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THE EPOCH TIMES
**ARTS &
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Child Prodigies of Classical Music
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ESSENCE
OF
CHINA

Rediscovering Our Innate Good Nature in the 'Three Character Classic'

DANIEL TENG

The "Three Character Classic," or "San Zi Jing," is the best-known classic Chinese text for children. Written by Wang Yinlian (1223-1296) during the Song Dynasty, it has been memorized by generations of Chinese people, young and old. Until the 1800s, the "Three Character Classic" was the first text that every child would study.

The text's short, simple, and rhythmic three-character verses allowed for easy reading and reciting, while the content covered a broad range of topics. It not only helped children learn common Chinese characters, grammar structures, and lessons from Chinese history but also, above all, enabled them to develop an understanding of traditional Chinese culture and the upright ways of conducting themselves as good people.

The very first lesson in the "Three Character Classic" teaches children about their original pure nature:

People at birth
Are good by nature.
Their natures are much the same,
Their habits become widely different.

In other words, people are born innately good. Infants may vary in their personality, but by and large they share similar qualities of innocence and purity.

However, as the young grow up and are influenced by different people, environments, and experiences, they develop priorities and habits that can lead them to become very different individuals.

For example, some learn to value family and filial piety as being of the highest importance; others learn to cherish money above all things. Some find gratification through material gains; others find meaning in spiritual pursuit.

Same Background, Different Values

The following anecdote illustrates how two people who grew up together can turn out very differently. A Chinese writer relates how her father, a carpenter named Jing, was a kind, honest, and respectful man who was well-liked by everyone in his village for his good character.

Jing had an old classmate and friend named Wang. One day, Wang invited Jing to his house for dinner.

As they were chatting, Jing saw that an old man who looked like a servant was cooking for them and serving them tea and wine. He asked Wang, "Who is this elderly man?"

When Wang replied, "That's my father," Jing was shocked.

Jing jumped up and said to Wang's father, "Uncle, please sit down." He helped the elderly man into his seat, poured him a glass of wine, and respectfully said, "Uncle, please forgive my rudeness."

Then, turning to Wang, Jing said, "I am

Chinese children attend preschool in Beijing on April 26, 2012. Until the 1800s, the "Three Character Classic" was the very first text that every child would study.



STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

As people are innately good, even those who have gone astray can rediscover their good nature and return to their original true selves.

no longer your friend. You don't know how to respect your elders." He picked up his tools and walked out the door.

Jing had learned from a young age that one must be respectful to one's elders and teachers. Wang, on the other hand, never learned to take this principle seriously. Despite growing up as old friends, the two had developed widely different characters and values.

Kou Zhun Receives a Lesson Beyond the Grave

So what makes a person become like Jing instead of Wang? The answer lies in the next stanza of the "Three Character Classic":

If foolishly there is no teaching,
The nature will deteriorate.
The right way in teaching
Is to attach the utmost importance in thoroughness.

A person's innately good nature is maintained through teaching and guidance throughout one's life. Without guidance, however, this good nature can become corrupted.

The story of Kou Zhun, a prime minister who lived during China's Northern Song Dynasty, offers an example.

Kou was born into a family of intellectuals. However, his father died when Kou was young, and he was raised by his mother, who wove fabric to help them get by.

Despite their poverty, Kou's mother taught and urged Kou to work hard so that he could one day make great contributions to society.

Kou proved to be extremely intelligent, and at 18, he passed the national examinations with outstanding results. He was thus among the few to be selected by the emperor to become a government official.

The good news spread to Kou's mother, who was seriously ill at the time. As she lay dying, she gave a faithful servant a painting she had made.

"Kou Zhun will one day become a gov-

ernment official," she whispered. "If his character starts to go astray, please give him this painting."

Tempering Extravagance

Kou Zhun eventually became prime minister, but fame and luxury began to go to his head. To show off his wealth and status, he decided to host an extravagant birthday celebration, replete with a banquet and opera performances.

Noticing that the time had come, the servant presented Kou with his mother's painting. Kou saw that it was a painting of himself reading a book under an oil lamp, with his mother weaving cloth by his side.

