

PHOTO: RAJ K. RAJ

Romantic Operatic Preparations

MEENAKSHI KUMAR

Frenchman writes an opera on India in the early 20th century, it is destroyed during the World War and lost to humanity completely, without having made an appearance in India at all. Little less than a century later, a Frenchwoman accidentally discovers the opera and is fascinated by it. And incidentally, she is a lover of India and opera. So, she decides to bring it to the country of its origin. Co-sponsored by the *Hindustan Times*, *Fakir Of Benaras* (to be staged in Delhi from Feb. 27 to March 2 at the Siri Fort) will be the first ever opera that Delhiites will see.

Priya Wazirang is the Frenchwoman who discovered the only remaining manuscript of the opera a year back and immediately got in touch with Frederic Ligier, a French conductor and music writer, who was equally fascinated by the work. A lover of India, who'd fallen in love with the country when he'd first visited it with the Pocket Opera which was staged only for a select audience, he was thrilled to work with Priya. "I have played with her in concerts and I love her voice. Also, it was interesting to work with Indian music," says the 40-year-old Indophile who has written a string quartet, as a tribute to Satyajit Ray, the theme of which is *Gitanjali*.

But what posed a big challenge to the enthusiastic duo, was recreating the entire orchestra for the opera, as the available manuscript was meant only for the piano. "We had to rely on our imagination and retranscribe the score for each instrument," says Ligier, who hopes to write a peace opera based on Arabic music.

"Actually, as the opera is not too well-known, it was easy to experiment."

The same applied to Muzaffar Ali, who is directing the opera and, Meera his wife, who's doing the costumes. Ali thought it was a good opportunity to try out this rather interesting opera - a simple story about an ugly woman called Sundara who falls in love with a blind beggar. "I have tried to give it a new dimension on a visual level. There's no tried and tested formula to fall back upon, so I have done my best," he says. Meera, who's still finalising the costumes, has settled for a timeless, authentic Indian look.

Unlike western operas, which have a combination of singing and dialogues, *Fakir Of Benaras*, produced by Francis Wazirang, has only singing, which includes both western and Indian. The Delhi Symphony Society is one of the Indian contributions apart from 20 French musicians. "The music will definitely appeal to the public," says Ligier, who considers opera an extraordinary experience. "It's easy, beautiful but not poor in quality."

Even though the opera will be in French, provisions for translation are being made. Meanwhile, both Ali and Ligier are confident that the audience would be left spellbound by the spectacle of the grand Indo-French opera. ♦



French music composer Frederic Ligier (left) is providing the score for the first ever opera on India. Directed by Muzaffar Ali, *Fakir Of Benaras*, will be staged in Delhi from Feb. 27 to March 2. His wife Meera Ali is busy finalising the costume designs for the forthcoming opera.