

NAXOS

HUANG RUO

Book of Mountains and Seas 山海經



ARS NOVA Copenhagen

Gert Mortensen, Hsiao-Tung Yuan, Michael Murphy, Percussion

Paul Hillier

Huang Ruo (b. 1976)

Book of Mountains and Seas

In China, there is no question: the egg came first. Other cultures may count their chickens, but China places this common fertility symbol at the heart of its most widespread creation myth. Bursting from this primordial egg, the giant Pangu keeps pushing the purer parts of the egg upward to become the heavens and less pure elements downward to become the earth, thus instilling the new cosmos with the Daoist duality of yin and yang.

The power of such legends, as well as their countless variations through the millennia, stem largely from the nature of their literary source, the *Shanhai jing*, commonly translated as the *Book of Mountains and Seas*. Though codified in its present form for the imperial library during the early Han Dynasty (202 BCE–9 AD), many of the texts had already circulated for centuries and the stories themselves long before that. Divided into 18 sections, *Mountains and Seas* describes many landscapes and creatures (both largely mythical) in a series of standardised, highly elliptical vignettes.

What these texts lack in narrative clarity finds compensation in the cumulative power of their imagery, which not only forms a core of Chinese sensibility but often taps into corners of the collective human unconscious. Their brevity and very lack of concrete detail practically invites Chinese readers to embellish the stories in modern trappings, and non-Chinese readers to reframe them through a different cultural lens. In addition to Pangu (who seems part Adam, part Atlas), we meet such characters as a princess who becomes a bird and a reckless figure venturing too close to the sun, neither of whom would feel entirely out of place in European legends.

For the composer Huang Ruo, adapting such poetic stories for the stage was daunting – not in verbal terms, since he had previously worked with operatic texts in Chinese (*Dr. Sun Yat-Sen*), English (*M. Butterfly*) and a dialect entirely of his own creation (*Paradise Interrupted*) – but rather in the musical language. He describes *Book of Mountains and Seas* as ‘vocal theatre’ with singers surrounded – singing and beating things being the most basic and primal forms of music-making.

Within those vocal forces, though, comes a variety of musical textures: an ensemble of twelve singers, periodically performing as separate male and female choruses and all possible permutations of solo and ensemble combinations. Treading a fine line between ancient ritual and contemporary theatre, singers sometimes perform as specific characters, other times as omniscient commentators.

Given the calculated timelessness in Huang’s musical conception, the four stories of *Book of Mountains and Seas* still resonate clearly today. Following the introductory *The Legend of Pangu*, we veer into *The Spirit Bird*, where a young princess’s spirit embodies a bird after her own body drowns at sea. She then begins a relentless campaign of revenge on the water by dropping twigs and pebbles. ‘In Chinese, we have this expression, “Dripping water can penetrate rock”,’ Huang says. ‘For me, this simple story sends a clear message. Even if you think something is impossible, never underestimate one’s determination, or the power of revenge.’

From there, we encounter *The Legend of Ten Suns*, picking up the creation story after Pangu’s death. The earth is now guarded by ten suns, each revolving in turn, riding on a large and graceful bird. One day the suns all decide to come out together, and their combined heat dries the rivers and shrivels the crops, imperiling the earth. Their father, the God of Heaven, employs the God of Archery to shoot them down, but after the ninth has fallen he asks that the tenth be spared; so fearful is the remaining sun that he keeps his scheduled revolution faithfully, clearly marking day and night.

From that cautionary tale extolling moderation, we turn to *Kua Fu Chasing the Sun*, where the giant Kua Fu, trying to discover where the sun goes at night, spends his days chasing it from east to west. Exhausted and overheated, he keeps drinking from one river to the next until they all run dry and he finally dies of thirst. After his death, however, his walking stick falls to the ground and grows into a forest of peach blossoms, a long-held symbol of paradise. ‘For us today, this story is rich in meaning,’ Huang says. ‘First, we see the danger in mistreating the environment by trying to control nature. Nature will always have the last laugh.’

His original conception, however, notably changed during the Covid pandemic lockdown. ‘I was working on the part with the peach trees when the pandemic hit,’ Huang recalls. ‘I’d wanted it loud, bright, with everybody singing and glorifying nature. But once the pandemic hit, I couldn’t write that. It was so different from our experience then.’

After much contemplation, during which he completed his meditative string quartet *A Dust in Time*, Huang returned to the scene anew. 'It was a 180-degree turnaround,' he says. 'The sun was no longer burning, but quiet and warming. Survivors crawl out of the post-Apocalyptic debris in search of others, remembering to be humble and treasuring life.'

