



THE MUSIC

Composer Richard Taylor led a series of workshops to develop musical ideas and themes for setting the texts, which he incorporated into the finished work, as well as giving children the opportunity to try their hand at some Chinese instruments.

The Workshops

Richard Taylor – Composer

Twenty-five weeks before the first performance at the Hackney Empire I went to Lauriston School for the very first composition workshop. I was to visit each of the six primary schools during the next few weeks, for two half-days each, to begin the process of creating the score for the opera. Before that first day not a single note had been composed; I had only been able to read the libretto and get familiar with all the characters, just as each of the schools had done for their particular scenes.

The first composition workshops were about dipping our toes into this wonderful Chinese world for the first time. After singing some light-hearted warm-up songs and trying some rhythm exercises to focus our thinking, we began by reminding ourselves of the story of their particular scene and began to think from the 'outside-in' about the mood of the whole scene, characterisation, pace and energy. We wrote words on large sheets of paper that we could refer to later, so we always knew we were not veering from the scene in mood. Stephen had

usually written for chorus at the start and end of each scene, so we concentrated on these passages in this first session, working as a large group reading the words out loud and feeling the rhythm of the text. If there were particular moods and colours, even orchestration suggestions at this stage, they were added to the large sheet of paper.

To begin I would ask the children to look at the words and imagine they had been written to describe some music they had just heard. What did that music sound like – was it fast or slow, loud or quiet, high or low? By trial and error I would play the piano and alter what I played according to their instruction until we had something they were happy represented the words they had described. This became our basic accompanying pattern, and to this I encouraged them to sing the words of the text, line by line, making it up as they wished, thinking of word-painting opportunities where possible and encouraging them to let their voices travel upwards lyrically not just downwards in their

speaking range. Every two or three lines we would stop and have a 'rehearsal' and make sure everyone was happy with the result. Of course, this process took some time to relax into, and for the children to really understand that at this stage there was absolutely no such thing as a wrong note, but by the end of every first session we had more or less completed the first, and in some cases also the last, chorus piece.

The second sessions began with a re-sing of the piece composed in the first, since which time I had perhaps altered a key or modified the accompaniment, but the melody was usually almost identical. Where I had tried to subtly change it I was soon reminded that's not what they composed and politely asked to change it back! For this session I had identified a few shorter passages of text from their scene, for either solo or ensemble, which were nevertheless key moments in their story. The children split into smaller groups, and this time without me giving any piano support they composed melody lines for these

pieces of text. I went round each group in turn with manuscript paper writing down their melodies, and at the end of the session we all re-grouped by the piano and I played as each group performed their section to the others.

Five weeks after the first workshop I completed my last, and gathered my patchwork of themes and bits and pieces and began to assemble the score.

Our composition workshops with Richard were incredibly rewarding. His calm, totally encouraging approach resulted in the children creating together collaboratively and with total commitment. He managed to gently inculcate a belief in each child that they could create something amazing – and they did!

Veronica Frankland, Project Co-ordinator
St Dominic's RC Primary School



The Orchestration

Richard Taylor

As I composed I realised this was a very percussive score. I was keen to include elements of Chinese music while at the same time not attempt to pretend to be a Chinese composer; and percussion would help with this. I had travelled to China a few years ago to learn about Chinese music and returned with various percussive instruments found particularly in Chinese opera. One particular gong was very distinctive in its sound, having a swooping curve to the note which settles on a perfect A. I decided to make this the characteristic sound of the Almond Seller, the character who represents Confucius and who re-appeared in each story. I used my other instruments for the appearance of the dragon, which needed an authentic sound. In order to give the score the tinkle and twang that would be reminiscent of Chinese music I decided to use not a Chinese instrument at all but an Eastern European one, called a cimbalom. The Chinese have a similar

instrument from the same family, but the cimbalom is bigger and would give me more range and dynamic. I was also lucky enough to know one of the finest cimbalom players in the country, Chris Bradley, who agreed to play in the orchestra. However, as I didn't want the distinctive sound of the cimbalom to become overused, Chris would also play many other percussion instruments, and in order to give the score still more twinkle and fizz, I wrote for a second percussionist, also surrounded by instruments: some standard ones like a xylophone and timpani, and some unusual ones like a bicycle bell and a football rattle!

Besides all the percussion, the piano would still be central to the orchestra. Since the cast would have learned everything to a piano accompaniment and time to rehearse with full cast and orchestra was to be very limited, I didn't want it to sound so different to the singers

that they didn't recognise when to start singing! So, the piano provided much of the backbone and other instruments provided decoration and atmosphere. Flutes feature heavily in Chinese music, so I knew this sound was vital. A flute or piccolo can also whizz around like a kite over the melody and not interfere with our ability to hear the voices. A clarinet is very useful for doubling voices without overpowering them, and the same player could play saxophone (which, when played high, sounds like a Chinese reed-trumpet, but could also provide the jazzy atmosphere for *The Walk Learner* tale) and also the bass clarinet, giving beautiful warm low notes that were very useful to be associated with Gong-Gong. To complete the orchestra I wrote for a French horn, which blends beautifully with the clarinet, but can also cut through the texture and become a brassy fanfare or a call to arms (in the Chess match). So, although my orchestra

amounted to only 6 players, between them they played 47 instruments! My hope was that if you weren't able to see in the orchestra pit you would surely think there were more than only 6 seats.

Richard Taylor's colourful orchestration, including an eclectic use of percussion such as the cimbalom, conjured evocative sounds of China.

Rebecca Swift, Opera Now

The music was like it was coming all the way from China.

Nisha

