

KARL GOLDMARK & THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

WRITTEN BY KEVIN SHERWIN

The Opera that Captivated Vienna

Karl Goldmark's music for *The Queen of Sheba* (*Die Königin von Saba*) was a direct response to a uniquely dramatic world and its spectacular setting, opulent images, and ancient characters. The work's grand scale and blend of diverse musical influences created a monumental experience that made it Goldmark's breakthrough composition. *The Queen of Sheba* quickly became an audience favorite and was staged nearly every year for over 60 years at the Vienna Court Opera (now the Vienna State Opera), from 1875 to 1937.¹



Liebig card for *The Queen of Sheba*, 1912

went on to major opera houses worldwide, including La Scala, the Berlin Hofoper, the Metropolitan Opera, and the opera houses of Prague, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Boston, St. Petersburg, Madrid, Buenos Aires, and many others.³

Goldmark's Early Life and Studies

Born in the small Hungarian village of Keszthely, Goldmark was one of 12 children.⁴ His father, the local cantor, sang regularly at the Keszthely Synagogue, and the distinct modalities of Jewish liturgical singing may have provided early inspiration for the unique melodic language that would in part characterize *The Queen of Sheba*.

Exhibiting early talent on the violin, Goldmark moved to Vienna in 1844 to live with his older brother. He initially

studied violin with Leopold Jansa before entering the Vienna Conservatory (now the University of Music and Performing Arts). There, he undertook formal studies in harmony and counterpoint with Gottfried Preyer. He also continued his studies in violin with the prominent pedagogue, Professor Josef Böhm, who taught at the Conservatory for nearly three decades, from 1819 to 1848.⁵



Portrait of Karl Goldmark by August Weger

Josef Böhm's star pupils included the virtuosos Joseph Joachim and Leopold Auer; Auer would later edit Goldmark's violin concerto for publication. By the late 19th century, the violin sections of the Vienna Court Opera and Philharmonic Orchestras were filled with musicians from Böhm's pedagogical lineage, and by this time, Goldmark's music was regularly performed in Vienna.⁶

Inspired by History: Hearing Goldmark's World

Celebrated performers from Goldmark's lifetime can be heard on early sound recordings, providing invaluable inspiration for the present day. Reflecting Romantic-era performance styles more broadly, Goldmark's contemporaries performed with expressive approaches to tempo flexibility, emotive nuances of articulation, and prominent uses of portamento, including in orchestral, operatic, and chamber music. In the decade following a highly successful 1901 production of *The Queen of Sheba*, conducted by Gustav Mahler at the Vienna State Opera, prominent cast members made recordings of the opera's highlights.⁷

Singers who starred in *The Queen of Sheba* in Vienna, including Leo Slezak, Grete Forst, Elise Elizza, and others, were featured on some of the earliest recordings of Goldmark's music. In the discography "Karl Goldmark on

Early Recordings,” author Ferenc János Szabó describes that these pre-1915 recordings can be “considered as audio witnesses of the last German (and the only real Austro-Hungarian) romantic operatic tradition.”⁸ Additionally, violinist Arnold Rosé’s recording of Goldmark’s Violin Concerto offers valuable perspectives; Rosé was the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic



Elise Elizza, Soprano

and Vienna Court Opera for over 50 years, and in 1881, he was the soloist for Goldmark’s Violin Concerto with the Philharmonic.⁹ By extension, Rosé’s recordings point to the violin playing styles that surrounded the composer.

Listening closely to these recordings, therefore, offers significant insights into how these Romantic-era artists approached phrasing, articulation, tempo rubato, and portamento in Goldmark’s works. As Mark Bailey, Head of the Yale Collection of Historical Sound Recordings, points out, each artist draws on common expressive idioms, but performs with their own distinctive style. In this way, their recordings are not prescriptive interpretations for replication, but rather, can stimulate the creative revitalization of Goldmark’s music today.¹⁰ Studying these historical artists influenced our recording of *The Queen of Sheba Suite*, expanding the ensemble’s stylistic approaches to convey the inherent drama, mood, and narrative qualities of Goldmark’s music. The accompanying essay, “Listening to Goldmark’s Contemporaries,” offers a brief analysis of several recordings by these significant artists and their performance styles.

