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The dance of magical music and monster folklore: Interview of the composer of *Once Upon An Island* Ching-Shan Chang

written by 何敬堯 | 2021-03-03



In March 2021, collaboration between the National Taiwan Symphony Orchestra and StoryWorks, the magical musical *Once Upon an Island*, will be brought on stage in Taipei soon. In the end of last year, the musical was premiered in Taichung, and we were able to sit down with composer Ching-Shan Chang and original writer Ching-Yao Ho, taking a deep insight into the structure of the music and the relationships of the monsters.

In the interview, composer Ching-Shan Chang shared her thoughts about the creation of this musical, and provided us some refreshing points of view.

Where did the monsters come from? How do you showcase elements of Taiwan?

Ching-Yao Ho: When you just agreed to compose a musical for this topic, what were you imagining it to be?

Ching-Shan Chang: I grew up watching animation by Miyazaki, so I made the connection in my mind right away that this musical is probably going to be something similar to that, except those monsters are from Japanese folklore. However, I hoped to create something that the Taiwanese people can relate to, so I sprinkled lots of local elements throughout the music. Different from how the West often introduces monsters as the enemy of humankind, here in Taiwan, they are merely different species and also have a spirit. Although they are different from humans, they try to co-exist among us in the same society, just like what humans do.

When designing the music, I hope to build a fantasy world for the audience. I wanted to focus on human feelings because folklore has always been written by humans. In the script, monsters are stories, and the emotional connection between those made-up creatures and humans is inseparable.

Ching-Yao Ho: In our previous interview with you, you mentioned that you gave a great deal of thoughts for two keywords before diving in: monsters and Taiwan. How did you portray these two words in the musical?

Ching-Shan Chang: In terms of monsters, the design of the music differs from scene to scene. For example, the music for the human world is set around a major or a minor key; however, the world of monsters is carried out through pentatonic and Japanese folk modes. Through more traditional sounding elements and certain rhythms, I was hoping to bring the audience to ancient times immediately.

Additionally, because the targeted audience of this musical includes the parents and their young children, I don't want to give them the impression that monsters are scary. Therefore, I tried to keep the music more light-hearted and lively, hoping that children will also take interest in the story.

As for elements of Taiwan, that took me a while. Because of the multi-cultural history in Taiwan (including westerners, the Han people, Japanese...etc) and the bloom of each culture, I decided to not limit my music to one specific style. For example, inspired by temple fairs I remember from childhood, you can hear instruments that the temple also uses such as Chinese bass drum and Chinese cymbals during the parade of monster floats. Furthermore, I've also included music of the aboriginal people - an imitation of pasibutbut. Overall, you would hear the typical orchestral music from the West interwoven with Eastern tunes throughout the musical. All in all, the design and structure in general might sound Western, but Eastern scales and elements can be found throughout the entire piece.



The Old Spirit and The Giant Whale: The mysterious pasibutbut

Ching-Yao Ho: In *Once Upon An Island*, there is this part that grabs everyone's attention, it turns out to be the pasibutbut. Could you share with us how you approached it?

Ching-Shan Chang: I was originally thinking that we could just use it as a small interlude, but after some discussion with the playwright, we decided to let it grow organically into something grand. It ends up becoming the climax of the entire musical. I was originally trying to paint my imagination of an island and a giant whale through music, but it occurred to me that I could combine ideas by metaphorically portray the island as an old living spirit, and that gives the birth to the song titled *The Old Spirit and the Giant Whale*.

Honestly, I was hesitant to include anything about the aboriginal culture due to fear of offending any tribe if not done carefully. Fortunately, StoryWorks hired a consultant who is fluent in many aboriginal languages before taking this musical on stage.

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Writing *The Old Spirit and the Giant Whale* was relatively a complicated process and a great challenge to me. I spent most of my time doing research on each tribe, and in the end picked 7 tribes where their language work together phonetically. In addition, the tunes from each tribe has its unique pacing and rhythms, so it poses a great challenge for me to layer one on top of another. I tried really hard to honor the original form of the tunes and find the best entrance for each tune so the harmonies don't clash, however, there are circumstances where the only solution is to change a note or two in order to achieve intended harmonies.

