

Program notes for

The Aspects of the Divine Mother: in Holy Mother and the Chandi

A new Oratorio by Swami Atmavidyananda

Why Set Teachings and Scriptures to Music?

Music has been used for thousands of years to assist in the memory of important texts and to enhance the energy of the words. Music is vibrational energy and mirrors the nature of the cosmos.

The motivation for writing this work had at least three sources.

After the performance of the *Vivekananda Oratorio 150: His Ministry* in San Diego, Swami Harinamananda suggested that a third oratorio be written on Holy Mother (Sri Sarada Devi) the wife of Sri Ramakrishna. So as the need arose for new choral pieces for Sunday lecture topics, I would first look to Holy Mother for words that might fit the subject. Over the last few years several pieces were written for our Hollywood Choir to sing with the idea that they would become part of this current work.

When listening to two works by George Frideric Handel the thought occurred to me that the *Chandi* or *Devi Mahatmyam* would be a good text on which to base an oratorio. Both of these works, *Dixit Dominus* and *Israel in Egypt*, are like the *Chandi* in that they are centered around wars, conflict, and strife. They illustrate how God helps us overcome these calamities.

Swami Chetanananda's book, *Sri Sarada Devi's Divine Play* had a whole chapter on how Holy Mother manifested several aspects of the Divine Mother. Thus the idea of combining songs about Holy Mother, her teachings, and the *Chandi* seemed like a good fit.

In these trying times, it seemed appropriate to turn to the Mother for help.

Overall Scheme of the work:

The overture is based on our Arati Hymn “Sarva Mangala”, which comes from one of the hymns in the *Chandi*. It is written in the style of an organ chorale prelude.

The next four numbers include are things which people said about Holy Mother. These are followed by a collection of songs based on her teachings. Next are three selections on the three main goddess aspects, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Kali.

The retelling of the *Chandi* comprises the last portion of the work.

Notes on Individual Numbers

Holy Mother Wrapped Herself in a Veil of Maya: the chromatic melodic line and harmonic progressions gives the impression of the divine mystery of an incarnation. It gives a sense of searching for understanding; the understanding of a mystery which eludes our understanding.

Numbers 5 through 13 are the simple, practical, and tender teachings of Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother. Unlike Vivekananda who lectured to large crowds, Sri Sarada Devi counseled individuals with tender motherly advice. I tried to capture that loving tenderness and also her very practical side in the music. These selections are generally simple and straight forward.

Hail to the Goddess is the earliest composition, written in the 1980s in the style of a school anthem, *Praise and Prayers to Mother Lakshmi* is an aria show piece designed to represent the magnificent splendor of the supportive aspect of Lakshmi.

The Kali Round is also a very early composition.

The *Chandi* – Synopsis and notes on the composition

Creating a libretto for the *Chandi* presented several challenges, some of which are like those that a script writer might face turning a novel into a Hollywood movie.

First, it is a scripture, so I felt an obligation to be as true to the original as possible. However it easily takes three hours to read and it had to be reduced to less than half that time. Also, it is easier to set lyrics to music if they follow a meter and a rhyme scheme. The available translations are not written in rhyming verse. Another difficulty is that the vast majority of the text is written as narration by the Sage. Some of this had to be reworked as dialogue with other characters. Sometimes the chorus acts a narrator, a tradition dating back to ancient Greece.

The *Chandi* is best read symbolically. The demons represent the aspects of our ego which prevent us from seeing through this veil of maya. Calling on the Divine Mother is the solution to battling these demons.

The *Chandi* opens with a brief overture which musically portrays a king plagued by wars and court intrigues who is eventually forced out of his kingdom, and a merchant cruelly driven from his home by his family members. They meet, share their sad stories, and seek advice from a sage. The Sage relates three stories of how the Devas, the gods, called upon the Divine Mother to save them from calamity.

Creatures Gather Knowledge, the opening lines for the Sage, makes use of a tampura accompaniment.

The King's inquiry into the nature of this Divine Mother puts the Sage into an ecstatic mood of excitement as he tries to express her glorious nature in the aria *She Pervades All This*.

The first story relates how the demons, Madhu and Kaitabha, try to prevent the creation of the Universe in its next cycle. They symbolize the tamasic ego which prevents us from even getting started on things.

