

SCOTT WHEELER  
**NAGA**

OPERA IN TWO ACTS

LIBRETTO BY  
CERISE LIM JACOBS

ANTHONY ROTH COSTANZO SANDRA PIQUES EDDY DAVID SALSBERY FRY  
STACEY TAPPAN MATTHEW WORTH

WHITE SNAKE PROJECTS ORCHESTRA & CHORUS

CAROLYN KUAN  
CONDUCTOR



NAGA  
Opera in Two Acts

*Music by*  
Scott Wheeler

*Creator and Librettist*  
Cerise Lim Jacobs

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

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Xiao Qing (Green Snake) A green grass snake who loved the White Snake in a prior life and is now her companion and servant	Anthony Roth Costanzo
Master/Abbot An ancient herbalist and apothecary, now at the end of his life, who has dedicated himself to curing the diseases of the body and soul	David Salsbery Fry
Madame White Snake A powerful snake spirit/demon	Stacey Tappan
Young Monk A devoted husband who is seeking the Way and has renounced his wife and family	Matthew Worth
Young Wife The young Monk's wife	Sandra Piques Eddy
Chorus (Nagas, Parents of drowned children, Celestial Voices) Children's Chorus (Spirits of drowned children)	
Children's Chorus soloist Voice knocking at Master's Door	Emily Kang Andy Papas

White Snake Projects Chorus  
Lidiya Yankovskaya, Associate Conductor and Chorus Master  
Boston Children's Chorus  
Michele Adams, Chorus Master  
White Snake Projects Orchestra  
Carolyn Kuan, conductor

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Director and Production Designer	Michael Counts
Dramaturg	Cori Ellison
Video and projection designer	S. Katy Tucker
Costume Designer	Zane Pihlstrom
Lighting Designer	Yi Zhao

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DISC 1 [55:14]

PRELUDE

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| 1. "I am the Sata-snake, long of years" (Chorus) | 9:24 |
| 2. "Apophis comes, Apophis comes . . ." (Chorus) | 3:46 |

ACT I

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| 3. "It is time, I must go now" (Young Monk)              | 5:55 |
| 4. "Twelve years, One red peony" (Young Wife)            | 3:00 |
| 5. Aria: "What moves these mortals?" (White Snake)       | 1:28 |
| 6. Aria: "Amitabha Buddha, Infinite Light" (White Snake) | 3:34 |
| 7. "I renounce all that I am" (White Snake)              | 3:45 |
| 8. "We have watched many humans come and go" (Xiao Qing) | 1:45 |
| 9. "We see clearly only after the fact" (Chorus)         | 6:38 |
| 10. "And the serpent said unto the woman" (Master)       | 2:35 |
| 11. Aria: "Ling long, ling long" (Young Wife & Children) | 3:06 |
| 12. Aria: "You hellish gods" (Young Wife)                | 1:42 |
| 13. "We see clearly only after the fact" (Chorus)        | 0:58 |

14. Aria: "What terrible famine wracks this land" (Young Monk)	2:10
15. "Xiao Qing, we must save him" (White Snake)	1:25
16. Aria: "O beauty beyond belief" (Young Monk)	4:03

## DISC 2 [TT: 35:00]

### ACT II

1. Aria: "A young wife sat at river's edge" (Young Monk)	3:37
2. Aria: "We've been here since we led him" (Xiao Qing) 2:11	
3. Aria: "How many winters have changed to spring?" (Xiao Qing)	3:28
4. "Is the fever potion ready?" (Master)	1:13
5. Aria: "Love seeketh not itself to please" (Master & Children's Chorus)	5:12
6. "Aaia, snake, snake" (Master)	4:45
7. "He has cast a spell on this cage" (Xiao Qing)	0:42
8. "What a beautiful snake" (Young Monk)	4:44
9. "Snake, he is not your Saviour" (Master)	1:51
10. "We spit upon you, O Apophis" (Chorus)	0:54
11. "Slice off my tongue" (White Snake)	1:52
12. "Magic whiteness, magic albino" (Chorus)	0:45
13. "My loving embrace" (White Snake, Monk, Master, Xiao Qing)	2:07
14. "Open the cage" (Master)	1:39

In Vienna in 1791, two months before his death, Mozart presented his last opera, *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*), radically different from his other mature operatic works in part because of its fairy tale story but also because of the solemnly religious (Masonic, not Christian) spirit of much of the music. Fairy tale opera has been a challenging genre for composers, with even some of the musically most successful examples, like Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* of 1893, more often presented for children than for adults. Scott Wheeler's *Naga*, working from a text that lies between fairy tale and mythology, stands much closer to Mozart's marvelous exemplar in its musical account of a restless man setting out on a spiritual quest in a world polarized between good and evil forces that are not easily distinguishable one from another. Set to a libretto by Singapore-born writer and impresario Cerise Lim Jacobs, the opera follows a Buddhist monk as he leaves his wife and sets off in search of spiritual enlightenment, under the tutelage of a stern Buddhist master and the surveillance of two fiercely passionate snakes, the "naga" of the title, designating Hindu and Buddhist serpentine deities.

*Naga* had its premiere in Boston in September 2016 at a festival of three operas with different composers, all with libretti by Jacobs, all on serpent subjects—*The Ouroboros Trilogy*. Wheeler's *Naga*, the first opera of the trilogy, stands easily on its own, and reflects chorally on the mythology of creation, intermingling Hindu-Buddhist and Judeo-Christian strands. "The prelude," according to Jacobs, "expresses some of the key roles the Snake has played in human civilization, history, myth, and psyche, feared and revered, loathed and sanctified." Wheeler opens the prelude "misterioso" with rain stick, cymbals, harp, and electric guitar; the English horn and the soprano saxophone, closely associated with the two principal snakes, enter with a quivering triplet figure, and they are joined lower down the staff by the alto saxophone and the bassoon. After some fifty bars, the chorus enters, singing "I am the Sata snake," for they are also naga, and the chorus returns throughout the opera, playing a very large role, with a presence similar to that of the choral forces in a Handel oratorio, while singing with the modernist rhythms of a Britten operatic chorus.

The prominence of the chorus is unusual here, but even more unusual is the very large role of the children's chorus, also sometimes singing as snake spirits: "I am the Sata snake, I am reborn." Around the hundredth bar, however, the vocal forces shift their spiritual emphasis to the language of Genesis: "In the beginning, God said. . . ." For the snakes of *Naga* recall the fateful snake in the Garden of Eden, coiled around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and *Naga* also belongs to a long tradition of reflections on Eden that have been recently explored in Stephen Greenblatt's study of *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (2017).<sup>1</sup> Greenblatt recovers an alternative counter-biblical tradition, proposing that "the serpent was a benefactor rather than a destroyer of the human race"—and this alternative view is very relevant to the opera *Naga*. At the biblical climax of the prelude Madame White Snake herself enters at the top of the staff to celebrate her own creation, singing over the children's chorus, accompanied by harp, "I am the Sata snake, I am reborn." She rises to high A-flat, high B-flat, high C, as if to affirm her place as the pinnacle of God's creation. The dominant key of the prelude is E-flat, Mozart's Masonic key for *The Magic Flute*.

While the Buddhist quest provides the spiritual structure of the opera (analogous to the mission of Prince Tamino in *The Magic Flute*), it is the two singing snakes who give the opera its remarkable mythological character. There is an important Chinese legend of the White Snake and the Green Snake, and Madame White Snake is depicted on the walls of the imperial Summer Palace in Beijing. That legend is freely adapted in the opera libretto, and while *The Magic Flute* begins with the slaying of a giant serpent, in *Naga* the two snakes drive the entire drama and dominate the top of the musical staff throughout the opera. Madame White Snake is cast as a high soprano, Stacey Tappan, singing with elaborate ornamentation at the very top of the soprano range, recalling Mozart's Queen of the Night, and, like that queen at her first appearance, of uncertain moral valence: Is she a force for good or for evil in the life of the Buddhist monk? The Green Snake, her servant and companion, is no less musically striking, cast androgynously as a countertenor, a man

singing in the female range, here Anthony Roth Costanzo, most recently celebrated for his performance at the Metropolitan Opera in 2019 in the eponymous pharaonic role of Philip Glass's *Akhnaten*. The hint of uncanniness in the countertenor timbre beautifully suggests a preternatural character, though it is important to note that these are very human snakes: In Chinese legend they easily transform themselves into humans, and in *Naga* there is a further religious dimension that suggests they have been, and may become, human in other lives and incarnations.

