

PART **C**

Life!

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Emma Yong

How she fought cancer

C2



Mildred Baena

Arnie's mistress breaks her silence

C5



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50 years of video art



C8

From **Mao** to Madame White Snake

Chinese-American composer Zhou Long started out composing jingles for the revolution in China and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for his opera Madame White Snake. AKSHITA NANDA reports

C4





Pulitzer winner

Madame White Snake (left), the Pulitzer Prize-winning opera by Chinese-American composer Zhou Long (below), has a touch of Singapore in it. The text was written by a Singapore-born lyricist, former lawyer Cerise Lim Jacobs, who emigrated to Australia in her youth and is now based in the United States.

The story is based on the Chinese legend in which a snake spirit takes on the form of a woman in order to find true love. She finds happiness with a human but their love ends tragically when a monk discovers her secret.

Zhou wrote the music for a four-act opera in the Western style, but incorporated Eastern elements. The 100-minute production was performed by Opera Boston in Boston in February last year and in October at the Beijing Music Festival.



PHOTOS: CLIVE GRAINGER, COURTESY OF ZHOU LONG

Madame goes West

Turning Madam White Snake into an English opera pays off for composer Zhou Long



akshita nanda

Chinese-American composer Zhou Long found setting Mao Zedong's edicts to music during the Cultural Revolution a lot easier than blending Eastern and Western themes for his first-ever opera.

While he could turn political statements into jingles within a day, he spent three agonising years on Madame White Snake, which won the US\$10,000 (S\$12,300) Pulitzer Prize for Music this year. "It was not a human's life, it was a half-life," he tells Life! over the telephone from Beijing, where he is a visiting professor at the Central Conservatory of Music.

Zhou, 58, also a professor of music composition at the University of Kansas-Missouri in Kansas, will be in Singapore in September to speak about his prize-winning musical project at a symposium organised by

the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

His opera was performed in Boston in February last year by Opera Boston, an American troupe that specialises in unusual productions. In October, it was presented in China as part of the Beijing Music Festival. The four-act, 100-minute performance is in English but is based on the Chinese myth of a snake seeking love among humans. Its highlights include roles for a male soprano – a nod to Peking opera tradition – and a children's chorus, which introduces every act.

The Pulitzer judging panel called it "a deeply expressive opera that draws on a Chinese folk tale to blend the musical traditions of the East and the West".

The Pulitzer joins the portfolio of accolades Zhou has garnered over a 28-year career, including a Guggenheim fellowship and a 2003 lifetime achievement award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is one of the noted "Gang Of Four" composers of Chinese-American extract. The other three are Bright Sheng, Tan Dun and Zhou's wife, Chen Yi.

He often draws on ancient Chinese history and culture for inspiration. Several melodies based on 7th-century Tang dynasty poetry were recorded in 2004 by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) in the CD, Rhymes. SSO conductor Lan Shui is a former

schoolmate and calls Zhou's music "a bridge between East and West".

While Madame White Snake fits into this theme, Zhou says that working on the opera was a completely different challenge. First, it was daunting to try and create something entirely new out of a legend that has been made into Peking and Sichuan operas and even a Singapore-Taiwan TV drama in 2001.

It was also hard to pace his music according to the demands of the human voice – though he still made the singers hold high Cs for prolonged periods. In fact, he resisted taking on the project until he found out that librettist Cerise Lim Jacobs shared the same birth year as him and his wife – 1953, the year of the Snake, according to the Chinese calendar.

Given that coincidence, he "dropped all other projects" and concentrated solely on the opera. "Right after the opera was performed, people asked me if I would write another one and I said, 'no,'" he says. "Because it was my first opera, it was like a once-in-a-lifetime experience. After writing the last note with my pencil, I felt at that moment, 'I am empty, I am nothing'. I was in a depression. For the whole year, I could not compose."

Instead, he took solace in a long-time hobby of tinkering with radios and electronic models.

"Music is not my original love. I love to make radios and model boats with electronic motors. I can spend a long, long time on this and forget about meals," he says, betraying a hint of wistfulness.

"Music is not my first love but it is pressed into my bones," he adds, referring to a childhood spent avoiding piano lessons, even as his mother, a vocal teacher, insisted on drilling him in the basics of Western classical music.

