

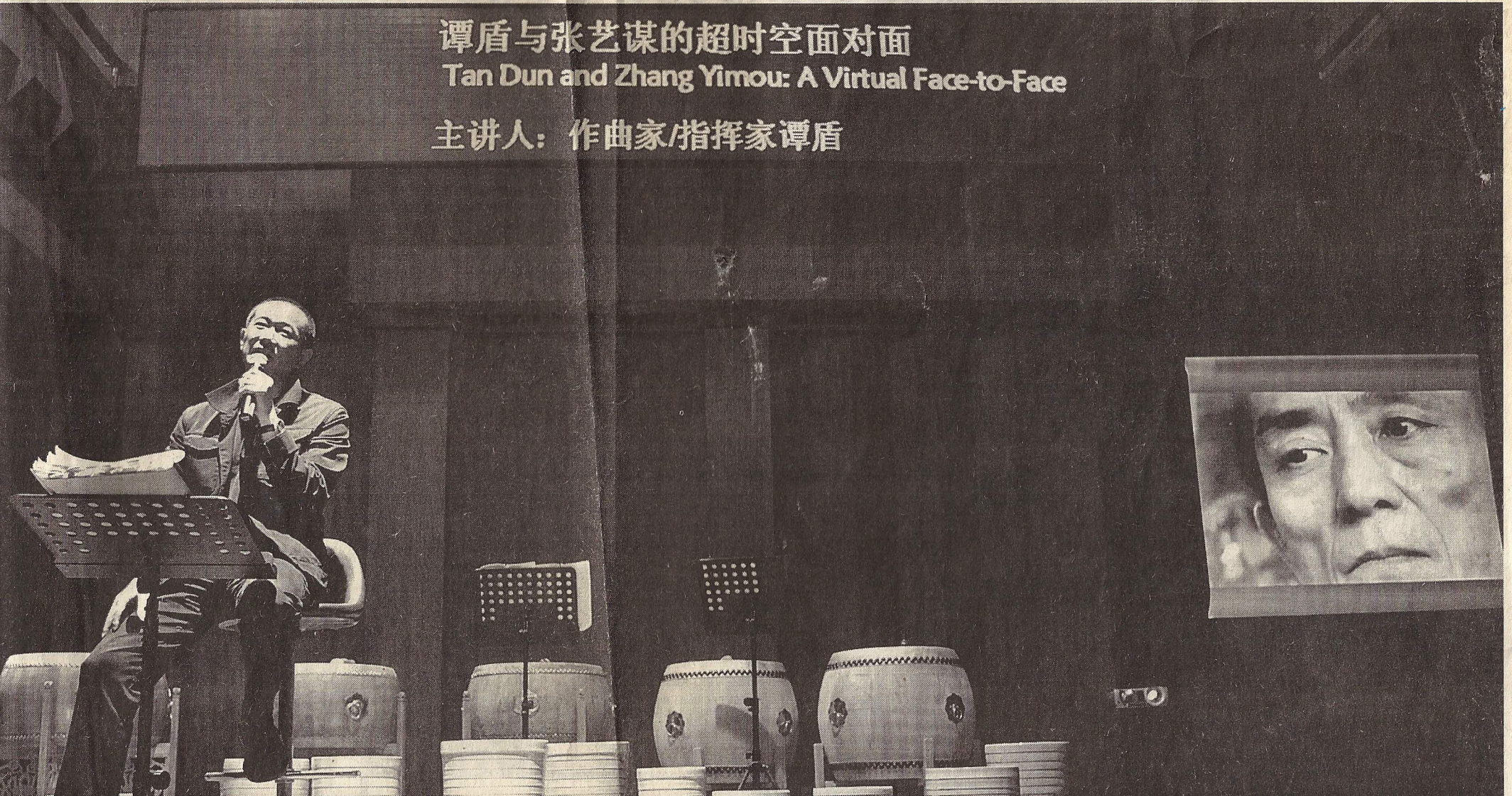
| MUSIC |

The Met's Way Out-of-Town Tryout

谭盾与张艺谋的超时空面对面

Tan Dun and Zhang Yimou: A Virtual Face-to-Face

主讲人：作曲家/指挥家谭盾





Photographs by Guo Xinyang

'The First Emperor,' Tan Dun's high-stakes cross-cultural gamble, gets a live run-through at manageable Chinese prices.

