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From virtuoso solo to ensemble opera

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From virtuoso solo to ensemble opera

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ABSTRACT

Writing for solo instruments today offers composers an option to create a framework that results from the psychoacoustic interaction of composer, listener and performer. The interaction between musicians, audience and the concert environment, and the extent to which they themselves embody the material of the music presented, can be called into question and a composer's expectation of the dynamics of the concert situation is part of this examination. This understanding in turn prepares the way for one of the ultimate challenges and achievements for a composer, writing an opera. Opera combines all the other arts with the composer in command, which is not the case when composing for dance or providing auxiliary music for theatre. Writing an opera means that all features of structure and timing are in the composer's hands. Opera has had a crisis of identity; the market for traditional operas and classic repertoire but there is no overall identity for contemporary operatic writers. However modern opera is still evolving. This thesis will recount a range of musical ideas developed for a variety of classical solo instruments, all of which attempt to create this interactive concert situation, before going on to consider the three year evolution of my opera *The Doll Behind the Curtain*.

To my mother and father, Parinaz Mafi and Habib Tafreshipour

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: Writing for solo instruments and overview

In 1997 in Esbjerg, the city in Denmark where I lived after entering the conservatoire as a piano major, I realised that my true ambition was to be a composer. I decided that, in particular, I wanted to compose an opera. I felt that I already had a good knowledge of harmony, form and analysis through my studies as a trained pianist. I had been working on an opera for a year when I asked my tutor, Professor Mogens Christensen, for advice about the process of writing an opera. His advice was to put the opera aside and concentrate on writing for smaller ensembles or solo instruments, and to increase my understanding of writing for as many instruments as possible. The eventual transition from solo writing to writing for opera would give me the ability to create multiple characters for each instrument, which in opera is crucial in order to characterise the story. A careful study of solo writing would also increase my ability to create an effective sound world, using fewer instruments but with more expressive individual characters.

Professor Christensen recommended exploring and analysing the composition techniques in solo piano pieces by György Kurtág as well as Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* progressive piano collection in order to create an index of subjects for my solo writing. In turn these studies generated many more questions for me as a composer: Is it important to write a full-scale work? Is it not enough just to write for solo instruments and small ensembles? Later I discovered that, even though they were using monophonic scales, these solo works could be composed so that they sounded symphonic. I decided to take further lessons in music composition and orchestration, and to continue writing works in which I concentrated on single lines.

I did however also start composing an opera at the same time. The theoretical questions that I considered then became relevant for my thesis:

- Are all instruments equally effective as solo instruments?
- What effect does utilizing space in a composition have on the relationship between soloist, composer and audience?
- Can “monophonic” compositions also inhabit a “polyphonic” sound world?

Composing for solo instruments

In Renaissance and Medieval times, large ensembles were unusual. When a composition included parts for more than one instrument, the parts were interchangeable, and not even necessarily for particular instrumental groups. The same music for example for three players might be played by either three strings or three traverso players. This was a practical approach that gave the composers much more scope. Later, during the Baroque and Classical eras, composers became adept at writing works for specific groups of instruments

and began to explore an expanding palette of ideas and slowly an interest in writing for solo instruments became fashionable for composers.

The character of an instrument depends very much on its ability to perform as a solo instrument, but is it the case that all instruments can act as solo instruments? In music, a solo is a piece or a section from a piece played or sung by a single performer. In practice this means many dissimilar things, depending on the genre of music and the idea that informs it. The action of performing on a single instrument is also categorised as a solo, and the performer is more often referred to as a 'soloist'. The double bass is integral in the orchestra, but how well known is it as a solo instrument?



Fig.1, Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680): Great Bass Viol (c.1640), Courtauld Institute Galleries.

It is, of course, completely clear that a solo concert on the largest of the bowed string instruments is not the principal reason for its existence. However, research into the extensive solo repertoire of the instrument in the era of Bottesini, for example, reveals the double bass as a capable solo instrument. Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889) was a virtuoso Italian double bassist, composer and a conductor highly regarded with the composers of his time. Was it simply that the tonal and musical practicability of the double bass did not please them? Bottesini became famed for the virtuosity of his compositions and was allegedly one of the few bassists capable of performing his works in his day. However, not all critics were convinced of the worth of the double bass as a solo instrument. In a review of a solo performance given by Bottesini in 1844, a Viennese critic reported, "Giovanni Bottesini from Milan played with distinction as far as one would call the double bass a solo instrument."¹

It is also critical to consider the fact that only a few players are capable of shining as solo performers, so this can hardly be taken as evidence for the suitability solo instrument of the double bass. The harp is another example of a solo instrument with a limited repertoire. So perhaps the question is: can the double bass or harp make a good solo instrument? A supporter of the instrument would answer yes and quote virtuosi of the past like Ossian Ellis (1928-) and their sensational success.

The harp is one of the oldest instruments; its existence has roots in many ancient cultures from Persian Chang to Japanese kugo both ancient angular harps. It was, however, not until the revolutionary invention of the double-action mechanism in 1810 by Sébastien Érard (1752-1831) which enabled the

harp to play in multiple keys and chromatically, that the repertoire for this instrument began to expand.

One such enthusiast was John Thomas (1826-1913), a Welsh harpist, soloist, and composer who wrote extensively for the new double action harp. These were pieces that showed off the capabilities of the harp, using new virtuosic techniques such as multiple enharmonics with the use of the pedals, seen in his series, *The Seasons*, from 1842. There are numerous recordings such as the Lipman Harp Duo released by Naxos.¹

Other composers also realized the potential of the harp as an orchestral instrument. The most prominent of these was Hector Berlioz in whose *Symphony Fantastique* (1830), the second movement, 'Un Bal', begins with two harps in a dialogue supported by the orchestra. Despite such significant mechanical and musical progress, the repertoire composed for the solo harp is still developing with recent innovations including Graham Fitkin's MIDI-harp concerto (2011). I have also explored the instruments in my harp concerto and two harp trios.

Pendar and solo writing

A composer who had great influence on solo writing was Luciano Berio (1925-2003), whose ground-breaking series of fourteen virtuosic solo pieces for instruments, each entitled *Sequenza*, opened up new sound worlds using extended techniques. Berio's work inspired me to conduct my own research into composing for disparate solo instruments. So far these include works for oboe, piano, cello, clarinet, percussion, horn, double bass and flute, five of which have been recorded in a collection named *Pendar* (2009-2013). These compositions are thematic expositions of the forms, idioms, structures, and textural patterns that are immanent in the musical dialects of the instruments, as I understand them. This collection of work provided me with some fundamental insights and perspectives into solo writing. The composition of *Pendar* is an instinctive rather than cerebral interaction with the outside world.

Pendar is built from a range of sequences of harmonic fields from which the other, strongly characterized musical functions are derived, but the process of modification and cross-pollination helps to create a conceptual continuity, composing to highlight the strengths and the less explored nuances of each instrument. "Pendar" in Persian means thought and I conceive it as that thought which subverts and challenges, aiming directly at the unconscious and confronting the listener when they least expects it. The different relationship between the player and their instrument, and between the audience and performer, constantly twist. During the early stages of composing *Pendar* I could clearly feel an inclination to use a programmatic and exotic element to a work that may not even have been intended at first, or perhaps is not necessarily expressed by the specific techniques or manner of conventional composing.

