

The Possibility of Finding the Light

Daniel Asia's Opera *The Tin Angel*

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THE *TIN ANGEL OPERA*, A TESTAMENT TO THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP and music in a dark world, is the culmination of a singular personal and creative journey by composer Daniel Asia and poet Paul Pines. It began in 1978 at MacDowell, an artist colony in the woods of New Hampshire, the kind of place where creativity is a simmering brew of works in progress, and where the denizens meld with others in their own and other disciplines in sometimes life-changing ways. Asia and Pines struck up a friendship marked by a chain of pieces that would emerge over the next 25 years before Pines's death in 2018. Says Asia: "We have gone through our lives together, checking in periodically, and gauging our development and understanding of life and our art through our artistic interaction."

Dan Asia and I go back further: we met as Yale composition students in 1975, and have been friends, colleagues, and mutual admirers since. The first things I noticed about Dan were a flair for instrumentation in his work, a gift that steadily deepened through his career, and a kind of chipper self-confidence that stood out among the mostly searching and uncertain atmosphere of grad school. We were all trying to get our acts together, find our voice, polish our craft, attract some attention. Dan was doing all that, but unlike most of us he was already determined to write music that would have a life outside the academy.

Thus his string of recordings includes pieces he created at Yale. Through his studies with notable composers—Jacob Druckman, Isang Yun, Gunther Schuller among others—and a flurry of creative sojourns and fellowships, he was steadily thinking as an artist in the world, rather than as a student. He ended up teaching and heading the composition department

at the music school of the University of Arizona for over 35 years. There he conducted new music and issued a string of recordings and works in a variety of media, including six pieces setting the poetry of Paul Pines.

Pines had a singular creative journey, much of it involved with jazz. He could not have known it, but his career and Asia's were on a journey that was going to culminate in *The Tin Angel*. He was born into a family of emigrants, his Russian Jewish mother paying her way through law school doing gigs with a jazz trio. After a stint with the Merchant Marine, Paul ended up in the East Village, where in 1973 he founded, in a former speakeasy at the corner of 2nd Street and Bowery, the jazz club Tin Palace. It lasted for a decade, Paul running it for the first six years. The place remains a legend, the building noted in the National Register of Historic Places. "At the start," Pines recalled, "the location was a no-man's land, a dangerous place to go. By the time The Tin Palace closed its doors ten years later, it had become a destination. The place was full of artists and writers... The fascination for me was the relationship between art and the underworld, the unconscious, a dark place in the psyche." A good deal of Pine's poetry and prose came out of that experience. He has been called "the poet of jazz," publishing thirteen collections of poetry, two novels, and a memoir. Alongside his literary work, he was a jazz promoter and a Jungian psychotherapist.

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One of the upshots of Paul's passion for jazz was his novel *The Tin Angel*, based on his years running the club. When he and Dan started looking for ideas toward an opera, they settled on the novel as their story and Paul got to work on the libretto. Dan: "*The Tin Angel Opera* captures and extends the elements that make the novel so powerful. In so doing, it marries the high drama of opera with the cutting-edge world of a Bowery jazz club, where a unique cast of characters plays out a dark story that becomes a call for redemption." Paul: "I felt that *The Tin Angel*...raised a timeless question: How do we, as individuals, and a species, make music out of love and loss, recognizing the light in the darkness that unites us?"

Those are the elements of the opera in a nutshell: people making their way through a dark and dangerous world, a gathering place of characters with their contrapuntal tragedies and dreams, all joined by music and the hope of redemption, a path toward the light.

The opera begins with a murder, and not the last one. The setting is the jazz club run by Pablo and Ponce called The Tin Angel, the club perennially on the brink. The first victim is Ponce, killed in a botched drug

deal when he was trying to get money to keep the club alive. This sets off a rich plot involving dealers, crooks, cops, and a Bahamian drug runner called Black Hattie. Dan calls it a "tragic comedy" that is also a murder mystery filled with characters, many of whom are capable of murder.

For Asia the opera is the culmination—to date—of a long, acclaimed, and steadily evolving output. The beautifully sung, acted, and designed June premiere, by Teatre Grattaciela at the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in New York's Bowery, did justice to a powerful and kaleidoscopic score, which in turn does justice to Pines's poetic libretto:

Notes that form when the room
Is still in the memory of the space itself
Something born from the smoke
Something still something clear
Something born in the night
that melts through these walls
to rise like prayer that fills the air
with the roar of butterfly wings

The premiere was anchored by tenor Spencer Hamlin as club owner Pablo, soprano Victoria McGrath as his lover Maria, and mezzo Chantelle Grant as gangster Black Hattie. The performances were received by full houses, standing ovations, and appreciative reviews.¹ As another critic noted, the musical atmosphere is counterpoint to the darkness of the story, in the tradition of American operas by Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber. As Dan notes, this is "not a jazz opera, but an opera about jazz." Still, whispers of jazz are there in the rhythm, the atmosphere, wisps of familiar tunes as in the beginning, with its recall of the old standard, "You Don't Know What Love Is" amidst unsettled harmonies.

In the story there are deaths, ghosts, laughs, old wounds reopening, a search not only for a killer but for meaning. The program book summarizes: "*The Tin Angel*—once a place of loss—becomes a space for rebirth. In a final act of defiant beauty, music rises again as jazz, memory, and love merge in one last improvisation."

Dan Asia is a seasoned master of the orchestra, and that carries over into this reduction of the forces of a full band into an 11-player ensemble. Really, this is not a loss: although a full orchestra is always welcome, the intimacy of the forces in the premiere suited the intimacy of the story and the intimate struggles of the characters. It also lucidly conveys the sumptuous harmonic rhetoric of the score. In presenting this tale of darkness and fragile hope, the poise and elegance of Asia's music evokes, throughout a story full of pain, the possibility of redemption. A