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(Photo by Judith Kirtley)
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One Thousand and One Nights to Heal the Heart

ELIANE ABERDAM

I composed *The Heart of Shahrazad* as a modern re-telling of the story from *One Thousand and One Nights* (also called *Arabian Nights*), a collection of folk tales from Persian, Arabic, and Indian cultures, compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden

Age. The story, however, relates to all times and cultures, even our present. It addresses the issues of violence against women, including rape and murder, as well as the healing process through story-telling, endurance, forgiveness, and remembrance.

The Heart of Shahrazad, a monodrama in one act with five scenes, is scored for soprano, actress, and harp, and it was written, produced, and performed by women. Its genesis can be traced back to the Festival of Women Composers (February 13-16, 2014) at Indiana University of

Pennsylvania, where my piece, *Deux Poemes Océaniques*, scored for soprano, violin, and harp, received its world premiere performance. The encounter gave birth to a new friendship with two of the performers, soprano Lara Cottrill and harpist Marissa Knaub; our musical chemistry sparked the idea for *Shahrazad*.

Lara emailed me four months later with an idea for a commission from her performance company, Amiche, which was planning a new show on the themes

of betrayal and healing based on the stories of Shahrazad. She invited me to compose the music and said that her business partner, Sarah Carlton, would write the text. On August 12, 2014, the libretto arrived. Sarah remarked that a few years earlier she had read the book *Shadow Spinner* by Susan Fletcher, and it created a new perspective for her of the story of Shahrazad. At the time, Sarah was concerned with what it meant to forgive and how to deal with betrayal. A paragraph from the program notes describes our concept of the plot:

We imagined...a story from the past that had much to say about our current world and those who currently live in the midst of violence. The news is often filled with stories of violence, both locally and around the world, from rape to domestic violence, from kidnappings to human trafficking. And though violence impacts everyone, women bear the primary brunt....This performance wrestles with what we do when we live in the midst of violence or have been the recipient of violence.... We believe stories matter, the stories we tell and the ones we write with our lives. It is our hope that this performance connects our audience with their own stories, but also reminds us of the helpers in the world who are bringing light to the dark places of violence.

The composition process involved many challenges. First of all, a musical work with "Shahrazad" in its title automatically recalls the gorgeous *Scheherazade*¹

symphonic suite by Rimsky Korsakov (1888), and this can be intimidating and humbling for any composer. Another challenge was that the libretto refers to many characters and has different settings and various moods, implying a full operatic cast and myriad kaleidoscopic orchestral timbres; the monodrama, however, is scored for a cast of only three: actress (Sarah Carleton), soprano (Lara Cottrill), and harp (Marissa Knaub).



L to R: Marissa Knaub (harp), Lara Cottrill (soprano), Sarah Carleton (narrator)

The solo singer has two roles: she serves as the emotional mirror of the story through powerful and dramatic as well as lyrical arias that portray the passion of individual characters. Her second role could be compared to the "Greek chorus" (as put by one critic), since her arias provide reflective, contemplative comments on the action. The singer embodies the concept of "Story," the allegory of the healing process. She is both the muse of the unfolding story and its process. As explained in the libretto, she sings about "stories in their various forms as they manifest and change—across time and cultures—weaving together the power



Eliane Aberdam

to help us to see one another.” “Story” is the goal and the medium of the monodrama; the emotional narrative is recounted through her singing.

The orchestral palette consists of only one harp, which meant that I would have to create enough timbral, textural, gestural, and harmonic variety to express the shifting moods, feelings, and atmospheres conveyed by the libretto with one solo instrument.

Shahrazad, the main character-role, was to be performed by an actress—not a singer—with her part, much like the recitative in an opera, representing Shahrazad’s inner monologue with a series of strong emotions as she remembers, anticipates, or mourns. Her role, sometimes spoken over music, is evocative and powerful. The problem that I encountered was that I had no sense of the actress’s speech speed, her vocal strength, her emphasis in diction, or her agogic accents. This made the process of underscoring a challenging guessing game.

SCENE 1: Shahrazad’s home

The stage set is simple so that the focus is on the women. The harp is on Stage Right, a wooden screen with various colored material hanging from it is Upstage Center, and lamps and books are scattered around.

Shahrazad enters the home where she lives with her father, a viceroy to the Sultan of the land. She is carrying a package of books that her father brought back from one of his many travels for the Sultan. Her

collections of stories from various places and peoples have become her dearest treasure and delight, as she shares them with her family and friends. Her reading is interrupted by the delivery of a letter from Zurafa,

a close friend who has been like a sister to her. Zurafa’s letter contains shocking news, as she relays a conversation she overheard between the Sultan and Shahrazad’s father. The letter is filled with anxiety. The Sultan told the vizier that the queen was unfaithful and will be put to death. Convinced that all women are unfaithful, the Sultan declared that a woman will be brought to him every night and killed the next morning. Over-

whelmed with the news, Shahrazad goes in search of her father. As she leaves, Story moves about the stage and turns the hourglass, a symbol of the time that has passed.