The length of writing a solo was another factor to consider. It became clear that expanding the length of a *Pendar* would not necessarily extend its variety

¹ Thomas, J.: Harp Music, Naxos.8.570372

of character. Similarly, a short passage could be written to sound as if it is stretched and far longer than it actually is.

Every composer has a specific ideology and sound world in which they are particularly interested. However, it is also important to consider the impact that the performer could give to the work, represented by a freedom given to the performer through tempi, dynamics, etc. During the first compositions for *Pendar*, I had to choose which instrument to write for and the basic sounds, textures and timbres I wanted in my piece. This created a fluid relationship between the performer and instrument, and between the performer and the audience.

Space within a composition and the relationship between performer, composer, and audience

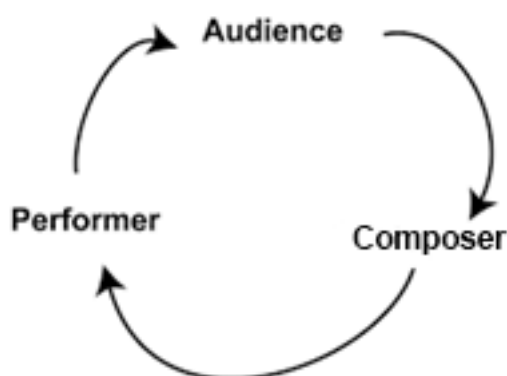


Fig.2, Interaction plan

When writing the *Pendar* I discovered that the idea of an interaction between the three core components – composer, performer, and audience – became of utmost importance. Composing in a way that would treat the material in a non-formal and untraditional way allowed for greater freedom in collaboration not only with the performer but also with the audience in performance. To clarify, this refers to how I might choose to finish or start a phrase. The soloist's input on how to interpret the music of course shaped the work and this freedom was intended to allow listeners to imagine that the material was improvised, as was the idea of leaving space in the music for the imagination of the audience to take over, perhaps anticipating or finishing a phrase.

It is important to consider the varying input that different instrumentalists can offer the composer when writing a solo work. This collaboration with the performer is a key element in shaping and guiding the material, illuminating the musical intent. A player's skill is the basis, and the extent to which they possess a soloist's aura, or are less authoritative when performing, is a further factor that shapes the interpretation of the work. As for the audience, the intention is that the listener can be part of the work by interacting with the sound in the spaces created by the composer. All of this lends itself to the material being interpreted in an interchangeable and multi-faceted way.

In the *Pendar* for solo oboe, for example, the work starts with an attacking opening whose declamatory significance of which is followed by a musical conversation or monologue.



Fig.3, *Pendar* for Oboe, bar 1

The concluding multiphonic then presents the listener with an element of subversion:

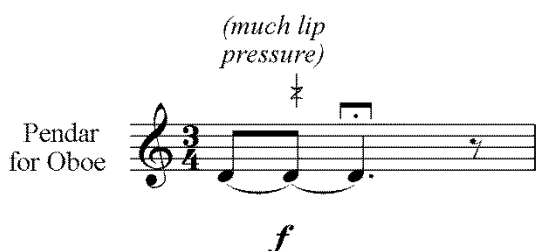


Fig.4, *Pendar* for Oboe, bar 3

When working on the final phrase of this *Pendar*, the idea was to have a multiphonic effect that would not only carry to the back of the hall and remain “strong” but also seem to be located in the “prime site” of the performer’s position.

Pendar for piano is given a more sympathetic form but is still ametric. The intense accentuated opening chords reflect the unsettling nature of the rest of the work. It is the pause at the start of the piece, however, which is the “unifying moment” of uncertainty between the three components of what is to follow.

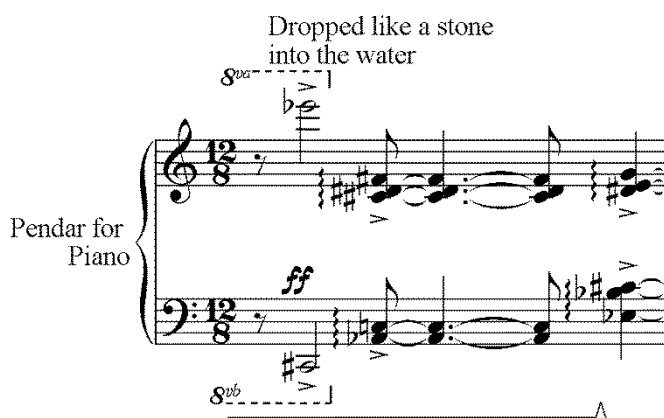


Fig.5, *Pendar* for Piano-bar 1

The lucidity of the moments that come between repeated notes is an echo and a kind of fantasy around a single note, directing the listener to a single sine-wave-like sound. The texture of the holding and repeated notes in this section brings the three components to a dramatic meeting point once again.

Fig.6, *Pendar* for Piano, bar 31-33

The percussive sounds in *Pendar* for solo horn at the beginning have similarities with traditional Persian music. This example is filled with versification and poetic and lyrical expressivity, and the dynamic 'push' that the solo requires.

Fig.7, *Pendar* for Horn, bar 34)

Making “monophony” sound “polyphonic” in performance

One of my stated objectives when writing with monophonic instruments was to create an impression of polyphony.

Fig.8, *Pendar* for Piano, bars 3-4

The figure above shows an example of this, using contrapuntal rhythmic effects, ties, and rests, to create a polyphonic character.

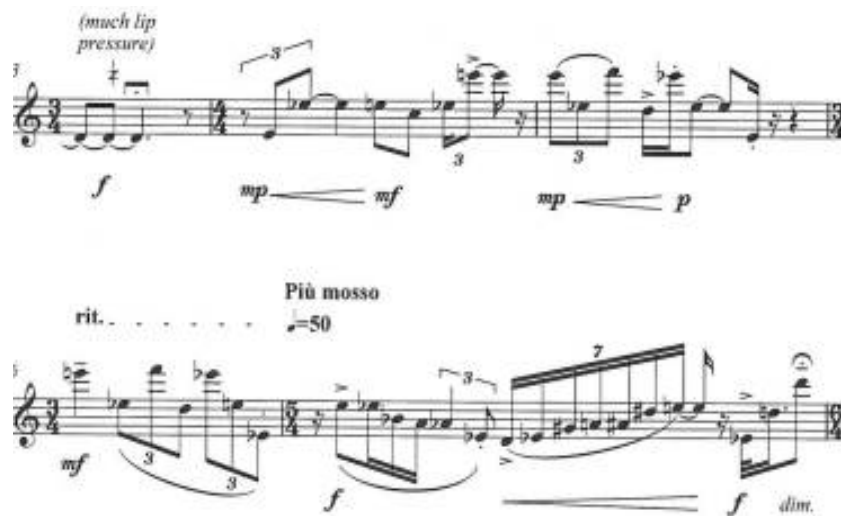


Fig.9, *Pendar* for Oboe, bars 3-7

The polyphonic line in the oboe excerpt demonstrates one voice moving up chromatically, and the lower second voice simultaneously driving apart. Solo writing for me has been a time of discovery, of progression. Completing the *Pendars* gave me a greater insight and became a strong foundation for composing my opera *The Doll Behind the Curtain*.

