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## What's Handel doing in a Ming temple?

Artist Zhang Huan hopes to polarise audiences with his radical restaging of *Semele*, he tells  
**Rupert Christiansen**

At first glance, it's completely baffling. Why should anyone think that Handel's ironic and sophisticated mythological comedy of adultery, *Semele*, should be entrusted to a Chinese artist of Buddhist persuasion, best known for his massive, often grotesque sculptures and performance art installations often involving feats of extreme physical endurance? But that is precisely what Linda Wong Davies has done, and next month she will find out whether what might look like a meaningless culture clash has turned out to be an inspiration worthy of Diaghilev.

For the past two years, Lady Davies has chaired the KT Wong Foundation, dedicated to furthering international understanding of Chinese culture. This is no idle hobby: a heavyweight conference was held in November at Ditchley Park, and a garden commissioned by the foundation from Shao Fan won a gold medal at last year's Chelsea Flower Show.

Music is another of Lady Davies's passions, and after she had witnessed a riotously acclaimed performance of Handel's *Messiah* in Beijing, she had her bizarre brainwave: why not ask Zhang Huan to design and direct what would be the first-ever performance of a baroque opera in China?

The project quickly mushroomed after Zhang took the bait. *Semele*, with its witty libretto by William Congreve, found a co-producer in the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, where it will be premiered next month before moving on to Beijing and Shanghai, with a cast including Chinese soprano Ying Huang as the ditsy good-time girl *Semele* and British tenor Jeremy Ovenden as her seducer Jupiter.

What made Zhang agree to undertake such a complex and risky project, which seems so far from his current interests in peasant mythology and the Maoist past? He has no experience of working in theatre; the few operas that he saw during seven years in New York left little impression on him; and his personal musical tastes span Nirvana and Tibetan folk tunes, with no room for the Western classical tradition in between.

But, he explains, this was precisely what intrigued him. "I always like to do things that I don't understand," he told me through an interpreter. "Things that I've never done before." And as he began to think about it, connections established themselves: Handel's tale of a mortal girl taken up into heaven and transformed after sexual intercourse into a divinity has many equivalents in Chinese myth, and also relates to Buddhist ideas about reincarnation and karma.

A more specific coincidence comes from a disused 450-year-old Ming temple that Zhang had bought and transported from an outlying village to his enormous studio in Shanghai. Inside this temple, Zhang found many domestic relics, including a diary written by a man who had lived there about 20 years ago.



**Sparking controversy:** Performance artist Huan, above, is setting his production of *'Semele'* in an ancient temple, top

The diary records the man's frustration with his enchanting but adulterous wife. Eventually his jealousy led him to murder one of her lovers, and to his own subsequent arrest and execution.

This also has resonance with the plot of *Semele*, which Zhang has followed to the point of tracking down the surviving wife, a lady of great beauty and charm, Zhang says. "Had I known her at the time, I would certainly have wanted to be her lover, too." Her face is on the show's poster, and she has been invited to Brussels "to participate".

Zhang is mysterious about his more precise intentions, but his production (which will use the Ming temple as the basis of the set) is split into two: Handel's *Semele* will take place inside the opera house, while a Chinese version is played out in the square outside.

Directing opera is a matter of constant negotiation and delicate delegation of decisions. For Zhang, this is the easy bit.

He employs more than a hundred assistants in the development of his projects, and he is by all accounts a brilliant manager and team player. But what he didn't know when we spoke is how far his conductor Christophe Rousset, a baroque specialist, is prepared to follow his fantasy – Zhang wants to make cuts in the score and introduce some episodes of Chinese music: purism and authenticity aren't matters on Zhang's agenda, and it will be fascinating to see what compromises emerge.

Zhang certainly isn't afraid of being controversial. He hopes that "most people" will love his *Semele*, but that "some people will hate it", and, as what we would call a "site-specific" artist, he also plans to change its content radically when the production travels to China. "I want it to be 70 per cent beautiful, 15 per cent surrealistically beautiful, and the rest so beautiful that nobody can bear it," he laughs.

London may get a chance to see the show – Lady Davies has invited Nicholas Kenyon of the Barbican Centre to the Brussels premiere.

Meanwhile, the White Cube gallery is about to open an exhibition of Zhang's recent work, focused on a pig, nicknamed Zhu Gangqiang ("cast-iron pig"), who survived 40 days of burial during the Sichuan earthquake. Zhang has invented an English lover for this heroic animal, a sow called Oxford Flower. It's a tease which provokes Zhang to another of his disarmingly wicked laughs.

✦ *Semele* opens at the Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels (0032 70 23 3939) on September 8. *Zhang Huan* opens at White Cube Mason's Yard, London SW1 (020 7930 5373), on September 4. A new monograph by Zhang Huan is published by Phaidon Press at £24.95