Songs of India

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The hidden gems are rich beyond measure,
Unnumbered are the pearls thy ocean treasure,
Oh wondrous land! Oh land of India!

"Song of India" from Sadko

In the opera Sadko of 1898 by Rimsky-Korsakov, the hero Sadko asks three merchants to sing of their native lands so that he can decide which one he wants to visit. The merchants are the Viking, the Venetian, and the Indian. After hearing the three songs including the overly familiar and enticing description of India, "Song of India", for some unexplained reason Sadko proceeds to choose Venice. I believe that Sadko made a terrible mistake. I say this in spite of the fact that I would describe India in a very different manner, in equally glowing but not quite so affluent terms.

There are many operas which mention or are about India from all periods of our musical heritage. Although many of these operas have been recorded or discussed in books, very little is ever said about their content. Much verbiage is given over to such things as “Hindu melodies” referring to the oriental flavor of the music. This is especially true in reference to Massenet’s use of the unfamiliar saxophone for a waltz followed by “Hindu melody” for flute in the Paradise scene of Le Roi de Lahore. The use of the title “Hindu” is extremely misleading to a Western reader. No Indian would recognize such a thing as Indian, just as no Chinese would feel that Puccini’s Turandot sounds anything but foreign to his ear. These often repeated comments are entertaining to read, but perhaps a more logical thing to say is that Massenet used the exotic situation of his opera to introduce exotic new sounds and strikingly original melodies. To call these melodies “Hindu” merely points out the European naïveté about things Indian. More important to consider are the plots of the stories. One must consider whether a French version of a love triangle set in Sri Lanka, as seen in Les Pêcheurs de Perles, is as Ceylonese as an Italian version of a Scottish story such as Lucia is Scottish. Despite the Italianate quality of Lucia, one can view Europe as a cultural unit, but how do Westerners view something as foreign and remote as the Indian sub-continent?

Having been a student of India for all of my adult life and a lover of opera for almost as long, it has been a constant source of pleasure to me to hear India mentioned in odd contexts in a great many operas and directly dealt with in what are, in my opinion, some rather good works. When the Vendor of Animals in Der Rosenkavalier offers parrots from India during the levée of the Marschallin, I can almost hear the loud squabbling of those loveable creatures in the Islamic ruins of Delhi. When earlier in the same scene, the powder of the Queen of Golconda is mentioned, images of the Kohinoor diamond, which was probably mined there, and
the climb to the top of the magnificent Golconda Fort near Hyderabad in Southern
India pass across my mind.

Other operas include Indian characters adding a cosmopolitan quality to
exotic operas set in the East. The most well-known example due to performances in
recent decades is the character Idreno in Rossini’s Semiramide of 1823. Indian
titles for characters in operas happen in the 18th century as well, as seen in Philippe
Rameau’s Les Indes Gallantes of 1736 (about many of the “Indies”) with its Persian
Prince who is also King of India and Antonio Salieri’s Cublai concerning Kublai Khan
where an Indian princess finds her way to Central Asia. These characters are
gratuitous additions doing very little to further the plots of their operas. An opera
with Indian elements which actually function in the plot is Sir Michael Tippett’s
Midsummer Marriage of 1955 where two of the characters become transfigured as
the Hindu God Shiva and his consort Parvati.

While these enticing allusions to India appear in operas from time to time,
the operas which deal directly with India run the full gamut of our operatic heritage.
The first use of India as a setting is found in the many operas based on Pietro
Metastasio’s Alessandro nell’Indie. Metastasio’s text was set by a large number of
composers during the 18th century including Porpora in 1730, Handel in 1731,
Galuppi in 1738, Gluck in 1744, Sacchini in 1763, as well as Cimarosa, Hasse,
Cherubini, J. C. Bach, etc. The operas are variously labelled by the full title or after
the Indian king Poro (usually called Porus in the classical accounts) who fought
Alexander during the Indian campaign. The plot line suggests a knowledge of the
classical sources, since after Porus’ defeat Alexander restored him to his kingdom.
A fictitious character, the Indian queen Cleofide, adds the necessary soprano role
to these opera seria.