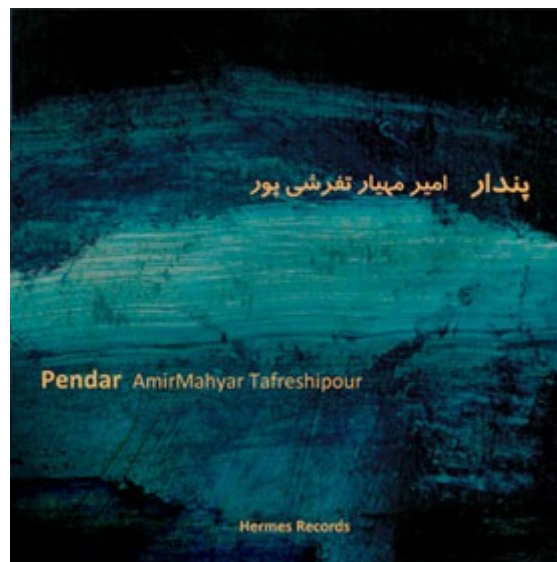


Fig.10, *Pendar* CD, Hermes Records 2012

CHAPTER II

Three Modern Operas

Introduction

The ambition to write an opera was fueled by my own selected viewing of modern opera - an experience that made me aware that the operatic form need not be grounded in the reinterpretation of a classic form. I discovered an art form that was able to explore complex issues, combining drama and psychology and modern compositional techniques.

I was introduced to modern opera in 1998, during my studies at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Esbjerg in Denmark. The opera was called *System Naturae*, and it was composed by my first composition professor, Mogens Christensen. It was produced by Den Anden Opera in Copenhagen in 1998. Den Anden Opera (The Other Opera), is a thriving space for experimental and chamber opera, founded in Copenhagen in 1995 with the composer Mogens Winkel Holm as the driving force. It was created because it was felt that Copenhagen's main opera stage, the Royal Theatre, did not adequately accommodate new musical drama. Den Anden Opera went on to stage important new works, changing its name to Plex in 2006. It continues to be a thriving forum for new and experimental work.

System Naturae introduced me to a new, more intimate form of musical drama. It was scored for a small chamber ensemble, one soprano and two tenors and one baritone. There was also a male actor, a young boy. Although its subject is historical, dealing with the death of the Swedish naturalist, Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). Mogens Christensen blends baroque instruments and the music of Linnaeus's near contemporary, the Swedish composer Johan Helmich Roman (1694-1758) with percussion, samples and electronic music, moving seamlessly between the eighteenth and the modern sound stage. and the libretto by Sanne Bjerg is a requiem with the underlying theme of nature versus science, its dramatic structure and psychological insights drawing on the traditions of modern drama.

An old man in a nightshirt, alone on a winter's night in a freezing greenhouse, is in the process of clearing up before his inevitable death. The man is Carl Linnaeus and his inner conflict is expressed in the disorder of the greenhouse, littered with upturned pots and smashed shelves. Linnaeus is haunted by both past and present. He hallucinates figures from his past: his father, wrathful and autocratic, his son, himself when younger, cowed by his father and the little boy who would take him out to play in the garden.

This was my first memorable experience of a new sort of opera. Among other things, it showed me how to use a limited instrumental palette effectively, while the libretto helped me understand how dramatic writing works with music. Modern opera is, however, too diverse to allow for generalization or categorization and in this chapter I will discuss modern opera through three examples which I have experienced in recent years: *Le Grand Macabre* by

György Ligeti, *A Dog's Heart* by Alexander Mikhailovich Raskatov, and *Anna Nicole Smith* by Mark Anthony Turnage,

Their composition spans over forty years but they will not provide a comprehensive account of modern opera; instead they suggest three possible directions in modern opera, as well as giving a context to *The Doll Behind the Curtain*. As an Iranian, living in Denmark, then in England, these works contributed to an understanding of different ways to explore issues of displacement and enabled me to write about my own country from a new perspective.

Ligeti: Opera as Black Comedy

Le Grand Macabre by György Ligeti is a black comedy about the end of the world, based on the 1934 play, *La Balade du Grand Macabre*, by the avant-garde Flemish dramatist, Michel De Ghelderode (1898-1962). The libretto was written by Ligeti in association with Michael Meschke who was a director of the Stockholm puppet theatre. It was Ligeti's only opera. The premiere was in 1978 at the The Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm.

It was composed between 1974 and 1977 when Ligeti's style was going through a period of change, adopting a more eclectic approach to tonality and modality. Ligeti produced a revised version of the opera in 1996, I first saw *Le Grand Macabre* in 2009 in a production by the English National Opera, directed by Alex Ollé and Valentina Carrasco, at the Coliseum. in London.

The plot of *Le Grand Macabre* is meandering and absurdist, shot through with moments of farce. The theme of the opera is mortality and its central character is Death, here called Nekrotzar. The action takes place in "Breughelland", a country drawn from Peter Breughel's paintings. The cast features a drunken everyman, Piet the Pot, the sinister Grand Macabre, Nekrotzar, who proclaims the coming end of the world, and two lovers, Amanda and Amando. There is also the sexually frustrated Mescaline, who craves a more energetic sexual partner than her astrologer husband.

Ligeti has admitted that the rhythms of his native Hungarian prevented convenient translation, and despite his claim that Italian and English are the two ideal languages in which to write opera, the libretto for the original version is in German.² Ligeti subsequently decided that the opera is best performed in the language of the area in which it is presented. The libretto is conventional but deliberately artificial, with a heightened poetic idiom. The vocal parts are extremely difficult and Ligeti conceived the work, in his own confusing definition, as an "anti-anti-opera", that deliberately subverts the typical conventions of opera by satirically appropriating elements of the classic opera form. The libretto and music use a comprehensive catalogue of insults, which continues to shock the audiences with its unsophisticated and often adolescent humour. Stylistically and structurally Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* could be seen as an experiment in Postmodernism.³

² Shirley Apthorp, "The Shows Go On: Shirley Apthorp Compares the Productions of *Le Grand Macabre* in Germany and Denmark in Light of Current Events," *Financial Times* (London), 25 September 2001.

³ Kramer, "The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism", in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed.

