FUSION OF MUSICAL STYLES AND CULTURES IN BRIGHT SHENG'S OPERA "THE SONG OF MAJNUN"

D.M.A. DOCUMENT

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ABSTRACT

_The Song of Majnun_, based on the libretto of Andrew Porter, is Bright Sheng’s first composition for the operatic stage. Sheng and Porter adopted the concept of the "Persian miniature" and deliberately created this one-act opera in eight miniature scenes. This opera was commissioned in 1990 and premiered by the Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1992 while Sheng was Composer-in-Residence for this company.

The story of Layla and Majnun is one of the famous Persian legends; it tells a touching love story and portrays a profound spiritual metaphor as well. Sheng has described this opera as a metaphor for the relationship between himself and his motherland, China, with Layla representing China and Majnun representing the composer. Porter’s poetical effusions are wonderfully portrayed through Sheng’s sensitivity to the text and effective use of both Eastern and Western musical elements and styles.

There are four major topics discussed in this document:

1) Bright Sheng: the man and his compositional philosophy

2) The legend as libretto

3) Musical analysis of the opera

4) The opera as theater: production considerations
Information with regard to the premiere, selected reviews, a complete list of Sheng's works and available recordings is included in the Appendices.
Dedicated to my grandfather 許清波
(Chin-Poo Hsu, b.1917), whose caring and loving spirit
will always be treasured, and the memory of
my dearest grandmother 許黃枝
(Huang-Chih Hsu, 1919–1996), whose elegance, profundity, and
endurance will always be remembered.
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I am eternally thankful to the composer of The Song of Majnun, Professor Bright Sheng, for taking time from his hectic schedule to give me guidance and invaluable suggestions throughout the process of writing this document. I also want to thank Christopher Zimmerman and Dan Weeks for sharing insights from their performing
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INTRODUCTION

Bright Sheng’s first opera, *The Song of Majnun*, was commissioned by the Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1990 and premiered by the same company in 1992. The world of music is a subjective and creative environment in which each musician has a unique musical language to convey personal thoughts and emotions and Bright Sheng, a composer of Chinese origin, has allowed his distinctive musical language to speak for him in this work.

Bright Sheng came to the United States after the Cultural Revolution to seek artistic freedom and pursue a musical career. Like other Chinese American composers, such as Chen Yi and Tan Dun, Sheng blends Chinese musical elements with western compositional techniques, an approach which has received much attention from the western musical world.

The overall feature of this work is the fusion of western and eastern music compositional styles which complements the blending of Asian cultures and philosophies suggested in the story. Sheng’s vocal pieces prior to the composition of his opera, such as *Sheng Sheng Man* and *Three Chinese Love Songs*, employ similar compositional techniques. *Sheng Sheng Man* incorporates elements of traditional Chinese opera described in the term *Sprechstimme* along with western compositional techniques.
In *Three Chinese Love Songs*, Sheng uses a modern compositional approach yet is able to preserve the elements of Chinese folklore.

Sheng was searching for a libretto which would lend itself to the fusion of eastern and western musical elements. He was particularly inspired by the love tragedy of Majnun and Layla when the librettist, Andrew Porter, brought this legend to his attention in 1989. This story of Majnun and Layla, a Persian Romeo and Juliet, became a resource from which Porter and Sheng drew in order to develop the libretto for this opera. Symbolically, this story also represents the intimate yet ambivalent relationship between Sheng and his motherland, China, with Majnun representing himself and Layla representing China. This relationship became particularly meaningful after the tragedy of Tiananmen Square.¹

When Sheng set the story to music, he did not consider it only a reflection of Persian culture; instead, he regarded it as a seminal legend from Asia, where he was originally brought up and nurtured. In order to bring out the exotic flavor of this legend, the composer pervasively uses pentatonic scales and certain folk tunes. These tunes are not randomly selected but are specifically from the Qinghai province near the Tibetan border. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, the composer spent seven years in this province working as pianist and percussionist in a Folk and Dance Troupe.

While adopting these folk idioms in his composition, Sheng fuses them with the western compositional techniques which he had learned systematically in his years of western schooling. According to Sheng, the idea of “fusion” is particularly inspired by

¹ In 1989, thousands of Chinese people gathered at Tiananmen Square to protest against political incidents and the gathering resulted in the Beijing Massacre on June 4th. More than 3000 civilians were wounded and over 200 people, including 36 students, were killed.
the compositions of Bela Bartok. Many composers such as Bartok, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Debussy, and even Brahms are well known for fusing their national individualities with European compositional techniques. Like them, Sheng obtains his initial inspiration from his unique cultural background and then uses his knowledge of western musical techniques to unify his composition.
CHAPTER 1

BRIGHT SHENG: THE MAN AND HIS COMPOSITIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Chinese by birth and cultural heritage, American by education and current citizenship, composer Bright Sheng has developed his own unique compositional style by combining eastern musical elements with western compositional techniques. His life has been influenced by eastern and western traditions and his works reflect his appreciation and understanding of both cultures.

Bright Sheng was born in Shanghai, China on December 6, 1955. He showed an interest in music at an early age and began piano lessons with his mother when he was four years old. The Sheng family enjoyed a high social standing and therefore the family was labeled as one of the Five Black Classes during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. According to his youth left him with violent and brutal memories which were later reflected in one of his greatest works for orchestra, "H’un (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1976.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a tragic period for the Chinese people and their civilization. The Cultural Revolution was designed to destroy the rich culture of pre-Communist China, to shake the social stratification of the wealthy and the

\(^2\) The information regarding Sheng’s family background was provided by Bright Sheng.
Intelligentsia and to punish those who criticized the leader Mao Ze-Dong’s failures in the Great Leap Forward Experiment (1958-1960).

During this time, the Chinese people were categorized in two groups, the Five Red Classes and the Five Black Classes. The Five Red Classes included the workers, tenant farmers, left-wing sympathizers, soldiers, and revolutionary political officers, while the Five Black Classes included rich landlords, reactionaries, rich peasants, conservatives, and criminals. Sheng’s family had fallen into political disfavor at the very beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Sheng made an opening statement about the Cultural Revolution in an article about *Hun (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1976 for Orchestra*:

The ten years 1966–1976 was the period of the infamous “Cultural Revolution” in China, the calamitous consequence of the cruel power struggle within the highest level of the Chinese Communist Party. It was the most tragic time in recent Chinese history, a time of violence, madness, and chaos, and a time that ultimately awoke the consciousness of the Chinese people under the Communist regime. Thousands of people died and millions of survivors are still paying the price to this day. I was one of the millions of Chinese who were the witnesses, victims, and survivors of the “Cultural Revolution.”

After Sheng graduated from Shanghai High School, he was expected to follow in his parent’s footsteps and pursue either a medical or an engineering career. At the time of Cultural Revolution, however, most educated people, including high school graduates, were forced to exile to labor camps for “rehabilitation.”

At this time, Sheng’s musical skills proved to be a blessing in that he was not required to perform hard labor. He was assigned to a Folk and Dance Troupe and sent to

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Qinghai province near the Tibetan border to work as a performer – he started as a pianist and percussionist and later became a conductor. The duties of the Folk and Dance Troupe were to entertain the local people.

As Sheng became more familiar with these expectations he began to arrange music for the Troupe. Shortly after he arrived in Qinghai, he realized that he could not obtain an adequate music education as an instrumentalist in such a remote area. Although he was fifteen years old, he was regarded as the best pianist in that area due to the limited musical skills and experiences of the people around him. Since there was no one in the area available to teach him, he instructed himself by watching and listening to accomplished musicians when he visited other cities. He was able to grasp immediately the elements which could be helpful to him in his musical work.

Another wonderful experience for Sheng in Qinghai was the discovery of the special and beautiful folk music which had developed in this very remote area. Sheng studied this folk music at first without any clear purpose, not realizing that someday it would become a great inspiration for his composition.

When Mao Ze-Dong died in 1976, the Cultural Revolution came to an end. In 1978, when universities reopened, Sheng was one of the first students accepted by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He earned his undergraduate degree in music composition and graduated with honor from this prestigious conservatory in 1982.

Sheng left China in 1982 and immigrated to the States with his parents. He received a Master’s degree from Queens College, CUNY and a Doctoral degree from

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Columbia University in 1984 and 1993, respectively. Among his teachers were Leonard Bernstein, Jack Beeson, Chou Wen-Chung, George Perle, and Hugo Weisgall.

Prior to receiving his Doctoral degree, Sheng composed successfully in various genres, including orchestral, chamber, instrumental and vocal works (see Appendix A). Moreover, he served as Composer-in-Residence for many performing organizations, such as the Seattle Symphony, the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and the Lyric Opera of Chicago. It was the latter organization that commissioned the composition of *The Song of Majmun*, a one-act opera, in collaboration with librettist Andrew Porter.

After he obtained his Doctoral degree from Columbia University in 1993, his career as a composer continued to develop. In 1994, at the invitation of the president of the University of Washington, Mr. Sheng became Artist-in-Residence at the School of Music. Since that time, he has continued to receive many invitations to lecture at universities and conservatories, including the Juilliard School of Music, Harvard University, and The University of Chicago. Since 1995, he has been Professor of Music at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Sheng believes that in music composition, it is important to achieve a balance between intuitive spontaneity and logical response. He feels his compositional technique developed gradually as he started to understand the essence of the masterpieces of Western classical music. Sheng believes that though music compositional styles may change through time, human feelings remain largely unchanged. Accordingly, whether the piece is tonal or atonal, Asian or Western, the most important elements in music are those which effectively convey human expression and emotions.
Sheng gains much insight by analyzing the works of great western composers from Bach to Bartok. He believes that, in the works of the great masters, he finds answers to many questions concerning the process of composition. He often mentions how frequently he would find himself looking for these answers in a Mahler symphony in order to release a block in his own writing.⁵

Sheng revises his compositions constantly. He often tells of Mahler’s quote that it would be “ideal to republish all my symphonies every five years,” which indicates that Mahler often made revisions in his works. Bernstein, another model for Sheng, was still revising his early works, such as West Side Story, towards the end of his life.

Although Sheng has a highly successful career overseas, his foremost interest in composition is the fusion of the Asian and Western cultures. Deep in his heart, Sheng considers himself Chinese and most people consider him so because of his cultural background and the natural flavor of Chinese influences in his music. Yet, over the years he has contemplated the definition of cultural identity, whether it be one’s native land and language or one’s current nationality. Chinese people regard him as a western composer while people in the western world consider him a Chinese composer.

Working with eastern and western ideas allowed Sheng to forge a compound cultural identity, a synthesis of these two elements. He has blended these two elements to create a compound cultural identity. He once mentioned that what makes Bartok’s music great is the combination of primitive and savage folk elements with the refined quality of

⁵ The information in regard to Sheng’s musical philosophy was provided by Bright Sheng.
the classical tradition. Sheng’s Chinese heritage and training in western musical techniques have enabled him to become an artistic ambassador to the international musical world.
CHAPTER 2

THE LEGEND AS LIBRETTO

In the translator’s preface to *The Story of Majnun and Layla*, it is stated:

Among the legendary love stories of the Islamic Orient that of Layla and Majnun is probably the best known. The two lovers live up to this day in poems, songs and epics of many tribes and nations from the Caucasus to the interior of Africa, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.⁶

The librettist Andrew Porter was inspired by the story when he first read the poem of the Persian poet Nizami. He states:

I first read Nizami’s poem in Shiraz some twenty-five years ago, and the idea of the Layla and Majnun opera began to form: not a large scale retelling of the whole tale, with all its incidents, but a small, exquisitely colored opera – as it were: Scenes from Layla and Majnun.... The opera found its composer when Bright Sheng responded to Layla and Majnun with a like enthusiasm.⁷

Andrew Porter, born in Cape Town, South Africa, is a renowned English writer on music. After he studied music at Diocesan College in Cape Town, he went to England to continue his education at Oxford and became an organist. Slonimsky, the editor of

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Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians, describes Porter as “a polymath, and uncommonly diversified intellectual.”

