

SEVEN SISTERS

a chamber opera

music by Justine F. Chen
libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann

director: Aya Ogawa
music director: Kelly Kuo
dramaturg: Cori Ellison



SYNOPSIS

Framed by the ritual of a Taiwanese funeral, and threaded through with the myth of the Pleiades reimagined, this boldly theatrical new opera is inspired by composer Justine F. Chen's powerful, complicated grandmother, matriarch of seven daughters. An exploration of the discordant legacy of bitterness and resilience A-Ma passes down to subsequent generations, *Seven Sisters* veers from the sublime awkwardness of caustic satire to wildly lyrical moments of emotional expansion via sounds ranging from the glamour of old Hollywood and 1950s Chinese cinema to Taiwanese folk music, Chinese Opera and kinetic, pulsating rhythms.

As the funeral unfolds, the sisters wrangle over largesse, power dynamics, awkward expressions of love, and their fragmented memories of the moment A-Ma gave Sister #3 away as a baby—a haunting of sorts. In the presence of these rites, Maggie, a second-generation Taiwanese-American, grapples with her disconnection from her forbears, her feeling of otherness, and her own complex relationship with her mother, Sister #1. Epic, stylized and hyper-real, deeply moving and unflinchingly funny, *Seven Sisters* looks at the hard truths of a culture that demeans and disempowers women and asks: How does the next generation move beyond this inheritance, bridging a cultural chasm that privileges silence?

Recipient of the 2020 Opera America Discovery Grant for Female Composers and selected for West Edge's Aperture Portfolio. The first music workshop was developed in partnership with Manhattan School of Music's Artist Scholars Program and Vocal Arts Division.

Duration: 90 minutes

Characters: 7 female vocalists, ideally all Asian

Maggie, Daughter of #1, also plays young matriarch (A-Ma) – spinto

Sister #1 – lyric soprano

Sister #2 – lyric mezzo-soprano

Sister #4 – soprano

Sister #5 – mezzo-soprano

Sister #6 – soubrette

Sister #7 – coloratura soprano

Orchestra: 10 strings (3 violins/3 violas/3 cellos/1 double bass) & 1 percussion (including bass drum, whip, bangu, temple bowls, crotales, tuned glasses)

Development: libretto workshop: October 2020 (online); piano/vocal: April 8, 2022, Manhattan School of Music, NYC

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