



## GUIDE OVERVIEW

### *The Weaving Maiden* CHAN KA NIN



For mixed choir (SATB), narrator, dizi, pipa, yangqin, guzheng, percussion, erhu and gehu.

**Premiere:** February 12, 2006

**Length of Recording:** 65 minutes

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Recommended for Grades 4 to 6

**Social Studies** – Traditions and Celebrations; Early Civilizations

**Language** – Forms of literary texts (reading, writing) – Folk Tales

**Language** – Reading activities that include materials that reflect the diversity of Canadian and world cultures.

## CHARACTER EDUCATION CONNECTIONS

Connecting to one's own cultural heritage and that of others; Morality Tales examined through the arts

## MAJOR THEMES

Folk Tales; Chinese Culture; Allegory; Storytelling through Music

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## ABOUT SOUNDMAKERS RESOURCES

The Soundstreams' series of SoundMakers Study Guides have been created for educators to enhance the SoundMakers.ca experience. There is a wealth of *free* streamable and downloadable music available on SoundMakers. These guides give background information, activity ideas, and curriculum connections to help teachers get the most out of the Soundstreams commissions catalogue which is available online.

In-class workshops are also available through Soundstreams. Soundstreams composers and artist-educators can visit your school or organization for in-class workshops or for a staff learning session.

For more information or to provide us with feedback please contact:

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This Resource Guide was written by Jessi Linn Davies

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## INSPIRATION

The story of *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden*, a tale of two forbidden lovers who are allowed to meet only once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month over the wings of magpies, is well known in Chinese folklore. Composer Chan Ka Nin, librettist Mark Brownell, and Soundstreams' Artistic Director Lawrence Cherney had the idea of telling this story as an oratorio with spoken narration. Since the weaving maiden is from heaven and the cowherd is of the world below, the music embodies the division between the celestial and the earthly. Gentle clusters of female choristers evoke the eternal voice of heaven, while the male chorus provides more mundane elements such as the mooing of the cowherd's cattle. In its marriage of choral sounds with traditional Chinese instruments, the music itself creates a world in which the two lovers may live together.

## ABOUT THE COMPOSER & LIBRETTIST

### CHAN KA NIN, COMPOSER

**b. 1949, CHINA**

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Chan Ka Nin is a distinguished Canadian composer who has written in most musical genres and whose extensive repertoire draws on both East and West in its aesthetic outlook.

Many prominent ensembles and soloists have performed his music, including the Toronto Symphony, National Arts Centre Orchestra, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Calgary Philharmonic, Esprit Orchestra, Manitoba Chamber Orchestra, Amici Ensemble, Gryphon Trio, Miró Quartet, Purcell Quartet, Amherst Saxophone Quartet, violist Rivka Golani, and cellist Shauna Rolston.

Mr. Chan holds twin undergraduate degrees in electrical engineering and music from the University of British Columbia, where he studied composition with Jean Coulthard. He subsequently received Master of Music and Doctor of Music degrees from Indiana University, where he studied with Bernhard Heiden.

He is currently a professor of Theory and Composition at the University of Toronto.

### MARK BROWNELL, LIBRETTIST

**b. 1960, CANADA**

Mark Brownell is a Toronto-based playwright and

co-artistic director of the Pea Green Theatre Group with his wife and partner Sue Miner.

Awards: Nominated for a Governor General's Literary Award for his play *Monsieur d'Eon* (Playwrights Canada Press). He also received a Dora Mavor Moore Award for his libretto *Iron Road* and a Dora Mavor Moore Award Nomination for *Medici Slot Machine* (Scirocco Drama). In 2010 he was the recipient of the infamous Harold Indie Theatre Award.

Other award-winning work includes *The Barbecue King*, *The Martha Stewart Projects*, *Playballs*, *High Sticking - Three Period Plays* (Scirocco Drama), *The Chevalier St. George*, *The Storyteller's Bag* (Children's Group), and *The Weaving Maiden*.

## IN THE MUSIC - ORATORIO

Oratorio is a composition for solo voices, chorus and instruments (without acting, costumes, or sets) that is based on a story from a sacred text and is performed in a concert setting. Oratorio is often compared with opera though opera includes more theatrical elements (acting, scenery, costumes, etc.) than oratorio.

**Discuss:** Describe the types of voices you hear in this piece. Identify places where all voices, some, or just one, can be heard. Why would the composer choose to divide the choir in such a way at certain times?

## IN THE MUSIC - STORYTELLING

It could be argued that music is crucial for storytelling – just think of the music for a movie thriller, or classic romance. In opera, the music drives the story that is happening on stage and heightens emotions. In film, music is often employed to assist with setting the mood of a particular moment or scene. Sometimes, the music itself is the story, written with a clear narrative, whether through Oratorio (this piece), Narration (think *Peter and the Wolf*), or music that suggests a strong narrative (the soundtrack for the animated film *Up*).

**Discuss:** How does music affect mood? How can music drive the story? Why would you choose to include music or exclude music from an oral story, a play, or a documentary you were creating? What moods or emotions can music evoke? Give examples.

## SYNOPSIS

### THE COWHERD AND THE WEAVING MAIDEN

This Chinese folk tale is about love and life in a rigid class system. Like many mythological tales, it creates a narrative to explain the positions of stars and other celestial bodies in the night sky. This love story is the basis of the yearly Qixi Festival in China.