Porter wrote music criticism for the Financial Times of London from 1953 to 1974 and served as editor of the Musical Times of London from 1960 to 1967. He became the music critic of the New Yorker in 1972 and remained in this position for twenty years. Currently he writes for the Times Literary Supplement and resides in London.

Besides his talent for music, Porter is proficient in several languages, including German, Italian, and French. He has translated several operas, including Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen, Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte and a number of operas by Verdi.

Slonimsky compliments Porter’s critical writing: “His mastery of English prose and his unostentatious display of arcane erudition make him one of the most remarkable music critics writing in the English language.”

There are various English versions of the story of Majnun and Layla. Porter’s libretto, The Song of Majnun, is based on the English version of Nizami’s The Story of Layla and Majnun, which was translated from the Persian and edited by Dr. Rudolf Gelpke in collaboration with E. Mattin and George Hill. It may be a universal theme that tragedy dwells in the most poignant love stories, such as the stories of Romeo and Juliet and Tristan and Isolde. Similarly, the story of Majnun and Layla is not merely a tragic legend but a story suffused with bliss as well as grief.

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9 Ibid.
Nizami Ganjavi, a native of Ganja (now Kirovabad, in Azarbajdjan, in what is today part of the Soviet Union), is described as one of the greatest Persian poets. He was born around 1140-41 A.D. and died at the age of sixty-three. The place where he grew up was once a highly populated town with a pleasant climate, beautiful gardens, vineyards and orchards. The natural scenery of the area is described in much of his writing. Nizami became an orphan when he was very young, but the clear memory of his parents remained vividly with him throughout his life, and he never ceased to mourn his loss. It is also said that he had been married three times, but one after the other his wives had died. Poetry became his intimate friend. Though the misfortunes of his life depleted his strength, it enriched him as well, inspiring him to become a great Persian poet and thinker.

The story of Majnun and Layla is traditionally considered to have its source in historical personages. A number of verses were written by Majnun and were compiled in different editions which became famous among Arabic poets. Nizami collected these folk versions and shaped them into a single narrative poem of approximately 4600 stanzas during the years 1188-1189. By reshaping the story, Nizami enriched the legend to reflect his interest in Sufism, a philosophy which describes the passions of the soul in its progress to eternity;¹⁰ this thought is a significant parable of religious experience for Sufis. Nizami dedicated this poem to his patron, Shirwanshah Akhsitan Minuchihr, a Transcaucasian chieftain.

In the translator’s preface to the story, Gelpke says:

Nizami had not chosen his subject himself, he had been commissioned by a Transcaucasian chieftain, Shervanshah, and confesses in one of the prefaces that at first he was by no means enthusiastic about the idea. This is hardly surprising to anybody who knows the ascetic aridity of the early Arabic sources which he was supposed to follow. But Nizami, while preserving the main facts, made many important additions: the scene in the garden, Nawfal’s attack against Layla’s tribe, her refusal to consummate her marriage, Majnun’s rule over the animals, the visit of his mother and his uncle, the mother’s death, the story of the youth from Baghdad, the death of Layla’s husband, as well as the fables and meditations, are either not to be found at all in the Arabic sources or only in rudimentary form.\(^{11}\)

These additional incidents, absent in the Arabic sources but included in Nizami’s version, are also excluded in the scenes of the opera.

Sheng and Porter realized at the very beginning the difficulty in successfully converting the great length of this story into a one-act opera. Therefore, they borrowed the concept of “Persian miniatures” to accomplish their original objective of producing a small-scale opera. In the book, *A Khamsa of Nizami of 1439*, the author states:

The miniature takes its name from the European term for the illustrations in mediaeval books or, more specifically, from the name of one of the colors used in the illuminations. This red color was called *minium* (lat.) and the artist who painted with the minium color was known as a miniator and in consequence the painting was called a miniature.

The Persian miniature is an illustration of an episode in a story of an epic or, more often, a romantic character. The picture is closely related to the text, both as regards position and subject matter. The same story may be illustrated by a few miniatures in one manuscript and by over a hundred in another.\(^{12}\)

This art form gives the viewer a visual image to illustrate the literary plot. The development of the miniature was intimately associated with artistic and poetic languages

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and obtained a profound and sincere accordance with poetry. There are fifty-four small-scale chapters in Gelpke’s translation of *the Story of Layla and Majnun*; the miniatures are presented periodically throughout the book. Sheng and Porter took this idea of the use of miniatures to clarify important events in the story.

In order to make a smooth transition from scene to scene, Porter and Sheng used two characters as gossips to narrate the plots. The Gossips function as a “Greek chorus” for the purpose of relating incidents to a character or to the audience and binding together the eight scenes in the opera. The “Greek chorus” in Greek tragedies functions in several ways. The first use of the Greek chorus is as Audience, as commentators who are the poet’s mouthpiece and form a link between the poet and the audience. The second use of the chorus is that of Character, wherein the chorus assumes the identity of a group of actual people, and acts with pertinent motivation and knowledge. The third aspect of the chorus is as Narrator, with the chorus donning the mantle of descriptive storytellers or of local gossips. The role of the Gossips used in this opera reflects the latter style of Narrator in which the Gossips speak to accentuate the action.

Following is a synopsis of *The Song of Majnun*:

**Scene I:** Majnun and Layla meet each other during a children’s gathering, and they fall in love at first sight. They express their feelings to each other. Unfortunately, Layla’s parents have already chosen a husband for her and interrupt this spontaneous relationship. Consequently, Majnun and Layla are torn apart.

**Scene II:** The Gossips explain, that Majnun’s father beseeched Layla’s father to give Layla’s hand in marriage to his son, but the entreaty failed. Majnun’s song of his passionate love for Layla breaks through this narration.
Scene III: Majnun’s love song passes from person to person and from village to village and becomes famous in his land, and finally it reaches the ears of Layla who immediately recognizes that the song is meant for her.

Scene IV: Majnun’s father has been searching in the desert for Majnun who fled his home in despair over his lost love. Majnun is finally found and encouraged to seek a cure in a pilgrimage to a holy place. Instead, Majnun prays for a stronger bond of love with Layla and becomes distraught from so much emotional stimulation. His father finally leaves, resigned and disappointed.

Scene V: The news of Layla’s wedding is carried to Majnun by the Gossips. Her husband, Ibn Salam, who promises to love and respect her, senses Layla’s unhappiness.

Scene VI: Layla and Majnun write to each other expressing their undying love and, as a result, these two lovers secretly meet in a moonlit garden. Nevertheless, they feel that the barrier that parts them is too great to overcome. Majnun leaves the garden before dawn, and Layla helplessly watches him depart.

Scene VII: Layla loses her strength to live after she sees Majnun’s departure and entreats her mother to be kind to Majnun when he visits her tomb. Then she expires in her mother’s arms.

Interlude: In a dream, Majnun sees a bird fluttering to him from high on a branch. In the bird’s beak, a jewel glistens, like a drop of light. The bird drops the jewel into Majnun’s cupped hands at the moment of Layla’s death. The glistening jewel is Layla’s tear.
Scene VIII: People mourn for the loss of Layla. Majnun rushes into the mournful crowd and breaks up the funeral. He sings his love song to his beloved for the last time, and he remains by the tomb.

The eight scenes in the opera are similar to eight miniatures, with each presenting an important scenario in the story. Porter’s libretto is a much-condensed version of the story compared to Nizami’s poem. Nizami describes every incident in poetic detail, including Majnun’s and Layla’s romance, while Porter distills the poem into eight miniature scenes, which are then magnified through Sheng’s craftsmanship into operatic form.

Many aspects of Bedouin culture are reflected in the Story of Layla and Majnun. Gelpke states: “It is interesting to observe how Nizami preserves the Bedouin atmosphere, the nomads’ tents in the desert and the tribal customs of the inhabitants, while at the same time transposing the story into the far more civilized Iranian world.”13

In the culture into which Nizami was born, men and women were rigidly separated; their marriages were arranged, with love playing a larger role in fantasy than in real life. The girls’ parents had powerful authority in terms of making decisions for them in the choice of their life-long companions. Well-bred young females were not allowed to choose their own husbands. For the Chinese, this particular aspect of family relationships is still common in the writer’s parents’ generation. Even nowadays, parents tend to play a more dominant role in life choices than in Western society.

Nizami uses the technique of piling metaphor upon metaphor to depict the scenes, which may be assimilated from Islamic art, in which elaborate patterns fully cover the surface of a decorated object. For example, in the first chapter of the story, a great lord, Sayyid, who is described as a caliph and successful in almost every aspect of his life, has remained childless.

Thus the noble man brooded and, the older he grew, the greater became his desire. Yet for many years his alms and prayers were in vain. The full moon which he so eagerly awaited never rose in his sky and the jasmine seed which he sowed would not germinate.\textsuperscript{14}

The full moon and jasmine seed symbolize male and female heirs, respectively. When a son is finally born to Sayyid, the baby boy is named “Qays,” which literally means “moon.”

When Qays is sent to school, he meets Layla. Metaphors suggesting the danger of a woman’s beauty are used to describe Layla’s glamour: “She was as slender as a cypress tree. Her eyes, like those of a gazelle, could have pierced a thousand hearts with a single unexpected glance, yes, with one flicker of her eyelashes she could have slain a whole world.”\textsuperscript{15} Interestingly, “Layla” means “night”. The moon (Qays) only shines at night (Layla). Qays and Layla fall in love at first sight and become inseparable for the rest of their lives. Like the metaphors describing Layla’s beauty, the metaphors describing their love are crafted ingeniously into the story. One poem which reflects the strong bond between Layla and Qays became the inspiration for the simple dialogue between these two lovers that Porter wrote in the first scene of the libretto. Sheng portrays the atmosphere wonderfully.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 2.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 4.
While all their friends were toiling at their books
These two were trying other ways of learning.
Reading love’s grammar in each other’s looks,
Glances to them were marks which they were earning
Their minds were freed from spelling by love’s spell,
They practiced, writing notes full of caress;
The others learned to count – while they could tell
That nothing ever counts but tenderness.\(^{16}\)

The happiness of the lovers comes to an end when Layla’s parents disapprove of
their pledge of fidelity and forbid them to see each other. As Layla secretly weeps over
her loss, Qays exposes his lovesickness for everyone to see. He starts to wander around
the countryside: “He walked aimlessly, driven only by his aching heart, without heeding
the staring eyes; tears springing from under his eyelashes like wild mountain streams.
All the time he sang melancholy songs such as lovers are wont to sing in their
misery...\(^{17}\)” According to Medieval Persian thought, lovesickness was considered a
disease. People no longer called him Qays, but Majnun (which means insanity), the
madman.

The detailed plots mentioned in Nizami’s version are not completely adopted in
the opera; for instance, Majnun’s original name, Qays, his father’s name, and their family
backgrounds, etc, are not included. Nizami’s use of metaphors in the story is well
managed through Porter’s concise and poetic prose, and Sheng’s symbolic music
depiction.