Madhu and Kaitabha want to kill Brahma. Brahma prays to the Divine Mother for help. As Brahma has four faces, his hymn is set as a number for four male voices. Each face of Brahma sings a different verse roughly based on Brahma's hymn in the *Chandi*, (Brahmakrita-Devi-Stutih). The four tunes sung by the four faces are then sung together. Musically, this is written in what is called non-imitative polyphony, several tunes which may be sung together.

To save Brahma, Lord Vishnu must be awakened by Yogindra, the aspect of the Divine Mother in charge of Vishnu's sleep – wake cycles. Yogindra's rousing aria indeed wakes him up.

The story illustrates the Biblical maxim, "Pride comes before a fall." I treated this scene like a comic opera.

The second story is probably the most famous of the three, the slaying of the buffalo demon Mahisasura. He symbolizes the rajasic ego which wants to forcibly control everything through power and activity. The scene opens with the Sage describing the problem. followed by Brahma seeking help from Vishnu. Then Lord Vishnu calls upon the other gods to pool all their resources into manifesting the Devi. This is described in the number, "Rejoice, Rejoice, Rejoice." The Devi first must defeat his army and then battle Mahisasura's many forms. Symbolically this represents how shifty the rajasic ego is, making it difficult to conquer. That is why we must call upon our inner Divine Mother who can easily overpower it. Musically, his changing forms are expressed by a change in key, which makes this number about as difficult as conquering our rajasic ego! His defeat is followed by several choruses that are drawn

from the second hymn, “Praise by Indra and the Other Gods” (Śakrādi-krita-Devi Stutiḥ) and the Devi’s promise to help in the future.

The third story is the most complex and lengthy. Symbolically Shumba and Nishumba represent the sattwic ego, the ego that says “I am a wonderful spiritual being who has and deserves all the wonderful things in life.” The Devas have again lost all their positions to these two demonic brothers and again sing a hymn praising the Mother, who, at the end of the previous story, has promised to help if they praise her. This is the famous “Yā Devī” song, The Hymn to the Invincible Mother (Deva-Gana-Krita-aparājitā -Stutiḥ). I used the chant tune sung by the Hollywood monastics as the basis for the first two sections of this lengthy hymn. The first section uses the chant tune in each choral part. It is first heard in the bass, then the tenor, followed by the alto and soprano parts. The middle section which comprises all the “Ya Devi” verses is written in the style use by J.S. Bach in his cantatas. He would take a hymn tune as a basis for an elaborate piece for chorus and orchestra. You will hear first the sopranos and then the tenors singing the chant tune while the remaining parts sing about the various attributes. The third section is written in a harmonized chant style to cover the last several verses.

Parvati, an aspect of the Devi, hears the Devas singing and wonders why. She is answered by another aspect of the Devi, Ambika, who knows they are calling on her to save them from their plight. Knowing the weakness of Shumbha and Nishumbha, she manifests as a most beautiful woman. This catches the attention of two generals of the Demon King, Chanda and Munda, who know that this woman is a “must have” by their master. They send a messenger, Sugriva, to Shumbha.

This scene is written in a style sometimes used by opera composers when there is a lengthy dialogue to set to music. There are background

dance tunes being played, and the various singers sing their lines in harmony with these tunes. The refined musical style is designed to evoke the ambiance of a lavish but corrupt court. You can think of this as a cosmic Hindu version of the court of Louis the XIV of France.

The Devi in the form of Ambika refuses to go without a fight, which sets the stage for a series of battles, each of which gets more difficult. First, she easily defeats Dhumralochana and his army. Then, in the form of Kali, the Devi slays Chanda and Munda. Raktabija's defeat is next. This is the most terrifying scene in which the Devi and her many aspects are faced with thousands of demons that multiply faster than they can be slain. Hopefully the music gives the sense of this overwhelming terror. With Kali's help Raktabija is made bloodless and dies. Next the Devi kills Nishumbha. Then the Devi withdraws her many forms so as to not present an unfair fight to Shumbha, who is the only one left. Shumbha's weapons are one by one destroyed. Ambika's song, as she battles Shumbha, reminds us that from her perspective, this is a play. And just like a good Hollywood sci-fi thriller, in spite of all the sophisticated weapons, it comes down to hand to hand combat. It looks like this format has had a long history in battle scenes. The Devi, of course, wins.

