

***Moon in the Mirror: Operatic
Monodrama at CSU (Jan. 31)***

by Daniel Hathaway



At first glance, *Moon in the Mirror: an Operatic Monodrama in Seven Scenes*, with libretto by Zhang Er and Martine Bellen and score by Stephen Dembski, bears a striking resemblance to Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*.

Both are centered around a solo soprano who meditates on aspects of the human condition in the pale, ghostly light of

Earth's only satellite — itself a mirror that merely reflects, producing no light of its own.

Schoenberg's piece is more bizarre because the singer uses pitched speech or *Sprechstimme*, but Dembski's soprano, who sings her lines to ravishingly affecting music, is no less haunting. Common themes include blood ("Swords gorged upon corpses, on parade in blood scarlet!") in the Schoenberg, which sets 21 poems by Albert Giraud, translated from French into German. In the Dembski, which is based on the Chinese folk tale *Lady of the Moon*, blood serves as the evidence of a miscarriage.

A 40-minute theater piece, *Moon in the Mirror* received a riveting performance by mezzo-soprano Hai-Ting Chinn and pianist Shuai Wang in Waetjen Auditorium at Cleveland State University on January 31. Produced by CSU's Andrew Rindfleisch

and directed by Christine McBurney, the event was co-sponsored by CSU's Cleveland Contemporary Players and the University's Confucius Institute.

The staging was simple. Two raised platforms gave Chinn ample space to act and sing, and a white sheet — the only prop — served multiple purposes. Wang's grand piano was at stage right, and at one point, Chinn joined her on the piano bench. Simple projections designed by Kasumi delineated the show's seven scenes with Chinese characters on alternating sides of the stage.



The production of a poetry-driven work like *Moon in the Mirror* poses many of the same challenges as a performance of *Winterreise*. How do you keep the audience abreast of the story? You can print out the texts and risk having the listeners' attention shift from the stage to the programs in their laps, or you can provide supertitles — even if a work is sung in the vernacular by a performer whose enunciation is as good as Hai-Ting Chinn's.

CSU chose to print the words in the program, but used tiny print and turned the house lights off during the performance. Since projections were already involved, supertitles would have been welcome, especially as the seven scenes became increasingly mystical and their meaning more difficult to read from the action onstage.



Moon in the Mirror was preceded by Shuai Wang's expressive performance of Chen Yi's *Northern Scenes*, composed for Susan Chan, who premiered the work in 2013. It evokes the blue mountains of the North of China, as well as the strong and passionate character of its people. Wang told the audience that she could relate, being a Northerner herself.

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