



KHAYYAM, OMAR XIII. MUSICAL WORKS BASED ON THE RUBAIYAT

The enduring popularity of the verses that make up the *Rubaiyat* (*Robā'iyāt*) of Omar Khayyam (ʿOmar Ḳayyām), both in the original Persian and in translation, is reflected in the substantial number of musical works that have been inspired by this work. Many other poets have also stimulated the creation of musical compositions: Shakespeare has been a perennial favorite for composers in the West, and other poets, including many 19th century poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-92) have been frequently set to music (Gooch and Thatcher 1979, pp. 509-629; 1982, pp. 43-177). But given the comparative brevity of the *Rubaiyat*, no more than 110 verses in the longest version by Edward FitzGerald (q.v.; 1809-83), it is remarkable that well over 150 composers have used this single work as their source of inspiration (Martin and Mason, 2007b).

The variety of music that has been created in response to the *Rubaiyat* is considerable. The works include modern popular music, as well as classical music from the late 19th century onwards. Most compositions involve either the setting of words from the *Rubaiyat*, frequently in English and from one of FitzGerald's versions, or a parallel narration of the verses. But there are also film scores, orchestral works and simple piano pieces, as well as jazz suites and pop records (Coumans, pp. 2-4; Garrard, pp. 224-28). Although much of the



music originates in the West, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, there are works by a number of composers from Russia, Central Asia and the Middle East, including Iran.

In Iran, there is a long established tradition of declaiming or singing verses from major poets with musical accompaniment (During et al, pp. 153-61; Yarshater, pp. 59-78). The ghazals of Hafez, Sa 'di, and Rumi have been perennial favorites in this respect. As far as the *Rubaiyat* are concerned, we do not know of any specific artists or performances whose music for the *Rubaiyat* was scored or recorded in earlier decades of the 20th century. There is, however, a well-known recording from the 1970s, still available from the Mahoor Institute, of the original Persian text with music by Fereydun Šahbāziān, recitations by Aḥmad Šāmlu (Shamlu) and vocals by Moḥammad-Rezā Šajariān (Shajarian). Verses from the *Rubaiyat* have also been included, together with works of other major Iranian poets, in “Ascension,” a composition by Kāmbiz Rošan-Ravān, issued on CD by Technoor in 2002.