In desperation Majnun runs away into the wilderness. The dramatic rending of
his garments, which leaves him naked, violates the beliefs of Islamic culture which

\(^{16}\) Ibid. p. 6.
\(^{17}\) Ibid. p. 10.
strongly disapproves of nakedness; in contrast to the custom in Greek, Roman, or European traditions, nakedness is rarely depicted in Islamic art. Majnun’s nakedness becomes a symbol of insanity and dishonors the tribes of his people. After his departure from Layla, Majnun’s health declines day by day. His father takes him to a shrine to entreat for God’s mercy. Majnun is asked to pray to God for a cure for his lovesickness. Nevertheless, he prays that Layla should be blessed and that his love for Layla remain strong.

While he roams in the desert and wilderness, Majnun writes poems and composes songs to express his affection for Layla. His songs are heard and sung by the villagers. One day, when Layla is thinking about her beloved in the garden, she overhears someone singing. She immediately recognizes Majnun’s verses and weeps bitterly. This scenario was the inspiration for the composition of Majnun’s song: Light of my soul. The text follows:

Light of my soul, where are you?
Why do you rob me of life?
They keep you from me, they imprison you, I know,
When it is I, the madman, who should be bound.
Who can cure me?
You, you alone.
I have left my father, my home,
No path leads me on to my beloved.
I am a star, Layla is my moon.
She is a blossoming almond tree, and I am a dried thornbush.
The glass has fallen from my hand and broken,
The wine is spilled, the cruel shards cut my feet.
The drum that should have beaten out joyful tidings is shattered.
In my ears there sounds only the dull and unchanging beat of separation.
I did not search for this love.
Heaven decreed it.
Heaven allots us joy and pain.
I can not escape my fate.  

Majnun’s love, insanity, and poetical genius becomes his identity. The more impassioned he is, the greater his insanity and the more poetic he becomes. These reactions are not uncommon in human nature, and in this case they are amplified because of Majnun’s character. As Gelpke observes, “Insanity and poetical genius are two expressions of the same state of mind, of a soul estranged in the world of men.”

Majnun’s new friend, Nawfal, persuades Majnun to return to a normal life. Yet, Layla’s parents still refuse to give Majnun their daughter’s hand. No matter how hard Nawfal tries, Layla’s people will not yield. Majnun’s feelings of despair return and he runs again into the wilderness. All wild animals, lions, deer, wolves, and antelopes assemble around him as he himself becomes increasingly wild. He loves the beasts, and they guard him like faithful friends and servants. Meanwhile, the hand of Layla is granted to Ibn Salam, who is described as “a knight like a lion, backbone of any army, pride of the Arabs.”

In Nizami’s version, Nawfal is a great warrior who is deeply moved by Majnun’s love and willing to use his power and force to help Majnun win back his beloved.

Nawfal’s attack of Layla’s tribe is described in great detail. No mention is made of Nawfal or the attack in Porter’s libretto. Nevertheless, Majnun’s insanity and poetic

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18 Andrew Porter, text from scene two.
19 Rudolf Gelpke, the translator of Nizami’s The Story of Layla and Majnun. (New York: Omega Publications., 1997): xv
20 Ibid, p.83.
genius are well preserved in the opera through Sheng’s use of harmonic and melodic diversity and enrichment.

Ibn Salam is deeply in love with Layla in spite of Layla’s coldness. He tells Layla: “Everything you can see is yours, my possessions are yours, my kingdom is yours.” Nevertheless, Layla refuses to become intimate with him, even after his long pursuit: “Waiting from night to night, during the day, to read every wish in the eyes of his beloved, yet, when darkness fell, he was left once more sleepless and alone.” Ibn Salam then considers using force to plunder his prey. The metaphor describing Ibn Salam’s decision is used artistically:

Ibn Salam stretched out his hands towards the garden, determined to pluck from the palm tree the date which was not granted willingly. But alas! Instead of the fruit he felt the thorn, instead of sweetness he tasted bitter gall. Before he even knew what was happening to him, the gardener hit him so hard that he went nearly deaf and blind.

While Ibn Salam pleads for love from Layla, she searches solely for a sign, a trace from Majnun.

Layla laments her destiny of being apart from her true beloved while Majnun echoes this grief through his aimless wandering. He receives a message telling of his father’s death; his mother dies soon after. Majnun mourns the immensity of his loss, and the wilderness becomes his only refuge.

Yet, the passion between these ill-fated lovers grows stronger day after day.

When a messenger becomes a go-between for Majnun and Layla, they are able to

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21 Ibid. p. 85.
22 Ibid. p. 86.
23 Ibid. p. 86.
communicate with each other. Porter has written beautiful verses to portray Layla’s longing for Majnun.

This letter comes from a grieving woman, to a man of grief,
From a prisoner to a man who roams free.
Oh, my love, if only we could live together in this world.
But happiness is denied us, my heart weeps over our cruel fate.
What is life in this world....
My days are passing quickly.
This rose without your love will fade and die.²⁴

And a letter is soon sent in response from Majnun, who writes to Layla to unveil his love:

I write to one who holds my fate in her hands.
Do not speak of fading like the day.
You’re my crown which does not adorn my brow
You are my garden to whose gate I have no key.
You are everything to me.
I shall stand in your garden.
For one moment I must gaze on you again.²⁵

Their longing for each other becomes unbearable, and they plan a secret meeting in a garden full of dates and palms. They stand far away from each other, yet their eyes find each other’s souls in the dark. Layla listens while Majnun recites the poems that he has written for her:

And who am I – so far from you, yet near?
A singing beggar! Layla, do you hear?
Freed from life’s drudgery, my loneliness,
Sorrow and grief for me spell happiness.
And thirsty in the painstream of delight,
I drown. Child of the sun, I starve at night.

²⁴ Andrew Porter, text from scene 6.
²⁵ Ibid.
Though parted our two loving souls combine,
For mine is all your own and yours is mine.
Two riddles to the world we represent,
One answer each the other’s deep lament.
But if our parting severs us in two,
One radiant light envelops me and you,
As from another world—though blocked and barred
What there is one, down here is forced apart.
Yet if despairing bodies separate,
Souls freely wander and communicate.
I’ll live forever—Mortal Fear, Decay,
And Death himself have ceased to hold their sway.
Sharing your life in all eternity
I’ll live if only you remain with me.\(^{26}\)

A different picture is seen through other peoples’ eyes,

Layla, the enchantress, was a treasure to others, but a burden to herself. If to her husband she appeared to be a precious jewel, he was for her a serpent coiled around her. In his eyes she was the moon; she saw him as a dragon holding her in his jaw. So each suffered from the other.\(^{27}\)

Ibn Salam’s deep grief weakens his body and his soul leaves the world of misery.

Weeping for her husband’s death, mourning for her fate, Layla is like a burning candle gradually losing its light. Layla told her mother:

When I am dead, dress me like a bride. Make me beautiful. As a salve for my eyes, take dust from Majnun’s path. Prepare indigo from his sorrow, sprinkle the rose-water of his tears on my head and veil me in the scent of his grief. I want to be clad in a blood-red garment, for I am a blood-witness like the martyrs. Red is the color of the feast! Is not death my feast? Then cover me in the veil of earth which I shall never lift again.

\(^{27}\) Ibid, p. 163.
He will come, my restless wanderer – I know. He will sit at my grave searching for the moon, yet seeing nothing but the veil – the earth – and he will weep and lament. Then, mother, remember that he is my friend – and how true a friend! Remember that I leave him to you as my bequest! Treat him well, comfort him, never look harshly upon him. Do so, for God’s sake, because I have loved him and my wish is that you too should love him as I did.  

Layla’s heart is not yet still in her love for Majnun:

When he comes, mother, and you see him, give him this message from me! Tell him: “When Layla broke the chain of the world, she went, thinking of you lovingly, faithful to the end. Your grief in this world has always been hers and she has taken it with her to sustain her on the journey. The longing for you did not die with her. Behind the veil of earth, you cannot see her eyes, but they are looking for you, following you wherever you go. They are waiting for you asking: When do you come? . . ..” Tell him that, mother!

These verses became the inspiration for Layla’s death aria toward the end of the opera.

The text follows:

Mother, I am dying.
My beloved, whom I live for, whom I die for, is going far away.
Before my soul escapes, the grief in my heart breaks the seal on my lips.
Hear me, mother.
When I am dead, dress me like a bride.
Make me beautiful.
Clothe me in blood red.
Red is the color of the feast, and my feast is death.
He will come, I know, my restless wanderer.
He will come to my grave, searching for his moon.
No moon will shine, and he will weep, cry and lament.
When he comes, mother, tell him this:
“When Layla broke the chain of the world, she died thinking of your love.
Your grief in this world was ever hers,
and her longing for you did not die with her.”
Tell him, though he cannot see my eyes, they watch him still, loving, yearning.

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28 Ibid. p. 167.
Tell him that I am waiting and ever asking:
“When do you come to me, Majnun?”

Layla then expires in her mother’s arms. When Majnun hears of the sinking of his moon, he hurries to her grave to mourn his beloved. He embraces Layla’s tomb for days, sobbing uncontrollably, and for the last time, he sings his wistful songs to his beloved.

Oh, my flower withered before you blossomed, where are you?
How can my moon sink into the earth?
You are a buried treasure, buried deep in a cave,
And I am drunk with the wine that I can only taste in paradise, Ah!
Here is my abode forever.
Relieve me, Ah, of this burden
Let me go where my love dwells
Free me from existence.
Ah, cure my torments, Layla, ah!

He then gradually and quietly passes away. The wild beasts continue their faithful guard over Majnun, preventing him from harm on his journey to his beloved.

In the opera, Ibn Salam is portrayed as a real gentleman who patiently waits for Layla without taking any forceful action toward her, which differentiates this character from Nizami’s version. The deaths of Majnun’s parents and Ibn Salam are also not included in the scenes of the opera. Moreover, Sheng and Porter deliberately allowed the ending of the opera to be ambiguous – Did Majnun die at the end? Will he and Layla ever be reunited in Heaven? This ambivalence can be traced to Sheng’s concern about his future with his native China, at the time of this composition. He was not sure if he would have the opportunity to see his motherland again.

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30 Andrew Porter, text from scene 7.
31 Andrew Porter, text from scene 8.
In this story, tragic irony is seen in each character. Majnun is insane, yet he is alert. Layla is a treasure to everyone, yet considers herself a prisoner. Ibn Salam is the king of his kingdom, yet a failure in his marriage. Layla’s parents seem to possess their daughter, yet they lose her long before they have realized it. Yet, as Gelpke observes, “it would be wrong to consider Majnun’s and Layla’s fate as ‘tragic’ in the western sense of the word.” According to Gelpke, “the lovers’ grief breaks through the limitations of human nature, enabling them to become free of the ‘Self’ which is tied to the transitory world. Death is the gate to the ‘real’ world, to the home which our wandering soul desires.”

The ambivalence suggested in the story not only mirrors Sheng’s ambiguous relationship with his motherland but also reflects Sheng’s earlier question about his cultural and musical identity. These concerns played a central part in the formation of his musical ideas for this composition.

