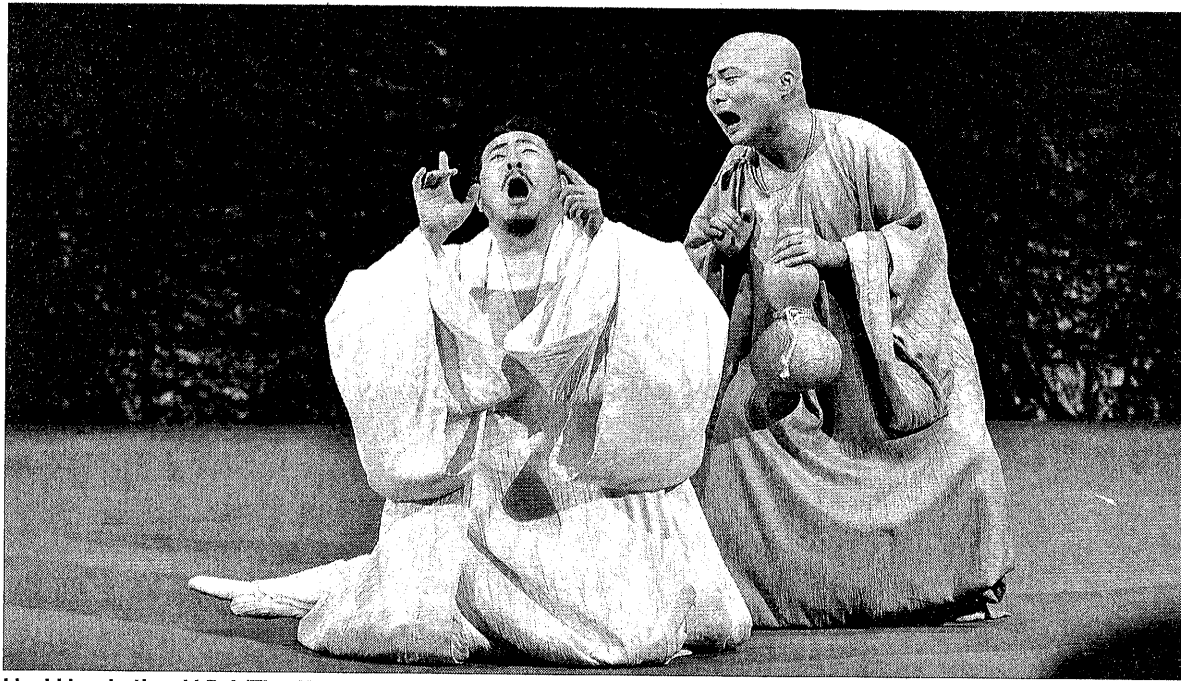


Postmodernism in a poetic wrapping



Andrew Clark
OPERA



Liquid inspiration: Li Bai (Tian Haojiang) clamours for wine as he struggles with his creative anxieties

Poet Li Bai

Poly Theatre, Beijing

Mention "Chinese opera" and most people think of stylised song and pantomime – all shrill voices, decorative costumes and symbolic tales. Mention it in the context of western opera and it means an east-west hybrid written by US-educated Chinese composers who follow western formulas, with oriental inflections pasted on.

But there is another type of Chinese opera. It marries the native poetic/decorative idiom to western instrumentation and vocal delivery in a way that remains instinctively Chinese. Its potential has been brilliantly showcased by Guo Wenjing's *Poet Li Bai*, the centrepiece of this year's Beijing Music Festival.

When the festival was founded in 1998, Chinese composers were conspicuous by their absence. The programme has since been dominated by expensive operatic imports, including *The Ring* and *Lulu* – both China premieres. It is a sign of growing self-confidence that the only opera this year is *Poet Li Bai*, complemented by an evening devoted to Wenjing's orchestral music.

Wenjing (b. 1956) is sometimes described as "the Tan Dun who never left China" – a man of equal talent

US-based compatriot. A year older than Dun, Wenjing is a professor at Beijing's Central Conservatoire and the most prominent composer resident in China. The fact that, unlike many contemporaries, he did not head for the US in the 1980s has not stopped his music being performed internationally. His first opera, *Wolf Cub Village*, was premiered at the 1994 Holland Festival; smaller works have been heard in London and Paris. Dun and others of the US-educated Chinese composer school may have marketed themselves better, but Wenjing has kept in touch with his artistic roots.

Poet Li Bai evokes the aesthetic world of a writer of the Tang dynasty, using excerpts from Li Bai's poetry to ponder the nature of creative inspiration and the failure of society to listen to artists. In the first two scenes the poet (bass-baritone) clamours for wine and summons the moon, his creative anxieties offset by the interpolations of a servant-like fool (character tenor) and a heavenly muse (lyric soprano), about whom he says: "With words I show you as man's delight/With sighs I desire you every night". He is then called to the imperial court and put on a pedestal – only to be imprisoned for treason. In the finale he joins "the immortals who through the sky".

The libretto by Diana Liao and Xu Ying leaves ample room for music, which is dominated by vocalise and

duet for the poet and his muse, while the overture and two interludes provide an atmospheric platform for chorus. The orchestral accompaniment is deft and expertly crafted.

Some of this is vaguely reminiscent of Berio's *Un re in ascolto*. But it is the way Wenjing suffuses postmodern operatic form with Chinese aesthetic that gives *Poet Li Bai* its mesmerising character – partly through judicious use of bamboo flute, wooden clappers, folk melody and a role for traditional Chinese falsetto tenor, but mainly in the prismatic, ritualistic personality of the work. The fact that it lacks a dramatic narrative is part of its charm. *Poet Li Bai* is entirely consistent within itself – something you could never say of Dun's operas.

The Beijing performance, to be repeated at the Shanghai Grand Theatre on Monday, used the same staging as the premiere by Central City Opera, Colorado, in July. Expertly conducted by Zhang Guoyong and directed by Lin Zhaohua, it drew maximum purchase on the minimal designs of Yi Liming, fragrant in the Chinese style. Tian Haojiang, on stage for the entire 100-minute span, was a tirelessly heroic Li Bai, with Zhou Xiaolin, a young soprano worth watching, as his radiantly seductive muse.

★★★★☆
Tel +86 10 6593 0299
www.bmf.org.cn