The scene opens with the Overture introducing the “Story” theme played by the harp (Example 1). The theme is later hummed lightly by the singer whose voice hovers above the intricate harp texture. The

harp plays a very significant role throughout the monodrama for it provides the moods and emotions especially in the portions where there is no vocal part. The two musical ideas are connected gesturally and rhythmically (triplets, dotted rhythms, three against two hemiolas) as well as harmonically (the mysterious equivocations of the augmented and diminished harmonies in D minor and F# minor). The cadences are interspersed with augmented chords and diminished intervals: this deliberate blurring aims to convey a sensation of floating, suspended harmonies that suggest the uncertainties of the unfolding healing process of the Sultan and Shahrazad. After some dense chromaticism, the C chord in second inversion at the final cadence implies brightness as a hint of the eventual healing. It recurs four times during the course of the monodrama.

One of the most challenging problems in writing intricate chromatic harmonies for the harp was the constant concern about pedal changes; the chromatic-mediant relationship in mm. 3-4, from C minor to E minor in eighth notes, requires a D# in the spelling of the C minor chord to avoid an additional pedal change (E flat to E natural). But even more challenging than the technical issues was the need to create a multitude of timbres to evoke a variety of emotions and narratives.

The only aria in the scene, King Solomon’s “Song of Songs,” suggests a Middle Eastern at-

Ex. 1. Overture, “Story” theme

mosphere; it is symbolic of idealized love, eternal and uncompromising. (See Example 2.) To depict the all-encompassing aspect of love, I chose an all-encompassing device: a minor/modal pandiatonic scale—the motives are tonal, but they lack a sense of tonal center. The harpist has many pedal changes as the chromaticism increases. The meter alternates between triple and duple and the rhythm between eighth notes and triplets, and this contributes to the music’s fluid pulse and shifting downbeats. The recurring triplets have the effect of an accelerated heartbeat. The mid-section is more passionate, and the words “jealousy,” “death,” and “burns like blazing fire” are emphasized in the vocal part while the harp plays glissandi and arpeggiated chords.

Ex. 2. “Song of Songs”

Ex. 3. "Letter from Zurafa"

Tension rises in the next number, "Letter from Zurafa," when Shahrazad learns about the Sultan's murderous plan. The actress reads the letter: "Let their blood cover my shame," the sultan says. To express "great darkness," "unending sorrow," and the desire for revenge, I used the harp in its extreme registers, starting with three warnings cries in the depth of despair (Fb-Ab-Bb); the short-short-long rhythm enhances the stress. (See Example 3.) The Bb half-diminished-seventh chord, played in different inversions, adds a level of anxiety and has the power to express poignancy and misery in a very compelling way. At the end of the piece, a dim ray of light and hope emerges with the open fifth.

At the first performance in Pittsburgh, the sheer power and unusual timbre of the harp during "Letter from Zurafa" caught the attention of the audience; they found the sound of the harp to be unexpected, startling, forceful, and even bewildering.

In "Time," the third number in Scene 1 (which returns later in the monodrama), the harp "plucks" time with quarter notes in the middle register. A simple but foreboding melodic line adds counterpoint, as if to suggest the tragic and horrifying events that are happening during the relentless tick-tocks of time-passing. There is no singing in "Time," which allows Shahrazad the opportunity to change her costume.

SCENE 2. Shahrazad's home, three years later

Three years have passed, about 1,000 women have been murdered, and Shahrazad's life has drastically changed. Her daily routine includes writing down the name of each woman who has been killed by the Sultan. She remains in a state of numb reflection until she writes the

name of her friend Zurafa. The death of someone close and dear to her turns her numbness to rage. As she wrestles with her anger, the character of Story tries to help her see past her hate and nudges her towards the stories she has loved in the past. Shahrazad slowly begins to be moved by Story, and in her desperation to do something to honor her friend's life and love of beauty, she decides to tell the Sultan a story. The scene showcases, in a relatively short time, three very different moods and feelings: anger ("I want him to suffer, I want him to die"), sadness and despair ("as if we are stuck in some endless darkness"), and hope.

To express Shahrazad's anger, the actress vociferates at the top of her lungs, and the harp needs to match her dynamically and dramatically. To accomplish that I had to write for the instrument in a most peculiar and non-harp-like style. Example 4 illustrates the short upward and downward glissandi at the bottom of the harp's register (the hands are two octaves apart), which creates a percussive yet resonant effect at a *fortissississimo* level. The harp sounds unnaturally and unexpectedly aggressive. There is no singing in "Anger."

