

***The Lesson of Da Ji.*** Music by Alice Ping Yee Ho; libretto by Marjorie Chan. Toronto: Centrediscs CMC-CD 22115, 2015. 1 compact disc (62:41). Contents: Scene 1: The Lesson (37:05); Scene 2: The Banquet (25:36). Performers: Derek Kwan, tenor; Marion Newman, mezzo-soprano; Vania Chan, coloratura soprano; William Lau, nan dan, Peking Opera; Alexander Dobson, baritone; Benjamin Covey, baritone; Charlotte Corwin, soprano; Toronto Masque Theatre Ensemble; Larry Beckwith, conductor.

Commissioned by the Toronto Masque Theatre, *The Lesson of Da Ji* won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding Opera in 2013. Composer Alice Ping Yee Ho and librettist Marjorie Chan collaborated for the first time in creating this compelling work, the storyline for which dates from the Shang Dynasty of China (circa 1600–1046 BCE). Chan’s drama of jealousy, infidelity, prophecy, and the grotesque is animated by Ho’s exotic and wonderfully crafted score.

Ho drew upon China’s expansive mythology to present Chan with the idea of writing an opera based on the legendary and historical figure, Da Ji. A concubine (and, eventually, an infamous Queen), Da Ji was either enslaved in war or bartered by her father to King Shang. While the King’s concubine, Da Ji has a secret affair with her guqin teacher, Bo Yi (who also happens to be the son of the King’s arch enemy, the Duke). When alone, Da Ji sings of her love for Bo Yi to the rising moon, and when she falls asleep, the moon warns her of possible heartbreak. The suspicious King learns of Da Ji’s betrayal through her chambermaid, Ming, and plans gruesome revenge.

In the liner notes Ho explains that the opera combines Chinese, Western, and Baroque art forms and instruments and produces a unique and innovative presentation of the Masque tradition. The score calls for violin, viola, viola da gamba, recorders, and harpsichord, as well as gaohu, erhu, guzheng, pipa, and zhongruan, and a variety of eastern and western percussion instruments. Ho’s musical soundscape is inspired by the guqin, a traditional Chinese seven-string plucked instrument that is part of the zither family. The music of the first act of the two-act opera is drawn from the guqin’s seven open strings; the composer notes that in the second act the material is based on “The Drunkard,” an ancient guqin tune. Prodigious rhythmic vitality is achieved with a cleverly reinvented *basso continuo* juxtaposed against lavish melodic vocal lines that are interspersed with occasional recitatives. The color combinations are beautiful and it is remarkable that the instrumental ensemble consists of only ten members.

The eight-member cast includes the three principals: mezzo-soprano Marion Newman as Da Ji, tenor Derek Kwan as Bo Yi, and baritone Alexander Dobson as the King. Newman’s full and



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expressive voice captures all of the nuances that her role demands. Kwan is also terrific, despite some inconsistency in the tone of his final A<sup>4</sup> in the first scene; his diction throughout the opera is impeccable. Alexander Dobson's haunting baritone voice effectively portrays the role of the menacing and evil King.

The remaining cast members include Vania Chan, who plays the roles of Ming and Moon 1 (Light). Vania Chan's performance as Moon 1 is perhaps the best of the entire recording. Her beautiful coloratura voice is enchanting. A striking timbral contrast is provided by Peking Opera singer William Lau—the only member of the ensemble who sings in Chinese in the traditional Peking Opera style—as the dark and foreboding Moon 2. Charlotte Corwin and Benjamin Covey deliver competent performances as the Duke and Duchess. The Toronto Masque Theatre ensemble under the baton of Larry Beckwith handles Ho's virtuoso writing with impressive competence and proficiency.

However, the recording balance on the CD—especially during Scene 1—is skewed in favor of the orchestral accompaniment rather than the vocalists. As beautiful as Ho's writing is, the orchestra overpowers the vocalists at times, making it difficult to follow the sung dialogue.

The English/French liner notes include bios of the vocal and instrumental performers, a synopsis of the plot—thankfully, without spoilers—as well as two sets of program notes by the composer and the librettist. (Unfortunately, there are also a number of slips in editing.) It would have been desirable to include the text of the libretto in the liner notes—or at least include an online link to the libretto.

This wonderful CD should be in every opera lover's collection and I hope that Ho and Chan will collaborate again to create another opera of this caliber.

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