Eduard de Boer:

Children of Gaza

Song cycle for high voice and piano

Poems by Michael R. Burch
INTRODUCTION

In 1976, I was 19 years old when I spent my summer holidays in Israel. I worked for three weeks in a Kibbutz, then travelled one week through the country. I very much enjoyed those weeks and have many beautiful memories of them. However, contrary to the expectations I had at the time, my fondest memories today have to do with Palestinians rather than Israelis. For instance, I vividly remember that, during my weeks in the Kibbutz, I was ordered to join a group that worked on a sunflower field in a nearby village, supervised by an old Palestinian man. He turned out to be the friendliest, mildest and loveliest person I had ever met. And I also remember hitchhiking somewhere, with a large backpack on my shoulders and a big camera hanging around my neck, when someone shouted at me, inviting me to come into his house; which I did. Maybe it was a naïve thing to do, especially for someone who obviously looked as much like a young and vulnerable Western tourist as I did, but I never regretted it. I was welcomed by a group of very friendly Palestinians, who offered me food and drink, and even showed me where the key to the house was hidden, so I could enter it at any time, whenever I wished. I had never encountered such hospitality before. These experiences formed a contrast to what I had learned at the Christian schools I had attended, where I had been told that Arabs were stupid heathens and that it was a good thing that God had finally returned the 'Holy Land' to his 'chosen people'.

I never returned to Israel, but I did develop a fondness for Jewish folk melodies, which I incorporated into some of my compositions, for instance in my first symphony and in my Yiddish Suite for cello and piano. (Recordings of these compositions can be found on YouTube, under my pseudonym Alexander Comitas.)

It was many years after my visit to this country, that my Belgian friend André Posman, at the time an organizer of classical concerts, made me aware of the plight of the Palestinians and the lack of attention by the mainstream media for their dire situation. He offered me a book about the situation in the Gaza Strip, a book that among other things contained some poems. Slowly the idea began to take shape in my mind 'to do something' with this, at some point in the future.

Again, years later, this idea had developed to the point that I wished to compose a song cycle about Palestinian children in Gaza. By then, the Internet had become commonplace, so I began searching it for poems having to do with this theme. In doing so, I came across the name of an American poet, Michael R. Burch, who on his website www.thehypertexts.com has for many years been campaigning very actively for the Palestinian cause. I found his e-mail address and in January 2016, I finally decided to contact him about the idea of a song cycle. By then, the idea of a 'storyline' had become rather clear. I envisaged a cycle with two consecutive climaxes, one where a child's family is shot by Israeli soldiers during a raid, and later another one where a child is killed by a bomb dropped by an Israeli plane. I also had found a number of Palestinian folk songs on YouTube and I had purchased a CD called *Lost Songs of Palestine*. In this way, I had acquired a small collection of songs to which I could allude.

And then a miracle happened, or rather: a series of miracles. Michael not only gave me permission to use any of his poems I wanted, but also offered to write any additional poems I needed for the cycle. Furthermore, I could feel free to instruct him not only about the subject of each poem, but also about its length, its meter and form, and about certain melodies I would like to use. He turned out to be just the ideal collaborator to make the wish of composing a cycle like this come true!

And it didn't stop there. I had proposed to Michael to make it a project extending over several years. I earn my income mainly by composing in response to commissions and I intended to write one song at a time in between them. But then, in February, I received an e-mail from Nelly, the widow of Christoph, a dear friend of mine who had sadly died a few months earlier, informing me that in his will he had left me and my wife an amount of money. I asked her if she would allow me to regard this amount as a commission fee for a *Children of Gaza* song cycle, and she liked the idea, because Christoph was the type of person who always stood up against injustice.

And on top of all this, against my expectation, I couldn't start with any of both composition commissions I had at this time: for one of them, a scenario still hadn't been written and for the other one I needed a detailed account of...