The first scene of the first act is set in a sort of Eden, with a man and a woman at the edge of the water. The alto sax sings in triplets, joined by the flute, above the accompaniment of the harp and vibraphone. The man is the Buddhist monk and the woman his wife, and he is about to abandon his happy marriage to set out on the dangerous road to spiritual enlightenment. The interweaving of the English horn and the soprano saxophone tells us that the snakes are watching, as baritone Matthew Worth and mezzo-soprano Sandra Piques Eddy launch themselves into a moving duet of human love and separation, in three-quarter time, the first signal in the opera of Wheeler's passionate romanticism. They sing delicately of "one red peony"—recalling the garden in which they first loved—while they hope to meet in another world, as the children's chorus joins them in cherishing the memory of red peonies.

Once the monk has departed, however, the stage belongs to the snakes. Madame White Snake unfurls a spectacular aria "What moves these mortals?" She tries to "imagine pain" in three-quarter time again (Wheeler is the master of the unusual waltz), with a small wind band of flute, oboe, and alto saxophone that follows her imaginings. The aria has a solemn central section, introduced by the soprano saxophone and the electric guitar, as the snake prayerfully invokes "Amithaba Buddha." In the fairy tale spirit of Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Mermaid" she imagines renouncing her aquatic incarnation to become human, and riotously scales the staff in a series of flashing staccato notes that take her all the way up to high C, time and again, the lyrics collapsing into an ecstatic ha ha ha ha, as her coloratura runs inevitably call to mind the brilliant display of Mozart's Queen of the Night.

Madame White Snake's hypnotic coloratura aria is followed by an achingly beautiful duet for the two snakes, taking up each other's musical phrases,

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve: The Story That Created Us* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), p. 75.

sometimes harmonizing, sometimes overlapping, majestically accompanied by the horns. The whole drama is driven by the fact that the White Snake is desperately in love with the monk, while the Green Snake is protectively in love with the White Snake and therefore suffering both jealousy and sympathy while witnessing her passion. Given the religious content and fairy tale legendry of the libretto, it is striking that Wheeler's *Naga* is neither ritually minimalist in its musical composition, nor carefully neo-classical, but a work of full-blooded passion, longing, and jealousy, gorgeously composed in the spirit of late Romantic opera. Mozart is clearly an important model for the fairy tale composition, but Wheeler, who was a student of Virgil Thomson, reflects some of the musical values of mid-twentieth-century composers like Barber, Britten, and Bernstein. Wheeler has composed three other operas, including an opera based on Henry Adams's novel *Democracy*, performed at the Washington National Opera in 2005, but he is also known for his character-painting piano portraits and his expressive song writing. In *Naga* Wheeler brings the characters vividly to life, both the humans and snakes, each role musically distinctive.

Costanzo as the Green Snake has his most beautiful aria in the second act, singing with particular intensity while jealously gazing at the beloved White Snake: "Watching her mistress watch the monk." At this point the Green Snake offers a countertenor aria from the heart, "Winter has now changed to spring/ How much longer can I wait for you?"—the line accompanied by leaping figures in the flute and harp. The meaning, the syllabification, the tessitura, the aching spirit of longing all recall the most romantic moment in mid-century American opera: "Must the winter come so soon?," the aria for mezzo-soprano in Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* in 1958, for the young woman in love with the wrong man. Here, however, the hopeless consuming passion belongs to a Chinese snake, voiced by a bewitching countertenor.

The use of the saxophone in the opera is very striking, adding an element of American blues to the emotional resonance of late Romantic opera, while the harp is used to great effect to underline the magical fairy tale aspects of the piece. Most notable, however, is the richness of the percussion that Wheeler employs. In

addition to timpani, vibraphone, and glockenspiel (so important for *The Magic Flute*), Wheeler employs snare drum, tambourine, slapstick, rain stick, wood blocks, temple blocks, finger cymbals, suspended cymbals, log drums, anvil, maracas, tomtom, and tam-tam. While the tam-tam—sometimes called the Chinese gong—has long been associated with Eastern inflections, the unusual elements of percussion here create not so much an atmosphere of orientalism or even exoticism, so much as a sense of the supernatural that fits very well with the mythological and fairy tale elements of the drama. One thinks of the way that Britten used the Balinese gamelan not just for the *Prince of the Pagodas* ballet (originally conceived under the title *The Green Serpent*), but also to suggest the mysterious forces in play in *Death in Venice*. Britten comes to mind again, not just for the complexity of the choral writing, as in *Peter Grimes*, but also for the spiritual dimensions of such questing works as *Curlew River*, designed for church performance. One of the striking features of *Naga* is the way that its operatic character is inflected by some of the religious and choral aspects of oratorio—including a powerful otherworldly dimension in the orchestration and in the unusual vocal characterization of the two snakes as high soprano and countertenor.

The four characters of the monk, his wife, the White Snake, and the Green Snake, give the opera its romantic power, its tragic intensity of separation, of unreciprocated longing, of jealous suffering—but standing outside and above the musical exchange of their passions is the figure of the Buddhist Master. He is a mentor to the younger monk, but also the declared enemy of all snakes, indeed a killer of snakes, for he practices a form of traditional medicine that makes use of the snake's magical healing properties. Righteous and compassionate, immune to the longings of the other characters, he sings in solemn voice—here performed by resonant basso David Salsbery Fry—as the counterpart of Mozart's Sarastro, the high priest of the Masonic temple, and often in the musical company of the children's chorus. "O Guan Yin," sings the Master in his moving aria of prayer in the second act, invoking the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, accompanied by harp and glockenspiel. The flute, the oboe, and the horns join to support him, to convey his own compassion, as he sings of human suffering.

Wheeler builds to thrilling ensemble finales in both acts, masterpieces of operatic composition. The first act concludes with Madame White Snake fighting against demons to protect the unconscious monk and leaving drops of her snake blood on the snow. He awakens into an A major aria in three-quarter time, expressing his perverse aestheticism—"Beauty beyond belief"—as the drops of blood remind him of red peonies. Both snakes and also the children's chorus join him in a finale of expansive melody, arching phrases of longing, that might make you think of Leonard Bernstein or Stephen Sondheim. For in *Naga* Wheeler's fundamentally operatic score also engages the melodic beauty of musical theater. The second act finale also mediates between these musical worlds, richly combining melody and drama, beginning with the beautiful quartet, "My loving embrace," for the Master, the Monk, and the two snakes. Madame White Snake dominates the top of the treble staff, while her enemy, the Master, presides over the bottom of the bass. He has caged her, and seizes a knife to sacrifice her, as the chorus, including the children, turn furious, and sing "Hack her, chop her, hack her, chop her," almost in the mob spirit of a Passion play. Returning to the Masonic key of E-flat, the quartet evokes "magic whiteness," as the Master prepares to wield his knife, until, at the last moment, the monk intervenes to obstruct the sacrifice and save the snake who loves him. "You and I shall meet again," sings Madame White Snake to her savior, as she exits on a high C, diva that she is, and the curtain falls.

Music history gives us very little guidance for imagining the song of a snake. There is an early modern wind instrument called the Serpent, with a sinuously curved shape, and a very low range on the bass clef, comparable in range to the contrabassoon (which is also somewhat snakelike in its coiled formation). When Haydn described the Creation in his oratorio of the 1790s he signaled the advent of snakes—"creeps with sinuous trace the worm"—by having the basso Archangel Raphael reach down to the very bottom of his range. There are not a lot of singing snakes in the nineteenth century, but Wagner's Fafner—a "Wurm" rather than a conventional dragon—was also voiced by a deep basso and accompanied with the darkest orchestral colorings. Mendelssohn, in his *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, offered a soprano aria to ward away "ye spotted snakes" and protect the sleep of the

fairy queen. In the 1941 Preston Sturges film *The Lady Eve*, Henry Fonda plays an endearingly eccentric herpetologist (opposite the seductive Eve of Barbara Stanwyck), and the film credits show an animated top-hatted snake, winding itself around the screen to movie music somewhat suggestive of snake charming. In 1967 Walt Disney presented a singing animated snake in *The Jungle Book*: Kaa's song "Trust in Me," rising stepwise up and down the scale, to hypnotic effect and with malicious purpose.