The work initiates a significant change of compositional approach for Ligeti. This opera was first performed when Ligeti's style underwent a remarkable change, adopting a more eclectic approach to tonality and modality. Many post-World War II composers found quotation an ideal mechanism with which to update their musical language, as it could integrate musical gestures of both the distant past, such as Mozart's melodic structures, and the recent past, such as Darmstadt and integral serialism.⁴ Quotation and parody also provide a compositional middle ground between what Glenn Watkins has called the "paralyzing polemics" of aleatory and integral serialism.⁵

Ligeti, too, has acknowledged this conflict, stating in an interview in 1996, "When I arrived in the west, people were obsessed by Schoenberg, Webern, and what followed, thinking '12-tone or not 12-tone?' The question on everyone's lips was 'Wie geht es weiter?' – what path could music possibly take after Boulez and Stockhausen? I cannot understand this idea that you have avant-garde and you have this postmodern, neo-tonal stuff, as if these were the only two possibilities, there could be no third way. There are always a *hundred* ways. You have to find them."⁶

If integral serialism sought to forget the past and start anew, works of parody attempted to reconcile past and present. The result, however, is often irony rather than homage. In her study, Hutcheon observes, "historians of parody agree that parody prospers in times of cultural sophistication."⁷ The borrowed work must be familiar in order to decode the borrower's intention. Yet, the meaning encompasses more than just a flash of recognition.⁸ When Ligeti was questioned about his opera in 1970, he declared: "It won't be an opera in the normal sense. I can't write a "traditional" opera, I don't want to."⁹

The musical material of the opera alternates between references to well known composers. There are beautiful brutal grand melodies and melancholic harmonies. In spite of Ligeti's original radical intentions, *Le Grand Macabre* bears several characteristics of traditional opera: it has an identifiable plot (though it is picaresque affair, with long episodes that are relatively inconsequential to the underlying narrative); it has clearly separated arias; its music reflects the meaning and moods of the text; its narration sometimes adopts a recitative-like fashion; and it includes separate orchestral sections.

This is not an opera that utilizes characters or situations from history, such as Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1975) or John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), but one which explores bizarre ideas indirectly inspired by Ligeti's experience in authoritarian pre-1956 Hungary. *Le Grand Macabre* uses the opera house as a theatre, employing all its technical resources. Ligeti creates a sound world which uses the harmonic

⁴Metzer, Quotation and cultural Meaning, 110.

⁵ Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and College from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1994), 405.

⁶ Andrew Clark, "Composer who harmonises extremes: Andrew Clark talks to György Ligeti about his alternative musical language," *Financial Times* (London), November 25, 1996.

⁷Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 19.

⁸ Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre*, 416.

⁹ Richard Toop, *György Ligeti*,

building blocks of the tonal language but without its structure, allowing a far larger harmonic palette. The music of *Le Grand Macabre* reflects a deformation of reality, by using a large range of styles and compositional approaches, including quotation or distorted quotation from a range of past historical music. He exaggerates his own composition style, and in a similar way raids other music, including Schubert, Liszt, Handel and ragtime music.

Le Grand Macabre is unique in Ligeti's output because of the way in which it mixes very different musical styles within the same composition. According to Ligeti¹⁰, this change in style is caused partly by the nature of modern opera, which puts major economic restrictions upon the composer in terms of rehearsal time. Sitting in the audience at the ENO's production of *Le Grand Macabre* I was dazzled by its inventiveness by its confrontational nature within recognizable operatic structure. It captured the dilemma of the futility of existence in the face of death. It also opened me up to a new operatic language that gave me confidence to undertake the composition of my first opera.

Anna Nicole: The Opera Heroine in the Age of Celebrity

The tragic heroine has been a staple in opera. From Handel's *Giulio Cesare* to Alban Berg's *Lulu* and beyond, the suffering heroine has dominated the opera stage. *Anna Nicole* by Mark Anthony Turnage reconfigures the tragic operatic heroine for the age of celebrity; the strapline for the opera on The Royal Opera House website reads, "Sex, Scandal and Celebrity: Mark Anthony Turnage's opera draws on the dramatic life and death Anna Nicole Smith"¹¹. Smith was a real person and the circumstances of her life were certainly tragic, though played out in the heartless arena of tabloid journalism and gossip. A small town girl turned stripper, she gained tabloid infamy by marrying the octogenarian billionaire, James Howard Marshall and becoming a *Playboy* centrefold and model, celebrity and sex symbol, who became embroiled in a legal battle over her husband's estate, before dying of an overdose of prescription drugs in a motel room, a few months after the death by overdose of her son.

Anna Nicole was commissioned and developed by The Royal Opera House and it premiered in London on 24th September 2011, which is when I saw it. It may be that choosing the short and lurid life of Anna Nicole Smith was a way of attracting new audiences, who were unfamiliar with opera. Certainly the audience at the premiere were much younger than the usual first-nighters.

The libretto is by Richard Thomas, a writer and comedy actor, best known for composing and scoring the award-winning *Jerry Springer, The Opera* with Stewart Lee¹², which also dealt with instant celebrity and was itself the subject of a media firestorm due to an organized and vicious campaign by a group of religious conservatives known as Christian Voice. During the performance, I found myself thinking, incongruously, of Benjamin Britten's 1951 opera *Billy Budd*, based on Herman Melville's novella dealing with the destruction of innocence. Britten's opera, which also premiered at The Royal Opera House, is, like *Anna Nicole*, about loss of

¹⁰ Liner notes for Sony CD S2K 62312, recording of *Le Grand Macabre*.

¹¹ Royal Opera House, website, 24th, September 2014

¹² Costa, Maddy "Jerry Springer the Opera", *The Guardian*, Nov. 2003

innocence and guiltlessness although Turnage's score looks towards jazz and popular music, which suits his subject.

The vulgarity of tone contrasts with the austerity of Britten's music and E.M. Forster's libretto. The rhyming couplets in the libretto clearly signalled Thomas and Turnage's intention to shock with end-rhymes using four-letter words and other mildly shocking profanities, but at the same time there is wit and poignancy here in a libretto that actually manages to cut through the niceties directly to the harsh crude reality of the circumstances of Anna Nicole Smith's life, unappealing though that might be a more conservative audience.

Anna's tragic life is framed by the birth of her children. When her son is born, he is loved by her but unwanted by her husband. Her son dies because he is unable to cope with the birth of Anna's daughter and she dies because she is unable to cope with the loss of her son. Anna's life is summed up when she sings in an aria towards the end of the opera: "I made some bad choices, then some worse choices, and then I ran out of choices."¹³ The words are both tragic and laconic. Her lack of self pity at that moment gives her a fleeting dignity.

The lurid elements of Anna Nicole's story –the "sex, drugs and celebrity" – attracted extraordinary media coverage and Turnage's score matched this with clashing, slab-like chords. He also knew how to write a vocal line for Anna herself and the constant onstage chorus, mixing speech and song with a sour taste that was sometimes too clever for its own good. In an interview with Jessica Duchon, Turnage hints at a commercial imperative behind the work: "People say I'm prolific. Well, I've got a lot of kids, so I've got to write a lot of music. I love composing, but I'm not writing to be indulgent, I'm writing to provide for my family." However, *Anna Nicole* was not ultimately successful in attracting a new audience, and it may have been that Turnage's score, for all its nods to jazz and popular music, was too challenging for younger audiences but at the same time too pop-friendly for the conventional opera-goer. At any rate it did not find a life after that first production. Tim Ashley in the guardian wrote "Richard Jones's revival is well done, but time has not been kind to this operatic life of the model and actor Anna Nicole Smith".¹⁴ It may be that The Royal Opera House itself was too incongruous a setting for this subject matter. The intricate gold paint and the traditional décor of flowers and angels were unsuited to this modern morality tale.

