



ZHOU LONG FIRST CAME TO BOSTON in 1990 for the city's first concert of music by the new generation of composers who came to study in America after the end of the Cultural Revolution in China. Several of the composers represented on that Jordan Hall program have become leading international figures in the last 20 years, including Bright Sheng, Tan Dun, Zhou Long, and his wife, Chen Yi.

Now Zhou Long is back for the world premiere performances of his opera *Madame White Snake*, commissioned by Opera Boston; Zhou's opera then travels to the Beijing Music Festival in the fall.

(The performances are in the Cutler Majestic Theater Friday February 26 at 7:30 PM, Sunday, February 28 at 3 PM, and Tuesday, March 2 at 7:30 PM.)

Zhou's background is even more dramatic than the libretto by Cerise Lim Jacobs that he set in his opera. He was born into an artistic family in Beijing in 1953. His mother was a soprano and a voice teacher, so Zhou grew up to the sound of the standard Italian opera arias, and they stand behind the many arias and duets in *Madame*

White Snake. He is not abashed to say that Puccini is one of his favorite composers – a preference one cannot imagine that most of his contemporaries share. His father was a painter, and the screensaver on Zhou's cell phone reproduces a charming painting Zhou's father made of him as a child.

Zhou had a relatively conventional artistic childhood full of music; he took piano lessons. But in 1969, when he was 16, the Cultural Revolution began, and everything changed.

“The schools were closed, and I was sent to work in a steel factory, working with the heavy rollers,” Zhou recalls. “I did that for the three years I should have been in middle school, and then I was sent to work on a state farm in the far northeastern province of China, not far from the Russian border. It was often very cold, 30 degrees below zero, and before we could do anything else, we had to build our own housing. I drove a tractor for five years, and we grew wheat, beans, and soy beans. We were lucky on the state farm, because it had machines – other farms had no machines at all.”

Zhou still has a strong build and handles suitcases with the strength of an ox.

He had to give up the piano, but transferred his keyboard skills to the accordion; he could entertain himself and others with that instrument, although what he could play was limited – all Western music, even traditional Chinese music, was banned, and a friend on the state farm got into serious trouble because he listened to Chinese folk music on a Russian radio station.

After five years, Zhou injured his back carrying a heavy gag of beans. There were no doctors, so he was sent to Beijing for treatment. There he worked privately with composers who had been left without a job by the Cultural Revolution; with their help, and his own diligence, he mastered the traditional techniques of theory, harmony and counterpoint – at one point he was writing fugues with 8 voices.

He was living outside of Beijing because he was not allowed to reside in the city itself; there, in that relatively small community, he started working for a city-owned cultural troupe, playing the accordion and making arrangements of official propaganda music. Zhou found this experience very useful; this laid some of the groundwork for what ultimately became his professional career. “I learned to be a creator,” he says, quietly.

After three years there, the Cultural Revolution came to an end; Zhou heard the news on a train. There more than 1000 applicants for the first 33 places at the newly-reopened Beijing Conservatory, and

Zhou was accepted. It was at the Conservatory that he met a young violinist and aspiring composer Chen Yi, whom he married after graduation. “No students were allowed to get married,” he says, with a smile. “It was thought that marriage would distract you from your studies.”

It was also in Beijing that Zhou had what he calls the “eye-opening” experience of discovering the work of such contemporary American composers as Elliott Carter, Milton Babbitt and George Crumb.

Chen Yi was younger, so he had to wait two years after completing his own studies before he could marry, so he worked for the Beijing radio orchestra until he and his wife could come to America to work towards their PhDs at Columbia University in 1985.

Since completing his degree Zhou has enjoyed a busy and prestigious career as a composer and educator, writing a ballet, orchestra pieces, and a wide variety of chamber works, all representing a highly personal synthesis of Eastern and Western influences. He currently teaches at the University of Missouri/Kansas City Conservatory of Music and has served as composer-in-residence at the Cleveland Institute of Music and with Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Project at the Seattle Symphony.

Boston’s indefatigable Cathy Chan, founder of the Chinese Performing Arts Association, arranged for that Jordan Hall concert by young Chinese composers in 1990, and 2006, it was she who sent Zhou an email to tell him that Cerise Lim Jacobs,

a retired Boston trial lawyer, was writing the libretto for a potential opera based on the legend of Madame White Snake and looking for a composer to work with.

In this process Jacobs, and her husband Charles M. Jacobs, explored the music of many living composers and interviewed many of them before settling on Zhou.

“This was difficult,” Crise Lim Jacobs says, “because we are not trained professional musicians. We are the quintessential audience members – we love music and very often go out to attend four or five performances a week. We also travel around the world to see operatic productions that are particularly interesting to us. I listened to Zhou Long’s music. I found it amazingly complex, yet at the same time so simple and direct. He told me had been asked to compose other operas, but never felt it was the right fit. But when he read my libretto, he said, ‘I can hear the music.’ And then he went on and described the music he hadn’t written down yet, and I felt we shared the same vision about what the piece should feel like. I knew at that point that he was the one.”