The Queen of Sheba Suite

The Queen of Sheba Suite builds on the 19th-century tradition of adapting the music from operas, ballets, and incidental music for the concert hall, celebrating Goldmark’s artistry and legacy. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ensembles including the New York Philharmonic, Boston Pops Orchestra, and the

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Vienna Philharmonic performed extracts from the opera in concert.¹¹ The present concert suite, arranged for chamber orchestra, features prominent arias, ballets, and choruses, bringing together the music for many of the opera’s most poignant, dramatic, and distinctive moments.

In the opera, arias, ballets, and recitatives are woven into a largely through-composed musical narrative. Goldmark describes that, for opera in the 1860s, “all the old forms, if not entirely abandoned, had been seriously questioned; the new ones had not yet been accepted nor established.” He goes on to say, “I was guided solely by the story and what was needed to interpret it.”¹² The opera, with a libretto by Hermann Salomon Mosenthal, tells the tragic story of an ambassador, Assad, whose love for the titular Queen conflicts with his duty and betrothal to the High Priest’s daughter, Sulamith.¹³

The concert suite opens by establishing the opera’s intense atmosphere with a ballet from Act I, conveying the grandeur of King Solomon’s court (No. 1). The next movement is Assad’s aria, “Aus klaren Fluthen steigt,” which portrays his mystical first encounter with the Queen (No. 2). The suite then moves into the opera’s opening of Act II, which introduces the setting of a nighttime garden “where the moon is rising” (No. 3). This lively ballet sets up Astaroth’s wordless call to the lovesick Assad, bringing him closer to The Queen; Assad expresses his impassioned state in “Magische Töne” (No. 4). In the opening ballet of Act III, Goldmark combines a carnival-like atmosphere with the magnificence of the banquet hall setting. Within the ethos of elegance and royalty, the ballet foreshadows Assad’s tragic fate (No. 5). Followed by a flashback to Act II, “Ewig, ewig” captures Goldmark’s depiction of ancient temple music through an antiphonal progression of the High Priest’s repeating chant, building into the chorus’s collective supplication for mercy and compassion. The suite then concludes with the finale of



Playbill for world premiere of the opera *The Queen of Sheba* by Karl Goldmark

the opera, which is set in the desert. Assad slowly dies in Sulamith's arms as their eternal love is affirmed.



Late 19th century stage design by Johann Kautsky for *The Queen of Sheba*

Throughout Goldmark's Career

The monumental success of *The Queen of Sheba* marked the beginning of a prolific career. Goldmark followed it with six more operas produced by the Vienna Court Opera



Portrait of Karl Goldmark painted by Otto Friedrich, 1905

and composed a celebrated catalog of symphonies, chamber music, and concertos, championed by leading performers during his lifetime.¹⁴

The performance history of Goldmark's music was significantly marked by the 1938 Anschluss, when the Nazis banned all performances of Karl Goldmark's music due to his Jewish background.¹⁵ After the war, many of Goldmark's works were revived, and his prolific output continues to offer opportunities for revitalization and discovery.

Goldmark's memoirs shed further light on his music; they were posthumously published in the 1920s and offer fascinating firsthand accounts from his lifetime; one can sense that *The Queen of Sheba* was a deeply personal triumph for Goldmark.¹⁶ The *Suite* celebrates Goldmark's artistry, offering both performers and listeners a profound, evocative, and transporative experience.

