



ALBERT J. MARRO / STAFF PHOTO

Composer Su Lian Tan's "Lotus Lives" premieres this weekend in Middlebury College's Mahaney Center for the Arts. The opera is in one act and features a mezzo-soprano, soprano, brass quintet and percussion as well as three dancers. The music is by the Meridian Arts Ensemble. Evan Bennett is the conductor. At right, mezzo-soprano Brenda Patterson rehearses her role. Top right, Evan Bennett conducts the Meridian Arts Ensemble during a rehearsal.

'Lotus Lives'

New opera by Middlebury professor tackles gender roles

By ED BARNA

ARTS CORRESPONDENT

There will be no charge for seeing the world premiere of Middlebury College composer Su Lian Tan's chamber opera "Lotus Lives" at the Mahaney Arts Center this weekend — but there may be a price.

Those who attend this highly original collaboration among Tan, poet librettist Anne Babson, Metropolitan Opera veteran mezzo-soprano Brenda Patterson, much-traveled soprano Miriam Gordon-Stewart, the Meridian Arts Ensemble, violinist David Bowlin, choreographer and dancer Arika Yamada, dancers Denys Drozdyuk and Sonia Hsieh, video set designer and award-winning filmmaker Tim Bartlett and director Claudio Medeiros may find themselves questioning how growing up in a particular tradition has limited their own as well as Lotus' personal unfolding.

Chinese women like Lotus have endured for centuries the constrictions of assigned, gender-specific roles, but so have many others, and Tan has made it clear that her breaking of conventions

in this work is meant as the world's healings.

Leave on the music shelf any expectations derived from the pompous, high-flown operatic world of ages past. In this production, within Tan's classical melodies, listeners will find dance club music rubbing against Chinese folk music, and rap amidst the recitative, with the musical elements adapted to a non-linear narrative that explicitly simulates the petal-by-petal opening of a lotus flower.

In one respect this will continue classic opera's traditions, though by adapting modern means to intricate settings and splendid costuming that have been among opera's attractions for centuries.

However adept the scene-changers and backdrop lifters of proscenium stages may have been, they did not have the wide world's visual resources at their fingertips. This opera does, thanks to Bartlett, a "Midd kid" who has returned to campus after traveling the world as a documentary cameraman, along the way winning a Sundance Special Jury Prize for "Tibet in Song"

See Lotus, Page B2

Su Lian Tan became a composer in Vermont

By ED BARNA

ARTS CORRESPONDENT

From an early age, it was evident that Su Lian Tan was endowed with unusual musical aptitude. Born in 1964 to ethnically Chinese parents living in Malaysia, she began taking piano lessons at 6, then added the violin at 8. But it was at 13, when she heard a British flutist perform in her home city of Kuala Lumpur, that she found her instrument.

She begged her parents for lessons. By 14, she was playing the flute with orchestras in the city and on Malaysian radio and television.

Clearly she needed advanced training. She found it by passing the

See Composer, Page B2

Thursday, September 29, 2011 The Arts and Entertainment Guide of the Rutland Herald

invite

■ LOTUS LIVES

Middlebury College presents the world premiere of "Lotus Lives," an opera by Su Lian Tan and Anne Babson, on Friday at 8 p.m. and Sunday 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 online to www.middlebury.edu/arts.

There will be three associated events: Babson will speak Friday at 12:15 p.m. at the college's Chellis House on "Cross-Cultural Commonalities: Women Working Collaboratively to Create Art that Speaks to Multiple Identities"; filmmaker Tim Bartlett and Tan will give an informal talk, "From Idea to Art," share images from the video set and participate in a Q&A on Saturday at 4 p.m., in the Mahaney Center for the Arts Concert Hall; and Sunday at 2:15 p.m. in the concert hall there will be a discussion with Tan, Bartlett and dancer Arika Yamada, moderated by visiting assistant professor Stephen Whitman, with the title "Glimpsing the Ephemeral."

Lotus

Continued from Page B1

in 2009 and picking up Emmys for editing TV's "The Amazing Race." For "Lotus Lives" he has put together a montage of visual accompaniments that includes Malaysian shadow puppetry, digitized images and laser effects.

