CHANG’E AND THE MOON

A CONTEMPORARY CHAMBER OPERA

Rowen Fox

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DECLARATION

I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree.

Signed: ________________________

Date: __________________________
ABSTRACT

The full-length chamber opera Chang’E and the Moon, inspired by elements of Chinese literary, philosophical and musical culture, is a retelling of the myth surrounding the Chinese Goddess of the Moon and the Mid-Autumn Festival. This thesis consists of the opera, a recording of its performance; and a written exegesis examining its contextual background and compositional process.

This exegesis examines the musical and structural elements of the work in a wide-ranging discussion about opera as a musically hybrid art form. It highlights the use of techniques gleaned from an analysis of the historical development of Western opera. Other unique narrative and structural features were also employed in the search for a musically and dramatically unified work which serves the singular demands of music for theatre.

Chang’E and the Moon’s cultural elements are explored within the context of the problems of Orientalism and appropriation in Western music, with a particular focus upon the artist’s role and responsibilities. The cultural rewards and challenges of such a project are re-examined through the more positivist prisms of artistic homage and cross-cultural exchange.
## CONTENTS

*DECLARATION* ........................................................................................................... ii  
*ABSTRACT* ............................................................................................................... iii  
*LIST OF FIGURES* ...................................................................................................... vi  
*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS* .............................................................................................. vii  

### 1. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1  
1.1 BACKGROUND ........................................................................................................... 1  
1.2 ABOUT CHANG’E AND THE MOON ........................................................................... 2  
1.2.1 Synopsis .............................................................................................................. 3  
1.2.2 Taoist inspiration ................................................................................................. 6  
1.2.3 Aesthetic inspiration ............................................................................................ 8  
1.3 THE PERILS OF REPRESENTATION .......................................................................... 11  

### 2. ORIENTALISM ............................................................................................................. 12  
2.1 CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON SAID’S ORIENTALISM ......................... 12  
2.2 ARTISTIC AGENCY AND THE CASE FOR IMAGINATION ..................................... 15  
2.3 CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT ..................................................................................... 18  

### 3. STRUCTURE .................................................................................................................. 23  
3.1 THE PROBLEM WITH OPERA .................................................................................. 23  
3.2 STRUCTURAL SOLUTIONS ......................................................................................... 25  
3.2.1 The Phases of the Moon as Narrative ................................................................. 26  
3.2.2 Continuous vs. Numbers Opera .......................................................................... 31  
3.2.3 One Act vs. Two .................................................................................................. 35  
3.3 CANVAS AND CONTENT ......................................................................................... 36
4. **MUSICAL ANALYSIS** .................................................................................................................. 37
4.1 AN ECLECTIC APPROACH ........................................................................................................... 37
4.2 HARMONIC LANGUAGE .................................................................................................................... 38
  4.2.1 Harmonic Development as Narrative ....................................................................................... 38
  4.2.2 Pentatonicism .............................................................................................................................. 41
  4.2.3 Analysis of No.16 Maid’s Song ................................................................................................. 42
  4.2.4 Pentatonic melodicism ................................................................................................................. 46
  4.2.5 Pentatonic characterisation ......................................................................................................... 48
4.3 OTHER CHINESE ELEMENTS ......................................................................................................... 50
  4.3.1 Overview .................................................................................................................................... 50
  4.3.2 A Chinese Syntax? ...................................................................................................................... 52
  4.3.3 Heterophonic Movement .......................................................................................................... 53
4.4 THE ELEMENTS IN SYNTHESIS – ANALYSIS OF NO.19 SCENE ............................................ 55

5. **OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION** .............................................................................................. 59
5.1 ON WRITING FOR VOICE .............................................................................................................. 59
5.2 RECEPTION AND FUTURE ............................................................................................................ 61

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................................... 63
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1a  Antithetical couplet from *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Chapter 76) .......................................................... 9
FIGURE 1b  Antithetical couplet from *Chang’E and the Moon* (No.17) .......... 9
FIGURE 2  Storyline pacing relative to the Golden Mean ............................................. 29
FIGURE 3  Vocal quartet, *Chang’E and the Moon*, No.27, bars 75–82
              (Piano score) ............................................................................................................. 30
FIGURE 4  *Chang’E and the Moon*, Introduction, bars 1–7 ....................................... 39
FIGURE 5a  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No.9, bars 1–7 .................................................. 39
FIGURE 5b  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No.32, bars 5–8 .............................................. 40
FIGURE 6  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No.1, bars 1–5 .................................................... 40
FIGURE 7  No.16, Maid’s Song Ostinato .......................................................................... 42
FIGURE 8  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 16, bars 1–11 .............................................. 44
FIGURE 9  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 23, bars 1–7 .................................................. 46
FIGURE 10  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 23, bars 16–34 ........................................ 47
FIGURE 11  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 23, bars 70–75 .......................................... 48
FIGURE 12  Yue’s Arioso, *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 32, bars 1–9 .................... 49
FIGURE 13  Opening of Yu Li (Beautiful Fish) from the *Book of Odes* .................. 50
FIGURE 14  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 20, bar 30 .................................................... 51
FIGURE 15  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 1, bar 30 .................................................. 53
FIGURE 16  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 1, bars 36–38 ............................................ 53
FIGURE 17  ‘Heterophonic’ doubling of vocal parts, *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 28, bars 14–17 ................................................................. 54
FIGURE 18  ‘Heterophonic’ orchestral unisons *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 34, bars 32–34 ................................................................. 54
FIGURE 19  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 28, bars 33–34 ........................................ 55
FIGURE 20  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No.19 ............................................................... 57
FIGURE 21  *Chang’E and the Moon* in its first staged performance at Wentworth Falls, 1 and 2 April 2016. ................................................................. 62
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The original 105-minute opera Chang’E and the Moon is a work inspired by elements of Chinese literary, philosophical and musical culture. It retells the myth surrounding the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival and the Chinese Goddess of the Moon, Chang’E. This paper details the compositional process behind the opera’s creation.

Although the work is inspired by elements of Chinese musical theory (pentatonicism) and portrays elements of Chinese Taoism, it is neither a literal retelling of the historical Chang’E story nor a Western attempt at appropriating Chinese traditional forms. Rather, it is a work of reflection and inspiration based on artistic forms (both Eastern and Western) that have gone before me. This artistic approach, I argue, harmonises with historical Chinese literary theory, and de-emphasises arguments about appropriation and intellectual property which are, in any case, Western concepts.

Nevertheless Chang’E and the Moon is written from within the Western classical tradition and is intended as a contribution to the Western operatic canon. As such, its creation also demands an examination of the history of artistic representation of non-Western cultures by the West through the prism of Orientalism and exoticism, particularly in relation to nineteenth and early twentieth century opera. This issue hinges partly on the question of creator and

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1 Following the methodology of the China Taoist Association, http://www.taoist.org.cn, I use the older Wade-Giles romanisation system for Tao and Taoism. All other Chinese transliterations are modern pinyin.
audience, namely, by whom and for whom the works are created. In this light, it is important to examine Chang’E and the Moon in its contemporary context, as intended for consumption by an ethnically diverse Australian audience. In this exegesis, I examine the various artistic and cultural threads that combined to create this new opera, an art form itself with a long history of adapting and integrating differing influences in the quest for dramatic or artistic unity.

Importantly, I explore this opera as a work of both homage and imagination, as a very personal creation which honours the models that inspired it but which aims to fuse the elements of inspiration into a different type of theatre, one informed by the traditions of theatre as ritual. For myself, its creator, Chang’E and the Moon was both a vehicle for a different type of performative experience and a structure from within which to work through some of the unique challenges posed by the medium of opera.

1.2 ABOUT CHANG’E AND THE MOON

Chang’E and the Moon was inspired by the Chinese Goddess of the Moon, Chang’E, a favourite subject of poetry, novels and Chinese opera. Chang’E is an ancient, yet minor, goddess within the Taoist pantheon, whose mythology is widely known and celebrated during the annual Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival both within China and throughout Asia. In the best known Chinese version of the myth, Chang’E is a mortal woman whose husband, Hou Yi, saves the Earth from destruction by shooting down nine of the ten original suns. For his services he is

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given a pill or an elixir of immortality. *Chang’E* (with overtones of the Greek Pandora) cannot resist the elixir and, overwhelmed by curiosity, swallows the double dose which had been intended for them both. The power of the dose causes her to float away from the Earth and land upon the Moon, where she is forced to remain.

