

MUSIC

Review: A Powerful Opera of Eastern and Western Allure

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI JULY 14, 2016

The engrossing chamber opera “Paradise Interrupted” could easily have ended up a clichéd, cross-cultural mess. Opera has long been an art form that draws together music, poetry, theater, dance and other genres. But few works mingle different elements so ambitiously as “Paradise Interrupted,” first performed at the Spoleto Festival USA last year. This production, at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater, was one of two works that opened the Lincoln Center Festival on Wednesday.

That this 80-minute opera proved so alluring and powerful is due largely to the inventive and personal music of its composer, Huang Ruo. The work was conceived by the director and visual designer Jennifer Wen Ma, who won international attention for her central role in creating the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics. The opera’s libretto fuses contrasting stories: the biblical tale of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and a story line from the Chinese kunqu drama “The Peony Pavilion,” a multipart, 19-hour epic. That sequence recounts the emotional journey of a woman who awakes from a dream of an idealized romance. The libretto combines Mandarin, modified Mandarin and invented words and sounds.

At the start of his participation in this project, Mr. Huang, 39, who was born in

China, trained in the United States and teaches at the Mannes College the New School for Music, decided to combine aspects of Chinese classical opera with Western contemporary idioms. Leaving nothing to chance, he took control of every note and gesture in this music, using his instincts and intelligence to write an integrated, richly detailed score. And, in the long tradition of composers tailoring operas to the talents of a prima donna, Mr. Huang wrote the main role of “Paradise Interrupted,” the Woman, for the Chinese singer Qian Yi, renowned for starring in “The Peony Pavilion.” Ms. Qian even contributed to the libretto.

In Scene 1, the Woman, in a glistening white robe, is in the midst of a rapturous dream. “I yield, coyly, trembling, whimpering,” she sings to an imagined lover. She continues, “Our souls dare to writhe like the rain and the clouds as one.” The music at first is spare and eerie, just hushed, high-pitched tones, sounds of chimes and hints of gurgling lower strings. Ms. Qian’s captivating singing combines the trembling, nasal-toned quality of Chinese opera with the more penetrating richness of Western classical styles. The setting at first is beautifully monochromatic, with blank white panels and flickering video images projected behind Ms. Qian.

The Woman rustles awake, distressed by the barrenness of the reality she encounters. The opera becomes the story of her journey to regain the perfection of her imagined love affair. The Wind calls her to a gate, which opens onto a strangely lush garden. Thin black strings thicken magically into the branches of a tree. Hundreds of rumpled sheets of paper assemble into rows of leafy black bushes, at once inviting and ominous.

The Woman encounters four male singers portraying the Elements: the bass-baritone Ao Li; the baritone Joo Won Kang, the tenor Yi Li; and the countertenor John Holiday, an exceptional vocalist with a strong voice, even in its highest range. The Woman sings mostly in long-spun lyrical phrases, with stretches of quasi-spoken dialogue.

The Elements intone chantlike harmonies, and in the most inspired moments, the male quartet performs complex, pungent passages, with crisscrossing strands of dense yet lucid counterpoint. But even when the Elements are sternly chanting, the orchestra is abuzz with restless instruments and fidgety riffs. While Mr. Huang

draws on Chinese sonorities, he folds them into his own feisty modernist voice, with whole passages of pulsing dance music.

The fantastical adventures on the Woman's journey soon come to a crisis point, when, alone in the garden, she panics, realizing that beauty fades, including her own. She is left "counting and swatting fireflies," her shadow her "sole companion." Video images of darting lights suggest the fireflies buzzing about the disconsolate Woman.

During an agitated third scene, the Woman is visited by a lover, leading to an intense duet in which wolf spirits appear and she gives in to animalistic passion. By the end, having come to her senses, she lets go of the illusion of the garden and frees herself from the imprisonment of desire.

The conductor, Wen-Pin Chien, draws colorful, delicate and lithe playing from the excellent Ensemble FIRE, with traditional Chinese instruments mixed into the scoring. Working with the choreographer Gwen Welliver, Ms. Qian enriched her portrayal of the Woman with elegant gestures that subtly combined stylized Chinese movements with naturalistic acting. And vocally, she was superb.

"Paradise Interrupted" runs through Saturday at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College, 524 West 59th Street, Manhattan; 212-721-6500, lincolncenter.org.

A version of this review appears in print on July 15, 2016, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Sounds From Secret Gardens.