

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 and their husband's abuse mounts. A story of love and passion, two heroines emerge as symbols of a 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. Consequently, 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, 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 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 eventually Laila 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 has loved and been loved... she has saved Laila's life. She has lived a life of consequence. 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 11-12 singers and 2 children, one of whom is a singing role. 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**)

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 lies to Laila

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

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

Zalmai, boy of 5, child soprano

Aziza, girl, ages 3-8 non-singing role –

A Cast of 11 can cover everything if:

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

OR

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

Sheila Silver Bio

“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*, Germany)

SHEILA SILVER is an important and vital voice in American music today. She has written in a wide range of mediums, from solo instrumental to large orchestral works, from opera to feature film scores. Her musical language is a unique synthesis of the tonal and atonal worlds, coupled with a rhythmic complexity which is both masterful and compelling. Audiences and critics praise her music as powerful and emotionally charged, accessible, and masterfully conceived. “Silver speaks a musical language of her own, one rich in sonority, lyrical intensity and poetic feeling.” *Chicago Tribune*

Silver is currently completing the orchestration for her opera based on Khaled Hosseini’s international best-selling novel, **A Thousand Splendid Suns**, which will be premiered by the Seattle Opera in February 2021. Recent honors for this project include: a 2016 *Opera America Commissioning Award* and a 2014 *Opera America Discovery Grant for Female Composers*; selection in *Opera America’s 2016 New Works Forum* concert; a 2015 *NEA Opera Development Grant* with American Opera Projects; and a 2013 *Guggenheim Fellowship*.

In order to develop a musical vocabulary with which to evoke the color of Afghanistan in **A Thousand Splendid Suns**, Sheila has made several trips to India to study Hindustani music with Pandit Kedar Narayan Bodas. This Hindustani sound world has filtered into other recent compositions such as her **Nocturne** and **Toccata**, premiered by Gilbert Kalish at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in 2015 and **Being in Life**, Concerto for Alphonse, French horn, 5 Tibetan singing bowls, and string orchestra. This piece, commissioned by the Fromm Foundation for Seattle’s *Philharmonia Northwest*, Julia Tai, conductor, and Ann Ellsworth, horns, will be premiered in October, 2019.

Other honors include the *Sackler Prize in Opera*; *Bunting Institute Fellowship*; *Rome Prize*; *Prix de Paris*, *American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Composer Award*; twice winner of the *ISCM National Composers Competition*; and awards and commissions from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Camargo Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, the Barlow Foundation, the Paul Fromm Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Cary Trust.

A recording of two recent vocal song cycles, **Beauty Intolerable**, **A Songbook based on the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay**, and **On Loving**, is in the works with a host of singers and pianists including soprano Dawn Upshaw and mezzo Stephanie Blythe.

Other operas include a chamber opera, **The Wooden Sword**, winner of the *Sackler Prize in Opera*, and the **The White Rooster, a Tale of Compassion**, commissioned by

the Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Gallery for the exhibit, *In the Realm of the Buddha*, scored for 4 singers, 6 Tibetan singing bowls and improvised frame drums.

Silver is Professor Emeritus of Music at Stony Brook University. Her teachers have included Arthur Berger, Harold Shapero, Erhard Karkoschka, and Gyorgy Ligeti. She was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, began studying piano at the age of 5, is a graduate of Rainier Beach High School, and attended the University of Washington for two years. She holds her BA from the University of California, Berkeley, and a PhD from Brandeis University. She makes her home with film-maker John Feldman and their son Victor, in the mid-Hudson Valley, New York.

For more information:

www.sheilasilver.com

Stephen Kitsakos, Librettist Bio

STEPHEN KITSAKOS is an opera librettist, theater director and writer. With the American composer Sheila Silver, he wrote the librettos for ***A Thousand Splendid Suns***, adapted from the bestselling novel by Khaled Hosseini, as well as ***The Wooden Sword (2009)*** and ***The White Rooster: A Tale of Compassion (2010)*** for the Smithsonian Institution's Freer & Sackler Museums. With the composer Martin Hennessy, he has written the musical monologues, *An Incident in Sutton Square (2017)* and *The Woman in Penthouse A (2018)* which will receive their premieres at The Helmerich Theater at The Studios of Key West, as part of "***Single Occupancies: Three Contemporary Opera Theatre Monologues***" that also include *The Other Room (2014)* with a libretto by Mark Campbell and music by Marisa Michelson.

Mr. Kitsakos was a regular contributor to the magazine *The Sondheim Review* as well as the textbook *Music in American Life (2013)* and his novel *The Accidental Pilgrim* was published by ASD in 2015. He has been a recipient of writing commissions from American Opera Projects, tNYSCA, National Endowment for the Arts, the BMI Foundation, the Catskill Watershed Alliance and the Episcopal Diocese of NY.

He has worked as a dramaturge and theater director on productions of new plays in New York and the Hudson Valley where he was on the Theater Arts Faculty at SUNY New Paltz from 2000-2013. He currently resides in Key West where he is an Artistic Associate of the Key West Art & Historical Society specializing in the work of Tennessee Williams, as well as the The Studios of Key West, the southern Florida-Based interdisciplinary arts organization and residency program.

For more information:

<http://stephenkitsakos.com>