

PARAM VIR
Snatched by the Gods
Broken Strings

A BBC recording

PARAM VIR
Snatched by the Gods
opera in one act

Libretto by William Radice

after a poem by Rabindranath Tagore *Debatar Gras*

Commissioned by the Landeshauptstadt München
for the Münchener Biennale 1992

Published by Novello & Co Ltd, London

A BBC recording made at Maida Vale on 16th July 1996

First performed by the Netherlands Opera, Amsterdam with the Asko
Ensemble conducted by David Porcelijn, Stage Direction by Pierre Audi
11–14 May (Amsterdam) and 22–24 May (Munich), 1992

This recording is from the British premiere production of the operas
by Almeida Opera and London Sinfonietta in July 1996
Conducted by Markus Stenz

First broadcast on *Hear And Now* on BBC Radio 3 on 6th September 1996

Composed April 1989–July 1990, London

Duration: approximately 52 minutes

Track Listing

- | | | |
|----|--|------|
| 1 | <i>Prelude</i> . Dawn: Maitra and the pilgrims gather. | 5:09 |
| 2 | Moksada enters and asks to join the pilgrimage. | 3:39 |
| 3 | Rakhal discovered on the boat. Moksada's curse. | 3:21 |
| 4 | "Burden of sin". The pilgrims respond to the curse. Moksada's remorse. | 3:54 |
| 5 | Annada arrives to stop Rakhal but the boat departs with him. | 3:43 |
| 6 | The journey to the sea. | 6:21 |
| 7 | Temple Bells at the place of pilgrimage. | 3:03 |
| 8 | Duet: Moksada and Rakhal. | 4:41 |
| 9 | The return journey: a furious storm arises. | 4:38 |
| 10 | Fear possesses the pilgrims. They turn on Moksada. | 5:05 |
| 11 | Moksada's last stand as she tries to protect her son. | 3:06 |
| 12 | The drowning of Rakhal. Sunset. <i>Postlude</i> . | 5:29 |



Almeida Opera production directed by David Farr, 1996
Photo: Ivan Kyncl

Characters

MAITRA *baritone* A well-to-do Brahmin from a village in East Bengal, leader of a group of pilgrims to a Hindu bathing-festival at the mouth of the Ganges

MOKSADA *mezzo-soprano* A young widow, keen to join the pilgrimage

RAKHAL *treble* Her son, whom she intends to leave behind but who insists on coming too

ANNADA *contralto* Moksada's elder sister, devoted to Rakhal, reluctant to let him go on the pilgrimage

BOATMAN *bass* Pilot of the boat that carries the pilgrims to the festival

PILGRIMS 1 *soprano* A young wife, going on the pilgrimage in the hope that this will bring her a child

2 *contralto* Her aunt, accompanying her

3 *tenor* A young man, college-educated, employed in the city now though originally from the village

4 *high baritone* A solitary, middle-aged man

5 *bass* An old blind man

MAITRA is well-intentioned but weak: he has a fatal desire to please everyone. MOKSADA is unhappy and guilt-ridden, impatient with her son. ANNADA is passionate and possessive, more aware of danger than the others. The BOATMAN is cantankerous and fanatical. PILGRIM 1 is pretty but not intelligent. PILGRIM 2 is dressy, fussy and materialistic. PILGRIM 3 is a cynic: he becomes an ally of the Boatman out of sadism rather than superstition. PILGRIM 4 is introspective and gloomy. PILGRIM 5 is blind, frail and pious. RAKHAL is joyful, hopeful and imaginative.

Instrumentation

Flute (doubling Piccolo and Alto Flute), Oboe (doubling Cor Anglais), Clarinet in B \flat (doubling Clarinet in E \flat), Bassoon, Contrabassoon, 2 Horns in F, Trumpet in C, Tenor-Bass Trombone, Percussion (2 players), Harp, 2 Violins, Viola, Violoncello, Double Bass.

Synopsis

Scene I

Dawn. As the boat hired to carry Maitra and his group of pilgrims is being loaded, Moksada appears, begging Maitra to let her join the pilgrimage. Maitra's concern is for Moksada's son Rakhal but when Moksada says that Rakhal will stay with her elder sister Annada, Maitra agrees to let her join them. While she is away collecting her baggage, Rakhal is discovered hiding on the boat: he too wants to join the pilgrimage.

Moksada, returning, is horrified to find her son there. Although the Boatman claims the boat is overloaded, Rakhal's eagerness persuades Maitra to let him stay. Moksada, furious, curses her son, although she immediately realises what she has done, seeks forgiveness and clasps her son to her.

Annada rushes in, appalled at losing Rakhal, and fearful for his safety on the journey. As the Boatman casts off, a wind begins to rise.

An orchestral interlude evokes the voyage and the festival.

Scene II

The pilgrims wait for the tide to turn so that they can return home. Rakhal is now restless and homesick, while Moksada's anxiety about her curse remains, despite the festival. The tide swiftly rises and the boat sets out. At first, Maitra and the Pilgrims are exhilarated by the strong wind and current, but Rakhal is frightened, clinging to his mother. The wind turns to a storm: the Pilgrims call on the Boatman to head for the shore but the boat is now out of control. The Boatman claims that the gods are angry at being cheated of their due: the Pilgrims throw their belongings overboard, but to no avail. Now Maitra points out Moksada as the one to blame, and in their panic and fear the other passengers call for Rakhal to be sacrificed to save the rest. Moksada desperately tries to protect her son, but fails: Rakhal is thrown into the water. The boy's drowning cries awaken Maitra's conscience. As the sun sets and darkness falls, Maitra leaps into the sea.

Libretto

Prelude

MAITRA

The sun is nearing Capricorn:
Only two weeks remain
Till the sacred festival time
When all shall wash away their sins
By bathing in the sea.
We must sail at sunrise.

PILGRIMS

PILGRIM 5 Someone help me.
PILGRIM 2 So much to load.
PILGRIM 1 Watch! Watch where you put
your step.
PILGRIM 3 Why the rush? Why the hurry?

BOATMAN

Fools, why aren't you ready?
You should have loaded the boat
While the sky was dark.
Dawn is near,
Auspicious first light.
We should have been ready to sail.

The sun rises.

MAITRA & PILGRIMS

Glory of the rising sun!
Show the light of truth to everyone!
Guide us as you cross the sky.

BOATMAN

Too light, too light already.
Quickly, quickly –

PILGRIMS

PILGRIM 5 No room to move.
PILGRIM 2 Bundles, boxes –
Boxes, bundles –
PILGRIM 1 No place to sit.
PILGRIM 4 Wait!
PILGRIM 3 Silly women, why have you
brought so much?

Moksada appears.

MOKSADA

Dada, I also want to come –
To ease my soul.

MAITRA

There's no more room in the boat.

MOKSADA

Dada, I do not want to stay behind.
I have seen it in a dream –
The sacred place where sea and
river meet,
The crowds, the noise,
The glistening limbs
Of hundreds of pilgrims bathing.

MAITRA

But what of Rakhhal, your son?
Who will look after him?

MOKSADA

Rakhhal? He can stay with his aunt.
She hates to be without him.
When he was born
I nearly died of fever.
Annada, my sister Annada
Took my baby
And suckled him with her own.
He loves her more than his mother.

