



Thai-British composer Prach Boondiskulchok (b. 1985 in Bangkok) moved to Britain at the age of 14 to study piano and composition. Since then, he has built up a remarkable body of work that now includes the opera *Burmese Days*, a new work that interweaves several artistic and autobiographical threads.

The opera is based on the novel of the same name by George Orwell, first published in 1934. What about it appealed to you?

For that, we have to go back to my earliest childhood in Thailand. At state school, we were taught both traditional Thai and Western classical music. From my childhood to the present day, I have always carried with me an awareness of those two worlds. As a composer, I aim to be in different places at the same time. As a Thai working in Europe, a performer of classical repertoire but also a composer seeking new paths, I am confronted with the questions: Who am I? And what is my music? The answer is: always something in-between, looking forward and backward, east and west, inward and outward. Many books have been written about this state of consciousness, but when I read *Burmese Days* for the first time during a holiday in Cambodia, a light bulb went off in my head: this book was the perfect subject for an opera.

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Orwell looks at the East with a Western gaze, but in reality we are all outsiders when it comes to the history of this region. So much has changed over the last few centuries. In many ways, a Thai or Burmese person today is also a total foreigner to pre-colonial Southeast Asia. It is interesting how Orwell develops the character of the British colonialist John Flory as someone who is part of the system but at the same time maintains a critical distance from it. This touches on the way I have researched the music of this region and how I have incorporated it into my own so-called classical musical idiom. The novel has given me the opportunity to express things that I have been, perhaps unconsciously, working on all my life.

How would you describe the music of Myanmar or Thailand?

I realize that this is a terrible generalization, but there are roughly two types of music. On the one hand, there is what we call folk music – but there are countless different forms of this in Myanmar and Thailand. And then there is court music. There was a lot of exchange going on between the courts of the Southeast Asian city-states. A lot actually originates from Balinese and Javanese gamelan music, which is even older. Burmese and Thai music share the way they treat melodies: a central melody is shared by all the musicians, but they each embellish according to their instruments' idioms and materialities. Double-reed wind instruments such as the *pi* or the *hnè* are the loudest and thus also lead the melody in a virtuoso manner. The combination of melodic percussion and such an instrument is prevalent throughout the region. I hope the audience will be able to discover my version of these melodies and their special pitches, in combination with my classical idiom.

How does that relate to the singing voices?

Actually, the first answer to this is very simple: for me, the voice primarily expresses the text. The five singers, who together sing seven roles, have their own vocal tradition. U Po Kyin, the hugely ambitious Burmese magistrate who wants to be accepted into the British club, has a fairly virtuoso but at the same time modern style. Ma Hla May, a singer and John Flory's Burmese lover, sings in a style closer to the vocal traditions of Myanmar. All the other characters are somewhere in between.

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Burmese Days is an early novel by George Orwell about Myanmar. He himself was stationed there for some time as a colonial soldier and police officer. Is the main character an autobiographical reflection of Orwell himself?

Anyone who reads the novel can hardly conclude anything other than that Flory is Orwell. This is evident in the artistic sensibility of the character alone. He is critical of the British colonial empire, but he also benefits from it. The theoretical criticism of a system in which you yourself are complicit always entails a certain tension. That is an Orwellian theme. Flory is Orwell, but also you and me. We all find ourselves in the same situation in some regard. Personally, however, I also identify with U Po Kyin. Orwell portrays him as a laughable and bad character, but I feel some affinity, perhaps because I am also a kind of outsider everywhere. While U Po Kyin is corrupt, it is the system that produces people like him.

And he also faces a foreign occupier.

Exactly. We are not making any moral judgements. We are trying to show that part of the Burmese world as it is – or was. This is not a postcolonial critique of the British occupation. It is about the complex elements of a society and clashing cultures and the richness that can ensue.

Translation: Patrick Lennon

Willem Bruls

Dramaturge and author Willem Bruls has published on orientalism in opera, the musical culture of Venice, and the musical history of Aleppo. He also works internationally as a production dramaturge.