

SHATTERED

BY LESSER OF 2 WEEVILS - 2022

Episode 6

[Shattered theme music]

NEMO: In the early 1900s, the great and good at the Paris Opera buried an urn full of “living voices”—Gramophone recordings of famous opera stars—to be disinterred after a century. When those urns were opened, mysterious recordings, similar to experiments done by Alexander Graham Bell at the Volta Laboratories in Washington D.C. in 1881, were discovered. Who made them? And why?

[Phonograph recording.]

COUNT PHILIPPE DE CHAGNY: *Qui sème le vent, récolte la tempête.* [As you sow, so shall you reap.]

NEMO: And who wrote the haunting music captured on this piano roll from the early 1900s?

[Excerpt from piano roll.]

PHIL: This podcast will investigate the mysterious happenings in turn-of-the-twentieth century Paris at one of its most popular cultural institutions, the Paris Opera, now the Palais Garnier. I’m Phil Donan, and with my colleague—

NEMO: --we’re going to use research, sound recording playback technology, and good old-fashioned detective work to try to find you the answers.

PHIL: Hello again, it’s Phil Donan here. Thank you to everyone who has been listening and offering leads and tips. It helps us a lot that we have not only a dedicated listenership but one that is so . . . erudite and with so many esoteric interests. First off, we had an e-mail query: what is a castrato? Well, uh, now, it’s not the kind of thing, it’s not the kind of thing . . . that one finds easy to describe. Probably easier to tell you in a face to face conversation. Well . . . I mean, maybe, if it’s not too old-fashioned . . . you could find a book about the history of opera and . . . What am I saying? You’re just going to Google it, aren’t you? Oooh. You may have noticed that I’m starting off this podcast on my own. My colleague

Nemo is, at the moment, having to deal with some issues arising with her contract with the BnF coming to an end and having to find some new means to support herself in Paris and possibly new digs. So if any of you are Parisian listeners and have your ears to the ground . . . don't fail to get in touch, if you think you might have somewhere for her to stay . . . temporarily. But she was insistent that we carry on, because in the intervening time we have made progress in leaps and bounds, since we debuted that beautiful organ music and that haunting parléphon digitized scan.

So far, we'd been focusing our efforts on identifying Erik—that's Erik with a k—who we believe to be the person whose voice has been recorded in the parléphon and who may be the composer behind the opera *Don Juan Triumphant* and is, we think, the voice captured on the experimental Volta Laboratory-esque recordings that we found in the urns underneath the Paris Opera. (takes a deep breath) Oh, my goodness, that's a lot to say. Anyway, Nemo suggested that perhaps we take a different tack, as regards the other person identified in those recordings, the ones that were found in the . . . the Richelieu archives, er, I think. I can't really read my handwriting there. Anyway, this was the man who was identified as Daroghah. And what is a Daroghah? Well, it was one of our listeners who helped us with that one.

Phone conversation.

PHIL: Could you repeat that, please?

PODCAST LISTENER: (on phone) Daroghah is a word for chief of police.

PHIL: So it's a title rather than a name?

PODCAST LISTENER:(on phone) Well, obviously.

PHIL: Luckily for me, I was able to call in some favors with some people I used to work with at Glenullen, and I was able to set up an interview with Professor Shahzad, who is an historian and now teaches at AACL, the Academy of Asian Culture and Languages in London. Now, I must confess, I did not cut these interviews together. My colleague is completely responsible for that. I'm hopeless with that kind of thing. I just did the interview.

[Smartphone recording. a large echo-y building with background noise.]

PHIL: Professor Shahzad, thank you for taking the time—

SHAHZAD: Yes, it's fine. You really shouldn't—you really could have gotten this information through e-mail, you know.

PHIL: Oh, ah. C-C-Could you tell me a bit about Persia in the nineteenth century?

SHAHZAD: Yes, all right. Persian society for much of its history has been what Homa Katouzian has called a short-term society. Power was arbitrary, and the king (or shah)'s grasp on it was fleeting. Over several centuries, there were many cycles of upheaval, and things were very unstable in the eighteenth century. And coming into the nineteenth century, there was a great deal more contact with European culture, mainly through the British and the Russians.

