

A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

SYNOPSIS OF THE OPERA

Music by Sheila Silver

Libretto by Stephen Kitsakos

Based on the novel by Khaled Hosseini

Summary: 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' is the story of two women, born a generation apart, one an uneducated bastard child and the other an educated modern beauty. Fifteen years apart, each is married to the same brutal man, Rasheed. Cold to one another at first, they bond in a loving mother-daughter relationship and make heroic sacrifices for one another as war surrounds them, their husband's abuse mounts, and patriarchal oppression is on the rise. A story of love and passion, two heroines emerge as symbols of the universal bond that exists between women.

More depth:

Fifteen year old Mariam, the cast-off bastard child of a rich father, is forced to leave her rural home after her mother's suicide, and marry a middle-aged cobbler from Kabul named Rasheed. Alone, scared and forced to wear the burka, something unfamiliar to her, she tries her best to be a dutiful wife, but is unable to conceive a child. She lives a loveless existence with a husband who abuses her regularly for her failure to give him a son.

Years later, as competing factions of sectarian warlords secure a stranglehold on Kabul, a bomb explodes in Mariam's neighborhood killing the parents of fourteen-year-old Laila, a modern, educated, ravishing beauty. Rasheed brings the wounded girl to his home and Mariam, reluctantly, nurses her back to health. Rasheed, a sixty-year old man, schemes to get Laila to marry him by concocting a story that her beloved fiancée, Tariq, who fled out of filial duty with his aging parents to Pakistan, has been killed. Laila, secretly carrying Tariq's child, agrees to marry Rasheed, hoping to create a safe haven for the child.

At first Mariam is cold to Laila, but gradually the women bond over Laila's baby, a girl named Aziza, as well as their hatred of Rasheed, who abuses them both psychologically and physically. Eventually the Taliban rise to power and life in Kabul becomes even more oppressive. When the two wives and Aziza attempt a daring escape from the city they are caught, escalating Rasheed's abuse and anger. Although Laila eventually gives Rasheed the son he has always wanted, the violence continues.

The turning point comes when Tariq, Laila's beloved, returns to Kabul and finds her. Rasheed learns of Tariq's visit to the house and in an act of extreme rage, begins to strangle Laila. Mariam, refusing to stand silent, saves Laila's life by hitting Rasheed on the head with a shovel, killing him.

Mariam convinces Laila to flee with Tariq and Laila's two children while she, Mariam, will remain to take responsibility for Rasheed's death, knowing that she will be sentenced to death. As Mariam walks to her execution, an understanding of her life brings her a sense of self-worth and spiritual peace: she lived a life of consequence — she has loved and been loved... she saved Laila's life. She knows that Allah will forgive her.

A Thousand Splendid Suns Cast and Doubling Possibilities

With doublings on the smaller roles, this opera can be performed with 11 singers plus 1 singing child in last scene. There is no chorus.

Principals

Mariam, lyric mezzo

Laila, lyric soprano

Rasheed, baritone, possibly bass-baritone

Tariq, tenor

Secondary Roles

Fariba, mezzo (Laila's mother, Mariam's friend)

Hakim, bass-baritone (Laila's father)

Can also sing **Driver** (Act I, sc.i)

Nana, dramatic soprano (Mariam's mother)

Smaller Roles

Jalil, tenor, Mariam's father (Act I sc. ii)

Can also sing

Wakil (Act II sc. iv, man in bus station)

Prison Guard (end of Act II, sc.v, jailor for Mariam)

Three Wives can also sing the **Three Market Women**:

High soprano (**Wife #2, Market Woman #1, Wajma**)

Medium soprano or high mezzo (**Wife #3, Market Woman #2**)

Low mezzo or contralto (**Wife #1, Market Woman #3**)

Mullah, bass (Act I, sc. ii)

can also sing

Abdul Sharif (Act II sc. ii) Rasheed's friend who tells Laila Tariq is dead

Taliban Guard in the bus station scene (Act II, Sc iv)

Driver (Act I, sc. 1) (**Driver** can also be sung by **Hakim**)

Midwife, Wajma lyric soprano (Act I sc. iv)

Is same character as

Market Woman #1

Zalmai, boy of 5, child soprano

Aziza, girl, non-singing role, ages: newborn/toddler (doll); age 7- 8 (optional) for moment at end of opera

A Cast of 11 plus the child can cover everything if:

Fariba sings **Wife #3** and **Nana** sings **Market Women #2**

OR

Nana sings **Wife #3** and **Market Woman #2**

Orchestra for A Thousand Splendid Suns

2 Flutes, 2° doubling Piccolo
1 Oboe
1 CA
2 Bb Clarinets
1 Bb Bass Clarinet
2 Bassoons

2 Horns
2 Trumpets
2 Tenor Trombones
1 Bass Trombone
1 Tuba

Harp
Celesta/Piano (one player)

Percussion: 2 Players
 Xylophone
 Chimes
 Marimba
 Glock
 Vibraphone
 Crotales
 2 Tams
 Cymbals

Strings 8/8/6/6/4 32 strings minimum – more possible

Bansuri soloist* (plays 6-8 different bansuris)

Tabla soloist* (plays 4 *tablas* (F, C, C#, Eb), *Baya*, mini-*Dholek*, *Daf* (frame drum), *Udu* (Ceramic middle Eastern drum) 1 Tibetan singing bowl)

*The two Hindustani instruments are not part of the regular flute/percussion sections. They are “non-Western soloists.” They each need separate amplification and in addition, the bansuri needs reverb. They need to be miked, not only so that they are heard in the hall, but so that the rest of the orchestra and singers can hear them. In addition, they need a monitor or an ear feed so that they can hear the singers and the other members of the orchestra. There are many solutions to how this can be achieved. Ideally they should be close to the conductor in the pit but it is conceivable that they could be onstage, depending on how the director wants to use them. Since their parts involve varying degrees of improvisation and depending on whether or not they have performed the opera before, they may need to be included in the rehearsal process from the beginning with the singers.

Total:

32 strings, 17 winds, + 4 -- 1 piano/celesta, 1 harp and 2 percussion

A CHAMBER OPERA ORCHESTRATION (12 players) IS IN PROGRESS: clarinet/bs clar.; horn, trbn/bs.trbn; vln, vla, ce, cbs; piano, harp, 1 perc, and 2 Hindustani soloists: *bansuri* and *tabla*.

BIOS

KHALED HOSSEINI, Author

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. In 1980, after the Soviet invasion of his birthplace, Khaled and his family were granted political asylum in the U.S. Khaled studied medicine and practiced as a physician in California until 2004, after which he dedicated himself to writing. He is the author of *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and other books with over 12 million books sold world-wide. He has served as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, since 2006. In 2008, he launched The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, which provides humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. He lives in California.

SHEILA SILVER, Composer

Sheila Silver is a distinguished composer of chamber and orchestral music, songs, and opera. "Only a few composers in any generation enliven the art form with their musical language and herald new directions in music. Sheila Silver is such a visionary." (*Wetterauer Zeitung*) As a 2014 Guggenheim Fellow, she traveled to India to study Hindustani music with master singer Kedar Narayan Bodas in order to incorporate elements of Hindustani music into her score for *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Her opera *The Wooden Sword* won the Sackler Prize in Music Composition for Opera. Other awards include the Rome Prize, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Composers Award, a Bunting Institute/Radcliffe Fellowship, and the Prix de Paris. Her work has been commissioned and performed throughout the world. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was shortlisted for "Best World Premiere" by International Opera Awards, 2023. Silver is Professor Emeritus of Music at Stony Brook University. She was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, and began studying piano at the age of five.

STEPHEN KITSAKOS, Librettist

Stephen Kitsakos is an opera librettist, theater writer, and performing arts educator. Writing commissions include the National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, American Opera Project, BMI Foundation, Florida Arts Council, ABC-CLIO, ASCAP Foundation, Catskill Watershed Corp. and the Episcopal Diocese of New York. With the composer Sheila Silver he wrote the libretto for *The Wooden Sword* ('09) and the cantata *The White Rooster* ('10) for the Smithsonian Institution. Other collaborations include *The Other Voice* ('98) with composer Robert Starer and Gail Godwin, *Single Occupancies* ('20) with composer Martin Hennessy and librettist Mark Campbell and *The Pleasing Recollection*, A Cabaret Opera ('22) for baritone Michael Kelly, with music by Hennessy. A contributing writer for *The Sondheim Review*, Kitsakos was a Professor of Theater Arts at State University of New York-New Paltz, and currently teaches at University of California-Los Angeles' Osher Institute and The Studios of Key West. The opera adaptation of Tomasz Jedrowski's *Swimming in the Dark* with Hennessy is in progress.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is published by Argenta Music. For more information contact:
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