

Tan Dun

Tea: A Mirror of Soul



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English libretto by Tan Dun and Xu Ying

Duration: 108' (Opera in Three Acts)

Cast: Lan: Soprano

Lu: Contralto

The Prince: Tenor

Seikyo: Baritone

The Emperor: Bass

B-Bar chorus

Orchestra: 3 solo perc; amp bf(pic).bcl(Ebcl)/2 Cpt.2 tbn/
3 ripieno perc/2 hp/str (8.8.6.6.4)

Commissioned by Suntory Hall, Tokyo, Japan

World Premiere NHK Symphony Orchestra, Suntory Hall,
Tokyo, Japan, 22 October 2002

European Premiere Netherlands Opera, Het Muziektheater,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 7 January 2003.

SYNOPSIS

Based on historical fact, *Tea* sketches the tale of Seikyo, a prince-cum-monk. By suffering "bitter love," Seikyo transcended a cruel destiny to achieve an austere peace, the meaning of which he teaches through tea rituals. But that is only half the story. For Seikyo's bitter love also involves a princess, an erotic passion so tainted by jealousy that it ends in death, shamanistic rituals, and fierce struggles over an ancient book of wisdom. Combining the lyricism of Italianate opera, lush Western orchestration, a male "Greek chorus," gamelan-like percussion, and the organic sounds of nature – water, paper, and stones – *Tea* brings an ancient tale to the 21st century.



"The opera is first and foremost a love story spanning a period of twenty years. It has more to do, for me, with early 17th century opera, than so-called 'contemporary' music-theater compositions. It is economical, hugely atmospheric but equally dramatic. Love, death and religion are all expressed through the metaphor of tea with all its multiple, sometimes even paradoxical meanings. The score is full of aural references to the different aspects surrounding the evocation of tea and tea rituals...it's as if Tan Dun had succeeded in translating the taste of tea, and its effect on the psyche, into music."

– Pierre Audi, director
October 2002





CRITICAL ACCLAIM:

Tan and co-librettist Xu Ying, resident playwright of China National Theatre, fashioned culturally disparate tales into a loose-leaf narrative that benefited greatly from Pierre Audi's minimal staging. *Tea's* true success, though, lay in Tan's music, an ever-extending sonic palette...The NHK Symphony proved perfectly responsive...particularly when musicians were required to vocalize or to animate the music. Three percussionists [represented] water, paper and stone. Water was dripped, poured and bowed (on a waterphone, an instrument of Tan's invention). Paper was crumpled, torn and malleted (on three floor-to-ceiling sheets). Struck ceramics not only sounded eerily like gamelan but actually managed to blend smoothly with Western tunings. These sounds aren't new for Tan, but the playful experimentation of his earlier works already had taken on emotional resonance in his *Water Passion after St. Matthew* [2000]. In *Tea*, these techniques have essentially evolved into non-pitched leitmotifs, with stones emitting a feeling of fate, paper a smooth sensuality and water an ominous message of birth and rebirth. Tan's music may sound impulsive, but *Tea* obviously has been brewing for a long time.

– Ken Smith, *Opera News*, February 2003

What is initially striking is that in [*Tea's*] the scenario, in which the composer took an active part, all the elements that surround mankind such as love, philosophy, art, the soul, feelings, tradition, religion and nature are blended into a whole with other elements such as the passage of time, abstraction and reality, directness and indirectness, universality and singularity, complexity and simplicity, difficulty and ease, symbol and metaphor...These elements are then combined with the simple but effective stage layout, the lighting, the costumes and above all Tan Dun's dynamic music to form great drama...Water, stone, earth and paper are used as musical instruments in this opera and are brought into surprising harmony with the orchestra, creating magical effects. Their sounds cross the borders of time and cultural difference and touch the essence of human life. The various instruments, themes and voices refer to music of many periods and modern peoples, including the Chinese, Japanese, South-East Asian and European; all of these influences are filtered by Tan and brought into a perfect harmony that is characteristic of his music...Tan unfolds his music in a dynamic and spatial manner, first slow and aesthetic, then strongly and urgently, all the while keeping the grace of the music in overall balance. He is especially successful in moving the spectator by always breaking the pattern of what the listener expects to happen.

– Tokyo Journal, Japan, November 2, 2002

The first European performance of *Tea*, a new piece by the Chinese composer Tan Dun, was an unqualified success. The piece is a fascinating blend of East and West, religion and drama, love and death. The central love story, of the Japanese monk Seikyo (Holy Sound) and the Chinese princess Lan (Orchid), is presented with so much poetry that by comparison the world of Romeo and Juliet seems very rough-and-tumble indeed. These roles were taken by two exceptionally gifted singers. The baritone Haijung Fu presented a splendidly full and focused voice, as well as a distinguished presence. The soprano Nancy Allen Lundy seemed to delight in the Zerbinetta-like virtuosity of her role. Tan Dun's music for these two figures was unabashedly vocal. Perhaps since Puccini and Bernstein there has been no one to write such grateful lines for singers...The colorful orchestration inspired the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra, and the composer is a fine conductor. Hopefully this staging will be given elsewhere.

–Michael Davidson, *Opera*, UK, April 2003



Photo: Nan Watanabe

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Director: Pierre Audi
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