

Selections from the Beijing opera *The Drunken Concubine*

orch. YE Zou

Chinese opera is a multimedia form of theater that may embrace music, declaimed speech, dance, acting, mime, acrobatics, and stage combat, rendered in stylized form by performers wearing makeup and elaborate costumes, and using props. The roots of Chinese sung drama extend back at least to the 12th century, but the repertoire that endures developed mostly during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1911). Scholars today recognize more than 300 distinct styles of Chinese opera, which vary in their languages, instrumentation, subjects, and local traditions. The dominant form – and the one most frequently encountered by Western audiences – is Beijing opera, which entered its heyday in the late 18th century and enjoyed a golden age in the 19th. Initially, this was an exclusive domain of male performers, but women had begun to participate by the latter part of the 19th century. During the Cultural Revolution the repertoire was limited or adapted to serve carefully defined social agendas, but since the 1980s traditional Beijing operas have again gained center stage. To some extent they are given in a preservationist spirit, although

changes of technique and presentation in many performances have made the works more popular with modern audiences.

The tale of *The Drunken Concubine* is set in the Tang Dynasty, in the mid-eighth century. Yang Yu-Huan is the favorite concubine of Emperor Ming-Huang, and they have made arrangements to meet one night. She prepares a banquet to share with him and waits – and waits, and waits. The Emperor, it turns out, has gone to visit one of his other concubines instead. Yang Yu-Huan decides at least to enjoy the banquet on her own, including the alcoholic drink that was to have been served. The two eunuchs attending her do their best to watch after her welfare, but she gets more and more drunk, showers abuse on them, and basically spins out of control before they manage to steer her off to bed to sleep it off.

Orchestrations for the selections performed for this set have been created by Ye Zou, who is admired in China as a composer of film scores.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, vibraphone, cymbals, tam-tam, bass drum, tambourine, snare drum, and strings, in addition to soprano voice.

Angels and Muses



Mei Lan-Fang (1894–1961) was one of Beijing opera's legendary masters. Born into a family of opera performers, he began studying the craft at the age of eight. He gained widespread renown while still a teenager, and went on to an international career, touring to Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union. He specialized in portraying female characters, and one of his most famous roles was in *The Drunken Concubine*, also known as *The Drunken Beauty*. Whereas Western operas are identified as works of their composers, Chinese operas are usually thought of in terms of their star performers. Accordingly, *The Drunken Concubine* is roughly considered to be “by” Mei Lan-Fang; and the character he portrayed, Yang Yu-Huan, is very much at the center of the show.

Mei Lan-Fang in costume, ca. 1920s

Translations

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Prelude – Concubine in the Royal Garden

Concubine enters.

The Moon Is Bright and Clear

Soliloquy: I was born with natural beauty, and dance for the Emperor. The Emperor has so many concubines but loves me the most. My name is Yang Yu-Huan, and I am beloved by the Emperor. So I was regarded as a high-ranking imperial concubine. I was informed that the Emperor wanted me to throw a banquet at the Baihua Arbor in the royal garden. And now I am going for the appointment.

Lyric: The moon comes over the horizon and hangs in the night sky. The view lets me imagine that the goddess of the moon leaves her moon palace, just like me. I feel like being the goddess of the moon and stepping into the moon palace. How beautiful the moon palace is. There are carps and mandarin ducks swimming in the pool, and wild migratory geese fly across the sky. With the beautiful fantasy, I step into Baihua Arbor.

The Emperor Does Not Arrive

Soliloquy: Stop! The Emperor informed me that he would like me to throw a banquet at Baihua Arbor, but why does he go to another concubine's palace? Since the banquet is already prepared, let me drink alone.

Concubine Drinks Alone at Night

Lyric: Servants attend me so complacently. Life is just like a dream, so let me enjoy and drink happily.

Concubine Drinks Her Sorrow Away

Soliloquy (dreamlike): Please forgive me for welcoming Your Majesty late. Please forgive me. You are misleading me, misleading me.

Awakening from Drunkenness

Lyric: I feel as though I am in a dream. When I married you, how much love you gave me. But right now, how cold I am. Let it be, let it be. Let me go back.