---

1 The idea for both dramatic climaxes came from a number of poignant accounts on Michael Burch's website www.thehypertexts.com, (search for 'Nakba Index', nakba being Arabic for catastrophe). See www.breakingthesilence.org.il with testimonies by critical Israeli soldiers, for similar stories. A particularly poignant testimony by founder of the Palestina Medical Relief Society Mustafa Barghouti can be found on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDe_ZX0wWIU, search words *Gaza Barghouti*).
the technical level of the members of the performing band. So, suddenly and unexpectedly, I had the collaboration of an ideal poet, the money necessary to write the cycle, and also an unexpected and perhaps provident amount of time!

Michael and I decided to go for it the cycle rapidly progressed, until 2½ months later we reached the point that it was ready. Luckily, inspiration came abundantly, and during the whole composing process I had the feeling that everything was just falling into place automatically. To give an example: the impact of the fatal bomb at the end of the song In the Shelter turned out to be exactly at the Golden Ratio point of the cycle as a whole; something I had neither expected nor influenced consciously in any way. The whole experience felt to me as if 'it just had to be'.

The Palestinian folk songs that are quoted or alluded to in the cycle are:
- [Al-Yadil Yadi](My Carefree Ways): This melody appears right at the opening of the first song and it returns at various places throughout the cycle.
- A so-called [Dabka](Palestinian folk song and dance), a Palestinian folk song and dance, dealing with the occupation of Palestine in 1948. This theme, too, is heard for the first time in the first song, and it, too, returns a number of times, throughout the cycle.
- [Mouvasha Lamma Bada Yathanna](Palestinian song of lament). Merely hinted at in the song For God's Sake, I'm only a Child, it is clearly alluded to in the songs In the Shelter and Among the Angels.
- [Hala Layya](Palestinian lullaby). The beginning of this melody appears for the first time in the song Mother's Smile, reappearing in In the Shelter and Among the Angels.

Happy as the story of this cycle's creation is, the plight of the Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank is far from happy. No parent would allow his or her own children to be subject to the circumstances under which the children who have had the misfortune to have been born there are living, and this alone ought to be enough reason for everyone to want to put an end to the atrocities that have been going on far too long in this troubled region. Everyone who has access to the Internet can now read about this, for instance on Michael Burch's website [www.thehypertexts.com](http://www.thehypertexts.com) (search for the terms 'Palestine' or 'Nakba') or can watch videos, for instance on Facebook pages like The Eye of Palestine or The Palestinian Information Center. No 'Holy Land' or text in Bible or Torah can justify how Palestinian children are treated on their native soil.

Eduard de Boer, May 14th, 2016.
Children of Gaza

Song cycle for high voice and piano
Poems by Michael R. Burch

I. Prologue: Where does the Butterfly go?

I'd love to sing about things of beauty,
like a butterfly, fluttering amid flowers,
but I can't, 
I can't …

Where does the butterfly go
when lightning rails
when thunder howls
when hailstones scream
while winter scowls
and nights compound dark frosts with snow,
where does the butterfly go?

Where does the rose hide its bloom
when night descends oblique and chill
beyond the power of moonlight to fill?
When the only relief's a banked fire's glow,
where does the butterfly go?

Where does the butterfly go
when mothers cry
while children die
and politicians lie, politicians lie?
When the darkness of grief blots out all that we know:
when love and life are running low,
where does the butterfly go?

And how shall the spirit take wing
when life is harsh, too harsh to face,
and hope is flown without a trace?
When the light of life runs low,
where does the butterfly go,
where does the butterfly go?

II. The Raid

When the soldiers came to our house,
I was quiet, quiet as a mouse…
But when they beat down our door with a battering ram,
and I heard their machine guns go "Blam! Blam! Blam!"
I ran! I ran! I ran!

First I ran to the cupboard and crept inside;
then I fled to my bed and crawled under, to hide.
I could hear my mother shushing my sister…
How I hoped and prayed that the bullets missed her!
My sister! My sister! My sister!
Then I ran next door, to my uncle's house,
still quiet, quiet as a mouse…
Young as I am, I did understand
that they had come to take our land!
Our land! Our land! Our land!
They've come to take our land!

