

Sisters

in suffering and strength

By Thomas May

A Thousand Splendid Suns, based on the novel by Khaled Hosseini, is a new opera charting the lives of two Afghan women trapped in a cycle of oppression and violence. The world premiere, soon to be given by Seattle Opera, sees the pioneering Afghan filmmaker Roya Sadat making her debut as an opera director

The fate of Afghanistan and oppression of women are two phenomena that have acquired a topical urgency in today's world. American composer Sheila Silver has been immersed in these subjects since 2009, when she first encountered Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. She was struck by the overwhelming power of Hosseini's narrative, which unfolds in Afghanistan between the 1960s and 2002. Above all, she sensed an operatic intensity in the bond that develops between the two protagonists, Mariam and Laila, as they struggle to cope in a milieu of abuse and domestic violence. The strength of that bond is what makes the shattering sacrifice at the opera's climax possible.

'I wanted to write this opera because the story of Mariam and Laila is larger than life,' Silver told me. 'That's why I thought it was singable – opera has to have big emotions. I felt like I was their sister, and that drew me in.'

Though the story of Miraim and Laila has a universal appeal that seemed to Silver to be especially appropriate for the emotional directness of opera, its very particular Afghan setting posed formidable challenges for an American composer. How to imagine a soundscape to convey it? And how to translate the cultural and social layers of an Afghan world into the idioms of Western opera?

Silver enlisted the librettist and stage director Stephen Kitsakos to compress Hosseini's epic narrative into opera-friendly dimensions. Friends for more than four decades, they have collaborated as artistic partners on previous stage works by Silver, including *The Wooden Sword* (2010), a chamber opera retelling of a Jewish folk tale, and the one-act *The*

White Rooster (also 2010), 'a tale of compassion' in the form of a cantata for women's vocal quartet, Tibetan singing bowls and drums. The perspective Kitsakos brings from the collaborative world of theatre has proved especially appealing for Silver's preferred method of working with a librettist – as opposed to simply having a text delivered as finished product.

The two-act libretto for *Suns* fixes its focus on the home life of Mariam and Laila, who are separated by a generation, and the older Rasheed, abusive husband to both; the tragedy is precipitated when a fourth main character, Tariq, unexpectedly resurfaces and reunites with his former sweetheart Laila (years after Rasheed had convinced her of his death in a bomb attack during the civil war with the Taliban). Kitsakos estimates that about half the libretto's text comes directly from Hosseini's novel, while his own words comprise the other half. He structured the dramaturgy so that everything else encircles the household 'in a way that Western audiences would comprehend'.

Hosseini, whose family left Afghanistan when he was young and found asylum in the Bay Area of San Francisco, has become an important literary chronicler of modern Afghan society following the worldwide success of his first novel, *The Kite Runner*, with its focus on the father-son relationship among Afghan men. When he was approached with the idea to adapt his second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as an opera, he stipulated two conditions: always to be respectful to the Quran; and for the women to wear the burqa on the stage whenever they do so in the novel. It was the second condition that posed a challenge for Kitsakos, which he solved by setting the majority of the opera indoors, where the women do not have to wear the burqa.

Other changes were made to adapt to an opera format. Kitsakos omitted the novel's epilogue-like final section, which occurs after the climactic crisis point and which, he and Silver agreed, would have weakened the opera's momentum. They also found it necessary to add pockets of humour to release some of the tension 'because the story is unrelentingly grim,' as Kitsakos puts it. Silver adds that respites of peaceful music in her score – as in the scene of Mariam's wedding, despite its having being coerced – serve a similar purpose. 'This opera has so much hard stuff that we wanted to find every possible moment to allow the audience either to laugh or to relax'.

The pair began working on *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in 2012. Over the next few years, their opera was painstakingly shaped through a series of workshops funded by Opera America's New Works Forum and other institutions in the American ecosystem of arts support. Seattle Opera eventually

came onboard as the commissioning company – a homecoming for Silver: though she gravitated to New York at the start of her career, the composer, now 76, was born and raised in Seattle.

When Christina Scheppelmann, Seattle Opera's general director, took on the company's commitment to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* from her predecessor, Aidan Lang (now heading up Welsh National Opera), she was determined to include a female Afghan director as the lynchpin of the creative team. Scheppelmann had been impressed by 'the intensity and humanity but also brutality' of Roya Sadat's 2017 film *A Letter to the President* and invited her to direct her first opera production.

