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A magical evening of myth

Triumphant return concert for Women's Philharmonic

The MYTHS BEING reenacted on the Yerba Buena Center stage spoke of creation, and love. The myth being enacted in "Myths and Poems of China: The Music of Chen Yi," a concert by The Women's Philharmonic and Chanticleer over the weekend, was one of rebirth, and love.

The newly-reborn Women's Philharmonic – which appointed Guangzhou-born, Beijing-trained composer Chen Yi its composer in residence in 1993 and subsequently performed important works by her – has itself been inactive since March 1995, when the orchestra elected to retire a modest debt and rebuild its board before resuming performance. The wisdom of that decision was apparent every moment of Saturday's triumphant return concert.

Long one of the area's best small orchestra – and one of its most ardent and expert proponents of new music – The Women's Philharmonic (TWP) has simply never sounded better. Precision of execution and unanimity of purposes were the norms all evening. And, as is her wont, conductor JoAnn Faletta conferred cogency – and then magic – on everything she touched.

The concert's focal point, in its second half, was the world premier of Chen's "Chinese Myths Cantata," a co-commission of TWP and San Francisco's make chamber chorus Chanticleer (partners in the composer's residency) and by a good measure the best of the fine Chen works of the last three years. **Joining them in spectacularly staged work were the Lily Cai Chinese Dance "Company and a complement of women performers of traditional Chinese instruments.**

The work was sheerly transfixing. What the "Cantata" made clear in a way the earlier works could not have was that Chen, the recent recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, is not only a master of orchestration musical texture and instrumental color. IN addition, she has the rare ability to manipulate, then integrate musical forces of different characters and sizes. Sealing the deal, she proves to be a master of dramatic shape and form.

The "Cantata" is microtonal in a natural, almost casual way, and the revelation was that the non-Chinese instrumentalists and singers managed it so expertly and pointed it to such clear expressive ends. In "Pan Gu Creates Heaven and Earth," the first of the three movements, strings, brass and winds together spelled out the agonies and ecstasies of cosmic creation in slithery, chaotic, then kaleidoscopically energetic phrases.

The Lily Cai dancers, who spun like atoms in the opening movement, were even more impressive in the central “Nu Wa Creates Human Beings.” The goddess’ snake body was realized by dancers who seemed to lack skeletons.

The mythic marriage of the human and the diving in “Weaving Maid and Cowherd” seemed the easiest passage for audience members unfamiliar with Chinese fable to apprehend intuitively. The narrative line of Lily Cai’s choreography seemed at its most explicit, and the choral setting of an anonymous Han Dynasty lament found Chanticleer at its most emotionally open, and heartbreaking.

Costumed and performing as characters in the mini-dramas, the men of Chanticleer came forward with musically the tightest and dramatically the most expressive work I’ve heard from them in a least a decade. The players of TWP, divided in three playing areas on the stage as well as in the small pit, were similarly in peak form, playing with a rare combination of sensitivity and drive.

The Chinese instrumentalists – Min Xiao-fen, pipa; Jie-bing Chen, erhu; Wei-shan, gu-zheng; and Yang-qin Zhao, yangqin; - performed with staggering skill and concentration. The piece would have been immeasurably poorer without their potent contributions.

The concert opened with Chen’s 1994 “Antiphony (Ge Xu),” a dense orchestral tone poem of considerable potency and also included the Largo of Chen’s 1993 Second Symphony. Even the expert performance left the latter feeling heavier on orchestral effects than musical ideas.

Chanticleer gave masterful a cappella performances of a set of Chinese folk songs in Chen arrangements and the 1995 “Tang Poems.” “Written on a Rainy Night,” the second of that set, found both Chen and the men at their best.