BOATMAN

The breeze is sharp,
It doesn't like delay.
Hoist the sail.

PILGRIMS

PILGRIM 3,4,5 Hoist the sail.
PILGRIMS 1, 2 Not so roughly.
PILGRIM 4 Careful!
PILGRIM 3 Dirty rotten boat.
PILGRIM 5 Someone hold me.
Someone help me.

MOKSADA

Please, please let me come.
I implore you at your feet.

MAITRA

We cannot waste more time.
Come along if you must.

MOKSADA

You're good, you're kind.
I'll run and get my things.

BOATMAN

The sun is up,
The current is keen as a razor,
The wind is impatient,
We should have left by now.

MAITRA & PILGRIMS 1, 2

Gods of the sea and river,
MAITRA & PILGRIMS 4, 5 Keep the
boat sound,
The boatman skilful,
The wind steady.
PILGRIM 3 Pious ignorance!

BOATMAN

Spread your weight
More evenly over the boat.
Move, move, you fools.
Who is this boy hiding here?

RAKHAL

I want to come too!
I have heard stories
Of festival crowds at sacred places:
So many things to watch and buy -
Jugglers, hawkers, great magicians,
Holy men smeared with ash.

MOKSADA

Rakhhal, Rakhhal, what are you doing here?

I told you to stay with your Aunt.
Out of the boat at once.

RAKHAL
I'm going to the sea.
I want to bathe in the sparkling water.
I want to jump, I want to splash,
I want to dance in the wind and spray.

BOATMAN
Absolutely no more – the boat is
overloaded.

MOKSADA
You naughty, naughty boy –
Out of the boat at once!

RAKHAL
I'm going to the sea.



MOKSADA
No!

RAKHAL
Yes!

MOKSADA
No!

RAKHAL
Yes!

MAITRA
The boy has a fervent longing.
Look how his eyes shine,
Look at his bright smile.
Maybe it is his *karma* calling.
Let him be.
He can come along.

MOKSADA
All right then, come!
The sea can have you!

RAKHAL
Sparkling waters –

BOATMAN & PILGRIM 3
Fools! Overloading the boat.

PILGRIMS 1, 2
What a squash, what a squeeze,
Move across, watch out!
PILGRIMS 4, 5 Calmly, calmly –
Not an inch to spare.
PILGRIMS 1, 2 Not an inch to spare.

MOKSADA

All right then, come, come!
The sea can have you!

BOATMAN & PILGRIMS

Women with their baggage and children!
Put this bundle here,
Move those boxes over there –
Overburdened like our souls.
All-seeing gods –

RAKHAL

I want to swim...

MOKSADA

All right then, come!
The sea can have you!

RAKHAL

...in the foaming waves.

PILGRIMS 4, 5

Burden of sin –
All-hearing gods –

PILGRIMS 1, 2 So much to carry on
a long journey.

PILGRIM 3 Brainless incompetence!
Leaking boat.

PILGRIMS 1, 2, 4, 5 Burden of sin –
All-hearing gods –

BOATMAN

Dangerously heavy,
Inauspiciously late.

MAITRA

What have you said?
What have you done?

PILGRIMS & BOATMAN

What has she said?
What has she done?

MOKSADA

Rakhal, Rakhal,
My God, my child, my child, my God,
Forgive, forgive my black anger.

MAITRA

You must never ever say
Such words of evil omen.

Annada rushes on.

ANNADA

Rakhal, Rakhal,
Rakhal, where are you going?
I was nearly mad,
With searching and worrying.

RAKHAL

I'm going to the sea,
But I'll come back again, Aunt Annada.

ANNADA

But who will control him?
He's such a mischievous boy, my Rakhal!
From the day he was born
He has never been away from his aunt
for long.

Where are you taking him?
Give him back.

RAKHAL

Aunt Annada, I'm going to the sea,
But I'll come back again.
I'll come back again.

BOATMAN

Untie the rope,
Say your prayers,
Prepare to sail.

ANNADA

It is not my will, I am full of dread –

PILGRIM 2

Why can't I sit here?

PILGRIM 3 Move, woman.

PILGRIM 4 All-knowing gods –

PILGRIM 5 Give me strength for
this journey.

PILGRIM 1 Pile this on top, cram that
underneath!

ANNADA

I cannot let him go!
I am full of dread –

MAITRA

So long as Rakhal is with me
You need not fear for him, Annada.
It is winter, the rivers are calm,
There are many other pilgrims going,

There is no danger at all.
The trip will take two months –
I'll bring your Rakhal back to you.

PILGRIMS

Sit here,
Sit there,
Sit here, sit there,
This side,
That side,
This side, that side,
Further forward, nearer the back,
Balance the boat evenly.

BOATMAN

Hold the child tight,
Hold the child tight if he has to come.
Cast off! Cast off!

ANNADA

It is not my will!

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS

Leaving at last in a fresh steady breeze,
Sailing away on the swift smooth stream
of the river.
Winds, be kind to us on our journey,
Gods, guide us safely on our pilgrimage.

PILGRIM 4

Have mercy!

PILGRIM 3

And give me patience with my fellow
pilgrims!

RAKHAL, MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS

Soft morning sun,
Bright broad river,
Perfect winter weather,
No danger at all.

ANNADA

I am full of dread,
He ought to stay at home,
He ought to stay on land.
I fear wind and water,
I fear storm and danger,
Give him back, give him back,
Rakhal, Rakhal, I cannot let you go.
Stay with me,
Stay on land.
It is not my will
That you should go to the...

MOKSADA, MAITRA, BOATMAN & PILGRIMS

Sailing away with the stream and
the wind,
Hold on tight as the boat turns.
Calm broad river,
Breeze filling the sail,
Perfect winter weather,
No danger at all.

RAKHAL

I'm going to the sea,
But I'll come back again, Aunt Annada.
I'm going to the sea.

Interlude



RAKHAL

I'm tired of water.

MOKSADA

Sultry sky.

RAKHAL

Endless water,
Sleek and glossy,
Dark and curving,
Cruel and mean and spiteful water –

MOKSADA

I ought to be happy,
Prayers and pilgrimage should have lifted
my cares,
But everything around me, everything
within me,

Hangs so heavy.
The water does not shine any more.

When the sky is so low and grey,
It's hard to breathe.
When the river is so black and sickly,
When the air is so still,
Neither the boat
Nor the tightness in my chest
Can move away.

RAKHAL
Dada, when will the tide come?
I want to go home.

MOKSADA
Something lurking, something brooding,
Holding back the boat, keeping the
weight in my heart
From moving away.

RAKHAL
At the place where the sea meets
the river
The waves were beautiful,
But here they frighten me,
Here they flicker and hiss
Like the tongues of a thousand-headed
snake.

MOKSADA
Endless water...

RAKHAL
When will the tide come, Dada?
I miss Aunt Annada.

MOKSADA
We shan't be safe until we're home.
The water stirs.

RAKHAL
Dada, Dada, the water is lapping
that branch.
You said it would when the tide turned.
Can we leave now?

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS
Boatman, the tide has turned.

BOATMAN
All aboard,
We must catch the tide.
It comes fast here,
Charging like a demon into battle.