PHIL: Who were playing . . . uh, the Great Game . . . is it called?

SHAHZAD: Yes, that's right. The Great Game, yes. It was not a very pleasant game for the Persians themselves, from the Golestan Treaty onwards. The best they could hope to do was to play Britain and Russia off each other.

PHIL: The days of the Persian Empire were over.

SHAHZAD: If you mean the Achaemenids, yes. The shah who died in 1834, Fath'ali Shah, he had a splendid court, and even Europeans remarked upon it. A decade later, in 1848, Naser al-Din Shah took the throne, and he managed to rule through most of the nineteenth century.

[Tapping on laptop keyboard.]

PHIL: Ah, now, Professor Shahzad is showing me an engraving of Shah Naser al-Din meeting Queen Victoria. And did he begin a process of . . . well, sort of . . . modernization . . . ?

SHAHZAD: Naser al-Din was reform-minded to an extent. His chief minister Amir Kabir ruled Iran in the shah's name for about four years, and this man had some remarkable ideas, like opening the Dar al-Fonun, which was modeled on the French *écoles polytechniques*. But he died due to court intrigue.

PHIL: Amir Kabir, did he instigate the introduction of the telegraph to Persia?

SHAHZAD: It certainly would have been consistent with his ideas. It was Abd ol-Vahhāb Khān-e Shirāzi, the Persian deputy manager of foreign affairs, who oversaw the laying of telegraph lines in the late 1850s from the center of Tehran to the outskirts of the city.

PHIL: And Tehran was the capital?

SHAHZAD: Yes, it had been moved there in the eighteenth century.

PHIL: I see. Was there much movement from East to West? Was there any . . . exchange of ideas?

SHAHZAD: Malkam Khan spent 10 years as a student in Paris and was the driving force for reform in the second half of the nineteenth century. He convinced Naser al-Din to go on his first of three European tours.

PHIL: Which is where that engraving of meeting Queen Victoria comes from. Would you, therefore, expect to see a Persian chief of police in Paris in the 1870s?

[Pause]

SHAHZAD: Because you had mentioned it previously, I looked through accounts of Persians in Europe, mainly ambassadors. (muttering) I told you this already.

[Tapping on laptop keyboard.]

SHAHZAD: I remembered the Daroghah of Mazandaran being mentioned in a telegram from the end of the nineteenth century, and that he had died outside of Persia, and that he had a connection to Paris . . . I also have, uh, this obituary . . .

PHIL: Can you tell us a bit more about Mazandaran? Is it very near to Tehran, for example?

SHAHZAD: Tehran is about 100 miles away, um, 160 kilometers, from Mazandaran.

PHIL: It's near the coast?

SHAHZAD: Yes, of the Caspian Sea. I don't really see how this is relevant to—

PHIL: Could you, please—if you have time—tell us a bit more?

SHAHZAD: Yes, all right.

[Tapping on laptop keyboard.]

SHAHZAD: So if you look at this, if you look at a map of modern Iran, here's Tehran. Here are the Elburz mountain range.

PHIL: And that's Afghanistan, is it?

SHAHZAD: Yes. So this part, this southern coast, in the Qajar period, this part of Iran consisted of three provinces: Astarabad, Gilan, and Mazandaran. So while this area was

historically agriculturally-based, the administrative capital, Sārī, had a more aristocratic feel to it.

PHIL: Why was that? Surely it's a bit isolated . . .

SHAHZAD: Sārī was where the governor-general of the province lived. There were important routes running north to south through Mazandaran as well, and from the 1850s, with the improvement of the roads and then laying of telegraph lines, like I said previously . . .

[Rustling of paper.]

PHIL: Okay, so Professor Shahzad is now showing me a scan from *The London Times* . . .

SHAHZAD: 12th September 1868.

PHIL: "A Mystery Explained."