*Chang’E and the Moon* continues the story from where the myths left off, and tells the story of *Chang’E’s* existence upon the Moon. It was inspired by a more romantic tradition from within Taoism which tells that *Hou Yi*, rather than being separated from *Chang’E* forever, is eventually taken to Heaven as a reward for his past services to the Jade Emperor. There he builds a palace on the sun. *Hou Yi*, representing the masculine *yang* principle, is able to visit *Chang’E*, representing feminine *yin*, in her palace when the Moon is full.³ In this wisdom, the full Moon becomes a metaphor for the meeting of *yang* and *yin*, which, as a Taoist concept, is seen as the embodiment of balance and harmony that all should strive to attain.⁴

### 1.2.1 Synopsis

The opera opens at the dark of the new moon in Guanghan Palace, *Chang’E’s* home upon the Moon. *Chang’E* awakens alone except for the company of the Jade Rabbit, her pet in my retelling. The opera uses the phases of the Moon as a structural device which frames the narrative; the events of the entire opera take

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³ K.B. Eng, *A Simple Approach to Taoism* (Singapore: Partridge Singapore, 2014), 34. I am conscious how much this variant resembles the legend of Spinner-maid and Plough-boy; the original star-crossed lovers of Chinese mythology. It is in this Taoist overlay, as a point of difference, that the *Chang’E* story most appealed to me as subject matter for an opera.

place within one Moon cycle, from new to full to new again, strongly identified with both the character and experiences of Chang’E, whose presence is constant throughout the work. Chang’E’s nature and psychology are also governed by the Moon’s phase. At the beginning of the work she is child-like and without a memory of herself or her surroundings, the state to which she will also return at the opera’s close.

The voices of Chang’E’s maids can be heard. Chang’E is joined by Mother Pearl, the matronly head of her household, and Nightingale, her principal maidservant. Between them these two characters facilitate much of the exposition as they instruct Chang’E in her daily duties. We learn through them that it is the month of the Mid-Autumn Festival on the Earth below, and the household is preparing for a heavenly banquet, at which time Chang’E will be visited by her husband, the Divine Archer. Chang’E has dreamed of the man (Movement No.7) and she now recalls his name, Hou Yi, and realises that he is indeed her husband.

As the Moon reaches its first quarter, the male servants make their first appearance in the work’s first mixed chorus (No.11), showing the household busy preparing for the coming festivities. Chief amongst them is Chang’E’s wizened advisor, Old Yue, modelled on the Chinese god known as *Yue Lao, the Old Man of the Moon*. Mother Pearl and Nightingale recount the progression of the seasons on the Earth below, emphasising the eighth month’s importance to Chang’E’s year (No.12). Old Yue sings about the various divine guests who are coming to the banquet (No.14).
As the Moon continues to wax, an Imperial Envoy arrives (No.17) with gifts from the Jade Emperor, the ruler of Heaven, but Chang'E can think only of her husband's imminent arrival. Hou Yi arrives at last, but their reunion is interrupted by the approaching ceremonies. When the Moon is full, the banqueting guests arrive and populate the gardens of Guanghan whilst, on the Earth below, the humans can be heard praying to Chang'E (No.20). Chang'E emerges in beauty at the full Moon before her assembled guests and Hou Yi and the guests celebrate and sing her praises.

After the festivities, Hou Yi and Chang'E are finally alone together. It is the Moon’s third quarter, and Chang'E remembers that Hou Yi must soon leave her again in a cycle which they are forever destined to repeat. In a central duet the two wonder at their strange fate (No.27). Hou Yi reminds her that they are both fulfilling their duty towards Heaven, and that taken together their lives are in balance. He reassures her that he will always return to her (No. 29). When Hou Yi has left, Old Yue endeavours to comfort Chang'E, but soon leaves to fulfil his own responsibilities, which involve looking up the names of all those destined to become lovers and connecting them with a red thread, thus ensuring they find one another (No.31).

In the Moon’s last quarter, Chang'E is distraught but she remembers Hou Yi’s promise (No.32). Nightingale, to distract her mistress, sings of the encroaching autumn, which is covering the Earth below (No.34). As the Moon wanes, Chang'E
once again grows weary and appears even to have forgotten Hou Yi. One by one her maids depart, followed by Mother Pearl. Alone with her rabbit, Chang’E sleeps.

1.2.2  Taoist inspiration

The central message of the opera reflects a personal spirituality that has been strongly shaped by Chinese philosophical Taoism. I believe in those principles of Taoism which the work expresses and for which the characters of Chang’E and Hou Yi serve as allegories: principles such as wu wei – non-action – and the division of the universe into complimentary/opposing forces, yin and yang, as personified by Chang’E and Hou Yi themselves.

Non-action could be more accurately conceived as effortless action; in the Tao Te Ching its most potent symbol is water, which achieves doing (such as carving a river-bed) only through being (non-action). Non-action can be seen as form of liberation through which one becomes a vessel for the Tao to achieve action. In the opera Chang’E and Hou Yi are constrained by events out of their control: Chang’E’s existence on the Moon is a result of her banishment by Heaven, and the Moon’s cycles govern her waking life. Similarly, by the will of Heaven, the couples endure the enforced separation and the permitted reunion. Of the two, Hou Yi, being always awake, shows greater awareness, and it is he who gently guides Chang’E towards an understanding during their time together. Chang’E, who relives every Moon phase anew, is more doubtful, and more pained; however, even she comes to accept the truth of her fate and of Hou Yi’s promise. The supporting cast stress continuity, responsibility and duty towards Heaven.

The unspoken inference is that Chang’E and Hou Yi somehow contribute towards, or hold in balance, the principles of *yin* and *yang* that they embody. This is the mystery at the heart of the opera.

Expressing Taoist philosophy on stage was itself an artistic and dramaturgical challenge; after all, a celebration of non-action would seem particularly ill-suited to opera. An acceptance of fate smacks of passivity, particularly from within a Western cultural framework. The ending undoubtedly presents the viewer with a dramatic anti-climax. Yet, precisely because of this I was able to elevate more strongly within the work other theatrical elements of greater interest to me and to invoke the older ritualised uses of theatre. Teleological time is de-emphasised in favour of cyclical time. This is entirely appropriate for a work with such a strong philosophical focus, and in no way limits, I believe, its effectiveness as enjoyable theatre. As I explore below, the Moon-narrative structure casts a compelling aura over the whole work and strongly heightens its meditative qualities. A sense of suspense is created, paradoxically, by its very predictability. Within this, we should feel that the opera’s end could give birth to the opera’s beginning, and that the whole cycle could repeat itself.

*Chang’E and the Moon* is my own musing on one form of eternity: the repetition of nature’s cycles, which finds such glorious expression in the phases of the Moon. The Moon therefore is arguably the opera’s most important presence; in itself it is a metaphor for the life, death and rebirth cycles within nature, with some resonance, I think, for how we approach those things in our own lives over which, like Chang’E and Hou Yi, we ultimately have no control. Sadness at the
lovers’ separation comes naturally to us; this is one of the work’s important tensions. However, we could just as easily focus on the positive – Hou Yi’s promise of an eternal reunion.

As gods, Hou Yi and Chang’E represent divine archetypes, and as such they needed to be aspirational, to be able to show us finer versions of ourselves. Hou Yi, although for much of the opera an absent figure, is nevertheless incredibly important to my treatment. In his aria (No.30), he articulates an unconditional love for Chang’E, which, I feel, we could better try to emulate, not just in our personal relationships, but also in our relationship to all of nature and to the Earth. Ultimately we cannot possess the things we hold most dear, but we can love and appreciate them while they remain in our lives.

1.2.3 Aesthetic inspiration

This opera is directly inspired by the Chinese classical literature that I have read and loved over many years. I formulated the opera libretto based upon these influences and worked closely with a co-librettist, Diana Baric, to craft a language which would match. Inspirational works include the large-scale fictional forms – classics such as Journey to the West (Xi you ji), Investiture of the Gods (Fengshen Yanyi) and The Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng) – and other literary forms such as short stories, poems and libretti from the various forms of Chinese opera. From the earliest Confucianists, who saw art as a vehicle for the expression of moral principles, the Chinese literary canon has been imbued with
the spirit of Chinese philosophy. In creating the libretto, I sought to emulate both the implicit philosophical flavour evident in this literature and simultaneously, as a form of homage, some of the literary devices of the tradition, including the natural world, and folkloric references, and the imitation of Chinese poetic forms such as antithetical couplets (figures 1a and 1b).

FIGURE 1a Antithetical couplet from The Dream of the Red Chamber (Chapter 76)

In golden censers figured incense burns;
Unguents in their jade pots coagulate.

FIGURE 1b Antithetical couplet from Chang’E and the Moon (No.17)

The heavy fragrance of cinnamon trees in the grove
Lightens the steps of guests who gather in courtyards.

These devices should be recognisable to those familiar with this tradition, in so far as I have been able to translate them through my own cultural baggage. Most importantly, because I don’t read Chinese, my experience of these texts has been English translations. My own understanding therefore of Chinese culture will always be skewed and distorted through the prism of language. In the example above, other aspects of this couplet from The Dream of the Red Chamber, such as matching character length and matching tone patterns, remain untranslatable into English and therefore unavailable for imitation. My attempt becomes a reference to the style of the translations, a reference accessible essentially only

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to those who, like me, are familiar with the literature in this translated form. Rather than seeing this as necessarily problematic, I feel it merely adds a further layer of complexity and interest to what is already clearly a hybrid work, a work which purports to be nothing other than my own artistic response to Chinese cultural influences, viewed through my Western eyes. Importantly for me, this sort of imitation represents an act of love and homage to a tradition that, however rightly or wrongly, has become a part of my lived intellectual and artistic experience.

