

Tan Dun

The First Emperor

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The conceptual and multifaceted composer/conductor Tan Dun has made an indelible mark on the world's music scene with a creative repertoire that spans the boundaries of classical, multimedia, Eastern and Western musical systems. Central to his body of work, Tan Dun has composed distinct series of works which reflect his individual compositional concepts and personal ideas — among them a series which brings his childhood memories of shamanistic ritual into symphonic performances; works which incorporate elements from the natural world; and multimedia concerti. Opera has a significant role in Tan Dun's creative output of the past decade, mostly recently with the premiere of *The First Emperor* by the Metropolitan Opera in December 2006 with a title role created for Plácido Domingo. In 2008 Tan composed *Internet Symphony No. 1: "Eroica"* commissioned by Google/YouTube as the focal point for the world's first collaborative online orchestra. Of his many works for film, Tan Dun's score for Ang Lee's film, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," received an Oscar Award for best original score.



Libretto
G. Schirmer

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cover: Plácido Domingo as *The First Emperor*; photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

Tan Dun

The First Emperor



"undeniable
artistry at work"
—The New York Times

Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera

The First Emperor

Music by Tan Dun

Libretto by Ha Jin and Tan Dun



Elizabeth Futral as princess Yue-Yang
photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

More than 2,300 years ago, China was divided into seven warring states. Among them the state of Chin was the strongest and eventually conquered its six rivals. After Chin Shi Huang unified the country, he established the first central government, calling himself the First Emperor. To strengthen central rule, he standardized the written word, currency, measurements, and roads. He also initiated many building projects, among which were the Great Wall and his tomb guarded by the terracotta soldiers. But behind those imperial achievements, there was a tragic story of love, hate, and betrayal.

CREATING THE TITLE ROLE

"In my repertoire of 123 different roles, there have been historical characters like Carlos (Don Carlo), Andrea Chenier, Rasputin, Goya, Lord Essex, Vasco de Gama, to mention a few. But this is the first time I'm dealing with a character of such tremendous power and of a lasting legacy — the building of the Chinese Wall. As I prepare this role, I'm faced with the challenge of expressing as much as possible the different sides of the man's character — in his extremes: the all-powerful, almost ruthless, ruler versus the caring father of a daughter."

— Plácido Domingo

WORLD PREMIERE

Metropolitan Opera
Tan Dun, conductor
Zhang Yimou, stage director
December 21, 2006

CAST LIST

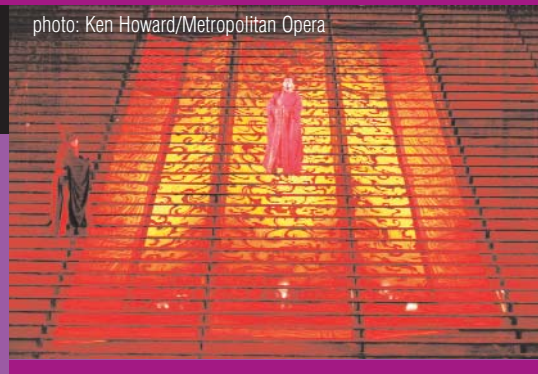
EMPEROR CHIN: Tenor
PRINCESS YUE-YANG, Emperor's daughter: Soprano
GAO JIAN LI, musician: Lyric Tenor
GENERAL WANG: Bass
SHAMAN: Mezzo-soprano
CHIEF MINISTER: Baritone
YIN-YANG MASTER, official geomancer: Peking Opera Singer
MOTHER OF YUE-YANG: Mezzo-soprano

CHORUS: soldiers, slaves, guards, etc.
DANCERS

ORCHESTRA

2(amp bfl).2.2.2/3.3Ctp.2.1/timp.4perc.Tibetan singing bowl/2hp/str;
ancient music instruments (min 7 players): large Chinese drums, pairs of stones, 15-string Zheng[=Chinese lute or Japanese koto], pitched ceramic chimes[=pitched ceramic flower pots], waterphones, giant bell onstage

photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera



SYNOPSIS

Based on
Historical Records
by Sima Qian (c.145 BC — c.85 BC)
and on the screenplay
The Legend of the Bloody Zheng
by Lu Wei

Act One: Shadow

Standing in front of the closed curtain, the Yin-Yang master invites the audience to witness a two-thousand-year old story of love, betrayal and madness.

Act I, Scene 1

The Emperor and his entourage are watching the Shaman lead a ritual performance. His daughter, Yue-yang, is in a sedan, her legs paralyzed from a riding accident. She is betrothed to General Wang. The Emperor interrupts the ritual as he finds the music empty. The Emperor wants an Anthem to unify the land and orders Wang to change the war plans so that he can find the musician Gao Jian Li. The Emperor tells about Jian Li, his childhood friend and master musician.

Act I, Scene 2 In the Chin Palace

The Emperor and his Chief Minister are discussing ways to unify the empire. Wang enters and delivers the captured Jian Li. The Emperor welcomes Jian Li as his brother but Jian Li despises him for his brutality. The Emperor orders him to write the Anthem but Jian Li refuses, preferring to die.

Act I, Scene 3

Yue-yang is attending Jian Li who is fasting to death. When left alone she seduces him. The startled Jian Li responds and they make love. She then realizes that she has regained the use of her paralyzed limbs. The Emperor enters with his retinue. He is at first ecstatic but then they all realize how the miracle happened.

Melodies spring from the recognizable Asian pentatonic scale, but they feature the long-lined beauty of traditional Western opera, spiked with gnawing dissonances and unexpected leaps. The composer has deep appreciation for sensual beauty, but he is also immensely sophisticated...he draws expertly on such a wide range of influences to create his distinctive brew....The nearly three-and-a-half-hour evening flew by, propelled by Tan's ceaselessly inventive, dramatically savvy music....**The mélange of stage musicians, pit percussion, ritualistic dancing and choral chanting is electrifying...**

— Joshua Rosenblum, *Opera News*

Act Two: Anthem

Act II, Scene 1

At a construction site of the Great Wall, slaves are laboring under threat of whips. In the foreground, Jian Li, now healthy and happily in love, is giving a music lesson to Yue-yang. Jian Li stops to listen to the Shaman's singing and then to the slaves' chorus and is clearly touched by their songs. The Emperor arrives to force Yue-yang to marry the General and she storms away. The Emperor convinces Jian Li to wait for Wang to die in battle. In the meantime Jian Li must compose the Anthem.

Act II, Scene 2

The throne is at the top of a pyramid of steps. Jian Li, the newly-appointed Chief Minister, announces the beginning of the ceremony. The Anthem is to be played only when the Emperor reaches the throne. The Emperor begins to climb the steps and stops, the ghost of Yue-yang tells of her suicide. After climbing further he is stopped again, Wang's ghost tells him that Jian Li poisoned him, and still seeks vengeance. As the Emperor climbs higher, Jian Li lunges at him, grief-stricken and crazed. The Emperor asks Jian Li to call him Elder Brother. Jian Li does so then bites off his tongue. Realizing his death will be slow and painful, the Emperor stabs Jian Li. When the Emperor reaches the throne he asks that the Anthem begin. It is the slaves' song and the Emperor realizes this is the Jian Li's revenge.