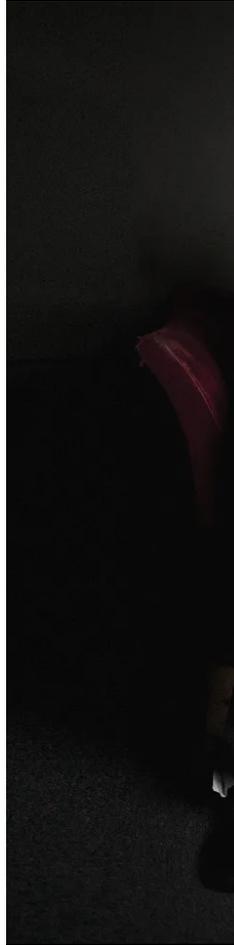


Seattle Opera's 'Bound' explores a second-generation Asian American story

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Huang Ruo, composer of the chamber opera "Bound." (Wenjun Miakoda Liang)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

When composer Huang Ruo was a student at Oberlin College, he saw his first live Western opera during spring break when Plácido Domingo conducted Metropolitan Opera's

“Samson and Delilah.” Even with standing-room tickets, it was a much more exclusive event than the Chinese operas he watched in the village square with his grandmother when he was growing up in the 1980s in Hainan, China. Now Huang composes Western operas that center Asian characters and stories like “M. Butterfly,” which upends the plot of Puccini’s classic opera, and “Bound,” which explores the second-generation American immigrant experience.

Huang will conduct Seattle Opera’s production of “Bound,” the chamber opera he composed with librettist Bao-Long Chu, June 9-18 in Tagney Jones Hall at the Opera Center at Seattle Center. The hourlong opera is based on the true story of Diane Tran, the teenage daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, who was jailed for truancy while working two jobs to help support her family. Soprano Karen Vuong, who sang Mimi in Seattle Opera’s “La Boheme” last season, will sing the role of Diane. This will be the third staging of the opera, which premiered in Houston in 2014.

Tran’s story was in the news at the time when Houston Grand Opera commissioned Huang and Houston poet Chu to create an opera. The commission was part of the Song of Houston initiative, which commissions new chamber operas that reflect the city’s diversity and resonate with contemporary life. Chu is an immigrant from Vietnam; Huang was interested in exploring the stories of second-generation Americans, who are often overlooked in favor of immigrant narratives.

“They were born and raised in the U.S. Do they feel they truly belong? Were they treated as an equal 100% American? What are their struggles?” asked Huang. He and Chu collaborated closely to tell the story of Diane’s struggles as the child of immigrants, bound both to her family and the American dream. Although Diane is the focus of the story, Huang points out that every character in the story is bound by their own struggles.

“Many people like me who immigrated here as a first-generation immigrant, we came here for our American dream,” said Huang, who’s based in New York. “And of course,

the many people who came before us had their dream. We all have our own struggle, but this is what makes America beautiful as well, this diversity, built by so many groups coming from different parts of the world to contribute. Asian American struggle is not *their* or *the other's* struggle. It could be *our* struggle as well. It's part of the American struggle.”

Huang is known for fully integrating Western and Asian instruments in his compositions. In “M. Butterfly,” the operatic adaptation of David Henry Hwang’s play, he incorporated percussion used in Chinese operas. For “Bound,” Huang turned to Vietnamese instruments, using both the đàn bầu, a type of lute, and đàn tranh, a type of zither.

“I feel to tell Diane and Diane’s mother’s story, I should have this sound world from the East. I was very fortunate to be introduced to a wonderful musician, [Emmy Award-winning Vân-Ánh] Vanessa Võ. She herself plays multiple Vietnamese instruments, and she offered me different choices. My true love was the đàn bầu, which is a single-stringed instrument. It is so unique,” said Huang.

Võ will play both instruments for Seattle Opera’s production, accompanying Huang’s new piano reduction of the original seven-instrument ensemble score.

“We have less instruments, but the piano actually plays most of the missing voices. Musically, all the notes are there,” said Huang.

In fact, there are more notes than in the original production. Huang composed a new section of music for Seattle Opera, a prelude set to đàn bầu in which Diane’s mother recites a poem.

“Both Bao-Long and I felt this will make our story more complete. I’m very excited to hear and see that,” said Huang.

When Huang returns to Seattle — he has been here twice before when Seattle Symphony performed his work — another thing he is looking forward to seeing is the audience.

“Seattle is a very diverse city with a large Asian American community. I hope our opera will serve as a gathering of Asian American communities to see their own story being presented proudly on stage by one of the world’s best opera companies. I would love to fill every performance with a very diverse audience from all people, and to really show what opera of today is about. It’s really not an elite form just for the entertainment of a few. But it is a reflection of our lives, of our time. This is an opera for you.”

“Bound”

June 9-18; Tagney Jones Hall at the Opera Center, 363 Mercer St., Seattle; \$85, \$15 for teens on June 16; 206-389-7676, seattleopera.com

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