

Lakmé première in 1883 at Opéra-Comique in Paris

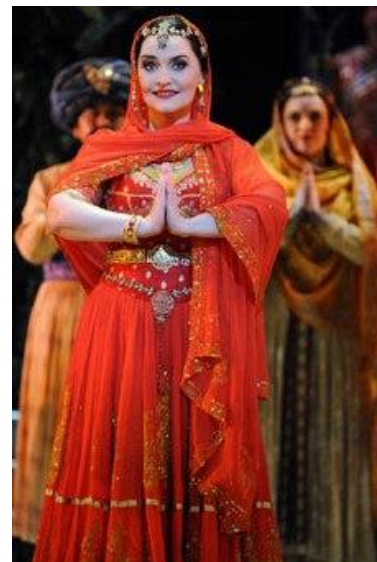
LÉO DELIBES (1836-1891)

Libretto by E.Gondinet and P.Gille after a novel by Pierre Loti

Running time: 137 minutes

Performed at Sydney Opera House in 2011

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Lakmé, daughter of Nilakantha | <i>Emma Matthews</i> | Soprano |
| Mallika, her slave | <i>Dominika Matthews</i> | Mezzo |
| Ellen, English lady | <i>Jane Parkin</i> | Soprano |
| Rose, English lady | <i>Angela Brun</i> | Soprano |
| Mistress Bentson, their governess | <i>Roxane Hislop</i> | Mezzo |
| Gérald, an English officer | <i>Aldo Di Toro</i> | Tenor |
| Frédéric, an English officer | <i>Luke Gabbedy</i> | Baritone |
| Nilakantha, a Brahmin priest | <i>Stephen Bennett</i> | Bass-Baritone |
| Hadji, servant of Nilakantha | <i>Edmond Choo</i> | Tenor |
| Conductor | <i>Emmanuel Joel-Hornak</i> | |
| Stage Director | <i>Roger Hodgman</i> | |



Synopsis

The plot centres around the fanatical hatred felt by 19th century Brahmin priests for British invaders who forbade them to practise their religion.

ACT 1: Lakmé and other Brahmin devotees sing an invocation to the gods. Nilakantha and others depart, leaving his daughter and Mallika to sing the popular *Dôme épais, le jasmin* flower duet. Two British officers Gérald and Frédéric subsequently find themselves in a sacred grove. Catching sight of the Lakmé, Gérald falls in love with her. He is seen by Nilakantha, who swears vengeance on the intruder who's desecrated holy ground.

[Interval]

ACT 2: Gérald and Frédéric meet in a crowded market place, while Gérald is being shadowed by Nilakantha. The priest commands a disguised Lakmé to sing an old Brahmin song – best known as *the Bell Song* – so that Nilakantha will be able to identify the intruder the next time that Gérald is attracted to her. Lakmé faints when she sees Gérald, but she later manages to warn him of her father's desire for vengeance. Nevertheless, Gérald is stabbed and slightly injured during a procession.

ACT 3: Lakmé is nursing Gerald in a forest hut, where Frédéric finds him and calls him back to duty. Lakmé, realising that she will lose Gérald, takes poison and dies just as her father rushes in to find her.

Delibes's Lakmé

With *Lakmé*, Delibes who was already successful as a composer of memorably tuneful ballets fulfilled his ambition to produce a successful serious opera. Its title role attracted the finest sopranos of the time, such as Adelina Patti, and its survival is substantially due to the vehicle it provides for the coloratura soprano voice.

Lakmé has a melodic fluency that has proved irresistible to singers and listeners alike. Its French elegance and transparent texture place it poles apart from prevailing Wagnerian influences, which Delibes' more forward-looking compatriots were less able to overlook.

From a technical perspective Delibes was happy to conform with less sophisticated procedures that were well established at the Opéra-Comique: separate numbers without musical links, together with a subordinate accompanying role for the orchestra.



Léo Delibes

Delibes came to Paris from the provinces. His Conservatoire teachers included the stage composer Adolphe Adam. Mainly remembered as a stage composer, Delibes was a church organist, and he sang in the Opéra chorus (including the première of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*). Needing to earn a living – partly to support his widowed mother – he also taught at the Conservatoire, becoming a Professor in 1881.

| <i>Main Stage Works</i> | <i>Summary</i> |
|-------------------------|--|
| Coppélia (1870) | Ballet: based on one of the Tales of ETA Hoffmann. The mechanical doll Coppélia appears in Offenbach's 1881 opera [so the Doll's Song in Offenbach's opera could possibly have influenced the <i>Bell Song</i> in Delibes' <i>Lakmé</i>]? |
| Le roi l'a dit (1873) | Comic Opera: a comedy of errors set at the court of Louis XIV [which was particularly successful before 1914] |
| Sylvia (1876) | Mythological Ballet: a nymph in Ancient Greece who falls in love with the Aminta the shepherd. A well remembered production was choreographed by Sir Frederick Ashton for Margot Fonteyn |
| Lakmé (1883) | Opera: set in an exotic Indian location, with a celebrated title role for a coloratura soprano |

Operas set in Southern [and Eastern] Asia

Setting operas in more exotic Asian locations remains fairly unusual. The ones listed below include several pieces that aren't very well known.

INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

These three works were all premièred in Paris during a twenty-year period, when exotic luxury was a fascinating aspect of major Parisian exhibitions. The 1878 Exposition Universelle in particular featured a grand Indian pavilion, which could possibly have influenced *Lakmé*?

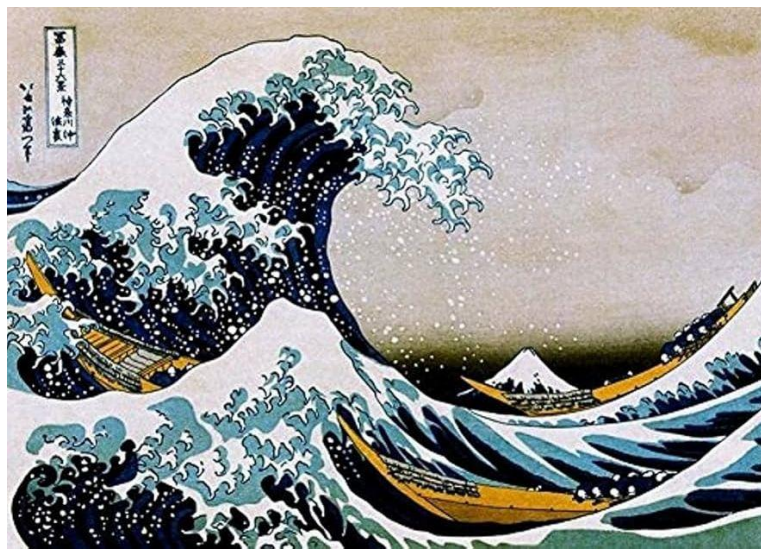
1863 *The Pearlfishers* by Bizet

1877 *Le roi de Lahore* by Massenet

1883 *Lakmé* by Delibes

JAPAN [AND INDONESIA]

Parisian exhibitions between 1867 and 1900 introduced Japanese art and Indonesian gamelan to Europe. The latter influenced composers including Debussy and Britten.



1885 *The Mikado* by Gilbert & Sullivan

1898 *Iris* by Mascagni

1904 *Madam Butterfly* by Puccini

[1964 *Curlew River* by Britten, based on a Japanese Noh play. Productions of his 1957 ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* are understandably sometimes set in Japan.]

CHINA

Turandot – two versions – then two operas in English premièred about three months apart!

1917 *Turandot* by Busoni

1924 *Turandot* by Puccini

1987 *A Night at the Chinese Opera* by Judith Weir

1987 *Nixon in China* by John Adams

Adelina Patti (1843-1919)

This Spanish-Italian singer, arguably the most celebrated early interpreter of the *Lakmé* title role, became one of the most successful singers of the 19th Century. She made her operatic début in New York, singing the lead role in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the age of 16! Two years later she performed another title role – as Bellini's *La Sonnambula* – at Covent Garden. London became a base from which she conquered Europe, including Paris, Vienna, Moscow and St Petersburg.

She also performed in South America, and extensively in USA. Verdi admired her stupendous talent, noting that her lower register had matured by 1878. During this era, she successfully tackled major roles by Verdi and Meyerbeer. In her prime she earned \$5,000 a night (sometimes more than venues could realistically afford)! Towards the end of her career, she focused on performances at her Craig-y-Nos castle home in the Swansea Valley, in a specially constructed miniature version of the theatre at Bayreuth.



Selected Musical Biography

LAKMÉ: EMMA MATTHEWS (born 1970) is an Australian soprano particularly noted for her operatic career – mainly in Australia – which focused initially on her coloratura voice. She later performed more challenging parts, and profited from friendship with Joan Sutherland and her husband Richard Bonyngé. Her role choices have inevitably stimulated comparisons with the former.

Postscript: Should we now ban Carmen as offensive to the traveller community?

Surrey Opera has withdrawn its production of Delibes's work at the Minack Theatre in Cornwall following an objection by a serial protestor.

The Minack issued this statement:

'It is correct that Surrey Opera proposed to stage a production of Delibes' Lakmé at the Minack this year. The opera contains two well-known arias, the Bell Song and the Flower Duet, which are frequently performed in classical concerts, however it was composed in 1883 and reflects colonial and social attitudes prevalent in Europe at that time.

'Because of this we had concerns from the start about their choice and were in discussion with Surrey Opera about how they would address these issues in their production before Mr [Rajah] Zed contacted us. They have subsequently withdrawn the opera and Mr Zed has been informed of this.

'The Minack is an inclusive venue, welcoming people of all cultures and faiths. We do not condone racial or religious intolerance or misrepresentation in any form. We understand and accept Mr Zed's valid concerns and are happy that we have been able to resolve this matter.'

Zed is a persistent anti-Lakmé campaigner. This is, we think, his first success.

[UK opera cancels Lakmé after Hindu protest - Slippedisc](#)

At a time when antisemitism is increasing, the RSC will hopefully still be allowed to stage The Merchant of Venice?