

Tan Dun's new *Passion*: from the Bodhi tree to Nirvana in 95 minutes

By [Laurence Vittes](#), 11 February 2019

Depending on how you look at it, Tan Dun's *Buddha Passion* – an ambitious spiritual celebration of the Buddha's teachings and the timeless, universal concepts of love, forgiveness, sacrifice and salvation based on six stories inspired by ancient cave paintings on the western edge of the Gobi Desert along the fabled Silk Road – either was too long or not long enough.

"In those caves there are thousands of paintings about music, musical instruments, and orchestras," Dun told Australian magazine *Limelight*. "All these manuscripts and musical stories fascinated me deeply and I wanted to transpose those ancient paintings into an opera."

As a religious oratorio – "a drama for chorus and orchestra... like a symphonic movie," as Dun explained recently – *Buddha Passion* captures the ancient narratives of the Buddha's teachings, expanding the implications of Buddha's enlightenment to an universal spirituality, and revealing the composer's own yearning for a musical past that was methodically destroyed during Mao's cultural revolution.



As a blend of music, song and dance, with a Cirque du Soleil *joie de vivre*, *Buddha Passion* was an unforgettable theatrical experience. At the end of the first half, with one of the percussionists jumping off his feet to hammer blow after blow on a massive Chinese red flower drum, the young, hip, and ready to be swept off its feet Hollywood-type audience – some of which would undoubtedly be attending the Grammys the following night two miles south at Staples Center – went wild. If its production costs weren't so high – even without the massive Buddha that the composer envisioned to lie across the entire length of the stage (but which we didn't get in Los Angeles) – it could run on Broadway.

Instead of Broadway, *Buddha Passion* was making its US premiere at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, an HD showcase for its sonic splendors where every detail could be heard, from the most gigantic climaxes down even to the silence between the sounds and the contrasts between joyous celebration and reflective meditation – which is what Tan Dun's art is about. The Los Angeles Philharmonic shared commissioning honors with the Dresden Music Festival – where the piece had its world premiere last May – the New York Philharmonic and the Melbourne Symphony. The orchestra responded brilliantly to Dun's technicolor score, including drop dead gorgeous French horn and viola solos. In addition to a Philharmonic well-stocked with 12 woodwind, 11 brass and 30 percussion instruments – including a battery of kettledrums – each of the seven soloists, and even the two choruses, developed musical and charismatic relationships with the audience.

The conventional singers – soprano Sen Guo, mezzo Huiling Zhu, tenor Kang Wang and bass-baritone Shenyang – all sang and acted splendidly. The two indigenous singers – Tan Weiwei and Batubagen – made striking impressions, the latter a Mongolian otherworldly, low bass notes throat singer as well as a virtuoso of the two-string *morin khuur* which he played with a bow strung with Mongolian black horsehair, the world's finest. Dressed in diaphanous white, soloist Chen Yining supplied some the most magical moments of the evening as she danced and seemed to float above the stage while plucking at her lute-like *fantan pipa*.

The 80-member strong Los Angeles Master Chorale rose to the big climaxes with force and majesty, and was a flexible instrument following conductor Gustavo Dudamel's attentive direction in their dialogues with the singers: they could sing sweetly and lyrically, as at the beginning of the "Deer of Nine Colors", and be precisely in tune at an exposed moment in "Zen Dream", where they also played tinkling fingers bells in a particularly charming moment. Arrayed in front of the Chorale for the first half only, the Los Angeles Children's Chorus sang so well that there ought to be an alternative version for matinees when they can stay up for the whole performance.

The sense of an ensemble on stage created a tangible bonding throughout the hall with the demographically diverse audience. By the very nature of the story, the glorious generosity with which each member of the large cast and crew gave their fullest, allied to the composer's own libretto – which is as direct and emotionally charged as his music – allowed the concepts of Buddhist present moments and eternal repeating arcs of life to co-exist for an evening.



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