



MUSIC

Chan Ka Nin translates immigrant experience into symphonic theatre

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A Chinese immigrant steps off a ship and into a new world, the culture clash represented by a swirl of music: a straight-ahead military march to begin, and flowery gestures of eastern music flowing in and out and overtop of it, providing not just a contrast but also a complement. Welcome to Canada.

This is the opening of Chan Ka Nin's *Harmonious Interest*, described as a work of symphonic theatre. It's 1884 and Wong Sam Mo (John Han) has just arrived at the port in Victoria. He will meet an older immigrant, Wong Ying (Erica Iris), who writes letters home for the new arrivals, and who will help Wong navigate through his new life in Canada.

The work, with libretto by Mark Brownell, has its world premiere in Victoria on Friday, commissioned by the Victoria Symphony, the culmination of a month-long celebration to mark the 155th anniversary of the city's Chinatown. The name of the work comes from the Gate of Harmonious Interest, which serves as the symbolic entrance to Victoria's Chinatown.

VS Music Director Tania Miller says Chan was an obvious choice for the commission – given his repertoire, and his background. Now 64 and a Juno Award-winning composer and professor of theory and

composition at the University of Toronto, Chan was born in Hong Kong and arrived in Vancouver with his family when he was a teenager. They spent their first nights at a Chinatown hotel, and after a great career disappointment, his father would wind up back in the neighbourhood for work. This had not been his plan. With a high-up management position for Shell Oil back in Hong Kong, he left for Canada with the impression that he would acquire a comparable position here. Instead, he found himself working at a gas station.

“When I think back, it was very hard on him,” says Chan, whose father – who died 10 years ago – wound up working at a Bank of Montreal branch in Chinatown. “He also tried working in the lumber yard, carrying wood. It was very hard on him.”

In commissioning this work and building a month of commemorations around the Chinatown anniversary, Miller, who is marking her 10th-anniversary season with the Victoria Symphony, really did have a harmonious interest. Not only was she eager to expand the symphony’s reach into the Chinese community, but she also wanted to create a better understanding of the city’s Chinese history for the symphony’s other patrons.

“What I’m trying to do is find contemporary-music relationships with our audiences that have direct meaning in their lives and can express who we are here in Victoria and who we are here in British Columbia,” says Miller. “And for me, the history, the story of our Chinatown, was so meaningful and so interesting that it gave us an opportunity to really ... understand our Chinese heritage here, and to explore that through music.”

Chan, whose previous work includes the celebrated 2001 opera *Iron Road*, drew upon that personal experience of immigration in writing *Harmonious Interest*.

“I know what it’s like to be all of a sudden in a foreign land: the language, the customs and how people think – they’re all very different. And to survive, I can see why people sometimes cling to Chinatown for support,” he says.

When he began studying composition and writing himself, Chan was initially drawn to western composers such as Beethoven and Debussy. Later, with encouragement, he embraced Chinese music.

This fluency in both musical traditions surely helped in the creation of what Miller describes as an exciting, highly energetic opening, with its east-west musical clash and a traditional march written right into it. *The British Columbia March* is an unfinished work by 19th-century London-born composer Arthur Thomas Bushby, an immigrant to Canada himself who arrived by ship to the Victoria area, on Christmas Day, 1858.

Later in the 45-minute piece, Chan provides comic relief by tapping into what he figures is a cross-cultural common denominator for Chinatowns: food. In this movement, cookery replaces the instruments, and the principal percussion soloist bangs away at woks and chopping boards, using chopsticks, spatulas and knives.

Harmonious Interest also features a lion dance, an opium den hallucination and an emotional letter home. It portrays difficult conditions and homesickness. Symphony violist Stacey Boal has been specially trained on the Hulusi, a traditional Chinese instrument, for the piece. Throughout, dancer Jung-Ah Chung contributes to the theatrical experience, in the work directed and choreographed by David Ferguson.

For Chinese audiences, Chan knows seeing their own stories in their own language can have tremendous impact. He recalls vividly what that was like with *Iron Road*.

“In the opera, they actually spoke Cantonese,” says Chan. “And then there’s tears in the eyes [of the audience members] because their language was spoken on the stage.”

Victoria Symphony’s world premiere of Chan Ka Nin’s Harmonious Interest takes place March 15 at 8 p.m. at the McPherson Playhouse in Victoria. The program also includes the Butterfly Lovers Concerto performed by concertmaster Terence Tam, and a performance of Dorothy Chang’s Strange Air, a new music piece inspired by B.C.’s natural environment.