

## “Strange Story from a Scholar’s Studio” - A New Vocal-Physical Opera

This new opera is based on “The Painted Skin,” from *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, a collection of short stories by the Qing Dynasty writer Pu Songling. The original story is well-known for its fantastic plot and moral lesson. Our adaptation aims to interpret the social criticism and reflection on human nature under the surface of the original story from a contemporary perspective. The opera probes into the dilemma between subsistence and morality under a harsh social reality, and engages with the timeless themes of desire, temptation, and sacrifice. This work also embodies a bold innovation in Western opera conventions. We hope to revitalize this classic art form by introducing Chinese aesthetics into the music and characterization, as well as embracing the combination of vocal and physical means of expression on stage.

### Synopsis

Late Ming Dynasty (17<sup>th</sup> century) China, Shanxi Province.

The ex-scholar Wang has turned to petty businesses after failing to obtain rank through the imperial examinations. One morning, he runs into a strangely beautiful young girl wandering the streets. Driven by desire, Wang takes her in, lodging her in his study. He soon discovers that she is in fact a monster who feeds on human hearts, luring in her victims by wearing a painted human skin. Horrified, Wang seeks out an old fortune-teller, who agrees to help him for a hefty fee. By the time he manages to slay the monster, however, Wang has already been killed. To revive him, his timid wife Chen must seek out a mysterious beggar, and follow his shocking instructions . . .

### Concept

#### Libretto, Characters, and Music

The libretto expands on the archetypal features of the characters from the original story. With little change to the original plot, we focus on fleshing out the internal world of each character. Originally the least vocal, Wang’s wife Chen is now the anchor for the whole story. The heart-eating fiend is no longer simply an embodiment of evil, but has its own struggles and sorrows. Wang and the fortune-teller become compelling examples of human weakness in the face of temptation. The subtle social criticism of having the mighty deity with the power to restore life appear in the form of a socially marginalized beggar also strikes a strong note in our own time.

The music of the opera and its vocal-physical method provide the expressive core. Every transition in tonality closely corresponds to changes in the plot and the characters’ internal world. Intricately choreographed physical movements illustrate the characters and their interactions. We hope the contrast between these vibrant themes and the brutally cold overall mood of the music can provoke a reaction from the audience.

#### A New Way of Making Opera

We have been working towards a breakthrough in Western opera conventions with our new operas, and *Strange Story* is yet another step in this journey. For one thing, we integrate elements from physical theatre to reinforce the inner meaning in the music. This helps to challenge the limitations of rigid singing and achieve a more engaging expression on stage through the amalgamation of the body and the voice. Additionally, we introduce elements from Chinese art forms such as traditional opera to take advantage of music’s cross-cultural possibilities. For example, in this work, we merge the classic Western opera format with the Chinese pentatonic scale and archetypal rhythms to portray each character in their finest

psychological detail. Moreover, leaving “blank space” in the music is also based on the “impressionistic freehand” characteristic of Eastern aesthetics.

We hope to arrive at a new way of creating opera that includes the performer’s training, rehearsal, and performance. We endeavor to challenge convention and encourage a more active involvement on the part of the performer. These new works are also made for smaller-scale, more easily accessible spaces, in the hope that they can reach a broader range of audiences.

In 2017, our first new opera *The Monk and the Lotus* was performed in both Tête-a- Tête: The Opera Festival and the Grimeborn Opera Festival in London. Media, including the *UK Chinese Times*, *Nouvelles d'Europe*, and *Harkii*, as well as many members of the audience, applauded the “novel performance style” brought about by the “skillful” and “mesmerizing fusion of opera and physical theatre” and Chinese elements “through imperceptible details”.