

“I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung”

Study of Opera Role Based on the Real Person Hitomi Ohki

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Abstract

“I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung” is an aria from the opera “Nixon in China”, written by American composer John Adams in 1987. My interest in contemporary music is driven by the opportunity to engage directly with living composers and the modern relevance of the themes. While searching for a new audition aria, I discovered the role of Chiang Ch’ing, which suits my coloratura soprano voice. This prompted an in-depth study of her historical background, reversing my usual method of learning an aria. This approach allowed for quicker and deeper internalization of the role, demonstrating that understanding a character's context can enhance performance, even without personal empathy. This method improved my connection with the audience and enriched my overall performance. I plan to apply this approach to future roles, whether they are based on historical figures or fictional characters.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

“I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung” is an aria from the opera “Nixon in China”, written by American composer John Adams in 1987. I am interested in music from the modern contemporary period. There are two reasons. Firstly, I like to study or work with living composers. Then I have a chance to talk to them directly. Also, the theme and the characters are often more current and easier to relate to. Secondly, usually there are not so many people that know the pieces. Therefore, people do not compare with other singers and just try to listen to the music with an open mind.

I found out about the role of Chiang Ch’ing in the opera “Nixon in China” when I was looking for a new aria for an audition piece. The role is based on a real person. Chiang Ch’ing was the wife of Mao Tse-tung, the leader of the Communist Party in China from 1949 to 1976. Furthermore, the role is written for my voice of coloratura soprano. The aria also has many high notes to high D and it starts just four bars after the intro. I am good at baroque music which have *agilità* and repeated high notes. I think it is good piece for the audition because of the short intro and since it is an Asian role. I thought it is the perfect piece for me as a Japanese.

“Nixon in China” is based on the political history between U.S.A. and China in 1972. The roles in the opera are based on real persons. I have never sung a role of a real person before. I thought that if I research the background of her life and thoughts, it will help me understand her situation when I act and sing as Chiang Ch’ing. This way I would like to make a stronger musical expression and

increase the artistry. Finally, I would like to be able to interpret the role with confidence and be able to sing it any time and connect it to future opera stage work.

Generally when I start studying a new aria, I first study the melody line, then the lyrics, thirdly the scenes of the aria and finally I learn the story of the whole opera. This way I am able to imagine the whole piece little by little. However, I have noticed that when using this study process it takes a long time to deeply understand the aria and the role. When I focus mainly on the melody line and the vocal technique, I do not fully act and live the role. It is clear that this way it is very hard to communicate with and intrigue the audience. I also want to get quicker at understanding and performing the role. This time, I first studied the historical facts and biography of the character in the opera. My research question is “How does the knowledge of historical facts and the real people behind the characters influence the singing and acting?”

Chapter 2 Method

First study the historical facts and biography of the character in the opera

I first studied the historical facts and biography of the character in the opera before starting to study the aria and scene lessons. I read a few books written about the period when Mao Tse-tung was the leader of the Communist party of China, about Chiang Ch'ing's life and thoughts. Fortunately, there are a lot of references about the Mao period and her. When I went to my home country of Japan, I bought books written in Japanese. It is the easiest way to study quicker and understand in the mother language.

I studied about Mao Tse-tung when I was a junior high school student. However, this time I have studied deeply about the Mao period and what they did. For instance, The Cultural Revolution which was a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 until 1976 when Mao Tse-tung died. I also learned about "Little Red Book". Its real title is "Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung" (Johnson 2021, 143). At the same time, I learned the musical analysis from Timothy Johnson's book "John Adams's Nixon in China", mainly the arias of Chiang Ch'ing or if there was any strong musical motif in the opera.

Analysis of the character, Chiang Ch'ing

Chiang Ch'ing, which correct spelling is Jiang Qing, was born in Zhucheng, Shandong province in 1915. Her birth name was Li Shumeng. She grew up in a poor family and was bullied when she was in elementary school. At the age of 16, she discovered theatre and after that moved to Shanghai to start studying about acting. Her actress name was Lan Ping. At that time, actresses were considered very low class in China. According to Johnson (2011, 133) "She acquired a lifelong resentment of the upper classes and a contempt for traditional Chinese values". Before the age of 19, she became a member of the Communist party and began political activity. After that she met Mao Tse-tung and married him at the age of 24. She became his third wife. By this time, she was already calling herself Jiang Qing.