The operas to be considered here follow later conventions and there is an
attempt to be about India rather than merely set there. The oldest opera about India
still performed is Adolphe Adam’s Si J’étais Roi of 1852 which is the story of an
Indian youth who scribbles the words “If I were King” in the sand and gets his wish.
The important thing about this opera is that the opera concerns Indians themselves
and not merely set in India to illustrate the magnanimity of a character like
Alexander. The choice of the setting is clearly for its exotic possibilities, but at the
same time this choice allowed composers more freedom from the old traditions,
contributing a great deal to the development of romantic opera. From Si J’étais Roi
to the most recent of Indian operas, Gian Carlo Menotti’s The Last Savage of 1963
(first performed as Le Dernier Sauvage, a comic opera about a rich American girl’s
anthropological aspirations and her search for the abominable snowman), Phillip
Glass’ Satyagraha of 1980 (about Mahatma Gandhi) and Per Nörgard’s Siddharta
of 1983 (about the early life of the historical Buddha and his decision to renounce
the world when a dancer dies before him), the audience is presented with a variety
of Indias—in some cases over-romanticized, in others fairly true to the realities of
India, but always exotic.

Unlike Si J’étais Roi many of the operas about India are no longer in the
repertoire (the Adam opera was recently revived by a small company in London).
Mentions of other little-known works such as Alfano’s La Leggenda di Shakuntala
of 1921 tantalize my imagination. The latter, in particular, conjures up the finale to
Puccini’s Turandot finished after his death by Alfano and memories of my struggles
to translate *Shakuntala*, the most famous of all Sanskrit plays, over fifteen years ago. Both Louis Coerne (1904) and Felix Weingartner (1884) offered operatic versions of the playwright Kalidasas *Shakuntala*, while a ballet by Ernest Reyer with a book by Gautier premiered in 1858 and a famous overture by Karl Goldmark by the same title dates from 1865. All of these were presumably based on the early translation by Sir William Jones of 1789 (translated from the English into German by Georg Forster in 1791 and into French by A. Bruguier in 1803) which was widely known in the intellectual circles of Europe. Even Franz Schubert began an opera based on the play as early as 1820, but he never completed it. Alfano’s opera has recently been staged at the Wexford Festival, 1982, where apparently it was staged as a performance in a crumbling hotel during the English Raj.

While one can imagine the classical presentation of the Shakuntala operas, other titles offer only vague, tantalizing hints of the plot lines—such as Donizetti’s *Il Paria* which hints of untouchables and was based on C. Delavigne's *Le Paria* of 1821. Many references to pariahs are found throughout this period in both literary and theatrical works. Other operas which tempt us are Donizetti’s *La Regina di Golconda* of 1828. Franz Adolphe Berwald’s *Drottning av Golconda* of 1864 (1st performed in Stockholm in 1968), Berton’s* Aline, Reine de Golconde* of 1803, and Boieldieu’s opera of the same name of 1804, as well as a number of ballets with similar titles. These works are all presumably based on the play by S. J. de Boufflers and hint of the same queen of Golconda who lent her powder to Strauss for *Der Rosenkavalier*. Mentions of *Les Bayadères* of 1810 by Carle (the famous ballet by Minkus of 1877 was entitled *La Bayadère*) and *The Temple Dancer* by John Adam, Hugo, which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1919, are equally tantalizing. An operetta by Kalman called *Bayadère* is different than these other works since it is not about an Indian temple dancer but concerns an actress in a play by that title who is loved by an Indian maharaja.

Besides these few operas a quick list of some of the operas still in the repertoire giving Western operatic impressions of the Indian sub-continent includes: *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* by Georges Bizet of 1863; *L’Africaine* (a title which refers to color, not to race or continent) by Giacomo Meyerbeer of 1865; *Le Roi de Lahore* by Jules Massenet of 1877; *Lakmè* by Léo Delibes of 1883; *Savitri* by Gustav Holst of 1916 (but written in 1908); and, *Padmavati* (an opera-ballet) by Albert Roussel of 1923.

