

Oberlin to present Winter Term Opera *Angel's Bone*

by Jarrett Hoffman



It's hard to say what's most interesting about the new opera *Angel's Bone*, which will receive its second-ever performance next week in Oberlin. It could be the music of Oberlin Conservatory alum Du Yun (left), which incorporates punk rock, cabaret, and electronics. It could be the libretto by Royce Vavrek, which examines sexual slavery and trafficking through a prism of magical realism. Or maybe

it's the challenge for performers of portraying the perpetrators of those crimes, making them human.

On January 31 at 7:30 pm at The Cat in the Cream Coffeehouse, Oberlin Conservatory presents a Winter Term Opera production of *Angel's Bone*, directed by Christopher Mirto and conducted by Matthew Chamberlain. After opening night, which is part of Cleveland Opera Theater's [{NOW} Festival](#), performances continue on February 2, 4, 6, and 7 — see our [Concert Listings](#) for exact times. Admission is free, but [tickets](#) are required and seating is limited. Talk-back sessions including Oberlin faculty, students from the production, and community support groups will follow each performance.

Winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Music, the 85-minute *Angel's Bone* follows two angels whose longing for their time on earth brings them mysteriously back to our world, a journey that takes a heavy physical toll. The troubled Mr. and Mrs. X.E. find the angels, nurse them back to health, then imprison and exploit them.

Oberlin recommends the opera for mature audiences. As director Christopher Mirto said in an interview last week, “It can be bleak, and there are some moments that I find just devastating.” Mirto joined the faculty at Oberlin as assistant professor of opera theater this past August.

Asked how the students have responded to the challenges of the opera, Mirto said, “They’re warriors. The characters don’t have the same performance history as those from standard-rep opera, so these guys are diving in and embracing what’s on the page while trying to make sense of it themselves. They have a different sense of ownership over the process since we started.”



Du Yun working with Mirto at Oberlin (Photo: Dale Preston)

Mirto’s background as a theater director influenced the rehearsal process. “We did some table work: the designers all made presentations to the group, the orchestra was invited, and we tried to get everybody inside of the play world and on the same page,” Mirto said. “I wanted to encourage a lot of collaboration and sensitivity in everyone, protecting and bolstering each other through what is ultimately an incredibly difficult process. Challenging music aside, the piece goes to some really dark places. So the context is tough *and* the content is tough. I think the young singers are finding the demands high but pretty rewarding so far.”

Another challenge has been portraying the characters of Mr. and Mrs. X.E. “If we judge them, we’re probably not doing them justice,” Mirto said. “We have to explore them as if what they’re doing is right and correct, and the only thing they could possibly do at this moment. Then we end up creating complicated, flawed, difficult, kind of beautiful characters. The moment-to-moment work has been trying to fill them with as much compassion and understanding as we can so that any judgment is ultimately left up to the audience.”

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