

Review: With a brilliant 'Buddha Passion,' L.A. Phil and Tan Dun usher in the Year of the Boar

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Dancer Chen Yining (far left) with conductor Gustavo Dudamel, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and vocal soloists in the U.S. premiere of Tan Dun's 'Buddha Passion' at Walt Disney Concert Hall on Friday night, (Craig T. Mathew/Mathew Imaging /)

All standing ovations at classical concerts are not equal. They can be spontaneous expressions of delight, dutiful exercises of obligation or nothing more than a reverse domino that begins when the guy in front of you stands.

But when a piece of music reminds you of what is important in life you sometimes stand as a reaction to awe. That felt the rare case at Walt Disney

Concert Hall on Friday night after the U.S. premiere of Tan Dun's "Buddha Passion."

On my way down the aisle after the galvanizing Los Angeles Philharmonic performance conducted by Gustavo Dudamel — and featuring a half-dozen vocal soloists and a dancer, along with the Los Angeles Master Chorale and Los Angeles Children's Chorus — someone from the audience asked me for the seeming impossible. "I dare you to pan this," he challenged.

What *is* impossible is pinning down Tan. Since emigrating from China to New York in the late 1980s, he has made a practice of not only combining East with West but also the avant-garde with romanticism and leaving room for Hollywood flash. In fall 2000, for instance, Tan wrote his "Water Passion," a Taoist take on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, for cellist Yo-Yo Ma, country fiddler Mark O'Connor, a Western chorus and a literal kitchen-sink of percussion instruments splashed in water. Six months later he picked up an Oscar for his score to "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" at the 73rd Academy Awards.

Like "Water Passion," based on incidents from or aspects of Jesus' life that most Westerners know, the new passion takes instances surrounding the Buddha that many Chinese of Tan's generation would have learned. Also similar is an extravagant use of Chinese and Western musical forces. But here opposites no longer sound like opposites. Tan's musical language has matured into a hybridization that seems as natural as a nectarine.

The original inspiration for the passion came from the Buddhist murals and manuscripts found in the Mogao Caves outside the Western Chinese city of Dunhuang. From these materials, Tan re-imagined the sounds of ancient instruments and the style of the chants to illustrate six tales about the Buddha illustrating compassion.

A little prince (mezzo-soprano Huiling Zhu) learns the hard way, by losing a piece of his flesh, that all life — a tiny bird and the Buddha-to-be — is equal. The Deer of Nine Colors (soprano Sen Guo) is betrayed a drowning man (tenor Kang Wang). In a Zen garden, a lowly woodcutter (baritone Shenyang) competes with the illustrious 6th Patriarch (Wang) for the emptiest mind. While playing the stringed pipa, an extraordinary dancer, Chen Yining, executes the “Flying Pipa Dance,” impersonating the bodhisattva with a thousand arms and a thousand eyes.

The most moving section is the fifth, in which the Buddhist “Heart Sutra” is chanted. For this, Batubagen, a Mongolian singer, produces high overtones from low bass drones and plays on a traditional instrument, while Tan Weiwei sings in a manner based on traditional Chinese folk music.

Tan provides, of course, plenty for the large orchestra, with its extensive percussion section, and the choruses to do. Asian melodies get Westernized, sometimes with the expansive and unembarrassed extravagance of a 21st century Puccini. But just as often Western instruments and the choral singers are asked to Eastern-ize, producing tones meant for scales of other cultures.

Each half of the 90-minute passion ends in shameless glory. The first is after the “Pipa Dance,” and that makes sense. The second, though, is after the dying Buddha (Shenyang) achieves the heart-stopping, music-stopping mystic state of nirvana. He whispers his last words of wisdom, “I am awake.”

Any other composer would have ended there. But Tan daringly tacked on another near-tacky Hollywood climax. We didn’t leave to mourn the Buddha with a tear in our eye as if he were a character in a melodramatic 19th century opera. We walked out awake, into the modern world. It worked brilliantly.

The performance seemed its own marvel. Dudamel brought a sense of convincing expression to every kind of music thrown at him. A woman from

Beijing told me she thought the Master Chorale sang the Mandarin text like natives. For all I know, they did the same with the few lines in original Sanskrit.

Tan first conducted “Buddha’s Passion” himself last year in Dresden, and it will now go on to the New York Philharmonic and to Melbourne Symphony. But leave it to the L.A. Phil to offer more than two weekend performances of the passion as its celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year. The orchestra also offered two evenings, Wednesday and Thursday, of more pops-oriented “Year of the Boar” fare, conducted with sophisticated grace by former Dudamel fellow Elim Chan.

Violinist Ray Chen was the suave soloist in Saint-Saëns and Ravel potboilers. Flashy Chinese orchestral pieces, Ravel’s “Bolero” and an encore with lion and dragon puppets ensured festivity. But the L.A. Phil being the L.A. Phil, it also used the program for yet another uncompromising centennial season premiere.

In “Thirst,” Du Yun — an edgy New York composer whose Pulitzer Prize-winning opera, “Angel’s Bone,” will be given its West Coast premiere by Los Angeles Opera next season — offered a feminist updating of classic Chinese opera. She rewrote a scene between two women meant to impersonate old men.

While Wang Ying did make the old man believable, Zhang Tingfang turned the same role into the young woman the singer really is. The Year of the Boar, yes, but also, in L.A. Phil-land, the year of the Buddha and the year of the woman.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-laphil-year-of-the-boar-review-20190211-story.html>