The tragic story is about the cowherd, a kind and hardworking peasant whose only friend is a water buffalo. The peasant falls in love with and then marries a local weaving maiden who is really a celestial princess. They start a family and live happily together until her royal family finds out about her lowly husband and comes to force them apart.

The princess is forced back to heaven by her mother. With the help of the buffalo (who is revealed to be a supernatural creature himself) the cowherd and his children try to follow the weaving maiden through the sky. The angry mother sees them coming and slices the sky down the middle to separate the lovers permanently. The two can still be seen in the night sky as the stars Vega and Altair and the slice between them is known as the Silvery River (or, in the West, the Milky Way). There is a sliver of happiness for the family though: one day per year, on the 7th day of the 7th month (the Qixi Festival in China, which is much like Valentine’s Day) the family is able to reunite by crossing a bridge made of birds.

Like the vast majority of stories that have been passed on through oral tradition, there are many variations in the details of this tale. In some versions, the buffalo is a cow. In some versions the buffalo speaks and actually helps the boy meet the weaver girl. In some versions the boy tricks the weaver girl into marriage, and in others, she notices and courts him. In some versions, the birds are crows sent by the sympathetic Jade Emperor, and in others, they are magpies who are drawn by the family’s sadness.

While the sources and details of these stories’ incarnations may vary, one element is always the same: the two lovers are always punished for marrying out of their class and must linger in lonely anguish for 364 days a year, only able to watch their loved one from across the vast night sky. It is clear that this tragic tale is not a fairy

tale of the modern sort, where evil is defeated and love wins in the end; it is rather a legend created in an austere era where perhaps one celebratory day of joy in year filled with grueling drudgery was not so hard to imagine.

**Further Reading:** Other popular Chinese folk tales include *Hua Mulan*, *Madam White Snake*, and *The Magic Paintbrush*.

## ACTIVITY - FOLKLORE

All cultures have traditional stories that are passed down through generations. *The Cowherd and Weaving Maiden* story is said to be one of the four most famous such tales in Chinese folklore.

**Discuss:** What are some traditional stories from your family, religion, or culture? What do your stories have in common? Why do you think they have continued to be so popular?

**Think-Pair-Share:** Divide into partners and share the telling of a folk tale (or popular family story) with each other. Find a new partner and re-tell your first partner’s story to your new partner, sharing the oral tradition of storytelling.

**Text v. Oral Storytelling:** Many traditional stories are shared through retelling orally, rather than writing them down. After having read the text version of *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden*, pair students and have them retell the story together, as they remembered it, allowing for changes along the way. Invite a few pairs of students to share their retellings with the class. Compare the differences and similarities. What elements were present in all of the retellings? What changed? How else did the storytellers differentiate themselves from each other (tempo, energy, tone of voice, etc.)?

### “ON THE SEVENTH DAY OF THE SEVENTH MONTH”

The Chinese calendar, used to determine holidays such as Chinese New Year and the Qixi Festival, is different from the 12-month Gregorian Calendar which we use for day-to-day planning. The Chinese calendar is a lunisolar calendar, based on both the moon and the sun. The New Year begins on the second new moon after the winter solstice.

Some Upcoming “7th Day of 7th Month” dates are:

August 13, 2013	August 20, 2015
August 2, 2014	August 9, 2016

## ACTIVITY - WORKING WITH THE MUSIC

### Before you Listen

- Read the story of *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden*.
- Identify the key characters and settings for this work.
- Identify key ‘beats’ in the story (Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Resolution).
- Brainstorm ideas about what sorts of instruments, sounds, rhythms, etc. might be used to tell this story through music.

### As you Listen

- Identify a favourite part/sound/emotion.
- Write words to describe the mood of the piece, how it makes you feel at certain points in the story.
- Write/Draw what you hear. What instruments are being used? How many and what type of vocalists might you see in a live performance of this work?
- Identify key beats in the music as you listen. When are there clear shifts in tone/idea?

**Bright Idea:** Display a digital timer while the music is playing so that students can reference a precise time for key moments. That way you can find the section again while discussing the piece and students can compare notes. It will also help if you need to listen to the (60-minute) work in smaller pieces.

### After you Listen

- Get on your feet and create mimed performances to enact the story along with some of the music. Try this with tableaux, too!
- Create your own musical folk tale. Select a well-known folk or fairy tale and create a composition to tell that story. Work in composer/librettist pairs to create a musical work with narration. Present these and share with your class.

- Mix it up! Using downloadable excerpts from this piece, remix and rearrange the clips to tell a different story using parts of this one. Perhaps students could use clips to tell a sequel or prequel to the original tale? Use the free SoundMakers iPad app, or free software like Audacity to mix your clips.

<http://soundmakers.ca/soundstreams-commissions/the-weaving-maiden-chan-ka-nin>

## GLOSSARY

**Tableau vivant** (plural: tableaux vivants) means “living picture.” The term, borrowed from the French language, describes a group of suitably costumed actors or artist’s models, carefully posed and often theatrically lit. Throughout the duration of the display, the people shown do not speak or move. The approach thus marries the art forms of the stage with those of painting or photography, and as such it has been of interest to modern photographers.<sup>[1]</sup>

[1] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tableau\\_vivant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tableau_vivant)