

LAKMÉ

Music by Leo Delibes

Libretto by Edmond Gondinet and Philippe Gille

Cast Of Characters

NILAKANTHA (bass), a Brahmin priest, enemy of the British

LAKMÉ (soprano), Nilakantha's daughter, a divine priestess

MALLIKA (mezzo-soprano) Lakme's servant

HADJI (tenor) Lakme's servant

ELLEN (soprano), daughter of the British Governor of India

FREDERIC (baritone), an officer in the British Army

GERALD (tenor), a fellow officer, engaged to Ellen

ROSE (soprano), Ellen's friend

MISS BENTSON (mezzo-soprano), governess to Ellen and Rose

FORTUNE TELLER (tenor)

CHINESE MERCHANT (tenor)

PICKPOCKET (baritone)

English officers and ladies, Hindus, Brahmins, Merchants, Musicians, Sailors, Chinese dervishes, and Dancing girls

Note: Hindu deities, whose worship is forbidden by the British, include Brahma, the Creator; Shiva, the Destroyer; Ganesha, god of wisdom; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Durga, goddess of war. Pariahs belong to the lowest caste of India, ostracized by all.

Notes on the historical context of the opera's setting and premiere, as well as a discography, follow the synopsis.

Act I A secret temple and surrounding garden, India, 1883

A group of Hindus are met at a secret temple by their priest Nilakantha, who was barred from practicing his religion by the British. He promises that although their gods have been banished from the temples, Brahma will soon avenge their wrongs. Nilakantha proclaims the power of the gods and of the prayers of his priestess daughter Lakmé, who enters singing praises to Durga, Shiva and Ganesha. The worshippers prostrate themselves and Nilakantha tells them to go in peace. He praises Lakmé for a childlike faith that brings God close and gives him the courage to endure the sacrilegious torments of the British. Nilakantha goes to prepare for a religious festival, leaving Lakmé with her servants, Hadji and Mallika.

In the garden, Lakmé and Mallika begin a dreamy duet in praise of the beauty around them, "Sous le dome epais" (Beneath the thick canopy). Mallika dismisses Lakmé's worry about her father's hostility towards the British and they go to gather lotus blossoms.

Two young British officers, Frederic and Gerald, enter with two young ladies and their governess: Miss Bentson reprimands Rose and Ellen (Gerald's fiancée) for entering this secluded garden uninvited. The officers banter, and Frederic warns them all that among the beautiful flowers surrounding them is the lovely yet deadly poisonous datura. Gerald's imagination is fired, while Frederic laughs at him.

Frederic tells them that this is the garden of the fierce priest, Nilakantha, whose daughter Lakmé, worshipped by her father's cult, lives secluded in this forbidden paradise. Gerald is bewitched by her name and a spirited debate ensues-- "Quand une femme est si jolie" (When a woman's as

pretty as that)--on the nature of women. Frederic argues that Asian and European women are not the same, that in India women love as if intoxicated by passion. Ellen replies that men may be charmed by the exotic beauties of the East, but Western women know how to love them. Frederic urges them to leave, just as Ellen finds some of Lakmé's jewelry on a rock. Gerald impulsively decides to make sketches of the trinkets, and promises to give Ellen copies of the Indian ornaments for their wedding day, waving his companions onward as Frederic calls a final warning. Left alone, Gerald muses about the mysterious Lakmé -- "Fantaisie aux divins mensonges" (Thou dream of heavenly illusion) -- as he examines her baubles, speaks her name aloud and imagines her near. Hearing someone approach, he hides.

Lakmé and Mallika return with garlands of flowers for the god Ganesha. Lakmé hesitates: the world seems altered--the flowers are prettier; the sky is glittering; the breeze is a gentle caress. "Pourquoi?" (Why?) she wonders in a pensive ariette. Upon seeing Gerald, she cries out. Dismissing Mallika and Hadji, Lakmé confronts Gerald. The two spar in the duet "C'est le dieu de la jeunesse, c'est le dieu de printemps" ('Tis the god of youth, 'tis the god of spring). Lakmé demands to know what he is doing in her secret refuge, while Gerald in his turn marvels at her exotic beauty. Lakmé tells him that she is the daughter of the gods, and warns he could be killed for profaning her refuge. Afraid yet angry, Gerald swears he can never forget her. Lakmé orders him to leave but Gerald refuses, saying his very life hangs upon her lips. His ardor frightens Lakmé, as does the strange fever burning in her own heart. She asks what god gives him such courage, and his reply--the god of youth, of spring, of love--thrills her. Gerald pleads to remain, and she finally succumbs, joining him in a passionate declaration of love.

They are interrupted by Nilakantha and his followers, and as Gerald flees he promises never to forget her. Nilakantha, catching only a glimpse of the intruder, swears vengeance on the man who has desecrated his sanctuary.

Act II A public square in a nearby town, the following day

The square is crowded with merchants and British sailors as the noon closing time approaches. Into the melee wanders Miss Bentson. Besieged by a merchant and a fortune teller, she is rescued by a villager whom she then discovers has stolen her watch and handkerchief. Rose appears with Frederic, and the noon bell sounds as the British round up the peddlers and close the market.