The essential message, though, remains the same. 'No matter how much destruction occurs, nature will always return,' Huang maintains. 'Whether or not humans will be there depends on what we do.'

Ken Smith

This essay was commissioned by the Moss Arts Center, Virginia Tech

Huang Ruo with Basil Twist, director



Photo © Michael Brosilow

Book of Mountains and Seas

Opera in four scenes (2021) for vocal ensemble with percussion instruments

Scene I. The Legend of Pangu

《盘古开天地》

天地浑沌如鸡子，盘古生其中。

Tiāndì hún dùn rú jīzi, pángǔ shēng qízhōng.

The heaven and the earth were, at first, one blurred entity like an egg. Pangu was born into it.

万八千岁，天地开辟，阳清为天，阴浊为地。

Wàn bāqiān suì, tiāndì kāipì, yáng qīng wéi tiān, yīn zhuó wéi dì.

After 18,000 years, the heaven and the earth are separated, the Yang, which was light and pure, rose to become the heaven, and the Yin, which was heavy and murky, sank to form the earth.

盘古在其中，一日九变，神于天，圣于地。

Pángǔ zài qízhōng, yī rì jiǔ biàn, shén yú tiān, shèng yú dì.

Pangu lived between them, and went through many changes every day, his wisdom greater than that of the heaven, and his ability greater than that of the earth.

天日高一丈，地日厚一丈，盘古日长一丈，如此万八千岁。

Tiān rì gāo yī zhàng, de rì hòu yī zhàng, pángǔ rì zhǎng yī zhàng, rúcǐ wàn bāqiān suì.

Every day the sky rose ten feet higher, the earth became ten feet thicker, and Pangu grew ten feet taller, another 18,000 years passed.

天数极高，地数极深，盘古极长，后乃有三皇。

Tiānshù jí gāo, de shù jí shēn, pángǔ jí zhǎng, hòu nǎi yǒusān huáng.

The sky was extremely high, the earth was extremely thick, Pangu was extremely tall, only after then, the lords of heaven, earth, and mankind are created.

数起于一，立于三，成于五，盛于七，处于九，故天去地九万里。

Shù qǐ yú yī, lì yú sān, chéng yú wǔ, shèng yú qī, chǔyú jiǔ, gù tiān qù de jiǔ wàn lǐ.

Numbers started from one, built on three, established at five, flourished at seven, ceased at nine. Therefore the distance between the heaven to the earth is nine million miles.

首生盘古。垂死化身，

Shǒu shēng pángǔ. Chuísǐ huàshēn,

Pangu was born first, and then by the time when he was dying, he transformed:

气成风云，声为雷霆，

qì chéng fēngyún, shēng wéi léitíng,

His breath became wind and clouds; his sounds became thunder;

左眼为日，右眼为月，
zuǒ yǎn wèi rì, yòu yǎn wèi yuè,
his left eye became the sun; his right eye became the moon;

四肢五体为四极五岳，
sìzhī wǔtǐ wèi sì jí wǔyuè,
his four limbs and five body-parts became four pillars to support the heaven and five mountain peaks;

血液为江河，筋脉为地里，肌肉为田土，
xiěyè wèi jiānghé, jīn mài wèi dì lǐ, jīròu wèi tiántǔ,
his blood became rivers; his nerves and veins became mountain ranges, canyons, and paths; his muscles and flesh became fields and soils;

发为星辰，皮肤为草木，
fā wèi xīngchén, pífu wèi cǎomù,
his hair became stars; his skin became grass, bushes, and trees;

齿骨为金石，精髓为珠玉，汗流为雨泽，
chǐ gǔ wèi jīnshí, jīngsuǐ wèi zhūyù, hàn liú wèi yǔ zé,
his teeth and bones became gold and stones; his semen and marrow became pearls and jades; his sweat became rain and lakes;

身之诸虫，因风所感，化为黎甿。
shēn zhī zhū chóng, yīn fēng suǒgǎn, huà wèi lí méng.
all kinds of insects on and in his body, weathered by the wind, became humans.

Scene II. The Spirit Bird

《精卫填海》

又北二百里，曰發鳩之山，其上多柘木。
Fā jiū zhī shān, qí shàng duō zhè mù.
Going north 200 miles, there is the Fajiu mountain, which has many Cudrania tricuspidata trees.

有鸟焉，其状如鸟，文首，白喙，赤足，名曰“精卫”，
Yǒu niǎo yān, qí zhuàng rú wū, wén shǒu, bái huì, chì zú, míng yuē 'jīng wèi',
There is a kind of bird, its shape is like a crow, its head has patterns, its mouth is white, and its feet are red. Its name is 'jīng wèi'.