My own reaction to *Anna Nicole* was that, by choosing to make a figure of tabloid infamy the centre of the opera, the intention to break with convention was perhaps too obvious, and that the moments of humanity were too fleeting. That said, the first night audience I saw it with were cheerful and attentive. *Anna Nicole* evoked other great dramatic composers – Bernstein as well as Britten – and combined aspects of opera and music theatre. However, as Peter Conrad noted, "In opera, music harmonises discords and helps to pardon moral faults, but the real Anna Nicole was loud, unlyrical and intermittently obscene."¹⁵

As a composer sitting in the audience, the applause seemed more for the extravagant surface of the production and the exotic popular culture it represented than the score itself. It struggled to find its identity: was it a musical or was an opera?

¹³ David Carlin, "Anna Nicole" back track review, 2011.

¹⁴ Tim Ashley, "Anna Nicole review – a scabrous tale of sex, money and ambition" The Guardian 2011.

¹⁵ Peter Conrad, "Anna Nicole: The Opera", The Guardian, 2011.

For all the serious talent that went into composing and staging this opera, it still seemed as if *Anna Nicole* was half-musical, half-opera, cleverly stitched together. For all this confusion of genre, the uninhibited Anna Nicole attains a kind of operatic grandeur, a destructive and self-destructive heroine reminiscent of the man-killing heroine of Alban Berg's *Lulu*.

In the end I took away negative, rather than positive lessons from *Anna Nicole*; there were elements that I wished to avoid in my own opera composition. I realised that in the subject matter of my opera the gap between Western and Eastern music could easily be highlighted, along with the exoticism and otherness of an over-flavoured eastern gestural music, and that this would be a mistake. I will expand upon this in Chapter IV.

A Dog's Heart: The Dissident Source

A Dog's Heart is an opera by the contemporary Russian composer Alexander Raskatov, The libretto written in both Russian and English is by Cesare Mazzonis. It was commissioned by the Dutch National Opera and premiered in Amsterdam in July of 2010. It was performed in London by English National Opera, directed by Simon McBurney, in November of that year. I was fortunate enough to see it during its London run and I found it the most inspiring experience of contemporary opera that I have seen.

A Dog's Heart is based on a 1925 novella by Russian satirical novelist and playwright Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) which originally was published in 1968. It tells the story of Sharik, a stray dog who is given the testicles and pituitary gland of a human by a distinguished medical professor, Filippov. The transplant is intended as an experiment in revitalize, but to everyone's amazement, the treatment has a different effect. The good dog Sharik turns into a frightful human,.

My father gave me a Persian language edition, which made a strong impression on me as a child. Bulgakov's novella was immediately seen as a satire on Soviet man and banned in the Soviet Union the year after its publication, not to be republished there until 1987. Sharik is transformed into a human being and renamed Poligraf Poligrafovich Sharikov.¹⁶ The newly created Sharikov takes on the worst attributes of both species, getting drunk, singing pornographic songs and raping the house maid before eventually finding himself a post in the Moscow bureaucracy, in charge of ridding the city of cats. Finally, even the single-minded Filippov realises he must reverse his operation.

Bulgakov's novella is thoroughly misanthropic, and the opera follows it faithfully. The frailties and ugliness of every character are mercilessly explored, from the ghastly Sharikov, to the Doctor, his attendees and the Bolshevik house committee of their apartment block. Nobody comes out of it with much credit except for the dog. Although Raskatov's score follows in the absurdist tradition of Shostakovich's adaptation of Gogol's *The Nose* in its riotous satire, I felt that the score counter-intuitively drew on chamber music. With the exception of some coloratura soprano writing (reminiscent of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*), the vocal lines are declaimed

¹⁶ Similarly the idea of 'cloning' in the context of Soviet reality is a subject of *Rosenthal's Children*, another recent opera by the Russian composer Leonid Desyatnikov, based on a play by Vladimir Sorokin and staged at the Bolshoi Opera House in Moscow in 2005.

rather than truly sung, and Raskatov's writing of vocal lines has come to influence my vocal writing. He confines the vocal line to punctuating or reinforcing them with his orchestration. Raskatov selects his orchestral palette with care, so the result is somewhat at odds with the activity on stage.

A Dog's Heart is, I believe, a unique achievement and should be better known among operagoers. The central dramatic device in Bulgakov's novella and Sadeq Hedayat's short story, *The Doll Behind the Curtain* (the work I chose to adapt for my first opera) have marked similarities. This is scarcely surprising, since Bulgakov and Hedayat are early modernist authors in conflict with their authoritarian backgrounds; both cast a jaundiced eye on their respective native countries.

Simon McBurney's visually inventive production has flair and physicality but the undoubted hero of the piece is Sharik himself. He was played by a puppet that, moved around the stage, leapt, cowers and yapped with the assistance of a team of three handlers, with two singers to represent the voices of the "nice" and "nasty" parts of his character. Such is the illusion that all you seem to see is a strangely transmuted dog.

The polystylistic musical palette of *A Dog's Heart* is similar to the complexity of Bernd Alois Zimmermann's musical style¹⁷, combining the popular tunes of primitive Soviet mass songs with cosmopolitan Baroque recitatives accompanied by an amplified harpsichord. There are also snatches of Russian folk song or funeral dirges, deployed brilliantly in the religiously fervent passage where the Professor announces his creation to a choir of his scientific peers. There are elements of Stravinsky and Webern too in the refined sound development and concentrated treatment of material.

There was a harsh stridency in the music which I sought to use in my own opera. a kind of anger that words can simply not express. Raskatov used a megaphone for Sharik's nasty voice with lots of discords and vocal gymnastics for the female parts. On the other hand I didn't want my audience to view my opera as an exotic entertainment or antagonise their taste. To many opera-goers' ears modern operatic music, such as that of Raskatov or Ligeti, is so unrelentingly harsh as to alienate them. Yet we also have to remind our audience that new opera should be capable of posing big questions and may need to do so in subversive ways. Vivid stories, gripping drama and brilliant innovative staging can re-educate our ears and mind.

Raskatov's score's showed me possibilities for bridging locations, something inherent in *The Doll Behind the Curtain* which is set both in Le Havre and Tehran, and *A Dog's Heart* was also a perfect source of inspiration for the transformation in my opera of the Doll into a human being. Seeing *A Dog's Heart* proved to be a liberating and inspiring experience both for my imagination and my intellect.

¹⁷ Bernd Alois Zimmermann (1918-1970), German composer best known for his opera *Die Soldaten*.