In *Naga*, with its beautiful, disturbing, passionate pair of snakes, playing morally ambivalent roles, vocalized with the otherworldly timbres of a high coloratura soprano and a plaintive countertenor, Wheeler stakes out new operatic terrain, while also returning to the domain of fairy tale and legendry in opera and the precedent of Mozart's *Magic Flute*. *Naga* richly suggests some of the ways in which contemporary opera might engage not just with the intensity of human emotions but also with the complex relation between human beings and the natural world.

—Larry Wolff

Larry Wolff is Silver Professor of History at New York University, Executive Director of the NYU Remarque Institute, and Co-Director of NYU Florence. He is the author of *The Singing Turk: Ottoman Power and European Emotions on the Operatic Stage from the Siege of Vienna to the Age of Napoleon*, and he writes frequently about opera.

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**Scott Wheeler** has written four full-length operas, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, Washington National Opera, the Guggenheim Foundation, and White Snake Projects. Smaller operatic works have been commissioned by Boston Opera Collaborative, the Institute for Dramatic Voices, and Sequitur. Wheeler's music has been performed by violinist Gil Shaham, conductor Kent Nagano, and singers Renee Fleming, Anthony Roth Costanzo, and Susanna Phillips. Recordings of his music are available on Naxos, Bridge, and BMOP Sound. He received the Stoeger Award from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center for distinguished contribution to chamber music and the Composer of the Year Award from the Classical Recording Foundation for his Naxos song CD, *Wasting the Night*.

Wheeler has appeared as a conductor in New York, Berlin, Boston, and on several recordings, often with the Boston-based ensemble Dinosaur Annex, which he co-founded and directed for many years. He has also conducted many productions of opera and musical theater works and has appeared as a pianist in a wide repertoire of classical, jazz, and cabaret.

Scott Wheeler was born in 1952 in Washington, DC. He grew up in various cities in the American Midwest and east, then studied at Amherst College, New England Conservatory, and Brandeis. His principal teachers were Lewis Spratlan, Arthur Berger, and Virgil Thomson, along with studies at Dartington with Peter Maxwell Davies and at Tanglewood with Olivier Messiaen. He is Senior Distinguished Artist in Residence at Emerson College in Boston, where he teaches musical theater and songwriting. [scottwheeler.org](http://scottwheeler.org)

Creator and librettist **Cerise Lim Jacobs** creates new American opera from her past in multicultural Singapore and her sojourns around the world. Her original libretti are inspired by the myths that live in our imaginations and the excitement of current events and people she encounters. Her work includes *Ouroboros Trilogy*, comprising *Naga* (by Scott Wheeler), *Gilgamesh* (by Paola Prestini), and the 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Madame White Snake* (by Zhou Long). Ms. Jacobs's other operas include *REV. 23* with Julian Wachner (2017), which received its New York City premiere in 2020; *PermaDeath, A Video Game Opera*, the first in the world using real-time facial motion capture, with Dan Visconti (2018); and *I Am A Dreamer Who No Longer Dreams* (2019) and *Alice in the Pandemic* (2020), both with Jorge Sosa. The latter has been acquired by the Library of Congress for its Performing Arts COVID-19 Response Collection as an example of "artistic excellence."

Ms. Jacobs was born in colonial Singapore under British rule into a traditional Chinese family. She grew up absorbing the disparate influences of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Western cultures, and the world religions of Christianity (indeed, she was educated by American Methodist missionaries), Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Her sojourns took her from Melbourne to Oxford, Michigan, Vancouver, and Pittsburgh, until she finally settled in Boston, Massachusetts. She

graduated from the University of Pittsburgh and from Harvard Law School, spent twenty years practicing law, and is now president of the Charles and Cerise Jacobs Charitable Foundation. She is a founder of White Snake Projects, (formerly, the Friends of Madame White Snake). Ms. Jacobs was named a 2017 Mover & Shaper by *Musical America*, and one of Boston's 100 Most Influential People of Color in 2018.

[www.whitesnakeprojects.org](http://www.whitesnakeprojects.org)

Recognized as a conductor of extraordinary versatility, **Carolyn Kuan** has enjoyed successful associations with top-tier orchestras, opera companies, ballet companies, and festivals worldwide. Her commitment to contemporary music has defined her approach to programming and established her as an international resource for new music and world premieres. Appointed Music Director of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in 2011, she signed a six-year contract extending their creative collaboration through May 2022. Highlights of recent seasons include appearances with the Baltimore Symphony, Singapore Symphony, Santa Barbara Symphony, and Portland Opera, conducting a production of Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. She led the premiere of Iain Bell and Mark Campbell's *Stonewall* with New York City Opera in June 2019. She conducted the premiere of Philip Glass's opera *The Trial* with the Opera Theatre of St. Louis and has conducted the Santa Fe Opera in Huang Ruo's *Dr. Sun Yat-sen*. <http://carolynkuan.com>

GRAMMY®-nominated countertenor **Anthony Roth Costanzo** began performing professionally at the age of eleven and has since appeared in opera, concert, recital, film, and on Broadway. Costanzo has appeared with many of the world's leading opera houses, including the Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Francisco Opera, English National Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Los Angeles Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Glyndebourne Opera Festival, Dallas Opera, and Teatro Real Madrid. In concert he has sung with the New York Philharmonic, Berlin Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, London Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, and National Symphony Orchestra, among others. He has performed at a wide variety of venues including Carnegie Hall, Versailles, the Kennedy Center, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Sawdust,

Joe's Pub, the Guggenheim, the Park Avenue Armory, and Madison Square Garden. Costanzo has begun working as a producer and curator in addition to being a performer, creating projects for the New York Philharmonic, National Sawdust, Opera Philadelphia, the Philharmonia Baroque, Princeton University, WQXR, the State Theater in Salzburg, Master Voices, and Kabuki-Za Tokyo. Costanzo graduated from Princeton University and received his master's from Manhattan School of Music.

<https://anthonyrothcostanzo.com>

Mezzo-soprano **Sandra Piques Eddy**, a celebrated Carmen, performed the role with various companies, including Portland Opera, Michigan Opera Theater, Chicago Opera Theater, Austin Opera, Opera Colorado, Opera North (UK) tour, and twice with Maestro Seiji Ozawa touring Japan. Career highlights include Isabella in *L'Italiana in Algeri* with Vancouver Opera, Arizona Opera, Austin Opera, and Atlanta Opera; Rosina in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* with Nashville Opera, Vancouver Opera, Austin Opera, and a tour with New Zealand Opera; Dorabella in *Così fan tutte* with Boston Lyric Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, and New York City Opera; Poppea in *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* at Opera North (UK); and Orfeo in *Orfeo ed Euridice* with Portland Opera. With more than a hundred performances at the Metropolitan Opera, Ms. Eddy's roles include Fiona in Nico Muhly's *Two Boys*, Cherubino in *Le nozze di Figaro*, La Badessa in *Suor Angelica*, Mercedes in *Carmen*, Lola in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and Zulma in *L'Italiana in Algeri*, among others.