The great Chinese literature has a depth which goes beyond the surface depictions of ghosts, fox-spirits and deities, battles, intrigues and love affairs; these works also show a deep regard for the interconnectedness of all things, and a preoccupation with the big questions, such as the search for the meaning of human existence. As a result, no-one has populated other worlds quite like the Chinese. There is something irresistible to me about the idea of a cultural and social system so powerful that it replicates itself within the imagined spaces of the afterlife. This was undoubtedly the case in the formation of the religious and literary tradition in the millennium after Chinese unification. The impetus was certainly more political than religious, as the hierarchic system of the Chinese afterlife strongly reflects Confucian political values, values not always palatable to the modern West. However, the syncretic, pluralist nature of the tradition itself made me eager to, in the spirit of that tradition, reshape the message by

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seeking out more positive interpretations of the old systems. For this reason I choose to see the rigid structure of the Chinese afterlife as simply a metaphor for the limitations of our own existence, and its moral hierarchy as rather an example of the respect we should accord those things from which our free will cannot exempt us, such as the finite resources of our planet, or the inevitability of death.

1.3 THE PERILS OF REPRESENTATION

Chang’E and the Moon is set in an ahistorical or undefined China. As the opera takes place entirely on the Moon, the general Chinese population are not mentioned by name, other than as ‘humans’ or as ‘mortals below’. The name ‘China’ is not used at all, although its centrality to the opera is implicit. This allows the story to remain in the world of mythology, in the hope that, by so doing, the work would be less likely to contradict other existing traditions or shared history, through error or omission on my part. As such, my treatment is ahistorical and arguably could be perceived as exoticist – as being without reference to the actual China that it purports to represent.

This approach will undoubtedly leave me open to accusations of musical Orientalism, which of course has a rich history in Western opera with the plethora of nineteenth and early twentieth century operas set in ‘exotic’ or foreign locales. Dealing with art created by the West, and for the West, Orientalism depicts (usually) the East or, by extension, the foreign Other. The following section discusses Chang’E and the Moon in the context of charges of Orientalism and examines other potential frameworks for its appreciation.
2. **ORIENTALISM**

2.1 **CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON SAID’S ORIENTALISM**

... we need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient, and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate.\(^9\)

Said’s definition of Orientalism seems apt when we remember the depiction of the East, and indeed any foreign culture, in the art and theatre of early modern Europe. In music, well-known tropes such as the Turkish style were able to conjure up images of Otherness that were only reinforced by the very remoteness of the actual countries they depicted. In *Orientalism and Musical Style*, Scott points out that such musical signifiers were largely interchangeable,\(^10\) supporting Said’s contention that the idea of the Orient, and by extension the foreign Other, was all that mattered in such depictions.\(^11\) In spite of this, Scott’s article is actually dedicated to looking for “changes in representation”\(^12\) in a centuries-broad sweep, thereby including those works that, on the surface at least, seemed to offer more genuine attempts at ‘authentic’ representation. This is a common trend in much musicological discussion of the subject, with the result being a greatly expanded definition of musical Orientalism, and one that might even be thought to contradict Said’s original definition. Said’s own methodology is brought into question by the presence of such contradictions.\(^13\)

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\(^12\) Scott, “Orientalism and Musical Style,” 309.

\(^13\) “As Valerie Kennedy phrases it, ‘Said’s failure to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Orientalism may be one reason why his analysis of it becomes embroiled in contradictory definitions and redefinitions.’” Kennedy, *Edward Said: A critical introduction*, 29. Quoted by Daniel Martin.
Falling into this expanded category of a more deliberate representation are the two ‘exotic’ operas by Puccini, *Turandot* and *Madama Butterfly*, set in China and Japan, respectively. In *Madama Butterfly* Puccini incorporates certain Japanese source materials into a larger synthesis; however, the very fact that synthesis occurs is taken as proof that this is Orientalism by a different name. Here the language *does* match, the represented culture is unambiguous, but perhaps a wider definition is in play: one that stresses the ultimate irrelevance of the source material to the composer’s other artistic (by implication, Orientalist) goals. Unintended consequences also follow from such representation. In wider dissemination such works and the images they present can still serve to reinforce “limited, distorted, and indeed entirely fictive, self-serving Western stereotypes of foreign cultures”14. Finally, the use of ‘authentic’ source materials without contextualisation introduces another problematic area, giving rise to issues of appropriation.

Globalism offers an alternative prism through which to view these issues. In contrast to Said, Bhabha brings into question the stark opposition between cultures that *Orientalism*’s analysis implies. “Bhabha’s basic argument ... is that culture cannot any longer (if it ever could) be conceived in monolithic terms, but has to be thought rather in terms of hybridity”,15 which he tellingly calls the

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“third space”.\textsuperscript{16} Taylor reminds us that hybridity, as a concept applied to world music, has been somewhat overused by the commercial music industry. As such it is perhaps unavailable to apply to the privileged forms of Western art music – as \textit{Chang’E and the Moon} undoubtedly is. Nevertheless, Taylor accepts the corrective nature of the ‘third space’, as “implicitly referring to the momentary, evanescent nature of culture, social formations, and music”.\textsuperscript{17}

Varisco also criticises \textit{Orientalism} for setting up a “debilitating binary”\textsuperscript{18} between East versus West, largely through its rhetorical reductionism. Said’s approach leaves little space for a response from the actual voices of the real historical and contemporary Orient.\textsuperscript{19} Wang stresses instead the importance of cultural dialogue:\textsuperscript{20}

Its (orientalism) existence is still possible although the concept itself is becoming problematic and indeterminate along with the rediscovery of the real Orient by more and more Western people in this age of information.\textsuperscript{21}

To return to Puccini, it is possible to see the beginnings of this phenomenon in his own lifetime, in which the last years of the age of imperialism overlapped with, arguably, the West’s first opportunity to experience a more ‘authentic’ East through its new technology. As a case in point, Puccini consulted multiple phonographic recordings of Chinese and Japanese traditional musics in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] Ibid., 160.
\item[18] Varisco, \textit{Reading Orientalism}, 290.
\item[19] Ibid., 290-4.
\item[21] Ibid., 60.
\end{footnotes}
preparation for both *Turandot* and *Madama Butterfly*. Greenwald points out that Puccini’s meticulous preparation for *Butterfly* – the collection of source musical manuscripts, his meetings with the wife of the Japanese ambassador and his attendance of Japanese traditional theatre – transcends Orientalism:

Certain ‘Japanese’ elements of *Madama Butterfly* have real cultural analogues that support a reading of the opera as more profoundly ‘authentic’ than has usually been argued.

Greenwald offers convincing evidence that these analogues extend to informed and respectful representation in areas as diverse as staging, and even the opera’s unusual structure. This has implications for a discussion of the role of the artist as a genuine arbiter for cultural dialogue. Puccini’s intentions for *Madama Butterfly* and their relevance, if there should be any, to the traditional perception of him as an Orientalist are therefore of interest in examining broader questions surrounding agency and inspiration.

### 2.2 ARTISTIC AGENCY AND THE CASE FOR IMAGINATION

Throughout *Orientalism*, there is a failure to acknowledge Orientalist discourse as capable of self-criticism in order to protest an aspect of Western society or contest inaccurate understandings of the Oriental other.

Deliberate artistic intention is not a strong theme in the study of Orientalism: it would probably seem to bear neither upon the question of unrepresented voices (for whom the artist cannot speak), nor upon the cultural/historical forces that

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24 Varisco, *Reading Orientalism*, 178-9
created Orientalism, from which an artist (a product of his/her time) cannot stand immune. While an artist’s cultural and historical milieu undoubtedly exerts a strong influence over his or her work, we ignore a variety of other artistic impulses when we focus only upon the artist as a passive product of his or her times. Artistic goals frequently show reformist tendencies, self-criticism and other ironic subtext, which may function as sociological critique. Although less quantifiable, perhaps positive or sympathetic depictions including homage may also have positive cultural effects.

In the case of *Madama Butterfly*, Liao Ping-hui sees the depiction of the Japanese, and of Butterfly’s rejection by Pinkerton, as darkly representative of the Western world-view. Butterfly is powerless, “a female body to be possessed and then deserted … Butterfly is that feared other, the scapegoat that constitutes the white male’s repressed desire and guilt for which she must suffer and then die”.25 Liao’s depiction of Butterfly’s literal powerlessness ignores the theatrical power of her status as eponymous character with whom the audience is clearly intended to sympathise and, crucially, to identify. The fact that Pinkerton is sketched so unsympathetically should be a clue that the author intended his Western audience to further question the values of imperialism, as many were indeed already doing at the turn of the twentieth century.

This reading becomes apparent when we view the opera’s genesis and examine the progressive original play upon which *Madama Butterfly* is based. In the play,

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which Puccini’s first version followed, Pinkerton’s callous indifference is heightened by the fact that he never returns from America to Butterfly at all.\textsuperscript{26} Puccini added Pinkerton’s return after Butterfly’s suicide only as response to criticism of the first performance, particularly that the tenor needed an aria in the final act.\textsuperscript{27} He did so only reluctantly because he knew it would (wrongly) create the impression that Pinkerton cared one way or the other what happened to Butterfly after he returned to America. Nevertheless, the opera is capable of being read as a powerful critique of Western chauvinism and of colonial and imperial values. Indeed, arguably it is still read that way by most contemporary opera audiences, who appreciate the work’s deep humanism.

