

# THE WHITE ROOSTER

A Chamber Opera in One Act



MUSIC BY SHEILA SILVER  
LIBRETTO STEPHEN KITSAKOS

# THE WHITE ROOSTER

Music by Sheila Silver  
Libretto by Stephen Kitsakos

From an original story developed by Stephen Kitsakos & Sheila Silver

Commissioned for **TAPESTRY**  
by the Freer Galley of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery  
at the Smithsonian Institution on the occasion of the exhibit  
*"IN THE REALM OF THE BUDDHA"*  
Premiere: July 10-11, 2010, Freer Sackler Galleries, Washington, D.C.

Scored for 4 women's voices, 1 man  
5 Tibetan singing bowls and hand drums

## CHARACTERS

Yangchen, Tsering, Tsomo, Pema	Tibetan Buddhist Nuns
The Narrators	Sung by Tsomo & Pema
Diki , a young nomadic maiden	Sung by Tsering
The White Rooster, a Prince living under a spell	Sung by Yangchen
A Chinese Doctor	Speaking role **

\*\* In the World Premiere the speaking role was also taken by the percussionist who entered the action unexpectedly.

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*The opera takes place in the present day on the outskirts of a small village on the Tibetan Plateau near the edge of the Indian border in the Himalayas. Three women are kneeling on the ground of a rudimentary hut. Through gesture and indication it is apparent they are caring for another, unseen woman, who is ill. They are Tibetan Buddhist nuns who have begun a long and arduous journey to exile in India. They carry in their satchels the necessities for sustenance and prayer: food, water, the Tibetan singing bowls they incorporate into their daily life for spiritual nourishment, and a “khatag” – a ceremonial white scarf, either cotton or silk, used to establish contact between persons or between a person and a deity.*

YANGCHEN, TSERING & TSOMO  
*(chanting Dharani for Medicine Buddha)*

TEYATA: OM BEKANZE BEKANZE  
MAHA BEKANZE RANZA  
SAMUNGATE SOHA

Ray of light like a hundred thousand suns.  
Ray of light like a hundred thousand suns.  
Purify my mind, Purify my thoughts,  
Sisters meditate on the Medicine Buddha.

YANGCHEN

She suffers still from the loss of blood.

TSERING

There's a bullet lodged somewhere.  
A soldier's bullet.

YANGCHEN, TSERING & TSOMO

Purify my mind, Purify my thoughts

YANGCHEN

How can we dream of Dharamsala?

TSERING

How can we dream of a blessing from His Holiness?

TSOMO

Our dreams make us mindful of death.

YANGCHEN

She will die soon if we don't get help.

TSOMO

Death is inevitable. Only the time is uncertain.  
Be mindful of death  
and the meditation will be more powerful.

YANGCHEN, TSERING & TSOMO

Everything is changing from moment to moment.  
Nothing can remain unchanged.  
There is nothing to hold onto.  
Do not attach.

YANGCHEN  
*(spoken)*

Look! She's stirring.

TSOMO  
*(spoken)*

Give her some water.

*PEMA enters, breathless.*

TSERING  
*(spoken)*

Pema's back!

PEMA  
*(taking things out of her bag)*

I found some herbs and butter to make a salve.  
It should help to stop the bleeding.  
And I spoke with an old woman.  
She sends us some food and her blessings for a safe journey.

TSOMO

Did anyone else see you?

TSERING

Is there help to be found?

PEMA

There is a doctor but he is one of them.  
You know that he is forbidden to help us.

FOUR NUNS

Everything is changing from moment to moment.  
Nothing can remain unchanged.  
There is nothing to hold onto.  
Do not attach.

*They continue chanting Dharani for the Medicine Buddha.*

TEYATA: OM BEKANZE BEKANZE  
MAHA BEKANZE RANZA  
SAMUNGATE SOHA

*PEMA sings an extended prayer in preparation for giving healing herbs while the others accompany her.*

YANGCHEN

We are a long way off from Lake Nam Tso . . .

PEMA

*(finishing her healing tasks)*

We suffer so on this journey.

TSERING

Did we make the right decision to come?

YANGCHEN

We are accustomed to hardship.  
But we will endure to walk the path of the Buddha.

FOUR NUNS

We are accustomed to hardship.  
But we will endure to walk the path of the Buddha.

TSOMO

Yes, we are accustomed to hardship.  
That is why we are able to make this journey.  
But we must never lose our compassion  
for those who would harm us,  
For those who would see our culture fail.  
For that is not our way.

TSERING, YANGCHEN,PEMA

Let not anger control you.  
Fill your hearts with love, For that is our way.  
For that is our way.

For that is our way.

*PEMA, YANGCHEN AND TSERING look at one another and at TSOMO, understanding that their suffering is an opportunity to develop their compassion*

PEMA

As we spin the mani wheel,  
Let's tell a story to help our sister heal.

TSOMO

Yes, let's tell a story...

