

Azerbaijan at UNESCO 08-09
The renowned opera Leyli and Majnun by the eminent
composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov turned 100 in 2008

Within the framework of the UNESCO programme to celebrate the anniversaries of eminent personalities and historic events, the 34th session of the General Conference of UNESCO decided to officially mark the 100th anniversaries of the first staging of "Leyli and Majnun", of the national artist Sattar Bahlulzadeh, the writer Mir Jalal Pashayev and Academician Musa Aliyev in 2008-2009. The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, issued an order on 31 January 2008 on the organization of events to celebrate these jubilees.

The order reads:

"The first staging of the opera "Leyli and Majnun" by the brilliant Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov in 1908 opened a new epoch in the history of our national musical culture. The opera "Leyli and Majnun", created from an organic synthesis of mugham and European opera, is a real encyclopaedia of Azerbaijani music. The opera genre of the Islamic East was founded by this first example of a mugham opera.

The name of the national artist, laureate of the State Award, Sattar Bahlulzadeh, will remain forever in the annals of Azerbaijani fine arts as one of the founders of its school of landscape painting.

Having discovered new shades of different colours, Sattar Bahlulzade created beautiful paintings from the harmony of those colours. The artist's paintings, created in original style and outstanding for the richness of their palette, poetic mood and colourful beauty, are now among the most valuable jewels of the nation's fine arts.

The eminent representative of the history of national literary-artistic thought of the 20th century, writer Mir Jalal Pashayev, played a significant role and enriched the development of Azerbaijani literature.

Mir Jalal Pashayev is well-known as a writer who founded a new synthesis of the national oeuvre and advanced traditions of our classical artistic heritage and who inspired literature. But he was also a renowned scientist-researcher.

The famous scientist-geologist Musa Aliyev was rector of the present Azerbaijan State Oil Academy from 1939-1941 and President of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan from 1950-1958. He made a great contribution to the development of science in our country. In order to organize celebrations of the 100th anniversaries of the first staging of the opera "Leyli and Majnun", of the national artist Sattar Bahlulzadeh, of the writer Mir Jalil Pashayev and academician Musa Aliyev in 2008-2009 in Azerbaijan at state level, I here - by decree:

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Azerbaijan, jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, as well as with corresponding proposals from the Union of Composers of Azerbaijan, the Union of Artists of Azerbaijan and the Union of Writers of Azerbaijan, are to prepare and implement an action plan for the organization of the 100th anniversaries of the first staging of the opera "Leyli and Majnun", of the national artist Sattar Bahlulzadeh, of the writer Mir Jalal Pashayev and the academician Musa Aliyev within the country, abroad and at UNESCO level".

Age of Fame

The 100th anniversary of the opera "Leyli and Majnun" was celebrated in January 2008.

"I started working on the opera in 1907. However I had the first idea at an earlier stage, approximately in 1897-1898, when, as a boy, I saw the scene "Mejnun on Leyli's Grave" in an amateur play in my hometown of Shusha. That image touched me so deeply that I decided to write something similar to opera as I returned to Baku" (Uzeyir Hajibeyov).

The premiere of the opera "Leyli and Majnun" was held on 25 (12) January 1908 in Baku in the Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev theatre (in the building of the present State Theatre of Musical Comedy). The talented actor and director Hussein Arablinsky staged the opera. The first conductor was the writer-dramatist Abdulrahimbey Haqverdiyev. At following performances the writer of the opera himself and the composer Muslim Magomayev, the close friend and associate of Uzeyir Hajibeyov, stood on the conductor's podium. The famous publicist, artist, and public figure Alibey Husseinzadeh contributed to the artistic decor of the play. The orchestra accompanying the first play was comprised of only a few musicians who were Uzeyir Hajibeyov's friends from the Gory Seminary. The mugham parts were accompanied by the famous tar players Gurban Pirimov and Shirin Akhundov." (Graduate of Baku Musical Academy, candidate of Art History, Jamila Hasanova).

And now we, the new generation, are privileged to mark the centenary of the first Azerbaijani opera "Leyli and Majnun", based upon motifs from the poem by the genius Mohammed Fuzuli. The opera "Leyli and Majnun" was not only the first opera in Azerbaijan. That day saw the initiation of opera in the ancient East and the name of the 22-year-old composer, Uzeyir Hajibeyov, entered the annals of opera for the first time in the East.