SHAHZAD: This is an obituary, of a sort, about Ismail Khan, who was a Persian who was very fond of opera.

PHIL: "A Persian gentleman of mysterious habits, who was well known from his constant attendance at the opera and other places of amusement in Paris, has paid the debt of nature." Well, it's fascinating, but it doesn't really explain—

SHAHZAD: I'm afraid I'm an historian, not a detective.

[She gets out of her seat and walks away.]

PHIL: Thank you, Professor, we've taken up enough of your time as it is.

SHAHZAD: Quite.

PHIL: That was all clearly in the realm of facts. The next call that we got—

Phone conversation.

SIMEON: (on phone)--no, you don't understand. I must speak to the historian.

NEMO: Uh, could you please tell me what this is about, Mr . . . ?

SIMEON: (on phone) Mr Simeon Entwhistle. I sent you an e-mail.

NEMO: I'm sorry, Mr Entwhistle, I've been a little busy—

SIMEON: (on phone) I need the phone number of the Irish chap.

NEMO: Phil Donan? What for?

SIMEON: Uh, look. There's no need to be so stand-offish. I'm a film historian. My specialism is silent era film.

NEMO: Okay . . . ?

SIMEON: You don't seem to be aware of a film from 1916 that could help you identify some of the voices that you've captured in your phonographic recordings.

NEMO: Um, well, technically they're not phonographs . . . They're mostly recordings similar to the experimental ones Alexander Graham Bell was making at the Volta Laboratories in Washington D.C. in—

SIMEON: (on phone) Never mind that. The film is *Das Phantom der Oper*, and it will explain everything.

PHIL: Mr Entwistle was normally based in London but he was doing some research in Germany.

Phone conversation.

SIMEON: (on phone) Dr Donan, thank you for getting in touch. At last. Now I hate to sound cross, but you're doing yourself a disservice and your listeners as well.

PHIL: What do you mean by that?

SIMEON: (on phone) You've ignored a crucial piece of evidence.

PHIL: I'm sorry, Mr Entwistle, I don't understand.

SIMEON: (on phone) Please call me Simeon.

PHIL: All right, Simeon, but what can a silent film possibly have to do . . . ?

SIMEON: (on phone) You have been trying to find out who Daroghah is. Well, a Daroghah is a Persian chief of police.

PHIL: We've literally just been given that information, from a listener . . .

SIMEON: (on phone) I think I know who this particular Daroghah on the recording is.

PHIL: Well . . . who is he and how do you know?

SIMEON: (on phone) Have you heard of a French journalist called Gaston Leroux?

PHIL: I . . . I think so. Was he also a playwright?

SIMEON: (on phone) Yes, and he wrote locked door mysteries. *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune*.

PHIL: Ah, yes, all right.

SIMEON: (on phone) He did an interview in 1909 with “the Persian” that became the basis for this 1916 film, *Das Phantom der Oper*.

PHIL: I’m sorry, “the Persian”?

SIMEON: (on phone) He wouldn’t identify the man by name, and in surviving documentation he’s referred to as the Daroghah of Mazandaran.

PHIL: But not Ismail Khan?

SIMEON: (on phone) Who’s Ismail Khan?

PHIL: A puh- Sorry. Let me try that again. A Parisian Persian who loved opera, apparently, and died in 1868.

SIMEON: (on phone) No, this couldn’t be him. He had to still be alive in 1909 to be interviewed. Anyway, like I said, the Daroghah of Mazandaran wouldn’t identify himself by name to Leroux. Or Leroux, for some reason, wouldn’t identify him.

PHIL: And you said this interview was the basis for a film?

SIMEON: (on phone) Yes, do keep up.

PHIL: Is this film from 1916 . . . a documentary? Or a . . . like a fiction film, a drama?

SIMEON: (on phone) No one can really tell.

PHIL: What do you mean by that?

SIMEON: (on phone) The film is gone. It has disappeared.

PHIL: Now, in case you couldn’t tell, I didn’t make that dramatic edit.

NEMO: (laughs) I did.