That the artist can be crucial in shaping perception of the Other, both positively and negatively, is readily apparent: it might therefore be argued that we should not in our analysis place preference too heavily on one hypothetical outcome over the other. Rather, the independence of the artist is paramount to Bhabha’s hybrid universalism. Importantly we know that artists continue to be, and perhaps always will be, inspired to engage with stories, symbols or cultural framework other than their own. An artist should be able to defend their right to be imaginative with such source material, provided that material’s original context is properly accounted for and acknowledged. The question of authenticity becomes a larger one in relation to the artist. In my own case, critiquing the composition of \textit{Chang’E and the Moon} based on the alienness of my Western cultural heritage misses a crucial factor: the Chinese literary culture’s

\textsuperscript{26} Alexandra Wilson, \textit{The Puccini Problem: Opera Nationalism and Modernity}, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 102.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
influence upon my lived intellectual experience and artistic imagination is a matter of fact, an authentic experience all my own. As one example, I along with many of my generation, was first introduced to the Ming Dynasty classic *The Journey to the West*, through the popular Japanese television series *Monkey Magic*, which I watched from a very young age.

2.3 CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT

Emphasising imaginative autonomy restores the artist’s voice but cannot excuse cultural representations that cause offence, even when offence is unintentional. However, unintentional offence can be rectified through dialogue, provided all voices have an equal seat at the table. One of the historical problems then clearly lies in unequal power relationships, namely, when dominant cultures are able to determine the way in which other groups are represented for the entertainment of a privileged elite, without those represented necessarily having a say in the use (or misuse) of their culture, symbols and meanings.

How then do we evaluate those non-Western cultures with a sufficiently empowered voice to withstand the damage Orientalism inflicts, at least within our own era? I am particularly aware that Chinese thought and expression, for most of its historical existence, has not been a disempowered cultural force, but rather the opposite. While the West indisputably and disastrously exploited China in the early modern era, this is a historical anomaly when one takes the long view from a Chinese perspective. Any criticism of *Chang’E and the Moon* as Orientalism would benefit from an analysis of the culture it represents (that of
the dominant Han Chinese) and that culture’s ability to represent itself, as bearing relation to Said’s discussion of authority in Orientalism.28

It should be noted than Han Chinese culture is not a monolithic entity, but an extremely robust historical synthesis which evolved from the contributions of many ethnic groups from within an oft-changing geographical region. Contrary to the views of Chinese traditionalists in many periods, these fusions clearly enhanced rather than weakened Han cultural resilience.29 An early galvanising force was the introduction of Buddhism from India, which both influenced and competed with Taoism and Confucianism, the nativist schools of thought. Han culture was a syncretic pluralism of East Asian ideas that created a philosophical and artistic culture capable of penetrating far beyond the political borders of China. While military aggression and coercion should not be dismissed, it is nevertheless important to understand the ‘opt-in’ universalism which made Han culture the appealing centre of an East Asian client state system, in the same way that US cultural hegemony seems appealing to many Australians. Like US culture in Australia, Han Chinese culture was incorporated into the cultures of many other East Asian countries through a combination of both soft and hard power displays. Many of those countries have their own versions of the Chang’E story and celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival.

The very historical ubiquity of Chinese culture in our greater region also offers an alternative framework from which to examine issues surrounding cultural

appropriation. Much of what I love about the Chinese literary and artistic tradition lies in its endless capacity for reinvention, a tradition driven in no small part by the conspicuous absence of concepts surrounding intellectual property.\(^{30}\)

Artistic endeavours were, in the terminology of Mun, “often conceived as a transformative synthesis of ... past accomplishments”.\(^{31}\) In Chinese literature in particular, allusion, repetition and adaptation were taken as markers of an author's own erudition and knowledge of his/her own culture. There could be no fear of infringing a previous author's rights or distorting the tradition, because the sources of such tradition were largely known to all.

It was in this spirit of cultural homage and reinvention that I felt emboldened to adapt Chang’E’s story as an extension of my own philosophy, a philosophy which is itself deeply influenced by Daoist thought. While I cannot claim myself to be a direct heir to the Chinese intellectual tradition, I can certainly assert my artistic rights to express myself under its influence. In addition, I do feel that Australia’s location within the greater Asian sphere, as well as our increasing cross-cultural interdependence with all humanity, means that the deeper history and stories of Asia will soon reach a more mainstream awareness within Australia, as surely all cultural expression has the right to do.

This introduction of a non-Western framework for analysing issues surrounding artistic creation and transmission offers another perspective for the Western discussion of Orientalism, and perhaps points the way forward to Wang's


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 159.
 Such an approach seems paradoxically underutilised when the West engages in conversations about its representation of Others. It is possible to conclude that this is a conversation that the West has been having with itself. Wang calls Orientalism “merely a provisional strategy for deconstructing the centre”; indeed the cultural firestorm instigated by Said’s work largely achieved his goal of calling out the implicit imperialism and racism of our cultural past. If the impetus was a moral one – acknowledging the need to honour the dignity of groups we once oppressed – why then are we still failing to include them in the discussion?

A nuanced appreciation of these issues brings us beyond the polemics of blame but may never give the clear-cut definitions or framework to adequately define the grey areas. As Locke concludes, this approach may offer its own rewards:

An adequate interpretation of a Western work set in the East, I conclude, must maintain two perspectives in a state of creative tension. On the one hand is the work’s essential Westernness—its irrelevance to the East, and the East’s to it—and, on the other, is its power to reflect and even shape, perhaps damagingly, the attitude and behaviour of Westerners toward the non-Western world. I propose that we accept these as being two irreconcilable yet equally valid points of view, and, at the risk of intellectual messiness—perhaps, richness—take care not to privilege one over the other. 33

Chang’E and Moon functions similarly in a state of creative tension, an outcome perhaps of the desire to see my own reflection in the mirror held up by the thought and art of a culture not my own. But I would suggest this is a very

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32 Wang, "Orientalism Versus Occidentalism," 60.
33 Locke, "Reflections on Orientalism in Opera (and Musical Theatre)."
universal trait; many of us approach art, irrespective of its origins or context, in just this fashion. Issues surrounding appropriation will still arise in the analysis of my musical inspirations and references. Therefore, it will be relevant to return to this discussion as I examine individual musical circumstances in Section 4. Before this, however, I examine some of the structural elements unique to the opera.
3. STRUCTURE

3.1 THE PROBLEM WITH OPERA

Opera is by its very nature a hybrid art form. A marriage of music and theatre, it must assimilate poetry, story, drama, musical expression, visual representation in space, and unparalleled musical virtuosity under its one umbrella. Opera raises “crucial problems concerning the aims and effects of music, drama, and indeed the arts in general”, in no small part because the needs of any one of these elements are frequently in opposition to the needs of another.

Opera was conceived in the late sixteenth century as an attempt to restore the imaginatively idealised expressive powers that music was thought to have held in the classical past. The goal was to put music more firmly at the service of drama, and vice versa. Yet, as acknowledged by Joseph Kerman in Opera as Drama, opera’s dramatic efficacy is routinely questioned. That “musical drama is viable”, and that opera’s primary vehicle for articulating the drama is music, is the underlying thesis of Kerman’s landmark work. It means that the ultimate arbiter of an opera’s dramatic and narrative shape is not the librettist but the composer, who must shape its development through the music above all else.

Through a series of case studies, Kerman’s method is to analyse the operatic ideal and its varied and disparate realisation throughout the history of the form.

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36 Opera as Drama, 10
37 Ibid., 2
Taken as “an art-form with its own integrity and its own particular limiting and liberating conventions”, Kerman sees operas of the past as “not a series of immature experiments, but a number of solutions, each distinct, and each with the potentiality of artistic success within its own limitations”. The implications of this thought on the composition of opera are profound. Being presented with both the successes and shortcomings of the various models, one is left with a roadmap to try one’s own ‘solutions’ to the various problems or contradictions inherent in the art form.

At the outset, these contradictions begin with the purely aesthetic concerns of music in contrast to the conventions required to move the narrative. In opera, this is immediately apparent in the marriage of text and music, which gave rise to the narrative tension between those musical forms that could develop the action (recitative), and those that could expand upon sentiment or meaning (aria). This is just one dichotomy among many that have pulled upon opera’s historical development, at times threatening to entirely distort the edifice. At one extreme stands the development of the aria as a vehicle for virtuosity in the early eighteenth and again in the early nineteenth centuries, at the other the quest for dramatic realism through continuity of music and action as expressed in the verismo school and the operas of Verdi or Wagner (see 3.2.2).

