“Compassion”
~ a song cycle for voice and orchestra (42:00)
by Lior Attar and Nigel Westlake.

Lior Attar – vocal solo
Monash Academy Orchestra - conducted by Nigel Westlake.

1. ‘Sim Shalom’ – ‘Grant Peace’
2. ‘Eize Hu Chacham’ ? – ‘Who is Wise’ ?
3. ‘La Yu’minu’- ‘Until You Love Your Brother’
4. ‘Inna Rifqa’ – ‘The Beauty Within’
5. ‘Al Takshu L’vavchem’ – ‘Don’t Harden Your Hearts’
6. ‘Ma Wadani Ahadun’ – ‘Until the End of Time’
7. ‘Avinu Malkeinu’ -‘Hymn of Compassion’

“Compassion” draws from the rich worlds of Islam and Judaism to present a collection of profound and poetic messages surrounding the idea of compassion between human beings.

The texts are largely a collection of poems, proverbs and songs that give us an insight into such wisdom. Their similarities are immense and their universality is undeniable.

Far from the misguided commentaries that have so often steered humanity away from the true enactment of compassion, these texts affirm that attaining a greater sense of compassion is an ultimate goal, and letting it guide our actions is the ultimate wisdom.

The Genesis of the Work
- by Nigel Westlake

The catalyst for “Compassion” can be traced to a single watershed moment, the occurrence of my first Lior concert.

It was the winter of 2009 in the tiny rural village of St Albans NSW, the occasion being the inaugural fund raising event for the “Smugglers of Light”, a foundation formed by our family in memory of my son Eli.
At dusk, as the winter mist settled upon the forgotten valley (as it is sometimes known), quietly nestled between the towering ridges of Hawkesbury river sandstone, Lior began to weave his magic upon the crowd, many of whom had traveled long distances to join us for the weekend music festival.

It was a poignant occasion that had been planned to coincide with the 12 month anniversary of Eli’s death, and the music held a very special meaning for our friends & family, many of whom were still grappling with the tragic loss that had befallen us the previous year.

Lior’s music had been introduced to me several years earlier by my son Joel, and had quickly become absorbed into the family playlist, underscoring many happy times & celebratory moments. As it happened, ‘Autumn Flow’, the album that rocketed Lior to prominence in 2005 was among the last music I shared with my son Eli the week before his death, thereby forever imbuing these sweet songs with a very unique and deeply personal significance for me.

A fortuitous family connection with a dear friend had facilitated a personal introduction and Lior had graciously accepted our request to perform for the foundation.

It was one of those special nights that people talk about for years afterwards & also featured some wonderful performances from the Grigoryan Brothers and the Goldner String Quartet.

Lior concluded the proceedings with one of his best known songs, ‘This Old Love.’ As he was brought back on stage for the encore, little did I realize that his final offering for the night would hold the germ of an idea that would become the catalyst for a life changing and enriching journey. Coaxing us gently into another world, as if possessed by unseen forces, and without accompaniment, Lior began to embrace the plaintive and emotionally charged strains of the ancient Hebrew hymn of compassion “Avinu Malkeinu”.

In stark contrast to what had preceded, here was another side to Lior’s artistry, his keening and emotionally charged voice allowing us an intimate glimpse into the rich vein of middle eastern heritage that is his birthright. The power and spirituality of the song struck a deep resonance amongst the crowd, all of whom were captivated in spellbound rapture.
For my own part, I had just experienced a small taste of a tantalizing and exotic soundworld and was overcome by a strange yearning to be a part of it. Following the concert I suggested to Lior that I take a solo vocal recording of his performance & create a symphonic arrangement around it. Neither of us were sure where this might lead, but I had a hunch it was at least worth a shot.

Weaving my orchestration around Lior’s voice was a little like writing a movie score, the vocal part an intractable dramatic narrative, the orchestral accompaniment a fluid underscore replete with abundant possibilities.