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS
Strong tide speeding pilgrims
home again,
Calm earth beyond the water,
Green land touching the horizon,
Tide pushing, earth pulling –

BOATMAN
Cast off, catch the tide,
It races like a chariot into battle.
Fools, pray to the gods for safety.

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS
Gods rushing us homewards,
Tide driving us onwards,
Back to the land –
Purpose achieved,
Sins washed away.
Earth's invisible arms draw us on.

BOATMAN
Sandbanks! Sandbanks ahead!
Narrow channel.
See how the wind battles with the tide.
Lash down the boxes,
Hold the child firmly.

RAKHAL
Dada, when shall we be home?
When shall we be home?

MAITRA
Soon, if the wind keeps up as strong.
Boatman, steer
Into the fastest stream.
River, flow –
Wind, blow –
Carry us home.

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS
Racing hurtling stream
Carry us home.
Dazzling break in the clouds,
Arrow of sunlight points us forwards.
Follow the sun,

Follow the wind,
Follow the tide,
Forward, northward, onward, homeward.
Faster, faster.

RAKHAL
I'm frightened, mother,
The waves are high,
The stream so fast,
The sky is black and stormy,
I can't see the shore.
I see snakes' hoods rearing.

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS
Boatman, Boatman, the river flows too
swiftly here,
The wind is too strong –
Turn the boat towards the shore.

MAITRA
Where is the shore?
Turn back, turn back,
A storm is about to break.

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS
Turn back, turn back,
The wind is too strong,
The stream's too fast,
You've steered far from the shore.

BOATMAN
Too late now,
The rudder's useless,
The boat spins and tumbles like
a drunkard.

The storm pounds the boat.

The passengers scream.

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS

Ravenous, gluttonous,
murderous waters,
Whipped-up water beating at the sky,
Jeering at the sun,
Clapping with a thousand hands
Its own mad death-dance!

BOATMAN

Someone among you has cheated
the gods,
Has not given what is owing:
Hence these waves, this unseasonal
typhoon.
I tell you, make good your promise now,
Or we shall all drown.

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS

Merciless, pitiless, furious whirlwind,
Shattering the waves,
Smashing up the sky,
Fighting with the frenzied tide,
Wind and water locked in a wild
death-dance!

BOATMAN

A promise to the gods must be kept.
You must not play games with
angry gods.

MOKSADA, MAITRA & PILGRIMS

Boxes, bundles, throw them in.
Give the gods all that you own,
Promises must be kept,
Bow before the rage of the storm,
Nothing is stronger than the gods'
death-dance!

BOATMAN

I warn you now,
Who is holding back what belongs to
the gods?

MAITRA

This woman is the one!
She made her own son over to the gods,
And now she tries to steal him back.

PILGRIMS

Throw him overboard!
You can't defy the gods!

MOKSADA

Dada, Dada, I'm a foolish
ignorant woman.
Spare him, spare him –

MAITRA

Am I your saviour?
You stupidly, thoughtlessly gave your
own son
To the gods in your anger,
And now you expect me to save him!
Pay the gods your debt!

PILGRIMS

Never make gods angry.
The boy should be sacrificed.

RAKHAL

What are they doing?
Mother, Mother –
What are they doing?
Mother –

BOATMAN

Throw him into the water.
Let the river drag him to the sea.

MAITRA, BOATMAN & PILGRIMS

Churning, foaming waters,
Howling, roaring whirlwind.
Current of the river fiercer than the tide,
Let it drag the boy
Back to the sea where he belongs.
Back to the sea where he be –

MOKSADA

No!
You've all gone mad –
Mad as the storm.
O God, O reader
Of our inmost thoughts,
Is what I say in the heat of anger
My true word?
Did you not see how far,
How far from the truth it was, O Lord?
Do you only listen to what our

mouths say?
Do you not hear
The true message of a mother's heart?

PILGRIMS

Die! Die! He must die!

RAKHAL

No, no, stop them, Mother!

Moksada collapses.

Maitra turns away.

RAKHAL

Get up, Mother, stop them, stop them!

BOATMAN

Throw him in.
Let the river carry him to the sea.

*Rakhal mouths a long voiceless scream
as he is thrown overboard.*

Everybody freezes.

RAKHAL

Aunt Annada, Aunt Annada,
Aunt Annada!

MAITRA

Child!

RAKHAL

Aunt Annada!

MAITRA

Child!

RAKHAL
Aunt Annada!

MAITRA
Scream of drowning child –

RAKHAL
Aunt Annada!

MAITRA
Sears like a whiplash of lightning,
Stings like a scorpion.
Cry, helpless, hopeless drowning cry –
Stabs like a spike of fire.

RAKHAL
Aunt Annada!

He drowns.

MAITRA
Stop!
Save him! Save him! Save him!

BOATMAN & PILGRIM 3
Fool! Spineless fool!
Why did you let the boy and his
mother come?

MAITRA
I shall bring you back.

*He leaps into the water, and drowns.
The setting sun gradually becomes
more visible.
Long pause, as the sun sinks slowly
into the river.*



PARAM VIR
Broken Strings
opera in one act

Libretto by David Rudkin

based on a traditional Buddhist story *Guttīl Jatak*

Commissioned by the Landeshauptstadt München
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Composed April 1991–March 1992, London

Duration: approximately 59 minutes

Track Listing

- | | | |
|----|--|------|
| 1 | The King summons the players of his Company. | 2:22 |
| 2 | Their play begins. Musil begins to play. | 9:55 |
| 3 | Guttill enters. | 5:04 |
| 4 | Guttill begins to play.
The first string breaks. | 5:24 |
| 5 | The Elephant appears and dances and sings with Guttill. | 5:07 |
| 6 | The second string breaks. | 3:13 |
| 7 | The Fish appears and dances and sings with Guttill.
The third string breaks. | 9:06 |
| 8 | The Peacock appears and dances and sings with Guttill. | 4:59 |
| 9 | The Elephant, Fish and Peacock dance to the music. | 2:11 |
| 10 | Afraid of the fourth string's breaking, the King interrupts the play.
The Guttill actor powerfully demonstrates the fourth string's breaking. | 1:30 |
| 11 | As the marvellous music resumes, Musil dismisses it as a trick.
The King, troubled, banishes the players from the space. | 5:00 |
| 12 | Only the broken instrument remains.
The King reflects on what it means for him. | 5:06 |



The Netherlands Opera production directed by Pierre Audi, 1992
Richard Suart in the role of Guttil, photo by Regine Körner

Characters

KING *bass*

An Actor, later seen as MUSIL *tenor*

A brilliantly talented young musician, seeking the post of Player to the King

THIRD JUDGE *high baritone*

SECOND JUDGE *tenor*

PRESIDING JUDGE *baritone*

adjudicators of the contest for the royal post

GUTTIL *bass–baritone* An old musician, forgotten and poor

ELEPHANT *contralto*

FISH *soprano*

PEACOCK *tenor*

magical creatures summoned by the music

The names MUSIL and GUTTIL are ideally pronounced:

Muss' il, Gut-til', with German vowels, though the i-sound is shorter; and the g- and t-sounds not harsh.

Likewise, the names of their cities Ujjain and Banaras:

Oo-djain', Ba-nahr 'as, all sounds light and pure.

