

# LISTEN TO 'MILA', LISTEN TO THE HONG KONG'S SOCIAL SOUNDSCAPE ON THE CONTEMPORARY OPERA STAGE (REVIEW)

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## Abstract

The creation and performance of contemporary opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflect the main ideas of contemporary humanistic trend of thought. Contemporary opera is increasingly deepening in international cooperation, cross-cultural artistic expression, global exploration of local social issues, and artists' social participation. Today is a new humanistic era for contemporary opera and other art forms. The artistic and humanistic languages of different nationalities and cultures communicate and dialogue on more diverse artistic platforms. Therefore, the creation of realistic opera which reflects the diversity of Chinese humanistic values and the real development of Chinese society is particularly important today. The creation and performance of contemporary opera in Hong Kong is also a representative of the development of Chinese opera with remarkable regional characteristics. Taking 'Mila', an opera commissioned by the Asia Society Hong Kong Center, as an example, this article analyzes the realistic librettural themes, the music composition of contemporary scenes, and the dramatic presentation of life materials in the work, so as to discover Hong Kong's social sound landscape on the contemporary opera stage.

## Keywords

Social soundscape, Hong Kong, Opera, 'Mila', Stage perception, Performance review

The world premiere of 'Mila', a chamber opera commissioned by the Asia Society Hong Kong Center, took place at the centre's Chamber Stage, 9 Justice Road, Admiralty, Hong Kong, from 18 to 21<sup>st</sup> January 2018. The Center has invited creative and performing teams from Hong Kong, the United States, and the Philippines to produce a thought-provoking chamber opera work with contemporary realistic themes for the Hong Kong stage, such as 'Concrete jungle', 'Endless work', 'Test scores' and others. Aside from the scenes on the stage, the lyrics suggest that this is a work about the pressures of life in the Metropolis.

## SYNOPSIS

The opera 'Mila' tells the story of a Hong Kong family of three and their Filipina domestic helper. The merchants' family has always been strict with their domestic helpers. Before Mila's arrival, they had fired more than a dozen helpers because of the Hong Kong wife's fussiness. She had been blacklisted by the Immigration Department as an employer. In order to avoid the hassle of recruiting new helpers, the American husband decided to compromise with this situation. Mila had worked for a Singaporean family for 20 years before arriving in Hong Kong. When her daughter was drowned, she gave up her job and went back to her hometown to mourn. In order to not be tortured by the painful memories of the unexpected death of her daughter, she wanted to change a new working environment, so she came to Hong Kong. Due to the heavy work pressure of both sides, the wife's lack of erotism and the husband's infidelity, Mila often became the object of the wife's anger. The husband and wife are so busy with their career that they ignore the pressure their son is under. Because of the hypercompetitive campus environment in Hong Kong, the boy is extremely concerned about exam results and ranking. In addition, the atmosphere of the family is not warm, multiple mental pressure so that a 10-year-old child has suicide in mind. Mila believed that she was in a foreign

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country and that her husband did not care about her daughter after his affair. No one at home cared about her daughter's life. It was their neglect that caused their daughter to commit suicide, which made Mila deeply regret and blame herself. She was sensitive to the boy's abnormal behavior when she came to the new family and kept an eye on him, hoping to avoid a similar tragedy in the future.

## LIBRETTO: REALISTIC THEME ON DOMESTIC HELPER

The story of 'Mila' was inspired by independent Hong Kong journalist Godden's (2015) book 'Migrant Domestic Workers: Strangers at Home. "The book respectively from the employers, the families in the Philippines, commission system and the social echo, the maid image group in Hong Kong, and outside workers complain of their records and describes the life of the five angles in the process of globalization is the most real plaintiffs and around their families living style and environment, collect relevant people's voice and sound from different backgrounds. It allows readers to view foreign domestic workers from multiple perspectives and reflect on their own attitudes towards personal equality and human rights and freedoms in different ethnic and social contexts." (Fang Bo [方博], 2018: 52) Hong Kong local Librettist Candace Chong selects material from many true stories in the book *Migrant*, "to embellish the intense pressure of the employer's family on the helpers' labor force, the questioning of the foreign helpers' personality, the distinction between the rank and inferiority of the employers, and the tension of the foreign helpers in the families left behind." (Fang Bo [方博], 2018: 52) At the same time, she also focuses on "the dependence of some foreign helpers on their employers' families, especially the care of their children, and describes a lot of psychological activities, shifting the focus of the story from the tense relationship between the employed characters to the theme of peaceful and great love" (Fang Bo [方博], 2018: 52).



Figure 1: from left to right: Mila, wife, husband. Photo from the performance by courtesy of the Asia Society Hong Kong Center.