Ultimately it's Tan's show, and it's her ability to compose compelling music that will determine how long "Lotus Lives" survives. The odds on a long run are good, given her accomplishments to date.

She has been commissioned to create new works by the Takacs Quartet, New Juilliard Ensemble, Princeton University Orchestra, Encore Brass,



ALBERT J. MARRO / STAFF PHOTO

Su Lian Tan is the composer of "Lotus Lives," which premieres this weekend in Middlebury College's Mahaney Center for the Arts.

Composer

Continued from Page B1

music exam to study at Trinity College in London, where her teachers included the renowned Jean-Pierre Rampal. It was under Rampal's auspices that she came to New York City to perform at Lincoln Center and on WQXR, a classical music radio station that drew listeners from many states in the days before public radio.

Those performances in turn opened the door to working with orchestras around the United States and overseas. Among the venues was Middlebury College.

But it was at another Vermont institution of higher education, Bennington College, that Tan developed a

newfound strength: composition. Studying there in the 1980s, she encountered musician Jacob Glick, who insisted that she should move in the direction of composing.

As Tan said in an interview with Middlebury College's alumni magazine, "He was sure of something in me that I wasn't able to see."

At Glick's suggestion, Tan pursued the craft at Juilliard, then went to Princeton, from which she received a Master of Fine Arts in 1990 and a doctorate, also in composition, in 1997.

Tan's affiliation with Middlebury College was at first personal: In 1989 she married a member of the music department. In 1991 she was offered a one-year teaching position. She's been at Middlebury ever since.

An associate professor, Tan was for a time the music department head. In addition to helping student composers at all levels, she has worked to expand the visiting artist residency program, helping to bring in, for instance, the Takacs Quartet, Brentano String Quartet and the Meridian Arts Ensemble, who are collaborating in the production of "Lotus Lives."

As a composer, Tan is celebrated for her ability to blend cultural traditions, notably the gamelan orchestral music that she encountered growing up in Malaysia. At times she has gone to great lengths to cross cultural lines — once she dyed her hair yellow for a flute performance in Germany — out of interest not only in the musical aspects

Da Capo Chamber Players, Sage City Symphony, Amici Musici, The Core Ensemble, Genkin Philharmonic and individual artists and locally by the Vermont Symphony Orchestra, Vermont Music Teachers Association and Middlebury College for its bicentennial. Her music has been performed at more than 40 venues on three continents.

Not to neglect the librettist, Babson's poetry has appeared in four chapbooks and over 100 journal publications. Awards have come from the Atlanta Review, Grasslands Review and other reviews; in 2008, she was included in "Seeds of Fire," a British anthology of the best contemporary American poets.

The Meridian Arts Ensemble, with which Tan has worked on previous occasions, is composed of five brass players and a percussionist. Founded in 1987, the group has put out nine commercial releases, has taken part in more than 50 premieres and has performed in 49 states and on four continents.

Arika Yamada, the choreographer, came to the attention of Elena Tchernichova when she was 15 and studying at the Nutmeg Conservatory in Connecticut. The Russian ballet mistress (a title used in an account of how she improved standards while heading the Vienna State Opera Ballet) brought Yamada to the Vaganova Ballet Academy in St.

Petersburg for training in that tradition. Returning to the U.S., she was accepted at the Juilliard School and came in contact with many noted choreographers as part of the Juilliard Dance Ensemble. After graduating in 2009, she joined Gallim Dance, with which she has traveled to Spain, the Netherlands, Russia, Canada and cities throughout the Eastern seaboard. She has published 37 choreographic works.


Those are just some of the talents that have gathered around Tan for the production of this work, which should have an outstanding place when the history is written of how much the Chinese diaspora has contributed to world culture.

Weston Craft show

Celebrating Vermont Craftsmanship

October 7, 8, 9, 2011

10:00 am to 5:00 pm



Weston Playhouse • Route 100 • Weston, Vermont

www.westoncraftshow.com