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2. Karl Goldmark, *Notes from the Life of a Viennese Composer*, trans. by Alice Goldmark Brandeis (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1927), 207.
3. Alfred Loewenberg, *Annals of Opera, 1597–1940*, 3rd ed. (London: John Calder, 1978), 1045-46; Goldmark, *Notes from the Life*, 261-262.
4. Goldmark, *Notes from the Life*, 19, 21.
5. Goldmark, *Notes from the Life*, p. 32, 44-45; Paul David, "Boehm, Joseph," in *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. George Grove (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1878), 1:254.
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7. Ferenc János Szabó, *Carl Goldmark on Early Recordings. Discography of the 78 rpm recordings of Goldmark's compositions* (Online publication on the homepage of the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music, Institute for Musicology RCH HAS, Version 2, 2018), 1.
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10. Mark Bailey, "Replication, Anachronism, and Inspired Information: The Use and Misuse of Mechanically-Produced Recordings as Performance Practice Resources for Operatic Singing" (paper presented at the Mechanical Recording Workshop: Operatic voice study, University of Surrey, Guildford, England, July 18, 2024).
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12. Goldmark, *Notes from the Life*, 208-209.
13. Salomon Hermann Mosenthal, *The Queen of Sheba*, music by Karl Goldmark, trans. by uncredited translator (New York: Metropolitan Opera House, 1885).
14. David Brodbeck, Tihamér Hlavacsek, and Balázs Mikusi, "Goldmark, Carl," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane L. Root, published online 2001, updated August 23, 2022, accessed October 29, 2025, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000011384.>; Wiener Staatsoper, "Performance Record for Karl Goldmark" Archiv der Wiener Staatsoper, accessed October 29, 2025, <https://archiv.wiener-staatsoper.at/search/person/8438>.
15. Michael Haas, *Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 59.
16. Goldmark, *Notes from the Life*, 92, 158, 187, 205-250.

LISTENING TO GOLDMARK'S CONTEMPORARIES

WRITTEN BY KEVIN SHERWIN

The present-day efforts to revitalize Goldmark's music benefit greatly from the inspiration of hearing early sound recordings from the composer's lifetime. The first decade of the 1900s saw many renowned operatic voices from *The Queen of Sheba* record in Vienna for The Gramophone Company, offering listeners and today's performers a window into the soundscapes and expressive approaches of Goldmark's contemporaries.¹

In a 1905 recording of tenor Leo Slezak singing "Dem König Heil" from Act I, both soloist and orchestra buoyantly over-dot the dotted quarter-eighth note figures to match the regal setting.² For the contrasting triplet theme, they perform with a fluid rhythmic treatment of the melody, gently speeding up and slowing down to reflect the excitement, relaxation, and rhetoric of the phrases. The same year, he also recorded the aria "Aus klaren Fluten steigt," where he sings with nuanced tempo changes for each phrase, so as to evoke the individual meaning for each image presented in the text.³ Slezak frequently starred as Assad in *The Queen of Sheba* while Goldmark was still active, performing the role over 40 times at the Vienna Opera from 1904 to 1928.⁴

