

Program Note by the composer:

When Alexandra Raikhlina asked me to write a string sextet for the Brundibár Art Festival, I first thought about reflecting on the festival's themes and the horrific lives of the lost artists. Then I realised we should celebrate these geniuses. Even in the greatest adversity, they still left us a legacy, however much less than their true potential. I wanted to write something that was not dark but optimistic. Something that speaks of achievement, art and lightness in the darkest times.

This work is a combination of two ideas I had been contemplating for a long time: a piece inspired by the story of *Zaal and Roudabeh*, and a Fantasia on the most important of Persian dances, the *Reng*. Eventually the two merged.

Zaal and Roudabeh is a romance from the *Shahnameh*, the Persian Book of Kings. Their love leads to the birth of Rostam, the greatest Iranian hero. But this is not a simple romance. Zaal is born to the great Persian paladin Sam with pure white hair. Ashamed, Sam abandons the infant on Mount Alborz. The mythical bird Simurgh finds him and raises him alongside her own chicks. Tormented by dreams and told that the boy is blessed by God, Sam seeks Zaal out. The Simurgh returns him. Zaal gradually becomes a wise hero.

As an adult he hears of Rudabeh, princess of Kabul and, through her mother, a descendant of the tyrant Zahhak. They fall in love. In one of the story's most famous scenes, Rudabeh lets down her long hair from her palace tower so Zaal can climb up to her, yet Zaal refuses to use her hair. There is formidable opposition to the marriage from both sides, but Zaal, Rudabeh and Rudabeh's mother Sindokht resolve everything diplomatically, not violently. That is one of the core meanings of the story: the difference between violence and civilisation, and how we treat someone deemed "other."

Zaal himself was treated as “other.” He was different, and even though he became the wisest man he could be, he could easily have ended up dead. Their marriage was considered wrong because Rudabeh came from the “wrong” blood. Everyone feared their children would be evil; instead, their son became the greatest hero of Iran. This is the ideal way of treating someone different. The way that was denied to so many Jewish artists and intellectuals during the Nazi era. They could have been our artistic Zaals and Roudabehs, but they never had the chance to shine properly.

At the same time, I had long wanted to write a *Reng Fantasia*, something like Chopin’s *Polonaise-Fantaisie*. The Reng is one of the most prominent of all Persian dances: a graceful dance in 6/8 with a very strong hemiola feeling of 3/4. I tried to compose a long symphonic poem in that rhythm, used quite freely. For most of the work, I deliberately distanced myself from Persian melodic stereotypes, hoping to achieve a new sound by combining a Persian rhythm with non-Persian melodies and harmonies.

Last but not least, I wanted this romance to reflect a personal adversity I am facing. My recently married wife could not come to me because of the recent war. Being distanced from her made me realise how much I need her and how much she has made me more civilised, just as Roudabeh did for Zaal.

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Classical composer