Many of these operas have had productions in North America during the last decade or so: *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* in San Francisco and New York; *L’Africaine* in San Francisco; *Le Roi de Lahore* in Vancouver; *Lakmé* in Dallas, New York, and Chicago; *Savitri* in San Francisco and Baton Rouge; *The Last Savage* in Charleston; and, *Satyagraha* at Artpark in Lewiston, New York.

The most interesting thing for an Indophile is that few of these operas owe much to the real India. One might presume that this fact would be disappointing, but many of the mistakes and oddities of the libretti illustrate the way that the West has viewed India over the past few centuries beginning with the lush tropical setting for melodrama in the Adam opera and ending with Glass’ rather surrealistic vision of the Mahatma set to verses of the *Bhagavad Gita* sung in Sanskrit. With the exception of the most recent operas concerning India, the picture of India is often lumped together with an equally hazy vision of the Islamic world. This may not
seem true at first glance, considering that the plot lines of the most popular of these operas are consistently Hindu; but few Hindus would accept food from the hands of characters named Leila, Selika, Alim, and Hadji.

Les Pêcheurs de Perles contains many such names. Leila is the name of the Hindu priestess in the opera, but it is also the name of a very popular heroine in Persian literature, indeed the heroine of the opera Leyli and Medzrhnun by Uzeir Abdul Husein Hajibeyov, a Persian composer from Azerbaijan. Nadir, Zurga, and Nourabad are Persian as well, but they are all plumped down in a fishing village in Sri Lanka, the tropical paradise depicted in so many of the French operas about India.

After the duet “Au fond du temple saint” for tenor and baritone (often referred to as “that duet from The Pearl Fishers” on FM radio) the priestess Leila makes her entrance. Both the tenor and baritone have loved and forsaken her, but her reappearance—heavily veiled and ordered not to speak to any man—starts the drama rolling. Needless to say, the tenor and soprano sing lengthily of their love, the baritone finds out, condemns them and then saves them. The whole plot rests on the fact that the lady is veiled. This of course is purdah, a practice found in India but only after the Muslim conquest which did not quite make it to Sri Lanka. There is a good reason the West has always related to the harem, or zenanas of North India. The reason is that they are basically Mediterranean, culturally linked with our own traditions. At the same time the West has failed to depict the less protected Hindu ladies of pre-Islamic India. Even today the ladies of the South do not cover their heads in the presence of a man, while their North Indian sisters are often kept from sight.

Most of these operas are Hindu in theme, but much of their romance owes a great deal to the picture of the veiled lady in the harem, removed from the world and, therefore, desired by every male around—after all they must be beautiful if they are protected in such a fashion. For an old India hand with a rather strong penchant for the Hindu world, Leila’s predicament as she sings to the great god Brahma is musically beautiful, but difficult to accept when forced into an historical setting.

The grandest of the 19th century French grand operas is L’Africaine, the last work of Giacomo Meyerbeer. Again we are presented with a tropical landscape including a deadly tree under which the Indian beauty Selika grandly inhales its perfumes in a sophisticated and melodic, if not quite believable, suicide. Her Western lover, Vasco da Gama, lends some basis of historical accuracy to the plot, but, as usual in these Indian operas, the name Selika hints of an Arabic heritage for this Hindu queen-priestess, just as the earlier protagonists of Bizet’s opera hint of Persian origins.

The plot line of L’Africaine is anticipated in part by the opera Jessonda of 1823 by Louis Spohr based on A.M. Lemierre’s La Veuve de Malabar about the love of Tristan d’Acunha for the widow of the Maharaja of Goa. The similarities are primarily the Portuguese-Indian connection, since in this opera the lovers are united after the widow is saved from death on her husband’s funeral pyre.