## MUSIC: COMPOSITION FOR CONTEMPORARY SCENES

In the creation of the chamber opera, it was conceived that the work would be performed in English, Cantonese and Tagalog, the main official language of the Philippines, in a manner corresponding to the Hong Kong wife, the American husband, the Chinese-American son (who also plays the Filipino daughter) and the Filipino helper. Such multilingual opera creation is not common on the opera stage in Hong Kong. The multilingual and cross-cultural dialogue also poses a high challenge to the composer in the composition of opera music. In order to express each characters' perform very well in form of language itself, the composer used a great deal of differential sound, atonal and pantonality

melody writing, such as cantonese and Tagalog voices of melodic imitation, the lyrics of language makes their respective roles in the process of singing closer to the normal daily conversations. This treatment not only increases the singability of the melody, but also exaggerates the mood of the singing and the dramatic performance of the singer into the role performance.



**Figure 2: Percussion set/Kitchen scene. Photo from the performance by courtesy of the Asia Society Hong Kong Center.**

In the musical composition of the opera, apart from the solo of the wife and husband in the second act, the duet of Mila and Rosa in the fourth act, and Mila's aria before the end of the opera, a large amount of vocal and instrumental writing in the whole play is carried out by atonal and pantonal techniques. The composer added a lot of cooking ware to the percussion instruments in order to create the soundscape of the kitchen (Figure 2). The features of the pots and plates of different size with differential pitch, the composer and his colleagues manual cutting wood, steel pipes, with the whole row of glass bottles of different capacity of water and other means in accordance with the law of averages and differential for its sound tuning, arranging, the composer achieves his goal to the convergence of pitch, timbre and sounds from the kitchen to the dining room's scenes integration. In the whole opera, the music is outstanding, "large-scale percussion instruments in combination with string and wind, and specifically targeted tuning of the double piano playing together much atonal sound texture, dominated by special chamber music tone combination, for specific scenarios and the shaping of emotional and psychological activities to enhance the dramatic effect" (Fang Bo [方博], 2018: 52-53).

## DIRECTION AND STAGE DESIGN: THEATRICAL STAGING OF MODERN LIFE

Hong Kong stage director Chan Chu-Hei uses a lot of real-life material in his creation of 'Mila'. For instance, special percussion instruments consisting of kitchenware and cutlery are arranged regularly on custom-made shelves to create a view of the kitchen, corresponding to the scene of the dining room in the first act of the opera. In addition, the table is lifted upright during the act to serve as a projection screen, through which the magnified screen shows the small mobile phone screen of the wife in the car monitoring the domestic helper with the camera in Act 2 of the opera. At the same time, the director also apply many of the theatrical techniques into the performance. "When the characters in the opera sing their inner lines, they use the expression of dramatic narration. The singer is moving in different positions to express emotions, while the other characters are still in place, highlighting the inner activities of the singer and predicting the distance between the main characters." (Fang Bo [方博], 2018: 53).



**Figure 3: Son.** Photo from the performance by courtesy of the Asia Society Hong Kong Center.

When “the couple's almost ritualistic uniform and orderly dining movements, combined with their different expressions and narrations, convey their physical separation.” (Fang Bo [方博] 2018: 53) In addition, every time the little boy leaves the table, he stoop to carry the chair to his desk, walking slowly and heavily. This chair also symbolizes the pressure of his schoolwork, which makes the boy suffocate (Figure 3).

## HONG KONG’S SOCIAL SOUNDSCAPE ON THE CONTEMPORARY OPERA STAGE

Opera has long enjoyed a good audience in Hong Kong and has always maintained an active performance practice. As Hong Kong music fans living in an international metropolis where Chinese and Western cultures meet, they have always had a high enthusiasm for traditional Western opera. Arts organizations such as the Hong Kong Opera House, the Hong Kong Arts Festival and Viva Merlot present local productions of Western opera classics every year. At the same time, the Hong Kong Arts Festival, the New Vision Arts Festival and other institutions will pay close attention to the contemporary international opera scene, with internationally renowned opera houses and festivals jointly commissioned and produced contemporary opera works. For example, ‘Dream of the Red Chamber’ (2016), jointly commissioned by the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the San Francisco Opera, was performed during the 2017 Hong Kong Arts Festival. Hong Kong New Visions Arts Festival and Beth Morrison Projects co-produced Pulitzer Prize-winning opera ‘Angel’s Bone’ (2017), which was staged at the 2018 New Visions Festival. The former is composed and adapted by a group of Chinese-American artists, including the composer Bright Sheng, using the opera genre to tell the Eastern and

Western audiences a love tragedy of the ancient Chinese literati society in the relatively traditional operatic language. The latter, the young Chinese composer Du Yun tells the story of human trafficking in contemporary society by means of magic realism. The musical language of this work jumps across time and space, and the dramatic presentation on the stage is also exaggerated and fierce.

