

Violin Concerto: *Fire Ritual* — A Musical Ritual for Victims of War

Tan Dun

Born in a village in central China, Tan Dun grew up surrounded by the shamanistic traditions of rural and small-town communities. But like most of his countrymen, his life was turned upside down with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. In the mid-1970s, he spent two years living among peasants, planting rice, with no real expectation of escaping that occupation. Nonetheless, he set about collecting folk songs and even (at the age of 17) conducting an ad hoc village musical ensemble. Soon he was pressed into service as a string player and arranger for a provincial Peking opera troupe, and in 1978, with the restoration of China's educational system, he pursued his musical studies more formally by enrolling at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing.

As the political climate thawed, composers from outside China began to visit Beijing. Among those with whom Tan Dun came in contact were Alexander Goehr, George Crumb, Hans Werner Henze, Toru Takemitsu, Isang Yun, and Chou Wen-chung. From figures such as these he received his first exposure to not only their music but also to the works of such central 20th-century Western masters as Bartók, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Boulez.

In the early 1980s Tan Dun championed music that mixed Chinese and Western instruments. He moved to the United States and, in 1986, entered Columbia University to earn a doctoral degree. His music began to reflect a more liberated attitude about tonality, as well as the intense concern with nuances of tone color that continues to mark his work. The composer's palette often includes such naturalistic effects as the sound of trickling water or stones rubbing against each other.

Marco Polo, the first of his four operas, was premiered in 1996 at the Munich Biennale

and was quickly staged internationally. In 1998 he received the Grawemeyer Foundation award, and in 2003 he was named *Musical America's* Composer of the Year. Other honors include an Oscar and a Grammy for his score to Ang Lee's film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; the 2011 Bach Prize of the City of Hamburg; the 2012 Shostakovich Award; and, in 2017, the Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Venice Biennale. He served as artistic director of the Tanglewood Contemporary Festival and as resident composer / conductor with the BBC Scottish Symphony. In 2010 he served as Cultural Ambassador to the World for World Expo Shanghai; in 2013 UNESCO named him its global Goodwill Ambassador; and this past December he was named dean of the Bard College Conservatory of Music.

Tan Dun has written numerous concertos, including works featuring guitar, pizzicato piano, cello, percussion, "paper percussion" (you can get a lot of interesting sounds by manipulating paper), double bass, and the Chinese instruments erhu, pipa, and zheng. In 1999 the New York Philharmonic premiered his Concerto for Water Percussion

IN SHORT

Born: August 18, 1957, in Changsha, China

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 2018

World premiere: September 19, 2018, at the Ultima Festival in Oslo, Norway, with the composer conducting the Oslo Philharmonic, Eldbjørg Hemsing, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: this performance, which marks the US Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 30 minutes

and Orchestra in Memory of Toru Takemitsu, and in 2008, it introduced another work it had commissioned, *Piano Concerto: The Fire*. In 2009 he composed his Violin Concerto, subtitled *The Love*, and in 2018 he followed up with two more, his Violin Concerto: *Rhapsody and Fantasia* (revised from a 1994 composition) and his Violin Concerto: *Fire Ritual — A Musical Ritual for Victims of War*. He said of the latter:

The idea came from a very ancient music ritual. From my historical research [in] early music, I find ... people always in the circle — [it] always starts from the center and the conductor and the soloist, like a shaman trying to talk to the people through special sounds. The whole idea is to commemorate the victims We're trying to use a ... kind of a sound map, trying to find those dead

people and souls to wake them up with special sounds and gestures and colors.

He observed:

Fire Ritual unfolds and extends from a single note D (“re” on the solfège scale) ... calling for the RETURN of souls and the RE-birth of all victims of war so that they may RELive another life, and love once more.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets and piccolo trumpet, three trombones, tuba, large Chinese crash cymbals (three sets), four slapsticks, three Chinese drums, two flexatones, bass drum, large cowbell, tubular bells, stones, small Chinese drum, tam-tam, timpani (with small cymbal to be played on the drumhead with a bow), harp, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

The Work at a Glance

Tan Dun’s publisher has provided this comment about Violin Concerto: *Fire Ritual — A Musical Ritual for Victims of War*:

The composer of *Fire Ritual* was deeply influenced by ancient Chinese ritual music and court music, and created a musical ritual of a symphonic concerto. In ancient Chinese music rituals, two ensembles interacted — one asking questions, the other answering — the two representing a dialogue between man [the smaller group] and nature [the larger]. They were distributed in the audience area — in the field or courtyard, where larger group of participants played while standing — and on the stage, where the smaller group sat to play. As with the ancient court band, the performing forces are divided into the stage performers and those placed in the audience area. The conductor led two bands, directing both the onstage and offstage musicians, infusing spirit into the participants. The solo violin, like the prophet in a sacrificial ritual, serves as a bridge connecting the two bands. The work’s musical narrative is divided into four episodes: 1) Cruel war; 2) Innocent people; 3) Birds in heaven; and 4) Eternity. The whole musical offering imagines the dialogue between man and nature: to worship the innocent victims of war, to acknowledge the endless conflicts and sufferings in human history, and to pray for the eternal peace of the world.



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