While at least one source suggests that Jules Massenet’s Le Roi de Lahore, his first opera written for L’Opera in Paris, was based on a story from the Mahabharata (the longer of India’s two great epics), the story suggests otherwise.
Again the names used are surprising. Timour, the name of the Muslim Central Asian conqueror (the Tamerlane of our high school English classes), is quite inappropriate for a Brahman priest. Scindia, the name of the heroine’s uncle, is an Indian name but used only by the most recent ruling family of Gwalior, many years and miles removed from Lahore during the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni in the early 11th century. Needless to say, the hero Alim and his servant Kaled sound as if they should be fighting on the side of Mahmud! They are Muslim without a doubt. Sita, the heroine, and the god Indra are the only authentic Hindu names of the lot.

While the setting of Le Roi de Lahore is historically accurate, the action owes more to the heritage of the West than to India. The concept of the incestuous uncle in a Brahman family is bad form to say the least. The definition of incest in India for North Indian Brahmans includes many unrelated “relatives”, based on elaborate family lineages dividing the many Brahman groups into clans, as well as an incredible number of distant but quite real relatives. Needless to say, incest was not exactly condoned in Massenet’s France, but the plot line of the opera suggests that had Sita wished, she could have married her uncle. In fact, she would not have been able to marry anyone with a common ancestor for a good number of generations on both her father’s and mother’s side. It is true that different systems existed in South India (notably cross-cousin marriage) and since the French possessions in India centered in that area, the librettist may have thought that he was presenting a possible Indian marriage practice; but it seems more likely that this titillating addition was used to underscore the barbaric immoral qualities of the character of Scindia. This particular detail of the plot would have been impossible in an opera set in the West, although in Verdi’s Ernani the heroine is loved by her uncle. At the same time the idea of the dead king’s trip to Indra’s heaven and his return to earth to claim his love is incredibly romantic, but it seems to be Massenet and his librettist through and through.

My favorite Indian opera, for a variety of reasons, is Léo Delibe’s Lakmé, which owes much to the same interest in the exotic of the earlier French operas. In it we find the most Muslim of all names: the Brahman priestess Lakmé has a servant (variously called servant or slave in the librettos accompanying the recordings) named Hadji, implying that this pure and orthodox Hindu girl (with an extremely strict father!) had a Muslim servant who had made the hajj, visited Mecca. Most surprising! It might be possible for Hindus to have Muslims around the house (not eating with them of course) but the picture one gets of Lakmé’s father is one of very strict orthodoxy ruling out both unclean caste-less Muslims and Englishmen alike. Some of the characters of the opera fare better, although the name Lakmé is not the classical Sanskrit spelling, the more authentic form should be Lakshmi. Lakmé’s father has a real Brahman name, Nilakantha (literally translated as “Blueneck”, a title of the great god Shiva whose neck turned blue when he swallowed poison to save others at the Churning of the Ocean) which implies that Delibe’s librettists were doing their homework. There is a definite attempt to portray India in this opera, although some of it may seem wrong. We can notice these errors since we are in a more fortunate position to understand India than 19th century librettists.

It is often stated that the libretto of Lakmé is based on Le Mariage de Loti by Pierre Loti (pseud. for Julien Viaud), but even after a glance at this charming fictionalized travelogue it is soon discovered that it is not about India at all, but takes
place in the South Seas. The point is that rather than saying "based on" these accounts of the opera should read "inspired by". Both works concern an East-West romance and on one level may suggest the non-Western siren, but both Rarahu, the amoral primitive girl from Bora-Bora in the novel, and Lakmé, clearly the product of a sophisticated and highly moral ancient civilization, are destroyed by their encounters with the West. The men survive. Lakmé is driven to suicide, while Rarahu takes on with any good-looking sailor before she succumbs to her malady.

For the opera buff it is curious that another book by Pierre Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, was the inspiration for the series of works which led to Giacomo Puccini's Madame Butterfly. Although about Japan and a Japanese wife for a foreigner, Madame Chrysanthème has little to do with Puccini’s popular opera. Where Loti plays the amoral Frenchman communing with nature and women in Tahiti and Japan, the operatic characters of Gerald and Pinkerton are quite different.