<https://www.sandrapiqueseddy.com>

A tireless advocate for new music and composer-performer collaboration, bass **David Salsbery Fry** has premiered works by Robert Aldridge, Shawn Brogan Allison, Lembit Beecher, Frank Corcoran, Chaya Czernowin, John David Earnest, Ruby Fulton, Juliana Hall, Jenny Olivia Johnson, Louis Karchin, Lowell Liebermann, Adam Maor, Eric Nathan, Osnat Netzer, Steve Potter, Arnold Rosner, Joseph Summer, Kristian Twombly, and Nicholas Vines. He has also collaborated with Justine F. Chen, James Granville Eakin III, Oliver Knussen, Ari Benjamin Meyers, Nico Muhly, John Musto, Judith Shatin, and Charles Wuorinen. Before creating the roles of Abbot and Master Chen in *Naga*, he worked with Scott Wheeler on his opera *The Sorrows*

*of Frederick*. Mr. Fry is the grand-prize winner of the 9th Bidu Sayão International Vocal Competition. He is also a proud member of the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA). [davidalsberyfry.com](http://davidalsberyfry.com)

Soprano **Stacey Tappan** is highly sought after as a performer of modern works. Her professional debut in 2000 was in the role of Beth in the mainstage premiere of Mark Adamo's *Little Women* with Houston Grand Opera, also broadcast on PBS, and released on CD by Ondine and on DVD by Naxos. One of Ms. Tappan's signature roles is Stella in André Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which she has performed with Los Angeles Opera (opposite Renée Fleming), Opera San Jose, and Hawaii Opera Theatre. In close collaboration with composer Ricky Ian Gordon, Tappan created the stage work *Once I Was*, a monodrama built from twenty-two of Gordon's songs, which she subsequently recorded for Blue Griffin Records. She played Dawn in Nico Muhly's *Marnie* at the Metropolitan Opera, and she has sung fourteen productions with Los Angeles Opera, where she was Florestine on the multiple GRAMMY®-award-winning recording of John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles*. She has performed Woglinde and the Woodbird in *Ring* cycles with Lyric Opera of Chicago, LA Opera, and San Francisco Opera. <http://staceytappan.com>

**Matthew Worth** is a Professor of Voice at San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Performing highlights from recent seasons include the title role in the world premiere of David T. Little's *JFK* with Fort Worth Opera, the title role in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* with Boston Lyric Opera, the Narrator in the world premiere and recording of Richard Danielpour's *The Passion of Yeshua*, the world premiere of Kevin Puts's *The Manchurian Candidate* with Minnesota Opera, and Jake Heggie's *Moby Dick* at Washington National Opera. He has performed principal roles at Santa Fe Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Opéra de Montréal, Tanglewood Festival, Cincinnati Opera, and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, under conductors James Levine, Lorin Maazel, and Sir Andrew Davis. Mr. Worth holds degrees from the University of Richmond, Manhattan School of Music and The Juilliard School.

<https://www.matthewworthbaritone.com>



Russian-American conductor **Lidiya Yankovskaya** is a fiercely committed advocate for Russian masterpieces, operatic rarities, and contemporary works on the leading edge of classical music. She has conducted more than forty world premieres, including sixteen operas, and her strength as an innovative and multi-faceted collaborator has brought together the worlds of puppetry, robotics, circus arts, symphonic repertoire, and opera onstage. Ms. Yankovskaya has shared her vision for the industry as a featured speaker at the League of American Orchestras and Opera America conferences and as U.S. Representative to the World Opera Forum in Madrid. She has served as Music Director of Chicago Opera Theater since 2017.

<https://lidiyayankovskaya.com>

**Michele Adams** served for ten seasons as Director of Choirs for the award-winning Boston Children's Chorus, where she conducted choirs of all levels, managed the innovative education program, and administered artistic programming. Ms. Adams is currently the Executive Director of the Performing Arts Center of Metrowest in Massachusetts. She is an active guest conductor, educator, and adjudicator. Ms. Adams completed a Master of Music in Choral Conducting at Florida State University and earned a Bachelor of Music in Music Education from The University of South Carolina.

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## SYNOPSIS

### Prelude

*Naga* is the story of a young Monk who renounces everything, like Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, to find nirvana. The Prelude is in the form of a ritual, featuring the Chorus as both Nagas (snakes) and the parents of drowned children, who are sung by the Children's Chorus. Madame White Snake, Xiao Qing, and the Master take part in this ritual, whose text draws from the book of Genesis, the poetry of William Blake, and modern astronomy. The Prelude explores some of the key roles the Snake has played in human civilization, history, myth, and psyche—feared and revered, loathed and sanctified, a thing reviled and a thing of beauty, all coexisting in one image. The White Snake is part of this dialectic. She is the more powerful for her whiteness, another symbol of contrary elements—light, death, purity, healing, nihilism.

### ACT I

In the Peony Garden, the Young Monk says goodbye to his wife. This departure and his quest for nirvana were foretold from his birth. Madame White Snake and the Green Snake Xiao Qing observe; the couple's grief moves the White Snake, who realizes that despite her immortality, she has never experienced such emotion. She renounces her immortal powers in order to follow the monk, ignoring the warnings of Xiao Qing.

The Monk sets out on his journey, hearing Celestial Voices singing the Song of Renunciation. He encounters the demon, Mara, who tempts him three times (as he did Buddha.) The Monk resists the first two onslaughts, but in the third temptation, he sees his wife dying after the birth of his child. In this vision, the Young Wife sings a lullaby to her child. The Monk starts to turn back, but is stopped by the White Snake, who steals the baby and gives it to Xiao Qing. The Wife curses the gods and dies. The Monk continues through a snowstorm in which he is attacked by demon rats. The White Snake attacks the demons, saving the Monk. Having renounced her immortal invulnerability, the White Snake is wounded in the attack of the rats. As her blood streams through the snow, Xiao Qing rushes to her aid. The Monk sees the White Snake's blood on the snow and imagines that these red drops are peonies. Tormented by guilt from the vision of his wife's death, the Monk follows the trail of "red peonies" to continue his journey. The White Snake sings of her love for the Monk, while Xiao Qing sings of love for the White Snake. Children strew red peonies in the snow.

### ACT II

The Monk is now in the apothecary shop of the Master, a renowned healer. Led there by the White Snake, the Monk works as an apprentice in the healing arts. He sings to himself the ballad of a young wife and the loss of her child. Xiao Qing observes, and sings an aria describing how when he was a man the White Snake scorned his love. He died and transformed into a snake in order to follow her; he continues to wait for the White Snake, who loves the Monk.

The Master, alone in his apothecary, prays to Guan Yin for a way to fulfill his spiritual healing mission, incomplete after a thousand years. Suddenly he discovers the White Snake hiding in the shop. He captures her and recognizes her magic—she is the answer to his prayers for the salvation of the world. Anyone who eats of her will be cured of all ills. The Monk returns to find the captured snake, who begs to be freed and convinces the Monk that they are kindred spirits.

The Chorus and Children's chorus unite in denunciation of the White Snake, who offers power to the Monk through her loving embrace. The Master orders the Monk to hold the White Snake so he can sacrifice her. In the ensuing struggle, the Monk stabs his Master and releases the snake. Xiao Qing drags the White Snake to safety as she vows to meet the Monk again. The Monk begs forgiveness of the Master he has killed.

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## DISC 1

[Track 1]

### Prelude

#### Chorus [*from Genesis*]

In the beginning  
God said,

#### Xiao Qing

"Let the earth bring forth the living creatures after his kind, cattle, and the creeping thing, and beasts of the earth after his kind."

#### Master

And God saw everything that he had made,  
and, behold, it was good.

#### Solo Girl

Where are you now almighty Jehovah?  
Cursed to fade away?

#### Children's Chorus [*Introduction to Blake's "Songs of Experience"*]

"Hear the voice of the Bard!  
Who Present, Past, & Future sees;  
Whose ears have heard  
The Holy Word  
That walk'd among the ancient trees"

#### Chorus

In the beginning,  
Vasuki, the Great Serpent,  
was bound to Mount Mandara  
And used by gods and demons  
As a churning rope in the Ocean of Milk  
To make the Nectar of Immortality

#### Xiao Qing

Lord Krishna pays him homage, proclaiming

#### White Snake

"Of weapons I am the thunderbolt . . .  
of serpents I am Vasuki"

#### Solo Girl

Where are you now triumphant Krishna?  
Cursed to fade away?

#### Children's Chorus [*Introduction to Blake's "Songs of Experience"*]

"Calling the lapsed Soul,  
And weeping in the evening dew;  
That might control  
The starry pole,  
And fallen, fallen light renew!"

#### Chorus

In the beginning,  
Nuwa made man and woman from yellow clay.