His father was an arts professor, but Zhou had no love for painting canvases either. He might well have turned mechanical engineer had the Cultural Revolution not turned his life upside down when he was 16. His parents were considered "intellectuals" and sent to state-run camps for "re-education". Similarly, the young Zhou and his classmates were sent to a rural area in the far north-east, close to the Russian border, to do manual labour on farms.

After a long journey by train, truck and tractor, the teenagers were dropped in the wilderness and left to learn how to pitch their own tents and dig wells for water. "Shocked and numb", he felt like joining his female classmates in their wails. Instead, he had to put on a brave face.

"We were teenagers, we were Mao's 'young students', it was a great honour to be doing this," he recalls of those days. "Later, we felt, 'Where is the honour? Where is the future?'"

For five years, he drove a tractor and grew wheat. A back injury took him back to Beijing for medical treatment. His mother used her influence there to have him taken on by a musical troupe.

His job was to collect folk songs and also to set political announcements to tunes for the radio or to be performed by travelling theatre groups. The turn-around time was often a day or less, he recalls. "That made me write pretty fast. Even now, because I have that experience, I can write a jingle in very little time."

Then in 1977, the Central Conservatory in Beijing re-opened and he was among the hundreds beating down its doors to resume their education. He made it into the first music composition class after the Cultural Revolution and it was during his five years there that he met his wife.

In 1985, he headed to Columbia University in the United States, where he gained his doctoral degree and started Music From China, to promote traditional Chinese music and the works of contemporary Chinese composers. Now a US citizen, he continues to take young talent from China under his wing, along with Chen. The couple have no children.

Among their proteges is Sichuan-born composer Hu Xiao-ou, whose work Soul Capture was performed last month by the T'ang Quartet at the Singapore Arts Festival.

Hu, 35, tells Life! that he went to the US only to study under Zhou and holds his teacher's words close to his heart: "He told me the most important thing for any composer is to open your ears, your heart and find space for your own voice."

Another fond friend is SSO conductor Lan, 53, who feels that before the Pulitzer, Zhou had always been "a little bit under-rated".

However, Zhou remains well-known in China. He often teaches in conservatories in Tianjin, Xi'an and Guangzhou, apart from stints in Beijing. He finds China "pretty supportive of the arts", with its grand concert halls and appetite for musical performances.

He declines to comment on the detention of outspoken artist Ai Weiwei, but says: "Of course, the political area still needs to make some improvement. I still can't get on Facebook here. But that's all right, I'm not crazy about Facebook."

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Life and work

Born in China in 1953, Zhou Long was among the first students of music composition at the Central Conservatory in Beijing, when it re-opened after the Cultural Revolution.

At 30, he was the resident composer for the National Broadcasting Symphony Orchestra of China. Two years later, he headed to Columbia University in the United States for further studies.

He has been styled as part of the Gang Of Four Chinese-American composers moulding the contemporary music scene.

He founded Music From China, which promotes classical Chinese music and supports contemporary composers. His efforts won him an Adventurous Programming Award in 1999 from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers.

He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations, and written works for ensembles around the world, including the BBC Symphony, Tokyo Philharmonic and Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO).

In 2003, he received a lifetime achievement award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, one of the most elite arts circles in the US.

A year later, the SSO recorded his first CD, Rhymes, which includes works inspired by Tang dynasty poetry.

This year, his first-ever opera, Madame White Snake, netted him the US\$10,000 (S\$12,300) Pulitzer Prize for Music.

'I have to do everything at home – often I have to teach, shop, do the laundry and cook. The only time I have to concentrate is at midnight or in the early morning'

Zhou Long on the hardest part of being a composer

'My wife. Most times, she is the first person to read the music. Sometimes, she will say, "Oh, it's a piece of junk"'

On his harshest reviewer

'I don't really prefer to conduct. I get nervous on stage. There are so many excellent conductors who will interpret your music better than yourself'

On conducting his own work

'American composers, you can't say harsh words, they'll hate you. You have to give them direction and encouragement. With my Asian students, I have no soft side'

On whether he treats Asian and Western students differently