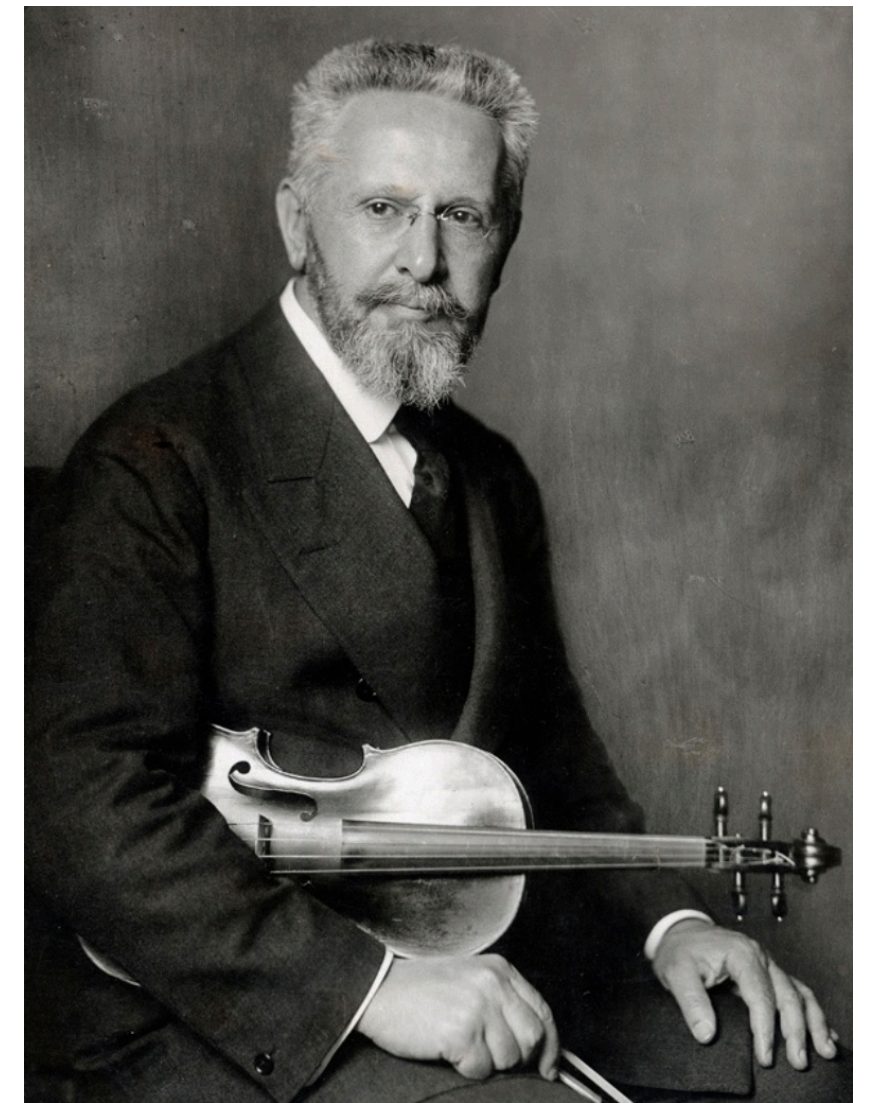


Grete Forst in *The Queen of Sheba*

Another Viennese recording features soprano Grete Forst as Astaroth singing the unaccompanied *Lockruf* in 1907.⁵ Forst's radiant soprano voice embraces the line's intricate chromatic shifts, frequently leaning in for emphasis when a phrase changes mode, resulting in ascending augmented fourths or descending augmented seconds. She treats the sixteenth notes with an ornamental, chant-like grace, sometimes speeding up, and other times lengthening pivotal notes for expressive effect. The freedom of pulse is encouraged by Goldmark's marking *Mit freiem Vortrag*

("With free interpretation"), and Forst's expressive choices evoke the scene's dramatic context, luring Assad to a moonlit garden.

As well, violinist Arnold Rosé made notable recordings of the first and second movements from Goldmark's Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 28. Rosé was renowned as the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic and Vienna Court Opera for over 50 years, and in 1881, he performed Goldmark's Violin Concerto as soloist with the Philharmonic.⁶ In the first movement, recorded



Arnold Rosé

in 1910, Rosé embraces a sense of forward momentum, highlighting the movement's underlying urgency with subtle accelerandos that carry the melody from one phrase to the next. In the second movement, recorded in 1909, Rosé plays with an expressive warmth while treating the opening theme as over-dotted sixteenth notes. He creates contrast in the second section with a more declamatory style, and at various points pushes and eases the tempo to reflect the excitement and relaxation of the phrases. Throughout both movements, Rosé plays with an upward and downward portamento. During rapid runs, these left-hand slides create an almost liquid sense of legato. In slower melodies, the portamentos coordinate with Rosé's rubato, often stretching the tempo to bring out the dramatic, yearning effect of the movement.

One of Goldmark's most frequently recorded pieces is the tenor aria, "Magische Töne" from Act II, which was an audience favorite in the early 1900s. A fascinating stylistic comparison exists between leading artist Enrico Caruso's 1909 recording of the aria in Italian⁷ and the 1905 rendition by tenor Leo Slezak,⁸ who, as mentioned,

was a regular performer of the role in Vienna. The two artists immediately differ in their approach to the gentle opening melody: Slezak adopts a slightly faster tempo, highlighting the arc of each two-bar phrase and the rising or falling energy as one phrase succeeds the next. In contrast, Caruso employs a slower pace, choosing to linger on the sound and color of each syllable. Throughout the aria, both vocalists employ ample portamento, not only to fill in large intervals but also occasionally to create an expressive bridge between seconds and thirds. They each use portamento with their own individual style: Caruso's portamento tends to be more varied in speed and dynamics, whereas Slezak's is often more sustained throughout the vocal slide.