They shot my father, they shot my mother,
they shot my dear sister, and my big brother!
They shot down my hopes, they shot down my dreams!
I still hear their screams!
Their screams! Their screams!

Now I am here: small, and sad, and still ...
no mother, no father, no family, no will.
They took everything I ever had.
Now how can I live, with no mom and no dad?
How can I live, with no mom and no dad?
How can I live? How can I live?

III. For God’s Sake, I'm only a Child

For God’s sake, ah, for God's sake, I’m only a child —
and all you’ve allowed me to learn
are these tears scalding my cheeks,
this ache in my gut at the sight
of so many corpses, so much horrifying blood!

For God’s sake, I’m only a child —
you talk about your need for “security,”
but what about my right to play
in streets not piled with dead bodies
still smoking with white phosphorous!

Ah, for God’s sake, I’m only a child —
for me there's no beauty in the world
and peace has become an impossible dream;
destruction is all I know
because of your deceptions.

For God’s sake, I’m only a child —
fear and terror surround me
stealing my breath as I lie
shaking like a windblown leaf.
For God’s sake, for God's sake, I'm only a child,
I'm only a child, I'm only a child.
IV. King of the World

If I were King of the World, I would make every child free, for my people's sake.
And once I had freed them, they'd all run and scream straight to my palace, for free ice cream!

[Directly to the audience, spoken:]
Why are you laughing? Can't a young king dream?

If I were King of the World, I would banish hatred and war, and make mean men vanish.
Then, in their place, I'd bring in a circus with lions and tigers (but they'd never hurt us!)

If I were King of the World, I would teach the preachers to always do as they preach;
and so they could practice being of good cheer,
we'd have Christmas—and sweets—each day of the year!

[Directly to the audience, spoken:]
Why are you laughing? Some dreams do appear!

If I were King of the World, I would send my counsellors of peace to the wide world's end...

[speaking:] But all this hard dreaming is making me thirsty!
I proclaim lemonade; please bring it in a hurry!

If I were King of the World, I would fire racists and bigots, with their message so dire.
And we wouldn't build walls, to shut people out.
I would build amusement parks, have no doubt!

If I were King of the World, I would make every child blessed, for my people's sake,
and every child safe, and every child free,
and every child happy, especially me!

[Directly to the audience:]
Why are you laughing? Appoint me and see!

VI. In the Shelter

Mother:
Hush my darling, please don't cry.
The bombs will stop dropping, by and by.
Hush, I'll sing you a lullaby...

Child:
Mama, I know that I'm safe in your arms.
Your sweet love protects me from all harms,
but still I fear the sirens' alarms!

Mother:
Hush now my darling, don't say a word.
My love will protect you, whatever you heard.
Hush now...

Child:
But what about pappa, you loved him too.

Mother:
My love will protect you.
My love will protect you!

Child:
I know that you love me, but pappa is gone!

Mother:
Your pappa's in heaven, where nothing goes wrong.
Come, rest at my breast and I'll sing you a song.

Child:
But pappa was strong, and now he's not here.

Mother:
He's where he must be, and yet ever-near.
Now we both must be strong; there's nothing to fear.

Child:
The bombs are still falling! Will this night never end?

Mother:
The deep darkness hides us; the night is our friend.
Hush, I'll sing you a lullaby.

Child:
Yes, mama, I'm sure you are right.
We will be safe under cover of night.

[speaking] But what is that sound? [screamed] Mama! I am frightened)....!
VII. Frail Envelope of Flesh

Frail envelope of flesh,
lying on the surgeon's table
with anguished eyes
like your mother's eyes
and a heartbeat weak, unstable…

Frail crucible of dust,
brief flower come to this–
your tiny hand
in your mother's hand
for a last bewildered kiss…

Brief mayfly of a child,
to live five artless years…
Now your mother's lips
seal up your lips
from the Deluge of her tears…

VIII. Among the Angels

Child:
There is peace where I am now,
I reside in a heavenly land
that rests safe in the palm
of a loving Being's hand;
where the butterfly finds shelter
and the white dove glides to rest
in the bright and shining sands
of those shores all men call Blessed.