Having left China when he was twenty-seven, Sheng felt a symbolic identity with Majnun’s homeless spirit. Over the years, he traveled around pursuing a career without knowing where his final destination would be. His heart has always been bound to his motherland, China, no matter how much China has changed. As Majnun prays for Layla, in his inmost heart, Sheng hopes for the best for his motherland. In his search for different approaches to express his feelings and thoughts, Sheng found an appropriate subject in his discovery of the Story of Layla and Majnun.

32 Rudolf Gelpke, the translator of Nizami’s The Story of Layla and Majnun. (New York: Omega Publications, 1997): xv
CHAPTER 3

MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SONG OF MAJNUN

In Sheng’s large-scale orchestral work, H’UN (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966 – 1976 (written in 1988), clusters of minor seconds are used to create a tuneless and dissonant impression and to portray the fear and terror that people faced during the Cultural Revolution. Three Chinese Love Songs (1988), scored for piano, viola and voice, shows another aspect of Sheng’s writing. He enhances the beauty of these folk tunes through the employment of simple consonance and harmonies.

When Sheng learned about the story of Majnun from Andrew Porter, he realized that this story would provide him a perfect opportunity to combine the musical elements he had used for the previously mentioned pieces into one composition. He believed the combination of these styles would heighten the dramatic effect of the opera.

The musical analysis of Sheng’s opera will proceed in the following order:

The Use of Folk Idioms
Majnun’s and Layla’s thematic motifs
Qinghai folk songs

Melodic Devices
Recurrence of melodic motifs
Elaboration of speaking voice
Melodic contrast
Intervallic device

Harmonic Coloring and Tonality
Rhythmic Diversity and Text Reflection
Choral Writing
Effective Instrumentation

The Use of Folk Idioms

Majnun’s and Layla’s thematic motifs

When the idea of writing this opera began to take form, the librettist, Andrew Porter, suggested that Sheng employ Persian music in the opera to preserve the authenticity of this Islamic legend. Nevertheless, Sheng had a different opinion regarding this proposal on account of his unfamiliarity with Persian music. In fact, he regarded this story not merely as a regional legend but also as a reflection of Asian culture and he intentionally made the opera imprecise in time and geographically unspecific.

Accordingly, Sheng used pentatonic scales and certain Chinese folk tunes, with which he was more familiar, to convey the exoticism of this love story. Thematic motifs are employed to represent the characters in this opera. The most distinctive ones are Majnun’s and Layla’s themes, as shown in the following musical examples:

Example 1: Majnun’s thematic motif, originated from a Qinghai folk tune.
Example 2: Layla’s thematic motif, originated from a Qinghai folk tune.

Majnun’s and Layla’s themes appear mainly in the instrumental parts. With Majnun’s theme, the main love theme of the opera, appearing more frequently than that of Layla’s. In the second chapter of this treatise, it is stated that Majnun exposes his pain for everyone to see while Layla keeps her weeping heart secret. The difference in the number of appearances of these themes seems to symbolically convey this poetic idea.

The effective applications of these melodies are as follows. The initial appearance of Majnun’s theme is in the interlude of the first scene when Majnun and Layla meet each other for the very first time; suddenly, everything seems to freeze except these two young lovers. The atmosphere is intensifies by the use of tutti in the higher range of the violins, piano, xylophone, and piccolo with the dynamic level of fff. This tonal effect changes gradually as the same melodies are transposed an octave lower with the dynamic marking of p. The purpose of the diminishing orchestral effect is to allow the singing voice to be heard (example 3).

In Majnun’s aria in the second scene, the orchestra restates his theme when he sings for the first time, “I am a dried thornbush” (example 4). This theme reappears when Majnun repeats this statement just prior to the end of this aria (example 5). The noticeable change in the reappearance of this melodic theme is the descending minor second (F# - F) between the third and fourth notes, which contrasts with the major second (E – D) in the first appearance.
Example 3: The first statement of Majnun’s theme with a rhythmic variation.

Example 4: The statement of Majnun’s theme in Majnun’s first aria.
Example 5: A melodic variation (tear motif) of Majnun’s theme.

In many composers’ works, such as those of Mahler, the descending minor second interval is often intended as a “tear” motif. The interval of the minor second becomes one of the important elements in the melodic lines of this opera. Majnun’s heart is weeping for his beloved. This tear motif is amplified in the beginning of Interlude: Majnun’s Dream prior to scene eight (example 6). The continuing use of this motif symbolizes the weeping spirit in a state of stupor.

INTERLUDE: MAJNUN’S DREAM

Example 6: Amplification of the tear motif.
In scenes six, seven and eight, Majnun’s theme appears with variations in melodic devices and rhythmic patterns. In scene six, it denotes Majnun’s and Layla’s longing for each other. In scene seven the theme resounds in the accompaniment of Layla’s vocal line as she sings “He will come, I know.” For the last time, the theme reappears in scene eight when Majnun cries out for God’s help, “Ah, cure my torments.”

Layla’s theme does not appear until her death aria in scene seven where the theme symbolically foreshadows Layla’s later revelation of her secret passion (example 7). She is a dying woman bearing her true love in her heart. Before she dies, she wants to reveal the truth to her mother and desires her mother to respect her will. The sentimentality of her grief drifts through the melody.

Recurring thematic devices are often employed to serve the purpose of the reminiscent return of a character. This compositional approach of thematic recollection, known as leitmotif, can be heard particularly in the later works of Wagner. Although Wagner has received the most acclaim for using leitmotif in his works, this approach was applied before his time, in Gretry’s opera, Richard Coeur-de-Lion in 1784, and Mehul’s opera, Ariodant in 1799. Other examples can be found in many operatic works, such as Puccini’s La Bohème, Bellini’s I Puritani and Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor.

Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique is a famous non-operatic example in which the motif “cri de fureur” is used. It is described in the New Harvard Dictionary of Music: “Leitmotifs combine both dramatic and musical functions, often in complex ways. They may simply emphasize aurally what is seen on stage, or suggest to the listener something unseen that is being thought by one of the characters – a recollection, intuition, or
prediction.” Sheng’s use of leitmotif in this opera symbolically reinforces the drama of this love story in a very effective and subtle way.

Example 7: A direct quote of Layla’s theme in the orchestra.

Qinghai folk songs

Majnun’s and Layla’s themes derive from famous Qinghai love songs. Qinghai literally means “blue ocean.” It is the name of China’s fourth largest province, surrounded by the provinces of Tibet, Xingjiang, Gansu, and Sichuan and located near the northwest border of China (see Appendix B).

More than half of the land in Qinghai belonged to Tibet until the time of the Qing Dynasty when these two provinces were officially declared to be bordered by the mountain Tangula Shan (Shan means mountain). Consequently, there are several ethnic groups, including Tibetans, residing in Qinghai. Sheng states:

Through Gansu, which borders Inner Mongolia and Ningxia Province (a Chinese Muslim autonomous region), Qinghai has been populated by Mongolian and Chinese Muslim immigrants – the Hui – as well as by Tibetans; by native Qinghai Chinese, most of whom are Buddhist; by Tu, who are Tibetan Buddhists; and by the Sala peoples, who are followers of Islam.\footnote{Bright Sheng, "The Love Songs of Qinghai" Smithsonian Institute, 1995: 52.}

Therefore, Qinghai is an ethnic melting pot enriched by several distinct cultures, and has a rich variety of folk music. Sheng took advantage of the opportunity to study the folk melodies in Qinghai when he became part of the folk music and dance troupe there during the Cultural Revolution. This folk music has become a great source of inspiration for his composition.

The composer’s use of a high tessitura for Majnun’s and Layla’s vocal lines is a prominent feature in this opera. Many Chinese folk songs, especially songs from high mountain areas, possess lyrical and long phrases set in the higher ranges of the voice. It is desirable for singers to project such a vocal quality in order to let people from the other side of the mountain or valley hear their singing.

There is a type of love song in Qinghai named “Hua’er,” which may have directly or indirectly inspired the composer’s vocal writing in this opera. Traditionally, the “Hua’er” is sung by two lovers who begin to sing as they approach each other from far away. Their journey would often start from the other side of the mountain or hill, or across a valley, and their voices would travel better if the singing were in the high
register. According to Sheng, for male singers in this region, falsetto singing is a required and prized technique, presumably because singing in the high register allows the voice to carry further in open fields and mountain valleys. Accordingly, one of the desired vocal abilities for both male and female singers is a virtuoso command of the high register.\textsuperscript{35} This influence is shown particularly in the vocal writing for Majnun and Layla.

In addition to the use of high registers, the employment of wild leaps, especially the intervallic relationships of perfect fourth and fifth in the melodic contours, is another pronounced feature of love songs from the high mountain areas of China. These two intervallic components are important in Chinese folk songs and Tibetan love songs and are frequently used melodically in this opera.

The melodic contours of Chinese folk songs are intimately bound to the topographic undulation and the inflection of the spoken patterns of the regions. Sheng has made an observation in regard to this reality:

To my ear, the melodic contour of a folk song has a close relationship to the spoken inflection of the dialect from the region in which it originates. To sing the word – to vocalize – is the result of an emotional leap beyond narrating and reciting. It also appears to me that the outline of variations in pitch of a folk song bears a resemblance to the topography of its region. This seems to be true in the cases of Chinese spoken dialects. For instance, in mountainous northwest China, the pitch variation is wider than in the south, where the land gently undulates. Melodic movement of folk songs in these regions also reflects the apparent relationship.... Qinghai, with its high plateau and mountainous terrain, inspires folk songs with melodic intervals more dramatic than those from elsewhere in China.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid. p. 51.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. pp. 62-63.
It is understandable that Sheng, who is very familiar with Qinghai folk songs, melds the essence of these folk features into his opera writing, like the composers Bartok, Tchaikovsky, and Vaughan Williams, who emphasized their national individuality by absorbing folk elements into their styles.

As stated before, the themes of Majnun and Layla are derived from Qinghai folk songs. The Hua’er influence of the high tessitura is also at the beginning of Majnun’s first aria, in the “Ah hei…” part (example 8). Notice that the majority of intervals here are fourths and fifths, which reflects Sheng’s notion of the relationship between the melodic contour of Qinghai folk songs and Qinghai topography. In the woodwind interlude of scene six, the sixteenth and eighth-note patterns are related to Layla’s theme, somewhat disguised due to her need for secrecy (example 9).

Example 8: Passages influenced by Qinghai folk songs.
Example 9: A disguised form of Layla’s thematic motif.

Melodic Devices

Recurrence of melodic motifs

Unlike the original folk melodies employed in *Three Chinese Love Songs*, most of the melodic lines in this opera are original creations of the composer with added folk elements from Qinghai. Generally speaking, the cohesiveness of the entire composition is accomplished through the employment of the repetition of certain thematic fragments and rhythmic patterns, and a seamless flow of distinctive melodic devices.
In the beginning of the first scene, a seven-measure theme (example 10), containing the flavor of Chinese festival music, serves as an introduction to the singing of the counting theme (example 11). These two themes are then restated many times in various tonalities to portray children gathering for a game. The counting theme also recurs toward the end of this opera as part of the reminiscence of these two lovers and a recapitulation of significant events in the opera.

Example 10: The influence of Chinese festival music.

Example 11: Counting theme of children's gathering.
Sheng uses another motif with a haunting expression, to suggest that Majnun’s father is preoccupied with the thought of saving his son as he entreats Layla’s father to give the hand of his daughter to Majnun. The thematic motif “save my son” is narrated or sung by the Gossips in the second scene, and the woodwinds echo the haunting melody. The motif of “save my son” is made predominant by use of a consistent contour melodically and rhythmically in both the singing lines and accompaniment (example 12). The repetition of this theme from one mode to another reflects the urgency in the father’s plea. The same motif is used later in scene four when Majnun’s father sings “Joy of my heart” (example 13) and in a slight variation form “come home, come home…” (example 14).

