PART

I

The Beast with Eighty-Eight Teeth

CHAPTER

1

Music Torture

THE MOOD IN the Metropolitan Opera rehearsal room was tense and frustrated. Tempers were fraying.

"I can't play it another way. I've changed it so many times already, I just cannot do it again," said the normally accommodating soprano Elizabeth Futral, in a don't-mess-with-me tone of voice.

The December 2006 world premiere of *The First Emperor* was one week away, and our collective spirit was deteriorating. Every opening of a new production is fraught; multiply that by a hundred for a brand-new opera. But this opera had even more at stake. Plácido Domingo, the biggest star currently on the opera stage, was heading this first-ever Chinese-written, Chinese-directed, Chinese-designed opera, which was also the first-ever collaboration between the Metropolitan Opera and a Chinese creative team. Composer Tan Dun, whose film scores for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero* were his works most familiar to American audiences, had teamed with Chinese film director Zhang Yimou, whose movies had ranged from the small and tragic, such as *Raise the Red Lantern*, to the spectacular, like *Hero*. The libretto was written in English by the prize-winning Chinese novelist Ha Jin.

For me, *The First Emperor* represented the first time in my opera career that I would sing the role of an actual Chinese character in a work about real Chinese history. By that time, I had sung King Timur in Puccini's Italian conception of a Chinese opera, *Turandot*, at least two hundred times in opera houses all over the world. But never had an opera been presented for Western ears that told an authentic Chinese story, written by a Chinese

composer, with a production designed by a Chinese artist. I could bring my personal history and that of my country to bear on this work, in which I was to sing the principal role of the doomed General Wang, who also happens to have some great singing in this opera.

Publicity was everywhere in print and on the airwaves and had been growing for months. Now this opera was being billed as a breakthrough in the history of the art form and even of East-West relations. Oh, the pressure.

"Okay, let's take a twenty-minute break," sighed one of the Met's artistic staff members.

As the cast and production crew began to wander off, I sat down to let my fingers loose on the piano. I needed to lighten the mood. The tune that came to my fingers was "The East Is Red," the

Plácido Domingo (on the left) sang the title role in The First Emperor, *a Chinese-written opera by Tan Dun that had its world premiere at the Met in December 2006. I'm the general, who believes he will gain the hand of the princess once he fights the emperor's bloody battles. But the princess has a mind of her own and the centerpiece love scene is not with the general.*

omnipresent anthem from the long-gone era of the Cultural Revolution. And then, all around me, one by one, Chinese voices began to sing:

Dongfan hong, taiyang sheng,
Zhongguo chu liao ge Mao Zedong,
Ta wei renmin mou xingu,
Hu er hei you, ta shi renmin da jiu xing.

Our peals of laughter must have rolled out like a tidal wave into the hallway. The people from the Met and the non-Chinese performers, who had no idea what we were singing about, rushed back in. They were astonished to find Zhang Yimou, normally so dour, singing and raising his fist to the sky in a gesture familiar to anyone who had been alive during the Cultural Revolution. And his co-director, Wang Chaoge, who had been the most stressed out of his team, was actually dancing! Now all the singers were back in the room, and everybody was laughing, something no one had expected to experience during this rehearsal.

For the full twenty minutes we sang and sang and sang, one revolutionary song after another, plus set pieces with characteristic poses from the model operas we'd been required to attend during the Cultural Revolution. Wang Chaoge danced on, Zhang Yimou leaped about and gestured, and, as I added my own voice, I felt a rush of mixed feelings. The Cultural Revolution had been such a difficult time.

Whenever I sing "The East Is Red" now, so often I think back to an evening I spent in 1971 with a peasant farmer near my home in Beijing. The dumpling restaurant where I'd come for a cheap dinner that cold winter night was fairly crowded. I sat down at a table that had only one other customer, a very dirty man with a filthy old winter coat but no shirt on underneath. He probably wasn't as ancient as he looked, but the lines on his face were deep, not to mention dirt-caked. He quietly sang some old folk songs while nursing a cup of cheap Mongolian wine made from white yams. I'd heard many of his tunes before, since most of our

revolutionary songs, including "The East Is Red," had been set to old folk melodies, but I'd never heard these lyrics, some of which were very romantic, some raunchy. Though it was a little hard to understand the man, because he had no front teeth, I got to talking with him. He told me he had just delivered a load of cabbages to the city and was now on the way back to his village. With his horse and cart, the trip in had taken him all day, and the trip back would take him all night. Because of traffic congestion, farmers with carts were allowed to come into the city only at night in those days. I asked him about his life and his songs, and for four hours I bought us both more cups of the harsh, burning, definitely intoxicating wine.