其鸣自洩，是炎帝之少女，名曰女娃。
qí míng zì xiào, shì yándì zhī shàonǚ, míng yuē nǚ wá.
It sounds like calling its own name. It was the youngest daughter of Emperor Yan, named Nǚ Wá.

女娃遊於東海，溺而不返，故爲精衛，
Nǚ wá yóu yú dōnghǎi, nì ér bù fǎn, Gù wèi jīng wèi,
Nǚ Wá swam in the Eastern Sea, was drowned, and never returned. Therefore, she is called 'jīng wèi'.

发为星辰
皮肤为草木
齿骨为金石
精髓为珠玉
汗流为雨泽
身之诸虫
因风所感
化为黎甬



常銜西山之木石，以堙於東海。

cháng xián xīshān zhī mùshí, yǐ yīn yú dōnghǎi.

It often carries small pieces of branches and rocks from the Western mountain, and throws them into the Eastern Sea to try filling it up.

漳水出焉，東流注於河。

Zhāng shuǐ chū yān, dōng liú zhù yú hé.

The Zhāng River started from the Fajiu mountain, flowing East into the Yellow River.

Scene III. The Legend of Ten Suns

《大羿射日》

东南海之外，甘水之间，有羲和之国。

Dōngnán hǎi zhī wài, gān shuǐ zhī jiān, yǒu xī hé zhī guó.

Beyond the South-Eastern sea, between the gān shuǐ, there is the Xī Hé kingdom.

有女子名曰羲和，方日浴于甘渊，

Yǒu nǚzǐ míng yuē xī hé, fāng rì yù yú gān yuān,

There is a woman named Xī Hé, bathing suns at Gān Yuan.

羲和者，帝俊之妻，生十日。

xī hé zhě, dì jùnzhī qī, shēng shí rì.

Xī Hé, the wife of Dì Jùn, gave birth to ten suns.

大荒之中，有山名曰孽摇顛羝，

Dàhuāng zhī zhōng, yǒu shānmíng yuē niè yáo yūn dī,

In the distant bare land, there is a mountain named Niè Yáo Yūn Dī.

上有扶木，柱三百里，其葉如芥。

shàng yǒu fú mù, zhù sānbǎi lǐ, qí yè rú jiè.

There are fúsāng trees in the mountain, three-hundred miles tall, its leaves are like mustard leaves.

有谷曰溫源谷。湯谷上有扶木，

Yǒu gǔ yuē wēn yuán gǔ. Tānggǔ shàng yǒu fú mù,

There is a valley named Wēn Yuán Gǔ, also called Tānggǔ Valley, it also has a fúsāng tree.

一日方至，一日方出，皆載於鳥。

yī rì fāng zhì, yī rì fāng chū, jiē zài yú wū.

One sun just arrived, another sun just departed, they are all riding on three-legged Sunbirds.

湯谷上有扶桑，十日所浴，在墨齒北。

Tānggǔ shàng yǒu fúsāng, shí rì suǒ yù, zài mò chǐ běi.

Tānggǔ Valley has a fúsāng tree, it is where the ten suns bathed, in the north of Mò Chǐ.

居水中，有大木，九日居下枝，一日居上枝。

Jū shuǐzhōng, yǒu dà mù, jiǔ rì jū xià zhī, yī rì jū shàng zhī.

In the water, there is a big tree, nine suns stay under the branches, and one sun stays above the branches.

尧时十日并出，草木焦枯，

Yáo shí shí rì bìng chū, cǎo mù jiāo kū,

At the time of the Emperor Yao, all ten suns came out all at once, all the grasses and trees were burned to death due to the heat.

尧命羿射十日，中其九日，

yáo mìng yì shè shí rì, zhōng qí jiǔ rì,

Emperor Yao ordered Yi to shoot down the ten suns, Yi shot down nine suns.

日中九鸟皆死，堕其羽翼，故留其一日也。

rì zhōng jiǔ wū jiē sǐ, duò qí yǔ yì, gù liú qí yī rì yě.

The nine Sunbirds and the nine suns all died, all their feathers and wings fell down. Therefore, only one sun was left.

Scene IV. Kua Fu Chasing the Sun

《夸父逐日》

夸父与日逐走，入日；

Kuā fù yǔ rì zhú zǒu, rù rì;

Kuā Fù was chasing the sun, all the way to the place where the sun sets.

渴，欲得饮，饮于河、渭；

kě, yù dé yǐn, yǐn yú hé, wèi;

He was thirsty and wanted to drink water. He then drank from the Yellow River and the Wèi River.

