

The Faithful Gazelle

When I started work on this clarinet quintet, in October 2021, the 3-month-old Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was very fresh in everyone's mind and there seemed to be a collective feeling of utter helplessness as the country descended into chaos and fear, once more. The idea for this piece came in a conversation with my Afghan friend, Gulwali Passarlay, in which he was expressing the hope that people would continue to think about Afghanistan and to remember, violent political upheaval aside, what an incredibly rich, beautiful and ancient culture this country has.

Part of this wonderful culture are the centuries-old, mythical tales, often with a moral message, that have been passed down through many generations. *The Faithful Gazelle* tells of a Beggar raised to riches by a magical Gazelle, only to lose everything again when she becomes sick and he ignores her pleas for help.

The clarinet with its enormous scope of timbre and pitch seemed the perfect vehicle for the Gazelle and the 'cello a gruff, then majestic, then gruff again Beggar!

1. Beggar awoken by "Gazelles for sale!"

The piece starts with a fanfare of flourishes conveying the words "Ga - - zelles for sale!". For this I use the Afghan Jogiya mode (with its distinctive major and minor 6th). The Beggar/'cello initially plays *sul ponticello* to portray his gruffness but the tone becomes more lyrical as he sees how beautiful the creatures are. We go straight into the next movement, without a break.

2. Gazelle ghazal "Buy me and you won't regret it!"

I only discovered after writing this movement that some believe the gazelle is named after this ancient and classic Arabic form of sung poetry. Afghan ghazals have a very recognizable structure which keeps digressing and returning to the main theme (like a rondo) interspersed with fast-moving interludes, between verses. We start with a brief 'Naghma-ye kashal' (ghazal overture), as the magical Gazelle sticks her head out of the vendor's cage and tells the Beggar to buy her. The overture serves to establish the Jogiya mode and the mystical mood is set. Here I try to convey the beauty and magic of our heroine, again with the ambiguous Jogiya and peaceful Bilawal modes and a typical Tintal rhythm, where the 'cello imitates the tabla.

3. The Gazelle elevates the Beggar

Over and under a bed of interweaving Bairami Rekap, Jogiya and Kaj Duni modes, the groaning Beggar despairs – *why* did he spend his last 3 coins on a gazelle? The Gazelle reassures him and runs off to see a Prince (played by the viola), whom she dupes into thinking that her Master, of great wealth and importance, got waylaid by robbers on the road and wondered if he could borrow some clothes to pay tribute to the Prince. The movement ends with a peal of wedding bells as the Prince readily complies and is so impressed by a perfect emerald the Gazelle drops at his feet that he decides to marry his princess daughter to the now smartly-dressed Beggar, upon his arrival at the palace.

4. Wedding Dance

The *Atan*, in 7/8, is the most famous dance of Afghanistan and is frequently performed to the “Drunken (as in spiritually intoxicated) Shah” melody, on which I’ve very loosely based the proud and now resplendent Beggar’s theme. The dance increases in speed as it progresses and the wedding turns into a wild party. The music is suddenly interrupted by the poorly Gazelle imploring the Beggar’s princess wife to send for him as she feels very ill and only her master’s ministrations will help. But the party cracks on, faster and wilder, as the Beggar is having too good a time with his new friends to tend to the Gazelle. As she fades further, the party becomes wilder until proceedings are brought to a sudden end with a wail from the princess at the Gazelle’s death.

5. Lament for a Faithful Gazelle

A feeling of overwhelming sadness descends, as the strings lament the loss of the Gazelle/clarinet. The ghost of the poor unfortunate creature appears but the strings can barely keep going, under the weight of their grief. As the music comes to a close, the Beggar wakes up as his old rough, gruff *sul ponticello* self, paying the price for his foolish and selfish rejection of his loyal four-legged friend.

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Sources

John Baily: *Songs from Kabul: The Spiritual Music of Ustad Amir Mohammad; War, Exile and the Music of Afghanistan: The Ethnographer’s Tale; The naghma-ye kashâl of Afghanistan*

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