PHIL: Yes, she did. I told you that I’m hopeless with technology

NEMO: I'm back, I'm back.

PHIL: Yes, she's back!

NEMO: Hello, listeners to *The Shattered Podcast*. I've missed you, have you missed me?

PHIL: Thank God she's back, I'm a dreadful host.

NEMO: No, Not at all.

PHIL: I'm a dreadful detective, too.

NEMO: You're way too hard on yourself, Phil.

PHIL: Well, the good news is that you're back and you've got all your—well, have you got all your sort of worldly things taken care of . . . ?

NEMO: Yes, I was really fortunate that someone I used to know in Paris and was able to help me out financially and in terms of a place to live for awhile—

PHIL: A place to live as well? You didn't say anything about that before . . .

NEMO: Is this important?

PHIL: It is if it's your ex-boyfriend . . .

NEMO: This isn't really relevant—

PHIL: So, Simeon Entwhistle . . .

NEMO: It's none of your business. Simeon Entwhistle.

PHIL: The 1916 film.

NEMO: So Simeon Entwhistle didn't really have a lot more time to talk to Phil about this evidence we had "ignored"—

PHIL: --but he graciously gave us—

NEMO: --gave us permission to read, on the podcast, this report which he wrote when he curated a season of silent film at the Castro Theater Film Festival. And I'm gonna read it for you now. "This five-reel film, with script by Greta Schröder and directed by Ernst Mátray, tells the story of a master builder of an opera house, who has installed mechanical and technological contrivances throughout the building for his own purposes. The prints are, unfortunately, lost to us but suggest a romantic adventure. It was written based on notes from Gaston Leroux, the famous French novelist and journalist, who reportedly interviewed the Persian chief of police who had the events firsthand."

PHIL: Mr Entwhistle's conclusion is that the Daroghah of Mazandaran who was involved with this film is the same person who was recorded on those Volta cylinders.

NEMO: Some time in the 1880s. He would have been kinda old by 1909 . . .

PHIL: You know, is there any reason why this film disappeared?

NEMO: What do you mean?

PHIL: Why does this one not survive and others do?

NEMO: It's pretty standard. That's what Simeon told me. A lot of silent film is lost. If a lot of copies weren't made at the time, and if the copies weren't taken very good care of—film, like sound recording, is a pretty fragile material, when all is said and done.

PHIL: Which is surely why it's all the more remarkable that those phonographs buried in the bowels of the Palais Garnier still exist.

NEMO: Yes. Without putting too fine a point on it, it's a miracle.

PHIL: Or they wanted to be found.

NEMO: (laughs) That sounds like something a conspiracy theorist would say.

Phone conversation.

[Surreal, questioning music.]

SIMEON: (on phone) Look, I've really got to go . . . it's four o'clock in the morning here. Don't you people ever sleep? I wish you . . . all the luck in the world in tracing this . . .

PHIL: Do you think the film could still be out there somewhere?

SIMEON: (on phone) It's possible, but even if it was . . .

PHIL: What?

SIMEON: (on phone) It's ridiculous. I shouldn't have mentioned it.

PHIL: You can't leave it there!

SIMEON: (on phone) There's a rumor—a silly, unsubstantiated rumor, from a less scientific age—that the film is cursed.

PHIL: Cursed?

SIMEON: (on phone) I can't be more specific than that.

PHIL: Are we talking about Tutankhamen's-tomb-cursed?

SIMEON: (on phone) There's just a . . . a stupid little rhyme.

PHIL: In German?

SIMEON: (on phone) In French. . . . It goes,

Hésitez sur les ombres qui, quand vous turnez, bougent,

Et faites l'attention de la musique qui brûle.

NEMO: "Be wary of the shadows that move as your head turns

And watch out for the music, the music that burns."

[Shattered outro music.]

End credits:

The Shattered Podcast is hosted by Nemo and Dr Phil Donan, with theme music by Katie Seaton. It is produced by Leslie McMurtry and is a Lesser of 2 Weevils production 2022.