

## An Operatic Scene Based on E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

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E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* was among the first literary works I contemplated adapting as an opera. I loved the novel for its scenes that seemed to invite dramatic staging and vocal performance: Mrs. Moore meeting Aziz in the mosque; the trial of Aziz, with his supporters chanting outside the courtroom; and above all, the panic of Adela Quested in the Marabar Cave, which can best be described as a "nervous breakdown." It brought to mind operatic treatments, or "mad scenes," famously including those in Verdi's *Macbeth* or Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Accordingly, in 2014, prior to creating the Forster-adapted opera *Howards End, America* with composer Allen Shearer (which premiered in San Francisco in 2019--c.f. my article about it in *PJES*, 2017), I had sketched a short scene for solo soprano, depicting Adela in the cave. This scene was to be the jumping-off point for a full opera on *A Passage to India*. Both Shearer and I were fascinated by, and deeply immersed in, the culture and literature of India, including authors Anita and Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Shearer's first major opera, *The Goddess* (1992), based on the film by Satyajit Ray, had been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. But twenty years later, when envisioning an opera on *A Passage to India*, we confronted a new reality. The opera's likely forces--large orchestra, chorus and at least eight soloists, as in *The Goddess*--would prove prohibitively costly at a time when grants for developing and producing major operas were dwindling. Opera companies were under financial stress, and few were taking on productions of new works.

Other factors also worked to dissuade us. Although Forster's novel is harshly critical of British colonial rule in India, it relies on depictions that now could give rise to criticism of stereotyping or exoticizing Indian culture. This might attach to an adaptation of ours. And, for Shearer, incorporation of Indian classical music now might present issues of "appropriation" of indigenous music by a Western composer.

As a result, the scene I had sketched of Adela in the cave lay dormant for some years. Recently, however, we revisited the possibility of creating a stand-alone scene, with much reduced forces, that might be programmed on a concert

series as a short “monodrama” with a contemporary musical idiom. It would require only one solo singer (as in Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*), with the echo in the cave realized either by electronics or an acoustical instrument, and the possible addition of one performer. Shearer’s main concern was that an audience unfamiliar with the novel would have difficulty understanding the fragmented and disjointed text I had created to depict Adela’s hysteria, its sexual undertones and the background for her breakdown, if isolated from the novel’s larger narrative. We decided finally that the scene best would be performed with introductory remarks; and that a symposium on *A Passage to India*, such as California’s “Dickens Universe” at the University of California, Santa Cruz (which focused on George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* in 2017 and included excerpts from our opera *Middlemarch in Spring*) might be the most auspicious setting for the performance of “Adela in the Cave.” -Claudia Stevens

## Adela in the Cave

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**A monodrama, ca. 12-15 minutes, for soprano, echo and small chamber orchestra, based on a scene in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.**

Brief synopsis: Adela Quested, on an expedition to the Marabar Hills, finds herself alone in a cave and has a panic attack. She realizes with terror the emptiness of her life, her unfulfilled sexual desires, and the greater appeal and spiritual power of India than that of her own society--that of India's British colonial rulers.

A note on performance: at the composer's discretion, words of Echo (shown in upper case) may mingle freely with Adela's sung material. They need not follow her text but may also precede it.

Instrumental prologue precedes entrance of Adela Quested

Adela (to audience, spoken, pleasant and confidential at first but with increasing passion and angst): How's one to see the *real* India?

(Arioso)

The Marabar Hills, not to be missed, the guidebooks say, and so we came.  
The hills are dimmer in daylight, not what we thought. . .  
But the cave, to see the cave, mysterious dark and cool,  
that's the thing, to see the cave, that's why we came and so we came  
To see the real India!

We cannot only see people just like ourselves.  
We want to see Indians!  
Give us Indians to see, like that Dr. Aziz.  
So nice, so polite. So eager to please, that Dr. Aziz.

That Dr. Aziz! His hand, as it just held mine,  
climbing,

Climbing up, raising me up from the flat dry land,  
from the flat dry life. Beautiful, I suppose.

“Do I take you too fast?” he asked . . . “Do I take you too fast?”

Beautiful, I suppose. Beautiful.  
No doubt his wife and children are also beautiful.  
One usually gets what one already owns.

Oh, blast! Why did I ask him if he has many wives?

Stupid me, English mem! The English in India,  
Insulting and bungling,  
with our silly topees and swagger sticks . . .

He said, ‘Only one in my case.’ In my case.

Surely he thinks, “Why be insulted,  
she’s just a skinny old maid.  
Stupid like the rest.  
And she has no breasts.”

There! I did not offend after all, I was not in the wrong.  
No offense after all, I was not in the wrong.  
I am all right, thanks. Quite all right.

“Do I take you too fast?”  
I am all right, thanks, quite all right . . .

*(Short instrumental interlude, Adela moving towards entrance of the cave)*

So, I will have Ronny.  
Ronny, so English! So pale and cool.  
Am I really to marry? But why else did I come.  
And there need not be love . . .  
No need for love!

Why should I care! But perhaps I care . . .  
 Can I still break it off? What would they say?  
 Think of the shame!

“Do I take you too fast?”  
 He said that, that Dr. Aziz. Beautiful, I suppose.  
 “Take you too fast?”  
 No, I’m all right, thanks. Quite all right, thanks.

*(spoken)*

Why make a fuss!

*(Arioso)*

Marry Ronny, forget about love,  
 why make a fuss, and why else did I come!  
 The invitations are sent. A fine English wedding,  
 the chapel by the cemetery. Alongside the dead,  
 the honeymoon. Agra in October.  
 A marriage like others . . .  
 the club every evening, every evening the club.  
 Occasionally speak, nothing too deep,  
 touch in the twilight before we sleep . . .

*(Adela enters the cave, words of echo mingling with and overlaying her arietta)*

brief and cool, enough, quite enough . . .  
 of course without love . . . why make a fuss . . .  
 Of course it’s enough, and why else did I come . . .

Echo *(softly at first)*: ENOUGH . . . LOVE . . . COME . . . FUSS . . . TOUCH . . .  
 ENOUGH . . .

Adela *(advancing further into cave, looking around)*:

But it does not end here, see it goes on,  
 it goes on, it is not what we thought!  
 No ceiling, no floor, am I lost?  
 Can it be that I’m no more, there’s no more me?

Where is Adela, what is she? A mirror held up to . . . what?  
But why else did I come . . . so empty, is there no one there . . .

*(shouting)*

Adela! What is Adela! Where is she?  
No me, no there? No there, no me, is there, Mrs. Moore!

Echo (*louder, repeated, more insistent*): IS WHERE IS SHE, IS ME, IS THERE,  
ESMISS ESMOORE . . .

Adela (*wildly agitated, falling to the cave floor*):

It is not what we thought, not at all what we thought,  
all what we thought, thought we all what?  
Do I take you too fast? Do I take you too fast?

Echo (*more pervasive and rapid*): TAKE, TAKE, TAKE YOU, TAKE YOU TOO,  
YOU TOO, YOU . . .

Adela (*molto espressivo*):

Dr. Aziz! Do I take you,  
take you here like a whore, fast, too fast,  
take you, do I, do I, do I take you . . . take you, take you . . .

Adela with Echo: NO! YES! NO! (*Adela screams several times, echoed by instruments*)

Adela: Not mine, his! His fault, his thought,

Not mine, his, not what we thought,

I was not in the wrong . . .

*(shrieking)*: Not my thought, not my fault!

Help, help, assault!

His not mine, not my mistake!

Help! Help! *Rape!* (*running blindly off stage*).

END