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Classical opera comes to Cambodia for the first time as local and international cast take on Mozart's 'The Magic Flute'

James Reddick | Publication date 09 March 2018 | 10:45 ICT



Aaron Carpene leads the Saigon Philharmonic Orchestra during a rehearsal of *The Magic Flute* on Wednesday. [Pha Lina](#)

In an auditorium off Mao Tse Toung Boulevard, dozens have gathered from countries all over the region. Some have been working together for years, others for mere days. On the corner of the stage are nine musicians with traditional Cambodian instruments, like the roneat and trom, and in front of them is an orchestra – from the Ho Chi Minh Conservatory of Music – with four adopted Cambodian players among their ranks.

When Pariyachart Sithidamrongkarn emerges on the stage, all in black, she is circled by a group of dancers performing movements more closely aligned with traditional Khmer dance than to anything Mozart would have known. Pariyachart is Queen of the Night, one of the most iconic roles not only in what the cast is rehearsing – Mozart's *The Magic Flute* – but in all of opera. The Thai singer is just 18, and this is her first performance outside of school. Her casting is improbable, but so is just about every aspect of the production, which will be performed in an abridged form this Saturday.

When the curtains open at Chaktomuk Theater, it will be the first time a classical opera has ever been performed on Cambodian soil. For Robert Turnbull, it will be one step towards the realisation of a dream he's had for decades.

A classically trained pianist, Turnbull originally thought of the idea to perform a local production of *The Magic*

Flute after arriving in Cambodia in the late 1990s. At that time, the country was still struggling to revive its own artistic traditions, and organisations like Cambodian Living Arts and Amrita Performing Arts were just emerging.

"Everything was very conservative because Cambodians were only focusing on bringing back traditional arts and now it's completely different – you have contemporary art, contemporary ballet, pop music," he said.



Members of the Saigon Philharmonic Orchestra rehearse *The Magic Flute* at the Department of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh on Wednesday. [Pha Lina](#)

Turnbull noticed that there were a handful of classically trained musicians who had studied in Russia and returned to Cambodia, but they had few opportunities to perform. Unlike in Vietnam – where the French and close ties to Russia left an appreciation and infrastructure for opera and the symphony – classical music has been virtually nonexistent in Cambodia. Even in the 1950s and 1960s, both under the French and then under the patronage of King Norodom Sihanouk, there was little support for it, as other local art forms thrived.

But in *The Magic Flute* he saw an opportunity, in part because of its similarities to the Ramayana – both "rescue tales" with universal themes of romance, heroism and family pressures. Even the characters in the two stories are similar, Turnbull finds, with the Ramayana's Rama and Sita like Pamina and Tamino, and

Hanuman reminding him of Papageno, Mozart's bird-catcher.

"The Magic Flute, if you look on YouTube, is the most adaptable opera. You can do it in any way, you can make it fit any context," he said. "Because it's the universal truths it covers – the quest for love and truth."

Even with the idea germinating, little progress was made until Turnbull met Stefano Vizioli and Aaron Carpene, who had worked on a cross-cultural production of Dido and Aeneas in Bhutan. They were passionate about adapting European classics to a local context, and they began brainstorming.

"So we thought we'd try to create a really Cambodian spectacle to include all these different elements from Cambodia," Turnbull said.

Piecing together that spectacle has proved a monumental task. Whereas in Thailand and Vietnam there are either conservatories or full-fledged music schools for classical music, in Cambodia such an infrastructure does not exist.

In the search for a cast, Turnbull's team has been unable to find any local singers – with one candidate in Siem Reap having to drop out because of a lack of time – so they have looked throughout the region.

Pamina is played by Cho Hae-ryong, a South Korean who performs in Ho Chi Minh City, while Tamino (Kingston Kung) and Papageno (Rios Li) are both played by Taiwanese performers. Though there are only four Cambodian musicians in the orchestra – otherwise made up of the Saigon Philharmonic Orchestra – it's a big opportunity for local classical musicians, and one Turnbull hopes will multiply in the future.



Pariyachart Sitthidamrongkarn performs an aria as Queen of the Night alongside dancers from Amrita Performing Arts during a rehearsal on Wednesday. [Pha Lina](#)

Him Savy, an experienced flutist playing in the orchestra, said this is the second time she will have performed with the Ho Chi Minh orchestra, and the first time doing an opera. "We work together and we're happy together," she said. "We exchange our cultures and a new experience performing with singers."

Along with the dancing by local performers from Amrita Performing Arts, the opera incorporates daring Cambodian touches, especially in its music, which is under the direction of Carpene. The opening, he says, puts local instruments in conversation with the orchestra, immediately announcing the production's intentions. And rather than using Mozart's music for the glockenspiel, Papageno's instrument of choice, he will be using Cambodian instruments.

"What's happening globally with internet culture is that everything is becoming more uniform," Carpene explained. "This type of project is to exalt cultural particularities and not make them marginal."

After Saturday's performance, and another year of preparation and fundraising, the goal is to stage the full opera in a setting that amplifies those cultural particularities – a temple within the Angkor Archaeological Park. Turnbull says they already have tentative permission from the Apsara Authority, and hopes the first full production of an opera in Cambodia will take place in 2019 in the Kingdom's cultural heartland.

"Ultimately it's going to be fantastic. I think once we get that level of professionalism, the setting, the acoustics, the lighting, it's going to be magical," he said. "It's just, in Cambodia, it takes a long time to get things done."

A Cambodian Magic Flute will be showing on Saturday, March 10, at 7:30pm at Chaktomuk Theater. Tickets range from \$10-\$100 and are for sale online. For a link, check the "Mozart at Angkor" Facebook page.