By LOIS B. MORRIS and ROBERT LIPSYTE

THE first fitting of "The First Emperor's" new clothes was outsourced from New York to China last month in an unusual workshop for the most expensive and complex opera the Metropolitan Opera has ever commissioned.

Workshops for new operas are typically held with singers around a piano, and there were sessions like that last week at the Met. But "The First Emperor" is not typical. It is a bold and risky venture that could have an impact on the problematic futures of the Met and opera in America, and even on relations between China and the United States.

But first the composer, Tan Dun, who will also conduct "The First Emperor" when it opens at the Met on Dec. 21, had to hear what it sounded like — though not at New York prices. Mr. Tan, unlike many other modern composers, does not work with an electronic synthesizer, which would allow him, and the Met's artistic staff, to hear a semblance of the orchestration.

So, in a bright, airy rehearsal hall here, a handful of key administrators and other representatives of the Met, led by Peter Gelb, the incoming general manager, gathered to hear the music played and sung for the first time at made-in-China prices by world-class artists. Also on hand were Edgar Baitzel, the chief operating officer of the Los Angeles Opera (the coproducer of the opera with the Met), Chinese production designers and potential donors. Mr.

ly about "structure, to test the width and the rhythm of the opera," the arc of the music drama. There had been only a few days of preparation. "Don't mind if the performance is poor," he added with rare diffidence.

Sarah Billingham, the Met's assistant manager for artistic production, who had followed this commission from its inception nine years ago, laughed. "We'll understand," she said.

But they would also be measuring the score for depth.

Would the music be accessible as well as innovative, both familiar and exotic? Would it draw new, younger, hipper yet still well-heeled audiences without alienating traditional patrons? Could it be a commercial success without pandering to the crowds? Could it rank as an artistic success and still leave audiences humming a tune? Few opera composers have a full orchestra and chorus to help them tinker with their works in progress. The costs would be prohibitive: "a thousand dollars a minute, with no hope of getting that back in ticket sales," said Mr. Ochsner. But Mr. Tan, Mr. Hedges said, needed all the instruments and voices to "bring the score to what was in his head when he wrote it."

Mr. Tan, who lives in New York, told the Met that he could get it all done most efficiently and cheaply in Shanghai (where he has a second home and office), refining the opera with performers already familiar with his idiosyncratic use swoops and whoops and slurs, not to mention effects like rocks beating on drums.

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styles, his musical assistant Mr. Hedges said: "He crashes them together." Last October Mr. Tan received the 2005 Duisberg Music Prize in Germany for his "outstanding contributions through music to intercultural relations between the East and West." He strives not so much to mix styles, the jury suggested, as to sharpen the understanding of their differences.

Mr. Gelb, at the Met after his return from China, had his own take on the musical meeting of East and West. China must be reflected to a Western audience not only in the music, he said, but also in the English text.

And everything must work for the Chinese as well. (Negotiations continue among the Met, the Los Angeles Opera, Tan Dun, Zhang Yimou, various unofficial cultural ambassadors and the People's Republic about staging the work in China.)

The film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" did not appeal to Asian audiences, Mr. Gelb and others have speculated, because it was written first in English, from a Western point of view, then translated into Chinese. Mr. Zhang's film "Hero," to which "The First Emperor" is a sort of prequel, was originally written in Chinese. It is said to be the biggest box office hit in Chinese history.