#### White Snake

I am the Sata-snake  
I am reborn

#### White Snake

I am the Sata-snake  
I am reborn

She dipped a rope into mud and swung it around  
Drops of mud became the people

**Master**

And it was so

*Children's Chorus jumps rope as each child springs to life.*

**Solo Girl**

Where are you now holy Nuwa?  
Cursed to fade away?

**Children's Chorus** [Introduction to Blake's "Songs of Experience"]

"O Earth, O Earth, return!  
Arise from out the dewy grass;  
Night is worn,  
And the morn  
Rises from the slumberous mass."

**Children's Chorus**

O where are you gods  
Have you faded away?

**Children's Chorus**

You have faded away, O gods  
You have forsaken us  
And abandoned us

*Asteroid Apophis 99942 shoots towards the Earth with its tail of light. Its gravitational pull raises the waters.*

[Track 2]

**Chorus**

Apophis comes, Apophis comes . . .  
Asteroid Apophis 99942 comes . .

**White Snake**

I am the Sata-snake  
I am reborn

**White Snake**

I am the Sata-snake  
I am reborn

**White Snake**

I am the Sata-snake  
I am reborn

**Chorus**

Apophis opened the heavens  
A great flood arose

**Children's Chorus**

We are dying drowning dying drowning

**Chorus**

Dying drowning, dying drowning

**Children's Chorus**

Nuwa, Noah, Nuwa, Noah,  
save us, save us

*Image of huge snake (the Egyptian god Apophis) swallowing the sun as the water rises. The Abbot figure/Master cuts open the snake's belly and the sun emerges. The water recedes, but it is too late for the Children. The Master chops off the snake's head. He holds up the head of Medusa with eyes of stone, blood dripping from her neck.*

**Master**

Apophis, fiend of chaos and darkness  
Your head is crushed, O Groundling!  
Your eyes are stone,  
No more to turn my blood to stone, O Snake

**Chorus**

We spit upon you, O Apophis  
We defile you with our left foot  
We smite you, we fetter you, we stab you  
We put fire upon you  
For your great sin for which there is no atonement  
Drowning our children  
There is no atonement

**Children's Chorus**

Save us, save us

*The Chorus spit upon the headless body of Apophis (the White Snake), they defile Apophis with their left foot, they smite Apophis with a lance, they fetter Apophis, they stab Apophis with a knife and they put fire upon Apophis.*

**Children's Chorus** (*joining the attack on Apophis*)

Your head is cut off  
Your blood stains the earth, O Snake  
Your white flesh  
Your magic flesh  
Powerful medicine, O Snake

**Solo Girl and Children's Chorus**

But we are drowned by you, O snake  
No medicine can save us now

**Chorus** [*from Psalm 104*]

Bless the LORD, O my soul. . . thou art clothed with honor and majesty. . .  
Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters:  
Who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind . . .  
Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed forever.

**Children's Chorus**

The torrents rain upon us and we have no shelter

**Chorus**

Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment:  
The waters stood above the mountains.  
At thy rebuke they fled;  
At the voice of thy thunder they hasted away.

**Children's Chorus**

We are helpless in the rushing floodwaters

They go up by the mountains;  
They go down by the valleys  
Unto the place which thou hast founded for them.

**Master**

Thou hast set a bound that they may not pass over;  
That they turn not again to cover the earth.

**White Snake**

I am the Sata-snake  
I am reborn

**ACT I**

[Track 3]

**Scene 1: In the Peony Garden**

*The White Snake and Xiao Qing lie in the sun at the edge of the lake in the peony garden. A young man dressed in monk's robes enters. He is accompanied by a young woman. They walk to the water's edge. The Monk kneels down and cups the water in his hands. He brings it to the woman's lips. She sips the water and sighs. He bends down again and cups more water. He takes a deep drink.*

**Monk**

It is time, I must go now  
Our goodbyes have been said many times  
I have no more words

**Wife**

We said our goodbyes the day we met  
Our twelve years together stolen from the Way  
Yet there will never be enough goodbyes  
There will never be enough words

**Monk**

This parting was foretold when I was born  
Son of the White Elephant  
Who came to my mother in the night  
My divine father foretelling my destiny  
As a seeker of salvation

I renounce my life to find life  
 To break samsara  
 That pitiless cycle of life, death and rebirth  
 Meeting you was my blessing  
 Loving you, my sin  
 Forgive me, my wife  
 For my sin of loving you  
 Forgive me my wife  
 For my sin of leaving you  
 I must continue my journey  
 The robe you sewed my only dress  
 The bowl you made my only possession

# **Wife**

Do you remember when we first met  
 In this garden of red peonies?  
 I bent to pick up a fallen bloom  
 Then turned and gave it to you  
 Your eyes held mine, and I knew  
 That our meeting was meant to be  
 You touched my face with your gentle hands  
 They told me you could not stay  
 Your hands were seized by a jealous god  
 Who had touched your soul at birth  
 No one can withstand that mighty touch  
 Nor turn from his allotted path  
 I do not ask for you to stay  
 I do not ask for what you cannot give  
 For the bargain I made with fate  
 Was to take you as my lover—yes  
 To *choose* you as my lover—yes  
 Knowing you could not stay

# **Monk**

Yes, my beloved, I remember  
 I remember this garden  
 I remember

# **Monk**

I said I cannot stay  
 I cannot stay to love you  
 To love you, love you, love you

Fate has decreed I cannot stay  
 Yet stay I did  
 With you, my lover

[Track 4]

**Wife** (*banding the red peony with a yellow center to her husband*)

Twelve years  
 One red peony  
 Spring flower  
 One red peony  
 First bloom  
 One red peony

You will never see summer  
 Dear red peony

Red petals, holding my heart  
 O golden heart

Alone you die

# **Monk**

Dear red peony

My golden heart

No you will not die  
 As long as I love you . . .  
 I love you so

Wife	Monk	Children's Chorus
You could never love me so	I love you so	
You are bound to something else	I am bound to you forever	
That love endures for eternity	My love endures for eternity	You cannot follow, follow, follow
It is your immortality	At the end of our years on this earth	You cannot follow where he will go
		Follow, follow

But this I promise you	I promise you this	Red petals Red blood
We shall meet in another world	We shall meet in another world	Red peonies
In another time and another place	In another time and another place	Red peonies, blood peonies
I shall stroke your dear sweet face	I shall stroke your dear sweet face	Follow, follow
		. . . follow . . . follow . . . do not follow . . .

[Track 5]

### **White Snake**

What moves these mortals?  
What makes them feel  
So intensely?

Imagine pain etching my brow  
Grief sculpting my mouth  
Tears filling my eyes  
Running rivers down my cheeks

Feel spasms knotting my belly  
Sorrow knifing my chest  
Regret trembling my hands  
Spinning circles around his bowl

Imagine pain  
Imagine tears filling my eyes

[Track 6]

Amitabha Buddha, Infinite Light  
I call on you to save my soul  
From this eternal sentence

As the vengeful powerful snake  
Reflecting the bloody warrior I was in life  
Sustained only by lust for power  
I am weary now  
I am overwhelmed by this savage hunger  
I beg you Amitabha Buddha  
Have mercy on my soul  
Reincarnated as a snake so I never can weep  
I atone for the coldness in my heart  
Cursed with immortality  
So I can meditate on my cruelty forever  
I pray you Amitabha Buddha  
Let my tears fall softly  
My eyes fade gently  
My ears harken dimly  
My hands despair bitterly  
My feet drag painfully  
Let my heart crack thunderously  
As my tears fall now  
Softly softly  
Now

[Track 7]

I renounce all that I am  
To experience such a moment  
For once in my long life,  
I long to really live  
My heart wrenched from its complacent bed  
Crashing on the stony earth

**Xiao Qing**

My lady, this is foolishness  
 This is madness  
 Beware what you wish for

I renounced all that I was  
 To be with you  
 I renounced my manhood  
 To follow you

I am not man, not woman, not snake  
 I am all man and woman and snake  
 A new immortal created for you

*The Monk loosens his embrace, cups his wife's face in his hands. His hands drop to his side. He sends his wife away and watches her leave then turns resolutely away and sets off.*

