

Special Delivery From the Spirit World

Thanks to ghosts and talking birds, Tan Dun's new opera is finally taking shape.

By **ROBERT LIPSYTE**
and **LOIS B. MORRIS**

IN mid-May, a Federal Express package containing three copies of a 226-page musical manuscript thumped on the desk of Sarah Billinghamurst, the assistant manager for artistic affairs at the Metropolitan Opera. It was sent by Tan Dun, the Chinese-born avant-garde composer whom the Met had commissioned eight years ago to write an opera. Seeing the half score, Ms. Billinghamurst said she felt "ecstatically happy."

"Relieved" might have been appropriate, too. The project was controversial from the beginning, with the selection of a composer identified with the downtown New York art scene, who also makes videos and art installations and designs some of his own instruments. Mr. Tan is also a globe-trotting conductor, and his friends and associates had been wondering if, with all his other commitments, he had actually written a single note of the work. But now there was concrete evidence of progress. It was on track.

Mr. Tan says he had no sooner sent out this first half of the score than he began faxing changes. It is a process, he says that will continue as he writes the second half, due at the end of this year, and perhaps right up to the night of Dec. 21, 2006, when Plácido Domingo will march out onstage in the title role of "The First Emperor."

It will be, Mr. Tan promises, invoking



Qilai Shen

The composer Tan Dun was one of his art installations which opened in April at a gallery in Shanghai.

his favorite word, "fantastic."

One thing is certain: it will be unlike anything that has ever been seen or heard on the Metropolitan Opera stage — and will contain sounds that many have never before realized could be music. If this ambitious

and experimental project succeeds, it could widen the possibilities of opera as a whole, expanding its entire future. It may also allow the Met, an august institution with an aging fan base, to expand its own future by reach-

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An Opera, Special Delivery From the



the Spirit World

Tan Dun's intellectual restlessness has led him into other mediums. For "Tan Dun Visual Music 2005," left and below, he used old piano parts.

pans. And he started performing prerevolutionary ghost operas, despite their official disfavor, for rural audiences.

His big break was worthy of an opera plot. A touring Beijing opera troupe drowned in a boating accident, and Mr. Tan was recruited as a replacement string player and arranger; he thrived as a professional, if self-taught, musician.

In 1977, a year after Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Tan was admitted as a composition student to the newly reopened Central Conservatory in Beijing. There he joined a remarkable group of gifted young Chinese composers who would ultimately settle in America, including Chen Yi and Zhou Long.

Mr. Tan came to New York in 1986 and entered Columbia University, earning his doctorate in musical arts seven years later. He quickly made an international name for the chamber work "Ghost Opera," which he composed for the Kronos Quartet; the operas "Peony Pavilion," directed by Peter Sellars, and "Marco Polo," an opera within an opera that had its premiere at the Munich Biennial in 1996; "The Map: Concerto for Cello, Video, and Orchestra"; and others.

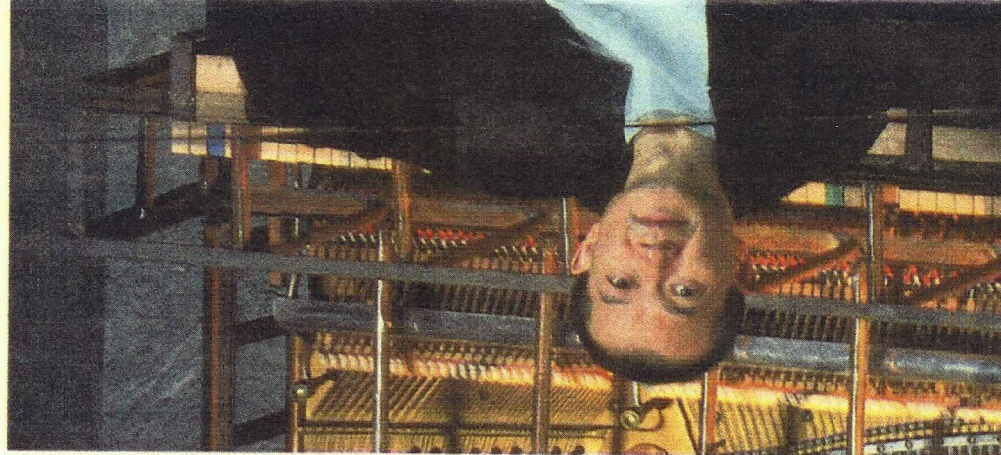
Mr. Tan's approach has brought him both standing ovations and disparaging reviews. A critic at The Independent of London described his work as "the rampant plagiarism of a cultural kleptomaniac let loose among the World Music racks at his local record store."

