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**Go East, Young Diva**

**By ANDREW MORAVCSIK**

For four hundred years, no art form has been more closely identified with Western culture than opera. At the heart of every great European city stands an opera house. Over the centuries, it became the center of intellectual and social life: the place where the aristocracy gambled and partied, the rising bourgeoisie conversed, the artistic avant-garde sought inspiration. From Baroque to post-modern, opera librettos mirror the modern history of the West.

Yet opera is dying — in the West. The most popular romantic operas — works like “Aïda,” “Turandot,” and “Tristan und Isolde” — can no longer be cast with singers of the high quality lovingly remembered and immortalized in recordings from only a few decades ago. Charismatic artists like Maria Callas, Birgit Nilsson or Ezio Pinza starring in 19th-century romantic opera is what transformed opera into a universally acclaimed art form — still popular around the world. Just ask anyone who heard Pavarotti sing “Nessun dorma.” These remain the operas audiences want to hear, yet where are the singers?

The music director of the Metropolitan Opera, James Levine, waxes nostalgic about the singers he conducted there 40 years ago: “They were sensationally full-scale in every artistic way. ... I’d give so much to hear them sing again.”

But help is on the way! And from an unexpected direction: the East.

In China, the first public performance of an opera in Italian since the Cultural Revolution took place only 15 years ago. Yet on a recent trip to Shanghai, I happened upon a local production of “Otello,” Verdi’s most challenging score, presented by a Chinese conductor and Chinese singers and orchestra members in an idiomatic performance that was later exported to a major Finnish opera festival.

A few months later I was at the glamorous new half-billion-dollar opera house in Beijing — shaped like a shiny silver egg, and so dubbed by the irreverent Beijing population — to hear a new completion of Puccini’s unfinished “Chinese” opera, “Turandot,” penned by a young Chinese composer, Hao Weiya.

Even better are indigenous works, which permit Chinese singers to shine in their native language. Guo Wenjing’s “Poet Li Bai,” which starred the Chinese-born Metropolitan Opera bass Hao Jiang Tian in its premiere, spellbindingly evokes the life and work of one of China’s great Tang Dynasty poets.

And I returned to New York in time to catch the premiere of “The First Emperor,” an opera by China’s best-known composer, Tan Dun, at the Metropolitan.

The star was Plácido Domingo. But Asian opera stars are on the rise. Asians are soaking up the slots in American and European music schools, winning vocal competitions throughout the world, infiltrating opera choruses in Europe, and increasingly showing up as main-stage soloists.

Asia’s newfound comparative advantage is perhaps not as surprising as it seems at first glance. Opera has always been a globalized profession, with singers traveling throughout Europe and across the Atlantic to ply their trade. The main reason is that great singers have always been a scarce commodity.

Opera resembles professional sports in that technical and physical demands push its superstars to the limit of human stamina and potential. In any generation of singers, few can hit the high C’s and execute the difficult runs that Verdi demands, or project over Wagner’s extravagant orchestration for five hours a night. Even fewer can do so with elegance, drama and musical depth. As with athletes, producing such singers requires that experts sift through millions of young people to find the talented few, provide decades of dedicated training and reward them with enough fame and riches to make the tedium and personal risk worthwhile.

For centuries, the raw material in Europe and America came from aristocratic and royal ensembles, church and school choirs, cabarets and clubs, Broadway and vaudeville districts, small towns and city streets full of wandering performers, and countless families singing around fireplaces, pianos and radios. For centuries, no entertainer was more glamorous, or more highly paid, than an opera star. They were, as the names *diva* and *divo* imply, divine.

In the West, those days are gone. Classical microphone-free vocalism has been marginalized by a sea of electronically enhanced pop. Church choirs and school music education are vanishing. A wide range of less risky and more remunerative job opportunities, inside and outside music, makes the chancy career in opera look less attractive. As a result, great Western opera singers are becoming scarce — at least those with the dark, resonant voices required for Verdi, Wagner and Puccini. They are rarer to start with, further from the microphoned norm, and demand a longer and tougher apprenticeship.

