



▶ NEXT IN THIS TOPIC

REVIEWS

As Opera, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Is a Perfect Fit

March 1, 2023 | By Thomas May, *Musical America*



SEATTLE—The world premiere of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* at Seattle Opera has attracted attention well beyond the usual music circles. With the Taliban’s recent return to power in Afghanistan, both the opera and its source, Khaled Hosseini’s 2007 novel of the same name, suddenly gained a chilling, unforeseen relevance. But the opening night performance (February 26) did not depend on the nightmarish specter of a revived Taliban to make its powerful impact.

Soon after reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, composer Sheila Silver sensed that the story’s combination of tragedy and endurance has an archetypal, larger-than-life quality—exactly what opera excels at expressing. It’s a terrible irony that the work’s lengthy genesis has actually made this story of the oppression of women even timelier than when Silver first considered the idea over a decade ago.

But along with the universal aspects of the story it tells, *Suns* is deeply rooted in the uniqueness of Afghan culture and history. When Seattle Opera General Director Christina Scheppelmann inherited the commission from her predecessor, Aidan Lang (the score was completed the year before the pandemic), she wanted to ensure that an Afghan woman’s perspective would have an integral presence in the production. She therefore invited the acclaimed filmmaker Roya Sadat—now in unplanned exile from her native Afghanistan as a result of the Taliban takeover—to make her debut as an opera director.

Both *Suns* and Hosseini’s debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, have been successfully dramatized for theater and film, but this is the first operatic adaptation of his fiction. Silver’s longtime collaborator Stephen Kitsakos compressed Hosseini’s epic narrative into a libretto tracing the parallel journeys of its two main protagonists, Mariam and Laila, from the hopeful innocence of youth through their forced marriage to the Kabul shoemaker Rasheed while they are still teenagers to the dramatic denouement made possible by their intense bonding.



John Moore (*Rasheed*), Karin Mushegain (*Mariam*), Grace Elaine Franck-Smith (*Zalmai*)

Kitsakos, who is also a theater director, skillfully contrasts the stark difference in family environments from which the two women originate—Mariam the daughter of an outcast mother, Laila the doted-on child in a loving home—as well as the distinctive effect each has on the oppressive atmosphere of Rasheed’s household.

The libretto interpolates glimpses of the public sphere and a sense of the chaotic sweep of historical events from the 1970s to 2001 (at the height of the Taliban’s first regime) into a sequence of mostly intimate domestic scenes. Kitsakos even finds room for some rare comic relief in an ensemble scene that takes place in a Kabul bazaar; not coincidentally, it is the most brightly lit moment in Jen Schriever’s otherwise somber, shadow-obsessed lighting design.

The score

In order to imagine a sound world appropriate to *Suns*, Silver—a Seattle native who has been based in New York throughout her career—moved to India for a half-year to immerse herself in the Hindustani classical tradition on which the music of Afghanistan draws. The score deftly fuses raga-based leitmotifs and mesmerizing drones with Silver’s individual, obviously Western voice. Her melodic gift is matched by a flair for intriguing orchestral colors and solo or chamber textures that suggest glints of light or shadow to give the musical fabric added vibrancy. Viswa Subbaraman conducted with sensitive attention to these details, eliciting moods of almost mystical tranquility in moments of reflection while going full throttle for the score’s most violent outbursts.

The contributions by Steve Gorn and Deep Singh as soloists on bansuri (Indian bamboo flute) and tabla, respectively, proved particularly effective in establishing a sense of immemorial tradition against which the opera’s events unfold. Silvers also showed an essential operatic skill in her ability to devise vocal characterizations that clearly differentiate each of the four principals.

As Mariam, mezzo-soprano Karin Mushegain imbued her lines with a compelling blend of pathos, despair, and, especially in her transcendent final scene (with a nod to Puccini’s *Suor Angelica*), radiance. Though at times more heft was needed to cut through the orchestra, her inspired vocal acting persuasively traced the full arc of Mariam’s journey—which in turn is the opera’s spine. John Moore’s dusky baritone, by contrast, spewed cruelty and scorn but never warmth, underscoring the prison of static resentment Rasheed has built around himself.

Maureen McKay fearlessly shaped Laila’s high-lying, at times acrobatic lines with lyrical warmth and passion and showed extraordinary mettle in her moments of confrontation. The chemistry was palpable between her and Rafael Moras in the tenor role of her lover Tariq, whose unexpected return to Kabul precipitates the culminating crisis. Moras navigated the part’s high tessitura with heroic bravado.

The rest of the cast appeared in multiple roles, creating a multi-hued impression of the larger society and the enforcers of power. Ashram Sewailam and Sarah Coit stood out as Laila’s parents: Hakim, a gentle father in contrast to brutal patriarchy, and the kind Fariba, who tries to befriend Mariam.