Mr. Tan dismisses most such criticism. But one thing irritates him, he admits: being described as an East-West fusion composer. "My music is my own personal statement," he said in his typical torrents of accented but fluent English. "I have patterns of orchestrations and expression that have been forming throughout my career. I take advantage of certain institutional tools — the orchestra, the operatic systems, Western and Chinese, and so on — to communicate my ideas. It's about human culture. Different races together make a more beautiful baby."

The mystery, at this stage, is what the baby will eventually look or sound like. Mr. Tan has not heard the score: he refuses to listen to a computer playback. There is no simplified piano version, either, because unlike most opera composers, he orchestrates the entire work first, extracting the vocal line later.

"I hear the entire orchestra in my head," he said last month in the Chelsea town house he shares with his wife, Jane Huang, and their two sons, Ian, 6, and Sean, born in March. Athletically trim, he is rarely still, offering Japanese tea and deli cookies, shaping words with his hands. It was a few days after he sent off the first half of "The First Emperor," and he kept jumping up to demonstrate new percussive sounds he intends to incorporate into the opening, like that of soldiers stomping and slapping their thighs.

"Opera will no longer be a Western form, as



As 'The First Emperor' evolves, the Met and a Chinese-born shaman composer-conductor become very important to each other's futures.

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ing out to a significant new audience. And the process of the opera's creation will shed light on the ideas and methods of one of the most uncommon composers at work today.

From the earliest days, many have wondered how Tan Dun and the Metropolitan Opera would fit together. Met insiders affectionately, even proudly, refer to their institution as rigid, as schedule-bound as a railroad. But Mr. Tan is an intellectually restless composer and innovator who says he works with the aid of spirits who send him notes on the score. He describes himself as a shaman, moving easily between the spirit and the visible worlds. He believes that water talks to birds that sing to him.

Both the Met and Mr. Tan are gambling that an apparent culture clash will create something that will appeal to the new, younger audiences that the Met craves without turning off the Puccini set or alienating the traditionalists who tend to be the Met's biggest patrons.

"All operas are risky," Ms. Billinghamurst said in December. "The Met can at some point pull the plug. But it won't come to that. We know when to be there to support, to push, to let him be. The composer is the genius. We're supportive in the range of what's realistic, what is best for the Met." And what is best for the Met, these days, seems to be the box-office power of big-name talent.

In the years since his commission was announced, Mr. Tan's own name has grown. He not only won the Grawemeyer Award, classical composition's most prestigious prize, for his opera "Marco Polo," but also went on to an Oscar and a Grammy for the score of the martial arts movie "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," which introduced him to new listeners who he says have followed him into his more serious work.

His co-librettist is another celebrated figure, Ha Jin, whose novels "War Trash" and "Waiting" have both won PEN/Faulkner Awards. (He submitted his libretto last year.)

The director is Zhang Yimou, whose recent film "Hero" has become the most popular ever made in China. Mr. Tan wrote the score for "Hero," which is set during the reign of the first Chinese emperor and which he envisioned as the opera's prequel.

Then, of course, there is Maestro Domingo, the superstar tenor, who will be a month shy of his 66th birthday on opening night. "I tell Plácido, I'm a tailor," said Mr. Tan, miming the placement of pins, the threading of needles. "Whether you're fat or thin, I'll make you beautiful, I will make your arias vocally beautiful."

And finally, the conductor. When the commission was first made, Ms. Billinghamurst explained, James Levine was expected to sign on. But that was before his new responsibilities at the Boston Symphony. Mr. Tan's second choice was himself. "For me, the composer is the live storyteller in the opera house," he said.

Late last year, Ms. Billinghamurst sounded adamant in discouraging that idea. "It is asking a lot to make your Met debut as both a composer and a conductor," she said. But by the time the first manuscript shipment arrived, those in charge had watched enough videotapes of Mr. Tan conducting his own operas to decide that the baton should be his. "He conducts his own work so well," Ms. Billinghamurst said.

Who else can instruct a percussionist how to click and clap stones, tear or shake paper? Mr. Tan's work often includes the sounds and sights of nature reproduced digitally, and video evocations of the spirit world. Water — splashed, poured, scattered through light — is often a dominant theme.

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Photographs by Qilai Shen

and a Chinese-born shaman important to each other's futures.