Instrumentation

Flute (doubling Piccolo and Alto Flute), Oboe (doubling Cor Anglais), Clarinet in B \flat (doubling Clarinet in E \flat and Bass Clarinet in B \flat), Bassoon, Contrabassoon, 2 Horns in F, Trumpet in C, Tenor-Bass Trombone, Percussion (2 players), Celesta, Guitar, Harp, 2 Violins, Viola, Violoncello and Double Bass.

Synopsis

The post of Player to the King is vacant. Musicians throughout the Kingdom have been summoned and heard; and all found wanting. But at last the young Musil is called forward, and it would seem the search must be over. Brilliant, versatile, Musil is secure in one simple conviction: he has heard, in all the contest, no talent to equal his; he will surely be chosen. To his surprise the Judges reject him; and a mysterious old man appears – Guttli, almost blind; stammering, out of practice, fumbling on his instrument: a beggar, he seems, but with a strange authority, and compelling respect. Barely waiting for the command, he begins to play.

Yet hardly has the old man begun, when one of his strings breaks. Distressed, and faltering at first, he yet plays on; and from his instrument an extraordinary new note begins to sound. Then a second string breaks; then a third. More and more intensely, the old man plays on,

with less and less. His music becomes even more extraordinary, and magical creatures begin to appear, delighting in this miraculous music. Even the three Judges begin to see and wonder. Only the young Musil is unaffected. Impressed but unmoved, he can only interpret the old man's magic as some external trick effect, that can be taught and imitated. To achieve the same magic, he breaks his own strings; but now no music comes from them at all. He has destroyed his own instrument.

This strange story, originally an ancient Buddhist legend, is here adapted and framed operatically as a “play within a play”, performed by court actors for their own King. It is a play that he has never seen before: and as one by one the old musician's strings break, the Spectator King becomes increasingly disturbed, and interrupts the actors; tries to stop the play ..

Libretto

[No music yet. A space. A throne. Enter a KING: middle-aged. He considers. He decides. An imperious clap of his hands.

[An ACTOR appears: man, young.]

KING

Play for me. No .. Yes. Act for me ..

ACTOR

What play, Great Majesty?

KING

The .. No .. The ..

[Silence.]

Choose for me.

ACTOR

We have a new play, Great Majesty ..

KING

What is that?

ACTOR

Its title is *To Play before the King*. Sir. It tells how –

KING

Don't say. Play it. I will see. Myself.

[He comes to sit on a throne, somewhat to one side off the space, with us the theatre audience.

[The ACTOR clicks his thumb; and again. The company assemble. Eight in all, they dress: three in old men's bald-cap and beard; three in fantastical costume and masks of ELEPHANT, FISH, PEACOCK ..]

KING

[aside, to us the theatre audience:]

An elephant .. ? A fish .. ? A peacock? What fantastical tale is this to be? .. 'to play before the King' .. ?

[The ELEPHANT, PEACOCK and FISH briefly practise moving in their costumes; vocalize fragments from their parts to come, etc. (Like tuning up.)

[A silence falls. All group, ready to begin.

[The ACTOR bows to the KING; retires ..

[THE PLAY BEGINS.

[Three old men preside, the JUDGES of a contest:]

JUDGE 3

Now only two remain.

JUDGE 2

Two competitors.

JUDGES 2, 3

And still we have heard not one, not one musician worthy: to play before the King.

*[The PRESIDING JUDGE 1 rings a little bell.
JUDGE 2 claps his hands. JUDGE 3 –]*

JUDGE 3
Next!

[– and pounds floor with an imperious stave.

*[A young man comes: the ACTOR now in character
as MUSIL, with his instrument. (In narrative reality,
the instrument is four-stringed. For the play within
our opera, it is theatrically conventionalized.)*

[MUSIL bows to the JUDGES, they to him.]

JUDGE 1
Name?

MUSIL
Musil.

JUDGE 1
City?

MUSIL
Ujjain.

JUDGE 1
Musil of Ujjain: when you are ready, play.

[MUSIL places his instrument, prepares to play ..]

MUSIL
*[to KING:] Play, they tell me. [including us too:]
I'll play. The prize is mine. The honour, the
office: Player to the King. In all this contest
I have heard not one – I tell you: not one*

.. whose mastery comes near to mine.
Listen: you'll hear.

*[He plays: theatricalized gestures of playing,
for the play within our opera. His music: a
high scherzando dancing, rapid, glittering,
impressive; but empty, cold ..*

[MUSIL pauses.]

Let these Judges delight in that.
My music, my sound, my sound: it
coruscates, it scintillates .. A dance of
dazzling, blinding light ..

Hear more ..

[He plays a second statement.

[Again MUSIL pauses ..]

Let these revel in that .. How is it pleasing
them? Don't look. I must ..

[He glances toward the JUDGES ..]

What? Unmoved? I make no
impression at all? Perhaps it does not
suit them. My more brilliant style. After
all, they are old. I'll tune my strings
down a little for them ..

*[He tunes his instrument down: in gesture
theatricalized ..]*

To a key less sharp ..

I'll play for them something more melodic

.. This will be more to their liking. My lyrical mode ..

[He plays: phrases in high middle register, arching, plaintive ..

[JUDGE 1 bends down in whispering consultation with JUDGES 2 and 3 ..

[MUSIL pauses ..]

What's this? They're talking now . . ?
While I play, the Judges are talking there?
– Sirs? Something is the matter?

JUDGE 1

Matter, Musil of Ujjain?

MUSIL

Matter! Matter with my playing!

JUDGE 3

You were playing?

JUDGE 1

We beseech your pardon, Musil, Sir:
we thought you were only tuning.

MUSIL

Tuning .. ?

JUDGE 2

I thought a mouse was scratching at the instrument.

JUDGE 1

If you are going to play for us, Musil of Ujjain, then play. Or else stand down.

[Brief silence.]

MUSIL

Is even that key too sharp for these?
They are, after all, extremely old .. But quite surprisingly severe .. I must tune yet lower ..

[MUSIL again seen tuning down his instrument.]

I'll give them something of my deeper voice .. My tragic vein ..

[He strikes .. But already –

[JUDGE 1 rings his little bell, JUDGE 2 claps his hands, and JUDGE 3 –]

JUDGE 3:

Stop!

[– and pounds with his stave.]

MUSIL

What?

JUDGE 1

Stop, Musil.

JUDGE 2

Next.

MUSIL

You are telling me, stop playing?

[JUDGE 1: angry ring of his bell. JUDGE 2: impatient clap of his hands. JUDGE 3 –]

JUDGE 3
Stop! Stop!

[– and pounds his stave twice.]

MUSIL
Sirs. Sir Judges. In all this contest I have heard not one, not one competitor, Sirs, whose music is a match for mine. Whose playing has brilliance, melody, power, to equal mine. My music is everything –

JUDGE 1
Yes, Musil, Sir. Your music is everything. Except enough.

MUSIL
Enough?! Enough . . . ?

JUDGE 1
You could play all the notes under Heaven, Sir: we should still be starved.

MUSIL
I do not understand you.

JUDGE 3
Next.

MUSIL
I do not un- –

JUDGES 2, 3
Next!

JUDGE 1
Stand down, Musil.

JUDGES 1, 2, 3
Musil, stand down!

