



**2023 MVOH Show – program notes for non-Cantonese speakers**  
**Prepared by the translation team of volunteers**  
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*The stories in traditional Cantonese opera are usually set in an ancient time. All the songs selected for this benefit concert are from popular operas depicting the dramatic stories involving princes/princesses, heroes/heroines, scholars and talented ladies. The stories are sometimes based on historical figures and facts, or they are at least set in the context of a specific historical time, the conditions of which will be more or less well known to the audience familiar with Chinese history. Empowered by the poetic license they have been granted as artists in this tradition, the playwrights are free to use their imagination to select and re-create those dramatic events that lend themselves well to operatic expression on stage.*

*Love happens to be the common thread running through all the songs chosen for this show, but love is more than romantic love. It takes many shapes and forms. In Chinese, there is a rich vocabulary with different words for the many kinds of love. How many types have you spotted in the following songs/stories?*

**Show III (Aug. 19, 2023 at 7pm)**  
**at Michael J. Fox Theatre, Burnaby, BC**

**1. Embroidering the Fragrant Sachet (十繡香囊) – from *June Snow* (六月雪)**  
Wong Chiu-Kwan & Pui Chun Hin

The well-known tragic folk story of Dau-Ngor (寶娥) that was made famous by a Yuan Dynasty play in the 13th century has inspired generations of regional opera in China. When the renowned Tong Dik-Seng (唐滌生) adapted this story for a Cantonese opera with Yam Kim-Fai and Fong Yim-Feng playing the male and female leads in the 1950s, he gave more depth to the characters and heightened the subplot of romantic love.

This aria, selected from another Hong Kong composition on an opening scene in the story, shows Dau-Ngor making a memento for her husband, who has to leave for his civil exam only 3 days after their wedding. In the poetic lyrics, the new bride describes how she integrates her love and blessings into every stitch and design on the satchel, on which she has embroidered ten messages of love.

**2. The Trial at the Execution Ground (刑場大審) – from *June Snow* (六月雪)**  
Ng Chin-Fung & Angela Keung

This song – the finale in the opera *June Snow* – depicts the high drama that halts the execution of Dau-Ngor, who has been wrongly accused of murdering her mother-in-law. Her husband, thought to be long

dead, now returns home as a high official. Prompted by the unnatural event of a snow storm in June, he orders the case to be re-opened. Through many twists and turns, the truth is finally uncovered and justice is restored: his faithful wife is vindicated when the villain is caught.

### 3. San-Pak's Last Lament (山伯臨終) –from *The Butterfly Lovers* (梁山伯與祝英台)

Ng Chin-Fung

The tragic love story of Leung San-Bak (梁山伯) and Chok Ying-Toi (祝英台) has been memorialised in many literary and musical works. The story is set in feudal China where girls are not allowed to go to school. However, Ying-Toi manages to get her parents to send her and her maid (disguised as men) to a famous college for young scholars, where she spends three years pursuing her studies.

There she falls in love with San-Pak, a fellow student who like everyone else has no clue that Ying-Toi is a woman. In spite of all the clues Ying-Toi drops when saying good-bye to San-Pak when school is over and everyone is returning home. Eventually, Ying-Toi asks if San-Pak would like to marry her sister who is exactly like her. San-Pak is delighted and promises to go to ask for her hand in marriage within a month. Unfortunately, he arrives three days too late, and Ying-Toi is betrothed to a powerful man in an arranged marriage by her father.

This famous aria is San-Pak's last song at his deathbed. He pours out his sorrows, regrets and love for Ying-Toi in this famous piece, which has been immortalized by several of the best singers in Cantonese opera. Ng Chin-Fung has studied his predecessors' renditions to come up with his interpretation especially for his North American fans at this show tonight.

### 4. As a Butterfly Lingering over a Lonely Grave (願為蝴蝶繞孤墳) – from *The Butterfly Lovers*

Angela Keung

Ying-Toi cannot disobey her father, who has arranged for her to marry a powerful man against her will. On her wedding day, she begs for permission to make a detour to visit San-Pak's grave. As she is mourning her lover, a strong wind arises, followed by thunder and lightning. The grave breaks open and she jumps in. The legend says that these star-crossed lovers are transformed into a pair of butterflies and fly about happily together forever.

After the opening tune, pay attention to the unique section of "cyclical naam yum" (palindrome), where the words in each pair of lines are exactly the same, but the order is reversed. This is a unique expression in naam yum that shows one's eternal feelings which go in circles without end. The singer is caught in a cyclical trap of emotions.

### 5. Sorrowful Goodbye at Chung Terrace (重台泣別) – from *Plum Blossoms Open Twice* (二度梅)

Anthony Cheung & Jennifer Cheung

Set in the Tang Dynasty, this story tells of the injustices experienced by the family of Mui Leung-Yuk (梅良玉), and the powerlessness of women who are used as pawns on the political chess board. Under threat

of attack from a foreign nation on the northern border, the emperor ordered Leung-Yuk's beautiful wife to be sent to the aggressor as a "gift" to appease him. This aria brings out the unspeakable sorrow of parting, and the helplessness and oppression suffered by the couple.

## 6. Reunited at the Floral Pavilion (花亭會) – from *Plum Blossoms Open Twice*

Pui Chun-Hin, Angela Keung & Vera Ma

Hung-Yuen (杏元), the beautiful wife of Leung-Yuk, is chosen by the emperor as an offering to the invader in exchange for peace. On her way to the bordering nation, Hung-Yuen jumps off a cliff but is miraculously saved. This aria describes the unexpected reunion of the couple at the Floral Pavilion.

## 7. Sewing (縫衣) – from *Repatriation of Man-Gay to Hon* (文姬歸漢)

Angela Keung

Man-Gay (文姬) is a historical figure in the era of the Three Kingdoms (220-280). Her father Choi-Yup (蔡邕) is the official historian who has been working on the chronicles of the Han Dynasty. Man-Gay has mastered both the arts and science of music, and her talents are well-known. Kidnapped by a Hun prince, who adores her and takes her to be his wife. Their love for each other is cut short after twelve years, when Cho Cho, as the new Prime Minister of Han, pays a high ransom to the Huns for the return of Man-Gay, so that she can continue her father's unfinished mission of completing the History of Han. Very reluctantly, Man-Gay bids farewell to her husband and children.

This aria describes the mixed feelings swelling in Man-Gay's heart as she prepares to return to her mother country, but has to leave behind her family of 12 years. With every stitch, she sews her love and thoughts into these new clothes for her children as a parting gift. In this solo piece, Cantonese opera Master George Lau has especially re-arranged the music and re-designed the *cheung-hon* (唱腔) for his student Angela who is singing this aria in public for the first time.

## 8. Separation (別離) – from *Repatriation of Man-Gay to Han* (文姬歸漢)

Ng Chin-Fung & Wong Chiu-Kwan

The Han Emperor has offered the Huns a high ransom for the safe return of Man-Gay to her mother country so that she can succeed her father's colossal task to complete the official history of Han. If the Huns do not oblige, there will be bloodshed.

This one-act show is performed by two of our star artists Ng Chin-Fung and Wong Chiu-Kwan as Man-Gay and the Hun Prince. Their reluctant separation, ending the unexpected but well-earned domestic bliss of twelve years, is artistically presented in the best of Cantonese operatic tradition.