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[Arts and Cultures] A Broadway Show with Taiwanese Elements

2020/12/09 05:30



Full orchestra from National Taiwan Symphony Orchestra performing *Once Upon An Island* (photographed by Mei-Hsueh Lin)

記者凌美雪 / 專訪



The beautiful props and costumes on stage of *Once Upon An Island*

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The first time that Ching-Shan amazed the crowd was her high school graduation concert where she assembled 35 players and conducted her composition *El Carnaval Español* in 2013. Ching-Shan then continued her studies at Eastman School of Music, majoring in composition and minoring in piano performance. In 2016, she won the 2nd prize in the NTSO Composition Competition with her orchestral piece *When the Sun Rises*; she also won the 1st prize and some special prizes in the 7th International Antonín Dvořák Composition Competition. Since her junior year in college, she started actively working with student filmmakers, animators, and game designers, and she was finally able to hone her skills writing music for multimedia when she was admitted to New York University in 2017. In 2019, she was selected as one of the mentees in composer Tom Holkenborg's internship program.



Started playing the piano since a young age, Ching-Shan Chang is also a film composer, arranger, and a conductor now. (photographed by Mei-Hsueh Lin)

Positive reviews for her first musical

Since the beginning of her film scoring journey, Ching-Shan has not only won numerous awards including best scores in Star Hollywood Festival, Los Angeles Film Awards, and a silver medal for best score and soundtrack for film and tv at the Global Music Awards, but also a short film she wrote the music for titled *A flor Azul* was screened in the renowned Cannes Film Festival.



追蹤粉絲專頁

分享



自由副刊

7 hours ago

綠蒂 / 我的文學啟蒙——父親的漢文私塾

我的學前教育，五歲時就學於父親開設的漢學私塾——尚修書房。父親終生喜愛花藝詩棋，我亦追隨，至今詩學棋藝略有所成，均係源自父親的庭訓。

TOP

In 2019, she was awarded the Golden Eye trophy at the 8th Film Music Competition organized by Zurich Film Festival. She accepted the highest honor from film composer Don Davis, marking the first Asian female winner in history.

Speaking of creating the music for *Once Upon An Island*, Ching-Shan admitted that her experience working in film has helped her a great deal. "My motto when I'm writing any type of music is that music has to tell a story and paints the scene for the audience. With my training in the film industry, I hope that when the audience extract my music from its original form, they can still see some sort of scene in their mind."

Music in the musical *Once Upon An Island* has shown to be largely well-accepted by the audience of all ages. In addition to music, children are especially attracted to dashing lights, stunning props on stage, and the costumes. A parent who cares deeply about the classical music world in Taiwan talked highly about the music, and expressed that she is extremely happy to see how the NTSO has been ambitious in the past few years, including trying to bring Broadway to the Taiwanese audience.

A musical for the orchestra to shine

However, can we call a musical like *Once Upon An Island* an original Taiwanese production of a Broadway show? Ching-Shan took a second, "maybe we can see it as a Broadway show with abundant Taiwanese elements." Ching-Shan then added that she has been a big fan of musicals since a young age, and has seen productions from all over the world. She was most drawn to the mature orchestral writing with creative elements such as the pipe organ and electric guitar in *Phantom of the Opera*. She has since then dreamed to write a musical with a full orchestra in the background one day.



However, the process of completing the script of *Once Upon An Island* was actually different from other adaptations of literatures or novels. The most fundamental difference is that the original source is merely an encyclopedia, a reference book that organizes local folklore of monsters. To find materials to help shape the drama and logic behind the story was one of the biggest challenges for the playwright in the beginning. "While waiting for the first version of script, I also took some time to skim through the entire book, learning the uniqueness and personality of each monster. It really helped me understand what the director wanted when he showed me his script" Ching-Shan said.

While consuming as much information and literature about monsters, Ching-Shan also faced the challenge of "how do you make it uniquely Taiwanese?" Ching-Shan went through her process "I'm Taiwanese, why don't I simply just reflect my upbringing, my background, my education, music I've written and music I've listened to and blend into one? "With her multivariate background growing up, she was thinking about introducing some traditional instruments that are less familiar to the younger generation on top of the typical instrumentation of an orchestra. She was trying to find the middle point so the music can communicate with audience of all ages.

Inspiration from Pasibutbut

"What represents Taiwan has always been the question throughout my thought process. For instance, there is a part in *The Island and The Giant Whale* that features bass flute. Such rich, resonant and emotional sound does not exist in a regular orchestra, and I want something that imitates the sound of a Chinese instrument called Xiao. However, I purposefully avoided using any Chinese instrument for I don't want people to mistake that Han culture equals to the Taiwanese culture. "



Another highlight in *The Island and The Giant Whale* is my attempt to imitate pasibutbut. In ancient legends, Taiwan is depicted as a giant whale that has fallen asleep. Ching-Shan sees an opportunity to combine it with the custom of the indigenous people: paying tribute to honor the dead spirit and the motherland. "Originally planning to write an interlude, the imitation of pasibutbut and the idea of featuring different aboriginal languages later develops into one independent piece organically. Pasibutbut does not have any accompaniment originally, I plan to honor it with an orchestral layer as thin as possible layered in the background. Ideally, I hope the audience would be able to pick up the enunciation of each individual language, rhythm, pacing, and mode."

The monsters are coming to Taipei in March next year

It really takes a lot to finish a musical, just as Ching-Shan described "day after day, night after night of reading the script and writing music, sometimes I find myself lost in an endless abyss. However, monsters would then come into my head like a beam of light, and take me on a journey in their world."

Whether it's a Broadway show with Taiwanese elements or not, the National Taiwan Symphony Orchestra, StoryWorks and the uprising composer Ching-Shan Chang has definitely created a vision that no one has ever seen. For those who have missed the showing in Taichung, don't be sad! because *Once Upon An Island* will be coming to Taiwan Traditional Theatre Center in Taipei through March 12 to 14th of 2021. Please check the ticket information below.



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