河、渭不足，北饮大泽。

hé, wèi bù zú, běi yǐn dà zé.

The water from the Yellow River and the Wèi River were not enough for him, he then went north to drink water from the big lake.

未至，道渴而死。

Wèi zhì, dào kě ér sǐ.

He died of thirst before he could arrive.

弃其杖，化为邓林。

Qì qí zhàng, huà wéi dèng lín.

The walking stick he left behind, transformed into forests of peaches.

Huang Ruo



Photo © Wenjun Miakoda Liang

Composer Huang Ruo has been lauded by *The New York Times* for having ‘a distinctive style’. His vibrant and inventive musical voice draws equal inspiration from Chinese ancient and folk music, Western avant-garde, experimental, noise, natural and processed sound, rock, and jazz to create a seamless, organic integration using a compositional technique he calls ‘Dimensionalism’. His music has been premiered and performed by the New York Philharmonic, The Philadelphia Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, National Polish Radio Orchestra, Santa Fe Opera, Washington National Opera, Houston Grand Opera, LA Opera, and Seattle Opera. His opera *An American Soldier* received its world premiere at the Opera Theatre of St. Louis in June 2018, and was named one of the best classical music events in 2018 by *The New York Times*. His opera *M. Butterfly* received its world premiere with the Santa Fe Opera in 2022. His future opera commissions will be for The Met Opera and the San Francisco Opera. He served as the first composer-in-residence for Het Concertgebouw Amsterdam. Huang Ruo was born in Hainan Island, China in 1976 – the year the Chinese Cultural Revolution ended. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, when China was opening its gate to the Western world, he received both traditional and Western education at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. As a result of the dramatic cultural and economic changes in China in the 1980s and 1990s, his education expanded from Bach, Mozart, Stravinsky, and Lutosławski, to include The Beatles, rock and roll, heavy metal, and jazz. Huang Ruo was able to absorb all of these newly allowed Western influences equally. Huang Ruo is a composition faculty member at the Mannes School of Music in New York. Huang Ruo’s music is administered exclusively by European American Music Distributors Company (ASCAP). For more information about Huang Ruo and his music, please visit www.huangruo.com

Gert Mortensen



Gert Mortensen was born in Denmark in 1958. He was trained in the prestigious soloist class at The Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen, where he has been professor and head of timpani and percussion for 23 years. For 24 years he held the position of principal percussionist of The Royal Danish Orchestra and became recognised as one of the leading concert percussionists in the world. His repertoire encompasses music from all parts of the world and in his recitals he often uses a fascinating display of instruments. Scandinavian composers such as Per Nørgård, Niels Viggo Bentzon, Svend-David Sandström, Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, Poul Ruders and Askeell Masson have written works especially for him. Mortensen has recorded for BIS, Naxos, Deutsche Grammophon, Our Recordings and Dacapo Records.

Hsiao-Tung Yuan

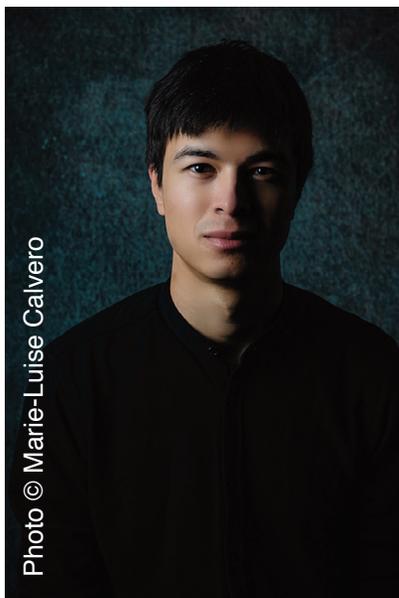


Hsiao-Tung Yuan is a versatile percussionist with an exceptional range of talents and significant international accomplishments. With a career spanning over a decade, she was a member of the world-renowned Ju Percussion Group in Taiwan. Since 2016, she has been based in Copenhagen, Denmark, and has specialised in contemporary music as percussionist with K!ART Ensemble. Hsiao-Tung Yuan has also worked closely with the Danish Chamber Orchestra, the Danish Concert Band, the Northern Opera Company, ARS NOVA Copenhagen and Current Resonance. In 2021 she debuted from the advanced post-graduate soloist class at The Royal Danish Conservatory of Music. In 2022 she started the Hsiao Solo Project, a collaborative initiative with different composers aimed at expanding the contemporary solo percussion repertoire.