The "Anger" theme is even more powerful and threatening than the fear and horror of "Zurafa's Letter," not only because of the sheer volume, but also because of the timbre of the harp and the harmony of the synthetic scale: three semitones (D#-E-

F-Gb) separated by a minor third, then two semitones (A-Bb-Cb); each reiteration of the glissando ends a semi-tone higher than the preceding glissando, as if to reflect the rise of wrath.

The statement of the theme (tritones and a descending chromatic motif in sixteenth notes) is in measure 5 in the right hand while the left continues with the low glissandi back and forth. Incidentally, the two chromatic sets of the scale also start a tritone apart. The theme begins in the middle register and slowly climbs to the high register. The overall structure follows a simple pattern: ABA'B'A" (A = glissandi alone, B = theme over glissandi).

The next number, "The Lost Ones" is one of the most poignant and intensely sorrowful arias in the entire monodrama. The murderous crime scene is uncovered, and the names of the women whom the Sultan has slaughtered are enumerated. The melodic line relies on text painting and the contour reflects the various distinct qualities of the women: "companion," "wise," "strong," "flower." The step-wise descending broken line, with a two- or three-note mini-motif, contributes to the disheartenment, sadness, despair, and sense of mourning and loss. (See Example 5.) The aria has a passionate, intense feel to it, yet the larger leaps—which sharply contrast with the downward stepwise motif in two—add an imploring, sobbing quality.

The text for the last aria in the scene is based upon excerpts from *The Essential*

Ex. 4. "Shahrazad's Anger"

Ex. 5. Basic descending motive of "The Lost Ones"

Rumi (Persia, 1207-1273). The piece leads to a pivot point in plot: how can the Sultan be cured and his pain and suffering alleviated? Shahrazad suggests: “What if I told him stories?”

SCENE 3: The Palace

As Shahrazad offers herself to the Sultan, Story reminds us of the importance of stories and the courage it takes to tell them. When the Sultan grants Shahrazad permission to tell him a story, she begins to weave together a story, and within the story, she places her friend Zurafa as the princess, honoring her beauty and life. As dawn appears, the Sultan agrees to let Shahrazad live so that he can hear more. Shahrazad stops every night before the story ends; she finishes it the next night and starts a new story. The story telling continues in the same way for 1001 nights.

In “Offering,” Story sings about the healing powers of stories: “May the stories you live guide you to love...take you to the other side of pain.” The various textures in the harp (melodic fragments over chords, arpeggios, and glissandi) express the variety of emotions of the text: strength, courage, hatred, cunning, love, darkness, and truth. (The soprano sings in her middle register so that her words will be clear.) The bright C-major chord enhances the words “Stories” and “heart” (an echo of the final cadence of the “Story Theme”), and the highest notes (G# and A) fall on the words “fight,” “strength,” and “take.” (See Example 6.) Shahrazad reads the tale of Aladdin to the Sultan over harp accompaniment. The Story character interrupts

Example 6 is a musical score for the piece "Offering". It features a soprano line with lyrics: "with love Fight the dark-ness with truth. Breathe life in the face of death. Face fear with an o-pen heart. with gen-tle strength". The score includes harp accompaniment with dynamic markings like *p*, *mf*, and *mp*, and a drum part. The key signature is C major and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two systems, starting at measure 24 and 31 respectively.

Ex. 6. “Offering”

the tale, asking the Sultan to listen with his heart to release the “sickness deep within.”

SCENE 4, The Palace one year later

Scene 4 marks another turning point in the plot. The audience learns that Shahrazad has survived and has become a mother. Story sings a “Lullaby” with harp accompaniment while Shahrazad cradles her baby in her arms. With its constant sixteenth-note arpeggios in 6/8 meter, simple harmonies, and idiomatic texture, “Lullaby” conveys a soothing and peaceful atmosphere—a moment of serenity very much needed at this point in the monodrama.

SCENE 5, The Palace two years later

Three years have gone by since Shahrazad entered the palace, and she has no more stories to tell. She is free from the hatred she had felt toward the Sultan but is afraid to tell him that she loves him, for he might not be ready. Story encourages her to tell her own tale and sings the “Heart Song,” a forbidden love story from *Layla and Majnun* by Nizami Ganjavi (seventh century

Persia). This expressive aria in a romantic-style is in ABA’ form: it features a clear melodic line in the soprano, enhanced by large leaps upward for the question: “How shall I free myself?” (See Example 7.)