Written next to the image were these words:

Watching you endure the hardship of studying under a dim light,
I hope you will become a good person and benefit many others in the future.
Your devoted mother has taught you the virtue of thrift.

In times of wealth, never forget those who are poor, like we once were.

Reading his mother's words, Kou burst into tears. It was clear he had not lived up to her expectations. He called off the banquet.

The reminder from Kou's mother beyond the grave saved him from a downward spiral toward greed and corruption. From then on, Kou lived frugally, treated others generously, and carried out his official duties with high morals and integrity. He eventually became one of the most famous and beloved prime ministers of the Song Dynasty.

This story not only illustrates that guidance and teaching are necessary for grooming one's character, but it also carries a deeper message: As people are innately good, even those who have gone astray can rediscover their good nature and return to their original true selves. As long as they realize their mistakes and are determined to change, it's never too late.

Communist China's school children during lessons in Hefei, in East China's Anhui Province, on Sept. 20, 2010. Until the 1800s, the "Three Character Classic" was the very first text that every child would study.

STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Mezzo Solos by Brahms, Elgar, and The Brothers Balliett

CATHERINE YANG

On May 3, The Cecilia Chorus of New York performs an interesting triptych of pieces shining the spotlight on the mezzo-soprano soloist.

The concert honors Alice Mandelick Flager (1872-1918), who was a mezzo-soprano, founding member, and benefactor of the chorus. On contemplating the role of altos, conductor Mark Shapiro found that these voices often hold together the chorus, only to have the audience give the glory to the sopranos. In opera, mezzo-sopranos sometimes suffer the same affliction, relegated to a side character.

But digging into an array of works, Shapiro found pieces by Johannes Brahms and Edward Elgar and was "struck by the poetry latent in each composer's choice of a lone mezzo to counterbalance the chorus," Shapiro wrote in a conductor's note. "She embodies nobility, wisdom, tenderness—and a poignant solitariness."

Furthermore, the "Alto Rhapsody" by Brahms and "The Music Makers" by Elgar both give us a deeper look at the journey of an artist.

While putting the concert together, the chorus had also commissioned contemporary composers The Brothers Balliett for a new work, which will be premiered at the same concert.

Mezzo soloists Renée Tatum, Naomi Louisa O'Connell, and Amanda Lynn Bottoms will perform with the choir on May 3 for the concert at Carnegie Hall.

'Alto Rhapsody'

Out of the three works, Brahms's "Alto Rhapsody" is likely the most familiar to audiences. While it is not often performed in concert, many singers have made recordings of the work.

"It's a jewel of the repertoire, if you're lucky enough to have the opportunity to sing it," Renée Tatum said by phone.

For Tatum, it is a new piece to perform, and an interesting challenge.

"It's largely emotional. It has a lot of introspection, and it has a lot of outward, declamatory, emotional life as well," Tatum said.

The story is about the inner life of an artist, she explained. The text comes from a poem about the wandering of a lost soul, urged to give up his suffering and to find spiritual fulfillment.

Being able to perform a work that allows a singer to show so much of his or her artistic range is most rewarding, and Tatum finds that in the Brahms "Alto Rhapsody."



(Left) Mark Shapiro, music director and conductor of The Cecilia Chorus of New York.



ALL PHOTOS BY THE CECILIA CHORUS OF NEW YORK

(Right) The Cecilia Chorus of New York will perform works by Brahms, Elgar, and The Brothers Balliett on May 3, at Carnegie Hall.

In these works, the mezzo becomes a Romantic hero isolated in an intimidating landscape.

"You have the opportunity to reveal a lot about yourself as a singer and as a musician," Tatum said.

'The Music Makers'
Elgar's "The Music Makers" is similarly metaphorical. Commenting on the piece itself, he said, "I have written out my soul."

The text, the poem "Ode" by Arthur O'Shaughnessy, might seem lofty at first glance, but "it actually hits quite close to home," said Naomi Louisa O'Connell by phone.

