

ASPECTS OF THE DIVINE MOTHER In Holy Mother and the Chandi

A New Oratorio with Words and Music
by Swami Atmavidyananda

Online Production with a Virtual Choir
Pictures and English Subtitles

Swami Atmavidyananda's works have been heard nationwide
including at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.



Holy Mother (Sri Sarada Devi) 1853 – 1920

The *Chandi* an ancient scripture
in praise of the Divine Mother

Premiered online on January 3, 2021

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Swami Atmavidyananda is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order and is treasurer of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. He lives at the Hollywood center.

His great love is creating musical works with a Vedantic theme. In 1995 he composed a Vivekananda oratorio. It was first performed at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood to much acclaim. This oratorio was also performed in Oakland, California at the invitation of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland. It was presented in the same auditorium at the church where Swami Vivekananda spoke several times in 1900.

In 2008 the Swami wrote another oratorio, *Ramakrishna and His Teachings*. This was followed in 2013 by a revised Vivekananda oratorio, *Vivekananda 150: His Ministry*, in commemoration of the 150th birthday anniversary of Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Atmavidyananda's works were becoming popular, and were performed at the branch centers of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Requests came to hear them from Vedanta centers across the United States. Since it was impractical to tour with a large choir, a special one man show was created. Swami Atmavidyananda talked about his musical works and then played selections from them. He also answered questions from the audience. This special program was presented over several years to most of the Vedanta centers in the United States and in Vancouver, Canada. CDs were released of his works and later online programs.

In 2013 the Indian ambassador to the United States, Nirupuma Rao, was searching on the internet for programming for a special Vivekananda event the Indian embassy was planning. She came across some selections from the oratorio, *Vivekananda 150*, and immediately contacted Swami Atmavidyananda to see if portions from the work could be presented at the Indian Embassy's special Vivekananda

birthday anniversary celebration. On a visit to Los Angeles, Ambassador Rao met Swami Atmavidyananda at the Hollywood center and they discussed arrangements to present selections of his oratorio as part of the embassy's Vivekananda program. While in Los Angeles, Ambassador Rao also visited the Vivekananda House in South Pasadena.

On October 16, 2013 the Indian embassy presented their Vivekananda 150th anniversary event, *Arise. Awake!* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The program included selections from *Vivekananda 150: His Ministry* that were sung by the choir of St. Albans Episcopal Church of Washington, D.C.

Swami Atmavidyananda's other musical works include two interfaith operettas: *Claudia and Alexander* and *Mountain Journey*, the *Ram Nam Symphony* and many spiritual songs.

Please enjoy Swami Atmavidyananda's latest work, *Aspects of the Divine Mother: in Holy Mother and the Chandi* available online January 3, 2021 after the Holy Mother puja. Just click the link on the cover of the program or go to [YouTube.com/VedantaOrg](https://www.youtube.com/VedantaOrg) and then click videos.

Program notes for

The Aspects of the Divine Mother Oratorio

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 in San Diego, Swami Harinamananda suggested that a third oratorio be written on Holy Mother. As the need arose for new choral pieces arose for Sunday lecture topics, I would first look to Holy Mother for words that might fit the subject. So 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 G.F.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 that *Chandi* in that they are centered around wars, conflict, and strife, and how God helps us overcome these.

Swami Chetanananda's book on *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 are things which people said about Holy Mother. These are followed by the 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 the very practical side in the music. These selections are generally simple and straightforward.

Hail to the Goddess is the earliest composition, written in the 1980’s 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 of 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 Mother is the solution to battling these demons. Throughout the libretto I incorporated some explanatory words to aid the listener unfamiliar with the symbolism.

The Chandi is opened with a brief overture which musically portrays a King plagued by wars and court intrigues and eventually forced out of his kingdom and a merchant cruelly driven from his home by his family members. They meet and 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 singing 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 his sleep-wake cycles. In a rousing aria by her, Lord Vishnu does indeed wake 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 the shifty way our rajasic ego makes 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 Stutih) 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 “Ya Devi” song, The Hymn to the Invincible Mother (Deva-Gana-Krita-Aparājita -Stutih). I used the chant tune used 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 of 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 who knows they are calling on her to save them from their plight. Knowing the weakness of Shumbha and Nishumba, 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 Shumba.