I am not sure if many who have visited India can completely believe the setting of Lakmé. During my travels, I have yet to find the tropical garden in which Lakmé is kept by her father, but I have searched for it and I really do hope that I find such a thing amid the harsh realities of India. At the same time the story of the love between the innocent Lakmé and the Britisher, whose call to duty leads her so quietly into suicide, is extremely moving, if not quite Indian in sentiment and content. Where in Madame Butterfly the amoral and somewhat dense Pinkerton pushes Cio Cio San to her grand rite of suicide, Gerald seems less guilty. He certainly has no Sharpless to warn him of the delicate nature of the heroine; rather, he and Lakmé become the victims of the confrontation of two cultures.

Lakmé is the only opera holding the stage which deals with the English experience in India while both Jessonda and L'Africaine deal with the Portuguese in India. It is interesting that British literature did not give rise to any opera still performed today. The only operas mentioned in the standard references are both based on Thomas Moore’s Lalla Rookh from his Oriental Tales. They are Spontini’s Nurmahal of 1822 (based on his play with songs Lalla Rookh of 1821), Rubinstein’s Feramors of 1863, David’s Lalla Rookh of 1877, Lalo’s Namoura of 1882, and a few ballets. The most telling revival of an opera could be of The Englishmen in India of 1828 by Sir Henry Bishop.

A common feature between the heroines of Les Pêcheurs de Perles, Le Roi de Lahore, Lakmé, and in a way L’Africaine as well, is the concept of the Indian priestess. The grand treatment of this theme and the way that the maiden is kept away from men (while relating to the Eastern purdah) seems very close to the Vestal Virgins of the West, who are found in opera in various guises from the obvious Roman La Vestale by Spontini to the Druid Norma by Bellini. In India some women were attached to temples, but as Frederic in Lakmé states, they were not quite virginal. Besides wives of chief priests, who are necessary for certain rituals, many of the ladies attached to temples were devadasis or “slaves of the god” who danced in the elaborate halls of the temple precincts. In many instances the money made by them in many different types of entertainment went into the coffers of the temple. On seeing the bayadères in Lakmé, the rather prim English governess Miss Bentson asked whether these dancers were Vestal Virgins. Gerald’s friend Frederic’s response amounts to Vestal Virgins with nothing to guard. At this point on the London Records recording featuring Dame Joan Sutherland as Lakmé,
Miss Bentson exclaims "Oh, Shocking!", an addition to the libretto which is quite in character. While the bayadères of India were of easy virtue, Leila, Sita, Lakmé, and Selika were purer in their activities. Had they been of easier virtue perhaps much of the tragedy of these operas could have been averted.

It is with Savitri by Gustav Holst that we find our first genuine Indian story. This falls into what is called Holst's Indian period which includes an opera Sita of 1900-06, a cantata entitled Cloud Messenger of 1909-10, and both Hymns and Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda. Savitri truly is a tale from the Mahabharata and Holst, his own librettist, tells it as it was written. With its small orchestra consisting of two string quartets, a contra-bass, two flutes, and an English horn, the music of Savitri may not be in the same grand manner of the French operas already discussed, but it is extremely compelling. It tells the beautiful story of the outwitting of Death by Savitri, the devoted wife, and the return to life of her husband Satyavan. Rather than offer her own life to save that of her husband, as does the Western Alceste in Gluck's opera, Savitri approaches the matter from a purely Indian point of view—she asks for her own life. When Death points out that she already has it, she instructs him in the definition of what life is to a woman: to fulfill her functions of wife and mother. In India a husband's death is related to the merit (karma) of his wife, and the plight of the childless widow is often extremely unpleasant. Only the land which shocked the British with its numerous suttees could present such a non-modern sentiment in so poignant a manner.