For the aria's middle section, both artists take a slightly faster tempo, which is not explicitly indicated in the score, but helps to convey greater urgency and longing. Caruso treats the syllabic eighth notes with significant rhythmic freedom, holding many of the strong syllables in the Italian translation that he sings. Slezak also treats the eighth notes flexibly, but less so than Caruso. For the culmination of this section, Caruso holds the high A in full voice, creating a sudden, high-energy climax that sets up a contrast with the phrase's ending. In comparison, Slezak sings the high A in falsetto, holding



Leo Slezak

the fermata with a gentle, narrow vibrato, following Goldmark's marking "sehr zart und leicht" ("Very delicate and light"). Slezak continues this gentle approach in the last section of the aria, where he maintains a delicate character throughout the final two phrases. In the same section, Caruso infuses a fuller, more vigorous sound into the measures that

start the final phrase. For Caruso, this sets up a striking contrast with the last two measures, which are marked *pp* and *ppp*. By these last bars, both singers culminate the series of ascending intervals with a soft, shimmering falsetto on the high notes. While Slezak and Caruso both bring "Magische Töne" to a close with this tender effect, their distinct approaches throughout the aria to tempo, portamento, and phrasing reveal their individual styles.

Such a comparative analysis, which is one of many that can be made, illuminates how different musicians expressed their individuality through the Romantic-era performance styles of Goldmark's lifetime.

Outside of Vienna, Goldmark's music was recorded in New York, London, Budapest, Prague, and other cities throughout the early 1900s. Leading ensembles such as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Boston Pops Orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic, and others recorded his music. As well, soloists such as Jascha Heifetz, Erika Morini, and Stefi Geyer were featured on releases during this period.⁹ The numerous musicians who performed Goldmark's music on disc in the early 1900s drew from common expressive idioms but rendered these techniques differently from one another. In this way, the study of Romantic-era performance styles can energize the reimagining of Goldmark's music today, with all of its inherent possibilities for expression.



Enrico Caruso

1. Ferenc János Szabó, *Carl Goldmark on Early Recordings. Discography of the 78 rpm recordings of Goldmark's compositions* (Online publication on the homepage of the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music, Institute for Musicology RCH HAS, Version 2, 2018), 1.
2. Leo Slezak, "Dem König Heil" (Act 1, Scene 4) from Karl Goldmark's *Die Königin von Saba*, accompanied by orchestra, recorded April 1905, Vienna, Gramophone Company 6840b, 10-inch 78 rpm disc, G.C.-3-42346 (matrix no. ER127).
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4. Wiener Staatsoper, "Performance Record for Leo Slezak in *Die Königin von Saba*," Archiv der Wiener Staatsoper, accessed October 29, 2025, <https://archiv.wiener-staatsoper.at/search/person/5920/work/695>.
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8. Leo Slezak, "Magische Töne" (Act 2, Scene 3) from Karl Goldmark's *Die Königin von Saba*, piano accompaniment, recorded April 1905, Vienna, Gramophone Company 6837b, 10-inch 78 rpm disc, G.C.-3-42419.
9. Szabó, *Goldmark on Early Recordings*, 26–27.