The man told me he knew all the old folk songs but wasn't so good at the new words. Back in 1966, he said, some Red Guards took offense when they heard him singing "The East Is Red" with the lyrics to the original love song. They rushed over and began to beat him. He was a counterrevolutionary, they yelled, because he had "changed the text" of an important revolutionary song, and that was a big crime. When they demanded that he sing it with the "correct" words, he was so scared he couldn't remember them. They beat him harder and threatened him more. At one point they had his head pushed down nearly to the ground as they hit him across the back of his skull. But the more they hurt him, the less he could recall the required lyrics. So they said that if he couldn't sing the song correctly, they would make sure he could no longer sing the words at all, and they smashed him with a stick directly in his mouth. Laughing as he told me this, he pointed to the empty hole where his front teeth should be. He laughed and laughed.

And here, more than thirty-five years later, in a rehearsal room at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, were three survivors of that horrific decade, singing those songs of oppression, yet suffused with the warmth of bittersweet nostalgia. We were back in our youth, the youth in our hearts, feeling a camaraderie that lifted our transient worldly cares. I felt such a loving kinship with my Chinese colleagues. We had come through that terrible time, yet in spite of it, or perhaps because of it, we had discovered our artistic identities. And life goes on.

We wrapped up our little intermezzo in such fine spirits, with a rendition of "East Wind Blows," a popular revolutionary song from those days with lyrics from a Chairman Mao quotation: "The east wind of socialism is prevailing over the west wind of imperialism." We sang it in Chinese, so who knew? We were young again, invigorated, ready for anything.

It was good to be born in Beijing.

Ever since the Forbidden City had become home to China's ruling dynasties in the fifteenth century, the people of Beijing have believed themselves more cultured, more refined, more knowledgeable, and better-spoken than everyone else in this vast and ancient land. By the time I howled my way into the universe, Beijing was Chairman Mao's seat of power. Nanjing had been Chiang Kai-shek's center of government during the Kuomintang (KMT), or Nationalist Party, period. In 1949, after the revolution, the Communists reestablished the capital of the People's Republic of China in its historic place in the land.

Because of the *hukou* system, which confined the residence of each Chinese citizen to one particular location that was registered at birth, a person born elsewhere in China could not remain in Beijing for more than a brief period. Indeed, no one could move—even from a rural area to a nearby town—without government approval, which was hard to obtain. The system remains in effect even now, and it is especially difficult to change from a rural to a city *hukou*—although this is becoming easier to evade with all the free enterprise that is prevalent throughout China today. Nowadays, at least half of the people in Beijing were not born there, and perhaps the superior airs of those in the capital are fading. But in those days, to have a Beijing *hukou* was a huge privilege.

My parents had not been born anywhere near Beijing. Although they grew up just one mountain apart in rural Shanxi province, they did not know each other when they left their families in 1939 to fight the Japanese. In the town of Jincheng, my mother's family, named Du, had once been very influential and had owned considerable property. Their tile-roofed houses encompassed five

courtyards, all connected to one another and surrounded by thick gray-brick walls. The Du family was so well-off generations ago that they had their own *si shu*, or traditional Chinese elementary school, just for their own children. There was even a separate hall in their home to preserve their ancestors' memorial tablets and the family *zupu*, the book of generations in which all names were recorded.

By the time my mother was born, however, her family's circumstances had vastly changed. Her father eventually had to leave the family in Jincheng to live far away in Beijing, where he worked as a private chef in an antique store to support his family. The Japanese, who invaded Shanxi province in 1937, captured my mother's two oldest brothers; one was never heard from again, and the other died in captivity after he broke his back doing hard labor. Two words—"Move out!"—spared her father's life. Lined up alongside other men in their village, he awaited his turn as, one by one, their throats were cut. The sword was at my grandpa's neck when the commander issued the fateful order that inadvertently saved his life.

My mother had received no education until she was ten, when she pleaded with the local teacher to allow her to study, even though she had no money to pay for it. The good woman offered to teach my mother to knit and to help her sell what she made to pay her tuition. Thus, my mother obtained three years of education—enough, in her words, "to go do Revolution."

My father was from Yangcheng, a poor farming village in the mountains. He was one of six children in the Sun family. They were so poor that his parents gave him up for adoption to a family named Tian; two of his brothers went to other families. By the time he met my mother in the entertainment unit of the 93rd Army Battalion, the Japanese had already massacred hundreds of thousands of civilians in the siege of the Chinese capital at Nanjing. The two young teens had no musical training, but they had no end of vitality and enthusiasm—and outrage. Their mission was to fill the soldiers' and the citizens' hearts and minds with courage and patriotic fervor through music, dance, and drama. It was something they would do, in one way or another, for the rest of their professional lives.