"It speaks about the role of artists in society, as well as what the life of an artist can be," O'Connell said. So, in fact, it feels personal, and can be so even if you are not an artist. "It talks about inspiration, and this goes beyond artists; I'm sure that the notion of wanting to make a dream become reality will resonate with most people."

"Something to listen out for in the piece is how Elgar set the lines 'We are the music-makers / And we are the dreamers of dreams,' which begin and end the piece. It's otherworldly and gives me chills every time I hear it," she said.

O'Connell most enjoys a piece that lets her plug into a story and find her character, and the way Elgar insightfully sets the text to music allows for that.

"It's gloriously colorful and will stick you to the back of the hall with sound in places, but he also skinnies it down to the barest whisper when the text requires it," she said.

'Fifty Trillion Molecular Geniuses'

Identical twins Brad and Doug Balliett wrote "Fifty Trillion Molecular Geniuses" using text from neuroanatomist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's book and Ted Talk "My Stroke of Insight." It is her story about how a stroke took away her brain functions one by one—speech, movement, understanding—but remembering every moment.

Amanda Lynn Bottoms says the piece is unexpected both musically and as a story.

"The things that are said are things we never would think about on a daily basis. We don't consider that a small molecular part of us allows us to breathe and to love and to smell," she wrote in a statement about the new work, which begins with a fugue. "This is a very elevated experience. It forces me to dive even further into my acting, my interpretation of text."

"There are moments of joy and moments of tragedy and fear. I'm excited to dig into my bag and pull those out," wrote Bottoms, who has experience with acting in musical theater.

All three of these works grapple in "search of a larger purpose," Shapiro wrote. They invoke the universal yearning for meaning, wholeness, and belonging in both place and time.

In these works, the mezzo becomes a Romantic hero isolated in an intimidating landscape, Shapiro discovered, making the program an interesting musical journey through which listeners might just come to discover some deeper truth, or something about themselves.

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The Beauty of Art and Nature

Enliven your spirit at the Pacific Bonsai Museum

KATHERINE WIMBLE FOX

Bonsai is distinct from other visual arts in that its creative medium—a tree—is alive. Unlike a painting or sculpture, which rarely changes after the artist applies the last brushstroke or chisels the last facet, a bonsai continues to grow and develop over its lifetime. Bonsai is a Japanese word, but the art of growing these trees originates in China, where it is called “penjing.”

A bonsai responds to the artist, and to the environment, and the artist responds in turn in an ever-changing dance. The work of art is never finished, always becoming. With proper care, bonsai can live in their containers for hundreds of years and therefore routinely far outlive their original artists. Bonsai often get passed down over generations, becoming imbued with layers of collaborative, artistic expression.

The Pacific Bonsai Museum is one of only a handful of public museums in the world solely dedicated to bonsai. Its bonsai collection includes more than 150 trees from China, Canada, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the United States—among the finest and most geographically diverse bonsai collections anywhere. When trees are accessioned into the collection of the Pacific Bonsai Museum, they often come with a deep history of artistic intervention—some having been touched by the most revered pioneers in the field. Bonsai created by Xueming Lu, Amy Liang Chang, John Naka (known as the “father of American bonsai”), Ben Oki, Harry Hirao, Vaughn Banting, Nick Lenz, and Melba Tucker are among the most noteworthy in the collection.

Aarin Packard, the museum’s curator, who oversees the collection’s artistic and botanical direction, is constantly reminded of what an honor it is to care for these living beings: “Bonsai are a touchstone for me; I not only feel connected to each tree, but to each person who has cared for it in the past and even to those who will care for them in the future after I’m gone.”

The oldest tree in the Pacific Bonsai Museum’s permanent collection—a Korean Yew (*Taxus cuspidata*)—has an estimated birthdate in the year 1500 and has been a bonsai since Su Hyung Yoo began training it in 1986. The museum’s largest bonsai is its signature “Domoto Maple,” named after the Japanese-American nurseryman Kanetaro Domoto, who cared for the tree after it was imported to America from Japan as a bonsai in 1915. It has endured trauma and war, standing as a testament to the will to live and the power of perseverance.