**White Snake**

We must follow him  
 He will teach us

**Xiao Qing**

We cannot cross into the earthly realm  
 Without the gods' permission

**White Snake**

A new quest awaits us, Xiao Qing  
 A new quest  
 We shall learn the secret of being human  
 A secret jealously guarded by the gods  
 Who made mortals in their image  
 But oh so much more beautiful  
 Because they live and then they die

**White Snake**

I renounce all that I am  
 To experience such a moment  
 For once in my long life, I long  
 to really live

[Track 8]

**Xiao Qing**

We have watched many humans come and go  
 They are weak, they are puny  
 They cry when they find this thing called love  
 They cry when they lose this thing called love  
 They live like there is no tomorrow  
 Yet worry and worry about tomorrow  
 Damn their mortality

*The White Snake looks sadly at Xiao Qing, then turns to follow the Monk. Xiao Qing follows her.*

**Scene 2: Time Passing**

[Track 9]

*The Monk walks clockwise in a circle depicting the passage of time. The two snakes follow him. Voices are heard singing the Song of Renunciation.*

**Celestial voices**

We see clearly only after the fact  
 We love dearly only after the loss  
 The wind blows dust in our eyes  
 We are blinded as tears hide the truth  
 When we cease yearning the wind will be at our backs  
 The dust dispels and we are emptied

**Chorus**

Mara comes, Mara comes

**Children's Chorus**

Mara comes, Mara comes

*The Monk shakes with fright as he sees Mara the demon who tempted Buddha three times.*

**Chorus**

Mara opens his gaping mouth

He bares his bloodstained fangs

His hideous maw looms over us  
His saliva drowns us

We are dying, drowning, dying, drowning

### **Chorus**

Dying drowning, dying drowning

Save us, save us

*Naga, the multi-headed serpent, champion of Buddha, rears over the monk protectively as the Mara's maw approaches the Monk.*

### **Chorus**

Naga, protector Buddha  
Unsheath your sword

### **Monk**

Begone Mara, O evil one  
I do not fear you

*The Monk continues walking clockwise.*

### **Celestial voices**

We see clearly only after the fact  
We love dearly only after the loss  
The wind blows dust in our eyes

### **Chorus**

Mara comes, Mara comes

### **Children's Chorus**

Mara comes, Mara comes

*The Monk trembles with desire as he sees Mara's three beautiful daughters.*

### **Chorus**

Mara sends his daughters  
Fair of face but foul of heart

### **Children's Chorus**

They stroke his body  
They arouse his lust

He is dying, drowning, dying, drowning

### **Chorus**

Dying, drowning, dying, drowning

*The Naga raises its hood again.*

### **Chorus**

Naga, protector Buddha  
Ready your sword

### **Monk**

Begone, O beautiful ones  
I will not have you

*The Monk continues walking clockwise.*

### **Celestial voices**

We see clearly only after the fact  
We love dearly only after the loss  
The dust dispels and we are emptied

*The Monk stops suddenly confronted by a vision of home.*

### **Monk**

I see my wife  
I did not know . . . she has a child

### **Chorus**

Naga, protector Buddha  
Your sword shatters!

*The Monk sees his wife in a pool of blood, red peonies scattered around her. She is cradling a baby wrapped in white silk. He falls to his knees, arms raised in supplication. A shadow passes between him and his vision of his wife.*



[Track 10]

**Master** [*from Genesis*]

And the serpent said unto the woman,

**White Snake**

“Hath God said,

Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof,

then your eyes shall be opened,

and ye shall be as gods,

knowing good and evil.”

**Xiao Qing**

So the woman ate of the fruit of good and evil.

**Master** [*from Genesis*]

And the LORD God said unto the woman,

**Solo Girl and Children’s Chorus**

“What is this thou hast done?”

**Xiao Qing**

And the woman said,

**Wife**

“The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.”

**Master** (*to the White Snake*)

And the LORD God said unto the serpent,

**Children’s Chorus**

“Because thou hast done this,  
thou art cursed above all cattle,  
and above every beast of the field;  
upon thy belly shalt thou go,  
and dust shalt thou eat  
all the days of thy life:”

**Master**

And it was so

**Xiao Qing**

Unto the woman he said,

**Solo Girl and Children’s Chorus** (*to the Wife*)

“I will greatly multiply thy sorrow

and thy conception;

in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.”

*The White Snake approaches the Wife. She holds out a golden anklet. It rings and chimes. The Wife takes it. She puts it around her baby’s ankle. She is surrounded by the Children who hold red peonies.*

[Track 11]

**Wife** (*accompanied by Children’s Chorus*)

Ling long, ling long, ding a ling long

A little golden bell rings ding a ling long

Nodding to the golden cat

Waving at the long life bat

Ling long, ling long, ding a ling long

Ling long, ling long, ding a ling long

I feel your legs kicking hard and strong

Once I’m holding you when you are born

Your mother will tenderly put your anklet on

Ling long, ling long, ding a ling long

Ling long, ling long, ding a ling long

Your mother’s baby girl sings all night long

As long as you wear this magic singing bell

Your mother will always find you wherever you dwell

Ling long, ling long, ding a . . .

*She stops, she appears to be listening.*

**Monk**

Spring flower

**Monk**

First bloom

**Monk**

You will never see summer

**Monk**

Red petals

**Monk**

Red petals

**Monk**

My golden heart

**Monk**

I must turn back

*He struggles around and walks in an anti-clockwise direction.*

**White Snake**

You cannot go back to her

I will not let you turn back

You have to complete the circle

Xiao Qing, take the baby

*The Wife tries to hold on to her baby; Xiao Qing manages to wrest the baby from her. In the struggle, the anklet falls off and the Wife is left holding it in her hands.*

**Wife** (*A child hands her a red peony*)

One red peony

**Wife**

One red peony

**Wife**

Dear red peony

**Wife**

Holding my heart

**Wife**

Too soon you fall

**Wife**

I die alone

[Track 12]

**Wife** (*raising herself from her bloodsoaked bed with her last ounce of strength*)

You hellish gods

Rapacious, greedy gods

Your jealousy knows no end

I kept my bargain

I let the man I love go

But that sacrifice was not enough

You would take my child too

I curse you O gods

I curse you to fade away

To live eternally

As shadows, a mockery of yourselves

Worshipped only by the superstitious

Feared only by the ignorant

Revered by no one

Until you are finally forgotten

*She collapses.*

**White Snake** (*spoken*)

The anklet, Xiao Qing

Take the anklet

*Xiao Qing turns around and snatches the anklet from the Wife.*

**Monk**

Am I mad?

Do I hear the voice of the gods?

*Xiao Qing seizes the child. The Wife screams in agony. Xiao Qing begins to walk with the baby in a clockwise direction. The Monk cannot take his eyes off his child. He reverses his direction and follows Xiao Qing. He continues walking clockwise and away from his wife.*

[Track 13]

**Celestial voices**

We see clearly only after the fact  
We love dearly only after the loss  
The wind blows dust in our eyes  
We are blinded as tears hide the truth  
When we cease yearning the wind will be at our backs  
The dust dispels and we are emptied

*The wind is now howling; it has started to snow. The Monk collapses from exhaustion. As he lies on the ground, demon rats come sidling up to him and start gnawing his bony frame.*

[Track 14]

**Monk** (*deliriously*)

What terrible famine wracks this land  
Thousands starve each day  
Even the rats are skin and bones  
Coming out to feast on me  
  
Eat, rats, eat  
Rip flesh from these unholy bones  
Tear this black heart out  
Chew off the hands that held the knife  
My hands!  
Plunged the knife into her belly  
Carved out our child  
And threw mother and child  
Onto the garbage heap of the world

**Children's Chorus**, *still holding their red peonies* [from Blake's "Songs of Experience," selections from *Holy Thursday*]

"Is this a holy thing to see,  
In a rich and fruitful land,

Babes reduced to misery,  
Fed with cold and usurous hand?"