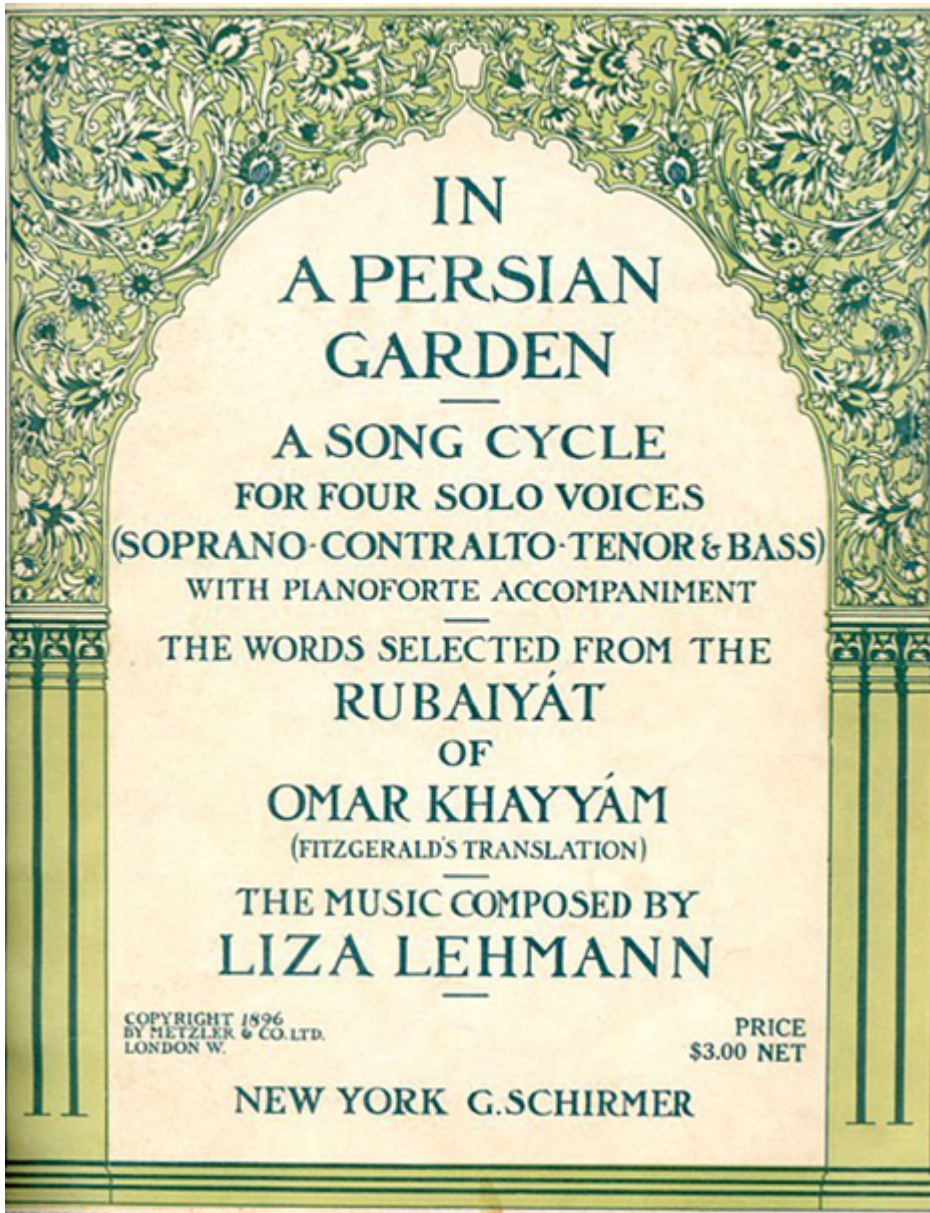
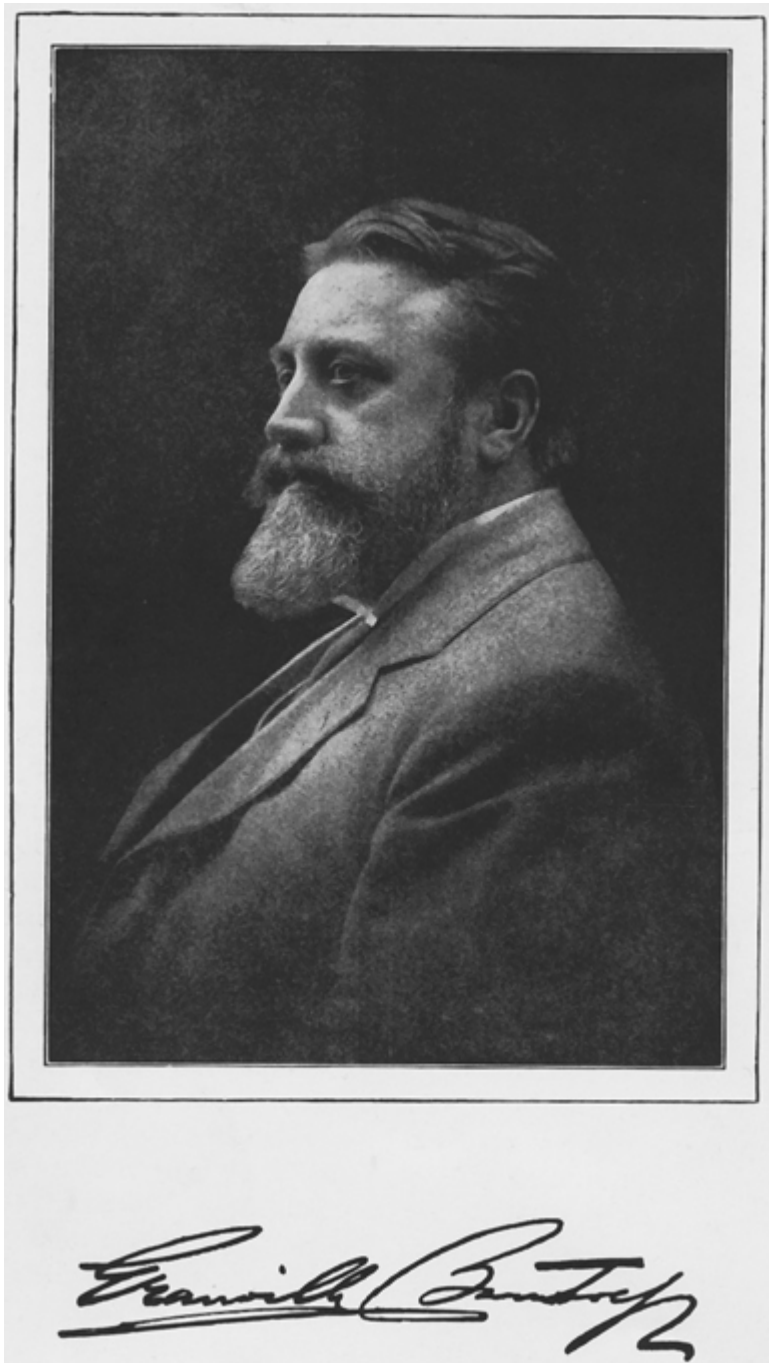


PLATE I Cover of the score for Liza Lehmann's 1896 song cycle "In a Persian Garden" (Designed for American edition, G. Shirmer, 1898). Illustration courtesy of Jos Coumans.

