

Léo Delibes: *Lakmé*

This week we're featuring Léo Delibes' *Lakmé*, the beautiful but ultimately tragic love story of the daughter of a Brahmin priest and a British military officer in colonial India. *Lakmé* contains two very famous numbers, the Bell Song (a coloratura soprano favorite) and the Flower Duet (used in Ghiradelli chocolates and British Airways TV commercials). Delibes, who was born on February 21, 1836, is perhaps best known as the composer of the ballets *Coppélia* and *Sylvia*. Based on Pierre Loti's 1880 autobiographical novel *Rarahu, ou Le Mariage de Loti*, the opera was first heard at Paris's Opéra Comique on April 14, 1883.

Set in nineteenth-century colonial India, the British Army officer Gérald (tenor **Gregory Kunde**) falls in love with Lakmé (soprano **Natalie Dessay**), daughter of Nilakantha (bass-baritone **José Van Dam**), a Brahmin priest. Lakmé and her servant Mallika (mezzo-soprano **Delphine Haidan**) venture down to the river to gather flowers and to bathe, removing their jewels. Swearing to take revenge on the violator of his temple, Nilakantha forces Lakmé, who's in love with the English officer, to sing at the bazaar so as to identify the culprit. When Gérald appears, Lakmé faints, thus giving him away. Later, Nilakantha stabs Gérald but Lakmé nurses him back to health at a secret forest hideout, where he is eventually found by his fellow officer, Frédéric (baritone **Franck Leguérinel**), who persuades Gérald to return to his military duties. When Lakmé returns to the hideout, she senses the change in her lover and commits suicide by eating the poisonous datura leaf.

Michel Plasson conducts the orchestra and chorus of the Capitole de Toulouse in this 1997 EMI Classics recording.

Jay Pierson

Host of the Thursday Night Opera House

Email: opera@theclassicalstation.org