**Chorus**

We see clearly only after the fact  
We love dearly only after the loss

**Children's Chorus** [from Blake's "Songs of Experience," selections from *Holy Thursday*]

"And their sun does never shine,  
And their fields are bleak & bare  
And their ways are fill'd with thorns  
It is eternal winter there."

[Track 15]

**White Snake**

Xiao Qing, we must save him

**Xiao Qing**

No!  
We crossed the great divide without permission  
We have no powers  
How would I save you  
(My dearest one)?

**White Snake**

We must save him without magic  
We must, we must

*The White Snake, followed reluctantly by Xiao Qing, attacks the demons. White Snake fights ferociously, blood streaming from her wounds. The demons retreat.*

*White Snake rushes to the Monk's side.*

**White Snake**

He is burning in the snow  
We must get him to shelter  
We must

**Xiao Qing**

My lady, you are wounded  
I must get you to shelter  
I must

[Track 16]

**Monk** (*opening his eyes; he sees the White Snake's blood on the snow*)

O beauty beyond belief  
Red peonies on snow  
I pick them for my journey  
To the other world

O beauty beyond belief  
Red blood on snow  
My guilty secret sacrifice  
Staining me red  
Guide me in my journey  
To hell

Monk	White Snake	Xiao Qing	Children's Chorus
	You could never love me so		
O beauty beyond belief	You are bound to someone else	I am bound to you forever	
Red peonies on snow	Your love endures for eternity	My love endures for eternity	Follow, follow
Your red peonies	It is your immortality	Through our years of immortality	Follow the red peonies
Red petals Holding my heart			Follow, follow

Red petals too soon you fall	But this I promise you	I promise you this	
Your fallen petals	We shall meet in another world	As together we journey to other worlds	
My fallen heart	In another time and another place	In another time and another place	Follow the red peonies
	I shall stroke your dear sweet face	I shall stroke your dear sweet face	
Follow the red peonies blooming in the snow			Follow the red peonies.

*White Snake and Xiao Qing slide away; White Snake leaves a trail of blood which the Monk follows. The Children strew red peonies in the snow.*

**DISC 2****ACT II****Scene 1: The apothecary shop of the Master**

[Track 1]

*White Snake and Xiao Qing are seated at the side of the store, obscured by large storage bins. The Monk is busy reading an ancient text and then searching for the right ingredients which he grinds in a stone mortar.*

**Monk** (*singing softly to himself*)

A young wife sat at river's edge  
O ma O ma O  
The tears she wept were deep blood red  
O ma O ma O

“How could you leave me,” so she said  
“Lying in our bloody bed?  
Our baby rent from my warm wet womb  
She’s gone, she may be dead”

A young wife sat at river’s edge  
O ma O ma O

“Forgive me please,” the young monk begged  
“I left to find the Way  
But can it be, the Way for me  
Leads always back to you?”

A young wife sat at river’s edge  
O ma O ma O

“We will not meet in the other world”  
The wretched Monk he cried  
“For cursed I am, and damned to hell  
Demons ring my dark death knell”

A young wife sat at river’s edge  
O ma O ma O  
The tears she wept were deep blood red  
O ma O ma O . . .

[Track 2]

**Xiao Qing** (*watching her mistress watch the Monk*)

We’ve been here since we led him to this herbalist’s shop  
Winter has now changed to spring  
How much longer can I wait for you  
My enchanted warrior queen?

Do you remember how you scorned my love  
When you were a woman and I, a man?

Yet I followed you in death as a snake  
Giving up my humanity and manhood  
To be with you

Now you wait for this mortal man  
You, my stonehearted queen  
You, who can rip out his heaving chest  
And swallow his bloody heart whole  
Now you wait for this puny man  
To give you his heart, his soul  
You wait helpless with love  
Even as I wait, helpless with love  
And the seasons pass us by . . .

[Track 3]

How many winters have changed to spring?  
How many seasons have passed?  
White on white, you sigh with delight  
Cooling your fevered blood  
But my blood boils with rage  
As I watch and wait  
To tear out his worthless heart  
Then you’ll see that it’s just  
An ordinary mortal heart

When spring turns to summer  
You will turn, white among green  
From him  
When fall overtakes summer  
You will run, white over gold  
To me

How many falls have changed to winter?  
How many seasons have passed?  
I will sit and dream, of you my queen  
Of the day you'll reach for me  
Until that day, come what may  
I will sit forever, never failing you  
Watching and waiting, for you

*Xiao Qing is interrupted by the Master who enters the room.*

[Track 4]

**Master**

Is the fever potion ready?  
I will deliver it to the Choo family

**Monk**

Yes, Master

Each day I thank the gods  
For leading me to you  
Your healing hands held back my soul  
As I watched the demons circle round in hell  
Tongues flickering in and out  
Winding around me  
I owe my life to you

**Master**

It was a blessed day  
That sent me out in the snow  
To feed the birds  
Only to find you frozen  
Clutching a red peony to your chest

**Monk**

With your help, I have found my calling  
Teach me your secret arts of healing  
That I may better serve humanity  
On my journey along the Way

**Master**

You are the son I never had  
My time is coming  
I make way for a new healer

**Monk**

Here is the potion (*handing potion to Master*)  
*The young Monk leaves.*

[Track 5]

**Children's Chorus** [*from Blake's "Songs of Experience, The Clod & the Pebble"*]

"Love seeketh not itself to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care,  
But for another gives its ease,  
And builds a heaven in hell's despair."

**Master**

Sometimes I see myself in him  
A young man not so long ago  
Eyes filled with bright vision  
Untainted by the world's blight  
Dedicated to the healing arts  
To save humankind  
  
But life has been disheartening  
Most of humankind is undeserving  
People are ungrateful and grasping  
They take and take, and take and take

They took everything and left me their waste  
I fear this young man will learn at great cost

Oh, Guan Yin, I too hear the world weeping  
Crying louder with each passing day  
Its pain claws at me  
Gouging welts in my flesh  
Its longing stabs my sides  
Drilling holes in my heart  
Its fever consumes me  
Scorching my brain

After one thousand years of searching  
I have not found the cure for the soul's diseases

Now my hands tremble  
My eyes dim  
My heart quakes  
Guan Yin, could it be that my time is coming  
And I have not come one step closer  
To fulfilling my mission?

**Children's Chorus** [*from Blake's "Songs of Experience, The Clod & the Pebble"*]

“Love seeketh only Self to please,  
To bind another to Its delight:  
Joys in another's loss of ease,  
And builds a Hell in Heavens despite”

*Master moves the storage bins, searching for his walking stick. The two snakes try to hide behind a desk.*

[Track 6]

**Master**

Aaia, snake, snake

*He grabs his stick to corner them; Xiao Qing runs away; White Snake is cornered; Master reaches for a rattan basket, throws it over her and captures her.*

**Master** (*gazing at her in amazement*)

You are extraordinary  
Perhaps other-worldly  
A powerful medicine for this sick world

**White Snake**

Free me, please free me  
And I will grant your heart's desire

**Master**

Are you speaking to me, do I really hear you?  
Or is the sibilant sound of your voice  
The feverish whispering of my heart?

**White Snake**

Free me, please free me  
And I will grant your heart's desire

**Master**

You are a demon clothed in snake's body  
A powerful medicine for this sick world

**White Snake**

Free me, and I will grant your heart's desire  
If you will free me

**Master**

Your tail will make the lame to walk  
Your tongue the dumb to speak  
Your red eyes make the blind to see  
Your stomach feed the hungry

Your bile will cool greedy longings  
Your blood stoke our spiritual fires  
Your white flesh conjure ecstasy  
For all those who eat of thee

**White Snake**

Free me, please free me  
And I will grant your heart's desire

**Master**

Your heart will bring love where thorns now grow  
Your bones give strength to strike the righteous blow  
Your brain teach everlasting wisdom  
And peace will descend on this blessed kingdom

*Master gazes at her reverently.*

**White Snake**

You have sworn an oath as healer  
Never to take the life of a living creature  
Would you now break that vow?

**Master**

I will take that sin upon me  
For the sake of all humanity  
I renounce my eternal soul  
For the chance to reach my life's goal

*The sound of someone desperately knocking at the door and calling:*

Master, Master, please come at once. Little Choo . . . she is dying . . .