The impact of FitzGerald's translation. Western interest in music for the *Rubaiyat* dates from the late 19th century when FitzGerald's translation (first published in 1859) began to gain in popularity (Martin and Mason, 2007a, pp. 7-8). The earliest known setting of a selection of these verses, and one that became very popular in the early part of the 20th century, was by the celebrated English singer and composer Liza Lehmann (1862-1918). In 1896



she created a song cycle, “In a Persian Garden,” for four soloists and piano (PLATE I), using thirty-one quatrains from FitzGerald’s versions of the *Rubaiyat* (Garrard, pp. 224-25). Some of the songs in this work became very well known, notably the one entitled “Ah, Moon of my Delight!” which was sung by the American tenor Mario Lanza (1921-1959) among others. The whole work has also been recorded, most recently by the Cantabile Vocal Quartet, on a CD issued by Quattro Voci Records in 2000.



Granville Bantock (frontispiece of G. Bantock, ed., *One Hundred Folksongs of All Nations*, Boston, 1911).

Lehmann's setting of verses from FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat* was followed by a steady flow of works by other composers. Almost every year from 1900 to 1940, some work or other based on the *Rubaiyat* was produced in the United States or Europe (Martin and Mason, 2007b). Many compositions were



straightforward settings of one or more verses for voice(s), with accompaniment from piano or a chamber ensemble. Some of these works fall into the category of popular or drawing-room ballads, which were much in demand in the early years of the 20th century. Others are more in the nature of the “art song” (Northcote, pp. 96-97). They include works by composers such as Roger Quilter (1877-1953), who wrote a setting of verses from the *Rubaiyat* for unaccompanied voices in 1902. Vivian Ellis (1904-1996), an English composer of musicals, set three songs from the *Rubaiyat* for voice and piano in 1921. Some musicians from the rest of Europe were also active in the field; for example, a French composer, Jean Cras (1879-1932), composed a setting of five quatrains for voice and piano in 1925, while, in the Netherlands around 1916, the musician Willem Smalt made a setting for an *a cappella* choir of some quatrains from the Dutch translation by Petrus (Pieter) C. Boutens (1870-1943).

Not all the works based on the *Rubaiyat* in the first half of the 20th century were small-scale pieces. Probably the best-known large-scale work of this period is Granville Bantock’s composition “Omar Khayyam” for soloists, chorus and orchestra. Bantock (1868-1946; PLATE II) was an English composer and conductor, most of whose works were substantial compositions, and his “Omar Khayyam” is no exception. It is a three-part work, setting all the 101 quatrains from FitzGerald’s fifth edition, and it lasts nearly 3 hours in performance (PLATE III). Bantock composed the “oratorio” in the period 1906-9, and it was first performed in this period in separate parts with the composer conducting (Foreman, pp. 10-11). The complete work has been broadcast and recorded a number of times in Britain; the most recent recording is from 2007 by Chandos with the BBC Symphony Chorus and Orchestra conducted by Vernon Handley.

A limited number of other composers produced orchestral works based on the *Rubaiyat* in the years before the Second World War. The American Arthur Foote (1853-1937) created an orchestral suite, “Four Character Pieces after the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam” in 1912, based on an earlier work for voice and piano. Charles Cadman (1881-1946), another American, was commissioned to create a musical score for a silent film about Omar Khayyam, finally issued as “A Lover’s Oath” in 1925. Cadman’s music for orchestra was published as “Oriental Rhapsody” in 1921. In 1917, Henry Houseley (1851-1925) published a cantata for soloists, chorus and orchestra, entitled “Omar Khayyam.” A little later, in 1924, the Swiss composer, Robert Blum (1900-1994), gave his first symphony, with baritone soloist, the appellation “Omar Khayyam.” Most of



these works seem now to have vanished from the performing repertoire. But the Arthur Foote suite was included in a record issued by the US Library of Congress in the 1980s.