Bonsai is an art with ancient roots in China from at least the third century. For the past 100 years, the art has been embraced by North Americans who have evolved it in unique and open-minded ways. In America, bonsai is finding new ground, with fewer rules and a range of new “bonsai-able” tree species.

The Pacific Bonsai Museum attracts a worldwide audience by presenting fresh exhibits, the likes of which the world has never seen before. The 2017 exhibit, “Natives,” was the first exhibit to exclusively present bonsai trees that are botanically endemic to the United States. “Natives” not only helped make bonsai relatable to American audiences but also celebrated the beauty and diversity of American native trees.

The museum’s 2016 exhibit, “Decked Out: From Scroll to Skateboard,” also provided points of connection to American cultural references. In place of hanging scrolls—traditionally hung beside bonsai in Japanese bonsai displays—“Decked Out” displayed custom skate decks painted by some of the Pacific Northwest’s most talented urban muralists with modern street-art styles. The mash-up

Bonsai is an art with ancient roots in China from at least the third century.

Chinese Elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*) “penjing” created in the early 1980s by Qingquan Zhao.



The Pacific Bonsai Museum’s serene setting in Federal Way, Washington, with a display of bonsai.

helped visitors see both disciplines differently and attracted new audiences to bonsai.

In the open air, against the backdrop of towering conifers in a wooded area at the heart of the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan region, the exquisite collection at the Pacific Bonsai Museum is rendered sublime. Upon arrival, visitors walk a wooded trail that transports them from the everyday to the threshold of the magical. As visitors stroll the grounds, they find harmony, grace, and delight. Each bonsai sits on its own table, set within display niches organized as an outdoor art museum with no roof.

The Pacific Bonsai Museum is one of only a handful of public museums in the world solely dedicated to bonsai.

Visitors come from around the world to admire the bonsai and reap the compounding benefits of time spent outdoors, time spent experiencing beauty, and time spent soothing the soul. “Our hope is that you will feel closer to nature and inspired as you experience the museum,” says Kathy McCabe, the museum’s executive director, adding, “There’s always more to see, in every tree and in every season.”

The Pacific Bonsai Museum is open six days a week (Tuesday through Sunday), from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is free, although donations are always appreciated. Don’t miss the museum’s 2019 special exhibits, “Living Art of Bonsai: Principles of Design,” and “Gnarly: The Dan Robinson Retrospective,” which are on view May 11 through September 29.

This article was written by Katherine Wimble Fox and is published, with permission, from Elle Lifestyle Magazine. Katherine Wimble Fox is a Seattle-based writer and designer who currently works as the communications manager at the Pacific Bonsai Museum.



Korean Yew (*Taxus cuspidata*), born around 1500, in training as a bonsai since 1986. Original artist: Su Hyung Yoo.



The “Domoto Maple” in summer, (*Acer buergerianum*), in training as a bonsai since at least 1913. Artist: Toichi Domoto.



The “Domoto Maple” in winter, (*Acer buergerianum*), in training as a bonsai since at least 1913. Artist: Toichi Domoto.



Alaska’s Aleutian Range as part of the “Natives” exhibition. Subalpine Fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*) forest planting and also accent planting by Young Choe, kusanomono container by Victoria Chamberlain, and “Alaska” painting by luna Tinta.

THEATER REVIEW

When the Unspeakable Is Accepted

JUDD HOLLANDER

NEW YORK—No one's life is worth more or less than any other's is a statement that's the central message of Stephen Unwin's drama "All Our Children." This quietly unnerving work is having its American premiere at the Sheen Center for Thought & Culture.

It's early January, 1941, and as Germany moves into the New Year, the majority of the country's people seem to be roundly behind Adolph Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers (also known as the Nazi) Party. They're convinced that any changes deemed necessary by those in charge are strictly for the greater good of the country.

Yet whispers of something darker can be heard in some quarters. They paint a picture not at all pretty, such as how children judged to be mentally disabled are being secretly murdered in the name of Aryan purity and the economic bottom line.

This is the situation that Dr. Victor Franz (Karl Kenzler) tries desperately to avoid facing. As the director of a clinic charged with caring for such children, it has fallen to him to sign the final orders that will send some of them to their deaths.