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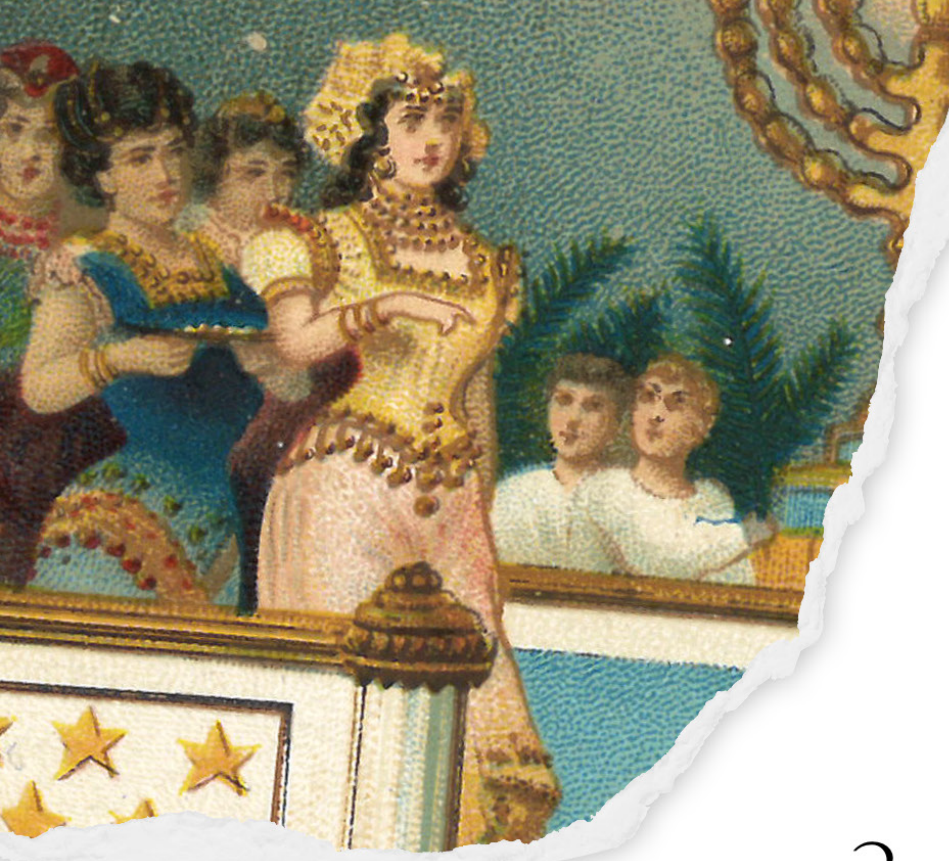
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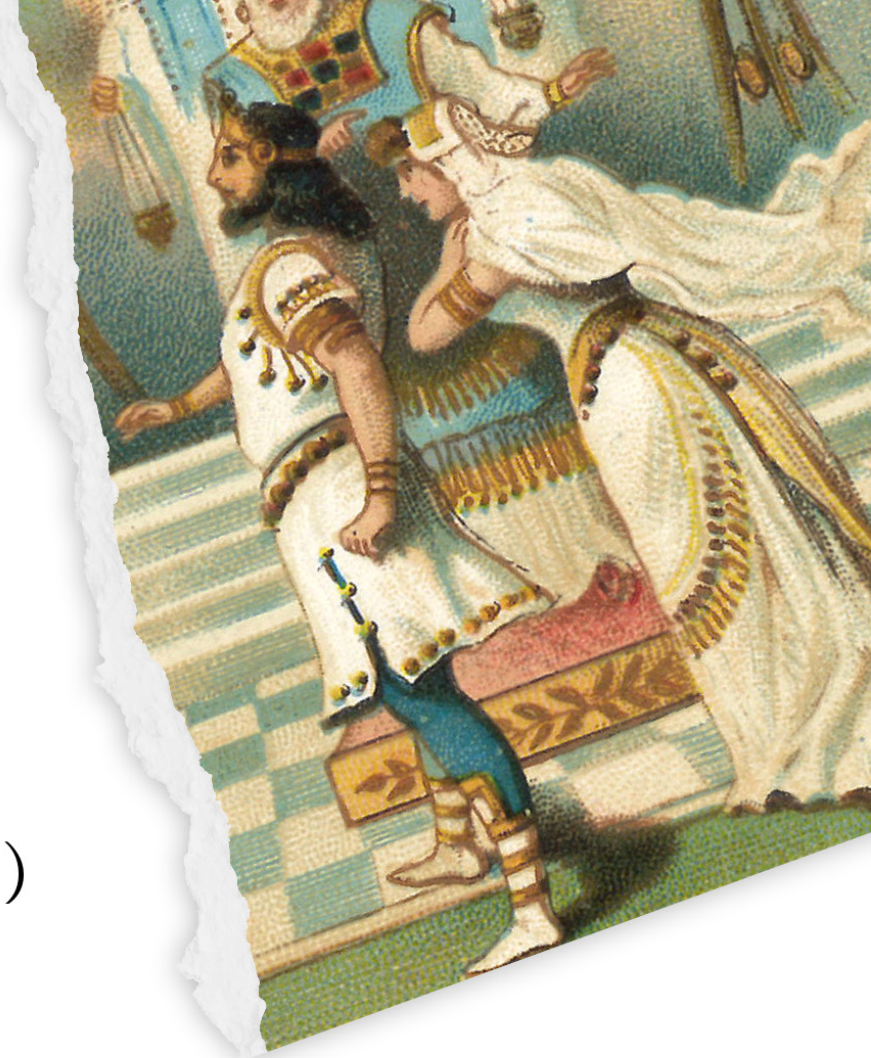
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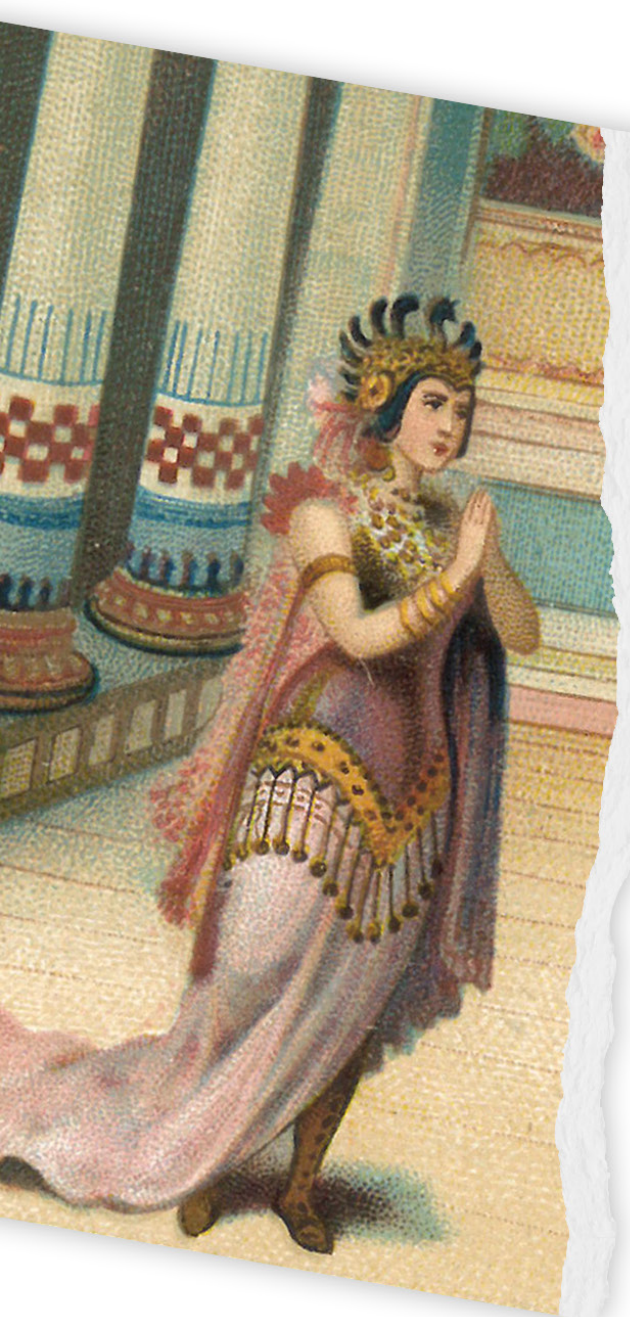
SPECIAL THANKS TO SZABÓ FERENC JÁNOS, RESEARCH FELLOW
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THE QUEEN OF SHEBA SUITE KARL GOLDMARK (1830-1915)



1. BALLET 1 (ACT I)
2. ARIA, "AUS KLAREN FLUTHEN STEIGT" (ACT I)
3. FESTAL MUSIC (ACT II)
4. LOCKRUF & ARIA, "MAGISCHE TÖNE" (ACT II)
ABIGAIL LEIDY, CELLO SOLOIST
RAFAEL MÉNDEZ, FLUTE SOLOIST
5. BALLET 2 (ACT III)
6. CHORUS, "EWIG, EWIG" (ACT II)
7. CHORUS, "DER FREUND IST DEIN" (ACT IV)



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