“It has always been my dream to compose an opera,” Zhou says. “We had recordings of Western opera in our house, and I heard my mother sing and teach from my earliest childhood. Melody is of primary importance to me. That’s one of the reasons I like Puccini so much, or Tchaikovsky’s *Eugen Onegin* or Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*. These are operas about common people, deep dramas about

otherwise ordinary. I never wanted to write a political opera, or a heroic opera.”

That is why the *Madame White Snake* project felt right to Zhou. “I don’t remember when I didn’t know the story; it is a powerful legend, and everybody in China knows it from books and movies and television and Chinese opera versions; there is even a modern opera based on the story written by a composer in Taiwan. I found that Crise’s words are very elegant and very beautiful – and very emotional. And the story is so pure, and so earthy.”

Opera Boston came into the picture about the same time, and sponsored three different private workshops of the work-in-progress. “I found this very, very useful,” Zhou says. “I wanted to collect all the comments, even the negative ones, because I knew I could benefit from them – it is better to hear these things early on rather than later, when it is too late to do anything about them. I made a lot of adjustments because of these workshops. I had a lot of lessons to learn about theater, about collaboration, about drama, about compromise. But there were also many things I didn’t want to change. I wanted the music to reflect the emotional complexity of the story – but also always to keep the audience in mind.”

After I wrote the lyrical sections,” Zhou confesses, “I would ask my wife, Chen Yi, ‘Is this too sweet?’ That’s because I wanted the music to be challenging and complex as well. There is nothing wrong with either side of this question, but I wanted to balance both of them.”

Certainly there is no shortage of the traditional excitements of opera – exciting high notes, startling low notes, dramatic leaps and changes of register; about the only characteristic of Western opera singing Zhou has no use for is pitch-obscuring vibrato. “What I love is the beauty of the human voice,” Zhou says. He has also found new ways to use the *Sprechstimme*, that unusual balance between speaking and singing developed by Alban Berg in *Wozzeck*.

One unusual feature of Zhou’s compositional process is that he felt he needed to sing every single note as he worked. “I have no voice,” he admits, “and I cannot sing loud, so it was all very frustrating, but I had to sing out to make sure that the vocal part develops the drama, so that every line is musically motivated. I didn’t let myself touch the keyboard.”

Another characteristic of the music is that Zhou avoids harmonic resolution. “Always the cadences are open because this is a big opera, questioning, always questioning. Even at the close of the individual acts I end up in the air – this surprised even me, because that is unusual in opera. The vocal lines modulate through many keys, and the rhythms, too are complicated, nervous, intense. In this story the rhythm cannot be square; it must coil and strike like a serpent.”

Over the course of its development, the opera changed a lot – originally it was going to be a short chamber-opera, perhaps half an evening, but it grew to a full-length piece. Many questions of dramatic structure

arose – Zhou felt he needed more aria texts to develop the characters, for example. And the structure continued to evolve once director Robert Woodruff entered the picture.

For example, Cerise Lim Jacobs wanted a prologue to introduce the main facts of the story to a Western audience; this freed her to concentrate her text on the emotional situations later on. But everyone felt that at 20 minutes, the prologue was too long, and part of it wound up as the final scene of the opera.

The whole question of balancing Chinese and Western elements naturally concerned the composer. “At one point we had thought of using a Peking opera actor to play the Green Snake and deliver the prologue. But we couldn’t find one who read Western music or who could sing in a Western opera tessitura – or who could sing in English,” Zhou explains. “What we did keep was the Chinese tradition of a man singing a female character, which is parallel to the Western tradition of female singers singing male roles. So I wrote the role of the Green Snake for a male soprano, Michael Maniaci.”

Zhou uses a Western orchestra, augmented by three Chinese melodic instruments – the bamboo flute, the clay flute, and the cello-like er-hu; there are also some traditional Chinese percussion instruments, gongs, drums and blocks. “There are four percussion instruments in Beijing opera,” Zhou says. “But I deliberately decided not to use all of them. I

also didn't want to quote folk tunes or to use vocal lines like those in Beijing opera."

The adult chorus was present in Cerise Lim Jacobs's libretto; adding the children's chorus was Zhou's idea. The libretto was built around the four seasons; Zhou had already written four choruses on seasonal themes on texts from ancient Chinese choruses and decided to add them as an introduction to each individual scene.

Zhou believes the internet has changed our world. "We live in one world, no gaps. Nevertheless cultures are still plural; art is what can bridge them. I want the Chinese elements of this opera to melt into the Western elements to create something fresh and meaningful."

- *Richard Dyer*