Inherent in Kerman’s ‘series of solutions’ is the concept of a hybridity of form created by a composer’s choice between those elements of opera most important

38 Ibid., 4
39 Ibid., 3
to them, in the service of taste and thematic or structural unity. This prompted me to look upon the creation of my own opera as an exercise in compromise: a process of weighing competing interests and steering a middle path that would allow me to take what I needed from the medium. Incorporating these ideas into the compositional process, I made choices based on the service of the several conflicting aesthetic needs that opera serves: namely, the needs of drama and music, both including narrative, pacing, shape, macro-structure and microstructures. Issues of a purely musical or performative nature, such as comprehension, performance difficulty, singer or player fatigue, introduce another layer of complexity that interacts with and shapes aesthetic needs.

3.2 STRUCTURAL SOLUTIONS

With *Chang’E and the Moon* I theorised that I could mitigate or reconcile some of the natural contradictions of opera by creating an even closer relationship between the narrative structure of the work to the other necessary elements: both musical, such as harmony and orchestration, and dramatic, such as plot, action and characterisation. The appeal of writing this opera was the opportunity to solve some of these problems at the highest level of narrative expressed through structural organisation. At this structural level, the challenges and solutions broadly involved three areas:

- The overriding artistic macro-structure of the work – the choice to frame the narrative within the phases of the Moon. The tensions arising from a palindromic form and my choice to express it within a traditional golden-mean ratio dramatic form (3.2.1)
• The historical tension between continuous opera and baroque numbers opera, and my desire to capture elements from each (3.2.2)

• My artistic ideal for a unified one-act structure and its performative two-act compromise (3.2.3).

3.2.1 The Phases of the Moon as Narrative

The adoption of the waning and waxing cycle of the Moon as the opera’s principal narrative framework allowed me to bind all other elements and express them within one structure, fulfilling, in theory at least, one of Kerman’s conditions. In the hierarchy of the drama, the Moon phase macro-structure is paramount, whilst all other plot development, characters and characterisation, and musical considerations flow from and are a reflection of it.

The projection of the Moon’s phases throughout the opera also serves as a visual presentation of the unfolding drama. It has the unique effect of serving the audience with both a road map and a potential spoiler: as soon as the audience is aware of the Moon’s relevance to Chang’E’s development they should be able to predict the ending. This function was always a deliberate form of distancing device, as the anticipation of an event is often an effective ingredient in creating suspense. At the same time, the irresistible predictability of the movement would, it was hoped, create a hypnotic, meditative quality to the work. That both states should exist simultaneously in a state of creative tension within the audience member was an explicit goal of my dramaturgy.
Within the structure, the score for the work is divided into the Moon’s four phase quarters. These quarters act as smaller organisational units, and work discreetly like Acts. From a dramaturgical point of view, the first and last quarters contain only the show’s female characters, Chang’E and her maids. The second quarter opens with the appearance of the male servants, closely followed by Old Yue, the Imperial Envoy, and finally Hou Yi. The male and female characters disappear in reverse order to that in which they appeared. Again this is reflective of Chinese Taoist philosophy, which holds that in the Moon’s energetic cycles, the masculine Yang principle is at its peak at the full Moon, and the feminine Yin at the new Moon.

Motivic, musical and orchestral development for the work are also driven and shaped by the Moon’s phases. Smaller structural forms (see 3.2.2) and broader stylistic moods (see 4.2.1) evolve in train with the waxing Moon and recede with its waning. New orchestral colours are introduced, primarily with the arrival of new characters, each with strong themes and statements dominated by a particular instrument. Chang’E, on the other hand, moves with and adapts to the changing musical circumstances. In concert with the Moon, her tessitura, compass and musical material expand and contract throughout the work.

**The Palindrome expressed as Golden Mean**

The waxing and waning Moon would create a palindromic structure if applied literally. However, experience would suggest that human creative endeavour strongly favours the Golden Mean as its preferred structural framework. Within
the context of dramatic narrative such as a film or play, this means that the
narrative high point of the work usually falls approximately two-thirds of the
way along its structure. In practice, my personal experience of this from a
psychological viewpoint is that the pace of a structure (film, book, show) builds
slowly and reaches a peak of intensity or complexity at the two-thirds mark, at
which point the *denouement* is perceived to occur rapidly in relation to that
which has come before. Anything that strays too far from the model or spends
too long (in relation to what has gone before) on *denouement* is, in my
experience, a recipe for boredom, due our deeply ingrained expectations in this
area.

For this reason a rigid presentation of the four quarters as a palindrome (in
which equal time was allotted to each quarter) would run afoul of audience
expectations. I chose instead to manipulate the duration of the quarters as
imperceptibly as possible, particularly shaving increments off the third and
fourth quarters after the high-point of the work had been passed. The contracted
fourth quarter particularly compels the work to its logical conclusion in as rapid
a manner as possible, given the audience's, by now, total appreciation of the
drama and its anti-climactic resolution. Similarly manipulated was the moment
of the full Moon, ordinarily only one moment along the entire continuum. I chose
to extend this moment in the opera, where Chang'E is at the peak of her powers
and is joined on stage by the full ensemble supported by the tutti orchestral
sound.
Composition of the opera was undertaken within this strict template from the outset. Although the total duration of the work had blown out on completion (the projected length was 90 minutes, the end product 104 minutes), crucially the relative weighting of the sections remained unchanged.

FIGURE 2  Storyline pacing relative to the Golden Mean

Figure 2 shows that the full Moon moment, although the most complex, does not function as the Golden Mean highpoint of the work. Instead, the division falls within the third quarter duet between Hou Yi and Chang'E. This duet examines both the circumstances of their strange fate and reaffirms their commitment to one another. It also contains the only (albeit brief) use of a vocal quartet in the entire opera, a device that underscores its crucial summation of the opera’s purpose and plot (Figure 3).
FIGURE 3  Vocal quartet, Chang’E and the Moon, No.27, bars 75–82 (Piano score)
3.2.2 Continuous vs. Numbers Opera

A recurring theme in *Opera as Drama* is the tension inherent in the historical quest for an ‘ideal’ dramatic form, which coalesced around the idea of ‘continuous opera’ and drove its evolution to a logical conclusion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the works of Wagner, Verdi and their ideological descendants. This is important because continuous opera found (or thought it had found) an effective formula for expressing dramatic action through music otherwise purged of those elements designed to arrest it (stop-start arias, differentiated forms, cabalettas and other virtuosic vehicles, silence, and that other enemy of drama and good taste, applause).

*Chang’E and the Moon*, on the other hand, consists of ‘numbers’: 36 individual movements, some musically continuous, some quite clearly defined, which together create the structural framework for a unified narrative. With the exception of a few important modern works, discussed below, this format has been largely out of fashion in ‘serious’ opera since the end of the bel canto period. Numbers remain, of course, in operetta and its twentieth century offshoots of musical comedies and music theatre. Choosing this numbers format involved coming to terms with its uses and limitations, as well as the musically continuous form. My borrowing from both these forms in different ways creates another hybrid, which aims to capture the best of both forms.
Kerman calls operatic continuity the “universal ideal of nineteenth century music” but sees the process as being present throughout opera’s entire development, as the “tendency towards the establishment of a single convention for all the action” on the musical plane. Gluck’s reforms of the late eighteenth century are key. Gluck both synthesized existing traditions and invented new ones, ostensibly to make the format more dramatic; many of his scenes are remarkably through-composed as a result. However, Gluck’s and then Mozart’s dramatic contributions to the genre were able to once again ossify in the hands of their bel canto successors. Verdi’s gradual abandonment of the bel canto divisions over a very long career, and some genuine innovations through composing devices such as parlante, laid the groundwork for the continuous ideal expressed in the verismo school, and the Wagnerian reforms accomplished the same for German opera during the same period.

Kerman also points out that, although late romantic opera marks the culmination of continuous opera, it emerged in consort with the ideals of monumental organic unity inherent in the other musics of the era. These works exist on such a scale and are of such length and complexity that their truly dramatic potential are brought into question. While the deep structures and thematic unity in these works are apparent with analysis, these structures are not immediately present in the context of a single performance, a criticism levelled at Wagner’s operas within his lifetime, and not simply a twenty-first century judgment. Wagner may

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40 Ibid., 113.
41 Ibid.
42 See for example Kerman’s discussion of the cabaletta as a far-less satisfying simplification of the composite aria as practiced by Mozart and Beethoven. Ibid., 124.
43 Ibid., 169-172.
have exceeded the boundaries of our own biological limitations, such as attention span, and this is a crucial point to consider in the formulation of any theories about effect drama. It is not enough to define narrative development as that of ideas expressed over time, unless we also consider the audience’s ability to follow and appreciate those ideas.

Stravinsky, for the narrative purpose of historical authenticity, returned to the divisions of opera seria in his neo-classical opera The Rake’s Progress, and in so doing unleashed what Kerman calls “a powerful dramatic possibility latent in an old convention”: 44

What is so striking about all these numbers is their clarity of feeling. Clarity, discreetness, is the great virtue of the traditional dramaturgical system of aria and recitative, and it is a virtue that Stravinsky was able to recapture. To arrange a clear psychological progression in arias and ensembles seems an obvious enough resource, but it is one that was not fully appreciated in the time of the classic operatic tradition. 45

In a similar way, the numbers within Chang’E and the Moon aim for the same psychological progression. Importantly, in contrast to the continuous opera model, I feel intuitively that the baroque model more accurately offers the structure humans require in order to build complex pictures, and the time needed to digest the individual ideas that constitute those pictures. In this sense, the divisions of aria and recitative, and the double bar lines between them, become psychological breaks in the unfolding narrative for the listener. The steady digestion of a structure, building upon what has gone before it, is the most

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44 Ibid., 197.
45 Ibid.
valuable means to transmit compelling narrative and to keep the audience engaged throughout.