The “Healing Song,” the last number of the monodrama, is more sober; it is half recitative (repeated notes, simple rhythms, small range), half aria (rhythmic agitation, sixteenth notes, higher register, leap of a sixth and high G# on the word “death”). I chose the brighter keys of E and B major for the first section to symbolically acknowledge the victory of stories and love over evil, but went back to F and Bb in section 2 as an echo of past suffering and loss (empty fifths and avoidance of tonic-dominant progressions). The bright keys of E and B return at the end. The Story character is on stage alone and reaffirms the power of stories to heal, the power of words “to create life or death,” “to break through violence”; it is an exhortation to “live stories of healing...for the freedom of our cities, the freedom of our hearts.”

Production,² Review and Conclusion

Three performances took place in August 2015 in Pittsburgh, PA. The premiere on August 13th was held at the Mansion on Fifth; the August 14th and 15th performances were given at the Founders Room at the Carnegie Museum and the Garden Center respectively. The beautiful evocative costumes, glorifying jewelry, floor cushions, and decorated wooden screen added a layer of professionalism and magnificence to the

Example 7 is a musical score for the piece "Heart Song". It features a soprano line with lyrics: "How shall I free myself from love's hid-den tor-ments when they have be-come my heart's joys and its on-ly choice?". The score includes harp accompaniment with dynamic markings like *mf* and *mp*, and a tambourine part. The key signature is E major and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two systems, starting at measure 6 and 6 respectively.

Ex. 7. “Heart Song”

production. After the performance on August 13th, there was a panel discussion on the topic of violence against women. The panel members were Beth Docherty, Michael Madonia (both from the Pittsburgh Action Against Rape), Dr. Joanne Martin from the Lazarus Center, Professor Esther L. Meek (Geneva College and Redeemer Seminary, TX), Amanda Ludwig, Counselor for the Allegheny Prison System, and Valerie Fulmer, University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine.

"It's not like anything I've ever seen before," were the first words written by drama critic Drake Ma in the online magazine *Pittsburgh in the Round* (August 16, 2015) after he saw the world premiere. He called the work a "refreshing piece of art" that "combines the beauty of opera and acting into one mind-cleansing journey: a healing through story-telling" and pointed out that "this is not your typical big-orchestra big-dance-number opera production." He explained that the work "provides a one-of-a-kind theater experience with its unique complexity yet simple aesthetic."

The Heart of Shahrazad not only tells a story of a young woman fighting through violence and anger with hope and courage, it also presents us a healing journey that could potentially resonate with hundreds and thousands of people out there in the world who are still fighting through their pain and darkness. We certainly will always remember the fact that one of the intentions of this piece is to raise awareness about violence against

women. But through this journey it also reminds us of the reason why we love stories and theater in the first place: because we believe in the power of language, the influence of hope and faith, and most importantly, the magic of storytelling. Ms. Carleton's performance was...very emotional. Her interpretation of the progression of Shahrazad's internal struggle and pain was truthful.... And her portrait of the character's exploration...was compelling and exhilarating. Story is interpreted as a representation of the inspiration and muse that drives the plot forward, and Ms. Cottrill's singing did just that! Her voice comes with both stunning colors and a striking range that strengthens the narrative....Ms. Eliane Aberdam's vibrant score is the spirit of the healing. Starting from the first few notes...[her] music will immediately grab your attention and take you back to the roads of the ancient Arab world....The music of the opera is performed entirely on a harp by Ms. Marissa Knaub. With her exquisite techniques plus Ms. Cottrill's magnificent voice, the music puts the audience on a magic carpet....In this score not only can you feel the pain and anger that the characters struggled with throughout the story, you can also hear the courage and hope that Shahrazad took....Ms. Aberdam's

music highlights the timeless story with an invigorating yet calming scent, and it's a one that promises to dig out all the feelings.

Being asked to compose the music for *Shahrazad* was an empowering experience for me both as a woman and as a composer. Sarah perfectly summarizes how the three of us felt when the work was completed: "It was a privilege to work with such amazing women who shared their passions and work to bring beauty to a hard topic and hopefully help the audience...think about violence towards women." My hope is to see this piece produced again soon, because the message it carries is transmitted in a unique way.

NOTES

¹ Most of us are familiar with Rimsky Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, but the accepted spelling of the character's name is indeed Shahrázád.

² The production was made possible thanks to Christine Kroger (provided the list of Names of Women), Arianna Carleton Assistant (costume designer), Sombre Carleton (props), Heather Greco (donated custom designed pillows), Kayla Haberbern (choreography of "The Heart Song" dance), Doug McGill (poster design), and Emily Havranek (video). Special thanks to the donors: Judy Kirby, Mary Beth Siedenburg, Esther Smith, Rebecca Oilrig, Rose E. Freeman, Annie Adams Moon, Mr. and Mrs. Dale Cottrill, Heather Greco, David and Candy Carleton, and Karen Merritt.

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