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fled to Shanghai in the 1930's and 1940's, another about Freud and dreams. The ultimate choice was the saga of Qin Shi Huangdi, the visionary and brutal warlord who unified China and proclaimed himself the country's first emperor in 221 B.C. The dynasty he founded was eventually brought down by rebels from Hunan — Mr. Tan's home province, he proudly notes.

As Mr. Tan, 47, describes it, he grew up in a truly fantastic world of enchanted phantoms. In the rural town where he lived with his grandmother until he was 7, intricate, mysterious, erotic Chinese ghost operas filled his ears and imagination. "I would tremble, but I loved it," he said. "Hunan is the home of philosophy, of yin and yang, of shamanistic culture. It has good feng shui. We are dreamers. Everything is spirit. Birds talk to water, water talks to flowers, flowers talk to stones. Everything communicates, even the next life and the last life."

His parents, meanwhile, were living in a city, his mother practicing medicine, and his father running a food research institute.

After the onset of the Cultural Revolution, in 1966, they were sent away to be "re-educated" as farmers. Mr. Tan himself was eventually ordered to the countryside, where he tended rice paddies while teaching himself music, singing revolutionary songs and operas and collecting folk music from the local peasants. At 17, he formed a ritual band to play his own arrangements at weddings and funerals using whatever instruments he could round up, even pots and

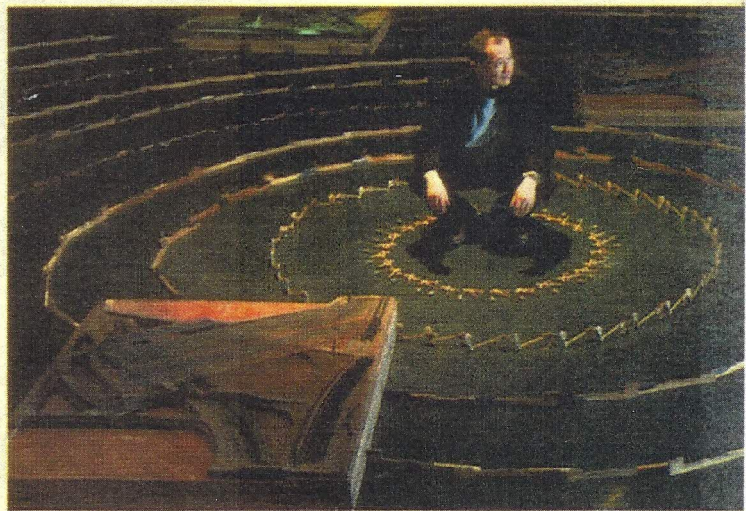
shamanic sense, there is no East or West, all is human. Plácido and Zhang Yimou are also shamans." Would this kind of spiritual power help him operate within the rigid powerhouse of the Met? Mr. Tan laughed easily. Being a shaman will help, he said, as will coming from Hunan, a province known for people with big egos and ambition, including Mao.

Not everyone is as optimistic. Not even Pierre Audi, the artistic director of the Netherlands Opera in Amsterdam, who directed Mr. Tan's most recent opera, "Tea: A Mirror of Soul." "Plácido in a Chinese costume with a film director who has no experience in modern opera and did one poor 'Turandot' is just not interesting," Mr. Audi said. (In 1998, Mr. Zhang staged "Turandot" in the Forbidden City.)

"I asked Tan Dun if there was an opera dying to come out," Mr. Audi continued. "'Tea' was an embryo. It excited me. It was difficult. The Met is the opposite. They need big names. They said, 'Get Tan Dun, then get a big director, get a big conductor, get big stars,' and then you get artificial insemination. Now will they make him write something more conventional and grandiose than what he is good at?"

Mr. Tan blithely dismisses the possibility that even the Met could crimp his artistic vision. Beyond the Hunan ego and the shaman's powers, he said, "Don't forget, I am a New York composer who once played the fiddle for money on the streets of New York."

While a student at Columbia, as he tells it, he competed with an aggressive violinist he knew only as Bob for a spot in front of a bank on Sheri-



dan Square — prized because there you could make \$60 in two hours. He stood his ground.

Years later, Mr. Tan passed the old spot, and Bob asked, "Where you playing now, man?"

"Lincoln Center," Mr. Tan answered. "Can you make money outside Lincoln Center?"

"I said to him, 'I don't know.'" In the retelling, Mr. Tan's face assumed an almost otherworldly serenity. "I said, 'I am inside.'"