The numbers within Chang’E and the Moon somehow also underscore my conception of the work as being a spiritual or meditative experience for the audience. Thus in the first quarter, particularly from Mother Pearl’s entrance, the gentle and relentless alternation of recitative and short formal songs evokes an atmosphere that is both meditative and reassuring whilst at the same time anticipating forward movement, as Pearl and Nightingale alternately comfort and prepare Chang’E for the rigours of the day.

In addition to this, the numbers’ format and type change throughout the work, and this treatment also plays a narrative function. In contrast to the first quarter, the second quarter increases the dramatic pace through a series of more complex and separate songs, culminating in a moment of high ceremony with the arrival of the Imperial Envoy. From Hou Yi’s arrival to his departure, the edges of the numbers are blurred and the work begins to approximate the continuous opera model in service of the dramatic tensions.

Therefore Chang’E and the Moon strives to strike a different balance between the two poles. It is a work which remains more sharply delineated than most modern opera but not yet so sharply delineated as opera seria or bel canto. Because the divisions of opera seria and bel canto served often non-dramatic considerations, the resulting hybrid format is one able to bend to the demands of the narrative. The stop-start nature of the arias contributes to the sense of
stillness; the impetus of continuous opera drives the action forward when it matters.

3.2.3 One Act vs. Two

The artistic ideal for the work was to present the opera as one-act. This I felt was necessary to maximise the impact of the Moon structure on the audience’s awareness of the unfolding narrative. A key aim was that the Moon’s continuous progression would, towards the close of the work, contribute a certain uneasy tension to my audience, that sense of inevitability that would become a key ingredient in the work’s poignancy.

In preparation for the work’s premiere, it became apparent that this one-act ideal would be problematic in performance. Although 104 minutes can be a comfortable period of time for an audience member (it is the average length of a Disney animated film), live music performance must also take into account the needs of its musicians. In particular, player fatigue amongst the nine musicians who, of necessity, play almost continuously throughout the work, would need to be addressed. For this reason, I chose to create a two-act performance version of the work by inserting the possibility of an interval where I felt it would do least damage to the build-up of the narrative. In the current two-act version the curtain falls as Chang’E and Hou Yi appear before their guests at the opening of the full-Moon sequence. At the start of the second half, through the repetition of this moment’s musical motif, the action is resumed from this point onwards. In this way the interval can be seen to pause the action at one of the work’s high points.
The score was constructed to include the option for a continuous one-act performance (through the excision of the repeated bars) if such a possibility were to become available. There may have been other, equally effective, ways to divide up the Moon’s precession to create an effective two-act structure, but there was, I believe, no other way which could better preserve the tension inherent in the original one-act form.

3.3 CANVAS AND CONTENT

Opera is a type of drama whose integral existence is determined from point to point and in the whole by musical articulation.\textsuperscript{46}

As demonstrated above, many of the structural features of \textit{Chang’E and the Moon} were intended to serve the larger demands of effective narrative, thereby creating a framework to unify some of opera’s natural contradictions. However, effective structure is not a goal in itself, but exists to provide a canvas for the content; clearly within opera, this content is the musical treatment. Kerman’s adage therefore remained a guiding principle and the same underlying goals of thematic unity were also present in all of my musical and harmonic considerations, as explored in the next section.

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., 10.
4. MUSICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 AN ECLECTIC APPROACH

The approach I took to the musical composition of Chang'E and the Moon was eclectic and yet ultimately functionally unifying. On the one hand, I sought to create a new musical language which would define the limits of the Chang'E sound-world; on the other, the delineated and evolving nature of the Moon-precession narrative demanded a palette which could evolve and absorb new elements throughout the work, elements which would need to be reconciled with the unified whole. This changing and evolving usage is reflected in all musical elements, including the harmonic palette, the interplay of small and larger musical structures, and importantly in the orchestration. These elements are examined individually below.

In addition, my belief in the unique status of opera as a hybrid art-form and its consequent demands upon theatrical/narrative/musical expression led me to take a much broader magpie-like approach to assembling my musical materials. Thus, the strongly diatonic-pentatonic approach to modulation that drives much of the harmonic language is nevertheless frequently abandoned in favour of anything else in my musical lexicon that I felt the drama demanded, such as semitone shifts or more abrupt post-romantic modulations. Similarly, the vocal writing ranges from Baroque-style recitatives to generously ‘modern’ vocal phrasing drawn from the idioms of twentieth century popular music, including musical theatre. In short, I have very much enjoyed playing with all the different solutions which Western composers have for centuries been applying to the
unique problems involved with creating "drama through music", as opera was once called.\textsuperscript{47} It was my intention that any disunity arising from such an eclectic approach would be mitigated by the powerfully unifying force of the narrative, in service of which such devices are always deployed.

4.2 HARMONIC LANGUAGE

The \textit{Chang'E and the Moon} compositional palette consists of my own harmonic style crucially modified through the incorporation of some elements from Chinese classical music. There is a nod towards heterophony and, I think, a nuanced appreciation of the differing syntax of Chinese music reflected in my use of phrasing and rhythm (see 4.3.2). I have used harmonic pentatonicism not to the exclusion of Western tonality but rather as a loose organising principle. My own harmonic style has been modified through the incorporation of these elements, rather than being subsumed by them.

4.2.1 Harmonic Development as Narrative

The opera itself opens in a state of ambiguous tonality encompassing a series of motivic elements in isolation. Within this framework other, more strongly Chinese motivic elements, are introduced, discussed below. The opera opens on a major 2nd between the flute and the clarinet playing E and F\# (Figure 4). From this small centre the palette is expanded with the addition of other notes, A, G and F. The second motif, an arpeggiated major third on B and D\#, breaks across the gloomy mood with sudden light (Figure 4, bar 6).

The individual elements of the opening coalesce to form one of the two distinct key-regions which pull upon the opening scenes. The first can be thought of as a shifting octatonic and pentatonic modal region based on E which evolves naturally from the opening E, F# tonality. A strong pull to both B and F# major tonalities are a feature of this tonal area, which represents the Moon landscape. This thematic area also includes the arpeggiated 3rds, which accompany Chang’E’s awakening and in many ways represent her personality upon the Moon. This motif recurs and forms the basis of her later arioso No.9 (Figure 5a), and last quarter aria No.32 (Figure 5b).
The second tonal area, centred around F major, represents Chang’E’s - at this stage only partially glimpsed - inner world, her humanity, the Earth and her memories of her previous existence upon it, represented by the Dream from which she has just awoken. The opening scenes of the work play upon the tension created by these two tonal areas which are resolved in favour of the E tonality, in imitation of Chang’E’s own struggle between her sleeping (F) and waking (E) selves (Figure 6).

FIGURE 5b  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No.32, bars 5–8

![FIGURE 5b](image)

FIGURE 6  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No.1, bars 1–5

![FIGURE 6](image)
The Moon phase progression that drives the opera’s mood and narrative development also works upon the development of the harmonic language. The pointillist and fragmentary music of the opening mirrors the landscape – and Chang’E’s – unformed state at the new Moon. The arrival of major characters introduces new thematic materials and broadens the harmonic palette. In particular, the work grows more diatonic and pentatonic as a metaphor for the waxing Moon phase. When Chang’E and Hou Yi are reunited, and particularly in their lovers’ music during the third quarter, the music takes on broader, post-romantic qualities, with more pronounced chromaticism and parallel harmonic shifts. As with the other aspects of the opera’s structural forms, these characteristics regress, and earlier motivic materials reappear as the Moon wanes during the last quarter.

4.2.2 Pentatonicism

I have called pentatonicism within Chang’E and the Moon a loose organising principle. I neither restrict myself to scales of only five tones, nor avoid semitones. Nevertheless in my approach to modulation, and my use of pentatonic melody and motivic materials, a strongly ‘Chinese’ pentatonic flavour is evident. The pentatonic aesthetic determines which chord tones are allowed to predominate in the primarily diatonic tertian harmony. This includes not only the ubiquitous 4ths and 5ths but also tones formed through the addition of such intervals (thus the major 2nd is particularly prominent, arising as it does as a 5th on top of another 5th). Importantly, frequent modulation to and between these chord tones is common and contributes to a sense of ‘home-key’ ambiguity. This
ambiguity is further often exploited through changing tertian harmonic tones, particularly minor/major ambiguities.

4.2.3 Analysis of No.16 Maid’s Song

The Maid’s Song (No.16) is a good strict example of this style of modal harmonic modulation, with progressions derived from the movement of 5ths along the pentatonic scale. It also contains many features that are broadly characteristic of a wider ‘Chang’E style’. Its melodic material is chiefly pentatonic; however, it utilises an expanded chromatic palette creating by the superimposition of two closely related tonal centres and their pentatonic scales. It exploits the resulting rapidly shifting tonal centre and actively cultivates ‘home-key’ ambiguity. Finally, its use of triadic harmony and semitones, and a strong instance of parallel harmonic modulation for narrative emphasis (Figure 8, bars 25–28), seats this work within the Western harmonic tradition, and reveals its strongly hybrid nature.