I read books to see and find out about her political activities or her desires. I could understand that she was a strong-willed woman. However, she was a jealous woman. Through the books, I got the impression that to get the upper hand or to keep up with others, she kicked people down. It is easy to imagine that it was not simple for women to speak their thoughts in China at that time. Still now, most Asian countries have a male dominated society. Although, I felt that she was a person who always wanted to be recognized by others.

In 1976, Mao Tse-tung died. During the years before Mao's death as his illness condition worsened, Jiang Qing became a more active politician. Jiang Qing thought that she stated the dominance of women and after Mao

will die, the Empress should appear and take power (Sankei 2021, 56-57). I understood that she was thinking that after Mao died she would become empress in China. It must have been a radical thought. I think that Jiang Qing had a strong feminist view. It was the most surprising thing to me. I feel that she held rage against a male dominated society. When she was a child, her mother was so poor that she sold her body (Johnson 2011, 133) and even when Jiang Qing was working as an actress in Shanghai, actresses were considered very low class, almost as prostitutes (Johnson 2011, 133). When I was getting to know about her, I think that her feminism was a response to a social system in which women are seen as less than men.

Find the musical motif of the character by analyzing the music score

I found a strong music motif of Chiang Ch'ing's feminism. I have divided the aria into three groups. The first group is from the beginning of the aria to bar 851 (Adams, 2004, pp.244-247). First, it repeats insisting on "I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung" as forte (*f*) confidently. From bar 842 to 846 is the first goal of this group "I walked my feet were bound on revolution". I think that it is her shout of how much she have done so far for China. Especially, there is a dynamic crescendo from bar 843 for 2 bars. I believe that this expresses her anger "revolution" from A \flat 5 to D6 which is the first highest note in this aria.

The second group is from bar 852 to 883 (Adams, 2004, pp.247-249). The accompaniment part starts with pianissimo (*pp*). This is the only pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic notation in the aria. Here the impression of the music changes. I think “Let me be a grain of sand” expresses her ideals and excitement towards “joy” of bar 869. Basically, almost the same lyrics and melody are repeated three times. The lyrics is reminiscent of the Chinese Land Reform and it seems almost like a religious prayer. This idea came from my vocal coach Jarosław Kaliski. This group makes a distinction between the first and the third group. It turns the tension in a different direction.

The final group is a reprise of the introduction (Adams, 2004, pp.249-255). The dynamic of the introduction in the first group starts fortissimo (*ff*) for the accompaniment and coming forte (*f*) for the vocal part. However, the accompaniment of the reprise begins fortississimo (*fff*) to decrescendo in two bars. When the vocal part enters in bar 886 with piano (*p*). I think that this part of Chiang Ch’ing should be sang calmly or quietly as an expression to the people who she is and what she has done. The bars from 905 to 913 are written as arpeggios in the accompaniment. I believe that this gives the impression that Chiang Ch’ing remembers the painful past that she has experienced.

The end of the aria is overwhelmed with repetition of “The Book”. The phrase is sang in several different intervals. I think that it is an expression of absolutely brainwashing the people. As written by Johnson (2011, 143) “Adams sets up Chiang’s climactic appeal to the book, the

written authority from which she derives her strength and power, primarily by exploiting her upper coloratura soprano register at key moments throughout the aria”. Therefore, I changed the last part of the vocal part from B ♭ 4 to D5 to further express the existence of Chiang Ch’ing to the audience.

Have a clear vision of the role before starting scene lessons

Before starting scene lessons with stage director Patrik Sörling, I had a clear vision about the character Chiang Ch’ing and the scene. Mostly I learned it from books and also two different videos of opera productions of “Nixon in China”. Especially, the videos gave me a strong image of her as a solitary and terrifying woman (Sellars, 2012, 2:07:58), (Cavanagh, 2016, 1:46:26). It was interesting to have a vision from the start of how to stand up when singing and even facial expressions. The acting was full of energy, performing the role as one of the top communist women in China at that period.

However, there was a problem. I could not memorize the whole aria until starting the first scene lesson. During the first two lessons, I had to look at the score. It took too long to read the books about the historical background. Therefore, I had a late start looking at the musical part. As a result, I could not establish the analysis of the music part in my mind by the time the scene lesson began.