YANGCHEN

*(excitedly)*

I know, The Tale of the White Rooster!  
I'll be the White Rooster

TSERING

And I will play Diki

TSOMO

Pema and I will narrate.

*The four women place themselves in a circle around their sick sister. TSOMO takes a large and special "khatag" (white silk scarf) out of her bag and gives it to YANGCHEN who wraps it around herself becoming the WHITE ROOSTER. TSERING puts on a Tibetan head scarf and becomes the maiden DIKI.*

PEMA & TSOMO

Like a jewel in a crown  
stood a house by a lake  
that the sunlight would kiss  
every morning to wake.  
In the family were three,  
they were sisters in name.  
They were raised in that house  
but they weren't the same.

They had barrels of tea  
and sweet barley in sacks.  
and a pasture of grass  
for the family's yaks.  
They made butter and cheese  
which they hung on a string.  
And the herd was the source  
of the family's well being.

And they loved them as much  
as they loved one another.

One evening when Diki was returning  
with the herd she became  
distracted by a beautiful voice singing.

YANGCHEN

*(The Rooster singing a mantra)*

OM A HUNG BENZA  
GURU PEMA SIDDHI HUNG

*The White Rooster's mantra continues under narrators.*

PEMA & TSOMO

She followed the voice.  
It lured her like a labyrinth.  
But she could not find the source.  
So she returned to the pasture  
to find her yaks had disappeared.  
She looked everywhere  
but they were not to be found.  
And saddened by the loss she started for home.

DIKI

But the path seemed unfamiliar.  
And as twilight turned to night  
she saw a cave with a red door.  
Surely something she had  
never seen before.

NAMO BUDDHYA, NAMO BUDDHYA  
NAMO DHARMYA, NAMO SANGHYA  
NAMO BUDDHYA, NAMO BUDDHYA  
NAMO DHARMYA, NAMO SANGHYA

Suddenly the door wide open was sprung.  
And she saw a White Rooster who spoke in her tongue.

THE WHITE ROOSTER

Tashi Delek!

DIKI

Can you help me find my lost yaks?

THE WHITE ROOSTER

Perhaps. But what will you do for me?

DIKI

I do not know much that would be useful to a bird.  
You are a bird... aren't you?

THE WHITE ROOSTER

Yes. I am a rooster... and I am lonely.  
Will you return?

DIKI

How will I know where to find the door?

THE WHITE ROOSTER

Diki, my blossom.  
Just follow your tracks.  
Then I shall tell you where to find your lost yaks.

*He turns away from her and begins chanting.*

OM TARE TUTARE TURE SOHA  
OM TARE TUTARE TURE SOHA  
OM TARE TUTARE TURE SOHA  
OM TARE TUTARE TURE SOHA

DIKI  
NAMO BUDDHAYA  
NAMO BUDDHAYA  
NAMO DHARMYA  
NAMO SANGHAYA

PEMA & TSOMO

*(spoken)*

And so she returned home.  
But remembering her promise  
followed her footsteps back again.  
Past the side of the lake,  
in the shade of the big mountain,  
until once again she was at the big red door.

DIKI

NAMO BUDDHAYA  
NAMO BUDDHAYA  
NAMO DHARMYA  
NAMO SANGHAYA

ROOSTER

OM TARE  
TU TARE  
TURE SOHA  
OM .....

THE WHITE ROOSTER

You have returned as promised.

DIKI

Yes, I can see that  
you are no ordinary bird.  
I would like to bring my yaks home, please.

THE WHITE ROOSTER

But I have something else in mind.

*(with great emotion)*

I am lonely.  
Diki, will you be my wife?

DIKI

How can I when I must care for my sisters?

THE WHITE ROOSTER

I will send the herd to nourish them  
if you will stay here with me.  
They will have yak milk,  
but *you* will have cream.  
Diki, do not be deceived!  
Diki, things are not always what they seem.

PEMA & TSOMO

And with anguish Diki thought ...



DIKI

By the merit I accumulate  
from practicing generosity  
and the other perfections,  
may I attain Enlightenment  
in order to benefit all living beings.

PEMA & TSOMO  
*(spoken)*

And so she came to live with The White Rooster.

PEMA, TSOMO, DIKI, ROOSTER

Everything is changing  
from moment to moment.  
Nothing can remain unchanged.  
There is nothing to hold onto.  
Do not attach.

PEMA & TSOMO  
And so the price was paid.  
And so the sacrifice was made.  
A year went by,  
but she wasn't distraught.  
He seemed so agreeable  
and they never fought.  
And despite a cave filled  
with feathers and clutter  
she nourished on yak meat  
and sweet rice with butter.

DIKI & ROOSTER  
OM TARE TU TARE SO HA.  
OM TARE TU TARE SO HA.  
etc. etc.

But one night the moonlight enticed her.  
So she went for a walk  
in the cool, mountain air.  
And there at the edge of the field  
she heard his song.

NAMO BUDDHAYA.  
NAMO BUDDHAYA.  
NAMO DHARMAYA.