But in Asia many of the critical conditions still exist. Asian students display a fierce commitment to education, a powerful work ethic and a strict sense of discipline. Classical music remains prestigious in Asia in part because it is associated with the West — and not without reason. Music education is often compulsory; and conservatories, while not at Western levels, are strong.

Increasing numbers of Western conservatories seek to cash in by recruiting the best young Asian opera singers — particularly those from Korea, Taiwan and China. Last year, in Germany’s prestigious Bertelsmann competition, all three top finalists were Korean, while in America’s top competition at the Metropolitan Opera, one of the four finalists was the Korean tenor Sung Eun Lee. A majority of new tenors hired in Berlin, Stuttgart and a number of other important German opera choruses are Koreans.

As these examples suggest, South Korea seems to produce an extraordinary number of opera singers, given its moderate size and geographical distance from the cultural epicenter of opera. In explaining the factors behind Korea’s success, the demure Metropolitan Opera soprano star Hei Kyung Hong seems to be describing the West 50 years ago: the prestige of Western high culture, the status symbol of owning a piano, the strong traditional family and a competitive drive to succeed at home and abroad. Some credit Korea’s tradition of song and extroverted culture — as compared to, say, Japan, where classical music is popular, but few opera stars are born.

More is at work here. One operatic advantage many Koreans enjoy is that the country is about a quarter Christian, with a predominance of hymn-book toting Presbyterians and Methodists. A disproportionate number of Korean singers are Christian, including Hong, whose father was a minister, and Lee, who makes a point of donating his prize money back to the missionaries who originally brought opera to Korea.

Yet the country with the greatest potential is, of course, China. With an estimated 30 million piano students and 10 million violin students, the number auditioning for conservatories has increased from a few thousand 20 years ago to nearly 200,000 today.

Following earlier waves of Italian, German, Russian, Japanese and Korean immigrants, China is now stocking the world’s orchestras. Recently, Shanghai-born Hae-Ye Ni was named principal cellist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and Liang Wang from Tsingtao principal oboist of the New York Philharmonic. Chinese soloists are on the rise as well, led by three prominent piano virtuosi: Lang Lang, Yundi Li and Yuja Wang — all in their 20s.

Chinese singers have to work harder than instrumentalists to overcome linguistic hurdles, and they lack the Koreans’ cultural and religious backgrounds. Yet the Chinese government helps them succeed. The view that opera is something modern finds support all the way up to members of the Chinese Communist Party’s Politburo. Arts education is mandatory in many places. The government sends inspectors with clipboards to many villages to find promising young singers and track them for conservatory training. The building boom has resulted in the construction of glamorous opera houses in major cities.

Chinese stars have already begun emerging — and they seem to have more potential than the Koreans to provide the great big voices opera needs. The bass Hao Jiang Tian, star of that poetical opera in Shanghai, has sung for decades at the Metropolitan. In 2007 he was followed by an unknown 23-year old Chinese bass-baritone from Tianjin with the stage name of Shenyang, who won the world’s most prominent singing contest — the Cardiff Singer of the World competition. He sings bass-baritone roles with a warmth, depth and maturity normally reserved for those twice his age. Many believe Shenyang may become the first Chinese operatic superstar.

It is too soon to know whether Asia will save opera. Perhaps Shanghai, Beijing and Seoul will become operatic Meccas. Or perhaps changes in government policy and the cultural inertia of millions of young people listening to Western pop in shopping malls will erase what might have been a promising operatic renaissance. Like so much else in that region, it is an uncertain social experiment.

Yet nothing demonstrates the ironies of globalization more clearly than the possibility that the future of opera, the most venerable of Western performing arts, may depend on Asia.

[](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/02/opinion/global/02iht-GA09Moravcsik.html)

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