Mr. Gelb says he is making sure that the librettist, the prize-winning Chinese-born English-language novelist Ha Jin, has plenty of time "to put his poetry back in" after Mr. Tan alters the wording in the process of tailoring the musical phrases. Such hands-on management will continue until opening night, Mr. Gelb said. In his view the general manager of the Met should also be its chief producer: a task his predecessors have not always warmed to. A producer, in his lexicon, "does whatever is necessary."

"There's a huge problem in the way operas are commissioned and realized," he said. While Broadway shows have previews and out-of-town tryouts to change and refine the production, he explained, "opera is supposed to emerge full

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Intense anticipation, if not tension, filled the hall. Mr. Gelb and his retinue read their scores with what seemed like studied impassivity. Mr. Tan, an athletic 48-year-old who cries "Fantastic!" when he means "Good!," seemed uncharacteristically testy. His assistants, John B. Hedges, 31-year-old composer, and Erik E. Ochsner, a 44-year-old conductor, scurried among the music stands, marking scores, cuing the eight vocal soloists, signaling the chorus.

"The First Emperor," whose production costs alone are expected to reach \$2 million, will be the first Met commission by which Mr. Gelb's regime will be measured, though he inherited the work. (Not that he has been unwelcoming: in his years as president of Sony Classical, Mr. Gelb worked closely with Mr. Tan on a number of recording projects.) The great tenor Plácido Domingo will sing the title role on the eve of his 66th birthday, though in a baritone range. The director is the Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou ("Hero," for which Mr. Tan wrote the score, and "House of Flying Daggers"), who was just named to produce the beginning and ending extravaganzas for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Mr. Zhang plans to build the Great Wall on the set stage.

"Opera will no longer be a Western form, as it is no longer an Italian form," Mr. Tan likes to say. Known for small, exotic avant-garde compositions and operas ("Marco Polo," "Tea") and grand, exotic commercial film scores ("Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," for which he won an Oscar and a Grammy), Mr. Tan had never undertaken a work of this scale.

"Ying, er, san, one, two, three," Mr. Tan said to the Shanghai Opera Chorus and the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, baton lifted. Then he stopped and turned to warn his small, expectant audience that this initial run-through was mere-

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Beverly Sills, when she was chairwoman of the Met, solicited a \$150,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to cover the rehearsal expenses in Shanghai as well as educational outreach programs that would continue in New York in the fall.

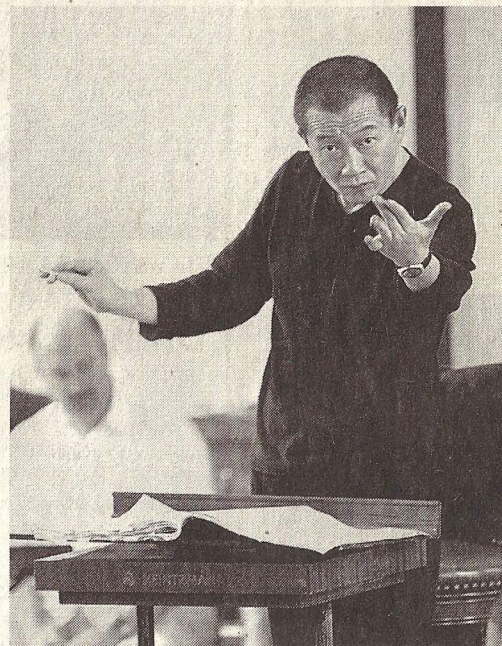
In Shanghai, Mr. Gelb, Mr. Tan, Ms. Billingham and others lectured to Chinese students from many areas. All the sessions were packed. One of the audience members asked, if they bought tickets to the opera, could they get visas to come to New York? "I'm not a diplomat," Ms. Billingham said diplomatically.

The run-through began with pulsating drums. Singing in the style of Beijing opera, an "official geomancer" introduced the story of Qin Shi Huangdi, the visionary and brutal warlord who unified China in 221 B.C., and his old friend Gao Jian Li, a dissident poet and musician. Gao, known as the Shadow, is captured and ordered to compose the new empire's first anthem. Qin and Gao's conflicted relationship would explode onstage into scenes of violence and fairly explicit sex, involving the emperor's daughter.