CHAPTER III

The Doll behind the Curtain: from first motif to completion

The Iranian musicians who had the opportunity to study in Europe brought back many reflections of classical European music. Unfortunately, after the revolution, this exchange ceased. My research into modern chamber opera has revealed a musical form that had a brief lifetime in the history of classical music in Iran that ended with the revolution (see, for example, *Hero of Sahand* (1968) by Ahmad Pejman). Today there is intense interest in Iran in fresh contemporary perspectives on music and my work is intended both to satisfy this demand and bring a wider, international audience – a sphere in which only a few Iranian classical composers are active – to an important part of Iranian musical and literary culture.

My opera, *The Doll Behind the Curtain*, is a staged modern operatic adaptation of Iranian writer, Sadeq Hedayat's short story of the same title, written during the 1930s. It is an emotionally intense story of a young Iranian student's fascination for a silent statue behind the window of a shop in Le Havre. Captivated by her mysterious beauty, he carries the statue back to Iran, where his infatuation and inner conflict leads him to destroy his own life and the life of his fiancée who has struggled to compete with her silent rival.

Since 2009 I have researched operatic plots suitable for staging. I was intrigued by this short story, both because of its length and its complexity, and thought it might have potential for adaptation as a chamber opera. The opera explores the complexity of love, sexuality and intimacy from the perspective of the main character who is torn between tradition and modernity. The libretto and scenario is by Dominic Power (Head of Screen Arts at the National Film and Television School and a librettist for both opera and theatre). The composer may dominate the creation of any opera, but it is very much a collaborative achievement and in *The Doll Behind the Curtain* this collaboration is not only with librettist and musicians but also with the extraordinary imagination of Sadeq Hedayat.

Composing this opera, and striving to reflect the complexity and drama of Hedayat's vision through the music, has been an exhilarating challenge. It is also the first modern chamber opera composed and performed in Great Britain by an Iranian composer. *The Doll Behind the Curtain* is a new opera with an old message: that man must recognize that his actions have consequences, which can sometimes be destructive to himself and those around him. I find Hedayat's ideas similar to my music; like him, I enjoy unresolved endings and the shift from rationalism to mysticism.

Synopsis

The Doll Behind the Curtain is a study of exile and obsession. Based on a short story by the great Iranian Writer, Sadegh Hedayat (1903-51), it is set in Le Havre and Tehran in the 1930s. Mehrdad, a shy, withdrawn young Iranian studying in Le Havre, nurses a dangerous obsession with a Mannequin, a beautiful image of womanhood in alabaster that he glimpses in the window of junk shop. On the eve of his return to Iran, to his father's business and marriage to his cousin Bita, he has a troubling conversation with the worldly principle of the college, Maître, which confirms his sense of isolation. Afterwards he wanders down to the harbour quarter and the sinister junk shop where he first saw the Mannequin. On impulse, he buys the Mannequin from the knowing old shopkeeper, Tombeau. The need to possess this vision of unchanging femininity begins Mehrdad's descent into degradation and self-destruction.

Returning to Tehran, Mehrdad finds it impossible to readjust to his old life. Despite the wishes of his parents he rejects the vulnerable, unworldly Bita. He spends his evenings in his room, communing with the mannequin. Fuelled by alcohol, he feels a mixture of adoration and resentment for the power she holds over him. During the day, Bita, heartbroken by his rejection, goes into his room to confront her rival, only to fall under the Mannequin's spell. In secret, she begins to emulate the Mannequin, whitening her skin to resemble alabaster, and making an exact copy of the Mannequin's green silk dress. One evening, Mehrdad returns to his room. Drunk and angry at his inability to break free from the Mannequin, he decides he must destroy her, not knowing that Bita is in the room, prepared to bring the model to life in a last attempt to win Mehrdad back. As Tehran is shrouded in snow, the scene is set for the final tragedy. Sadegh Hedayat's brilliant exploration of the dilemma of the cultural and sexual exile provides a powerful psychological narrative for *The Doll Behind the Curtain*, its protagonist caught between two Persian and European worlds and unable to find a home in either. His struggle to resolve his dilemma forces him to face the shadows in his own psyche, with fatal consequences.

Hedayat was born in 1903 in Tehran. He is one of the first and most successful Iranian authors to introduce modern literature and its technique into Persian fiction and literature and therefore he is considered one of the greatest Iranian writers of the 20th century. He was born in an aristocratic family and first educated in Tehran and then studied dentistry and engineering in France and Belgium. During his time in Europe he came in contact with the leading intellectual figures of the day and so he abandoned his studies for literature. He was very much drawn to works of Edgar Allan Poe, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka and Anton Chekhov among others. Hedayat also translated many of Kafka's works into Persian. He returned to Iran in 1930 and was a central figure in Tehran intellectual circles but later withdrew from his friends. In 1951 he was overwhelmed by despair and loss; he left Iran and went to Paris where he committed suicide.



Fig.11, Sadegh Hedayat - Le Havre 192

Plan of the dramatic and musical forms in *The Doll Behind the Curtain*

Drama	Music
Act I: Mehrdad in Le Havre	
<u>Scene</u>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mehrdad in the dark, family in distance 2. The Maître's office 3. The shopkeeper 4. The Mannequin and Mehrdad 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presenting motif, eastern flavours 2. Motif, French flavours 3. Tempo allegro, resolved material 4. Main motif, unresolved ending
<hr/>	
Act II: Mehrdad in Tehran	
<u>Scene</u>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mehrdad's fiancée suspicion despair 2. Mother and Bitā 3. Mehrdad and Bitā 4. Mehrdad and father 5. Bitā confronting the Mannequin 6. Destroying the Mannequin 7. Final scene with the Mannequin 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Solo accompaniment 2. Music in contrast 3. Motif unresolved 4. New material 5. Transformation of the motif 6. Final resolution 7. Motif as clusters

The chilling motif

The opera may be called *The Doll behind the Curtain*, but it is the emotions of Mehrdad that dominate the score; these are represented by a 'hope and despair' motif, which consists of two pairs of descending semitones separated by a perfect fifth.



Fig.12, *The Doll behind the Curtain*

The perfect fifth is a gap which represents a crucial flaw in Mehrdad's character. The question stated in the very opening of Mehrdad's vocal line shows us an uncertain statement.



Fig.13, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 5

Because the motif is so simple it can be woven into everything, showing that Mehrdad's fate and the Doll are inextricably linked, becoming his whole reality. Later this motif is reconfigured to represent revenge and obsession for both the ensemble and other characters.

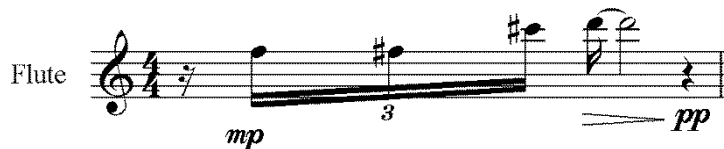


Fig.14, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 8

Mehrdad's pliable character is also crucial to the score, and to Dominic Power's libretto. When Mehrdad finally recognizes his delusion about the Doll, the motif turns into a revengeful and hate figure, a cluster that recurs over and over until the final ending.



Fig.15, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 588

The couples meet only twice, and only briefly, just like the motif. The second time they each share an inverted version of the motif.



