



Paradise Interrupted: The Substance Is the Score

By Fred Cohn, *MusicalAmerica.com*

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In 1998, Chinese authorities at the last minute canceled a tour of the 16th-century *kunqu* opera *The Peony Pavilion*, headed for the Lincoln Center Festival. The next year the festival, under the directorship of Nigel Redden, made up for the rebuke by producing its own acclaimed version of the opera, also 20 hours long, directed by Chen Shi-Zeng and featuring the young *kunqu* star Qian Yi.

Paradise Interrupted, which opened Wednesday night at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater as part of the Lincoln Center Festival, represents in a sense a return by Redden to his earlier, 1999 triumph.

Paradise, which premiered in 2015 at the Spoleto Festival (of which Redden is also director), is only 80-minutes long, but it unfolds along the dimensions of the 20-hour *Peony Pavilion* and incorporates plot elements from the *kunqu* classic. Moreover, it was conceived as a vehicle for Qian in the work's dominant role, called simply "the Woman."

Composer Huang Ruo and designer/director Jennifer Wen Ma have labeled *Paradise Interrupted* "an installation opera," as if implicitly warning us not to expect traditional narrative-driven music theater. Rightly so, since its plot, mixing *Peony Pavilion* elements with the Garden of Eden story, is all but unintelligible. The libretto, by Ma, Huang, Qian, and Ji Chao, written entirely in poetic abstractions, chronicles a woman's journey into an Edenic paradise and out again, but even after reading a synopsis, I can hardly be certain about what I witnessed.

The work makes more sense as ritual than drama. Ma's settings, consisting of projections and paper cutouts, ask us to abandon left-brain analysis and immerse ourselves in near-abstract dreamscapes. The designer was responsible for visual and special effects at the eye-popping opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics; her work here, while obviously on a smaller scale, has some of the same visceral impact. The black forest of the work's "paradise" has an animal-like furriness; when night falls, starbursts on the projection screen pulsate in response to the music. The most stunning effect is the last, when Qian, having abandoned her traditional costume for an Art Deco gown, starts ascending skyward, her legs, hidden by the skirt of her gown, seemingly stretching to infinity.

Huang's score has an incantatory effect. If I have a complaint about the "installation" label, it's that it sells the composer's effort short: *Paradise Interrupted* is no mere accompaniment to a primarily visual phenomenon, but a significant piece of music in its own right. The Chinese-born composer, now based in America, is known for mixing Western and Eastern idioms, as in his 2011 opera *Dr. Sun Yat-sen*. Here, Eastern elements predominate, especially in the vocal line for the Woman. Still, Western musical gestures, arising from the pit and from the throats of four male opera singers, helped these occidental ears make sense of the score's shape. When the Woman joins her imagined lover (here, the mellifluous tenor Yi Li) in a duet, the contrast between their vocal styles and musical languages underlines the impossibility of their liaison: this is a romance that could only take place in a dream.

Qian sang in an astringent soprano, with a slow oscillation on sustained notes—not easy to listen to, but presumably idiomatic. In accordance with *kunqu* tradition, the role is as much danced as sung, and Qian moved beautifully, with bourrées that would do credit to a Mariinsky ballerina. Every gesture was exact and significant: this was clearly the work of a diva.

The four male singers who surround her, wearing priestly garb—Yi, countertenor John Holiday, baritone Joo Won Kang and bass-baritone Ao Li—all sang with absolute firmness of tone, and their voices blended unerringly. (Holiday's clarion brilliance remains an astonishment each time I encounter him.) Under the direction of Wen-Pin Chien, the 14-piece Ensemble FIRE, combining Western instruments with the dizi, the sheng and the pipa, made strange, intriguing sounds. Omnipresent amplification gave the proceedings an aural glare, but that could be the composer's intention.

Pictured: Yi Li and Qian Yi

Photo by Stephanie Berger

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