*Master puts on his coat and grabs the vial of medicine.*

I come right away. . .

*When Master leaves, the White Snake whirls around in the cage, unable to escape.*

*Xiao Qing slips in and tries to raise the basket.*

[Track 7]

**Xiao Qing**

He has cast a spell on this cage  
I cannot lift it  
We need magic to fight magic  
I have none now  
To be helpless to save you  
Slays me, my dearest one

*Xiao Qing is interrupted as the Monk enters. She slithers behind a bureau. The Monk stops in amazement when he sees a white snake in the cage. He walks slowly around the cage, inspecting the snake with great curiosity.*

[Track 8]

**Monk**

What a beautiful snake  
You are incandescent  
You glisten like mother of pearl  
Gleaming with ghostly light

**White Snake**

Free me, please free me  
And I will grant your heart's desire

**Monk**

You speak to me  
Tell me, are you a human spirit in a snake's body  
Or a snake demon incarnate?

**White Snake**

I am a snake spirit who crossed the great divide  
Where spirit world meets earthly realm  
Seeking to know mortality  
The birthright of humanity



**Monk**

Then we are kindred spirits  
 Seeking a world beyond our own  
 Traveling along a narrow path  
 Alone  
 Always alone

**White Snake**

Release me and I will give you your heart's desire

**Monk**

What my heart desires no one can give  
 My heart itself knows not what it is  
 At times I despair that I will never know  
 Then suddenly, I behold it so  
 I have renounced my wife and family  
 To seek nirvana  
 Sometimes I stop in despair  
 And wonder if my renunciation is worth it all?

**White Snake**

We are kindred spirits  
 Seeking a world beyond our own  
 Travelling along a narrow path  
 No longer alone

Monk	White Snake	Xiao Qing
Now, in you I have found that inexplicable Intangible incomparable wonder of the universe		
	In you I have found that inexplicable Intangible incomparable wonder of the universe	
A fellow seeker, a soul mate Of rarified beauty		
	A fellow seeker, a soul mate Of rarified beauty	
Grace personified in a sinuous curve		
	Grace personified in a mortal soul	
Your glow illuminates me	Your glow illuminates me	You illuminate me You always have You always will

**Master** (*interrupting suddenly, lashing out with his cane at the caged White Snake*)

[Track 9]

Snake, he is not your Saviour  
 Your seduction is useless  
 He is strong, he is pure  
 He will turn from you

**White Snake** [*from Kundry in Parsifal*]

“My loving embrace  
Will allow you to achieve godhood”

**Master** (*to the Monk*)

Stay away from that snake  
She seduces you and steals your soul

**Monk**

She is a rare creature  
Put on earth to enchant us  
To remind us that our world  
Is not filled merely with squalor  
But with wondrous beauty

She is not ours to keep  
She belongs to the universe  
A free spirit  
To inspire all she meets  
Free her, Master

**Master**

She is a white demon  
Her whiteness will turn red  
To water the parched heart  
And revive the desiccated soul  
She is my life's work

**Monk**

Your life's work demands that you set her free  
A unique being, she is transcendental  
You will reap the vengeance of heaven  
For the sacrilege of killing her

**Master**

She will save the world

**Children's Chorus** [*from Genesis*]

“Ye shall be as gods  
Knowing good and evil”

How do you weigh the life  
Of one individual  
Against all humanity?

[Track 10]

**Chorus**

We spit upon you, O Apophis  
We defile you with our left foot  
We smite you, we fetter you, we stab you  
We put fire upon you

**Children's Chorus**

Your head is cut off  
Your blood stains the earth, O Snake  
Your white flesh, your magic flesh  
Powerful medicine, O Snake

**Master**

Your eyes are stone  
No more to turn my blood to stone, O Snake

[Track 11]

**White Snake**

Slice off my tongue  
Gouge out my eyes  
Drain my blood  
Dismember me

(*staring into space*)

Amitabha Buddha, hear me  
My life now for all humanity  
If I let his knife take my life  
As blood sacrifice

Will you let me come back  
 A woman?  
 To meet again  
 The man who will help me  
 Fulfill my destiny

[Track 12]

### Chorus

Magic whiteness, magic albino  
 Pure white, divine light  
 Pure light, divine white

We want her tail  
 We want her head  
 Give me a liver  
 Give me a spleen  
 Bless me with her whiteness

### Children's Chorus

Witchdoctor, Medicine Man  
 Witchdoctor, Medicine Man

Hack her chop her  
 Hack her chop her  
 Chop chop chop

### Chorus

Magic whiteness, magic albino

Magic, magic  
 Magic, magic  
 Magic

[Track 13]

White Snake	Monk	Master	Xiao Qing
My loving embrace Will allow you to achieve godhood	Your loving embrace will allow me to achieve godhood	Your loving sacrifice Will allow me to achieve godhood	Your loving embrace Will allow me to live my dreams

	Children's Chorus	Chorus	
	"Ye shall be as gods Knowing good from evil"	Sacrifice her to the gods of our drowned children	
Release me and I shall give you release	Release her and she shall give us release	Release her and the world shall never be released	Release her and I shall give you everlasting gratitude
	Children's Chorus	Chorus	
	Hack her, chop her Chop chop chop her (repeat as constant beat)	Chop chop Chop chop Chop chop Chop chop	
My magic whiteness White magic, white magic I want no magic Only love magic	Her magic whiteness White magic, white magic Forever magic Living magic	Her magic whiteness Black magic, black magic I want her magic Powerful magic	Her magic whiteness White and Green, White and Green Magic colors of love Love magic

*Master moves to the table and finds a knife. He grasps it in a trembling hand and strides purposefully to the cage.*

[Track 14]

Open the cage  
 Hold her fast  
 While I slit her throat

*The Monk hesitates, and swiftly approaches the cage. He lifts the cage, then turns and holds the old man back.*

### Monk

Forgive me, Master, forgive me  
 In saving her, I save your immortal soul  
 From the karma of killing her  
 Your hands will not smell of blood  
 In the next world

**Master** (*struggling*)

I must kill her  
For in killing her  
I save your immortal soul  
From the bonds of earthly attachment  
Which tie you down

*Xiao Qing rushes out from her hiding place.*

**Monk** (*to White Snake*)

Go, go now

**Xiao Qing**

My lady, we must go

*Xiao Qing drags her mistress out. As the two snakes leave, White Snake looks back at the Monk.*

**White Snake**

You and I shall meet again

*The two snakes slide out the back.*

**Monk** (*releasing his Master and suddenly noticing blood pouring from a wound in his Master's side. He prostrates himself.*)

Forgive me, Master.

THE END

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Portraits and Tributes.* Donald Berman, piano. Bridge Records 9463.

*Crazy Weather.* Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Gil Rose, conductor. BMOP Sound 1038.

*The Construction of Boston.* Naxos Records 8.669018.

*Wasting the Night: Songs.* Naxos Records 8.559658

*Naga* was commissioned by White Snake Projects as part of *Ouroboros Trilogy* (*Naga, Madame White Snake, Gilgamesh*).

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Producer: Scott Wheeler

Engineers: Antonio Oliari, Stephanie Rogers

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# NAGA

OPERA IN TWO ACTS

MUSIC BY SCOTT WHEELER  
LIBRETTO BY CERISE LIM JACOBS

ANTHONY ROTH COSTANZO, DAVID SALSBERY FRY, STACEY TAPPAN,  
MATTHEW WORTH, SANDRA PIQUES EDDY

WHITE SNAKE PROJECTS CHORUS, LIDIYA YANKOVSKAYA,  
ASSOCIATE CONDUCTOR AND CHORUS MASTER  
BOSTON CHILDREN'S CHORUS, MICHELE ADAMS, CHORUS MASTER  
WHITE SNAKE PROJECTS ORCHESTRA, CAROLYN KUAN, CONDUCTOR

DISC 1: PRELUDE, ACT 1

[TT: 55:14]

DISC 2: ACT II

[TT: 35:00]

File Under: Opera/  
Wheeler, Scott



Commissioned and produced by White Snake Projects.  
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