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## OPERA REVIEW

# 'Book of Mountains & Seas' Review: A Creative Look at Creation Myths

The U.S. premiere of a show, delayed by Covid-19, drawn from a Chinese compilation of myths that was first transcribed in the fourth century B.C.



A scene from 'Book of Mountains and Seas'

PHOTO: TEDDY WOLFF

*By Heidi Waleson*

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Brooklyn, N.Y.

Over the 80 minutes of “Book of Mountains & Seas,” which had its U.S. premiere on Tuesday at St. Ann’s Warehouse, composer Huang Ruo and director-designer Basil Twist create the world and destroy it. Their materials are simple: 12 singers and two percussionists along with some lengths of silk, large pieces of driftwood-like material and paper lanterns manipulated by six puppeteers. The piece is based on the eponymous Chinese compilation of myths that was first transcribed in the fourth century B.C.; the sung text is in Mandarin Chinese and an invented language. Yet the plots of the four myths that the composer adapted into the libretto are given only the most basic outline in the English supertitles, for the spirit of this haunting evening is atmospheric rather than narrative. “Book of Mountains & Seas” is an exquisite masterpiece of suggestion, an immersive

tapestry of sound and image that weaves itself into your consciousness and makes its point about the interdependence of humans and their planet without ever saying it outright.

The opera begins in darkness. Only the faces of the singers, members of the Choir of Trinity Wall Street, are illuminated; you can barely make out the percussionists ( Michael Murphy and John Ostrowski ) positioned at stage right and left. The singers, three per voice type (soprano, alto, tenor, bass), all have independent lines, and the music layers the voices in various combinations to create different textures and sonic effects. In the first scene, depicting a creation story about Pan Gu—a being whose body parts ultimately become the Earth's rocks, rivers and finally humans—solo lines come together to build a hypnotic, chant-like texture with tight harmonic intervals. Here, it is mostly a cappella, with just some soft gong strokes adding another color. The singers move apart to reveal, at center stage, driftwood pieces emerging from Pan Gu's cosmic egg; the glowing lanterns that are his eyes become the sun and the moon.

In the three subsequent scenes, new combinations of all these elements expand the piece's mythic universe. In "The Spirit Bird," a billowing sheet of silk becomes the ocean; a smaller one, flapping above, is the bird, once a princess who drowned. In revenge, she flies back and forth above the ocean, dropping twigs and branches into it. The percussionists trade bass drumbeats, symbolizing the ocean's vastness and tides, as the soprano and alto lines swoop above the men's repeated phrases.



A scene from 'Book of Mountains and Seas'

PHOTO: TEDDY WOLFF

In the third myth, 10 suns take turns revolving around the Earth until the day they decide to all come out together. The setup is extended at a length that seems impossible to sustain, but it works: The suns, paper lanterns, glowing orange and carried on long poles, emerge

one at a time as the high and low voices alternate, with more joining in at each entrance, accompanied by the shimmering drone of a temple bowl and a high-pitched finger cymbal. When all the suns are visible, the ritual mood suddenly evaporates and violence takes over. The drum and marimba pound while the suns dance, change color and even dangle menacingly over the audience—their combined heat makes the Earth burn and die. The archery god then shoots nine of them, turning them blue, and leaving one—along with a single bass voice, the cymbal and the temple bowl—to light the Earth..



For the final scene, the driftwood pieces are gloriously assembled into the giant Kua Fu, whom we see chasing the sun across the Earth, but never catching it. A percussionist pounds out his journey, weaving around the rhythmic, repeating voices, symbolizing the frustration of his quest. The giant falls in exhaustion and drinks the (silken) rivers dry. Finally, he dies—pieces of his body are taken away. Once again, we are in the dark, with only the illuminated faces of the singers visible. The titles tell us that the giant's staff became a forest of peach blossoms; bits of bright paper drop from above; and the final notes, soft solo voices over a drone, suggest a faint hope for rebirth. The cycle, it implies, will begin anew; we are fated to keep creating and destroying the planet.

Poe Saegusa designed the lighting; Lynne Buckson devised the black velvet costumes that were perfectly invisible until the curtain call. Huang Ruo conducted from the booth behind the audience. This extraordinary piece, co-produced and co-commissioned by Beth Morrison Projects, had its world premiere last November at the Royal Danish Opera House with the choir Ars Nova Copenhagen. It was supposed to be part of January's Prototype Festival, which was canceled due to the Covid-19 surge. Its resurrection two months later

seems of a piece with the fragile hope of its ending: Perhaps there is something to be learned from death and devastation.

—*Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the Journal and is the author of “Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America” (Metropolitan).*

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