Originally, I was hoping to truthfully recreate what a real pasibutbut would sound like by featuring more human voice and less orchestra. However, I didn't realize the risk of singers unable to find the pitch and the beat without the help of the orchestra until we started rehearsing. In the end, I decided to gently layer in some strings in the beginning to provide pitch, and sprinkled some repetitive rhythms on the percussion to keep them in sync. It is quite challenging on stage as I don't wish to make any of that obvious, so where to sneak in and where to fade out while not disrupting the natural flow and color of the music is very crucial.





Challenges of writing music for monsters - A reflection of the local culture

Ching-Yao Ho: What were other challenges you had when creating the musical of *Once Upon An Island*?

Ching-Shah Chang: The biggest challenge is that there was not much time. The initial script needs to go through a thousand times of revision. There had been several times when I had already finished a piece of music, but would either have to perform surgical revisions or lose it completely due to revisions of the script, unfortunately. Furthermore, with parts of the music missing, I would need to reevaluate the continuity as a whole and adjust it accordingly.

Secondly, while having a discussion with the lyricist and playwright regarding the musical style for a certain scene, they would come up with multiple references that are considerably different in nature such as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Lion King*. Therefore, how to internalize the core or spirit of those masterpiece and infuse it into the language of this musical so it makes sense at the story-telling level became a big challenge to me.

Thirdly, regarding the instrumentation, I was fortunate to work with over 60 people in the orchestra and would love to take advantage of that in my orchestral writing. However, I decided to add a drum set and an electric bass in certain spots to help shape the music better without sounding too pop-y. I think the overall effect turned out to be well-balanced.

To me, the nature of story-telling about monsters is relatively an emotionally neutral subject matter as opposed to stories like *Romeo and Juliet* which has vivid hatred, love, positive and negative feelings built in. Therefore, I intended that my music should sound more neutral which doesn't orient towards an overly bright tone or an overly sad tone; in short, I didn't want the audience to feel biased by my choice of a major key or a minor key.

It really poses a great challenge of "how can I stay creative, intriguing, and have enough variety while trying to follow the principle I set in the beginning throughout this 100-minute musical? "

Lastly, due to lack of experience writing Chinese songs, I was constantly struggling with figuring out how to write a memorable melody and clear pronunciation of the lyrics. With Chinese being a tonal language, it decreases its flexibility when put against a melody as you might lose the tone in it and the audience might not be able to understand. However, I tried to find the sweet middle point where the audience can sit back and appreciate the music instead of reading the subtitle of the lyrics.

Ching-Yao Hao: What message do you want the musical to deliver to the audience? Can you also describe what your initial thoughts were when creating this fantasy world?

Ching-Shan Chang: I hope to take the audience on this fantastic journey with me and explore the world of monsters of Taiwan through the eyes of our protagonist Xiao-Yao. I hope to draw the audience closer and hopefully they will find something relatable in the story.

For our younger audience, I want to tell them that "monsters are not that strange." They might be all living among us but in a different way, a way that we might still not be able to understand. However, I don't want to demonize them, but rather, portray them as creatures from a different world which seek to co-exist with humans peacefully.

Additionally, I think introducing the long-forgotten folklore and local culture to the audience is very important.

Some people told me that the musical sounds like Broadway, and I took it as a compliment. However, I hope the audience could also hear the Taiwanese elements in this Broadway-sounding musical. But to be honest, Broadway really does not represent one single musical style, I think it is rather an ambiguous category of umbrella to those took the only few famous musicals they've watched as a reference.

If we are talking about fantastic works as a musical style, I think it has shown to be overly saturated and over-used in the West already. Especially under the influence of Hollywood, art creation nowadays has a tendency to sound unanimous. Therefore, I think it is a rather less competitive and a healthier direction that the music of Taiwan builds upon its unique and beautiful local culture instead.



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