

SEVEN SISTERS *a new opera*

music by Justine F. Chen

libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann

director: Aya Ogawa • conductor: Lidiya Yankovskaya • dramaturg: Cori Ellison

BRIEF OVERVIEW

An unflinching, epic, *funny* exploration of the dysfunctions of family and the fallout of growing up Taiwanese-American and female. Juxtaposing the intensely personal with the sweeping presence of the universal, this boldly theatrical new chamber opera—recipient of a 2020 Opera America Discovery Grant for Female Composers and selected for West Edge’s Aperture portfolio—veers from the sublime awkwardness of caustic satire to wildly lyrical moments of emotional expansion, weaving together sounds ranging from the glamour of old Hollywood and 1950’s Chinese cinema, to Taiwanese folk music; Peking Opera; kinetic, pulse-racing rhythms; and a haunting emotional resonance rooted in the timeless struggle for agency and voice. Framed by the ritual of a Taiwanese funeral, and threaded through with the myth of the Pleiades reimaged, *Seven Sisters* looks at the hard truths of a culture that demeans and disempowers women and asks: How does the next generation move beyond this legacy, bridging a cultural chasm that privileges silence?

DURATION

90 minutes

FORCES

Characters—7 female vocalists

Mina, Daughter of #1/ Young matriarch (A-ma) - Spinto

Sister 1 - lyric soprano—oldest sister

Sister 2 – lyric mezzo-soprano

[Sister 3 - died young; an offstage character, retold via others]

Sister 4 – soprano

Sister 5 – mezzo-soprano

Sister 6 - soubrette

Sister 7 – coloratura soprano—youngest sister

Orchestra

10 bowed strings & 1 percussion: 3 violin; 3 viola; 3 cellos; 1 double bass; percussion: incl. bass drum, whip, temple block, temple bowls, crotales, tuned glasses

CURRENT DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Libretto workshop: October 2020; first music workshop: May or October 2021

MORE DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Composer Justine F. Chen’s mother was born in Taiwan, the oldest of seven sisters, daughters of a complicated matriarch, a businesswoman/politician whose power and influence Chen only truly understood upon attending her grandmother’s funeral in Taiwan in 2018. Her mother and her sisters, known in their family by birth order, are an embattled lot, who came of age in a culture that undermines the agency and self-worth of its girl children, stripping them of their voices. Chen’s grandmother raised

her daughters for the society that did not value them, controlling them with rivalries, and inculcating them with society's rules of wealth and power, and the understanding of a single directive: marry well. As a 2nd-generation American who barely speaks any Chinese dialect, Chen's attempts to understand these dynamics have been stymied by mistranslation and a communication gap that, in many ways, is the source, the inspiration for *Seven Sisters*.

In this 90-minute opera, the ritual of a formal Taiwanese funeral, seen from the perspective of Mina, a second-generation Taiwanese American—frames a sequence of fractured memories centering on the fate of sister #3, who was given away at birth. As the funeral unfolds, and the sisters squabble over largesse and distribution of power, Mina grapples with her disconnection from her inherited past, a feeling of otherness in the context of the present moment, and her complex relationship with her mother, sister #1. Recurring through the opera is the refrain, "*Ghin dsao!*" or "Get out!" which family members yell just before the deceased is to be cremated, urging their relative's soul to separate from the body. A kind of raucous liturgy for releasing the spirit from its fetters, *Seven Sisters* evolves to become the means by which the second-generation can begin to know herself.

Harnessing sharp humor and a dark lyricism, *Seven Sisters* looks at these often painful dynamics via a boldly theatrical, prismatic form. As the funeral unfolds, Mina, a second-generation Taiwanese-American, grapples with the static of her aunts' animosities, struggling to understand what's expected of her, the strange ways this family expresses love. Reliving her struggle to connect with her mother (#1), she attempts to move beyond this legacy, finding redemption through music. Interspersed between funeral and flashback is the myth of the Pleiades, the constellation known as Seven Sisters, which has given rise to legends across cultures, here reimaged as a flock of birds who touch down to earth to whisk ill-fated sister #3 away to safety.

CULTURAL MANDATE *from composer Justine F. Chen*

Taiwan, a small island of blurry political status, remains a cipher to many; my own understanding of my Taiwanese identity is limited to what's been passed down, embedded in the dysfunctions of family. Giving voice to the story of these 7 sisters means creating a work that arises from a complicated and sometimes painful set of expectations and disconnects. Yet we have a strong mandate to honor my Taiwanese cultural antecedents, to make a work that resonates with that community as well as with a broader audience. In this particular instance, crafting the universal from the specific poses an intricate and exciting set of cultural challenges.

