

Opéra : Le Fakir de Bénarès  
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# French Conductor Brings The Fakir Back To Life

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Opera is an unfamiliar word for many Indians; for others (who have merely a sneaking suspicion of what opera is) it conjures up the image of a buxom lady screeching like Bianca Castafiore. In this context, an opera written by a Frenchman with an Indian backdrop sounds, well, far-fetched? Then, dig this: The opera *Fakir Of Benares*, composed in French by Leo Manuel, was first staged in Paris in 1922. Then it got lost during the Second World War and remained forgotten till last year when Frenchwoman Priya Waczziarg stumbled upon the remaining manuscript. And decided to bring the "Fakir" back to life.

This is where the tall, lanky Frederic Ligier comes in. Having already worked with Priya, the "conductor and writer" (as he calls himself) was among the first to be summoned for Fakir's resurrection. "There was only the piano score," says Frederic. "I had to reconstruct the entire orchestra, which was a very interesting job." It was also time consuming. It took Frederic five years to recreate the *Fakir Of Benares*, which will be staged at Delhi on February 28 and March 2.

The tale, says the 40-year-old conductor, is about an ugly woman who falls in love with a blind man in Benares. The fakir comes to her rescue and gives her a

charm to cure his blindness. In the process, she becomes beautiful too and they live happily ever after. "The music of the opera is not very difficult," feels Frederic.

But why isn't the opera coming to Kolkata? "Translocation and finding a big enough place to perform in this city will be a problem," Frederic is here with two of his French colleagues for a performance at the Calcutta School of Music tomorrow.

On his last visit to India, Frederic had performed with three Indian musicians — Gaurav Mazumdar, Aditya Verma and Vinit Vyas — at the Neerama Fort near Delhi. The soiree has been turned into an album *Neerama Journey*. The Indo-French project had travelled to France as well. One of Frederic's favourite Indians is Sabajit Ray. "I liked *The Music Room* (*Lalsaghar*) best." He has even composed a string quartet as a tribute to Ray, naming it *Geetanjali*.

On his plans, Frederic says: "We are dreaming of taking *Fakir Of Benares* to Paris for its second performance after 1922." Given the kind of talents involved in the project — filmmaker Muzaffar Ali directs the opera, and his wife Meera is doing the costumes — it seems that Frederic's dreams might soon come true. ♦

Conductor and writer Frederic Ligier reconstructed the entire orchestra for the *Fakir Of Benares*.