Mother:
My darling, it is as if I hear your voice
consoling me.
Oh, can this be your choice?
Great Allah, hear my plea.
Impart wisdom to me.

Child:
Dear mother, I was born of your great love,
a gentle spirit...
I died a slaughtered dove,
that I might bring this message from the stars:
it is time to end earth's wars.

Remember —in both Bible and Koran
how many times each precious word is used—
"Mercy. Compassion. Justice.” Let each man,
each woman live by the Law
that rules both below and above:
reject all hate and embrace Love.

IX. Epilogue. I have a dream

I have a dream...
that one day all the world
will see me as I am:
a small child, lonely and afraid,
a small child, lonely and afraid.

Look at me... I am flesh...
I laugh, I bleed, I cry.
Look at me; I dare you
to look me in the eye
and tell me and my mother
how I deserve to die.

I only ask to live
in a world where things are fair;
I only ask for love
in a world where people share,
I only ask for love
in a world where people share.

Oh, I have a dream...
that one day all the world
will see me as I am:
a small child, lonely and afraid,
a small child, lonely and afraid.

Child:
Dear mother, to your wonderful love I bow.
But I can't return...
I am among the Angels now.
Do not worry about me.
Here is where I long to be.
Composing this song cycle was made possible by Christoph Bouthillier and Nelly Bouthillier - Den Boer
Dedicated to the children of Gaza and their parents
Duration: ca. 41 minutes

Drawings on cover and page 10 by Rafeeq Omar Isalami, courtesy of the Middle East Children's Alliance (www.mecaforpeace.org). I found these drawings on the website electronicintifada.net. They were part of a planned exhibition in Oakland, California, entitled A Child's View of Gaza; an exhibition that unfortunately was cancelled, due to pressure from pro-Israel organizations.

A note about the piano part. It is advisable that the pianist has at least one, but preferably more of the following three things at his disposal: 1) large hands; 2) a third pedal; 3) a very delicate pedal technique, with the capacity to make use of the shadings of 'half-pedalling' (which cannot be notated in the score) to a very subtle degree.

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This score may be copied, shared and distributed freely. It will be appreciated if information about performances and/or recordings of this cycle or part thereof is sent to alexander@comitas.org. Royalties will go to the organisation End the Occupation (www.endtheoccupation.org), or other worthy charities that provide aid and relief to Palestinian children.
for the children of Gaza, and their parents

Children of Gaza
Song cycle for high voice and piano

I. Prologue. Where does the butterfly go?

Poems by Michael R. Burch
Music: Eduard de Boer, op. 79 (2016)
like a
mid -
flow - ers,

a
about
things
of
beau -
ty,

like
a

A tempo

but -
ter -
fly,

flut -
tering
a - mid
flow- ers,

I

poco rit.

la melodia in rilievo

but
I
can't,

I

poco rit.

A tempo

can't
when lightning rails when thunder howls when hailstones

scream while winter scowls and

calmando poco a poco

nights compound dark frosts with

snow. where does the

Children of Gaza
When the only relief's a banked fire's glow.

Where does the butterfly go?

Allegro inquieto

Where does the butterfly go when mothers cry while children die and politicians...
Children of Gaza

lie, politicians

lie?

When the darkness of grief

blots out all that we know: when love and life

are running low, where does the
52 Adagio

but - ter - fly_ go?

55 rall._ _Adagio

And how shall the spi-rit take wing_

59 mf

when life is harsh, too harsh to face_

60 and hope is flown__

Children of Gaza
When the light of life runs low, 

Where does the butterfly go,
Where does the butterfly go?

A tempo, poco meno

Rall.

Children of Gaza
II. The Raid

Allegro $\frac{\text{C}}{4} = 116$

When the soldiers came to our house, I was quiet, quiet as a

mouse...

But when they beat down our door with a battering ram, and I heard their machine guns go

"Blam! Blam! Blam!" I ran! I ran! I
ran!

First I ran to the cupboard and crept inside; then I fled to my bed and crawled...
My sister!

under, to hide,

I could hear my mo-ther

shush-ing my sis-ter...