[Bell, hand-clap, pounding of stave: emphatic, final.

[MUSIL with an ill grace stands aside.]

MUSIL
[to KING and us:] They'll come to me in the end. They've only one candidate left. I'll wait.

JUDGE 2
Listen ..

JUDGE 3
Sir .. ?

[.. His entrance unobserved meanwhile, an old man already here and waiting: thin, in rags, a man reduced to his own minimum – GUTTIL, bowed humble over his instrument ..]

JUDGE 1
Sir .. ?

JUDGE 2
Sir .. ?

MUSIL
And look at him. Old ruin of a man .. Half blind ..

JUDGE 1
Name? Name?!

MUSIL
And deaf too?

GUTTIL
Gu- Guttill .. Sirs ..

JUDGE 1
City?

JUDGE 2
Your city, Sir.

GUTTIL
Ba- Banaras .. Sirs ..

JUDGES 2, 3
Guttill of Banaras, Sir. Take your time.

JUDGE 2
When you are ready, Sir.

JUDGE 3
Take your time.

[But GUTTIL already strikes his instrument, as though in answer to some sound he hears afar .. We hear sour 'rusty' tones. GUTTIL utters a cry of despair –]

GUTTIL
Oh, let me be ..

[He makes to stumble away.]

JUDGE 3
No, stay, Sir.

JUDGE 2
Play. We cannot choose for the King, and not have heard you, old Sir.

JUDGE 3
The King commands: all players shall be heard.

JUDGE 2
Play, Guttill of Banaras.

JUDGE 1
Guttill of Banaras, take your time.

MUSIL
[to KING and us:] I see. They've put us through all this for nothing. Him they want. One of their own time. Old man: his Sun is set. The King will need a musician with good long years ahead of him. I'll wait.

[GUTTIL stands with his instrument apart, alone ..]

GUTTIL
'Play' .. 'Play' .. 'Play', they tell me .. Guttill of Banaras .. Told by Judges: 'Play' .. To be rated: worse – or better – than some other man or men .. Placed. Assessed ..

[He slowly turns, listening as to other sounds elsewhere afar ..]

I am dead. I am a ghost, bringing the song I sing among a world all noise that shuts me out .. For all that, I play on. I must ..

JUDGE 2

When you are ready, Sir.

JUDGE 3

Take your time.

[But GUTTIL already is touching his instrument. His notes: searching, as though tuning in to what he hears. They become surer, strong –]

GUTTIL

Ah – !

[He has stopped. A string has broken – [Silence. GUTTIL motionless, bowed over his instrument ..]

MUSIL

Ha! a string gone? The metaphor is loud and clear.

JUDGE 2

Guttill? ..

JUDGE 3

Sir? ..

GUTTIL

It is nothing.

JUDGE 2

But –

GUTTIL

Nothing! Sir Judges! A string, only! Nothing!

[He strikes a defiant harmony ..]

[to himself:] Nothing, I tell them. It is not nothing: a string that is gone ..

My deepest, darkest voice that was .. Wrenched and shapen from the gut of living clay .. Silenced now .. Silent for ever.

Well. We can make music yet. On higher strings ..

[He plays: a defiant high glittering scherzando, angry somehow, shallow, shrill ..]

MUSIL

[to KING and us:] A brilliant solution, you have to admit. A high scherzando. Of course. *[Laughs.]* What else?

[JUDGES among themselves:]

JUDGE 1

Well improvised.

JUDGE 3

Well recovered.

[But JUDGE 2 is silent; listening ..]

GUTTIL

Poor foolish hands. You pluck upon the emptiness, the nothing, where that taut string stretched: as though to make it speak ..

[Beneath the dazzle, a new deep note is sounding ..]

Fool hands, the string is gone! What touch shall touch a song from nothing?

ELEPHANT

Music ..

[A light reveals: the ELEPHANT begins to stir ..]

I hear music .. Deep for me .. Deep for me, the Elephant, to hear ..

JUDGE 2

Extraordinary sound ..

ELEPHANT

Who sends this music? No one sent the Elephant a song before ..

GUTTIL

[in wonderment:] Who's singing here?

ELEPHANT

The music touches me .. Caresses me .. It thrills through all my clay .. Where is this music .. ?

JUDGE 2

I could swear I hear a voice in that ..

ELEPHANT

Up, beast I am .. Beast I am, up, up, and stand .. Where is this music .. ?

GUTTIL

Here I am! – Ah, ah, look there! See there: a wonder! Singing to the song of the string that is gone .. !

ELEPHANT

Stand, beast I am .. Stand, and be moving .. To this music, this glorious music ..



JUDGE 1

Remarkable colouring ..

JUDGE 3

Amazing *tone* ..

JUDGE 2

Sh – Listen ..

ELEPHANT

[dancing and trumpeting:]

Music! Music! Dance to this music! ..

MUSIL

Bass string gone: yet from his instrument
such deep resonance .. Some freak
effect. I must pay him to teach it to me
before he dies –

GUTTIL

Here I am .. ! –

[Gesture as a second string is broken:]

Ah –

[A gasp from the JUDGES:]

JUDGES 1, 2, 3

Ah!

JUDGE 2

Ah! –

*[The music falls silent. Light on the
ELEPHANT fades.]*

ELEPHANT

Oh .. Where is my music gone .. ?

JUDGE 1

Guttill, Sir ..

*[GUTTIL seems to hear no one, see nothing;
bowed over his instrument again, feeling its
strings; himself unmoving ..]*

JUDGE 3

Sir!

JUDGE 1

We are sorry, old Sir, it has to end this
way for you –

GUTTIL

[blind to them all, musing over his instrument:]
This string gone too? Also this string no
more? – End, Sirs you say? End for me?
When only a string has broken .. ?

*[He is touching the two strings that remain:
a music middle-register, halting, fragmentary,
spare ..]*

Two middle strings alone .. Some song
can still be sung ..

JUDGE 1

Guttill, Sir, we cannot judge you fairly on
half an instrument –

*[But already – for he does not hear the
JUDGES from now – GUTTIL strikes as from his
instrument his answer: fierce, defiant ..]*

GUTTIL

If this is how it is to be. With even less:
play on .. I must. Has this not been my
story from the start? Guttill of Banaras?
Ever with less: sing on.

FISH

I hear music!

[In another light, the FISH begins to stir ..]

Silvery music .. It tingles like ripples of
light .. Down through the lightless deep to
me, where Sunlight cannot reach ..

JUDGE 2

Look! Glittering and leaping in the
darkness there .. !



FISH

Ha ha ha! The music, it touches me, it
tickles me .. Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! The
silvery music. It teases me, it teases me,
the glittering silvery music ..

GUTTIL

Who is here? Another? singing to the
song of a string I have lost?

MUSIL

It cannot be denied. For half an
instrument, this music is remarkable ..

FISH

It lures me! It catches me, it catches me!
It plays me, plays me .. ! Oh where is
the magic fisherman who makes such
music .. ?

GUTTIL

[cries in joy:] Ha .. ! Ha .. ! Here I am. Here
I am ..

JUDGE 1

Who's he talking to .. ?

JUDGE 3

Sh!

JUDGE 2

Look .. !