'When Christina first approached me about directing this opera, I had to think about it. I realised that the spirit of this story – its narrative of resilience, of sacrifice, of womanhood – was just screaming inside of me,' Sadat said while on a break from her newest film, *Sima's Song*, which she was shooting in Greece. '*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is also a story that takes place in the same city where I was born, in Herat. It was all so personal for me. When I saw the strength of this opera, I knew I had to be part of it.'

In fact, Sadat's visit to Seattle for her first personal encounters with the company – she and Scheppelmann had been communicating through social media – coincided with the Taliban's turbulent return to power in 2021. 'It was an emotional couple of days meeting with Roya,' Scheppelmann recalls, 'but it also made for >

Mood board and set designs by Misha Kachman

Roya Sadat, the acclaimed Afghan filmmaker, in her opera directing debut in Seattle



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Preview | A Thousand Splendid Suns



'Opera has to have big emotions': Roya Sadat working with composer Sheila Silver

a very honest encounter. She was very open as to what this all meant to her.'

In order to be able to evoke the Afghan setting, Silver studied Hindustani music online with the musicologist Deepak Raja and then undertook a six-month journey to Pune in India to immerse herself in Hindustani musical culture. The singer Pandit Kedar Bodas and his father Pandit Narayanrao Bodas, both part of a long line of respected musicians, became her mentors. 'I was drawn to discovering the classical music of this other culture, because I am a classical musician in my own culture.'

Silver grows impassioned as she details the knowledge she absorbed about raga and rhythmic patterns, as well as the use of the drone: 'While the harmony is simpler, the melodic line and embellishment are far more ornate and the rhythm far more sophisticated than anything in Western music.' Her score artfully weaves these features into her own idiom as an unmistakably Western composer. 'I don't want to write Hindustani music. At that I would fail,'

Silver says. Her acknowledgement of and profound respect for the difference in traditions is a far cry from the attitude that cultivated 'exoticism' in operas of the past.

At the same time, Silver points out that her encounter with Hindustani music has left a lasting impression. 'It has changed the way I compose, and not just for opera. I grew up in the world of atonal music, but my music has been fairly tonal for years. *Raga* suggested different melodic choices to the ones I might otherwise have made. But I can only write my music in my voice – which is a Western one.'

A Thousand Splendid Suns calls for a Western orchestra using conventional tuning but augmented by two Hindustani instruments – bansuri (bamboo flute) and tabla – which interact improvisationally with the ensemble. Viswa Subbaraman will conduct the premiere. The vocal characterisation is familiar from Western opera: the generational difference between Mariam and Laila, for example, is indicated by their respective casting as a mezzo (Karin Mushegain) and a soprano (Maureen McKay), while the young Tariq (Rafael Moras), who revives Laila's longing for passionate love, is a tenor. Portrayed as more than a two-dimensional villain, Rasheed will be created by the baritone John Moore. 'I'm a Western composer and I want to use all the lusciousness of the operatic voice and the emotional response it can evoke,' says Silver. At the same time, she incorporates the ecstatically soaring, quasi-improvisatory ornamentation of Hindustani singing.

'Learning about the culture and music of Afghanistan and India has expanded and enriched my life enormously,' says Silver. 'It's an artist's job to expand their horizons. Life is all about learning and growing and expanding. Or else why bother?'

In addition to hiring Roya Sadat as director, Seattle Opera has been collaborating with the San Francisco-based cultural consultant Humaira Ghilzai to ensure respect and authenticity in the representation of Afghan and Muslim culture. Ghilzai's career was in fact launched when Hosseini suggested her as an adviser for the film adaptation of his debut novel, *The Kite Runner*. She began meeting with Silver and Kitsakos while the opera was still in workshop stage and suggested details about both the characterisation and the music. Overall, says Ghilzai, composer and librettist 'have done a wonderful job of staying true to the book. These are stories that can be looked at from so many angles.'

Ghilzai has also been working extensively with Seattle Opera's education and outreach team to frame the opera so that the audience can 'go deeply into understanding Afghan culture. One of the perspectives I feel that [Western] society holds nowadays is that Afghan women are downtrodden and they need to be saved.'

'What I love about this story is that these two women *defy* victimhood,' says Silver. 'They prevail through the power of their love.'

Scheppelmann agrees whole-heartedly: 'I hope that people take this opportunity to learn more about that part of the world and its culture, not just base what they think on the headlines about the Taliban. There's more to it. As Roya points out, the book and opera are called *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, referring to the physical beauty of Afghanistan and the human beauty of the love story of Laila and Mariam. You don't recognise tragedy without the beauty. It is in that contrast that the power of the story lies.' **ON**

Author Khaled Hosseini

