

The Monk and the Lotus: Exploring the combination of opera and physical theatre

- Vocal-Physical Opera is a new theatrical synthesis
- As a professional singer and theatre director, I have noticed that opera singers are usually lacking in physical expression as a tool for dramatic interpretation. Blending vocal and physical training can greatly improve the artistic abilities of performers of many kinds (not only opera singers). However, as required by the profession, performers need to be multi-talented. We need professional singers who can display strong physical expression while they are singing, combining voice and movement, and delivering the inner meaning of the music in a more visual way.
- Adapting elements both from Western theatrical forms and Classical Chinese aesthetics, *The Monk and the Lotus* aims at changing the style of the performers on stage. It uses physical training, improvisation, and dramatic performing techniques to develop and enhance musical expressiveness and visual beauty.
- Theoretical support for training methods:
 - o 1. The singing techniques for opera singers are based on the control of relevant muscle groups and adjusting breathing accurately to transform the body into a perfect resonant instrument.
 - o 2. For dramatic performers, breathing techniques and control over muscles are also important for characterization. The effect created by breathing on stage is always clear for the audience.
 - o 3. Starting from breathing during physical activities (sport), I conducted research into the mechanism of relevant muscle groups, adjustment of vocalization and physical expression, and aiming at a union of the vocal and the physical.
 - o 4. In the Classical Chinese performer training system, this union of the vocal and the physical has been achieved. Although this system is not entirely applicable to opera singers and dramatic performers, it is still worth consulting for its sound methods and theories.

A record of the creative process

- In 2010, after working with several renowned directors, I first became aware of the lack of physical expressiveness in opera singers. I began my research into this area of training and how it might be improved.
- The initial idea for *The Monk and the Lotus* came to me after reading the play *Buddhist Master Yu* by Cao Lusheng. I wanted to make an opera based on the same subject matter, because there was a great potential for strong theatrical expression in the story, which would present a physical challenge for opera singers of just the type I had in mind.
- With this goal in mind, I applied for the MFA Theatre Directing course at E15 in London in 2015 to continue my research in vocal-physical theatre. During these two years in London, my focus was on developing methods for combining the vocal and physical.
- Starting in June 2016, I worked with the composer Niccolo Athens for one year on creating the opera *The Monk and the Lotus*.

- In December 2016, a demonstration video was made for the opera.
- In February 2017, I met with Mr. Cao Lusheng to discuss improving the libretto.
- In March 2017, I received a rough recording of the music of the opera from the composer.
- In April 2017, I began to hold vocal-physical training workshops.
- In April 2017, the full score and parts for the ensemble were completed.
- I received an invitation to present the opera as part of the Tete a Tete Opera Festival on August 10, 2017 at the RADA Studio Theatre.
- On September 28 and 30, 2017, we will present two more performances at London's Corbett Theatre.
- In October and November, we will be presenting additional performances at London's West Theatre (still in planning).
- Future plans: I will use this work to apply for participation in the Beijing International Music Festival, The Shanghai International Music Festival, and the Wuzhen Arts Festival, as well as music festivals in other countries.

Developmental direction for vocal-physical opera

- It has been 100 years since the commencement of the opera industry in China. In the current multi-cultural environment, there needs to be innovation in opera in China. The state government has already devoted large sums to support innovation and original creation in opera.
- Cultural exchanges between China and foreign nations have developed to an unprecedented degree, and so it will be easier to develop a new style of physical-vocal opera.
- There is also a great need for innovation in opera internationally, and the problem of an aging audience is in pressing need of solutions.
- The fusion inherent in vocal-physical opera represents the cutting edge of directing techniques. It aims to increase the visual impact of the action unfolding onstage, thereby attracting a younger audience.
- Vocal-physical opera can help the genre break free from the restrictions of the theatre. It is adaptable to performances in small venues (galleries, repurposed industrial buildings, etc.), lessening expenditures while helping to diversify the operatic form.
- The stage design concept must take the physical nature of the performers as a basis, creating costumes which are suited to the specific performers, thereby increasing the artistic range of this aspect of the production.
- This fresh approach to the performing arts aims to satisfy both the high visual and aural requirements of the modern audience.
- Research into vocal-physical synthesis will give rise to an opera with a distinctive style, and will be an important influence on the development of opera internationally.
- These techniques can be applied not only to opera, but also to stage plays, musical theatre, physical theatre, etc., aiming to blend the best of the Western theatrical tradition with the characteristic elements of various Chinese traditions (including not only theatrical traditions such as Chinese opera, but also various martial arts) all with the goal of broadening the expressive range of the performance.

Prospects for Vocal-Physical theatre

- It is a new art form which was inspired by the diverse real-world experiences of a performer.
- It will bring audiences a completely new theatrical experience.
- It will break new ground in East-West cultural fusion.
- It will be beneficial for the development and marketing of small-scale operas.
- It will be of great educational value in the training of opera performers.
- It will propel the continued development of the operatic tradition and have widespread influence on performance practices in the genre.

To whom it may concern:

I am honored to have this chance to interact with the staff at the Chinese Embassy regarding my operatic project. I very much hope we can receive your support. I am confident that this performance will be very important for cultural exchange between the United Kingdom and China, and give audiences in London a chance to experience a little-encountered aspect of Chinese culture as well as understand contemporary China through its art.