FIGURE 7 No.16, Maid’s Song Ostinato

The piece is built around a four-note piano ostinato: A♭, E♭, D♭, and an A♭ at the octave (Figure 7). The pattern contains two superimposed perfect 5ths creating an indeterminate triad (A♭, D♭, E♭) as the harmonic background, which makes the ostinato equally at home within several related Chinese modes. At its simplest
level the piece make use of two, the first being a $D^b$ major pentatonic, known as
$D^b$-Gong in Chinese modal theory,\textsuperscript{48} where Gong refers to Western $do$ in
solmisation, and the second being an $A^b$ minor pentatonic known as $A^b$-Yu,
where Yu refers to the Western $la$. $A^b$-Yu shares the same notes with the Gong
variant rooted on $C^b$, while $D^b$-Gong shares the same notes with $B^b$-Yu:

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\begin{align*}
&A^b$-Yu: & $A^b - C^b - D^b - E^b - G^b$ & OR & $D^b$-Gong: & $D^b - E^b - F - A^b - B^b$ \\
&C^b$-Gong: & $C^b - D^b - E^b - G^b - A^b$ & $B^b$-Yu: & $B^b - D^b - E^b - F - A^b$
\end{align*}
\]

The music preceding this piece has a B major flavour, which predisposes the ear
to hearing this indeterminate opening in the context of an $A^b$-Yu. However the
expectation is subverted by the strong $D^b$ and $A^b$ perfect 5\textsuperscript{th} in the bass at bar 3
(Figure 8). The entrance of the voices in bar 5 outlining a strong $D^b$ major
tonality reinforces the shift and would seem to establish $D^b$-Gong as the home
key.

From here the baseline moves through steps to $F^b$, which, together with the
ostinato notes, outline an $F^b$ major 7\textsuperscript{th} tonality. From a diatonic perspective this
is heard as modally borrowed mediant (M.B. III\textsuperscript{b}V) of $D^b$ major. However, the
sustained presence of the $E^b$ as 7\textsuperscript{th} allows for the phrase to return to the $A^b$-Yu
pentatonic in the next phrase (bar 21), and establishes this tonality as a strong
secondary anchor point. The first verse comes to a close ambiguously through a

\textsuperscript{48} Lok Ng, Modern Chinese Piano Composition and Its Role in Western Classical Music (University of
North Texas, 2006). There are many branches of modal theory that cover Chinese music’s many
historical and regional variants but this system is sufficient for the analysis of my composition.
parallel harmonic modulation and progression in the ostinato outlining, roughly, the chords of F minor, C minor, E\textsubscript{b} major, C\textsubscript{b} major 7\textsuperscript{th} (bars 25–28).

FIGURE 8  *Chang'E and the Moon*, No. 16, bars 1–11
In the middle of the work a new tonal area (bars 37–46) of G\textsubscript{b} is created through shifting the A\textsubscript{b} in the ostinato pattern to G\textsubscript{b}, and the F\textsubscript{b} in the bass progression is reheard in the context of D\textsubscript{b} minor (as iv of G\textsubscript{b}). The phrase at bars 58–63 picks up the F\textsubscript{b} to G\textsubscript{b} movement, which here feels strongly like a diatonic IV-V progression in the key of C\textsubscript{b}-Gong, before repeating the previously heard parallel harmonic tag-line that resolves completely ending the piece in E\textsubscript{b} major.

4.2.4 Pentatonic melodicism

Melody within the opera does not, in general, restrict itself exclusively to a pentatonic framework except in a few instances. As discussed in Section 3, the work’s pentatonic flavour becomes more pronounced in the build-up to the full Moon scene, which, I believe, serves both the ceremonial and celebratory mood of the work at this point. This usage opposes that binary analysis which sees the pentatonic in Orientalist music as connoting a negative depiction, which is only employed to articulate weak, simplistic, or submissive gestures, an interpretation which I believe only reveals the musicologist’s own projected prejudices.

FIGURE 9  
*Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 23, bars 1–7

The large ensemble chorus No. 23, *Below You Mortals*, is built around an orchestral tutti playing the above simple phrase built around C pentatonic rooted
on G, or G – A – C – D – E (5 6 1 2 3, one of the two Beijing Opera modes\textsuperscript{49}) and including the lowered or \textit{bian} passing note B\textsubscript{b} (Figure 9). The 7\textsuperscript{th} scale tone does appear in Chinese modal theory as a passing tone and has both a lowered and a raised variant (similar to usage in Western modal theory).

The opening phrase is repeated with heterophonic variety before it is built upon by successive orchestral entries in imitative canon of the original motivic material (Figure 10). The entries create three distinct lines, which together \textit{fix} or more strongly delineate a new harmonic context for the original melody.

\textbf{FIGURE 10} \textit{Chang’E and the Moon}, No. 23, bars 16–34

\textsuperscript{49} Terry E. Miller & Michael Church, Other Classical Musics: Fifteen Great Traditions, (Woodbridge, Suffolk, GB: Boydell Press, 2015), 133.
As the orchestral accompaniment returns to a complete restatement of the opening theme and development section, the chorus enters with a homophonic chorale based on the new harmonic context. The choral lines fit over the top of the orchestral accompaniment much in the same manner as in a Bach chorale cantata (Figure 11). This work showcases a strong fusion of both Western and Chinese classical techniques representative of a distinct ‘Chang’E style’.

FIGURE 11  Chang’E and the Moon, No. 23, bars 70–75

4.2.5 Pentatonic characterisation

The character of Old Yue represents, arguably, the most recognisably ‘Chinese’ characterisation in the entire opera. Modelled on the god Yue Lao, a deified Tang dynasty official, Yue presents as the archetypical Confucian scholar, a figure long portrayed (and oft derided) in Chinese literary and operatic depictions. Yue's music, in contrast to the other characters, sticks to strong pentatonic gestures.
Rather than seeing this as another problematic Orientalist portrait, this usage instead contextualises Yue’s characterisation as an upholder of traditional values, and relies upon our association of Chinese traditional music with a historical Chinese past to do so. That this characterisation relies on certain tropes – musical and textual – to be effective is beside the point, as the tropes would be equally appreciable by contemporary Chinese watching the opera as by any else, with I suspect no sense of unease. In this sense Yue has not been racialised in any demeaning or derogatory way.

FIGURE 12 Yue’s Arioso, *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 32, bars 1–9
4.3 OTHER CHINESE ELEMENTS

4.3.1 Overview

Only one specific Chinese music source can be cited as having a direct influence upon Chang’E and the Moon: an eighth century arrangement of a banquet song-text collected in the Han dynasty Book of Odes (Shi Jing). I used this two-part harmonisation of a traditional Chinese song as the model for No.20, the Choral Prayers, the wordless harmonies which can be heard drifting up from the (Chinese) humans on the world below, as they pray to Chang’E at the full Moon. If the opera as a whole takes place in a unique sound world governed by the landscape and inhabitants of the Moon, then No.20 was an opportunity for me to distinguish this world from that of the ‘real’ China, or any one of the many historical Chinas which might be below them.

FIGURE 13 Opening of Yu Li (Beautiful Fish) from the Book of Odes\(^\text{50}\)

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\(^{50}\) Taken from Lulu Huang Chang, *From Confucius to Kublai Kahn: Music and Poetics through the Centuries* (Ottawa, Canada: The Institute of Mediaeval Music, 1993), 22.
Figures 13 and 14 show the *Book of Odes* source and its influence on this movement. Rather than a direct quotation of this song, which would have felt incongruous given its original subject matter, the harmonic flavour and certain progressions were incorporated into an original composition sharing the same mode. This mode is Chinese heptatonic, rather than pentatonic, and is of a type simply known as the Ancient Type in Chinese modal analysis.\(^{51}\)

The singing of these ‘prayers’ occurs on indeterminate vowel sounds carried by a placement used in harmonic singing. This is designed to mimic the sound of voices too distant for words to be heard, and to create a distinction between the world of gods and mortals. It is a distinct dramatic Othering device, which will

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undoubtedly strengthen criticisms of exoticism in my music, particularly as in this case the group thus Othered are the Chinese. I make no apologies for this. The analysis of Orientalism using race alone and ignoring other dramatic devices and context merely strengthens the prejudices it sets out to illuminate.\textsuperscript{52}

4.3.2 A Chinese Syntax?

Western harmonic analysis can show the relationships between my pentatonically inspired harmonic progression through the use of modal borrowing; however, this does not then illuminate why the use of them should be in any way thought of as particularly Chinese. In most cases, I would argue that the perceived Chinese musical qualities of the work stem less from the pentatonic or harmonic elements, and more from the use of gestures or syntax gleaned from Chinese classical musical forms. This became most apparent during the early rehearsal/performance phase of the work’s creation. Particular wind phrasing marks were confusing at first to the players, who were most familiar with Western orchestral performance traditions. The tendency at first for these players was to want to rephrase their passages; however, after I directed them to Chinese recordings of \textit{dizi} or the \textit{suona}, I found in most instances that they developed an understanding of my intentions. Approaching the phrase with this awareness usually eliminated the players’ confusion as to how it should sound,

\textsuperscript{52} Consider for example Liao’s description of Butterfly’s Japanese family: “like all "Japanese" talk, it becomes unintelligible, sheer noise.” He is describing parlante: an operatic technique whereby musical and narrative flow are maintained by subsuming the regular conversational language of the crowd into the musical momentum of the orchestral accompaniment. It was first pioneered by Verdi in (the very Italian) \textit{Rigoletto}. Liao, ”\textit{Of Writing Words for Music Which Is Already Made’: ‘Madama Butterfly, Turandot’, and Orientalism.”
and my phrase markings were found to be largely accurate. I call this difference a
difference of musical syntax between Western and Chinese classical forms.