"Uzeyir Hajibeyov is a great composer, a classic of the musical culture of Azerbaijan. His works played a

fundamental role in the history of national music. The establishment and development of professional music in Azerbaijan, the emergence and evolution of many genres and the formation of numerous professional ensembles are connected with the name Uzeyir Hajibeyov. Uzeyir Hajibeyov was the first person, having begun composing and his social activity under difficult personal circumstances, to establish the first national musical theatre in the whole Near East." (J. Hasanova)

Graduate of the Baku Musical Academy and candidate of Art History, Jamila Hasanova, showed in her work that the outstanding musical and theatrical figure Husseingulu Sarabsky was the first to play the role of Majnun. "He so mastered the role that people started calling him "Majnun". In latertimes many famous khanende of different generations played the role. Among them were Aliovsat Sadikhov, Husseinaga Hajibababeyov, Abulfat Aliyev, Bakir Ashumov, Gulu Askarov, Arif Babayev, Janali Akbarov, Alim Gasimov, Mansum Ibrahimov and many others, who all left a trace in the history of the develop-ment of operatic theatre, thanks to their inimitable styles of performance and their luminous interpretations of the role.

But it was impossible to find an actress for Leyli's role at the time, as Muslim women were forbidden to play on stage at the beginning of the 20th century. That is why all the female roles in theatre were played by men. During the first play young A. Farajov, who had a nice voice and knew mughams, played Leyli. Following him, the role was played by Ahmad Agdamsky, the famous actor of principal female women roles in almost all mugham operas and musical comedies of that time. Only after some years (in the 1920s-30s) did women-khanendes appear on stage, creating beautiful roles in the mugham operas of Azerbaijani composers. Among the famous actresses who played Leyli we can name Surayya Gajar, Hagigat Rzayeva, Gulhar Hasanova, Rubaba Muradova, Sara Gadimova, Zeynab Khanlarova, Nezaket Mammadova, Sakina Ismailova, Gandab Guliyeva, Melekhanim Eyyubova, Nezaket Teymurova and others" - says Hasanova.

We should also note that the legend of the immortal love of Leyli and Majnun was very popular in the East. The Azerbaijani poet of the 12th century, Nizami, was the first to address this theme and wrote the poem of the same name. After him about fifty poets addressed the same theme in their oeuvres. We can name the Indian Amir Hosrov Dahlavi in the 12th century, the Iranian Imadi in the 15th century, the Uzbek Alishar Navai in the 15th century, the Tajik Jami, the Turkish Chakeri and many others. However, the composer took the poem by Fuzuli as the basis for his opera. Researchers say that the choice was not unintentional.

Uzeyir Hajibeyov took Fuzuli's poem as the basis of the opera because it was written in Azerbaijani and had a great influence on the development of eastern poetry. This is what the composer wrote about the form: "I wanted to use classical samples of the national art, mugham, as musical material. My only task was to select colourful music, rich in form and content, using Fuzuli's words and work out the dramatic outline of the action..." Thus Uzeyir Hajibayov defines the style of "Leyli and Majnun" as a mugham-improvised opera. Chanson-dance samples of the national art were also used in the opera, besides mugham. There were also episodes which were fully created by the composer.

The centenary was celebrated in several cultural houses - the House Museum of Uzeyir Hajibeyov, the Azerbaijani State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet, the Jaffar Jabbarly Azerbaijani State Theatrical Museum and the State Museum of Musical Culture of Azerbaijan.

A scientific conference dedicated to the hundredth anniversary of the "Leyli and Majnun" opera was held in the House-Museum of Uzeyir Hajibeyov within the framework of the centenary. Further, an exhibition including various posters, photo-graphs, scores and other memorabilia was also held. A very bright jubilee premiere of the opera was prepared in the Azerbaijani State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet on the occasion of this remarkable event. New, unique designs were created for the "Leyli and Majnun" opera and new costumes were designed for the artists playing in the opera because of the special nature of the event. An exhibition dedicated to the history of opera was held in the foyer of the theatre on the day of the performance of the 100-year-old opera.

A new, jubilee edition of posters and invitations was also published on the occasion of the centenary. Various famous artistic figures of Azerbaijan, whom life had brought together via the "Leyli and Majnun" opera, participated in the jubilee premiere of the opera.