

ZOROASTER IN CLASSICAL WESTERN MUSIC

Dr. Kersey Antia, Aug 10, 2020

References to 'Wise Men' from the East and Magi are made in the early Gregorian chants and the plainsong ritual music. Early French composer Perotin (circa 1160) and an Italian composer Peri (1561) were very much inspired by the East.

The first operatic connection with ancient Persia is seen in an opera *Zoroastre* by French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764). This three-hour long, five-act opera is staged sometimes even now in European opera houses (three CD recordings on Erato label 0927-43182).

Handel (1685-1759) wrote two full length operas about ancient Persia. In *Orlando* (1733), one of the main characters is called Zoroastro. Handel's second opera with Persian connections is titled *Serses* or *Xerxes*. An English composer Thomas Arne (1710-1778) also wrote an opera with a similar title *Artaxeres*.

Mozart, in his famous opera *The Magic Flute* (1791), has created a prominent role – Sarastro. *The Magic Flute* is a very popular opera and many good recordings are available on CDs and DVDs. Italian composer Gioachino Antonio Rossini has also written an opera *Cyrus in Babylon* premiered in 1812.

The most well-known connection between western music and Zoroastrian faith is the music *Also sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss, who was inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's epic *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Strauss' music contains the contrasting of two neighboring tonalities with major and minor modes suggesting dualism – light and darkness good and evil.

His opera *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* – The woman without a shadow (1919) – has a very deep connection with Persian mythology. In this opera, the woman's father is called Kaikobad. His name is frequently uttered in the opera without his actual presence on stage.

Richard Wagner was inspired to create his last opera *Parsifal* (1882), by the epic medieval poem *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eshenbach (1170-1220). He never indicated any connection between his opera and Parsis. Only once has he made a brief reference to Parsis – in his letter to Judith Gautier in 1877 "...the name is Arabian. Parsifal means Parsi, think of the Parsis, the fire worshipers, 'pure'..."

In some of the productions the grail temple and the hall in which the grail is kept show a striking resemblance to our sacred fire altars.

In the finale, Parsifal dressed in a long, white robe enters the inner hall of the temple and begins to perform the service to the Holy Grail. At this moment the fire on the grail starts glowing a brilliant red. With special lighting effects the entire stage turns into crimson, a quintessential Zoroastrian feature.

Gernot Windfuhr suggests that Mozart's opera *Die Zauberflöte* may have a Zoroastrian background and assumes that Mozart may have had access to Anquetil's work, especially the translation of the last Gatha commonly known as the "Wedding" Gatha, which celebrates wifehood, womanhood, and wedding. (*Fezana Journal*, Fall, 1999, p. 70).