FISH

Oh leap, leap, leap! up, to this silvery music .. Oh where are the ends of the sea, the shore of the land: to find this silvery glittering music .. ? Play me, catch me .. !

GUTTIL

Here I am .. Ha .. ! Ha .. ! Here I am ..
Ha .. ! –

[But gesture of a third string breaking. A gesturing soundless cry from the JUDGES, rising; and from the spectator KING himself, half-rising, a cry –]

KING

No – !

[Then, appalled at his intervention, he sits back on throne, hand clapped to his mouth; the play continuing ..

[Music falls away. Light on the FISH goes out.]

JUDGE 1

Guttill .. Old Sir ..

[Intent, intensely, GUTTIL is resuming: fierce notes, as plucked from one remaining string ..]

GUTTIL

Is this the way? One string alone .. On this last string alone, am I to sing it all .. ?

PEACOCK

I hear singing .. Oh listen ..
Ravishing singing ..

[Sounding already through the music, an unearthly arching birdlike calling .. In a third light, the PEACOCK begins to stir ..]

Oh hear it. Hear it .. Where is the bird, that sings this exquisite song .. ?

GUTTIL

Is this the way of it? Lose more; lose more: sing on?

PEACOCK

Oh where is the beautiful bird of the air, oh where? oh where? that makes this lovely song ..

JUDGES 1, 3

Look! Look there!

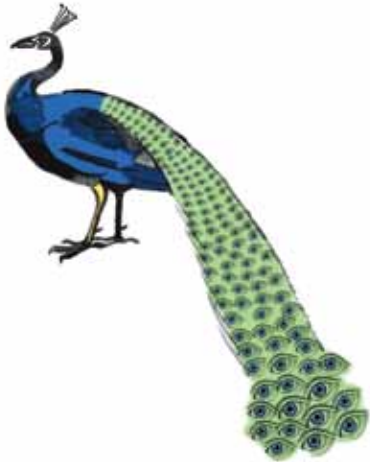
[The PEACOCK begins to rise ..]

GUTTIL

Ever with less, sing on? And less; and less ..

PEACOCK

Oh why have I a hundred eyes .. and only these two ears? .. to hear this singing ..



GUTTIL

Is this the way of it .. ?

PEACOCK

... this singing, this singing .. Two
wretched ears alone .. to take this
wondrous singing in ..

GUTTIL

Is this the way of it .. ?

JUDGES 1, 3

Look there! Look there!

JUDGE 2

Oh .. hear it ..

PEACOCK

[in fierce, penetrating anguish:] My hundred
eyes, what use are they? They cannot
see this song .. And yet they open ..
They open, they open .. all my blind
hundred eyes ..

[The PEACOCK begins to unfurl his tail ..]

GUTTIL

Then even this last string ..

[The KING stirring on the throne:]

KING

No ..

*[In first and second lights ELEPHANT
and FISH are rising again ..]*

ELEPHANT

This music ..

FISH

This music like light ..

*[The elephant music and fish music are
beginning to sound again ..]*

ELEPHANT

It comes again. It thrills through all
my clay ..

FISH

Oh where is the end of the sea? the shore of the land? to find this music, this music, this music .. ?

GUTTIL

This one last string: .. must even this be broken?

[KING writhing on throne as one in a dream, who cannot wake ..]

KING

No .. No! ..

GUTTIL

Hear it .. Hear it ..

[Through intensifying texture, one piercing note sounds more and more, suggests its breaking near .. GUTTIL plays on, remorseless, as though putting his instrument to mortal, final strain ..]

ELEPHANT

Up .. Up, beast I am .. Stand and be moving .. to this music, this glorious music ..

GUTTIL

I see it now! Yes, yes! It is the way of it .. It breaks ..

ELEPHANT

[dancing, trumpeting:] Dance to the music ..

FISH

Play me, play me, silvery music .. Catch me, catch me ..

PEACOCK

[wild with grief:] Oh oh .. ! Oh oh .. ! My hundred eyes are weeping. All my blind hundred useless eyes .. are weeping .. Weeping ..

[All their lights begin to blend, their musics to fuse, to glow with incandescent intensity .. Through it all sounds more and more the penetrating note of the final string about to break ..]

GUTTIL

Hear it! Straining to break .. !

KING

[gesturing:] No .. Stop ..

[KING rising ..]

GUTTIL

[in almost exalted fearful recognition:]

It breaks! Yes! Yes!

[KING stepping forward onto edge of the space –]

KING

Stop the play! Stop the music, stop, stop .. !

[All action freezes, appalled. KING too: on the space now, he cannot retreat.]

I'll have no more; I'll have no more ..

[The GUTTIL actor addresses him, direct:]

GUTTIL

It breaks, Sir. This last string breaks.

It breaks. Sir. So ..

[In silence, the fourth string's breaking, done by GUTTIL actor's gesture alone.

[Silence.]

There. It is gone. Last string .. broken ..

Who is here, who heard it breaking .. ?

No one ..

[Already the GUTTIL actor is GUTTIL again; the 'play', without our knowing, has seamlessly resumed ..]

Gone, at the last, so easy .. Now all my instrument is broken .. What music now? .. when I must make it, all, from nothing? ..

[Motionless, alone with his shattered instrument ..

[But JUDGES are living ..]

JUDGE 2

Listen ..

JUDGE 3

Listen ..

JUDGE 1

Listen ..

[Severally rising, voices variously overlapping:]

There! There! Look there, see there .. !

[About GUTTIL now, a magical light appearing ..

[Again, ELEPHANT, FISH, PEACOCK are living too ..]

ELEPHANT, FISH, PEACOCK

Hear it .. Hear it ..

Hear it ..

That music, that music ..

JUDGES 1, 2, 3

This music, this music ..

[A light beginning to illumine them all ..

[GUTTIL, himself becoming a radiance; a voice at first of seeming agony, that turns to joy and laughter ..]

GUTTIL

Yes .. Yes .. ! Play on! The song is here, and will be sung! The song itself burns all the instrument away! See it! and hear it! See and hear this song I am! The song's a dancing and a laughter! –

MUSIL

Haaa!

[A sudden satanic laughter from MUSIL –]

Great trick, that.

[All music shrivels to a black growl of negation ..]

That's how it's done .. One breaks one's strings. Simply breaks them. All our study, our apprenticeship: for nothing! The way is short, and easy! We break our strings, that's all. Old charlatan, teaching us the slow long way. Preserving your mystique. It's nothing. Nothing! The strings are a delusion! The strings are in our way! ..

[With terrible conventionalized gestures, he tears at his instrument ..]

Break! Break! Break! Break .. ! Easy. Nothing to it. Study; learning: .. all lies. Art? Exaggeration! The way is easy. There. Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone.

Nothing to it.

Now we'll hear. Now we shall hear.

[He touches his instrument. Nothing. Strokes it; then plucks at it. Nothing ..]

What? Nothing? .. Play! Play! Play, damn you! Play for me! Play!

[He strikes it. Nothing.

[MUSIL flees, uttering a long howl of one damned.

[Overlapping, a cry from the KING, stumbling forward amid the players themselves ..]

KING

Away from me .. All of you .. Out of my sight .. !

COMPANY

– But the ending .. – Sh. Sh ..

PEACOCK

Careful! Watch how you tread on my eyes .. !