How I hoped and prayed

that the bu-l-lets missed her!

My sis-ter!

My sis-ter!

My sis-ter!

Children of Gaza
Then I ran next door, to my uncle's house, still quiet, quiet as a mouse...

Young as I am, I did understand that they had come to take our...
Our land!

They've come to take our land!

A tempo primo
They shot my fa-ther, they shot my mo-ther, they shot my

dear sis-ter, and my big bro-ther!

They shot down my hopes, they shot down my dreams! I still__

allargando ---

hear their screams! Their screams! Their screams!
Children of Gaza

alla**r**ando - - -

$\text{allargando - - -}$

$\text{Adagio}$

$\text{Dabka, cont.}$

rall. . . . . A tempo (Adagio)

[Music notation]

Now I am here: small, and sad, and still no mo-ther, no

[Music notation]
father, no family, no will. They took everything I ever had.

Now how can I live, with no mom and no dad? How can I live, with no mom and no dad? How can I live?
III. For God's sake, I'm only a child

Adagio mesto, senza rigore

For God's sake, ah, for

Children of Gaza
God's sake, I'm only a child and all you've allowed me to learn are these tears scaling my cheeks, this ache in my gut at the sight, of so many corpses, so much horrifying blood!

For God's sake, I'm only a...
child, you talk about your need for "security," but what about my right to play in streets not piled

with dead bodies still smoking with white phosphorous!

Ah, for God's sake, I'm only a

child for me there's no beauty in the world and peace
has become an impossible dream: destruction is all I know be-

cause of your deceptions.

For God’s sake, I’m only a child.
30

Children of Gaza

p

fear and terror surrounding me stealing my breath as I lie shaking like a

poco affrettando

wind-blown leaf For God's

sake,

for God's sake, I'm only a

calmando

child, I'm only a child, I'm only a
Children of Gaza
IV. King of the World

If I were King of the World

I would make every child free, for my people's sake.

And once I had freed them, they'd all run and scream.

Children of Gaza
13

straight to my palace for free ice cream!

Palestine tomorrow will be free

17

Directly to the audience, spoken:

Why are you laughing? Can't a young king dream?

21

If I were King of the World,

25

I would banish hatred and war, and make mean men
Children of Gaza

28

va - nish.

And then, in their

place, I'd bring in a cir-cus with li - ons and ti-gers (but they'd ne-ver

hurt us!)

If I were King of the World,
I would teach the preach-ers to al-ways do____ as they

preach; and so they could prac-tice be-ing of good cheer.

we’d have Christ-mas—and sweets—each day of the year!

Directly to the audience, spoken:
Why are you laughing? Some dreams do appear!
If I were King of the World,

I would send my coun’lors of peace
to the wide-world’s end...

Palestine tomorrow will be free

But all this hard-dreaming is making me thirsty!

I proclaim lemonade; please bring it in a hurry!
If I _

were King of the World, I would fire racists and bigots,

Meno mosso

with their message so dire. And we

would n’t build walls, to shut people out. I would build a _

Palestine tomorrow will be free
were King of the

Children of Gaza

World, I would make ev’ry child blessed, for my people’s

Meno mosso

sake, and ev’ry child safe, and ev’ry child free,
and every child happy, especially

Directly to the audience, spoken:

Why are you laughing?

Appointment me and see!

Children of Gaza
V. Mother's Smile

Andante con amore

There never was a

fonder smile than mother's smile, no softer touch than mother's touch.

So sleep a while and know she loves you more than "much".

poco rit.
So more than "much", much more than "all". Though tender words, these

do not speak of love at all, nor how we fall and mother's there, nor how we

reach from nightmares in the ticking night and she is there to hold us

A tempo

A tempo

Hala layya light.

