

IMAGINE à MOZART OPERA WIU DIARAJAYAM DANCER!

But The Fakir of Benares will make that plausible. Ratnottama Sengupta lifts the curtain on an Indo-French opera whose arias will be introduced by the orchestra playing at Kamani on Monday

Frederic Ligier's journey to the Copyright office in Paris some-time last year has shades of Columbus's voyage. Well, the French conductor may not have discovered a whole new continent, but *The Fakir of Benares* was a discovery all right. "It is perhaps the only opera set in

India, and no one has performed it since it first staging in Paris of 1922," says Ligier. And it can be to the land of mystics and maharajas, what Verdi's *Ida* is to Egypt, and Puccini's *Turandot* to China, he believes.

The conductor describes the opera a "delightful love story, picked up from forgotten Indian tale." It devolves around an ungalvanised Sundara and the sightless Kandour. She helps him, he falls in love, he wants to regain his sight so that he can see her, but she doesn't want that, lest he falls out of love.

However, it's the "lyrical score" that Ligier is entirely taken up with. "The music is easy on the Indian ears," he's been told. "And I'm delighted because it offers me a chance to play a music which is not played everyday, like Mozart or Beethoven." The quality of the music, of which only the piano portion is available, and "the originality of the libretto gives it a definite Indian identity," Ligier informs.

Since the script indicates no specific time period, the composer has the freedom to suit it to the temperament of the director -- Muzaffar Ali, in this case -- and the choreographer, Justin McCarthy. It helps that Justin himself is a pianist of standing and a seasoned Bharatanatyam dancer.

"Since the opera features a number of ballets, we could have Kathak and Bharatanatyam by Aditi Mangaldas or Daksha Sheth," adds Ligier, who thanks the French composer Leo Manuel for this. "Imagine a Bharatanatyam sequence in a Mozart opera!" All this was

planned when Ligier came down last November, for the preliminary discussions to stage the *Fakir* in one of Delhi's heritage monuments, in February next year. Subsequent discussions with Francis Wacziarg, the Delhi-based Frenchman who's the prime mover of the Indo-

French project, showed the necessity of an organised professional symphony orchestra.

"When the French Cultural Centre and Alliance Francaise came on the scene, we decided to fly down one lead musician for each instrument from Paris." The rest of the 60-strong orchestra are players from the Delhi Symphony Society. But, since Delhi did not have suffi-

cient players of the cello and the oboe, the clarinet or the bassoon, "we brought over some musicians from our Calcutta chapter," says Gautam Kaul of the Society.

Taking time off between rehearsals at the Hungarian Cultural Centre, Ligier says: "It's a pleasure to play with the Indian musicians, because they've agreed to work hard." So have the soloists and sopranos of the Delhi City Choir. And when soloist Situ Singh Buehler joins soprano Aude Priya Wacziarg? "It's a great moment," enthuses the conductor who knows "because of the strong presence of traditional music, Indians lack an interest in Western classical." But if they see more and more of them, as they have in the past six months which have brought symphony orchestras from Vienna and Germany, they'll develop a taste for it. "More so, if the opera has an Indian context," he underscores.



Western music enthusiasts can hear the arias of the forthcoming *Fakir of Benares*, co-sponsored by The Times of India, at the East West Symphony Orchestra at Kamani on Monday.

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