Hope

Such acts of kindness serve as reminders of the promise and hope that continue to exist in the face of the opera’s depiction of crushing oppression and poverty. So, too, the reassuring presence of nature in the form of majestic skies and a mountain backdrop, a foil to the claustrophobic, clay-brick dwellings of Misha Kachman’s rotating set.

Sadat collaborated with the design team to shape a theatrical and visual language that unfolds patiently, accruing meaning with each new telling detail. In one scene, for example, still early in their marriage, Rasheed presents Mariam with a blue burqa that we watch her slowly retreat into as she tries it on for the first time. Deborah Trout consulted with Afghan designer Rika Sadat to devise costumes that traverse the narrative’s three-decade-long arc in parallel to the characters.



Divided into two extensive, 75-minute acts, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* at times felt overlong. Lengthy stretches of exposition or characterization, particularly in the first act, may need to be trimmed to broaden the opera’s appeal. On the other hand, it could be argued that this is an intentional strategy, that *verismo*-style, to-the-point efficiency would only commodify the story according to Western expectations. In its most indelible moments—above all, when the bond between Mariam and Laila emerges as the opera’s true love story—*A Thousand Splendid Suns* reaffirms the human connection that crosses cultures and that may, in this era of extreme polarization, be our last hope.

Top: Karin Mushegain as Mariam (left) and Maureen McKay as Laila (right).

Bottom: John Moore (*Rasheed*), Karin Mushegain (*Mariam*)

Photos by Sunny Martini



Law and Disorder by GG Arts Law  
Career Advice by Legendary Manager Edna Landau  
An American in Paris by Frank Cadenhead



ma career center

FEATURED JOBS

Find Jobs  GO

Staff Conductor  
Philadelphia, PA - **The Philadelphia Orchestra**

Assistant House Manager  
Princeton, NJ - **Princeton Symphony Orchestra**

Bartender/Server  
Princeton, NJ - **Princeton Symphony Orchestra**

Production Assistant  
Princeton, NJ - **Princeton Symphony Orchestra**

Usher  
Princeton, NJ - **Princeton Symphony Orchestra**

Administrative Assistant - Managerial  
New York, NY - **Opus 3 Artists**

Vice President of Development  
Columbus, OH - **Columbus Symphony Orchestra**

Executive Director  
Dallas, TX - **Dallas Winds**

Post a Job  More Jobs

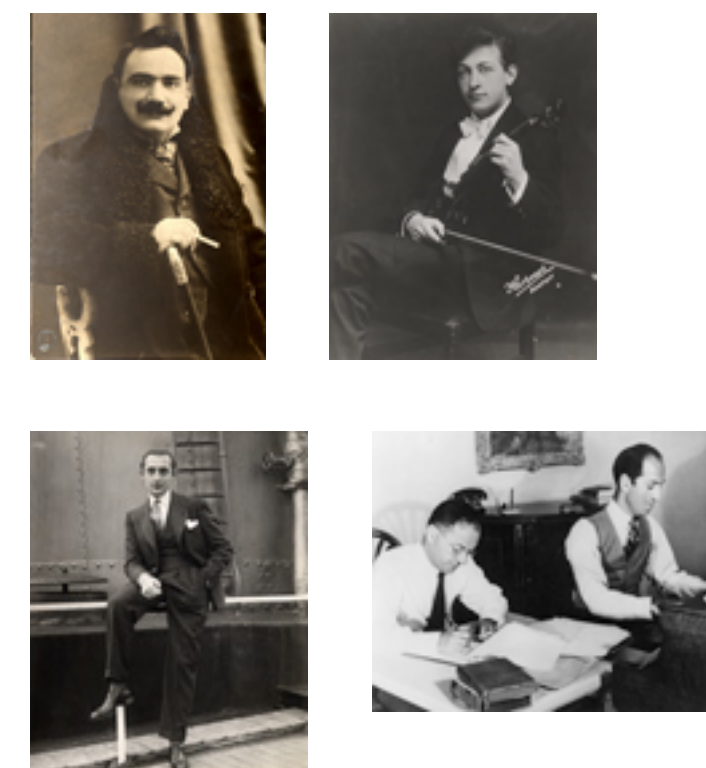
Powered By yourmembership

MOST READ on musicalamerica

- [New Artist of the Month: Plucked Instrument Specialist Brandon Acker](#)
- [MacDowell Artist Retreat Hires New Director](#)
- [Alexander Pereira Quits Maggio Musicale](#)
- [A Dim \*Lohengrin\* That Glistens Musically](#)
- [Philly O Plays for New U.S. Citizens, Including One of Its Own](#)
- [A Day at the Beach with the Oakland Symphony](#)
- [Catching Up with Competition Results](#)
- [At the Met: A Concert for Ukraine, II](#)
- [Opera Philadelphia Unveils Premieres This Season and Next](#)
- [A New Play About the Extraordinary Chevalier de Saint-Georges](#)

RENT A PHOTO

Search Musical America’s archive of photos from 1900-1992.



» BROWSE & SEARCH ARCHIVE