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MUSIC

Opera Star Hao Jiang Tian Bridges East and West

Opera singer Hao Jiang Tian, who will star in Tang Jianping's 'Voyage to the East' in New York, is strengthening cultural ties between the East and West



'I shaved my head and beard because I thought that would help me understand,' this part, said singer Hao Jiang Tian of his leading role in the opera 'Voyage to the East' opening June 22 in New York. PHOTO: BENJAMIN HOSTE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By *Charles Passy*

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By **opera-world** standards, Hao Jiang Tian is a late bloomer. The Chinese native didn't even attend his first opera until he was 29 years old, when he was getting ready to study in the U.S. and heard Luciano Pavarotti at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Since then, Mr. Tian has made up for lost time. Today, the 64-year-old bass is a presence on the global opera scene, having performed more than 50 roles at companies from Berlin to Buenos Aires. At the Met, he has appeared for more than 20 seasons, including alongside Pavarotti in 1993 in Verdi's "I Lombardi"—just a decade after his first visit to the opera.

This weekend, Mr. Tian will appear in the New York premiere of Tang Jianping's "Voyage to the East" at Lincoln Center's David H. Koch Theater. The opera, written in the Chinese dialect of Mandarin, traces the story of Jianzhen, a Chinese monk who helped establish Buddhism in Japan almost 1,300 years ago. Mr. Tian portrays Jianzhen, a role he considers one of the most significant in his career. The production is being presented by Jiangsu Performing Arts Group, a China-based organization.

Mr. Tian also has emerged as an artist of note when it comes to strengthening cultural ties between the East and West. He is founder and artistic director of the iSING! International Young Artists Festival, a program that brings Western singers to China to help them learn how to sing in Chinese. He champions Chinese composers, having appeared in several premieres of their works, including Tan Dun's "The First Emperor" at the Met.



Hao Jiang Tian in 'Voyage to the East' at the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing in 2017. PHOTO: WANG XIAOJING

The Wall Street Journal spoke with Mr. Tian recently at his apartment in New York. Edited excerpts:

What spoke to you about "Voyage to the East" and how did you prepare to play Jianzhen?

I studied the character seriously. I went to his temple in China and spent time with the monks there. I shaved my head and beard because I thought that would help me understand. I think even today we need a Jianzhen, somebody so dedicated to what he believes, who would give his life to his mission. During the time I studied this role, I also thought a lot about where I came from and how long my road has been.

Talk about the challenges you faced.

I went through the Cultural Revolution. I worked in a factory for six-and-a-half years. I came to the U.S. with only \$35 in my pocket and four English words. I started from the bottom to become an opera singer. Through my experience, I think I can understand more as an artist. Sadness and happiness, struggle—it all helps me on stage.

What do you remember about your first time seeing an opera?

I saw Pavarotti's poster at the Met. That face grabbed me. I thought, "I've got to see this opera." I bought a standing-room ticket for \$8 to see Verdi's "Ernani." My focus was really on Luciano. Luckily, an old couple left after the first act and they forced me to take their tickets. The usher brought me to the center of the fifth row. The curtain opened and it was Pavarotti singing just in front of me. I was so touched.

Is it easier for you to sing in your native Mandarin?

To me, it is more difficult. I'm trained as a traditional opera singer. My most comfortable languages are French and Italian.

You are bringing Western artists to China to learn to sing in Mandarin. Why is this important to you?

That's my revenge! No, I'm kidding. I got the idea in Italy in 2002, working in Genoa on a production of Verdi's "Don Carlo." The cast was from 10 different countries. They asked, "Is there opera in Beijing? Is there an opera house?" I realized their knowledge about China, especially music, was very limited. I thought, "Why not bring them to China?"

Is there more appreciation of opera in China, especially among young people, than in the U.S.?

In the West, I see the audience getting grayer. In China, it's all black hair, all young faces.

You sometimes perform Hank Williams's "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)" in concert. How did you discover the song?

I first heard it in China during the Cultural Revolution. I had a shortwave radio and the Voice of America was one of my favorite stations to listen to, even if it was the enemy's station and I could get in big trouble. One day they played "Jambalaya." I liked the tune, I liked the sound. I tried to write down the language. And I just started to sing it with my guitar.

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