We could both sense potential in the finished idea and it seemed a natural progression to expand the material into a song cycle for voice & orchestra.

In passing, I casually mentioned our plan to Peter Czornyj (director of artistic planning, Sydney Symphony Orchestra) and he suggested the orchestra would be interested in bringing the idea to fruition through a commission. We set to work.

Just as our first attempt ‘Avinu Malkeinu’ had begun life as a solo vocal, we now followed a similar pattern for the rest of the composition process, and using the concept of compassion as a common theme, Lior proposed the texts be sourced from a combination of Hebrew and Arabic writings.

In the context of a troubled and divisive history, the drawing together of these common threads of Judaism and Islam struck me as a bold and courageous strategy, and a perfect fit for Lior’s middle eastern ancestry and family history.

Through painstaking research, he managed to unearth a wonderful collection of ancient proverbs, writings and poetry. For each text he devised a vocal part which he sent me as a solo recording, sometimes embodying the germ of a melodic fragment and at other times as a complete series of mellifluous phrases.

Many of the songs sounded for all the world like ancient chants exhumed from a long lost tomb somewhere on the shores of the Red Sea, yet the melodies were very much alive and fresh, full of richness, vibrancy and spontaneity. It was inspiring to hear Lior working outside his comfort zone, experimenting with new vocal timbres and using his extraordinary three
octave vocal range to great effect.

Every few weeks we would get together to review progress & examine the overall form of each piece. Given our dissimilar experiences in music, I couldn’t believe how we both seemed to be on the same wavelength, striving toward a common goal, critical of the same issues and agreeing on the ideas that seemed to work.

Some of the songs evolved over a period of months, others over days, but what has emerged is a true collaboration, and music that neither of us could ever have written on our own.

“Compassion” inhabits a vast array of emotions & colours, at times pulsating and riotous, at others reflective and textural, and draws upon the myriad of influences the two of us have been able to bring to the table from our incredibly diverse backgrounds.

With the utmost respect, we have tried to imbue these ancient texts with a contemporary interpretation, adhering to the purity of a single voice & orchestra, and although the songs are all sung in their original language, there are no conscious references to traditional Hebrew or Arabic musical forms, melodies or scales (with the exception for ‘Avinu Malkeinu’ which is based on a traditional melody).

The support of the SSO in bringing this project to the stage has been absolutely extraordinary & Lior & I are profoundly grateful to Peter Czornyj and the orchestral management for their enthusiasm and encouragement. We would also like to thank the wonderful musicians of the Sydney Symphony for the commitment and finesse they bring to this music.

Seeing this piece come together over the last couple of years has been a major highlight in my career and it is my hope that this music might offer its listeners the space and opportunity to reflect upon the qualities of that most noble of human sentiments, the good stuff that enriches our lives with meaning, insight, depth and intrinsic worth. The virtue of compassion.
Two Worlds in Common
- by Lior Attar

The research that eventually led me to the texts threaded through “Compassion” took me far and wide, from conversations with religious leaders and linguists, to regular consultations with my good friend Waleed Aly, who took me through the finer details of Arabic pronunciation and the subtleties of the Arabic texts.

Being a fluent Hebrew speaker, I initially thought that singing some of the texts in Arabic would feel foreign and disingenuous, yet to my surprise, many of the words I encountered were common to both languages. It became clear in learning these texts that these two languages shared a deep and common source. Just as experience often validates the existence of a well-worn cliché, it is difficult to escape the analogy of two brothers starting from a common source and branching out to gather their own rich experience and identity to become what we now know as modern Hebrew and Arabic.

In time, I would also come to learn not only of the similarities in language, but in the very essence of the messages embodied throughout these proverbs and poems. What began with a feeling of trepidation as to whether Nigel and I could sincerely encapsulate the artistic concept and vision we shared for this undertaking, has ended with a full embrace and a somewhat unexpected sense of renewed optimism.

