

East to West: my life as a fairy tale

John Whitley

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Being raised among professional funeral singers in China has led opera director Chen Shi-Zheng to take an unusually physical approach to his production of Orfeo, which opens at English National Opera this month. John Whitley met him

For years the major selling point of English National Opera has been its ability to turn out productions that give a fresh twist to the classics - often illuminating and usually provocative. So it's no surprise that for its new version of the granddaddy of all opera, Monteverdi's Orfeo, it is enlisting 11 Javanese dancers, a fly-by-wire protagonist and a director from China.

What is a surprise, though, is that this exotic assembly isn't the brainchild of the state-funded company, with £16 million in grants a year, but originates with the tiny Handel and Haydn Society of Boston, Massachusetts. This august body, founded in 1815, gets a mere \$38,000 of public money and depends on its 4,200 subscribers to whistle up the rest of a \$3.2 million budget. And although ENO will get first bite of the show when it opens at the Coliseum on April 15, it's the Society which has committed itself to performing all three of Monteverdi's operas with the same director.

Its London partner was more cautious; even before it was riven with strife last winter, ENO had signed up to take a share in only the first opera in the sequence. Now the company, having swept out its chairman, artistic director and conductor-elect and antagonised its paymasters at the Arts Council, must be painfully aware that its future turns almost entirely on the success of the Bostonian interloper, however controversial that production may seem.

The director himself, Chen Shi-Zheng, remains remarkably equable amid all the brouhaha - though he is clearly miffed that, so far, ENO have refused to venture beyond Part 1. "I visualise the operas as really one production that portrays the development of human nature. That was my interest in taking on the project - I didn't want to do just a single opera," he says.

"I try to set them in different seasons - Orfeo is spring, Incoronazione di Poppea is summer and Ritorno d'Ulisse is autumn. Then the 1610 Vespers really makes a fourth opera, as winter - maybe on ice! So they move gradually as the productions change."

At 42, the quietly sardonic Chen has already fought more battles than most manage in a lifetime. Born in Hunan, he was separated from his family during the Cultural Revolution and taken in at the age of seven by professional funeral singers, who taught him their elaborate rituals.

"You had specific movements and gestures for everything," says Chen, "and I learnt them all - eye make-up, posture, finger movement. I trained as a professional shaman, really. So now, in any opera that has a death scene, I know how to



Opera in motion: Chen Shi-Zheng's Dido and Aeneas featured a surfboarding chorus

do it."

Since escaping the clutches of Communist China while on a tour of America in 1987, Chen has built a career in the West, directing productions of *My Life as a Fairy Tale*, *The Flying Dutchman* and a *Dido and Aeneas* for the Handel & Haydn Society that was notable for its surfing chorus. He has even deployed his dark tenor on a couple of records. While rehearsing for the Coliseum, he has another production on the go in Berlin, and then he's off to Toronto to film Meryl Streep and Val Kilmer in his own script of *Dark Matter*.

But he remains profoundly marked by those early years and convinced that Western theatre needs an urgent infusion of the precision and physicality that marks Oriental tradition. In the West, he says, "we have become too automatic, we don't think. There's this huge separation of the body from the language and the feeling which is almost scary - especially in opera.

"We tend not to understand about the articulation of our body, of our eyes or our whole frame. The entire art form of music is articulated in motion. Singers need to understand that when they sing a word, they should make sure that the image is coherent with the emotion at every level.

"What I'm trying to do is to bring the two worlds of East and West together, so that you can understand how close we think we are to each other. That to me is very interesting. It's like a cross-migration."

It's a conviction that determines his approach to *Orfeo*: "I want to have dancers consistently to express the emotion on stage, to tell the story and to bring the characters into it. So that they become the centre of the ceremony. And I think that will impose its own momentum on the action."

Hence the Javanese. "In those islands they have dances that are thousands of years old and you'd think these two worlds have nothing to do with each other. These dancers have probably never heard any Western music. But once you explain what the songs say, immediately they know how to apply their knowledge to the music, they know how to move.

"You can see how entirely modern they are in one way - they dress just like teenagers in London today - but they bring their very old tradition to this music. It's a fascinating process. They have so many dance forms - for weddings, for burial, for cremation. So I look at these dances and say, 'Let's have this one with this section of the opera, that one with that piece', and then they re-choreograph them."

Chen also requires physical labour from his European performers. "Western singers often think that they are just a machine, a machine that makes a particular sound. But in Chinese opera it's entirely charted by body function. You actually walk through the opera before you sing the opera.

"And your teacher talks to you through the music, so it's like a spaghetti Western, like a score for a film. They keep saying, you walk here or here, and then in this three-second part you put your head down and you look at your hands, then with this word you turn this way, and so on. It's entirely choreographed."

Such detailed acting means that Chen can dispense with other distractions on the Coliseum's wide stage. "I don't want to look at modern furniture on stage - you see that on television. So we pretty much have no sets, just props.

"The idea is really drawn from when *Orfeo* talks about his love. What we've come up with is a sort of doll's house. We use the roof and box of the house all the way through. Then, for example, the roof can come off and the house's centre becomes a day bed. That's where you have *Orfeo* having a drink and singing these beautiful arias.

"When we come to the Styx, the roof turns upside down and becomes a boat, the end of the house becomes the land and a projection shows the river on the floor. At the end, *Apollo* carries *Orfeo* up as though it's a rescue and you see the Hell as a backdrop behind the house, so it becomes a mirror image of the same house in a different colour. It's extremely

simple but very powerful."

Chen believes such minimalism emphasises the links between cultures: "The story of Monteverdi's opera is actually quite close to Chinese opera. It's like the Chinese contrast of yin and yang juxtaposed, like water and fire - Orfeo is defeated by the two things together. Orfeo composes the most gorgeous and seductive music, but his story is about how music is defeated."

Defeat is not something any shaman can contemplate, though, and Chen is confident enough to look beyond ENO's haverings over Monteverdi to next year, with a new opera to direct in San Francisco to a libretto by Amy Tan and plans for a "big English rock band" to write the electronic score for a spectacular at the £4 million Manchester festival. "For me," he says simply, "music brings freedom."

- 'Orfeo' opens at the Coliseum, London WC2 (0870 145 0200) on April 15.

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