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## Boston gets new opera from old legend

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | May 14, 2008

Opera Boston will present the world premiere of an opera by Chinese-American composer Zhou Long, the company will announce today. "Madame White Snake," based on a millennium-old Chinese legend adapted by Brookline librettist Cerise Lim Jacobs, will be given four performances at the Cutler Majestic Theatre beginning in February 2010 and will travel to Beijing later that year. Details will be announced at a press conference today, with Mayor Thomas Menino expected to attend.

"Madame White Snake" is co-commissioned by Opera Boston and the Beijing Music Festival. It represents the first main-stage opera commission for the local company and the first American partnership for the festival. After the Chinese premiere in October 2010, the opera may be performed in Shanghai and in Boston's sister city of Hangzhou, where the ancient legend is set. Robert Woodruff, former artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre, will direct the production. Soprano Ying Huang and male soprano Michael Maniaci will be among the cast conducted by Opera Boston music director Gil Rose.

"I think it's an acknowledgement of the adventurous audience we have at Opera Boston, and a testimony to their appetite for interesting work," said Opera Boston general director Carole Charnow by phone. The budget for "Madame White Snake" is projected to reach \$2.2 million, roughly equivalent to the company's entire operating budget for a typical season. Charnow says fund-raising efforts have begun, and State Street Corp. has pledged its sponsorship. The mayor's office is assisting with publicity and contacts in Hangzhou, says Julie Burns, director of the Mayor's Office of Arts, Tourism & Special Events.

Zhou, 54, came to this country in 1985 and teaches at the conservatory of the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He and his wife, Chen Yi, are prominent members of a generation of émigré Chinese composers who lived through the Cultural Revolution and have emerged as an animating force in contemporary classical music. This will be Zhou's first opera.

The idea for "Madame White Snake" actually originated with Jacobs, a Chinese-American attorney with no experience working in opera. Growing up in Singapore, she often heard the Chinese Opera versions of the Madame White Snake legend, about a demon who transforms itself into a woman and falls in love with a mortal man. Speaking by phone about her English-language libretto, Jacobs said that despite its mythic origins, "This is really a story about choice, brought down to a human psychic, emotional level."

Jacobs first showed Zhou the libretto over a dinner meeting early last year in New York City. He too had grown up with the legend and was immediately attracted to the subject, he said by phone: "I already felt the melody as I read." ■

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