PROCESS

Prior to the pandemic, we had structured our development process (libretto workshop & reading/talkback followed by revision; + initial music workshop/talkback) so that we could share the work at several junctures, with an audience curated to respond to the opera both culturally and dramaturgically—including members of the Taiwanese community (reached via: Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Office in NYC, where we plan to do our libretto reading; and Taiwan Center, Flushing) as well as colleagues and mentors from both the opera and theater worlds. We have now completed our libretto workshop via Zoom, with a stellar cast of actors and are embarking on a robust feedback process with culturally relevant audiences.

BIOS

The “propulsive, emotionally resonant” (*NYTimes*) music of native New Yorker composer **JUSTINE F. CHEN** has been commissioned and presented by New York City Opera, New York City Ballet, The Juilliard School, American Lyric Theater, NYFOS, Tapestry Opera, JACK Quartet, OPERA America, and Chicago Opera Theater. Her first opera, *The Maiden Tower*, was presented by Juilliard, NYCO’s VOX 2006 Showcase, and Chants Libres. When featured in VOX 2008, her second opera, *Jeanne*, was praised as “lyrical, atmospheric... striking... Throughout, Ms. Chen balances despair and humor.” (*NYTimes*) Recent projects include an opera on the life of computer-scientist Alan Turing, a work for three-time Grammy award winning choral phenomenon, *The Crossing*, and a holiday opera for American Lyric Theater and Saratoga Opera. Recent honors include grants from the Jerome Fund for New Music, Frances Goelet Charitable Lead Trust, and the 2020 Female Discovery Grant from OPERA America. She has been interviewed on WNYC’s Studio 360, WBAI, Indie Opera Podcast, and Cincinnati Song Initiative.

She received her DMA in composition from Juilliard, where she also earned her Bachelors and Masters in violin and composition. Dedicated to education, Chen is trained in Suzuki and Orff Pedagogy, created the composition-based music curriculum at Pierrepont School (CT), and teaches Theory and Composition at the Third Street Settlement (NY). <https://www.justinefchen.com/>

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STEPHANIE FLEISCHMANN is a librettist and playwright whose texts serve as blueprints for intricate three-dimensional sonic and visual worlds. Her “lyrical monologues” (*New York Times*), “smart” opera libretti (*Opera News*), plays, and music-theater works have been performed internationally and across the United States.

Upcoming operas: POPPAEA (Michael Hersch, Wien Moderne); IN A GROVE (Christopher Cerrone, commissioned by LA Opera); DIDO (Melinda Wagner, for Dawn Upshaw/Brentano Quartet—Dartmouth, Interlochen &...); THE PIGEON KEEPER (David Hanlon, Santa Fe Opera/Opera for All Voices); A SPACE OF SKY (Jeremy Howard Beck, Houston Grand Opera). Premiered: THE LONG WALK (Opera Saratoga, Utah & Pittsburgh Opera); AFTER THE STORM (HGOco); THE PROPERTY (Chicago Lyric). Current collaborations: Justine F. Chen (SEVEN SISTERS, OA Discovery Grant), Julia Adolphe (A BARREL OF LAUGHS, National Sawdust), Matt Recio (L’AUTRE MOI, Chicago Opera Theater, West Edge Aperture Sprint), Peter Knell (ARKHIPOV). Texts for voice/choral works for: Anna Clyne, C Cerrone, Gity Razaz, Olga Neuirth.

Selected plays/music-theater: THE VISITATION (with Christina Campanella & Mallory Catlett; HERE), SOUND HOUSE (the Flea), NIAGARA (with Daniel Fish), RED FLY/BLUE BOTTLE (Campanella/Catlett; HERE, EMPAC, Noorderzon, NL), The Secret Lives of Coats (Red Eye), The Sweetest Life (New Victory LabWorks). Also: Roundhouse Studio (London), Exit Festival (France), MASS MoCA, Birmingham Rep (UK), Synchronicity, Roadworks, New Georges, Soho Rep, Mabou Mines/SUITE.

