

Asian-American composer makes Middlebury debut

By Liza Sacheli Lloyd

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MIDDLEBURY—The original chamber opera *Lotus Lives*, by composer Su Lian Tan and librettist Anne Babson, will receive its world premiere on Friday, Sept. 30 and Sunday, Oct. 2, at the Mahaney Center for the Arts Concert Hall at Middlebury College.

Lotus Lives is a bold experiment in opera. The music incorporates elements of rap, Chinese folk music, and dance club music into its lovely, high-art classical melodies. The libretto is non-linear—designed to reveal itself like a lotus flower opening—and is filled with moments of humor and triumph, including vignettes from club VIP lounges, as well as a Chinese folktale as a parable.

The work challenges the artifice demanded of Chinese-American women, whose gender-specific upbringing and traditional education alienate them from their true selves. The work offers hope to those who would overcome stereotypes. Like its subject, *Lotus Lives* offers seemingly contradictory elements blended into a delicious and exuberant romp.

The opera project has brought together an accomplished set of artistic collaborators.

Composer Su Lian Tan is known to the Middlebury College community as a professor in the Department of Music, but she has also earned numerous distinctions worldwide as a flutist, teacher, and conductor. She has received grants and awards from Meet the Composer, American Music Center, the Argosy Foundation, and the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP). She has appeared with orchestras and ensembles worldwide, and her work has been featured at Lincoln Center and on radio's Morning Pro Musica, Dutch public radio, and CBC radio. Numerous ensembles have commissioned her work, including the Grammy-winning Takacs String Quartet, Meridian Arts Ensemble, Vermont Symphony Orchestra, and the New Juilliard Ensemble.

The Meridian Arts Ensemble takes the place of a traditional orchestra for *Lotus Lives*. This iconoclastic sextet of five



Su Lian Tan

brass players and a percussionist is America's leading brass group exploring the music of today. The Ensemble was founded in 1987, with nine commercial CD releases, over fifty premieres, and performances on four continents and in 49 states to date.

The rest of the production team includes violinist David Bowlin, choreographer and dancer Arika Yamada, dancers Denys Drozdyuk and Sonia Hsieh '10, and director Claudio

Medeiros '90.

Another unique aspect to this performance is the video set designed by Middlebury alumnus and filmmaker Tim Bartlett. He studied film, English, and music composition at Middlebury, and received a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to spend one year documenting the art of English bell ringing. Afterward, he continued to travel the world as a documentary cameraman, which included working with Ngawang Choephel as cinematographer and editor on Tibet in Song, winner of the Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 2009. He has also edited television shows, including *Hell's Kitchen*, *World of Jenks*, and Emmy-winning seasons of *The Amazing Race*. His visual work on *Lotus Lives* incorporates everything from traditional Malaysian shadow puppetry to digital technology.

In addition to the performances, the *Lotus Lives* team will offer three public outreach events. On Friday, Sept. 30, librettist Anne Babson will give a lunchtime talk entitled "Cross-cultural Commonalities: Women Working Collaboratively to Create Art that Speaks to Multiple Identities," at 12:15 pm in Chellis House. Next, designer Tim Bartlett and composer Su Tan give the informal talk "From Idea to Art." They will share images from the video set and participate in a Q&A on Saturday, October 1, 2011, at 4:00 pm in the Mahaney Center for the Arts Concert Hall. On Sunday, October 2, 2011, audience members are invited to the 2:15 pm pre-show talk "Glimpsing the Ephemeral," with Stephen Whiteman, Visiting Assistant Professor, History of Art, and a moderated discussion with Tan, Bartlett, and dancer Arika Yamada. All three events are free and open to the public.

Lotus Lives has been a multi-year project in development, with sponsorship from the Department of Music, the Arts Council, the Committee on the Arts, and the Director of the Arts.

Lotus Lives will be performed on Friday, Sept. 30, at 8 p.m., and Sunday, Oct. 2, 2011 at 3 p.m., in the Mahaney Center for the Arts Concert Hall. The performances are free and open to the public; no tickets are required. For more information, call 802-443-3168 or go to www.middlebury.edu/arts.

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