

# Orpheus Meets Isolde, With Ducks

*The Peony Pavilion*  
Lincoln Center Festival

BY KYLE GANN

For most of recorded history, China was several centuries ahead of Europe in music, as in so many other areas. The two cultures invented opera, however, in roughly the same era, and it is striking that *The Peony Pavilion* of 1598—the grand and gorgeous centerpiece of Lincoln Center Festival '99—comes almost precisely from the years that saw the first experiments in Italian opera. Written by composer-dramatist Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), the piece became popular then, and seemed remarkably modern this week, because of its frank glorification of romantic love as a force transcending social convention. In both theme and length (some 20 hours, though I skipped an evening to hear Steve Reich and saw only 15), it relegates *Tristan und Isolde* to the status of a footnote.

One thing *The Peony Pavilion* shares with Europe's early Baroque opera is the incredible richness in its portrayal of every level of society. The work started in its first three hours as a delightful but rather conventional love story, then morphed into a morbid psychodrama worthy of Maeterlinck before segueing into a sweeping war saga comparable to *Gone With the Wind* or *War and Peace*—not to mention the interspersed scenes from ghost tales and slapstick comedy. Even the animal world was present: the LaGuardia theater had been fitted with a moat between audience and stage in which goldfish and ducks sported beneath the tweeping of caged songbirds and, in the evening, even crickets.

As briefly as possible: the young heroine Du Liniang (spellbindingly sung by Qian Yi) dreams of being seduced by a scholar Liu Mengmei (Wen Hu Yang, equally powerful), and when she awakens, slowly begins to die of love for him. Liu, traveling to take the country's most prestigious academic exam, chances upon a self-portrait Du Liniang has painted before she died and falls in love with her. Meanwhile, in a curious twist on the Orpheus myth, Du Liniang gets permission to leave the underworld and search for her lover (the first European Orpheus opera, Peri's *Euridice*, appeared only two years later in 1600). With the help of a Taoist nun (Lin Sen in a broadly comic role), Liu digs up Du Liniang's body and unites with her, as the country is engulfed by a Tartar invasion that greatly delays their marriage and Liu's recognition as a leading young scholar. (Though nearly every detail of the performance was stunning, I also have to single out Jia Yong Hong for her enchanting job as Du Liniang's mischievous maid, Fragrance.)

You've got to love an opera whose male romantic lead is crucially distinguished by his book-learning; education is touted throughout as the manly virtue, while the soldiers are portrayed as bumbling fools. Another charming difference from European operas is the libretto's occasional earthiness. The Taoist nun, for example, was born with "a stone hymen," and sings that, on her wedding night, her husband had to give up and enter her from behind; as she told the audience, "One hole is better than none." Even in a European

opera as sexy as Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea* (1642) you don't get this kind of frankness.

Given that most of the melodies fell into a pentatonic scale, the wealth of musical characterization surrounding all this action was remarkably wide, from sensuously sighing love songs to stern parents' warnings with brisk rhythms and leaping intervals to raucously repetitious clashes of cymbals at dramatic moments. The orchestra of two-string fiddles, Chinese flutes and reeds, and various metal percussion cradled the vocal parts in a texture that academics call *heterophony*: that is, all instruments played pretty much the same melodic line, but differently elaborated according to the peculiarities of each instrument. If a subtle idiom, it was a surprisingly vivid sound, and one not surpassed in expressiveness by European opera until many decades afterward.



Liu Qing Chan (left) as the Bandit King, and Yu Qing Wang as Dame Li

Even in scenes of unaccompanied dialogue, the vocal technique kept the drama musical. Every word was delivered in a heavily stylized kind of *sprechstimme*, fluid in curvilinear glissandos and crescendos that made the text (in Chinese, of course, but translated by supertitles whose slowness and inadequacy were the week's only irritation) bristle and roil with tension. And two scenes—those involving the portrait, whose magnificence was wisely left to the imagination—were presented in a style called *Pingtan*, in which the action was narrated by Rao Yichen, a thrillingly expressive singer who accompanied herself on pipa (a fretted lute) with startling dexterity. Refrains occasionally sung by a small chorus called Sophocles to mind and reminded you that ancient Greek drama—which the Italians were trying to imitate when they invented opera—was itself an Asian art form.

Such a spectacular mirror of the world made you wish that we weren't trapped by the idiotic, formal, European convention of rows of chairs. Theoretically the audience could come and go as we pleased, but in this wide theater with no aisles, you had to climb over 40 people to take a break. We need to rethink what music theater can be, and a work as magnificent as *The Peony Pavilion* is an inspiring starting point. ▮

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