While Holst's story comes from the ancient literature of India, as did the few operas based on Kalidasa's Shakuntala, I have to date heard only one opera which is based on an actual event in the rich history of India. That opera is Padmavati by Albert Roussel. There is also a ballet by the same title by Leo Staats from 1923. Its tale is set against the historical struggle between the Hindu lords of North India and the incursions of the Muslims. Le Roi de Lahore shares a similar backdrop, but where Massenet's opera was pure fiction, the incident around which Padmavati is built actually took place. Le Roi de Lahore is set in the early 11th century when Mahmud of Ghazni habitually raided India from his base in what is now Afghanistan. By the time that the action of Padmavati takes place, 1303, Muslims had invaded much of North India and established kingdoms, the most important of which was the Delhi Sultanate. In 1303 'Ala-ud-din Khalji, the villain of Padmavati, had been on the throne of Delhi for seven years and he was to rule for another thirteen. He was the first really powerful Sultan of Delhi and had grand plans for conquering much of India. Indeed, while he was attacking the rich Hindu city of Chitor, where the action of the opera takes place, his generals were making the first conquests for Islam in South India.

The characters of the opera are, on the whole, accurately named. Ratan Sen is Ratan Singh, the Maharaja of Chitor, and the husband of the beautiful and the accomplished Padmavati, originally a princess from Sri Lanka and named Padmini in history. The historical uncle and cousin of Padmini, Gora and Badal respectively, are members of Ratan Sen's staff in the opera. 'Ala-ud-din is presented as a Mughal, although the Mughals did not take control of India until the fall of the Delhi Sultanate in the early 16th century.

The Indian concept of history is sketchy at best and native Indian historians have embroidered most of their accounts lacing them with mythology
and chronological inconsistencies. The story of Padmini is known in a number of versions, but basic elements are present in each of the many accounts which I have found in written and oral traditions. I believe that the first published Western version is that found in Lieutenant-Colonel James Tod’s *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast’han* of 1829. Roussel actually visited the site of Chitor, presumably hearing the story told there, and together with his librettist, Louis Laloy, based their version on a French retelling of the tale by Théodore Pavie.

The basic story line is that 'Ala-ud-din heard of the great beauty of the wife of Ratan Singh and managed to see her, at which point he demanded her for his own. She was promised to him and a great entourage of ladies were to be sent to his camp. Instead of the ladies the litters contained the bravest warriors of Chitor. A battle ensued and after a long siege the Hindu defenders of Chitor were beaten. 'Ala-ud-din entered the city to find that many virtuous ladies, including Padmini, had burnt themselves to death rather than fall into the hands of the Muslim invaders.

The opera has all these basic elements including many of the names, but it is quite different in rather telling ways. The most incredible thing is that Padmavati is actually encouraged by her husband to save the city by giving herself to the Sultan. I doubt whether the Rajput ladies of today would like to hear that. They revere Padmini considering her the noblest of their breed. That in turn implies a very noble husband, historically a husband who went to his death knowing full well that Padmini had already saved her honor.

In the French version Padmavati has to murder her husband to ensure her own *suttee*, her death on his funeral pyre. At Chitor during the heat of the battle noble women in thousands are said to have gone to their fiery deaths. They certainly did not have to resort to murder. Ratan Singh’s honor would not allow Padmini to be taken and the idea that he would suggest that she lose her honor, and consequently his own, is beyond belief. An important factor is that this whole predicament with a man ready to defile the honor of the heroine does make for good opera; but, I doubt whether a librettist would be ready to set this story of betrayal in Europe with tales of Arthurs and Guinevere’s, while he was willing to make the barbaric Easterner act in such a manner.

There are a number of minor details in the opera that appear to relate to the actual story itself. The most interesting is when the priests tell Padmavati that more than one victim is necessary; hence, in the opera at least, the god condones the murder. In the most common legend Ratan Singh has a vision of the goddess of the city who informs him that his sons must each meet their deaths for her to be fully satiated. Perhaps this vampire-like goddess appears in the opera as one of the six female manifestations of the god Shiva who come to test Padmavati’s virtue prior to her ritual of *suttee*.