As the music rose from the orchestra, alternately heroic, lyrical and haunting, Mr. Tan's shoulders seemed to relax. Voices wove through the gongs, the bass flute and the plucked strings of ancient instruments as well as the orchestra's standard violins and cellos, woodwinds and brasses.

"I'm a sucker for this stuff," said Andrew Watson, the Ford Foundation representative for China, between acts. Although the foundation rarely finances cultural programs, especially in China, he said, "The First Emperor" presented an opportunity to build an artistic bridge that might help carry the weight of its grittier legal and social development projects.

Bridge building — especially the one between East and West — was as common a metaphor during the workshop as tailoring. Four years ago Zhou Xiaoyan, the founder of the opera center at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and once an opera singer herself, offered her vision of the future: Chinese musicians would be successful in the West, return to China to develop new works melding East and West, then re-educate the world to a new tradition.



Madame Zhou, as she is called, now 88, was in the workshop audience, where singers and musicians all but kowtowed to her during rehearsal breaks.

"It is what I was hoping for," she said after the run-through. "It is challenging for singers in a good way. It is exalting and fresh, something new that connects Eastern and Occidental."

But don't accuse Mr. Tan of "fusion," a concept he deplors. He does not blend the two

put his poetry back in after Mr. Tan alters the wording in the process of tailoring the musical phrases. Such hands-on management will continue until opening night, Mr. Gelb said. In his view the general manager of the Met should also be its chief producer: a task his predecessors have not always warmed to. A producer, in his lexicon, "does whatever is necessary."

"There's a huge problem in the way operas are commissioned and realized," he said. While Broadway shows have previews and out-of-town tryouts to change and refine the production, he explained, "opera is supposed to emerge full blown from the head of Zeus on opening night."

"The odds are stacked against you," he added. "So anything I can do to unstack the odds, I would like to do. Going to Shanghai began that process."

THE evening the workshop ended, Mr. Gelb packed up his tennis racket and headed with his retinue to Beijing to meet with Mr. Zhang, who was shooting a feature film there. By its own admission, Mr. Zhang's Chinese team, accustomed to movie sets, has been slow to appreciate the problems of a mammoth opera set that must go up and come down in the same day to make room for other operas.

A revelation of the workshop run-through was that one of Mr. Zhang's major scene changes would have to be tailored to fit the musical drama.

"I didn't want to leave it to chance," Mr. Gelb said, "so I figured I might as well schlep up to Beijing and make sure."

Everyone agrees there is plenty of work to be done. The sets are being designed in China, but the Met crews are building them, and everything must be ready for setup, lighting design and initial rehearsals in August. The costumes — 400 of them, designed by Emi Wada — must be sewn by hand in China. New instruments will be manufactured according to Mr. Tan's designs, and ancient ones will be found and shipped.

Cast members must learn their roles and receive coaching. The Chinese film directors and the Met's creative team, some currently learning to speak Mandarin, will have to find a way to work together on the great opera stage. Acts II and III need to be tweaked.

Money, lots of money, still has to be raised for an opera whose production costs, commission, New York workshop, preparation and rights fees are expected go far beyond \$2 million. But at the end of the Shanghai workshop, the Met folks seemed happy and relieved.

"The most happy moment for me was listening to the music and hearing stuff that I had not heard from him before," Mr. Gelb said.

Mr. Tan, on his way out of the last rehearsal in Shanghai, mimicked a tailor with a needle and said, "Next time you hear it, it will be different."

ONLINE: CREATING AN OPERA

In a previous article, Robert Lipsyte and Lois B. Morris looked at the beginnings of "The First Emperor": nytimes.com/arts.

Above, the composer Tan Dun, seated with microphone, and the director Zhang Yimou on screen, in a virtual lecture as part of the educational aspect of the Chinese venture. At right, Mr. Tan directs his workshop musicians in Shanghai.

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