# In the Tavern of Sweet Songs 

## 17 Songs from Salámán and Absál



David Lewiston Sharpe

## Scoring

High Voice
Piano

## Duration: 55 mins approx.

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## Preface

At one level, In the Tavern of Sweet Songs is simply a story asking to be told - simultaneously through the sequence of poems that this song cycle sets to music, and the narrative poem within which those poems appear. The narrative of Salámán and Absál is a story told in a thousand lines; but like way-stations along the journey, there is the sequence of shorter verses that apostrophize particular events with a string of separate tales and build a concurrent, complementary narrative strand. These are the texts of the present songs.

The 'tavern' (kharabat in Persian) represents, in this instance, a holy place (a Sufi monastery, or even the House of God) in which the experiential 'wine' of spiritual intoxication is imbibed; the 'sweet songs' (the ghazal, or love song in Persian literature) represent the intoxicating music that is a pathway to the divine, sung by the qalandar (a Sufi mystic) who travels - perhaps from 'tavern' to 'tavern' - peripatetically singing his ecstatic songs of spiritual love.

As with many cycles, the present songs are to some extent discrete entities, although a thread of recurring melodies, motifs and thematic ideas binds these 'beads of song' together. In this work, there is an overriding element of parable, and at the very least a significant degree of symbolism, that this sequence aims to intimate.

Edward Fitzgerald is known for his translation, really a 'recomposition', of Omar Khayyam's Rubai'yat ('quatrains'), which he issued anonymously in April 1859. Fitzgerald was a wealthy gentleman scholar who cut something of a dandyish figure in his milieu of Victorian society. His translation of Abd-ar-Rahman Jāmi's mystic poem Salámán and Absál, however, was the first extended work he undertook in his studies of Persian; it appeared in 1856 in the first instance, later being issued in a revised form in 1879 with the fourth edition, of five, of his Rubai'yat. It is one of a number of poems by Jāmi (1414-1492CE) that adopt common figures from a shared heritage of characters and stories in Islamic and Persian traditions. Another long poem of his tells the story of Yusuf and Zuleikha, alluded to in the texts of songs 8 and 13 in the present work. The tale of Salámán and Absál appears first to have been told, however, by Ibn Sina (known in Europe as Avicenna), a philosopher and poet of the 11th-12th centuries CE.

The whole of Jāmi's narrative is intended to be allegorical of a more spiritual Divine Love, contrasted with the materialism of a 'life of the senses'. The story centres on a king of Ionia (in western Anatolia, present-day Turkey), described in the poem as the Shah of Yūn (or Yūnan), who had a son called Salaman. Salaman is, the poem tells us, nursed by a girl named Absal, who falls desperately in love with him as he grows up, in time ensnaring him. Salaman and Absal rejoice together in their life of sense, for a year, thinking their pleasures immortal. A wise man, or sage, is then commissioned by the king with the task of reasoning with the erring couple. Salaman confesses to the sage that he speaks wisely, but pleads the weakness of his own will.

Salaman leaves his homeland with Absal, and they find themselves eventually on an island that comprises a beautiful garden (compared to the Irem Garden of Islamic tradition), a paradise garden perhaps, the etymology of 'paradise' being simply the Persian word for 'garden'. Salaman, fulfilled on one level in his love for Absal but suffused with the guilt at the injury he has caused his father, returns once more to his native country. He and Absal resolve to bring an end to their lives and their suffering. They travel to a desert and build a pyre; both walk into the fire that they kindle. Absal - who symbolises consuming, blinkered, earthly desire - is consumed, while Salaman is preserved against the voracious flames, but laments the fate of his beloved.

Ultimately he is introduced by the sage, who represents the guiding light of a higher love and elevated awareness within the individual psyche, to a celestial beauty called Zuhrah (the morning and evening star, Venus). Zuhrah symbolises the divine energy that builds a pathway to perfection clothed with intellectual light. Salaman becomes totally enamoured as his desire for Absal is, eventually, sublimated in the broader context of a compassionate love. He has undergone a rite of passage involving separation (while he still possesses Absal and thereby his earthly love), limination (the isolation on the island where his carnal love plays out its dénouement) and re-incorporation, via the 'cleansing' fire of ascetic discipline: in assuming his
station as heir to the Shah he re-incorporates himself into a lineage and 'tradition' of existence that his 'royal road' symbolically represents. Love is both goal and agency of the rite, which is transformed within the self by the 'sage' of his own love's spiritual metamorphosis.

These songs intend to distil the memory and emotion of those moments in the story where their texts appear, and attempt to catch the light as the sounds pass by, offering the opportunity of further, deeper moments of thought, feeling, repose and comprehension. There are musical themes and ideas that are associated with elements of the storytelling, as we move from one song to the next, which are not immediately to be seen as linked when the texts are read on their own. However, the music offers up associations not obvious but subliminal, which rest otherwise undetected as an important sub-stratum of the story.

Considered as one arching span, the music of these 17 songs is a single symphonic thread which attempts to bring us back to our starting point and - in the words of T.S. Eliot - 'know the place for the first time'.

## In the Tavern of Sweet Songs

17 poems from the Salámán and Absál of Jámi
Edward FitzGerald (1809-83)
(after Abd ar-Rahman Jami, 15th Century CE)

> I. Where am I, and Who?


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2







Subito più lento



rit.


Poco allegretto











## Tempo primo





Loughton, 26-29 March 2007

## Lentorello







A tempo



Tempo primo






plains be - fore the Jus - tice
And the Fa-ther has to pay.



molto rit. - - accel.








Tempo primo




## VII. Cypress Shadow




poco più lento




Quasi recit.




Lentorello. Brillante e leggiero mf molto espress.





poco meno mosso








molto rit. - - - A tempo


X. The Hand of Fate







## Poco allegretto. Doloroso






rall. - - - -



## Poco allegretto






$$
\text { poco rit. }-\quad-\quad-\quad \text { A tempo }
$$




























poco rit. - - - A tempo ma con rubato





poco più rit. - - - - - più lento