It may seem strange in the context of this work, yet neither Nigel nor I consider ourselves religious people. We do however share a firm belief that much of the beauty and wisdom found within so many works of art and philosophy attributed to a certain religion need not lie exclusive to those who subscribe to its faith, or only to those who seek a connection with God through directional prayer. They have so much to offer to those who might accept them without bias or judgement.

“Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and, therefore, the foundation of all invention and innovation.
In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared.” - J.K. Rowling

1. ‘Sim Shalom’ – ‘Grant Peace’

Sim Shalom
Chen vachesed v’rachamim
Aleinu ve’al kol am
V’imru Amen
Sim Shalom
Aleinu ve’al kol am
Tova u’vracha
Ahavat chesed u’tzdaka u’vracha verachamim
Vecha’im veshalom
Barchenu Avinu
Kulanu k’eched

More than any of the texts used in “Compassion”, ‘Sim Shalom’ demonstrates that a literal translation is often inadequate in conveying the depth and richness of these texts. An example can be found in one of the stanzas relating to the vital virtues of character – “chesed, tzedakah, u’vracha’, v’rachamim”, - “charity, integrity and compassion”.

The word “rachamim” can be quite simply translated as “compassion”. When uncovered however, this word has far richer and deeper meaning, being a derivation of the Hebrew word for ‘womb’. More importantly, a closely related word of the same origin - ‘Rachaman’ - which can be translated as “the Compassionate One”, is one of the three names for God in the Jewish religion.

Interestingly, the origin, meaning and use of “Rachaman” is almost identical
between the two worlds of Judaism and Islam. Such is the centrality and esteem these two religions place on the virtue of compassion, that it is in fact one of the names given to God.

2. ‘Eize Hu Chacham’? – ‘Who is Wise’?

Eize Hu Chacham?

Halomed mikol adam

Eize hu gibor shebagiborim

Mi she’ose soneh ohavo

Al tehi baz lechol adam

U’maflig lechol davar

She’ein adam she’ein lo sha’ah

Ve’ein davar she’ein lo makom

Dabru emet ish et re’ehu

Emet u’mishpat shalom

Shiftu b’sha’areichem

Eile hadvarim asher ta’asu

‘Eize Hu Chacham’ is a collection of ethical and moral statements of the Sages taken from ‘Pirkei Avot’ – Ethics of our Fathers. ‘Pirkei Avot’ is a section of the ‘Mishna’, one of the fundamental works of the Jewish Oral Law.

“Who is wise? One who learns from every man” (Ben Zoma - Pirkei Avot 4:1)

“Who is a hero? One who turns an enemy into a friend” (Avot d’Rabbi Natan Ch 23:True Heroism)

“Do not scorn any person, and do not discount any thing. For there is no one
who has not their hour, and no thing that has not its place” (Ben Azzai – Pirkei Avot 4:3)

3. ‘La Yu’minu’- ‘Until You Love Your Brother’

La yu’mimu
Ahadukum hatta yuhibbu li akhihi
Ma yuhibbu li nafsihi
Al rahimuna yarhamuhum
Ar rahman urhamu
Man fil arda yarhamakum
Man fis samaa

“None of you will have faith until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself”

(Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 1 : #12) Reporter – Hadhrat Anas (r)

“Those who are merciful will be granted mercy from the Most Merciful; be merciful to those on the earth and those in the heavens will have mercy on you.”

(Sunan At-Tirmidhi, Book of Righteousness, Number 1924, Sahih]

Reporter - Abdullah ibn Amr

A Hadith is a report of something the Prophet Muhammad said or did. Hundreds of thousands of these reports have been gathered together in the Hadith collections that form the basis of so much Islamic thought and teaching.

This piece, titled ‘La Yu’minu’ is a melding of two central hadiths. These
two proverbs relay a simple yet universal truth, the closest approximation of the first being that of “the golden rule” : ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’, while the second speaks of what some of us might otherwise call ‘karma’.