Viewing the works presented on the stage of contemporary opera in Hong Kong, it is easy to notice that opera works of different artistic styles have relatively stable audience groups. Western classics still account for the lion's share of the Hong Kong opera market, while contemporary operas created by Chinese artists from both the Mainland and abroad, especially Hong Kong local artists, are also supported by local art institutions and the market itself. Realistic themed operas such as *Angel's Bone* and *Mila* have also won praise in the media and among a diverse local audience.

## FOREIGN DOMESTIC HELPER, METROPOLIS, AND THE ONCE 'SILENCED' VOICES

As the media has repeatedly exposed the abuse of domestic workers by local employers in Hong Kong, local people have gradually raised their attention to the group of migrant workers in recent years, and the voices of different individuals in the domestic helpers have gradually been heard. "In addition to the above-mentioned book 'Migrant Domestic Workers', Hong Kong Jade Terrace's feature program 'Sunday Archives' of one episode titled 'Days without maid', depict from Hong Kong people to get along with maids, rely on their labor force, Hong Kong helpers and migrant helpers' salary and work style comparison, domestic helpers' agent and contract system and other aspects, discusses their social position and value in the Hong Kong society. 'Sunday Beauty Queen', a documentary by Filipino director Villarama, depicts the struggles and loss of self in daily life and work as domestic helpers compete on the Hong Kong stage of the beauty pageant for Miss Philippines. Xyza Cruz Bacani, a street photographer who used to be one of the Philippines' maids. Now her work was featured in the New York Times, and has become a renowned photographer in Hong Kong and around the world. In addition to the above-mentioned concerns of artists and media in the fields of literature, art and journalism on the life of foreign domestic helpers working abroad, social science scholars have also paid attention to the transnational survival status of foreign domestic helpers, including economic and social status, gender identity, personal emotion, transnational family maintenance and others. However, there are only a handful of musical stage works that describe the domestic helpers' community and the reality of their lives.



**Figure 4: invited Filipino domestic helpers as guests to the premiere of 'Mila'. Photo of the audience while showing the performance by courtesy of the author.**

Back in 2007, *The Silent Soprano*, a Philippine musical theater, told the story of Margie, a Filipino girl who was a domestic helper, had been discovered in Hong Kong and gradually became a famous

singer. In order to win over Hong Kong music fans, Margie had to change her Cantonese stage name to 'Fai fai'. She was always in the public eye, accompanied and 'guided' by her agent. Hiding her Filipino identity and branding herself as a Chinese singer was a marketing strategy that led to her success.

In early 2018, Asia Society Hong Kong Center premiered this chamber opera 'Mila', which once again aroused the attention of the media and Hong Kong music fans. (Figure 4) Different from Margie, the heroine of the musical theater mentioned above, who is gradually shaped into a script character attracting worldwide attention through her talent and performance, Mila, the heroine of the opera, is a manual laborer who has always lived at the bottom of the metropolis. Her struggle in a foreign land does not show her hardships in a single line. The long-distance emotional contradiction between her and her left-behind husband in her hometown, as well as her emotional bond with her daughter who has no one to take care of, are the 'behind-the-scenes' theatrical layers of the opera that present the story of this cross-cultural family in Hong Kong in front of the curtain. When 'the Philippino silent soprano' expresses how she and people like her were forced to make the 'silent' helpless choice to hide their own national identity and language in the cross-cultural environment, 'Mila' more directly reveals the maid from both her broken families from far away and her depressive living environment in front, bravely broke the reality of this unharmoniously employers' family. Her emotional company in the son of her employer's family encouraged her to use her 'silent' voice to save the crisis of the family. Even though the opera boldly breaks through national boundaries and class thresholds in Mila's characterization, expressing the great personality of the labouring people at the bottom and conveying the light of humanity, the librettist still ends the story in a very sad way. In Mila's aria by the river at the end of the opera, the heroine sings in a weak and sad voice about her attachment to her hometown, her helplessness to life, and her longing for love. The creators of the opera hope that the realistic theme of this work can bring the audiences in Hong Kong and even the world the most direct touch of heart through these stories and the real feelings in the stories, and generate the most profound reflection on the humanitarian crisis in the social development around them. This opera also allows the 'social stage' of Hong Kong opera and Chinese opera to hear the voices of contemporary metropolises that were once 'silenced' but are no longer silenced.

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