This leitmotif approach is amplified in the third scene where the Gossips and villagers, one after another join in the singing of Majnun’s song symbolizing the song’s journey far throughout the land. Flexible utilization of recurring motifs is a fundamental device for extending and developing melodies. The recurrence of the melodic motifs, melodic complexity and variation is especially significant in this composition. For example, the melodic materials in scene three are basically from Majnun’s aria in scene two, sometimes used in direct quotes, sometimes in their varied forms.
Example 12: Repeating thematic motif “save my son.”
Example 12 (Cont.)

F.G.

"Save my son, let Lay-

S.G.

ter, [music notation]

55 [music notation]

F.G.

la be wed."

S.G.

and Maj - nun be wed."

W.Bks.

I.Bks. [music notation]
Example 13: The melodic motif “save my son” in the words “joy of my heart.”

Example 14: A variation of the melodic “save my son” in the words “come home.”
Elaboration of speaking voice

When the drama is beyond the expression of the singing voice, Sheng turns to the speaking voice in declamation to further the drama in an effective and powerful way. At the end of Majnun’s song in scene two, explosive declamation is used in the text: (I cannot esCAPE MY FATE) with the dynamic level increasing from pp to ff. In the scene in which Majnun remains beside Layla’s tomb, the speaking is again used in the text: “Here is my abode for ever, forever” (example 15). This rhythmic pattern combined with the dynamic level $p$ fully portrays Majnun’s heart breaking through the loss of his beloved.

The same approach of explosive declamation is used in Layla’s death aria when Layla sings: “Red is the color of the feast, and my feast is DEATH” (example 16). The dynamic range increases from $ff$ to $fff$. These simple but artistic devices indeed portray the desperate and hopeless emotions of Majnun and Layla.

Example 15: Explosive vocal device in Majnun’s arias.

Example 16: Explosive vocal device in Layla’s aria.
In the third scene, as the villagers gradually join in to recite Majnun's song, the singing range becomes higher. When the drama reaches the climactic point emotionally and vocally, the spoken pattern takes over from the singing lines to emphasize the inescapable chaos (example 17).

Example 17: Declamatory vocal passage.
Sheng’s use of two narrators functioning as “Greek chorus” in this opera intensifies the drama with compelling effect. These narrating roles of the Gossips are half-spoken and half-sung. In the score, the composer especially notes that the spoken words have three different pitch levels, high, middle and low, with a wavy line indicating the inflection of the language (example 18).

The speaking lines of these two Gossips are closely connected, with no pause during the conversation, and this approach creates in the listeners a sense of urgency to learn more about what they have to say. The narrative section usually returns to singing when the two Gossips narrate conversations of others (see example 12). Through the composer’s observant design, the use of narration and singing clarifies the development of the plot.

Example 18: The spoken passages of the Gossips.
Melodic contrast

Sheng is very skillful in reflecting the emotions of the characters through contrasting melodic treatments. In the first scene, the affection between Majnun and Layla is portrayed through the tranquil, appealing love duet. While these two lovers continue to express their feelings to each other, the counting theme resumes in the background. The disparity between Majnun and Layla’s tender, lyrical phrases, and the childrens’ energetic, buoyant counting creates a noticeable contrast which underlines the growing attachment of these two lovers, who have eyes only for each other.

As Majnun and Layla continue expressing their passion and admiration, their vocal ranges become higher. This creates the effect of separating the lovers from the gathering of the young people. The words “charm” and “enchant” are enhanced by ascending melodic contours as the two lovers embrace each other’s images and move closer to one another.

Another similar melodic approach in the first scene is heard in the quartet sung by Majnun, Layla and Layla’s parents (example 19). The serenity of the continuing love duet creates a polarity with the parent’s agitated vocal lines, and these two opposite extremes heard simultaneously create a portentous effect. Layla’s parents are anxious to break the lovers apart. The intervals of diminished fifth and minor second are occasionally used in the melodic lines to reinforce the parents’ furious agitation.

In two later duets Sheng employs similar effects. When Majnun’s father takes him to the shrine seeking a cure for his lovesickness, Majnun’s melody is tonally detached from that of his father, and the complex rhythmic patterns emphasize their
opposing states of mind. In the letter duet of Majnun and Layla, the rhythmic pattern of both lines is simpler and the melodic lines are more correspondent to portray the unification of two spirits.

Example 19: Melodic contrast. (Cont.)
Example 19 (Cont.)

No, no, Lay-la, Maj-nun is not for you, your hus-band has been

Oh, Maj-nun,

Lay-la, we have cho sen him, come, come with us, life is not a game, is not

cho sen, we've cho sen him. Come with us, life is not a game, is not
Intervallic device

Chinese music generally demands a linear motion, melodic as opposed to harmonic. What is unique about the melodic devices in this opera is the pervasive use of pentatonic scales and the free use of the combination of various intervals within different pentatonic scales. The intervallic relationship is strongly bound to the text and enhances text clarity. This aspect is further addressed in the following content.

It has been mentioned earlier that perfect fourths and fifths are important intervals in the melody of Qinghai folk songs. These intervallic elements serve as the backbone for the melodic devices in this opera. Other prominent intervals used in this opera can be traced by examining Majnun’s and Layla’s arias.

In Majnun’s aria, *Light of my soul*, the nine-measure introduction serves as a recitative without words. The vocalization of “Ha, hei” is repeated by the villagers and eventually reaches Layla’s ears. These passages are similar to the love songs, which inspired this portrayal of Majnun’s longing for Layla. The occasional addition of grace notes to the melodic lines is one of the characteristics of traditional Chinese music. This elaborate embellishment adds a certain oriental flavor to the melodies (see example 8).

The emotions of the persona are conveyed through the combination of various intervals. In addition to perfect fourths and fifths, minor thirds, major seconds, and minor seconds are the most commonly used melodic intervals. Both conjunctive and disjunctive intervals are used skillfully to create melodic lines related to the inflection of the texts and the demands for depiction of the drama. Significant words often depart from the linear motion, as in “I, the madman” and each time Majnun calls Layla’s name, “Layla is my moon, she is a blossoming almond tree” (example 20). The word stresses
are emphasized by the mounting range and motion in the melody. The same approach is utilized in Layla’s death aria (example 21). This can be seen illustrating the text: “When I am dead, dress me like a bride. Make me beautiful. Clothe me in bloodred.” The aria continues with “He will come to my grave, to my grave, searching for his moon.” “When do you come to me, Majnun?”

Example 20: Significant words set apart from the linear melodic lines in Majnun’s aria.

Example 21: Significant words set apart from the linear melodic lines in Layla’s aria.
In Layla and Majnun’s letter duet in scene six, the text painting is very effective. Their unstable emotions are portrayed through a mixture of minor second and major second intervals melodically and harmonically and when they both repeat “You are everything to me,” their voices are in unison on the high A upon the word “everything”.. Their voices are again blended at the end of the duet as if these two lovers see the hope of being united.

In contrast to Sheng’s pervasive use of dissonance, the compelling sound of the voices in unison, in particular with the dynamic marking of forte, enhances the effect of the drama. This occurs in the first scene when Layla’s parents intervene in the intimate relationship of Layla and Majnun; Layla is warned, “No, life is not a game” (example 22). The combination of this simple melodic line and agitating rhythmic pattern expresses emotional disturbance and the power of the parents’ authority.

Example 22: Singing in unison to emphasize emotional disturbance.
To sum up, a mixture of major and minor seconds and thirds, and the use of diminished intervals are creatively used to produce tension in the drama. The unconventional melodic approach of constant change in tonality conveys the image of uncertainty and struggle suggested in the story. Frequent change in the melody, dynamics, and intervalllic relationships reflects Sheng’s sensitivity to the texts. Each verse of the text is often given a different tempo and melodic structure, which corresponds to the rhyme of the text and the persona’s emotion.

**Harmonic Coloring and Tonality**

Sheng preserved the authentic flavor of Chinese sound in order to suggest the exoticism of the story. In her dissertation, Su Su Wong makes an analytical statement regarding this compositional approach:

In Sheng’s opinion, triads serve as excellent harmonic support for compositions in traditional western music, but are not so effective for pentatonic melodies such as those found in the Tibetan folk melodies employed in The Song of Majnun: Chinese music is characteristically linear and non-harmonic. Consequently, Sheng avoids using triads in almost all of his compositions. He modifies the triadic structure by leaving out the third of a triad.\(^{37}\)

The depiction of the drama relies on the use of consonance and dissonance. Sheng remarked that the key to portraying conflict in the drama is knowing when and where to apply certain coloristic effects in the music.\(^{38}\)

During his interview with the writer, Sheng demonstrated the processes of his harmonic inventions on the piano. He started by playing one pentatonic scale, adding


\(^{38}\) Ibid. p. 104.
Another to harmonize with the first one. As the demonstration proceeded, he used three or four pentatonic scales simultaneously to make the harmonies interesting and colorful. This compositional technique is similar to one of the unconventional harmonic approaches, which arose in the first half of the twentieth century, known as bitonality, or its extension, polytonality.

In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, bitonality is defined as “the process of writing simultaneously in two different keys.”

It is a means of expanding the major–minor tonal system without breaking completely with the rules governing tonality, which on the contrary are essential to it. Its peculiar effects depend precisely on the clear definition of the two conflicting keys used; therefore the more remote the harmonic relationship between the keys, the more striking will be the effect of their superposition.39

Polytonality, the extension of bitonality, is described as “the simultaneous presentation of more than two tonalities in a polyphonic texture.”40 Well-known predecessors who applied this technique aggressively in their compositions are Richard Strauss, Bartok, Stravinsky, Ives, Prokofiev and Les Six, Darius Milhaud in particular.

Sheng’s approach to bitonality or polytonality is based on the use of pentatonic modes. He prefers referring to the so-called pentatonic scales as pentatonic modes because he feels that modes can be utilized more flexibly than scales in terms of harmonic transposition. This harmonic approach is first used in the fourth statement of the children’s game theme in scene one (example 23). From this point on, bitonality or polytonality is frequently used.

Example 23: The first use of bitonality.
Through these compositional techniques, the harmonic language in this opera remains alive and fresh. Throughout the opera, significant harmonic components reinforce the exotic atmosphere, namely the harmonic interval of the perfect fourth and the chords of the open fifth. In addition, the clusters of dissonance resulting from the use of polytonality create imposing harmonic effects that mirror the characters' emotional turbulence.

In Majnun's song, the use of polytonality and, particularly, the harmonic dissonance of minor seconds reflects Majnun's unstable state of mind. The chords become more dissonant as Majnun continues to express his undying love for Layla. The dissonant figures are identified with Majnun's insanity. The ambiguity of tonal and metrical elements and the enharmonic devices resolve to clarity towards the end of the aria to suggest Majnun's mental exhaustion.

Sheng's adoption of dissonant polytonality always depicts the scene effectively in terms of word painting. For example, in scene eight when Majnun sings "relieve me, ah, of this burden," the key is in C# pentatonic minor (F#, G#, E, and C#). Sheng portrays Majnun's torment with the use of a dissonant sonority accomplished by the simultaneous application of two sets of perfect fifths (example 24). This involves using two different modes in the chorus, the women in A C D E G pentatonic mode and the men in Ab Bb C Eb F pentatonic mode.
Example 24: Dissonant use of polytonality.