Fig.16, The Doll behind the Curtain-bar 683

It also features in the finale of the opera, where the orchestra's explicit statement hits hardest at the very end, sharing the motif scattered throughout the ensemble.

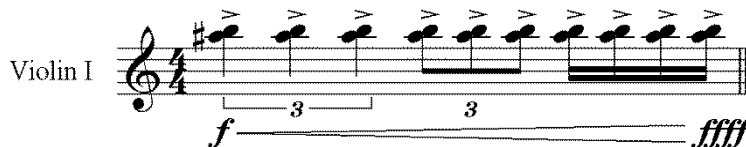


Fig.17, The Doll behind the Curtain-bar 1015

The motif is hammered out, to achieve a horrific climax, which is intended to be almost too much to bear.

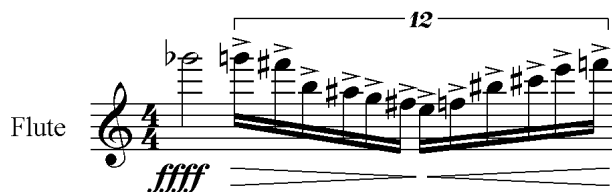


Fig.18, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 1015

Analysis of the individual scenes

Act I

Scene 1

The opening scene starts with the harp and clarinet, which a dialogue is made up of diverse thoughts, reflecting Mehrdad's state of mind. It is natural to include a brief presentation of the short main motif here:



Fig.19, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 5

This phase as a whole consists of a series of small music elements, which appear later. This phrase was not deliberately stylized but it gives the first scene an appropriately Middle-Eastern flavour as a way of representing Mehrdad, whereas elsewhere in the opera no particular period or culture is emphasised. The combination of these small musical elements also correlates to the stage and how they will form a music-dramatic organization.



Fig.20, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 3

Scene 2

The sudden interruption and entrance of the Maître prepares the listener for an entrance to the different world of the next scene. The stage lights up to bring us into an office of a Lycée in Le Havre in the morning. The music of this scene departs from the motifs of the one foregoing and presents new material based around major seventh chords. These suggest cultural difference and imply a more tonal medium through these apparently functional chords which are then varied throughout the scene.

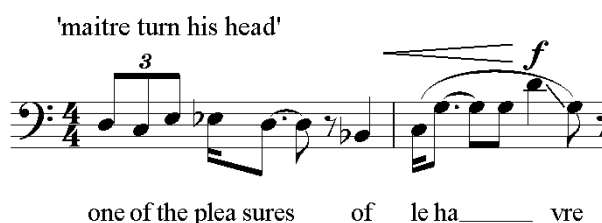


Fig.21, T *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 24-5



Fig.22, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 33-34

Later this musical idea develops into a short rhapsody, a musical representation of the character's fantasy.



Fig.23, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 151

The next musical component of this scene is sung by Mehrdad and the colours represent both his obedient nature and his fascination with superstition. His vocal line is a rhythmic declamation of "In accordance with my family's wishes". This haunting phrase is an example of the compositional ingenuity made possible by this use of motifs, enabling the establishment of relationships between different characters like a responsorial. The scene also involves atonal harmony, suggesting primitivism and the distance between Mehrdad's character and that of his mother.

Scene 3

The third scene opens with a rhythm suggesting stressfulness, which brings us into an untidy shop. During its repetition it becomes suddenly inaudible while the shopkeeper recites "Giselle".



Fig.24, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 280

Strings and a strong bassoon and voice bring a new important motif, the lament of an old man, which may also be considered as an introduction to the shopkeeper's life and character, although soon after his true character will be revealed as that of a charlatan.

TOMBEAU exits. MEHRDAD returns to the window, hesitates and enters the shop. He approaches GISELLE who does not look up from her book.



Fig.25, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 320

The characteristic descent in intervals, supported with the bassoon, prevails throughout this scene, representing the manipulative character of the shopkeeper.



Fig.26, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 322

As Mehrdad approaches the shop he is accompanied by the harp. This brings him slowly back on the stage, suggesting the weakened sentimental aspects of his character, governed by his desire for the Mannequin. The break in the rhythm dignifies the language of an unconfident foreigner trying to express his wish.



(fig.27, *The Doll behind the Curtain* , bar 327

(appearing quickly
from the back)

mon si eur _____ how can we help you

Fig.28, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 329

An aria follows, drawing together elements of the scene and suggests a free, unconstrained Mehrdad. The motif is sung by the shopkeeper to suggest a false sympathy with Mehrdad, but Mehrdad's deliberate lies in order to purchase the statue also present a new side to his character. This is almost the only point where Mehrdad acts out his inner fantasy and so I used a freer musical structure to suggest this attempt to escape from the confines of the narrative.

no the mo del that wears the dress _____

Fig.29, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 403-4

sen ti men tal

Fig.30, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 425

Scene 4

In its 37 measures, the last scene in the first act anticipates the finale of the second act with similar repetitions of the motif and other previous material.

no _____ wo man I have e ver can

Fig.31, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 468-9

The coordination and relation of recurrent material, drawn together as postlude, is used to establish the unity of Mehrdad's emotional journey through the first act, but this transitional material also introduces the idea of a frightful and unresolved future. This ends with an uncertain and sudden attack by the harp, pushing the listener into the second act.

Violin I
Violin II
Viola

f *ff* *ff*

Fig.32, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 495-6

Harp

pp *ff*

Fig.33, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 507-8

Act II

Scene 1

The second act presents three new characters in a new location and the three characters in this scene, Bita the fiancée, Mehrdad's mother and his father, serve as the basis for the three variations of the motif.

The whole dramatic expansion of this scene presents the increased reappearance of the uncertain situation and the collision of the main characters. In the upcoming scenes there is a strict musical division in which the motif turns into clusters, as if the emotional, loving character of the motif was being turned into hate and despair.

Harp

f cresc. *f cresc.*

Fig.34, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 509

The development, that part of the scene in which the music represents the conflict between the main characters, leads into the first angry climax of second act of the opera. The motif that pervades the whole piece becomes the repeated phrase, “a vision standing”.

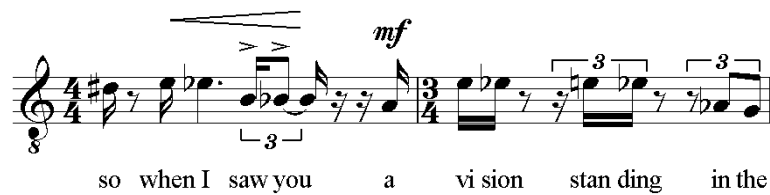


Fig.34, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 582

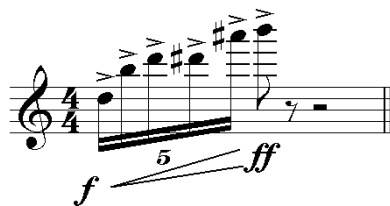


Fig.35, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 611

Scene 2

This scene brings two more people on the stage, but their connection is not as tight as that of the Doll and Mehrdad. Musically this part is organically related like a family; here the form is built of more foreign, contrasting elements for each of the character. There is independence in the use of motives for these themes, in contrast with the closer melodic interrelations of those in the previous parts, although the mother has motifs which are already familiar, to express her rigidity and desperation.