4. ‘Inna Rifqa’ – ‘The Beauty Within’

“Inna r rifqa la yakunu fi shay
Illa zanahu wa la yunza’u min shay illa shanahu”

(Hadith 6767, Sahih Muslim) Reported by A’ishah

“Compassion does not enter into anything without beautifying it, and is not removed from anything without making it ugly.

For several hundred years, the narrations of the Prophet were passed down via word of mouth. As time passed, and the chain of narration grew, it became more difficult to be certain of the authenticity of a hadith, and hence a rigorous science of examining the authenticity of hadiths grew.

Such was the importance placed on the science of verifying the credibility of Hadith, that it grew to become a complex academic field and for many, a lifetime’s dedication and pursuit. The most authentic collection of Hadith is widely recognized as those based on the study of Imam al-Bukhari.

There is a famous story highlighting the level of Imam al-Bukhari’s rigorous approach. Upon one of his journeys to seek out and examine the character of those involved in the chain of narration, al-Bukhari noticed one such person gesturing to his horse to come over to him by tricking him that there was food when in fact there was not. Al-Bukhari cited this act of trickery towards the animal as behavior not worth of trustworthiness, and hence the chain of narration to which this man was involved in was thereby deemed inauthentic.
5. ‘Al Takshu L’vavchem’ – ‘Don’t Harden Your Hearts’

“Al takshu l’vavachem” (Tehilim – Book of Psalms 95:8)

“Limnot yameinu ken hoda venavi l’vav chochma” (Tehilim – Book of Psalms 90:12)

“Vekhi yagur itcha ger, be’artzchem lo tonu oto” (Lev 19:33)

“K’ezrach mikem yihiyeh lachem hager hager itchem. Ve’ahavta lo kamocha ki gerim ha’item”

(Lev 19:34)

“Don’t harden your hearts”

“Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom”

“And if a stranger is among you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.”

“The stranger that is among you, shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself, for you once were also strangers”

There is a beautiful quote by The Dalai Lama - “There are no strangers, only friends you haven’t yet met”

“Fear makes strangers of people who would be friends.” - Shirley Maclaine.
6. ‘Ma Wadani Ahadun’ – ‘Until the End of Time’

“Ma Wadani ahadun illa bathaltu lahu
Ssafwal mawadati minni akhiral abadi
Wala qalani wa in kana almasi’u bina
Ilia da’awtu lahu rahmanu bil rushdi
Wala tumintu ala sirrin fabuhtu bihi
Wala madattu illa li ghayr aljameel yadi”

“None ever showed me compassion
Except that I showed them compassion until the end of time
And if someone were to show me harshness
I would pray to the most merciful to give him wisdom”

‘Ma Wadani Ahadun’ is a poem written by Ali Ibn Abi Talib, a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad and the fourth Caliph after the Prophet some 1400 years ago. Widely known for his calm wisdom and use of reason in place of hot-headedness, Ali is a universally revered figure in the Muslim world: a man through whom both the Sunni and Shi’ite traditions pass, whose strong character of kindness and compassion inspires people across sectarian divides.
7. ‘Avinu Malkeinu’ - ‘Hymn of Compassion’

“Avinu Malkeinu chanenu v’aneinu ki ein banu ma’asim
Aseh imanu tzedakah vachesed ve’hoshi’enu”

I have vivid memories of hearing ‘Avinu Malkeinu’ emanating out of synagogues in my childhood. The prayer is recited on Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year. What initially drew me to the prayer was its haunting melody, yet it was only later in life when I learnt of its meaning and universal resonance, that I felt drawn to perform it. One such performance later came to be the very seed of this project, as Nigel and I entertained the notion of orchestrating this beautiful ancient melody which I had only ever previously performed acapella.

The text of ‘Avinu Malkeinu’ houses a beautiful link between not only compassion and wisdom, but that of freedom. It highlights the notion of compassion being the path to liberation, a concept that has always stayed with me.