In the garden scene, the use of compound tonalities is heard in the orchestra, each separated by a parallel perfect fifth. The occasional involvement of tremolo with the dynamic indication $ffp$ suggests the anxious, agitated, and indecisive state of mind of both
Majnun and Layla. In the ancient society of many cultures, it was considered a serious violation for a married woman to see someone besides her husband, no matter how desperate her situation. The punishment could be very severe if an affair were detected. The use of polytonality in a more linear motion changes drastically to a striking repeated chordal structure with dynamic marking of $fff$ to portray the barriers that separate Majnun and Layla.

One example of the consonant use of polytonality is in the beginning of the third scene as Majnun's song moves from person to person (example 25). Three pentatonic modes are used with a two beat delay in moving from one to another to suggest the song being picked up among the people. Piccolo and clarinet begin the melody with a rising perfect fourth from Bb to Eb. This melodic contour passes to the alto part starting with Eb to Ab and the soprano part continues the melody starting with Ab to Db.

Example 25: Consonant use of polytonality.
As mentioned before, Sheng likes to utilize the pentatonic modes freely to produce various harmonic sonorities. Consequently, the harmonic coloring varies dynamically, ranging from simple consonance to ambiguous dissonance which shifts invariably from one mode to another for the purpose of expressing the emotional extremes. The consonance symbolizes happiness, hope and love, while the dissonance represents struggle, agony and even death.

The prelude to the wedding scene begins with a fast-moving rhythmic pattern followed by shifting tonalities that symbolize the sweeping gaiety of the celebration. Yet, Layla’s unwillingness to marry Ibn Salam is symbolically portrayed by the use of open fifths accompanying “Layla, you are blessed” sung by the choir. The thirds are left out in the triads to produce the interval of the open fifth which adds to the effect of mistrust and uncertainty. The villagers believe that Layla is blessed to marry Ibn Salam. Nevertheless, deep in Layla’s heart, she weeps for her miserable destiny.

Sheng often starts with one melodic idea in a certain tonality shifting to other modes while keeping the initial melodic contour. For example, in scene six, the same melodic contours change from one mode to another as if the tonalities were chasing one another. These patterns are constructed with eighth and sixteenth notes derived from Layla’s theme (see example 9). When Layla starts the singing line in scene six, the melodic contour on the words “this letter” recurs in almost every measure of this section (example 26).
Example 26: The repetition of melodic contour.
The continuing shifts of tonality echo Majnun’s distress. Though conscious of all that occurs around him, he is considered to be mad according to the social conventions of the time. Since he is not accepted in his society, he can only dwell in a place where his spirit can find temporary relief. Yet he is so much in love with Layla that his feelings of hopelessness arising from the rejection of Layla’s father lead him to an emotional paroxysm. The tonal ambiguity in the music particularly depicts the struggle and conflict of the characters and symbolically conveys Sheng’s earlier thoughts about his cultural identity.

**Rhythmic Diversity and Text Reflection**

The striking sonority in the first few measures of the introduction immediately reflects feelings of ambiguity, struggle, and conflict through the use of a repeated rhythmic pattern and semitone figure (C# against D) with a gradually increasing dynamic intensity (example 27). This rhythmic figure is the most important pattern in the composition, in the orchestra writing in particular.

![Example 27: The prominent rhythmic figure.](image)

Interestingly, a similar pattern is also used in the composer’s orchestral work *H’un*, which reflects the people’s suffering in the Cultural Revolution. In Sheng’s article
analyzing H’un, he states: “Thus I strove to create a developmental rhythmic drive which would increase in excitement and intensity as the work unfolds. I was concentrated more with keeping the excitement and intensity, rather than with the specific logical details of how things are done.”41 The various rhythmic devices used in this opera not only intensify the drama but also provide the listener a feeling of exhilaration and perturbation.

The rhythmic patterns in this composition are relatively difficult both in the vocal and orchestral writing in comparison with other contemporary operas. Syncopation is a conspicuous rhythmic device applied in this opera, a pattern often associated with rapidly moving passages. In the section when Layla’s parents warn her that “life is not a game,” (see example 22) the syncopation reflects the emotional agitation. In Majnun’s and Layla’s arias, the syncopation conveys the struggle suggested in the story. On the other hand, in the wedding scene, this rhythmic device is ever present to portray the exuberant setting.

Besides using specific melodic contours to reflect the original text inflection, Sheng adopts a mixture of various meters which match the innate accentual relationships of the text. The involvement of irregular beat groupings (such as 5/8) complements the wavering accentuation in the texts (see example 26). This rhythmic approach is used to accommodate the irregular phrases, which are often declamatory and contrary to balanced periodic structures.

The profound meaning of the text is always deliberately enhanced through the skillful use of melodic contours and rhythmic devices, as can be seen in the singing lines

of Majnun and Layla’s first love duet (example 28). The texts are:

Layla: Gentle tiger, I do not fear you. Lovely tiger, how you charm me, Majnun.

Majnun: Sweet gazelle, I would not harm you. How you enchant me, Layla.

The rhythmic setting of the words “sweet gazelle” sung by Majnun, conveys a bashful yet urgent message.

Example 28: Text inflection through the use of rhythmic patterns.

In this opera, particularly in Majnun’s and Layla’s arias, reinforcement of the dramatic plot is articulated by use of irregular meters and frequent tempo and dynamic changes. The emotional outpouring of Majnun’s and Layla’s longing for each other is beyond description.

Many contemporary composers have employed the device of constant changes in meter. Sheng’s idol, Bartok, used asymmetrical alternations of 2/4 and 3/4 bars in a swift and vacillating tempo in the fifth movement of his First Suite for Orchestra. Many French composers also favored this compositional technique. Debussy, Ravel, and the composers of “Les Six” often used irregular meters to capture the inflection of idomatic
French speech. Sheng’s constant meter changes display his artistry in mastering the language and understanding the natural flow of Porter’s lyrics.

**Choral Writing**

Choral writing in operatic works is generally produces a traditional homophonic texture. One of the parts (usually the soprano part) carries the major melody while the others harmonize with the melody. At times all parts sing in unison. Many examples of these compositional techniques can be traced in Verdi’s or Puccini’s opera chorus writing. Sheng does not fit this compositional stereotype. His choral design allows the opera chorus an exceptionally significant role. Each choral part displays melodic individuality by the use of successive phrases treated in imitation. This polyphonic approach is more fully elaborated in the third scene in order to depict the diffusion of Majnun’s song.

Although the melodic line of each part is independent, the lines are often connected to one another by similar melodic and rhythmic ideas, although they may be in different pentatonic modes. In scene three, when Majnun’s song is carried around, the compositional approach is very much like that of a canon. What amazed this writer about this scene is that the idea of time and distance could be portrayed through this style of choral writing.

The artistic refinement resulting from this style of choral writing can be heard in the scene when Majnun and Layla secretly meet each other in the moonlit garden. The listeners might expect passionate singing from Majnun and Layla when they see each other. However, Sheng uses four-part choral singing to give voice to suggest Majnuns’
and Layla’s feelings toward each other. There is neither physical embrace nor passionate kissing when they meet; they simply gaze at each other with much longing.

This scene is elegantly and effectively portrayed by the serenity of beautiful and expressive choral singing over a sparse accompaniment, illustrating the inner voices of the lovers as they realize that they can only unite in paradise. The final chord ends with an opera fifth to symbolically suggest the resulting disappointment and the hollow feelings of these two characters.

In Layla’s funeral scene, the soft sound of the choral part opens this melancholy setting. The villagers mourn deeply for the loss of the loveliest of flowers. The musical structure of the choral part in this scene is similar to that of scene three, with the music developing a thicker texture through to the climax by the gradual addition of more voices and then returning to a simpler texture by reducing the number of voices. The emotional outburst, intensified by this compositional technique, reaches its climax after Layla is laid in her tomb.

When the chorus interweaves with the solo singing, the integrity of the text is always preserved through Sheng’s proficient craftsmanship in emphasizing important melodic fragments. In the scene of Layla’s funeral, the chorus accompanies Majnun in his mourning over Layla’s death. Majnun’s voice line blends perfectly with the chorus, one strengthening the other emotionally. This technique allows the text great clarity as Majnun’s theme resounds on the word “Ah” after he sings “that I can only taste in paradise” (example 29). The use of “Ah” in this theme approximates sighing and at the same time allows the text of the choral singing to be heard.
The pitfall of adopting a polyphonic approach in choral composition is that the texts may not be projected clearly due to the thick texture of the musical structure. In order to avoid this common problem, the composer carefully places the important messages of each part in its best vocal range while fading away less significant passages. Consequently, the important words always float above the other melodic parts.

Example 29: The projection of text clarity through the use of melodic device.

**Effective Instrumentation**

The opera is scored for a chamber orchestra using woodwinds, brass, keyboard, percussion, non-pitch percussion, and strings. Although the opera has a tragic story, the orchestra provides an overall rich, bright and lavish impression, similar to that of the
Chinese orchestra. Stylistically, Sheng’s music is contemporary with romantic overtones, and this approach is particularly reflected in his orchestration, which may be directly, or indirectly, influenced by early twentieth century musical trends.

Each instrument is responsible for a particular effect in the articulation of the drama. Since Sheng himself is a percussionist, he uses many percussive instruments in the orchestration, including wood blocks, temple blocks, the sizzle cymbal, small and large suspended cymbals, large anvil, small and large tam-tam, bell tree, crotales, guiro, xylophone, marimba, vibraphone, bongos, timpanis, and large bass drum.

The other instruments involved in the orchestration are flute (I and II), oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn (I and II), trumpet, trombone and strings. The minimum number of string players required is twenty, with six first violin, five second violin, four viola, three cello, and two double bass. According to the composer, the strings should be increased proportionally at the discretion of the conductor when the composition is performed in a large hall.

In western music orchestration, percussion is treated as a relatively insignificant part. Nevertheless, in traditional Chinese music and the instrumentation of Peking Opera, and even in the traditional music of Korea, Japan, Indonesia and other regions of Southeast Asia, the percussion instruments take a dominant role. The use of percussion in this opera is quite dominant and not only reinforces the drama effectively, but also carries the drama to its climax.

In the very beginning of this opera, the percussion timber is a combination of wood blocks, bongo and small suspended cymbal. Supported by a pedal sustained in the strings, the cymbal sounds a striking sonority which draws the listeners’ attention.
immediately (see example 27). Sheng also combines various percussive instruments to produce collective effects for specific dramatic events. When the singing lines begin, the percussion recedes allowing the voices to stand out.

In the first scene, prior to Majnun and Layla encountering each other, the use of xylophone, crotales, large sizzle cymbal, and bell tree creates an exciting impact which serves as the introduction to the coming plot (see example 3). The use of percussion tends to diminish during the tender and lyric singing melodies and resumes as the emotional content intensifies.

The Chinese propulsive technique used to portray emotional intensity is often applied in the Peking opera and in Taiwanese local dramatic events. It involves a gradual acceleration of the beat in the percussion, continuing dramatically until the climax. The approach is particularly used in this opera to portray Majnun’s insanity and Layla’s desperation. The narration of the Gossips is always accompanied by wood blocks and temple blocks. The combination of these two instruments conveys a flavor of idle talk among these glib-tongued people.