In addition to phrasing, one of the important gestures within the work which,
although original, clearly evokes Chinese classical forms is the use of dotted and
double-dotted rhythms, particularly over falling intervals (figures 15 and 16).

FIGURE 15  *Chang'E and the Moon*, No. 1, bar 30

![Figure 15](image)

FIGURE 16  *Chang'E and the Moon*, No. 1, bars 36–38

![Figure 16](image)

4.3.3 **Heterophonic Movement**

I experimented in imitating heterophony in many places where unison or octave
doublings would occur in Western classical music, such as during doubling of the
vocal parts or as part of normal orchestration practice. Usually these were
isolated moments rather than extended passages; however, the large presence of these moments throughout the work creates a strong overriding impression of heterophonic movement (figures 17 and 18).

FIGURE 17  'Heterophonic' doubling of vocal parts, Chang’E and the Moon, No. 28, bars 14–17

FIGURE 18  'Heterophonic' orchestral unisons Chang’E and the Moon, No. 34, bars 32–34
In other places voice and instruments were treated as equal lines, holding smaller elements or heterophonic variants of one existing melodic phrase (Figure 19). At such moments the music comes closest to approximating the characteristics of Chinese heterophony.

FIGURE 19  *Chang’E and the Moon*, No. 28, bars 33–34

4.4  THE ELEMENTS IN SYNTHESIS – ANALYSIS OF NO.19 SCENE

The short scene No.19, shown in full in Figure 20, is a good example of how the various elements that inspired me musically have been bound together to create
a unified whole. The number opens with a polytonal chord comprising two
distinct sets of 4ths, C and F, superimposed on top of C♯ and F♯. Mother Pearl's
opening phrase (Bars 1–2) belongs harmonically to the upper dyad and using F,
G and A♯ (En: B♭) fills out a pentatonic mode which can best be thought of as B♭
pentatonic rooted on F (F – G – B♭ – C – D). The passing G♯, as its enharmonic
equivalent, can be thought of as a bian tone.

The theme here at Bars 3–4 and a variant derived from it (Bars 7–8) are a
recurring motif in the opera which is derived from the Choral Prayers
movement, No.20. As it is here, the theme has been foreshadowed in Nos.8 and
12, whenever Mother Pearl discusses the approaching Eighth Month
celebrations. In its full statement at No.20, the Choral Prayers are the wordless
harmonies which can be heard drifting up from the humans on the world below,
as they pray to Chang'E.

In bars 5–15 Mother Pearl's recitative warms into something resembling the
baroque: From bar 9 sequential phrases containing melodic appoggiaturas settle
into a harmony sketched with a bare V-I ground movement. The phrase moves
through both G minor and G major to an ambiguous B minor, leading to a
statement of ‘Choral Prayers’ by the offstage humans beginning on G♯ minor.
Chang'E’s reply leads the action forward into the next movement with an
unresolved leading phrase (C♯ min/A) over a final low C♯ in the bass.
19. Scene

*MOTHER PEARL* enters and goes hesitantly towards the lovers, not liking to interrupt them.

Recit. $\mathfrak{f} = 70$

*MOTHER PEARL*  

Recit. $\mathfrak{f} = 70$

MOTHER PEARL  

Allegro $\mathfrak{f} = 100$

Percussion  

Recit. $\mathfrak{f} = 70$

Allegro $\mathfrak{f} = 100$

Piano  

Maestoso $\mathfrak{f} = c. \ 84$

poco rall.

MP

Maestoso $\mathfrak{f} = c. \ 84$

poco rall.

$G^\text{#}\wedge$

The guests are beginning to assemble and it is time to perform your duties.

The

Pno.

a tempo

piu mosso

rall.

MP

mor-tals be-low of-fer you prayers and thank you for the gifts you have given them by giving you gifts in re-turn.

a tempo

piu mosso

rall.

Pno.
Can you hear them my lady? They are so close.

OFFSTAGE CHORUS OF HUMANS

Ah!

Slower

I hear them. Beloved, we must go to the temple.

CHANGE and HOU YI exit followed by all the servants. The stage darkens.
5. OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

The writing of my first opera was the culmination of a long process of development. It emerged from an interest in vocal music which began early and has spanned my entire compositional output to date. In spite of this, Chang’E and the Moon represents a major leap forward for me in technique, style and stamina, and it exposed important gaps in my knowledge. I was extremely fortunate to be able to work with many talented students from the Department of Opera Studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, with whom I presented the work’s premiere performance. This one-on-one work allowed me to come to a greater understanding about the challenges of writing for voice, with undoubted influence upon my future compositions for the medium.

5.1 ON WRITING FOR VOICE

Chang’E and the Moon allowed me to develop a more sophisticated vocal writing technique. I am particularly struck by the uniqueness of vocal performance as a result of the psychological implications of singers having their instrument internal to themselves. This allowed me to settle on notation conventions which were perhaps more reflective of the way in which singers actually approach their music, and in direct contrast to some contemporary usage which prefers to treat the voice as just another instrument. One example of this was my decision to limit excessive phrasing and articulation markings, and also to offer fewer dynamic markings. In part this is a reflection of older trends in historical vocal composition, in which the
nuances of the text were relied upon to create the correct guide for phrasing. In addition, the relatively limited dynamic range of the human voice compared with other instruments (particularly the voice which must project over an orchestra), means that a composer needs to approach vocal dynamics much less from the standpoint of decibels produced, and more from an awareness of the expressive qualities such dynamics will suggest to the performer.

Similarly, after some false starts and varied attempts, I returned to the older models for the expression of tempi, and relied less on the use of metronome markings. Schubert, Mendelssohn and Brahms all had an ambivalent attitude to metronome markings in their vocal music, preferring mood descriptors. The well-known Italian tempo markings (Adagio, Andante and so on) seem to me still best suited by their ubiquity for adequately and quickly transmitting the nuances of both mood and speed that a tempo marking requires, and a comparable ‘universal’ tradition does not yet exist in English.

During the performance period of *Chang'E and the Moon*, I formed the opinion that the title role of Chang’E was excessively challenging due to a too consistently high tessitura. The soprano who played this role reported during production that her lower range had grown a little rusty from overuse of her high register. Any vocal part requires a greater variety of placement and regular movement throughout the range if one is to not tax the performer too greatly over a two-hour performance. Unfortunately, I disregarded this knowledge partly through a mistaken

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54 Ibid., 188.
preconception about how I thought the character needed to sound, and partly through misjudging the most effective soprano range for transmitting the drama. One of the results of this may be that the role itself will sit truly well with only a much smaller number of professional sopranos than might otherwise be the case. The role will suit a true lyric with the right combination of a high passagio and enough dramatic stamina for sustained high singing. I felt during production, and still feel, that this limitation must stand, as it could not be easily rectified with a very large rewrite, being too consistently a part of Chang’E’s characterisation. Nevertheless, the experience has created a deeper understanding of the subtleties in writing an operatic role really well, and I hope this will be reflected in my future attempts at the genre.

5.2 RECEIPTION AND FUTURE

_Chang’E and the Moon_ was well received at its premiere concert performance on 28 February 2016 at the Sydney Conservatorium. The opera was subsequently presented with the same cast and orchestra over two nights in a fully staged and costumed production in my local Blue Mountains community (Figure 21). Both performances were sold out, with the work being favourably reviewed. The reviewer, John Shand, concluded that _Chang’E and the Moon_ “not only deserves but demands to be aired again”.55 I consider these very successful outcomes and they bode well for future presentations of the work, as from the outset it has been my intention to create a work with the potential to contribute to the professional Australian operatic repertoire.

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I will continue with this medium, and others related; in particular, I want to turn my focus towards other large-scale narrative forms for solo and choral forces, such as the cantata. The successes and lessons of *Chang'E and the Moon* will stay with me and be built upon, with the result that my future composition will continue to evolve.

**FIGURE 21**  *Chang'E and the Moon* in its first staged performance at Wentworth Falls, 1 and 2 April 2016. Performers: (from left to right) Michaella Ye Zhang as Mother Pearl, Julie Paik as Nightingale, and Aimee O’Neill as Chang'E.
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