DIKI

THE WHITE ROOSTER

OM A HUNG BENZA  
GURU PEMA SIDDHI HUNG

PEMA & TSOMO

As she approached she saw  
a handsome young man.  
Arms stretched to the sky!

DIKI

This is no rooster who warbles a call –  
This is no rooster I see here at all.

PEMA & TSOMO

He was singing to the moon  
in the snowy paradise.

*THE ROOSTER turns and sees her – their eyes meet. DIKI is stunned.*

WHITE ROOSTER

Diki, do not be deceived.  
Diki, things are not always  
as they seem.

*DIKI runs back and forth contemplating.*

PEMA & TSOMO

And then she ran, frantically ....  
across the field to the cave,  
to the red door and there,  
on the floor,  
she saw it ...

The white skin.  
The skin of the rooster.  
And she seized it and  
threw it into the fire.

Crackling and consuming!!  
Until there was nothing left.  
But ashes. But ashes. But ashes.

*During the above, Diki picks up the white “khatag” that has been lying on the floor and in a series of stylized gestures pretends it is being fed to the flames.*

But the moon began to cry.  
For she had got it wrong.

THE WHITE ROOSTER

Diki, what have you done?  
It is true. I am a man.  
A prince of my people.  
But I refused to be a slave to the demons.  
I fought. I rebelled.

DIKI

If I burn this skin  
he will be released.  
No longer shall he  
be a beast!

But the demons are powerful.  
They trapped me. They imprisoned me. And I am released just once a day  
To sing about freedom.  
To sing about liberation.  
My skin is my prison  
to remind me to be obedient.  
But now that it is destroyed,  
Never shall I be released.  
Never. Not even once a day.  
And now I shall now be taken by the demons ...  
They will come.

DIKI

Husband hear me!  
Husband listen to me!  
Husband hear what I say!  
No, we shall not let them come!  
Don't give the demons power!  
No, we shall not let them in!  
Don't give away your power.  
Be mindful of this and the journey we take,  
will lead you to freedom.

DIKI, PEMA & TSOMO

Purify your thoughts.  
Purify your mind.  
Husband meditate on the power of compassion.

DIKI & WHITE ROOSTER

Ray of light like a hundred thousand suns.  
Ray of light like a hundred thousand suns.  
Purify your thoughts.  
Purify your mind.  
Husband meditate on the power of compassion.

OM TARE TUTARE TURE SOHA.  
OM TARE TUTARE TURE SOHA.  
OM TARE TUTARE TURE SOHA.

DIKI  
NAMO BUDDHAYA  
NAMO BUDDHAYA  
NAMO BUDDHAYA

*The women circle around the "fire" having resurrected the white scarf which Diki holds above her. As the chanting and dancing builds to a climax, the DOCTOR knocks loudly and then enters. The women stop singing one by one.*

*The illusion of the story-telling ends abruptly and the "khatag" falls to the floor.*

*The Doctor's lines are all spoken.*

THE DOCTOR

The power of your singing has drawn me here ...

*He looks around the room and sees the prostrate sister.*

PEMA

*(cautiously)*

He is the doctor. I saw him in the village. The one I told you about...

TSERING

And forbidden to help us.

YANGCHEN

He could report us.

THE DOCTOR

Let me see your sister.

She needs my help.

TSOMO

Sisters calm yourselves!

He is offering help!

*TSOMO guides the DOCTOR to the unseen nun on the floor. YANGCHEN begins to softly chant "OM MANI PEME HUNG", and eventually others join her, lastly. TSOMO voice rises above the others. Meanwhile the doctor pantomimes carrying for the wounded nun, the removal of the bullet, and the bandaging of the wounds. The women chant freely the "OM MANI PEM HUNG" as he attends the sick nun. Finally he rises to leave.*

TSOMO

Will she heal?

DOCTOR

Yes.

TSOMO

Good Doctor, please tell me  
why have you saved this life?

DOCTOR

Sisters, I, too, have suffered.  
I save this life gladly.  
Every act of kindness counts.

*He starts to leave. TSOMO gently stops him.*

TSOMO

Doctor, wait.

We must give you something to thank you.

THE DOCTOR

*(shaking his head)*

But I require nothing ...

TSOMO

Please.

*While Tsomo presents the Doctor with the "khatag", the other three sisters continue their chanting of the "OM MANI PEME HUNG". Eventually, Tsomo joins them as it continues to build. One by one the nuns place their singing bowls on a table altar and once the doctor accepts the scarf he arranges their bowls and then begins to play them with mallets, in counterpoint to their chant. He continues in his accompaniment until the end of the opera.*

TSERING

By the merit I accumulate  
from practicing generosity  
and the other perfections,  
may I attain Enlightenment  
in order to benefit all living beings.

YANGCHEN, PEMA, TSOMO, TSERING

OM MANI PEME HUNG.

OM MANI PEME HUNG.

May I attain Enlightenment  
in order to benefit all living beings.

\*\*\* END OF OPERA \*\*\*