In contrast to the percussion instruments, the strings and woodwinds carry the melodies which often have fast-moving chromatic passages as major components. Sheng’s use of unison in the orchestration artistically strengthens the emotional effect as instruments double the singing lines preceding the chaotic chromatic passages.

Sheng has explained that the doubling effect is especially useful in contemporary music where difficult intervals and pitches are used, since it serves as a pitch reminder for singers. However, the doubling effect should be employed with discretion. If used too
frequently, the voice will lose its significance.\textsuperscript{42} Opera composers in the nineteenth century, such as Verdi and Puccini, often enhance the drama with this doubling device.

When the instruments play in unison, the unified, full sound is effective. The first appearance of Majnun's theme is a prominent example (see example 3). The orchestra is bestowed with coloristic individuality to paint the scene and provide accompaniment to the voice line. For example, when the scene gradually shifts to the wedding, the cluster of running sixteenth notes played in the extreme high range of the instruments creates an effective contrast to the solid chords. It is indicated in the score that "the guests were sitting together, admiring the bride's garments, throwing a tufan of silver coins in the air, enjoying choice delicacies and weaving new ties between the families on either side, talking and joking, in laughter and gaiety." The dazzling sonority of the orchestration depicts the scene functionally, and is similar to that of Stravinsky's \textit{Petrushka} in terms of bright orchestra colors, lean contrapuntal texture, alert rhythmic patterns, and the impression of public merry-making. In \textit{Petrushka}, many of the Russian idioms are applied; whereas in this scene the influence of Chinese folk music is evident.

The frequent use of chromatic passages in the orchestra is symbolically associated with the depiction of Majnun's madness. In the accompaniment to scene four, the chromatic lines reach a peak when Majnun tells his father: "I am ashamed that you should see me thus. But fate's threads, you taught me, are not held in our hands, and with my thread was woven hers. The world is rich, you say; but my world holds only Layla,

\textsuperscript{42} Su Su Wong, \textit{An Analysis of Five Vocal Works by Bright Sheng}. The University of Texas at Austin, (1995):124.
Layla, Layla, Layla...” In Sheng’s large-scale orchestral work *H’un*, he uses this approach to portray the wounds and lacerations of the people during the Cultural Revolution.

As Majnun arrives at the Holy Place seeking a cure for his madness, the orchestra repeats his theme with melodic variations. The chromatic passages increase the tension as Majnun and his father approach the Holy Shrine. Simpler melodic and rhythmic patterns resume when they reach the Holy Shrine. Nevertheless, as Majnun prays that his love for Layla be permitted to grow stronger and that every moment left in his life may add blessings to hers, the inverted major and minor seconds soar above the repeating hammer-like chordal structures in the orchestra, becoming a major device to demonstrate his madness. His love for Layla is so deep that there is no possibility of recovery and Majnun’s father sadly gives up hope of getting his son back. The postlude of this scene further defines the inner turmoil of Majnun’s father by applying dynamic extremes.

A similar approach depicts Majnun’s peculiar dream in the Interlude. The fast moving ascending melodies with dynamic markings from *ppp* to *fff* illustrate a wondrous tree growing in front of Majnun. The trill symbolizes the bird’s call while fast moving thirty-second notes in a descending configuration represent the bird’s flight from far to near.

The use of tremolo in the strings reflects the emotional agitation and excessive frustration of the personas in the story. In the scene when Majnun first meets Layla, tremolo is used to express their stirring affection for each other. The tremolo in the strings is aggressively applied at the repetition of the words “Relieve me, Ah, of this burden” when Majnun is in mourning beside Layla’s tomb.

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One of Sheng’s primary concerns in all of his vocally related compositions is to allow the words to be heard over the orchestra. Therefore, when the orchestra is accompanying the singing parts the texture is generally more sparse and transparent; when the orchestra is heard by itself, the texture is thicker and the sound is fuller.
CHAPTER 4

THE OPERA AS THEATER: PRODUCTION CONSIDERATIONS

The cast is as follows:

Majnun - Lyric Tenor
Layla - Lyric Coloratura Soprano
First Gossip - Mezzo - Soprano
Second Gossip - Mezzo - Soprano
Layla’s Mother - Mezzo - Soprano
Layla’s Father - Baritone
Ibn Salam - Baritone
Majnun’s Father - Bass
Ensemble of Townspeople (about 16 people)

The voicing of this opera has a somewhat traditional aspect: the male lead being the tenor and the female lead, the soprano. The roles are assigned to the various voice categories according to their personalities and characters. For example, although there are three mezzo-sopranos in the opera, the voice quality of Layla’s mother needs to express the motherly qualities of tenderness and kindness, and thus demands a richer sound than that of the Gossips. The role of Gossip, artistically described as “Greek chorus,” is equivalent to the loquacious comedienne in Chinese opera. Likewise, the
baritone voice of Layla’s father requires a deeper and darker sound than that of Ibn Salam.

The role of Layla is written for a lyric coloratura soprano with the ability to sustain the voice in the high range for a long period of time and to be dynamically flexible. Su Su Wong defines the singing ability required: "The role of Layla is intended for a lyric coloratura soprano voice. However, the vocal demand and dramatic intensity for this role is equivalent to that of a Puccinian lyric soprano such as Liu from Turandot and Manon from Manon Lescaut."  

The vocal lines of Majnun are also very demanding for the tenor. A refined vocal technique and supreme artistry is necessary to make the role convincing. Dan Weeks, the tenor who sang Majnun in a performance of this opera at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, shared with this writer his experience in preparing for this role. He said that the management of the vocal line was not as difficult as it appeared in the score since the lines are well written and comfortably within the tenor’s range. However, he further stated that the rhythmic patterns were somewhat difficult to manage. He thought it was important to keep the voice vibrating evenly in the high range from the beginning until the last note of high C, while portraying the emotions in differing dynamic intensity.

In general, the singers involved in this opera must have an impeccable sense of intervallic relationships and be able to center each pitch without the interference of excess vibrato. It is also important that the singers articulate the consonants distinctly.

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44 Dan Weeks, interview by author, April 20, 1999.
without destroying the beautiful and lyric melodic lines. From the technical point of view, well-managed breath control is essential to produce the optimal result.

There are several interesting aspects of the actual staging of this opera. According to Sheng, Colin Graham, the stage director for the Chicago premiere, researched many Asian plays. His unique design of stylized acting for the staging (comparable to taichichuan, often referred to as "shadow boxing") reinforced the eastern flavor suggested in the opera. The slow body movements of the stylized acting so different from the movements of our daily lives, provided a unique style and symbolic effect to the opera. Yet Sheng said he did not have any objection to other ideas for staging and would welcome a variety of approaches.45

A picture from the review of the premiere (Appendix C) showed two large discs on the stage; one floated on the floor with the other one erect in the background, as if one were the other's reflection. Sheng explained that these two discs symbolized "the moon." Symbolically, the major plots of the story developed inside "the moon" while the onlookers were placed outside "the moon."46

In his review of the premiere, New York Times critic Bernard Holland observed:

Mr. Sheng has nurturing support in Colin Graham's direction which creates subtle variations on Western effusiveness and oriental ritual. Andrew Porter's libretto is unadorned and direct: one narrative device is a pair of gossips who catch us up on offstage action as their lines spill hurriedly over one another. Marie Anne Chiment's set is two pastel moons, one as backdrop, the other in the form of a raked stage. White is the basic color, with occasional strong accents. Layla's parents are masked; her husband is dressed in full "Arabian Nights" regalia.47

46 Ibid.
This opera has been performed by several professional organizations (Appendix D). The Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music was among the first student organizations to perform this opera. It was the opera’s fifth production and performed in Patricia Corbett Theater of CCM, as the highlight of a four-day festival to study East-West fusion on March 30 and 31, 1996. The conductor was Christopher Zimmerman and the director James Schiebler. The cast is listed in Appendix D.

James Schiebler, the student director of CCM, had a different approach to the scene setting from that of Marie Anne Chiment in the premiere. Several large strips of silky material were hung from the ceiling, so that they could be raised and lowered alternatively for transparent and opaque settings; the colors could be changed by lighting according to the needs of the scenario. Rose pink and light blue were the principle colors reflected on the silky fabric, with the rose pink implying joyful occasions and the light blue representing mysterious or threatening situations. Besides producing varying symbolic effects, the use of the silky material divided the stage space into several sections, so the characters had more freedom to position themselves during the scenes.

The writer was fortunate to have the opportunity to interview two people who were significantly involved in the opera production at CCM. One is Dan Weeks, who sang “Majnun,” and the other is Christopher Zimmerman, the conductor. According to Mr. Zimmerman and Mr. Weeks, the opera has musical complexity not easily recognizable immediately since the rhythmic pattern is particularly difficult to follow. Mr. Zimmerman also said that because of the limited budget, the director was not allowed

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48 The description is based on viewing the video tape of The Song of Majmun produced by CCM, May 20, 1999.
49 Dan Weeks & Christopher Zimmerman, interview by author, April 20, 1999.
to produce elaborate stage effects. Fortunately the necessary effect could be easily achieved with only a few pieces of furniture and dim lighting.

Mr. Zimmerman further mentioned that most of the scenes in the opera were relatively dark reflecting well the atmosphere of the story and providing a special effect for the drama. Although the overall performance was very successful, it was not easy for the singers to see the conductor clearly. Mr. Zimmerman also noted that though the orchestra and chorus need not be large, skillful groups are essential for this opera due to the musical and artistic demands. The string playing demands a first-rate technique to convey the fast-moving notes and unpredictable tonalities throughout the music.

The characters of Layla’s parents along with the Gossips, Ibn Salam, the villagers, the dancers acting as God and demon in the shrine and the animals in the wilderness, were all masked at one time or another in the production at CCM. The use of masks is another aspect derived from “Greek tragedy.” Women were forbidden to expose themselves in plays at the time when “Greek tragedy” was popular. Therefore, male actors were required to disguise themselves by wearing masks in order to play female roles. The masks with subtle variations also helped the audience identify the gender, age, and social stratification of the characters.

In scene five, Sheng’s use of the double scene, which presents the wedding scene and the Gossips’ narration of the wedding to Majnun, is quite special. It is indicated in the score that there should be a series of intersects between Majnun, the village Gossips, and the wedding scene at which the Gossips are also present.\(^50\) The effect of the double scene is achieved by placing the wedding scene at the center of the stage while the

\(^{50}\) Bright Sheng, the piano & voice version of *The Song of Majnun*, (1992): 90
Gossips and Majnun are placed on the right or left front corner of the stage, with one group freezing when the other is active. A similar effect is used in the letter duet in scene six, where Majnun and Layla write letters to express their longing for each other. The lighting is crucial for the success of these scene settings.

The simple design of the scene suited the story very well. According to the review, the setting, although minimal, was effective: "The set was sparse and dramatic. The imaginative lighting and excellent staging were a reminder of how much one can effectively accomplish with few resources."\(^{51}\)

Given a thorough understanding of the story and the music setting, a director or stage designer could achieve optimal effects on a minimal budget. Since the music setting is always carried over from one scene to another, and little time is allowed for change of setting between scenes, it is preferable to design a general symbolic background which can be adapted to each scene. Although there is no standard stage setting for this opera, the symbolism suggested in the story and music needs to be reflected and interpreted through imaginative approaches to the staging.

CONCLUSION

There is a saying in Chinese, “天下無難事，只怕有心人”, meaning that only he who does not strive for progress encounters hardship. Sheng’s achievements as a composer have already established him as one of the most promising composers of his generation. Like a cultural ambassador, he draws imaginatively on the traditions of the Western and Eastern cultures.