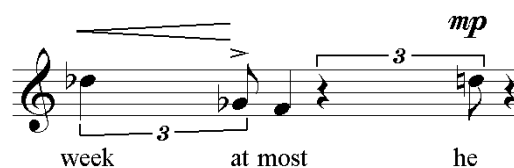


Fig.36, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 683

Scene 3

The variation of the music comes to a sudden stop with the only meeting of Mehrdad and Bitā, in the dark corridor of the house, prepared by a crescendo of the leitmotif clustering into a tutti. Both Mehrdad and Bitā use the same half of the motive, to represent the break-up of their relationship. The scene closes on an unresolved phrase from the end of the second scene.



Fig.37, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 705-6

Scene 4

This scene starts with dance-like music, apparently dissonant but essentially polytonal, a deliberately primitive effect; it expresses not only the dramatic situation on the stage but also the rational character of the father.

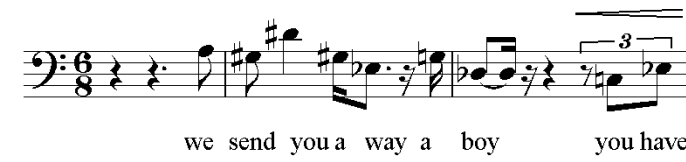


Fig.38, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 726-8

Soon a 'meno mosso' brings us to an entirely new environment. The descending glissando recurs from the beginning, which is imitated by the father, almost a reference to the theme for Mehrdad and Maître in Act 1, Scene 2.

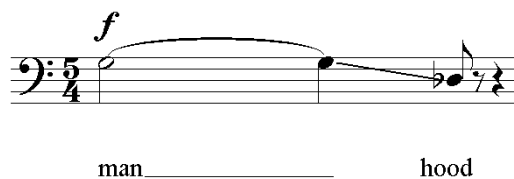


Fig.39, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 764

The harp figures quickly shift from the eastern thematic material of the previous bar to the beginning of the short Largo, creating figures from which a chord develops.

Harp

Tenor

f *mf*

I may hou nor it or I may not be a ble to ma

Fig.40, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 789-90

Finally the repetition of the motif arises not only as a cluster in an expanded form, a symbolic development for full ensemble of the final tragedy, but also acts as the variation to the next scene.

Scene 5

In the fifth scene we have a variation on the motif, supporting Bitā's confrontation with the Doll, while Mehrdad stays in his room where the doll is kept. The intention here is to represent the emotional tension between Bitā's love and her subjective reflection which runs throughout the scene.

mf *mp* *mp*

I could I would des troy you des troy you you a

Fig.41, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bars 851-3

There are further musical allusions to suggest the character of a broken woman. The brief transformation chorus music for all the characters appears in Mehrdad's dream and brings his underlying crisis to a head. The appearance of irregular rhythms and crescendo is intended to make the listener aware of the psychology that enables Mehrdad's act in the final scene.

Scene 6

The denouement starts with a viola solo, followed by the ensemble and Mehrdad; from a dramatic point of view; this can be contemplated as the epilogue to Mehrdad's act. The music of this ensemble scene is a thematic deelopment of all the important material used in relation to Mehrdad. The

music is primarily based upon harmonies and chordal combinations of the twisted and retaining motif.

This draws everything together in preparation for the final resolution. For instance, the furious steps towards the statue, which in the previous scenes were presented repeatedly but left unresolved, are now resolved by a pistol shot, in a silence which is preceded by a monotonous ostinato. Furthermore the main motif in the vocal line is expanded, contracted, shifted, and changed by different rhythmical variations.



Fig.42, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 1008

A broken chord leads to this crescendo of the subversive motif accelerates this tempestuous scene forward.



Fig.43, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 1008

Scene 7

A silence, interrupted by a pianissimo from Bita, brings the opera to its end. The second half of the motif is sung as a resolution by Bita, to show her loss of the battle, while Mehrdad sings the first half of the motif, in hope and longing.

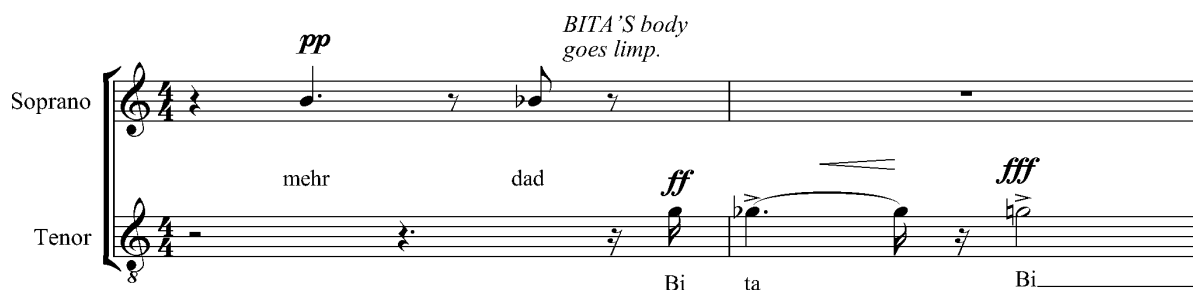


Fig.44, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 1013

It is also a harmonic completion, closing the preceding scenes that had remained unresolved. After a short cadence and a final chord, based on

clusters of the motif, the music goes forward. The opening measures of the opera, which presented the motif, unambiguously devoted to these concluding bars.

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Flute, Oboe, Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, and Horn in F. The score is in 4/4 time and features a dynamic marking of *fff* (fortissimo). The Flute part has a melodic line with a trill-like figure. The Oboe part has a similar melodic line. The Clarinet in Bb part has a melodic line with a trill-like figure. The Bassoon part has a melodic line with a trill-like figure. The Horn in F part has a melodic line with a trill-like figure. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The number 12 is written above the Flute and Oboe staves, and the number 6 is written below the Clarinet in Bb staff. The number 3 is written below the Bassoon and Horn in F staves.

Fig.45, *The Doll behind the Curtain*, bar 1015

Afterword

Since the opera was completed, the task of realising its premiere has been challenging. Primarily, the main obstruction has been finding a financial backer for the project. Of course the main factor has been to generate interest in the story. Fortunately, the original text by Hedayat has been of great help as his reputation precedes his work. I approached the Iranian Cultural Institute and then the estate of Hedayat in Iran, initially with little success, but a visit back to Iran brought a change to the opera's circumstances and a meeting with a private individual secured the financial viability of a premiere for the work in the future in the U.K.

This was an exciting moment, knowing that the quality of the musicians that would be involved in the project would not disappoint. The question of finding singers suitable for the roles is the next part to be explored. I did consider whether it would be possible to have a premiere of the Opera in Tehran, but the issue of finding singers for the roles proved to be difficult. Fortunately, a British premiere for the opera took place at the *Tête à Tête* Opera Festival, based in London on the 6th of August 2015.

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