

Madame White Snake



The ancient story of Madame White Snake is one of the most popular in Chinese culture; it has been called “the Chinese *Romeo and Juliet*.”

That comparison would never have been made when the story was first told – for one thing Shakespeare hadn’t written *Romeo and Juliet*. More to the point, in its earlier forms the story of Bai Suzhen, Madame White Snake, was very different from the story that is now a perennial subject for films, television miniseries, children’s books, ballets, stage musicals, and Chinese operas.

In the beginning, the story of Bai Suzhen was most likely a cautionary tale for children and perhaps for philandering husbands. Bai Suzhen was an evil snake who took on human and highly sexual female form to lure men to their doom; anyone who got involved with her found out, too late, how very dangerous she was. In these versions of the story, Bai Suzhen was analogous to all the fatal temptresses in Western literature from Homer through the Renaissance epic romances into the 19th century novel.

However, in the Ming dynasty – from the middle of the 14th century through the middle of the 17th century – the story began to take various written forms, and its shape began to change.

Bai Suzhen became a more sympathetic figure, a serpent who desperately wanted to become human so that she could experience love and learn its power. In most versions of the tale, this proved impossible, so she became a tragic and romantic figure.

The character of her principal adversary, the Abbot, therefore necessarily changed. A good and holy man who saw the white snake for what she was evolved into a hostile figure bent on destroying a love he had no ability to understand.

Cerise Lim Jacobs, the librettist and creator of Zhou Long’s new opera, was attracted to both versions of the story, and to the ambiguities which develop when you combine elements from both. She had known the stories about Madame White Snake from childhood, and in 2005, after retiring from a long career as a trial lawyer, she began writing a libretto – first for a song-cycle, perhaps, then for a short music-theater piece, ultimately for a full-length opera. (She and her husband love opera and have travelled the world to experience important productions).

She decided not to use any source material, least of all the immensely Chinese and Japanese romantic films produced by the Shaw Brothers that she had adored as a child. Instead she

wrote from what she remembered from the various versions of the story that she knew, and from the feelings the story awakened in her.

A year later she began searching for a composer to set it. Zhou Long was a member of that great group of composers from China who came to America in the late 1980s, after the end of the Cultural Revolution; among his colleagues were Tan Dun, Bright Sheng and Chen Yi, who became his wife. Once Cerise Lim Jacobs heard Zhou Long's music, she made her choice, and with Zhou Long in the picture, the opera evolved again; when he needed additional text to flesh out a musical episode or develop a character, she supplied it. The opera continued to evolve when Opera Boston and director Robert Woodruff joined the team; Opera Boston sponsored workshops of the piece as a work-in-progress, and is now presenting *Madame White Snake* as its first commission.

Many aspects of the opera will be familiar. The plot parallels that of Dvorak's water-nymph opera *Russalka* and Hans Werner Henze's ballet *Ondine* so memorably choreographed by Frederick Ashton for Margot Fonteyn and the Royal Ballet. For that matter, it has affinities with Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. The device of the question the lover must not ask Madame White Snake will remind long time opera goers of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, in which Elsa must not ask her knight what his name is.

Musically too, elements of the opera will help the listener feel at home – there are tunes and melodies; there are high notes galore, and low notes too – the Abbot rivals Sarastro in *The Magic Flute* and Baron Ochs in *Der Rosenkavalier* in that department. The

adult chorus has a prominent role. Like the chorus in a Greek play, it comments on the drama in progress, but it also participates in it, like the chorus in *Boris Godunov* and in *Porgy and Bess*. The creative team thinks of the chorus as reincarnated spirits who have lived through this story before and remember it; they are farther along on the journey to Nirvana.

Often the vocal line is squarely in the tradition of Western opera - Zhou Long's mother was a voice teacher, and the standard arias floated through the household all day when the composer was growing up. But the singers and the chorus in this opera also use speech, whispering, *Sprechstimme*, and a very unusual way of slithering away from pitches, or sliding off them. Most of all, Zhou Long refuses to let the expression of emotion ever become sentimental.

There is a prominent prologue, like the one in Benjamin Britten's opera *The Turn of the Screw*; a character, Xiao Qing, the green snake, Madame White Snake's servant and companion, relates the whole story to the audience from the outset, thereby allowing the opera itself, and the audience, to examine individual stages of the story more closely and from more complex points of view. Cerise Lim Jacobs has said she was not interested in telling the story like a movie; she wanted to explore the human dilemmas faced by the characters. The prologue presented her and Zhou Long with the opportunity to tell the story right away to an American audience that would not be familiar with it so that they could concentrate afterwards on the reverberations of the story.

Structurally the opera falls into four acts, preceded by the prologue, and followed by an epilogue that lifts the

story into an allegorical dimension and stretches it to cosmic dimensions. But these dimensions have been implicit all along: each of the four acts, or principal episodes, is associated with a different season of the year and each is preceded by an a cappella chorus of children singing Zhou Long's settings of English translations of Chinese poems from the 8th, 9th, and 11th centuries.

Like Wagner and Debussy in their different ways, Zhou Long avoids closed forms, moments of repose, closed cadences, or applause-getting climaxes; the harmonies do not come to rest, and the music offers a continuous ebb and flow. In contour and clarity the melodic line sometimes suggests the pentatonic patterns of traditional Chinese music, but Zhou Long melds these patterns with Western chromaticism. The rhythm, like the harmony, is always moving forward, and the rhythmic patterns are often complicated. "The rhythm could not be square," Zhou Long has said. "It must move like a serpent."

Some of *Madame White Snake* is gorgeous, like the sinuous awakening of Madame White Snake into womanhood at the beginning of Act I, or the wonderful passage in the last act when Madame White Snake, pregnant, moves in her scarlet bridal robes across the frozen White Lake holding a baby's charm anklet and singing a kind of chiming lullaby. But the music can also turn harsh and cruel, for the story incorporates that too.

There are many strange and wonderful things in the opera that lie

between these extremes. Zhou Long has expanded the coloristic palette of the orchestra by including Chinese percussion instruments and as well as the bamboo flute, the clay flute, and the erhu, a two-string instrument played with a bow.

Madame White Snake, Bai Suzhen, is a lyric soprano, her human lover, Xu Xian, is a tenor; the merciless Abbot is a bass-baritone. This is conventional, but Zhou Long has also expanded the coloristic palette of the vocal line by writing the part of Xiao Qing, the Green Snake, for male soprano, and especially for the unusual vocal gift of Michael Maniaci. The first thought was to find a male Chinese performer trained in the traditional Beijing Opera art of portraying women. (The most famous modern exemplar of this art was Mei Lanfang, and one of his greatest roles was Madame White Snake.) But it proved impossible to find such a performer who could also read and sing Western music, and perform in English. The casting of a male soprano enabled the team to create the exotic, supernatural and Chinese traditional aura that they wanted.

Now this version of the haunting story of Madame White Snake has completed its five-year journey towards performance. In Boston, now, and during the Beijing Arts Festival next October, it embarks on the next stage of its development, a performance history.

- Richard Dyer