



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 ancient times. 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 1 (Aug. 18, 2023 at 7pm)
at Michael J. Fox Theatre, Burnaby, BC

1. A Decade at the Sui Palace Dreaming of the Floral Mirror (隋宮十載菱花夢)

Ng Chin-Fung & Angela Keung

The story is set in the Sui Dynasty (581-617). When the general of Sui attacks the capital of the Kingdom of Chen, Princess Lok Cheung breaks her bronze floral mirror, giving one half to her husband while keeping the other half herself, hoping that one day they will put the halves together. To give her husband time to help the rest of the royal family flee, the brave princess stays behind to delay the enemy troops. This song describes how she tries to seduce the general charging into the palace, but when he realizes the real identity and motive of Lok Cheung, he admires her bravery and takes her under his wings and gives her protection among his troops by disguising her as his wife.

2. Ode to Fallen Petals (黛玉惜花) – from *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢)

Winnie L. Cheung

The world-renowned Chinese novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢) has inspired many regional operas of different traditions throughout China. Generations have been moved by the tragic love story

between Gar Bo-Yuk (賈寶玉) and Lum Doi-Yuk (林黛玉). Legend goes that in their previous incarnation Bo-Yuk is a precious stone and Doi-Yuk is a rare herb that survives only because of Bo-Yuk's tender loving care. This has created a special bond between them. When they are incarnated as humans, they become best friends and lovers.

This aria is inspired by the famous poem by Doi-Yuk, in which she laments the short-lived blossoms after a stormy night. Those poetic lines have given rise to many artistic renditions in different genres. This song is a well-loved piece in Cantonese opera style.

3. Doi-Yuk's Swan Song (黛玉離魂) – from *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

Wong Chiu-Kwun & Jennifer Cheung

When Doi-Yuk learns that Bo-Yuk is betrothed not to her but to his other cousin, she is heart-broken. On her deathbed, she asks her maid to bring out all the poems she has written. She has them burned, as she sings her swan song.

4. Bo-Yuk Enters the Zen Gateway (寶玉入禪關) – from *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

Anthony Cheung & Wong Chiu-Kwan

Devastated by the untimely death of Doi-Yuk, and disillusioned by the scheming adults around him, the teenager Bo-Yuk seeks enlightenment in Zen Buddhism. In this aria, Doi-Yuk's maid blames him for his unfaithfulness. The audience will come to appreciate the struggles and sufferings experienced by a sensitive young man. Though he lives a privileged life surrounded by adults who dote on him, he feels trapped like a bird in a golden cage. He hopes to find solace and liberation in the solitary life of a Buddhist monk by letting go of the past and the material world.

5. The Love-sick Monk Revisits Siu-Sheung Studio (情僧偷渡瀟湘館) – from *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

Ng Chin-Fung

Apparently, Bo-Yuk the love-sick monk finds it hard to let go of the deep and unfulfilled love he has for Doi-Yuk. So, one day he returns to her former abode – Siu Sheung Studio – in the Red Chamber. This aria is one of the best-known songs from the opera based on this classical novel, and has been made famous by many Cantonese singers and actors. This tradition is carried especially for us by performing artist Ng Chin-Fung tonight.

6. Farewell on Leaving the Yue Kingdom (越國驪歌)—from *Sai Si* (西施)

Anthony Cheung & Vera Ma

The opera *Xi Shi* celebrates one of the four great beauties of ancient China – Sai Si (西施 Xi Shi in Mandarin) – who lived in the capital of the Yue Kingdom in the 7th to 6th century BCE.

In the story, the King of Yue is made a captive in the Kingdom of Wu where he endures ten years of hardship, while his loyal minister Fan Lai (范蠡) recruits and trains some of the most beautiful maidens in Yue with a plan to bedazzle and distract the King of Wu. Sai Si (西施) who tops all the beauties, falls in love with Fan Lai, who convinces her to sacrifice herself to go on the mission. This song describes the emotions of the two lovers as Sai Si leaves Yue for the Wu Kingdom. Listen to some of the poetry in the lyrics as Sai Si complains to Fan Lai, "My medicinal pot is hardly cold, and yet you rush to send me away." In her heart though she understands their mutual sacrifice, and is resigned, "In the solitary Wu Palace, only a blue bird can fly out, carrying my love to you!"

7. Boating on Lake Tai (五湖泛舟)—from *Sai Si* (西施)

Pui Chun-Hin & Angela Keung

Their plan works, and the King of Yue eventually defeats the King of Wu. With mission accomplished, the wise Fan Lai resigns from his official role to retire with Sai Si. This song opens with Sai Si pining for her beloved Fan Lai, and how Fan Lai comes to share their dream life with her. The song ends with the couple happily riding a little boat on Lake Tai into the sunset.

8. Drafting the Indictment (寫表) -- from *The Ten Charges Against Yim Sung* (十奏嚴嵩)

Ng Chin-Fung & Wong Chiu-Kwan

This one-act show is taken from the famous opera based on the stories involving some historical figures during the Jiajing reign (1522-1566) of the Ming Dynasty.

In this scene, Hoi Shui (海瑞), an official hailing from Hainan Island (the farthest southern region of the Ming Empire) dares to expose the crimes committed by the corrupt but all-powerful Minister Yim Sung (嚴嵩), whose daughter is a favourite of the Emperor. Yim Sung dominates the Ming imperial court, abusing his power and inflicting miseries on the people with heavy taxation, while his son freely captures women he fancies. The conduct of the father and son is frowned upon by other court officials and scholars, but nobody dares say anything because an imperial edict issued by the emperor states that anyone reporting on Yim Sung will be beheaded.

In this scene, Hoi Shui is working on an official indictment that accuses Yim Sung of having committed ten crimes, including a conspiracy led by his son to overthrow the kingdom. He explains to his wife the risk he is taking, and asks her to flee the capital right away so that she will not be implicated if the emperor turns against him for daring to indict his trusted Minister. Notice how the internal drama in Hoi Shui is interpreted and presented by our star performers in this act.