

A Chinese revolutionary opera in America: Aesthetic and political avant-garde

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Abstract

Absolute music may be regarded as apolitical but the label avant-garde music, with its strident social implications, is nothing if not political. The paper considers the intersections of avant-garde aesthetics and politics in music by examining Chinese-American composer Bright Sheng's recent Santa Fe-commissioned opera *Madame Mao* (2003). Political revolution defines avant-garde, originally a military term. How does revolution in politics then translate into a radically different medium, music, traditionally regarded as apolitical? Does music become avant-garde because of its politics? Furthermore, how is avant-garde music realized in operas, conventionally deemed conservative or even retro-garde? To take the inquiry further, the paper interrogates the cultural assumptions about the avant-garde in music, taking Cornelius Cardew's Sinophile music as an example, to compare and contrast how the concept of avant-garde can be culturally defined depending on the relative "conservative" social background it is projected against.

Sheng's opera *Madame Mao* is a case in point. It is an opera set in the Cultural Revolution during the decade from 1966 to 1976, initiated by Mao Zedong and engineered by his wife Jiang Qing, a.k.a. Madame Mao. The period coincided with the revolutionary fervor of student protest in the West in the 1960s, contrasting Western theory with Chinese praxis, a polarity that can be further contextualized with the ideological debate surrounding the Boulez-Stockhausen Darmstadt school in music and the cultural cold war in general. The opera offers a good opportunity for us to re-examine the various strands of political and aesthetic avant-gardes in both East and West and re-consider the cultural and political particularity of the avant-garde. It is argued that Sheng's original aesthetic and cultural background in Chinese music and political background of the Red Guard generation combine to require a new set of values for defining and evaluating the musical avant-garde different from that of considering John Adams's minimalist opera *Nixon in China*.

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