Children of Gaza
There never was a stronger back than father's back that held our

weight and lifted us when we were small and bore us till we reached the
gate. then held our hands that first bright mile till we could run, and did, and flew.
A tempo

But, oh,___

A tempo, tranquillo

Children of Gaza
VI. In the Shelter

Allegro agitato \( \cdot \cdot = 112 \)

Mother

\[ \text{Hush my dar-ling, please don't} \]

\[ \text{The bombs will stop drop} \]

\[ \text{by and by.} \]

Children of Gaza
Children of Gaza

Hush, I'll sing you a lullaby...

Dabka, cont.

Ma-ma, I know that I'm safe in your arms. Your sweet love protects me from all

Hala layya, cont.
harm, but still I fear the

sempre con \( \text{d} \)

sirens' alarms!

Mother

Hush now my
darling, don't say a word.

My love will protect you.
But what about pap-pa, you loved him too.

Hush now... But what about pap-pa, you loved him too.

My love will protect you. My love will protect you!
I know that you love me.

but papa is gone!

Your papa's in heaven, where nothing goes wrong.

Children of Gaza
Come, rest at my breast and I'll

sing you a song.
But pap-pa was strong, and now he's not here. He's where he must be, and

yet ever near. Now we both must be

strong there's nothing to fear.
The bombs are still falling! Will this night never end?

The deep darkness hides us; the night is our friend. Hush, poco rit.

I'll sing you a
Child

Yes, ma - ma, I'm sure you are right.

We will be
screamed:

Ma ma! I'm fri...(ghtened!)

spoken:

But what is that sound?

Children of Gaza
VII. Frail Envelope of Flesh

Adagio mesto

Frail envelope of flesh, lying on the surgeon's table with anguished eyes like your mother's eyes and a heartbeat weak, unstable...

Frail crucible of dust, brief flower come to this...
your tiny hand in your mother's hand for a last bewildered kiss… Brief may fly of a child, to live five artless years…

Now your mother's lips seal up your lips from the Deluge of her...
Children of Gaza
There is peace where I now abide. I reside in a heavenly land that rests safe in the palm of a loving Being's hand; where the butterfly finds shelter and the white dove.
Children of Gaza

15

\[ \text{glides to rest in the bright and shining sands} \]

18

\[ \text{of those shores that men call blessed.} \]

22

\[ \text{la melodia in rilievo} \]

Al-Yadil Yadi
My darling, how I long to touch your face, to see your smile, to hear your laughter’s grace.

Great Al-lah, hear my... Mouwashsha
Children of Gaza
Here is where I will remain. —

My darling, do not leave me here alone! —

Come back to me! Why did you turn to stone?

joy. and no more pain.

A tempo, appassionato

Children of Gaza
Dabka...

A tempo, tranquillo

Great

Mouwashsha

Dear mother, to your wonderful love I bow. But I can’t return...

Palestine...
among the Angels now.

...A tempo

Do not worry

la melodia in rilievo

...about me.

...Here is where I long to be...
My darling, it is as if I hear your voicecon-

so ling me. Oh, can this be your choice?

Al - lah, hear my plea. Impart wisdom to

Children of Gaza
A tempo, poco meno mosso

it's time to end earth's wars.

Palestine...
A tempo primo

Re-member in both Bi-ble and Ko-ran how ma-ny times each

(pre-cious word is used)


Let each man, each wo-man live by the Law that rules both be-

low and a-bove: re-ject all hate and em-brace

Children of Gaza
Children of Gaza

La melodia in rilievo

Al-Yadil Yadi
IX. Epilogue. I have a Dream

Adagio mesto, senza rigore

I have a dream...

that one day all the world will see me as I am:

a small child,

lonely and afraid,

a small child,

lonely and afraid,
A tempo, poco meno

Un poco più mosso

fraid. Look at me... I am flesh... I laugh, I bleed, I cry.

Look at me; I dare you to look me in the eye and tell me and my mother

how I deserve to die...

ask to live in a world where things are fair:

Children of Gaza
I only ask for love in a world where people share.

mp la melodia in rilievo

I only ask for love in a world where people share.
Oh, I have a dream... that one day all the world will see me as I am: a small child, lonely and afraid.

rit. molto Molto lento

a small child, lonely and afraid.