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Chen Shi-Zheng: 'People go on incredible emotional journeys'

 By Shirley Athorp, FT.com site
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The latest production from Boston's Handel and Haydn Society is the second-biggest risk it has ever taken. The first was back in 1818, when the freshly formed ensemble gave the first New World performance of Handel's *Messiah*. That was a risk that paid off, since the society is still thriving, nearly two centuries down the track.

But a staged performance of Monteverdi's *Vespers*, cast as a love song to the Virgin Mary, employing Javanese court dance, Chinese martial arts and Japanese *butoh*? It's not the kind of thing subscribers expect, and the irate letters to the management started coming in well before opening night. Boston listeners are more accustomed to early music on period instruments presented in straight concert settings, though the Handel and Haydn Society's new music director Grant Llewellyn has already begun to introduce jazz to subscription programs.

The only time the organisation has tackled a staged production before was back in 1996, when then director Christopher Hogwood brought in choreographer Mark Morris to direct an *Orfeo ed Euridice*. It went down well, but not well enough to convince the Boston group to make it a regular event. So why the sudden digression? The answer, a few weeks before the event, is to be found in a small French café in New York's West Village. Chen Shi-Zheng likes his coffee strong and his theatre profound.

"I detest naturalistic acting," he says. "There is no need for theatre if movies and television can replace it. To create an illusion of reality is so dated! Imagination doesn't reflect what we already know. The important thing is to discover what we don't know."

As a child in the violent world of Cultural Revolution China, Shi-Zheng was taken in by a group of Hunan funeral singers. Only death was accepted as a valid excuse for traditional opera, and the political climate ensured that there were funerals enough. Exposed early to both emotional extremes and the power of the performing arts to harness them, he was trained rigorously in the discipline of *Kunju* opera. When the political heat cooled, he went on to become one of the country's leading performers. That was until 1987, when he moved to New York and took up directing.

A decade and a half later, as we meet for our interview, he is bringing classic Chinese theatre to the Lincoln Center Festival with two new productions of Ji Juan-Xiang's 13th-century *The Orphan of Zhao* - one in traditional style with a Chinese cast, one in modern translation with an American cast.

The two contrasting versions epitomise what Shi-Zheng is all about: both preserving and reinventing the great Chinese literature. He first hit the headlines with his late-1990s production of Tang Xianzu's 18-hour 15th-century epic, *The Peony Pavilion*. The idea was to reconstruct the piece in something close to its original form, an approach unknown in today's China. The production was ready to travel, its cast and musicians painstakingly rehearsed, when the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture took offence and banned the piece, withholding the performers' passports to enforce its edict.

Performances in five cities were cancelled, but New York's Lincoln Center and Paris' Festival d'Automne stood by him, and Shi-Zheng refused to concede defeat. He searched Europe and the US for replacement performers, and succeeded in bringing over two of his original cast. Rehearsals began again from scratch with the other 20. The end result was a triumph, with audiences around the world glued to their seats throughout the three-day serial. For its freshness, precision, extraordinary blend of ancient techniques with modern theatrical savvy, and sheer irrepressible humanity, *Peony Pavilion* put Shi-Zheng on the map. It was also, for him, part of a bigger personal crusade.

"How could they build a huge opera house in Shanghai when they don't even have a decent orchestra, or singers trained to sing western opera? People are willing to pay \$200 a ticket to see a third-rate symphony orchestra concert or a visiting European opera company, but they won't pay a penny to see Chinese opera. They're not interested. Not one opera house has been purpose-built for classic Chinese opera. The singers I work with may well be the last generation of performers who can do this. Chinese opera graduates have nowhere to go; most of them turn to television. And the bright kids now go to business school."

But *Peony Pavilion* also got him thinking about western classical music. In Chinese opera, performance traditions have been preserved but the original texts and scores are neglected or lost. In the western world, it's the other way round. What would happen if the two worlds met?

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Rene Jacobs had Shi-Zheng hired to direct *Cos fan tutte* for Aix-en-Provence. It was not a success. But when he went to Spoleto to direct *Dido and Aeneas*, things started to happen. Part of the key was the good working chemistry with conductor Grant Llewellyn. Llewellyn was about to take up the Boston post, and was keen to see what would happen if Shi-Zheng and the Handel and Haydn Society collaborated. For Shi-Zheng, it was the opportunity to embark on a project he has long dreamed of - a Monteverdi opera cycle, including a staging of the *Vespers*. The Florentine baroque composer, with his universal literary themes, monodic recitatives and stylised, strong expression had a surprising amount in common with his Chinese counterparts.

"The *Vespers*, if you think about it, are really about love. *Peony Pavilion* is also about love the dream of love, and the dream of desire."

Shi-Zheng was intrigued by the cult of Marian devotion, and by a range of cross-cultural experiences around the figure of Mary. "Mary is big in China. It's not a Catholic thing. You find miniature Mary statues all over the place in homes, in temples, even on fishing-boats. It's about purity, innocence, or love - something speaks to them, and I find that deeply moving. Once I was caught in the middle of a riot in Indonesia, and I saw an old woman running away from the looters carrying nothing but a Virgin Mary statue. This devotion is quite overwhelming - people go on the most incredible emotional journeys. There's a naivety about it, something vulnerable. At school we are taught that life is about being strong, big, tough. Nobody teaches us to be innocent. Delicacy is seen as something to be eliminated in modern life, but it's actually one of the most important things."

Shi-Zheng has hired Asian dancers to collaborate with the Boston musicians precisely because of their ability to express emotion through incredible delicacy and rare control. It's another step on his journey to fuse eastern and western performing styles in what could be the most significant development in opera direction this decade.

European music offers an inventive freedom that Shi-Zheng welcomes. But he continues to carry a heavy sense of personal responsibility towards the future of Chinese culture. Next year, in a triumphant closing of the circle broken by the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture, he will take his *Peony Pavilion* production to Beijing.

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