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.

Of course she 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 she slays Chanda and Munda. Raktabija's defeat is next. This is the most terrifying scene in which the Mother 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 he is made bloodless and dies. Next she 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 Deva Datta's book to focus on the praise of the Seven Little Mothers, and took some of this material from other sections of the text where they are praised. This is followed by the Promise of the Mother and the final chorus of Praise.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to:

Swami Harinamananda for first suggesting the work.

Janice Kalec for encouraging me to take up this project.

Daveyon Richardson and Br. Satya for putting together the video and subtitle portions of the presentation.

Atma for proofreading and promotion.

Madhavi and Kareema for help in collecting and organizing the musical files.

To all the singers who sent in their music files.

To Richard Warne who has spent the last several months helping me refine the musical score, orchestration, and mixing.

Performers

Sopranos:

Rebecca Rasmussen: Parvati

Nicole Rene Bouffard: Ambika

Clarissa Shan

Altos:

Ariel Pisturino: Devi, other than the aspect of Ambika and Parvati

Tuzy Ellis

Nalini Lasawitz

Tenors:

Joseph Buhler: Madhu

Joseph Garate: Kaitabha, Brahma, Chanda

Jon Keenan: The King, Sugriva

Basses:

Norge Yip: Sage

Jim Campbell

Scott Levin: Munda

Karl Whitmarsh: Vishnu

David Conley: Markendeya (the narrator) Shumbha

Cary Farnsworth

Performer Bios

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

Norge Yip, bass, 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 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 is a soprano currently working in Washington D.C. as a professional soloist. Nicole performs regularly at The White House, DAR Constitution Hall and The United States Capitol as a member of the U.S. Army Voices and soprano soloist for The United States Army Band, “Pershing’s Own.” Nicole was owner and creator of Los Angeles–based opera company Orpheé Arts, and has performed countless opera roles throughout the United States and overseas. She has her M.M. in vocal performance from California State University, Northridge.

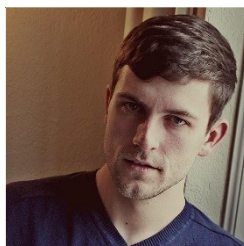
Tuzy Ellis, alto, has been singing professionally in LA since moving here in 2000, including regular work as a paid substitute singer (“ringer”) for the LA Master Chorale (2002–2011).

Joseph Gárate, tenor, studied at Cal State LA, and has sung numerous opera and operetta roles over the last 8 years.



Rebecca Rasmussen, soprano, is a choral ringer and cantor for houses of worship throughout the LA area. She is a Company Member of theatre dybbuk and Founding Member of Red Car Trolley Vocal Quartet. Her education was at 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.



David Conley is a Los Angeles-based composer, conductor, singer. David received his B.A. in Vocal Performance from the University of Georgia and his M.M. in Choral Conducting at Westminster Choir College. He is the Choir Director at Marymount High School and a singer at First Congregational Church of Los Angeles. He

has sung with ensembles including the Philadelphia Symphonic Choir, Hex, Pacific Opera Project, Tonality, and C3LA.

Tenor **Jon Lee Keenan** is a native of Las Vegas, Nevada. Jon's singing can be heard throughout Southern California, regularly with the Los Angeles Master Chorale downtown at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, and at less traditional venues in immersive productions as a company member with The Industry Opera of Los Angeles.

Cary Farnsworth, baritone/bass, is a graduate of the opera program at USC.



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

Ananda (Simon Syed), tenor, studied voice with Jing Tam at University of Texas at Arlington. He sang in the Vivekananda Oratorio in 1994 Vedanta Choir as a first tenor. He was initiated by Swami Swahananda in 1994 and has been a devotee and musician at the San Diego Center ever since. He is a schoolteacher for the Sweetwater Union School District, and describes himself as a “born-again musician/singer by the grace of Ma Sarada and Sri Ramakrishna.”