As the festival begins, Miss Bentson, concerned for Ellen's whereabouts, is reassured by Frederic. Temple dancers perform increasingly complex steps, building to a delirious conclusion. The British notice a strange couple among the spectators: an ancient, wild-eyed pilgrim accompanied by a young girl. Ellen and Gerald arrive, and they all watch the old penitent and young girl, Nilakantha and Lakmé in disguise, move among the crowd, which parts before them. Nilakantha has come to find the intruder. When Lakmé asks timidly if Brahma does not allow forgiveness, he replies "Lakmé, ton doux regard se voile" (Lakmé, your gentle gaze is clouded). Lakmé protests she is merely concerned for the foreigner, but Nilakantha is adamant in his belief that the man who braved death to speak with her did so for love, and such a profane love is forbidden to a daughter of the gods. He orders Lakmé to sing the legend of the pariahs' daughter, hoping the stranger will reveal himself at the sound of her voice.

Lakmé begins the famous "Bell Song" -- "Ou va la jeune Hindoue?" (Where does the young Hindu girl go?). In it, she tells the tale of an outcast, daughter of pariahs, who, one dark night, comes upon a stranger lost in the forest. As wild beasts are about to pounce upon him, the girl

rings a magic bell on her wand that frightens the animals away. Dazzled by the man's beauty, she is afraid to reveal that she is a pariah. The stranger puts her to sleep and transports her to heaven, where she wakes to find he is actually Vishnu, the son of Brahma himself, and that he has brought her to her place in paradise. Even today travelers sometimes hear the sound of the magic bell in the forest.

As Lakmé sings, Nilakantha searches, then urges his daughter to repeat the legend. Spying Gerald, who has not yet seen her, Lakmé falters; Nilakantha forces her to continue, and, attracted by the commotion, Gerald recognizes Lakmé. He moves toward her as she collapses with fear, but Frederic, guessing what has passed between them, stops him. The sound of approaching troops is heard, and Gerald is pulled away by Frederic. It is too late. Nilakantha has seen him, and as the crowd and troops leave, the priest and his followers enter the temple of Durga.

Inside the shrine, Nilakantha plots his revenge. In the ensemble, "Des siens separant le coupable" (From his people, we'll separate the culprit), he confers with his disciples as to how they will murder Gerald. Slowly they will encircle the guilty one and cut him off from his friends. Then, Nilakantha himself will strike the fatal blow. While the group is conspiring, Lakmé sneaks into the temple and listens. As they depart, she attempts to follow them but is stop by her father, who forces her to remain behind with Hadji. Noticing Lakmé's distress, Hadji pledges to help her. Gerald comes upon them and swears his love for Lakmé in a passionate duet, "Dans la vague d'un reve" (On the crest of a dream). Lakmé warns of danger but Gerald scoffs: he would brave death itself for her. Lakmé remembers her secret refuge in the forest and urges Gerald to flee there with her, but ties of honor and duty make him hesitate. Just then, the Brahmins carry in the statue of Durga, separating Gerald and Lakmé. Miss Bentson, Ellen, Rose, and Frederic join Gerald, the ladies complaining of the noise while Gerald tells Frederic that he can think only of Lakmé. Frederic laughs and remarks that if their regiment were not leaving tomorrow, he would be worried about his lovesick friend. Nilakantha points out the British officer, and the conspirators surround him. He stabs Gerald as Lakmé, watching helplessly, cries out. When the conspirators leave, she and Hadji rush to Gerald. Finding him badly wounded and unconcious, but still alive, Lakmé pledges her life to Gerald and asks the gods to protect their love.

Act III The secret bower, deep in the forest, the following day

Gerald awakes to Lakmé's melancholy lullaby. She explains the attack, and Hadji's bringing him here. In an ardent aria, "Ah! viens, dans la foret profonde" (Ah! Come! In the depths of the forest), Gerald exults that the wings of love have swept them away to a world of their own, and Lakmé prays that they can live together in happiness in this private world, protected by Brahma. We hear sounds of young couples on their way to a sacred spring to share a drink of its holy water, a ritual that will unite them forever. Lakmé goes to get a cup for herself and Gerald, so that they can be eternally joined.

Frederic enters following the trail of blood, and as Gerald proclaims his devotion to Lakmé, he argues that this is only an infatuation and reminds Gerald of his duty to Ellen and to the Army. Frederic convinces him to rejoin the regiment and departs, leaving Gerald to say goodbye to Lakmé.

Lakmé returns with the holy water and hesitates, sensing a change in Gerald. Despite his protestations, he no longer looks upon her with the passion that set her aflame. With growing fear, Lakmé asks if he still wishes their destinies to be one. Gerald replies that he wants only to see her smile once more. In desperation, Lakmé asks him to swear his love but, torn between his

sense of duty and his passion, Gerald cannot. Suddenly they hear a distant fife and drums--the troops are leaving, and Lakmé realizes that her love can never sever the link to country and comrades, and, unnoticed by Gerald, she plucks a deadly datura flower and bites into it. The regimental music fades away. Gerald is alarmed by the sudden change in Lakmé's appearance. She reassures him that he has taught her of a whole new world--"Tu m'as donne le plus doux reve" (You've given me the sweetest dream)--and promises they will have their life together. They drink from the sacred cup. Lakmé weeps to Gerald's protests--"Qu' autour de moi toute sombre" (Let all around me collapse): he wants never to see her brow shadowed by sadness or her beauty clouded by tears. They are tears of love, she replies, and they are her last, as she is dying. Gerald is stunned. Lakmé swears that death will not separate them, and their voices merge in a passionate declaration of love. A furious Nilakantha enters. With waning strength, Lakmé restrains her father and tells him that she and Gerald are one, they have drunk from the sacred spring. If the gods need a victim of atonement, let them choose her. She collapses into her father's arms, crying to Gerald that they will be together forever. Nilakantha exults in her now-heavenly splendor, as Gerald cries out in anguish.