

Music

Book of Mountains & Seas — China's creation myths in magical music and puppets

Huang Ruo's mesmerising work of 'vocal theatre' is playing at St Ann's Warehouse in New York



A giant puppet of a humanoid creature, operated by four people, points towards a globe lantern while a dimly lit choir sings

The show features puppets designed by Basil Twist © Teddy Wolff

March 17, 2022 5:00 am by George Grella

The annual Prototype festival of new opera and music theatre was a pandemic casualty in 2021. Regularly scheduled for January, it was again knocked off track this year by the Omicron variant. Frustrating, although some events have been salvaged and rescheduled. So, on Tuesday night, Huang Ruo's *Book of Mountains & Seas* made its US debut in St Ann's Warehouse, under the Brooklyn Bridge. The magic of the evening wiped away any sense of lost opportunities.

Presented by St Ann's and Beth Morrison Projects, in association with Prototype and Trinity Church Wall Street, it's a work of "vocal theatre", with 12 singers from the Choir of Trinity Wall

Street accompanied by two percussionists. It is a collaboration between composer Ruo (who conducts) and Basil Twist, who directs and who designed the large-scale puppets that are the show's non-vocal performers. In four tableaux, via Ruo's libretto, *Book of Mountains & Seas* adapts creation myths from Chinese culture, found in a compilation of the same title that dates from the fourth century BC. The myths explain the origin of the Earth ("The Legend of Pan Gu") and why there is one sun in the sky ("The Ten Suns"), among others.

Ruo cuts this to a handful of lines for each story. That's where the magic comes in, as he narrates using sound and Twist's marvellous creations. The singers, their faces illuminated only by the glow of the tablets on which they have the score, are a ghostly visual and sonic presence, their voices sliding through microtones and either attenuating or exaggerating each phoneme. Their faces gliding across the stage, they then disappear into darkness.

Ruo's score represents the action through shape and form, the music rising as the giant Pan Gu presses the sky away from the Earth, gently roiling like the ocean, weaving a mesmerising tapestry as the original 10 suns rise and circle the Earth. It's tonal, full of detailed and precise dissonances and inflections. Nothing is complicated, but there is always something happening, and it creates the wonderful feeling that it is outside of real time, a universe in between seconds on the clock.

The simplicity of Twist's staging is a perfect balance, solid against the ethereal music. Twist's taste is so intelligent that the obvious — each of the 10 suns is a lantern on the end of a pole — becomes, along with the music, deeply beautiful. He has designed a set of driftwood-like pieces that are laid out and assembled in evocative ways. In the first story, they make Pan Gu's face; in the final tale, they are the figure of the giant Kua Fu, chasing the Sun.

This is the only place where the music is prosaic, using repetition instead of detail. But the giant articulated puppet is incredible to see as it sits up, stands, reaches to the sky. With the human voices, this inanimate object becomes touching, and Ruo's piece discards text for pure feeling.

★★★★☆

To March 20, stannwarehouse.org

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