

Traditional Arts in King County: Cantonese Opera

Cantonese Opera, One of Many Forms of Chinese Opera

Chinese opera has been popular for centuries, a performing art that combines theater, dance, elaborate costumes and makeup, as well as singing and instrumental music, and sometimes acrobatics and comedy. About 1000 years ago, Chinese opera continued its development as many regional forms of drama. In different parts of China, opera was performed using distinct vocal styles and in some cases, also using different musical instruments.

Along with percussion, the major musical instrument for opera is a type of fiddle, or bowed string instrument, most often the *er hu*. This instrument is held in the lap (not under the chin, like the violin), with the bow passing between its two strings. The player stops the string with the fingers of one hand, but without pressing them to the instrument's neck—again, unlike the violin.

One form of Chinese opera, *kunqu*, has been a passion of many literary types and lovers of poetry in China. It is a more 'classic' form, with a softer instrumental accompaniment by string and reed instruments. Other more popular forms of opera also include everyday language, and loud percussion instruments; the best-known regional forms in the U.S. are Peking opera and Cantonese opera. Peking opera features especially striking makeup and costumes, acrobatics, and the sounds of small drums and a small gong with a pitch that rises quickly after it is struck. Cantonese opera is the form that was introduced to the U.S. by the many immigrants from Guangdong province, at the southeast end of China.

Where Does Cantonese Opera Come From?

Guangdong province, along with Hong Kong, is the region known for the Cantonese dialect of the Chinese language, and one of the top styles of Chinese cooking, Cantonese cuisine. Guangdong is culturally distinct within China, and Cantonese opera is famous outside of Guangdong—although probably not as famous as Cantonese food. Just as we continue to say 'Peking opera,' even though the city is now referred to as Beijing, the term Cantonese opera comes from the older English name of Canton for the city we now know as Guangzhou. Although 'Canton' has passed out of use, terms in English such as 'Cantonese opera' and 'Cantonese food' have stuck.

Cantonese opera dates from about 500 years ago, but developed much more fully in the 19th century. Originally it was sung in a more classic language style, then included more and more of its regional Guangzhou dialect. Around the turn of the 20th century, as a lot of political commentary and opinion was voiced through Cantonese opera, the emphasis was on using everyday language so as many people as possible would understand it. During the 20th century, some opera artists fled to Hong Kong and Macao during the Japanese invasion and continued to develop the form there. Modern changes brought occasional western instruments (such as the saxophone), and occasionally female performers, to Cantonese opera.

Cantonese Opera in King County

Seattle's International District/Chinatown area was home to the first Chinese opera group in the U.S., and a building from 1924 that was designed to house it still stands, now occupied by the China Gate restaurant. In the late 1930s, the building was then used by the newly formed Luck Ngi Musical Society, a Cantonese opera group that became one of the most important Chinese American community organizations in King County.

The Luck Ngi Musical Society was organized by a group of Chinese laundrymen in Seattle, to practice, teach and perform Cantonese opera. The group served the Cantonese American community well, as a meeting place, and through raising funds for war victims and local charities.

[To learn more about two Chinese opera musicians who live and perform in King County, see **Henry Lip Louie** and **Bin-Liang Wang** in the searchable database *Folk & Traditional Artists in Washington*]

Resources

For a history of the Luck Ngi Cantonese opera group in Seattle, see: So, Connie and Jane Liam, "Luck Ngi Musical Society"

http://www.ocaseattle.org/APIA_People/2002%20%20Luck%20Ngi%20Musical%20Society.pdf

Walt Crowley, Seattle Historic Tours—International District

http://www.cityofseattle.net/tour/HistoricDistricts/id/id_07.htm

Walking Tour—International District www.historylink.org/cybertour/PDF/id.pdf

"Cantonese Opera," webpage created by students,

<http://library.thinkquest.org/04apr/01272/index.htm>

Audio: "The Red Bean Cantonese Opera," Global Hit feature on *The World*, Public Radio International, May 7, 2007. Feature on Cantonese opera groups in San Francisco and Oakland, California. <http://www.theworld.org/?q=node/9917>

Video: Kwan, Michael. "Cantonese Opera," *Video Nation Archive*, BBC. Kwan talks about what it is like to be a member of a Cantonese opera group in England. Length: 2.30 minutes.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/l/leeds_cantonese.shtml