Grants/Fellowships/Funding: Café Royal Cultural Foundation, Toulmin Foundation, Venturous Theater Fund, Howard Foundation, 3 NYSCA Individual Artist Commissions, NEA Opera/Music-Theater, 3 NYFA Fellowships, Tennessee Williams Fellowship, Frederick Loewe & Whitfield Cook Awards, MAPFund, OA Repertoire Development grant, NY State Music Fund, Greenwall Foundation, Mid-Atlantic Fund. Residencies: New Dramatists; New Georges Audrey; American Lyric Theater.

www.stephaniefleischmann.com

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Director **AYA OGAWA** is a Tokyo-born, Brooklyn-based playwright, director, performer and translator whose work reflects an international viewpoint and utilizes the stage as a space for exploring cultural identity, displacement and other facets of the immigrant experience. Cumulatively, all aspects of her artistic practice synthesize her work as an artistic and cultural ambassador, building bridges across cultures to create meaningful exchange amongst artists, theaters and audiences both in the U.S. and in Asia. She has written and directed many plays including *A Girl of 16*, *oph3lia* (HERE) and *Ludic Proxy* (The Play Company). Most recently she wrote, directed and performed in *The Nosebleed* at the Incoming! Series at the Public Theater's Under the Radar Festival. As a director she most recently directed Haruna Lee's *Suicide Forest* for The Bushwick Starr and Ma-Yi Theater Company. She has translated numerous Japanese plays into English including work by Satoko Ichihara, Yudai Kamisato and over a dozen plays by Toshiki Okada; many of these translations have been published and produced in the U.S. and U.K. She is currently a resident playwright at New Dramatists and a Usual Suspect at NYTW, and recent member of the Devised Theater Working Group at the Public Theater and Artist-in-Residence at BAX.
<http://ayaogawa.com/>

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Russian-American conductor **LIDIYA YANKOVSKAYA** is a fiercely committed advocate for Russian masterpieces, operatic rarities, and contemporary works on the leading edge of classical music. As Music Director of Chicago Opera Theater, Ms. Yankovskaya has led the Chicago premieres of Jake Heggie's *Moby-Dick*, Rachmaninov's *Aleko*, Joby Talbot's *Everest*, and Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta*. Elsewhere: Ricky Ian Gordon's *Ellen West* (Prototype Festival), *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Wolf Trap), *Pia de' Tolomei* (Spoleto Festival USA), and *Taking Up Serpents* (world premiere, Washington National Opera). Ms. Yankovskaya is Founder and Artistic Director of the Refugee Orchestra Project (recent performances: United Nations; LSO St Luke's, London), and former Artistic Director of the Boston New Music Festival and Juventas New Music Ensemble, where she led operatic experiments with puppetry, circus acts, and robotic instruments, as well as premieres by more than two dozen composers. An alumna of the Dallas Opera's Hart Institute for Women Conductors and Marin Alsop's Taki Concordia Fellowship, Ms. Yankovskaya has also served as assistant conductor to Lorin Maazel, assisted Vladimir Jurowski via a London Philharmonic fellowship, and was featured in the Bruno Walter National Conductor Preview. Ms. Yankovskaya served as U.S. Representative to the 2018 World Opera Forum in Madrid, and received a 2018 Solti Foundation Career Assistance Award. Upcoming debuts: Seattle Opera, Dallas Opera, Hawaii Symphony Orchestra, Opera Vlaanderen in Belgium, Opera Seville, and the Glimmerglass Festival.

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CORI ELLISON, a leading creative figure in the opera world, has served as staff Dramaturg at Santa Fe Opera, the Glyndebourne Festival Opera and New York City Opera. Active in developing contemporary opera, she leads the Opera Lab at The Juilliard School, where she serves on the Vocal Arts faculty. She is also a founding faculty member of American Lyric Theater's Composer Librettist Development Program and has participated in the Yale Institute for Music Theatre. At New York City Opera she was a curator of the annual VOX American Opera Showcase and co-founded and led City Opera's "Words First" program for opera librettists. She has been a sought-after developmental dramaturg to numerous composers, librettists, and commissioners, including Glyndebourne, Canadian Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Arizona Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, and Beth Morrison Projects, and has served as

production dramaturg for projects including *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (Cincinnati Opera); *Orphic Moments* (Salzburg Landestheater, National Sawdust, Master Voices); *Aci, Galatea, e Polifemo* (National Sawdust); Washington National Opera's *Ring* cycle, Opera Boston's *The Nose*, and *Offenbach!!!* at Bard Summerscape. A faculty member at the Ravinia Steans Music Institute Program for Singers, she has taught and lectured around the world. She creates supertitles, and helped launch Met Titles. Her English singing translations include *Hansel and Gretel* (NYCO), *La vestale* (English National Opera) and Shostakovich's *Cherry Tree Towers* (Bard Summerscape).