This policy is carried out under the approving eyes of Eric Schmidt (Sam Lilja), the clinic's young deputy director, and proud Nazi Party member.

Dr. Franz, wanting nothing more than to stay out of trouble, has convinced himself that what he is doing makes sense for all concerned. More than a few of the children's family members have been only too glad to turn their young charges over to the clinic, as it relieves them of their economic and emotional stress.

Now Dr. Franz has been informed that he is to meet with Bishop von Galen (John Glover). A well-respected member of the clergy, the bishop has begun to suspect what is happening to these children and has started to speak out against the practice. Dr. Franz has been charged with placating von Galen with facts and figures (that is, how the cost of caring for someone unable to look after themselves would be much better utilized elsewhere), so the bishop will stop questioning the new order of things.

Offering an ominous warning about the dangers of not questioning decisions made by the few for the supposed benefit of the many, "All Our Children" reveals, in its most chill-



ALL PHOTOS BY MARIA BARANOVA

'All Our Children'

Sheen Center for Thought and Culture
18 Bleecker St., New York

Tickets
212-925-2812 or
SheenCenter.org

Running Time
1 hour, 30 minutes
(no intermission)

Closes
May 12

A difference of opinion: Bishop von Galen (John Glover, L) opposes the National Socialist German Workers Party's policies enforced by the deputy director of a clinic for disabled children (Sam Lilja), while the clinic's doctor, Dr. Victor Franz (Karl Kenzler), looks on.

ing aspect, the matter-of-fact attitudes of the various characters.

This frame of mind applies not only to Dr. Franz but also to Martha (Jennifer Dundas), a maid at the clinic who sees herself as a good German citizen; and Elizabetta (Tasha Lawrence), a woman who comes to find out about her son, who is a patient at the clinic.

There's also Martha's daughter who, at age 15, believes there's nothing wrong if she happens to get pregnant by her new admirer. She understands that having babies is the moral duty of every German woman of childbearing years.

There are also some rather interesting, almost throwaway lines in the show, which serve to show just how few worldwide were totally innocent regarding the events depicted.

In the end, it becomes clear that we must not only learn to question what those in power claim to be true, but also take an active stand against actions we believe to be wrong. For if we don't, we ourselves become part of the problem.

While the bishop understands the importance of following his conscience, it's something many of the other characters have yet to realize. And, ironically, even though

von Galen is aghast at what is happening to Germany's children, he's loath to accuse his own superiors. He downplays Dr. Franz's question regarding the Vatican's position on what Germany is doing.

While the show has some excellent points to make, it would have worked better had the piece focused on von Galen. He is the only character in the play who actually lived, and who, according to the program notes, has a fascinating backstory.

However, the bishop doesn't appear until more than two-thirds into the show, for a meeting with Dr. Franz that comes off as little more than overlong verbal volleying. The two men have staked out their positions long before they come face to face. Kenzler's portrayal of Dr. Franz also comes off as far too low-key to be effective.

The rest of the casting is fine, with each of the actors playing their roles with the appropriate amount of gravitas, threat, and/or



Dr. Victor Franz (Karl Kenzler) tries to avoid facing the morality of his actions, in "All Our Children."

denial, but, as with Kenzler, none connect with the audience as deeply as they should.

The one exception occurs during Lawrence's scene in which Elizabetta has a final encounter with Dr. Franz. Unfortunately, what happens ends up feeling rather out of place from what has come before, so that the scene seems tossed in to shake up the narrative rather than serve as an integral part of it.

Lee Savage's set of Dr. Franz's office, with what seems to be endless rows of filing cabinets stretching to the ceiling, each drawer containing, one assumes, the various patient histories, helps to bring forth the immensity of what is happening.

"All Our Children" is a play with quite a lot to say. Regrettably, the story feels more like an academic exercise on ethics and responsibility rather than a piece of theater.

Judd Hollander is a reviewer for Stagebuzz.com and a member of the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics Circle. He may be reached at bhncpeop@aol.com

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