It took Sheng approximately two years to complete *The Song of Majnun*. Sheng considers it autobiographical in a symbolic way, expressing his desolation at the possible loss of his motherland. He portrayed this exotic legend by using particular melodic and harmonic languages which were familiar to him.

In this opera, Sheng’s pervasive application of pentatonic modes reflects his Chinese heritage. Melodically, besides the use of specific folk tunes to represent the characters, pentatonic modes are the main components throughout the opera. Major and minor thirds, major and minor seconds, perfect fourths and fifths are frequently used in the melodic contours.

Harmonically, Sheng employs a diversity of colors to reflect the emotions of various characters. Sheng believes that for a composer, it is essential to be able to express different emotions through the free use of consonance and dissonance. He prefers to refer to pentatonic scales as pentatonic modes since modes offer more creative
freedom to the composer. Two or three modes are used simultaneously to create effective sonorities in expressing the emotions of happiness, sorrow and ambivalence. This technique is known as bitonality or polytonality.

The rhythmic patterns are complex overall, similar to the rhythmic approach in Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. These patterns are used mostly for the purpose of conveying the personages’ emotions and to point up the text. Frequent use of irregular meters accommodates the flow of the language and Sheng’s careful setting of the text combines various rhythmic devices, asymmetrical irregular meter, and varying melodic contours which contribute to the clarity of the text in this opera.

The choral writing in this opera is somewhat different from that of the traditional form. Polyphony is dominant and imitation is commonly applied in contrast to the traditional homophonic approach. The chorus is responsible for producing a harmonic atmosphere as well as chaotic disarray. In this composition, the settings are enriched and the scenes are bonded together into a seamless whole through the use of the two Gossips, commonly referred to as the “Greek chorus.” Explosive declamatory passages always dramatically enhance the story.

Sheng’s choice of instrumentation always echoes the drama effectively. He often combines instruments to create timbres, in a way very much like that of the Chinese orchestra. The employment of propulsive technique particularly contributes to the enhancement of the drama. The instruments not only function as harmonic support for the voices, but carry important melodic passages that support the text.

In the review of the premiere of this opera, Patrick Stearns expresses his appreciation for Sheng’s artistry:
Though future attempts at theater music will hopefully be more confident and singable, this one-act work tells a Romeo and Juliet-like story from Persian mythology, showing just how great Cheng's (sic) stylistic possibilities are. With luminous textures and highly expressive vocal lines, Cheng (sic) easily adapts to a cultural milieu that's neither Chinese nor American with no diminution of his remarkably fresh sense of invention or expressive power.52

This opera has been widely recognized and praised since its premiere (Appendix E). Sheng's musical ideas are innovative in many aspects. His musical treatments reflect and characterize the emotions dynamically and his vocal writing always allows the voice to spin above the colorful timbre of the orchestra. This opera, like so much of Bright Sheng's work, represents the cultures and techniques of East and West. Yet Sheng humbly feels that a great challenge lies ahead for him in perfecting the fusion of Asian and Western cultures in his music. Yet in this opera, he fused Eastern and Western elements to give a full life to this Asian legend — The Song of Majnun.

APPENDIX A

SHENG’S PUBLISHED WORKS AND RECORDINGS

Sheng’s works are published exclusively by Schirmer, Inc.

Opera and Music Theater

The Silver River (1997)
Duration: 55 minutes
Libretto (English) by David Henry Hwang
Cast (4), orchestra (5)

May I feel (1996)
Duration: 7 minutes
Words (English) by E. E. Cummings
Soprano, tenor, and piano four hands

The Song of Majnun (1992)
Duration: 60 minutes
Libretto (English) by Andrew Porter
Cast (8); chorus (16); orchestra (35)

Orchestra

Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra (1988)
Violoncello & Orchestra, triple winds
Duration: 22 minutes

Postcards (1997)
Chamber Orchestra, Double winds
Duration: 15 minutes
Spring Dreams (1997)
Violoncello & Orchestra of Traditional Chinese Instruments
Duration: 25 minutes

Spring Dreams (1997)
Violin & Orchestra of Traditional Chinese Instruments
Duration: 25 minutes

China Dreams (1995)
Large orchestra, triple winds
Duration: 25 minutes

Prelude for Orchestra (1994)
Large orchestra, triple winds
Duration: 6 minutes

Fanfare for Orchestra (1992)
Large orchestra, triple winds
Duration: 5 minutes

Fragments from "The Song of Majnun" (1992)
Soprano, tenor, chorus and orchestra
Duration: 5 minutes

Two Folk Songs from Qinghai (1989)
Mixed chorus and orchestra
Duration: 10 minutes

Large orchestra, double winds
Duration: 22 minutes

Two Poems from the Sung Dynasty (1985)
Soprano and orchestra (single wind)
Duration: 14 minutes

Chamber / Vocal / Solo

Seven Tunes Heard in China for Solo Violoncello (1995)
Duration: 15 minutes
Concertino for Clarinet & String Quartet (1994)
Duration: 18 minutes

Seven Yadhrtrib Variations for Solo Bassoon (1994)
Duration: 3 minutes

String Quartet No. 3 (1993)
Duration: 17 minutes

Three Chinese Poems (1982 -- 92)
Duration: 5 minutes

Four Movements for Piano Trio (1990)
Duration 12 minutes

The stream Flows for solo Violin (1990)
Duration: 10 minutes

Two Folk Songs from Qinghai (1989)
Mixed chorus, 2 pianos and 2 percussionists
Duration: 10 minutes

My Song for Piano (1989)
Duration: 10 minutes

Duration: 8 minutes

The Stream Flows for Solo Viola (1988)
Duration: 4 minutes

Three Etudes for Solo Flute (1982 – 88)
Duration: 8 minutes

Three Pieces for Viola and Piano (1986)
Duration: 10 minutes

Two Poems from the Sung Dynasty (1985)
Duration: 14 minutes

New World Records

New York Chamber Symphony
Conductor: Gerald Schwarz
The Stream Flows (1990)
Violin: Lucia Lin

Three Love Chinese Songs (1990)
Soprano: Lisa Safer
Viola: Paul Neubauer
Piano: Bright Sheng

My Song (1990)
Piano: Peter Serkin

Delos International

The Song of Majnun – An Opera in One Act (1997)
Libretto: Andrew Porter
Houston Grand Opera

Leonard Bernstein’s Arias and Barcarolles (1992)
Orchestrated by Bright Sheng
Seattle Symphony
Conductor: Gerald Schwarz

Koch International

Two Folk Songs from Qinghai (1994)
Conductor: John Oliver
John Oliver Chorale and Orchestra
APPENDIX B

MAP OF CHINA
APPENDIX C

SYMBOLIC SETTING FROM THE CHICAGO PREMIERE
APPENDIX D

PREMIERE AND VARIOUS CASTS

The scenes of this opera are specially dedicated to the following persons:

Scene I and II: Lee A. and Brena D. Freeman
Scene III: Philip Morehead
Scene IV: Hugo Weisgall
Scene V: Andrew Porter
Scene VI: Colin Graham
Scene VII: Lyric Opera of Chicago
Interlude: Richard Buckley
Scene VIII: Ardis Krainik

*The Song of Majmun* was premiered at the Civic Theater, Chicago, on April 9, 1992. Richard Buckley was the conductor, and Colin Graham the stage director; sets and costumes were by Marie Anne Chiment; and lighting by Todd Hensley. The cast included:

Majnun – Rodrick Dixon
Layla – Yan-Yan Wang
Layla’s mother – Eleni Matos
Layla’s father – Mark Jones
First gossip – Beverly Thiele
Second gossip – Julia Bentley
Ibn Salam – Elias Mokole
Majnun’s father – Jonathan Oehler

The only recording of this production is by the Houston Opera Studio and released by Delos International Incorporation. It was recorded during a live performance under the conductor Ward Holmquist, in Cullen Theater, Wortham Center, Houston, on March 24 and 26, 1995. The chorus preparation is by Richard Bado. The cast includes:

Majnun – Raymond Very
Layla – AnaMaria Martinez
Layla’s mother – Jill Grove
Layla’s father – Grant Youngblood
First gossip – Mary Petro
Second gossip – Jonita Lattimore
Ibn Salam – Michael Chioldi
Majnun’s father – Patrick Blackwell

The singers involved in *The Song of Majnun* at CCM in 1996 were:

Majnun – Dan Weeks
Layla – Michele Feliccia
Layla’s mother – Teresa Dody
Layla’s father – Robert Aurett
The first gossip – Victoria Wolfe
The second gossip – Meredith Meages
Ibn Salam – Brian Podolny
Majnun’s father – Aaron Dalton
APPENDIX E

SELECTED COMMENTS REGARDING THE PERFORMANCES

The important reviews for “The song of Majnun” are as follows:

The piece (The Song of Majnun)... reveals the lyric gifts of composer Bright Sheng in a way that his previous, smaller works could not. Sheng established his musical vocabulary early on, with one long strand of melody winding gently around another. This is an opera in which almost all vocal expressions are made in sinuous legato lines.

----- Chicago Tribune (4/10/1992)

In “Song of Majnun”, Mr. Sheng makes us forget about conflicts among Chinese, Tibetan or European styles while he is crowding them all together. For from eclecticism spring an opera style of his own, one willing to use anything available in order to reinforce stage pictures.


Bright Sheng’s new opera, “The song of Majnun,” ... is perhaps one of the monumental operatic masterpieces to appear in the last two decades. ... Sheng’s ability to blend Tibetan folk music into the idiom of modern music is tremendous. He had a serious concept of the voice and permits the vocal melody to soar while beneath, he underscores the accompaniment with the elements of modern and avant garde notations.

----- Chicago Daily Defender (4/13/1992)

Sheng’s music (the song of Majnun) blended his Chinese heritage, contemporary Western ideas, tonal music and atonal outbursts with almost devilish ease and cleverness.

----- Houston Chronicle (3/28/1995)
The music is luminous and lean, punctuated by exotic orchestral colors provided by Western instruments with Chinese gongs and bells.

--- The Cincinnati Enquirer Tempo (4/2/1996)

This one-act work tells a Romeo and Juliet – like story from Persian mythology, showing just how great Sheng’s stylistic possibilities are. With luminous textures and highly expressive vocal lines, Sheng easily adapts to a cultural milieu that’s neither Chinese nor American with no diminution of his remarkably fresh sense of invention or expressive power.... The Song of Majnun is the work of a composer with great things to say and a graceful, distinctive way of saying it.

--- USA Today (3/11/1997)

Sheng has been admired for his ability to fuse Western and Eastern elements in orchestral and chamber works. He is equally adept in the realm of opera. In “The song of Majnun,” Sheng employs harmonic and coloristic devices of his native China in tandem with European forms. The result is a score of unusual iridescence and dramatic power. Wedded to Porter’s concise verses, the music becomes a kaleidoscope canvas on which the tragedy of Layla and Majnun is vividly painted.

--- Cleveland plain dealer (4/20/1997)

His constantly active score – full of chattering winds; persistent, repetitive bass instruments; and rapping percussion – fits Andrew Porter’s spare, symbolistic libretto beautifully. The music veers toward the East, with a mostly diatonic (white-key) base occasionally dwindling to more characteristically Chinese pentatonic (five-note) scales for its jumpy melodic language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