On the other hand, I had a good understanding of the character setting. I was able to discuss and make the story or share the situation well during the scene with Patrik Sörling. However, I had not grasped the overall flow of the important singing part yet. During the first lesson I could not sing with movement but instead had to use a music stand. On the second lesson, I continued to look at the score during the movement and was also helped by pianist Jaroslaw Kaliski. Finally, on the third lesson I was able to have a more complete vision of Chiang Ch'ing.

Chapter 3 Analysis of presentation

Thoughts about the presentation

On the day of the presentation, I first talked about my project, introducing the opera “Nixon in China” and what knowledge I had gained so far. Furthermore, I performed the aria “I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung” together with pianist Jaroslaw Kaliski. Four other Master students helped out with the chorus part, which consists of shouting “Joy” in the middle of the music and repeating “I speak according to the Book” in unison for the finale. It added even more drama and impact to the performance.

The presentation was a great success for me. It was the first time I sang the aria in front of an audience. Normally when I sing an aria for the first time to a audience, I have the feeling of “Do not make a mistake” while checking the flow of the aria in my head. In many cases, I am not able to be completely mindful and concentrate on the lyrics or the music. As I wrote in the introduction, this way it is hard to fully connect with and capture the audience.

During the presentation, I could completely set my mind on Chiang Ch’ing and how to express her character. Furthermore, there was no need to remind myself of feelings of the character just before the aria. I had more confidence when singing and acting the opera role, which made me able to communicate better with the audience and have a more meaningful performance.

Findings during dress rehearsal

There was a discovery during the dress rehearsal the a day before the presentation. I sang with a pair of glasses which is a characteristic symbol of Chang Ch'ing. However, I usually do not wear glasses when I sing. Moreover, the glasses were not the right size so they slipped off many times and the reflection on the light by the glasses disturbed me during the performance. I could not concentrate completely and I lost my expression and singing.

I was surprised that just one difference would break the singing style. I was distracted by the unusual situation, I could not focus on singing or acting at all. After the rehearsal, I adjusted the size of my glasses and I was trying them on again at the final rehearsal for a short time on the day of the presentation. However, the teachers present advised me that if I were not used to the glasses, I should not wear them on stage. I also got feedback that I sang better without the glasses, using more natural expressions when singing. Hence, I decide to not wear the glasses at the final presentation.

Feedback from the audience after the presentation

The reaction was very positive. I received comments that made me feel I had achieved the goals of my project. I could communicate with the audience and share the performance with them. The audience said they were strongly impressed by Chiang Ch'ing and her desire. Also, the chorus

further strengthened the impact to the audience by screaming “Joy” and singing “The Book” in unison for the finale.

I got one interesting feedback. Some of them said “You made a clever choice of role”. This is what caused me to do this project: a contemporary work, studying a real person and an Asian role.

I have never sung an aria of an Asian character in the opera before. Speaking of famous Asian roles are for instance, Japanese “Madame Butterfly” or Chinese “Liù” of Turandot by Giacomo Puccini. These are the important repertoires that Asian singers should have when performing in Europe. However, both are dramatic and heavy for my voice. It is difficult to put them in my repertoire.

This time, I realized in particular that the role of Chiang Ch’ing is suitable for me. Besides, it is a role that is easy for the listeners to imagine.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

I learned that establishing a character before studying the opera aria is a quick way to make the role my own. By studying the aria after understanding the role I was able to more quickly understand and analyze the music.

As well as, I realized one more thing. Even if I learned about the role of a real person, I could not sympathize with the role. When I knew the role of Chiang Ch'ing, I always thought that "What scary thoughts this woman had". However, I could get the role easily by just analyzing the character and her situation logically in my head. I noticed that it was not the most important thing to find sympathy or something in common with her. At the beginning, I believed that the easiest way to understand and come closer to the role situation would be to find some sympathy with the role.

This project gave me the understanding that analyzing the role first and setting of the role was a way to more quickly get a clear inspiration for the aria. No doubt, it also made me become more confident when singing and acting the opera role, communicate better with the audience and have a more meaningful performance. Furthermore, when I stopped trying to sympathize with her I was able to go more fully into the role. It felt like that the singing, the acting and myself were aligned. It was like I found another color or personality as a singer. I will surely use this studying method in the future, not only when learning about roles based on real persons but fictional roles as well, and make the characters come alive even more.

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