The Met’s Way Out-of-Town Tryout

Tan Dun and Zhang Yimou: A Virtual Face-to-Face

主講人：作曲家/指揮家谭盾
'The First Emperor,' Tan Dun's high-stakes cross-cultural gamble, gets a live run-through at manageable Chinese prices.

By LOIS B. MORRIS and ROBERT LIPSYTE

SHANGHAI

THE first fitting of "The First Emperor's" new clothes was outsourced from New York to China last month in an unusual workshop for the most expensive and complex opera the Metropolitan Opera has ever commissioned.

Workshops for new operas are typically held with singers around a piano, and there were sessions like that last week at the Met. But "The First Emperor" is not typical. It is a bold and risky venture that could have an impact on the problematic futures of the Met and opera in America, and even on relations between China and the United States.

But first the composer, Tan Dun, who will also conduct "The First Emperor" when it opens at the Met on Dec. 21, had to hear what it sounded like - though not at New York prices. Mr. Tan, unlike many other modern composers, does not work with an electronic synthesizer, which would allow him, and the Met's artistic staff, to hear a semblance of the orchestration.

So, in a bright, airy rehearsal hall here, a handful of key administrators and other representatives of the Met, led by Peter Gelb, the incoming general manager, gathered to hear the music played and sung for the first time at made-in-China prices by world-class artists. Also on hand were Edgar Baitzel, the chief operating officer of the Los Angeles Opera (the co-producer of the opera with the Met), Chinese conductor-orchestral director Zhen Yinguo, Mr. Gelb's wife, Elizabeth Knecht, and the Chinese performer, Shanghai-born soprano Mei-ling Yang.

"The First Emperor," Mr. Gelb said, "is a dramatization of the emperor's descent from heaven, and his relationship with the people. It's a story of adoration and disillusionment, of a great leader who loses touch with his people.

"But the music is not just about "structure, to test the width and the rhythm of the opera," the arc of the music drama. There had been only a few days of preparation. "Don't mind if the performance is poor," he added with rare diffidence.

Sarah Billinghurst, the Met's assistant manager for artistic production, who had followed this commission from its inception nine years ago, laughed. "We'll understand," she said.

But they would also be measuring the score for depth.

Would the music be accessible as well as innovative, both familiar and exotic? Would it draw new, younger, hipper yet still well-heeled audiences without alienating traditional patrons? Could it be a commercial success without pandering to the crowds? Could it rank as an artistic success and still leave audiences humming a tune? Few opera composers have a full orchestra and chorus to help them tinker with their works in progress. The costs would be prohibitive: "a thousand dollars a minute, with no hope of getting that back in ticket sales," said Mr. Ochsner. But Mr. Tan, Mr. Hedges said, needed all the instruments and voices to "bring the score to its full potential.

Mr. Tan, who lives in New York, told the Met that he could get it all done most efficiently and cheaply in Shanghai (where he has a second home and office), refining the opera with performers already familiar with his idiosyncratic use of rocks and whoops and slurs, not to mention effects like rocks beating on drums.

Beverly Sills, when she was chairwoman of the Met, told Mr. Tan that he could do it all in New York, at a "massive" cost. "You'll never hear me say that again," she said.

And everything must work for the Chinese as well. (Negotiations continue among the Met, the Los Angeles Opera, Tan Dun, Zhang Yimou, various unofficial cultural ambassadors and the People's Republic about staging the work in China.)

The film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" did not appeal to Asian audiences, Mr. Gelb and others have speculated, because it was written first in English, from a Western point of view, then translated into Chinese. Mr. Zhang's film "Hero," to which "The First Emperor" is a sort of prequel, was originally written in Chinese. It is said to be the biggest box office hit in Chinese history.

Mr. Gelb says he is making sure that the librettist, the prize-winning Chinese-born English-language novelist Ha Jin, has plenty of time to "put his poetry back in" after Mr. Tan alters the wording in the process of tailoring the musical phrases. Such hands-on management will continue until opening night, Mr. Gelb said. In his view the general manager of the Met should also be its chief producer: a task his predecessors have not always warmed to. A producer, in his lexicon, "does whatever is necessary."

"There's a huge problem in the way operas are commissioned and realized," he said. While Broadway shows have previews and out-of-town tryouts to change and refine the production, he explained, "opera is supposed to emerge full blown the first night."

"It's a challenge for the Met," Mr. Gelb said, "and for me as well."
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Beverly Sills, who was chairwoman of the Met, solicited a $150,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to cover the rehearsal expenses in Shanghai as well as educational outreach programs that would continue in New York in the fall.

In Shanghai, Mr. Gelb, Mr. Tan, Ms. Bilinghurst and others lectured to Chinese students from many areas. All the sessions were packed. One of the audience members asked, if they bought tickets to the opera, could they get visas to come to New York? "I'm not a diplomat," Ms. Bilinghurst said diplomatically.

The run-through began with pulsating drums. Singing in the style of Beijing opera, an "official geometer" introduced the story of Qin Shi Huangdi, the visionary and brutal warlord who unified China in 221 B.C., and his old friend Gao Jian Li, a dissident poet and musician. Gao, known as the Shadow, is captured and ordered to compose the new empire's first anthem. Qin and Gao's conflict would explore stage into scenes of violence and fairly explicit sex, involving the emperor's daughter.

The music rose from the orchestra, alternately heroic, lyrical and haunting. Mr. Tan's shoulders seemed to relax. Voices rose through the going, the bass flute and the plucked strings of ancient instruments as well as the orchestra's standard violins and cellos, woodwinds and brasses.

"I'm a sucker for this stuff," said Andrew Watson, the Ford Foundation representative for China, between acts. Although the foundation rarely finances cultural programs, especially in China, he said, "The First Emperor" presented an opportunity to build an artistic bridge that might help carry the weight of its gritty legal and social development projects.

Bridge building — especially the one between East and West — was as common a metaphor during the workshop as tailoring. Four years ago Zhou Xiaoyan, the founder of the opera center at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and once an opera singer herself, offered her vision of the future: Chinese musicians would be successful in the West, return to China to develop new works melding East and West, then re-educate the world to a new tradition.

Madame Zhou, as she is called, now 88, was in the workshop audience, where singers and musicians all but knotted their hair during rehearsal breaks.

"It is what I was hoping for," she said after the run-through. "It is challenging for singers in a good way. It is exciting and fresh, something new that connects Eastern and Occidental."

But don't accuse Mr. Tan of "fusion," a concept he deplores. He does not blend the two
Above, the composer Tan Dun, seated with microphone, and the director Zhang Yimou on screen, in a virtual lecture as part of the educational aspect of the Chinese venture. At right, Mr. Tan directs his workshop musicians in Shanghai.