Omar Khayyám
The Ruba'iyat
according to EDWARD FITZGERALD.

Part I.

Maestoso. *lunga pausa* Granville BANTOCK.
(The Muezzin's Call to Prayer.)

(Al - la - hu Ak - bar!)

Lento. **1** Con moto grazioso.

pp sost.

sempre pp

ritard.

dim.

PLATE III First page of vocal score for Sir Granville Bantock's oratorio "Omar



Khayyam” (W. Breitkopf & Hartel, 1906).

World-wide interest in the modern period. *Rubaiyat*-based compositions from countries other than the UK or the USA were relatively few in number before the First World War. They increased gradually in the interwar years, and more especially in the second half of the 20th century (Martin and Mason, 2007b). This period has seen the creation of song settings from *Rubaiyat* verses in languages ranging from Dutch to Russian and from Finnish to Portuguese. An Uzbek musician, Firus Bachor (b. 1942), composed an opera on the Omar Khayyam theme in the 1990s. There has also been a regular flow of compositions using verses by FitzGerald in English. Quite a number of pop musicians from different countries have found inspiration from the *Rubaiyat*, while Khayyam and FitzGerald have been an influence both in the emerging sectors of world music, and in music used in Western explorations of mysticism based on Eastern thought.

The more classical formats of song settings have remained the most common forms of composition. Some of the major names among modern composers have put words from the *Rubaiyat* to music. Alan Hovhannes (1911-2000) created a major work, “The *Rubaiyat*, A Musical Setting” for narrator and orchestra in 1975, which has been twice recorded. The 1945 setting by Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) of two quatrains in English for “a cappella” of voices was included in a recording in 1998. In 1959, a verse from the *Rubaiyat* in its Persian original was included in the composition, “Strophes,” by Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933). This, too, has been recorded subsequently. A Dutch composer, Lex van Delden (1919-1988), won the music prize of the City of Amsterdam in 1948 for his *Rubaiyat* cantata, a setting for solo voices, chorus, two pianos and percussion.

Two films about Omar Khayyam have had original musical scores. The music for the first of these films, *The Life, Loves and Adventures of Omar Khayyam*, which starred Cornel Wilde and appeared in 1957, was the last film score to be created by the American composer Victor Young (1899-1956). The film including its music was recorded on video. More recently, the film *The Keeper: The Legend of Omar Khayyam* was released in 2005 with music mainly by Elton (Farrokh) Ahi. The complete work is available on DVD.

The influence of the *Rubaiyat* is also to be seen in a range of modern pop music, including jazz, folk, soul and rock and roll. Key names that have been



documented by Coumans (pp. 3-4) are: the jazz musician, Dorothy Ashby; the American folk singer, Woody Guthrie; soul musicians, Allan Toussaint and Willie Harper. The rock-and-roll singer Van Morrison included a mention of Omar Khayyam in one of his recorded lyrics (“Rave on John Donne”). More recently, texts from the *Rubaiyat* have been identified in works by pop artists such as Coldcut, In the Nursery, and David Olney, while the *Rubaiyat* of Dorothy Ashby was reissued on CD by Dusty Groove America in 2007. Looking further afield, the Egyptian singer Om Kolthoum (Omm Koltum; 1904-75) both performed and recorded songs in Arabic based on the *Rubaiyat* (Garrard, p. 227). In the field of world music, an Italian group Milagro Acustico, and a French one led by Abed Azrie, have each combined *Rubaiyat* texts in various languages with Eastern and Western instrumentation. The American-Iranian group, Axiom of Choice produced, in 2002, a vocal-instrumental recording subtitled “A Trans-Global Exploration of Omar Khayyam’s Mystical Vision.” This followed the production in the mid-1990s of two compact discs by Clarity Sound and Light, with instrumental music by J. Donald Walters that was inspired by the *Rubaiyat*; one recording is described as “a Persian fantasy for sitar and tabla,” the other is “a musical journey into the inner world of Omar Khayyam’s mystical love-poem.”

It is clear that the name of Omar Khayyam and his *Rubaiyat* lives on into the 21st century through these musical forms, as well as in the continued publication of the poem in book form (Martin and Mason, 2007a, pp. 29-30). Some of the musical interpretations, from earlier periods as well as modern times, may not resonate very closely with the original Persian verses or their original worldview. But the existence of *Rubaiyat*-based music, and particularly the recording and distribution of such music on a world-wide basis, has brought awareness of the medieval Persian poet and his Victorian English interpreter to a much wider audience than might otherwise have been the case.

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