KING

Out, out, out, out .. !

[The Company scatter. On the empty space, the KING alone. In silence, an after-echo of all the magical music hangs motionless ..]

Gone. Peacock, fish, elephant. Judges: gone .. The young man, gone. And the old musician .. Gone. All of them. They were not here. I dreamed them ..

No. The old man left his instrument .. His broken instrument .. As though for me ..

[He takes up the broken instrument.]

Is this .. myself? Some song I thought I was? And I was none at all, and must be broken? Great harmony I thought I was? and must be torn .. ? Must I go from this place .. sad in my heart? For an image here has told me: I must be broken, and torn .. ? And did the image say: The strings .. obstruct the song .. ?

Ever with less, the old man said. Ever with less. Must less sustain me too? Then even less? Less, gladden me? Then ever less. And less? Till I must make whatever song is mine .. from nothing .. ?

The song I am .. : from nothing?

Nothing?

Only then .. I begin .. ?

[Slow fade on him.]



Param Vir



An award-winning composer of opera and instrumental works, Param Vir's music fuses Western tradition and Eastern aesthetics. Born in Delhi, he grew up surrounded by Indian classical music. In 1984 he moved to England to pursue his studies with Peter Maxwell Davies at Dartington and Oliver Knussen at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has a particular affinity for dramatic genres. Amongst his most performed works are

Photo: Nick White

the operatic double bill *Snatched by the Gods* and *Broken Strings*, commissioned by Henze for the Munich Biennale, and the full length opera *Ion* which premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival. His concert works, *Horse Tooth White Rock*, *The Theatre of Magical Beings* and *Hayagriva* draw their inspiration from ancient mythologies, while the vast orchestral canvas of *Between Earth and Sky* evokes the disorientating beauty of the sculpture of Anish Kapoor. Recent works include a much-acclaimed BBC Proms commission *Cave of Luminous Mind* and *Raga Fields* for sarod and large ensemble commissioned and toured by BCMG, Fulcrum Point New Music Projects (Chicago) and Klangforum Wien (Vienna). NMC released a portrait CD *Wheeling Past the Stars* in 2021. Future plans include a major new opera for Theater Bonn.

www.paramvir.net

"[His] music is resounding in my heart as messages of great inner wealth. It is like a new idea of beauty and grace and has all the strength and the energy of great art."

Hans Werner Henze

William Radice



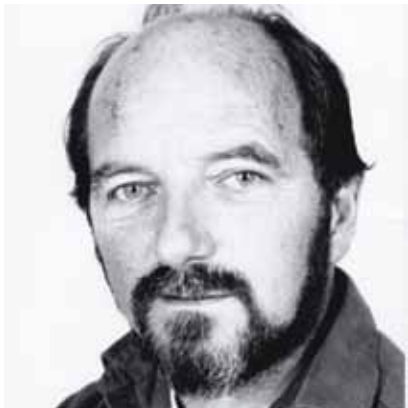
William Radice was born in London in 1951. He was educated at Westminster School, Magdalen College Oxford (where he read English) and SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies in London). Here he learnt Bengali, gaining a 2-year Diploma with a mark of distinction; later he did a DPhil at St Anthony's College, Oxford, working on Michael Madhusudhan Datta.

Photo: unknown, credit sought

His career then followed two complementary paths: he returned to SOAS to teach Bengali and at the same time developed his own writing. In 1994 Hodder published his groundbreaking *Teach Yourself Bengali*, later revised as *Complete Bengali*. His first book of poetry (*Eight Sections*, 1974) was published while he was still a student. There followed several further books of poetry, some journalism (*A Hundred Letters from England*, 2003) and libretti – *Snatched by the Gods*, *Chincha Chancha Cooroo* (2006, set to music by Bernard Hughes) and a new translation of *Turandot* into English for ENO. His literary and linguistic interests met in his work on Rabindranath Tagore, particularly the translations in *Selected Poems* and *Selected Short Stories* (both Penguin, 1985 and 1991 respectively).

He has been married for nearly fifty years, and has two daughters and four grandchildren.

David Rudkin



David Rudkin, born in 1936, first attracted public attention with his ritually violent first play, *Afore Night Come*, written while he was a Classics undergraduate at Oxford, and sensationally premièred by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1962; it was the modern play that most informed the Company's revolutionary approach to the performance of Shakespeare as 'our contemporary'. He has worked for over sixty years since,

in theatre, cinema, television, radio, and musical theatre, evolving an *œuvre* across a wide range of genres, but consistently rooted in mythical and archetypal themes, and always striking a strong political resonance. He has worked with some of the legendary figures of our time, among them the film-directors François Truffaut and Fred Zinnemann, and the theatre-directors Peter Brook and Pierre Audi – who premièred his 1986 stage-play *The Saxon Shore* at London's Almeida Theatre. His screenplay, *Testimony*, worked from the disputed memoirs of Shostakovich, was awarded the Gold Medal at the New York Film Festival, 1988. He has also translated Schönberg's *Moses and Aaron* (a singers' version for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 1964), and plays by Aeschylus and Euripides, Ibsen and Genet from their original languages for stage and radio. He has himself worked as librettist with several composers; this was his first collaboration with Param Vir. Their most recent, a full-scale music-drama, is scheduled by Theater Bonn for 2026.

Photo: unknown, credit sought

Markus Stenz



Markus Stenz has held several high-profile positions including Principal Conductor of the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, Principal Guest of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and most recently Conductor-In-Residence of the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra. He was General Music Director of the City of Cologne and Gürzenich-Kapellmeister for 11 years, conducting Mozart *Don Giovanni*,

Wagner's *Ring* cycle, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, as well as Janáček *Jenufa* and *Katya Kabanová* and Eötvös's *Love and other Demons*. His extensive discography includes many prize-winning recordings including the Gürzenich Orchestra's complete cycle of Gustav Mahler's symphonies with Symphony No. 5 receiving the German Record Critics' Award; Strauss' *Don Quixote* and *Till Eulenspiegel* both received unanimous critical acclaim, followed by an equally celebrated recording of Schönberg's *Gurrelieder* released in 2015, receiving the Choral Award at the 2016 Gramophone Awards.

Markus Stenz studied at the Hochschule für Musik in Cologne under Volker Wangenheim and at Tanglewood with Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa. He has been awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester and the 'Silberne Stimmgabel' (Silver Tuning Fork) of the state of North Rhein/Westphalia.