Photo © Michael Broslow

Michael Murphy



Michael Murphy is a Chinese-Canadian percussionist. As an orchestral musician, he has performed with the Toronto Symphony, the National Ballet of Canada, the Esprit Orchestra, and the Philharmonisches Orchester Freiburg. In the contemporary music world, he is regularly involved in groups such as New Music Concerts, Arraymusic, Soundstreams, Freesound, Ensemble Scope, and with festivals such as Nuit Blanche, the New Creations Festival, 2D2N in Odessa, and Frau* musica nova. He is also the featured xylophone-soloist in the videogame *Cuphead* (Delicious Last Course, 2022 and PS4 Commercial, 2020). Aside from percussion, Murphy is also a performer of the Japanese shō. He commissions works as a soloist and member of the trio shshcc (two shōs and accordion) and Duo HS (with clarinetist Carlos Cordeiro).

Paul Hillier



English conductor Paul Hillier studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. He formed the Hilliard Ensemble in 1973 and was its musical director for 17 years. In 1990 he created a new group called Theatre of Voices, which he continues to direct today. Hillier was principal conductor of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir (2000–07), chief conductor of ARS NOVA Copenhagen (2003–22), and has worked with many of the major choirs across Europe and in North America. In 2006 he was awarded an OBE by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for services to choral music. In 2007 he received the Order of the White Star of Estonia, and was awarded a GRAMMY for Best Choral Recording for the music of Arvo Pärt. In 2008 he became chief conductor of Chamber Choir Ireland and was appointed artistic director of the newly formed Coro Casa da Música in Porto. In 2010 he was awarded his second GRAMMY – for David Lang’s *The Little Match Girl Passion*. In 2013 he was awarded the Order of the Dannebrog by Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II of Denmark.

ARS NOVA Copenhagen

Carina Madsen, Ann-Christin Wesser Ingels, Mari Øyrehagen, Hanne Marie le Fevre, Laura Lamph, Elenor Wiman, Luís Toscano, James Robinson, Jakob Skjoldborg, Asger Lynge Petersen, Rasmus Thomsen, Mikkel Tuxen



Photo © Jeppe Bjoern

ARS NOVA Copenhagen is a twelve-voice ensemble specialising in Renaissance and contemporary repertoire. The ensemble's performances are marked with precision and verve and with a sound that attracts attention worldwide. ARS NOVA has made many recordings and won numerous awards, including a GRAMMY for *The Little Match Girl Passion* with music by David Lang. A series for the Dacapo label features numerous reference recordings of key works by some of the most important contemporary Danish composers. A complete recording of the narrative works for Christmas and Easter by Heinrich Schütz and a series of recordings featuring music by John Taverner and his contemporaries in Tudor England have won much acclaim in the international music press. This recording of Huang Ruo's *Book of Mountains and Seas* is the last recording made under chief conductor Paul Hillier who stepped down in 2022 after 20 years. In March 2024 Sofi Jeannin was appointed chief conductor.

Commissioned by Beth Morrison Projects, ARS NOVA Copenhagen, Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech, Toronto Soundstreams, Koorbiennale, Hong Kong New Vision Arts Festival, and Linda & Stuart Nelson.

Original staged production, direction and puppetry by Basil Twist, produced by Beth Morrison Projects, The Big Sing, ARS NOVA Copenhagen, and Soundstreams.

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AUGUSTINUS FONDEN

STIFTET 25. MARTS 1942



KorSangernes FællesRåd

道渴而死

未至

北饮大泽

河、渭不足



Huang Ruo is a multi-talented and award-winning Chinese-American composer, conductor, and conceptual artist. He is renowned for his inventive and seamless combination of Chinese and Western influences, creating a compositional technique he calls 'dimensionalism'. In the opera *Book of Mountains and Seas*, Huang Ruo has taken the awe-inspiring imagery of four traditional Chinese creation myths and transformed their truly remarkable landscapes and creatures into vibrant music and drama. The work ultimately expresses the creation of the universe and the power of nature over destruction, including a warning of mankind's responsibility to care for the environment.

HUANG RUO

(b. 1976)

Book of Mountains and Seas 山海經

Opera in four scenes (2021)

Text: Huang Ruo (based on *Shanhai jing*)

1	Scene I. The Legend of Pangu	13:14
2	Scene II. The Spirit Bird	12:20
3	Scene III. The Legend of Ten Suns	27:20
4	Scene IV. Kua Fu Chasing the Sun	21:20

ARS NOVA Copenhagen

Gert Mortensen, Percussion 1-4

Hsiao-Tung Yuan, Percussion 1 2

Michael Murphy, Percussion 3 4

Paul Hillier, Conductor

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