

## **Sussan Deyhim**

### *Zarathustra's Mother: A Multimedia Opera*

*Zarathustra's Mother* is a full-length multimedia opera by Sussan Deyhim, in collaboration with Richard Horowitz. *Zarathustra's Mother* will be scored for solo vocalist (Deyhim), an ensemble (including ancient and modern instruments and electronics) and string quartet.

*Zarathustra's Mother* draws its inspiration both from Friedrich Nietzsche's classic philosophical prose poem *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and the ancient Zoroastrian texts that inspired him. The opera will be performed in Pahlavi (the ancient language of Zoroastrianism), German, Farsi (the current language of Iran) and English. As in much of her previous work, *Zarathustra's Mother* will forge words and music from the ancient world with modern electronic and sonic techniques.

### **Zarathustra and Nietzsche**

In a time of religious and political conflict, the ideas of Zoroaster and Nietzsche have great contemporary relevance. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is an oracular and highly personal contemplation of Zoroaster's revelations. Zoroastrianism was founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, flourished for over a thousand years, and was the world's most powerful religion at the time of Jesus. Zoroastrianism was founded by the prophet Zarathustra (known as Zoroaster to the Greeks) in Persia, which is now modern-day Iran. When Islamic Arabs invaded Persia in 650 CE, many Zoroastrians fled to India where a small number continue to practice the religion today. Small communities also still exist in Iran and Canada.

Nietzsche clearly identified with Zarathustra – both were in their way utterly solitary figures trying to bring a message to the world at large – and saw in him the purest and most rational of prophets. Zoroastrianism espouses respect for the earth, free will, direct contact with a universal force without the intervention of idols or priests, the idea that evil exists only in the human mind and is not a primordial force, freedom from sin, equality of the sexes, and human rights: all ideas that resonate with Nietzschean philosophy.

Written at the end of the 19th century but largely ignored in its own time, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* became a vastly influential book in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It continues to be so today, because Nietzsche foresaw, over one hundred years ago, the destruction of Earth by modern society due to human greed and the reluctance to make an ultimate spiritual transformation. Nietzsche uses the language of a prose poem rather than formal logic to tell Zarathustra's story as he ventures from his mountain hermitage to teach his gospel, experience the world, and ultimately, to conduct his own spiritual journey of crisis and final affirmation.

### ***Zarathustra's Mother***

Like its sources, *Zarathustra's Mother* will be an incendiary and highly provocative journey that uses poetry and metaphor to raise questions critical to our time about free will, spirituality and religion, personal and political power, gender and equality, and our relationship to nature. Timeless insights will be drawn from the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, its main scripture (the Avesta) and the Gathas (or the Hymns of Zarathushtra); Deyhim will collaborate with scholars of ancient Persia to incorporate these into the libretto. The ancient texts will be juxtaposed with Nietzsche's own unique language, and his mix of parables, dialogues, poetry and humor that make up *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Through *Zarathustra's Mother* audiences will be introduced to pre-Islamic culture, its rituals, and mythologies. In this way, *Zarathustra's Mother* continues some the musical and thematic concerns of Deyhim's latest work. Her recent *Logic of the Birds* (in collaboration with visual artist Shirin Neshat, composer Richard Horowitz, and filmmakers Ghasem Ebrahimian and Shoja Yousefi) was based on a mystic, feminine hero from a 12th century Sufi text. A multimedia piece that blurred lines between performance, media, electronic and acoustic sound, *The Logic of the Birds* was commissioned by Artangel, The Kitchen, Walker Art Center, Change, and the Lincoln Center Summer Festival and premiered in 2002. Her CD *Madman of God: Divine Love Songs of the Persian Sufi Masters* was based on traditional Persian melodies and poems by Rumi and other Sufi writers from the 11th to 19th centuries. For a number of years Deyhim has also collaborated with artist Shirin Neshat on a series of highly acclaimed video installations, producing the scores to *Fervor*, *Soliloquy*, *Rapture* and *Turbulent* (which won the prestigious Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale). Their most recent collaboration was presented at the 2004 Olympics in Greece.

### **The Composition**

Musically, the composition will embody diverse stylistic and musical approaches, from the ritualistic primacy of shamanism to the atonal realities of post-industrial noise. At the heart of *Zarathustra's Mother* will be the solo voice performing in many languages (Pahlavi, Farsi, German and English) and drawing on Deyhim's long performance history of combining indigenous microtonal modes with a unique harmonic sensibility.

Deyhim's compositional approach includes the use of complex electronic and computer transformation of her vocals. Each vocal syllable and melismatic phrase is placed in a subtle, diffracted relation to its component digital double by choosing up to six overtones which are then placed in three dimensional space as a kind of sonic sculpture. These overtones are, in fact, based on microtonal modal melodic fragments, which are sung with microtonal harmonies. (In the last century Bulgarian composers invented ways to apply western harmonic concepts, based on the well-tempered scale, to microtonal modes they inherited after five hundred years of Turkish influence.)

At points in the composition, Deyhim's solo voice will be transformed into an electronic choir (with multiple overlays of samples), with each voice sculpted by advanced electronic and computer processing technologies. The advanced technologies also allow the singer to incorporate improvised passages by using interactive interfaces: composed elements can be triggered via an array of controllers (midi keyboards, infrared beams and various other sensors and looping devices). In this way, fragments of composed elements can be collaged, ornamented, and improvised spontaneously.

Although this piece would not be possible without extensive use of digital technology, the challenge and goal is to convey the emotional and spiritual depth of this ancient culture via live, human interaction. In *Zarathustra's Mother*, Deyhim will combine ancient Eastern musical sources and contemporary Western sounds, and through a kind of digital alchemy, bring audiences closer to a sense of ritual and the unknown.

### **Collaborators and commissioning organizations**

Deyhim will be collaborating with composer Richard Horowitz, with whom she worked on *Logic of the Birds*, *Majoun*, *AZAX/ATTR: Desert Equations*, and *The Ghost of Ibn Sabbah*. Potential visual collaborators include renowned Iraqi architect and designer Zaha Hadid (set design); A. J. Weissbard (lighting design) who has frequently worked with Robert Wilson; and Jenny Holzer (visuals).

Potential commissioning organizations and presenters for *Zarathustra's Mother* include Lincoln Center Summer Festival and Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, UCLA's Royce Hall, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Artangel and Iranian Heritage Foundation in London, Change Performing Arts and the Iranica Institute.