Performers

Snatched by the Gods

Maitra
Moksada
Rakhal
Annada
Boatman
Pilgrims

Robert Poulton
Susan Roberts
Jesse Gardiner-Smith
Fiona Kimm
Andrew Slater
Yvonne Barclay
Nuala Willis
Stephen Rooke
Richard Suart
Patrick Donnelly

Broken Strings

King
Actor, later Musil
Third Judge
Second Judge
Presiding Judge
Guttill
Elephant
Fish
Peacock

Andrew Slater
Stephen Rooke
Patrick Donnelly
Kevin West
Robert Poulton
Richard Suart
Nuala Willis
Yvonne Barclay
Wynne Evans

Conductor

Markus Stenz

London Sinfonietta

Helen Keen (flute)
Gareth Hulse (oboe)
Gareth Brady (clarinet)
John Orford (bassoon)
Stephen Maw
(contrabassoon)
Francis Markus (horn)
Miles Hewitt (horn)
Bruce Nockles (trumpet)
Roger Harvey (trombone)
Catherine Edwards
(celeste)
Helen Tunstall (harp)
Stephen Smith (guitar)
David Hockings
(percussion)
Martin Allen (percussion)
Clio Gould (violin)
Joan Atherton (violin)
Paul Silverthorne (viola)
Tim Gill (cello)
Enno Senft (double bass)

The **London Sinfonietta** is one of the world's leading contemporary music ensembles. Formed in 1968, it has commissioned over 470 works and premiered hundreds more. Resident at the Southbank Centre and Artistic Associate at Kings Place, it tours regularly across the UK and abroad. Working with the best composers and artists it experiments with other art forms alongside its music. It challenges audience perceptions by addressing societal issues, working with them as creators, performers and curators of the events it stages. The London Sinfonietta supports musical creativity in schools and communities across the UK, and its London Sinfonietta Academy trains young performers directly with its Principal Players, some of the finest musicians in the world. It has innovated through its digital Channel, featuring videos and podcasts about new music. Its recordings over 50 years have cemented its worldwide reputation.



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David Rudkin

Fiona Southey

Composer's Note

Snatched by the Gods is drawn from Rabindranath Tagore's dramatic poem of that name. Images of earth, water, air and fire charge the poem with meaning, and climax in a storm where nature and humanity collide. Tagore carefully structures this elemental symbolism within a binary scheme: the first half takes place on the banks of a river, amid preparations for a pilgrims' journey. The second half unfolds over water, as the boat returns and the storm arises. Water is the element of connection with the emotional world, as perhaps most poignantly expressed in Rakhal's dreamlike cry, "I'm going to the sea". His aunt Annada, noticeably, remains on the river bank. These haunting lines contrast water and earth and conjure an oppressive undercurrent:

*"...cruel and mean and spiteful water,
How like a thousand-headed snake it seems,
So full of deceit, greedy tongues darting,
Hoods rearing, mouths foaming as it hisses and roars
And eternally lusts for the children of Earth!
O Earth, how speechlessly loving you are,
How stable, how certain, how ancient..."*

Likewise, Tagore deploys imagery of fire, light and sun as powerful metaphors: the river journey, literally lasting two months, is framed between one sunrise and its sunset. Prayers are offered at sunrise, but the rising sun casts shadow, a shadow eventually projected upon the hapless mother and son. William Radice explicitly shapes this shadow as a collective darkness: the pilgrims' prayers are interspersed with trivial 'chatter' which, trite at the beginning, swiftly congeals into a terrifying death-chant when the storm strikes. All light is blotted out, as text and music churn up a turbulence that plays havoc with human frailty, fear and ignorance. But light reappears at the end, as fire lances Maitra's dormant conscience:

*"Aunt Annada,
Aunt Annada, Aunt Annada!" That helpless, hopeless
Drowning cry stabs Maitra's tightly
Shut ears like a spike of fire..."*

Thus *Snatched* need not be seen as inexorably dark. Often the music radiates joy, exuberance, warmth. Tagore's writing is suffused with strong emotion. He portrays Moksada at her most poignant immediately after her curse, when she recoils at the frightening implications of her harsh words, and asks for forgiveness. When finally confronted by a terrifying mob of pilgrims on the return journey, she pleads fiercely and powerfully for her son's life. There is energy and exuberance amongst the pilgrims at the start of the journey, and in the movement of the boat as it catches the current. There is joy in the splash of temple bells, gongs and cymbals as the place of pilgrimage is reached, reminding us of a universe that abounds in vibrant life, that human frailty dims before this play of light, colour and sound. And in the very last image of the opera, as the sun plunges into the river, its dying light embraces the crumpled form of Moksada, with a promise of sunrise and rebirth.

*

Broken Strings develops and interprets an ancient *Jatak* story, a pre-birth legend of the Buddha. A musician's life, lived defiantly, is viewed through the prism of a musical contest.

Guttil is a man on the brink, facing issues of his inner worth through a radical process of self-transformation. His physical presence, with its musical extension into his four-stringed instrument, is the staging ground of the alchemy. As the strings break with inexorable necessity one by one, Guttil continues to play on. His music awakens exquisite creatures, who dance and sing with him, making visible to us his

own journey metaphorically, through the elements of earth, water and air, towards a transforming light.

David Rudkin and I approached our music-theatre using the stylized device of a play within a play, to explore the meaning of a story that lay beyond the surface chemistry of a courtly contest. Within this format the music needed to move smoothly from one domain to another. I had to differentiate between 'outer' and 'inner' plays, and contrast Musil's technical brilliance with Guttill's mysterious magic. Many different musical styles needed to be incorporated: instrumental show-pieces, private monologues, recitatives, and dances featuring colourful music for each of the three creatures. They all needed to share a common harmonic and rhythmic principle, fluently juxtaposed and contrasted. I partitioned the harmony: reserving a nine-note 'mode of limited transposition' for Musil and the Judges' recitatives, and assigning to Guttill one of the octatonic modes. As each of the creatures come to life, oblique harmonic spectrums branch out from Guttill's octatonic music, allowing him to explore richer sound dimensions. Musil's music, on the other hand, remains static; vapid to the end.

Some compositional challenges needed solutions. How should the four-stringed musical instrument be defined? Literal representation of a plucked-string instrument would have been orchestrally limiting, but also trivialized the dramaturgy. If the 'contest' between Guttill and Musil was not about mere style, then where was the discourse located? Wherein lay Musil's 'flaw', given his technique was flawless? In answer, Guttill's performance draws songs from the magical creatures (creatures which Musil does not see or hear). His music hints at a central truth - that true seeing arises from true listening, just as true listening arises from a life consciously lived. Musil's (respectably sophisticated) music is dismissed by the judges as "everything, except enough", but what is 'enough'? In answer I chose

to characterise Musil's music by embedding within it an interesting flaw: his music lacks a bass line. Technically and symbolically, it is rootless, unconnected to the depths. Musil's flaw is tragically underlined when he twice attempts to redeem himself by lowering the tuning of his instrument. Perhaps, in some half-felt sense, Musil fathoms his own lack. As Musil is dismissed, Guttill re-appears, heralded by an aura of high bell sounds. He has *hearing*, he is in touch with something ineffable. No surprise then that it is the bass string on Guttill's instrument that is the first to go, unleashing an earthly creature, the Elephant in contralto voice. A bass line appears...

To create a sound world for the four-stringed instrument, my score did not limit its timbre, just as David Rudkin's text did not fix its description. Our instrument became a composite of sonorities, emphasizing plucked and bowed string instruments, harp and guitar, with highlights from xylophone and celesta. In Musil's case, the musical range is shallow, bordering on representational. With Guttill, the timbre (matching the expansion of harmony and rhythm) broadens to embrace new sonic opportunities. When finally the third string breaks, the Peacock appears and the orchestra is pared back to the simplicity of a bare *cor anglais* line.

One by one, as Elephant, Fish and Peacock are brought to life through the relentless ritual of the breaking strings, Guttill plays fiercely on, ever renewed.

Param Vir

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