The final outcome of a study of Western operas about India is that they owe most of their message to the West. Where the philosophy of India (Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina) had so much influence on the intellectual development of Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, there was little interest in the dramatic possibilities found in Indian literature. Such obvious things as the mysticism of Wagner owes much to the early German Sanskritists who molded an entire era of European thought. Wagner’s interest in Indian philosophy, primarily an interest
in Buddhism, is well attested to and his Buddhist opera Die Sieger remained uncomposed at his death. The importance of his studies of Indian literature and philosophy is seen in many of his operas including Parsifal, so often considered the ultimate Christian opera. In fact in the opening scene of Parsifal a swan is killed, an incident that must be based on the opening of the Ramayana. His famous Ring Cycle ends with Brünnhilde’s immolation which must relate to the rite of sūttī. The point is that Wagner was the product of his age and German intellectual and religious thought of the period was drawn from a wide range of sources, in particular Indo-European ones. Another German who was even closer to the mainstream of Indian philosophy was the great Goethe, whose many works owe much to his Indian studies. These works in turn have been so important as sources of opera libretti. The fact that India lies behind the psychological drama of a Faust or a Werther is rarely, if ever, considered. At the end of Boito’s operatic version of Goethe’s Faust legend the hero says “Si...ma il Real fu dolore e l’Ideal fu sogno”. (Yes...but reality was suffering and the ideal was a dream.) What could be more obviously Indian!

Indian thought lies behind much which we do not recognize as Indian, while the operas about India almost completely ignore India’s contribution to European thought. India is used solely for its exotic connotations and presumably to allow for some pretty outrageous costumes and sets, including the common mistake in the theater of draping the sari over the wrong shoulder! For anyone who knows India well it is in many ways unforgivable to see these obvious errors. So often sets and costumes refer to another ethnic area—Thai dancers set in Indonesian ruins, for instance. Granted a designer may wish for an exotic setting for his opera, but a designer could open the right books for a change and do it correctly! For a designer who wishes to set Lucia di Lameromoor in Roman ruins or as a sequel to Star Wars, the usual approach to these operas is legitimate.

All in all India has fared pretty well with its treatment in the theater. From at least the period of Gluck, the Arab world has been used for a similar exotic purpose, but the treatment of the Islamic characters has been far from fair. These operas comprise a rich subject for a future study. Where many of the “Arab” operas have been comedies peopled with buffo characters with titles like Beg and Sultan, the “Indian” operas are usually peopled with heroines who are handled in compassionate and melodramatic tragedies.

When Sadko asked the Indian merchant to sing of his native homeland, the merchant should have laced his “Song of India” with descriptions of these great beauties—Leila, Selika, Sita, Lakmé, and the rest. If Sadko could not be enticed by promises of great wealth, these alluring beauties may have done the trick. Better still the merchant could have sung Felix Mendelssohn’s musical setting of Heinrich Heine’s Indian vision:

On wings of song
beloved, I shall bear you away
away to the banks of the Ganges;
there I know the loveliest spot...
There will we lie
beneath the palm-tree
and drink deep of love and peace
and dream a blissful dream.

"On Wings of Song"¹⁰

NOTES:


2. The Buddha has received some attention in the musical world. Delibes planned an opera called Siddharta which was never written and Hubert Bath wrote incidental music for The light of Asia.

3. There are a few pieces which relate to another classic story, that of Nala and Damayanti. These include an opera Nal and Damayanti of 1899 by Arensky and a piece for soprano, choir and orchestra entitled Damajanti by Max Bruch.


7. It is interesting to note that in his translation of the libretto for a private recording of Padmavati (MRF-141-S, 1977), David Lambert chooses to rectify (?) matters by translating the word "mogol" as "mongol." This still places the wrong ethnic group on the scene. 'Ala-ud-din was a Khalji and the family is usually described as Afghanized Turks. The recent commercial recording (Angel DSBX-3948) uses "mogul" in the English version.


9. According to the short article by Dom Angelico Surchamp in the booklet accompanying the Angel recording cited above (p. 6), the decision not to have Ratan Sen die in battle was made by Roussel and Laloy and is not found in the Pavie original.