This is followed by "Salutations Be to You, Narayani" which is mostly based on the Hymn to Narayani (Indrādi-krita Narayani Stutih). But I took a clue from the book *In Praise of the Goddess* by Devadatta to focus on the praise of the Seven Little Mothers, and took some of this material from other sections of the *Chandi* where they are praised. This is followed by the "Promise" of the Mother and the final chorus of praise.

Swami Atmavidyananda

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Performers

Sopranos:

Rebecca Rasmussen: Parvati

Nicole Rene Bouffard: Ambika

Clarissa Shan

Altos:

Ariel Pisturino: Devi

Tuzy Ellis

Nalini Lasiewicz

Tenors:

Joseph Buhler: Madhu

Joseph Garate: Kaitabha, Brahma, Chanda

Jon Keenan: The King, Sugriva,

Basses:

Norge Yip: Sage

Jim Campbell: Shumba

Scott Levin: Markendeya (the Narrator), Munda

Karl Whitmarsh: Vishnu

David Conley

Cary Farnsworth

Performers Bios.

Jim Campbell is a SAG/AFTRA studio singer and arranger. Films include: *Frozen, La La Land, Star Wars: Rogue One, Star Trek: Beyond, Despicable Me 2*. TV includes: *The Simpsons, Black Monday, Tonight Show*. Jim has sung with the Dapper Dans of Disneyland for 28 years and is a soloist at All Saints Church, Pasadena.



Nalini Lasiewicz: Born in Holland and raised in Hollywood, Nalini has performed with Vedanta choirs over decades. Her music style is reminiscent of the Laurel Canyon heyday of folk rock. Her original songs can be heard at NaliniMusic.com.

Norge Yip has performed with ensembles throughout Southern California and in recordings for albums, video game/television/movie soundtracks, and studio demos. Stage credits: Pacific Opera Project, The Society of Revolutionary Operettists, El Dorado Opera, Lyric Opera of Los Angeles, Long Beach Opera, Emerald Opera Festival, La Bella Voce Opera.

Ariel Pisturino, Los Angeles based soprano, has sung with every major opera company in Los Angeles, ranging from traditional opera to experimental music. She teaches Applied Voice at Chaffey College and at the University of La Verne. She is represented by MIA Artist Management, and is an alumna of the University of Southern California.

Dr. Clarissa Shan, soprano, serves on the faculty at Concordia University and California State University, Fullerton. Dr. Shan is also an active church musician, serving as the Director of Music at both Glendale City Seventh-day Adventist Church and Temple City First United Methodist Church. She also shares her love of music with the younger generation by running a children's chorus for members of the community in Temple City. Dr. Shan is an accomplished performer throughout California. She is a staff singer in the Pacific Chorale and recently sang in Mahler's 8th Symphony under the direction of Gustavo Dudamel.

Nicole Renee Bouffard: Soprano, with an M.M. in Vocal Performance from CSUN, she is the recipient of multiple awards and scholarships. Nicole has performed various opera roles around Southern California and is excited to have her second opportunity to be singing for the Vedanta Society. She now resides in Maryland and sings for the U.S. Army Band "Pershing's Own."

Tuzy Ellis: Alto, has been singing professionally in LA since moving here in 2000, including regular work as a paid substitute singer ("ringer") for the LA Master Chorale (2002-2011).

Cary Farnsworth: Baritone/Bass, graduate of the opera program at USC.

Joseph Gárate: Tenor, studied at CSULA and has sung numerous opera and operetta roles over the last 8 years.

Rebecca Rasmussen: Soprano, soloist for Church of Our Saviour in San Gabriel and Founding Member of Red Car Trolley Vocal Quartet.
Education: Occidental College (Los Angeles) and Oxford University (England).

Karl Whitmarsh: Baritone/Bass, is a long-time member of the Vedanta Society and its choir. Former president of the Vedanta Society of Southern California Board, he and his wife Jaya Sri now reside in Ireland.