To their chagrin, their battalion soon fell into retreat, so, along with three of their friends, they simply walked away, to seek the enemy on their own. Until they saw their names painted huge on billboards as deserters to be executed when found, they had no concept of AWOL. Too late, they shed their uniforms. Military police caught up with them at a railway station. The five cried their eyes out. The senior officer took pity on them and, moved by their desire to face the foreign invader, let them escape.

Now the thirteen- and fourteen-year-old comrades made their way to the Second Anti-Enemy Performing Arts Troupe, one of ten propaganda ensembles under the aegis of the KMT. Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek had agreed to abandon their civil war, to form a united front under KMT military leadership to fight the Japanese. My parents did not know at first that the Second Troupe was an underground Communist cell. It was under the leadership of Zhou Enlai, who would one day serve as premier of Communist China, but who, like everyone else in wartime, wore the KMT uniform. Soon their political sympathies leaned earnestly, if secretly, leftward. As the Japanese approached and bullets flew, they sang and danced and acted their way from town to town, encouraging soldiers and townsfolk alike to be just as strong and brave and patriotic as they were.

Soon after they joined, the Second Anti-Enemy Performing Arts Troupe was selected to perform the premiere of *The Yellow River Cantata*. Immediately, the stirring work became the symbol of Chinese defiance against the Japanese. (It remains the most famous choral work in China and is known in every Chinese community throughout the world.) As a result, the Second Troupe became famous throughout China. But the KMT leadership was growing suspicious of the political allegiance of this troupe. Why, they began to wonder, had the Second Troupe been chosen over the other nine ensembles? Was it because the performance was held in Yan'an, the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party? Misgivings were so great by the end of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression that the KMT government detained a third of the troupe's members and grilled them for three months. My

parents were not held, however, and although my father had joined the Communist Party in 1941, no one disclosed this or any other secret. Ultimately, the ensemble relocated to Beijing (then called Beiping), where they performed in the massive public celebration of the Chinese victory over the Japanese.

Without a common enemy, all pretense of cooperation between the KMT and the Communists disintegrated. Civil war broke out again in 1946. My father became involved with clandestine Communist activities at Beijing University, teaching sympathizers the music and politics of revolution. Beijing was occupied by the KMT, and my parents, now married, continued to wear that uniform. But when it appeared that the troupe's true leanings were finally going to be exposed and arrests were imminent, all the members made their escape in small groups and went their separate ways. My parents decided to head for Communist Party headquarters, then in central Hebei province, about two hundred miles away. Disguised in long traditional Chinese gowns and with my mother cradling their infant firstborn, my parents made the dangerous journey by train, bus, and horse cart. They had to show their false identification papers to prove their Communist loyalties at blockade after blockade.

The Communists placed my parents in the brand-new university founded by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the new name for the Red Army, to train officials for the new China—Xin Jongguo—they were fighting for. Here, they studied music as well as politics and joined the PLA. Both studied violin; my mother also studied piano and began to compose. Here, too, they became part of the first formal philharmonic orchestra of the Communist military force. As the civil war raged on, they often studied or practiced while on the march, fleeing Nationalist bombers. In this stressful life, my mother produced no milk for my brother. The advancing force had to scout for nursing mothers in each village ahead of them, and my brother would be put to a stranger's breast until their group had marched completely through. In the next village, the process would be repeated. And so it was always said that my brother grew up drinking milk from a hundred mothers.

After the Communist victory in 1949 and Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan (then called Formosa), the new government founded the Central Conservatory of Music in the city of Tianjin. The PLA sent twenty people, including my parents, to be part of the first class, reserved for officials with military backgrounds. Nothing in this newly proclaimed land was separate from Communist beneficence, certainly not the study of music, for on the wings of song one can control the hearts of the people.

At that time, Mao Zedong and the Party leadership were enamored of Stalinist Communism, so my parents' musical education was modeled on the Soviet system, which was rigorously classical in the Western tradition. The Central Conservatory relocated to the capital in 1950, and thus my parents moved back to Beijing. By now, my father had taken up conducting and my mother had become a composer.

In 1950 and 1951, the PLA was ready to organize its own new song and dance ensembles. They chose my father to be among the founders of the new orchestra of the People's Liberation Army Song and Dance Ensemble, under the umbrella of the Zhongzheng, the powerful political arm of the PLA. My mother became an ensemble composer. She wrote song and dance music, all with revolutionary themes. She sometimes used folk melodies and composed in a Chinese style but with the Western musical scales and the compositional technique she had learned at the conservatory. Every military branch and virtually every unit had their own such troupes; at their peak, there must have been more than a hundred of them. The PLA Zhongzheng Song and Dance Ensemble was the most influential, famous, and powerful of them all. My parents were important people.

It was the realization of their ideals and dreams. They had dedicated their youth to a cause, decimated the enemy, defended their beliefs—and now the People's Republic of China was raising them up. The Communists created an enormously complex system of rank and privilege. Among officials alone, there were twenty-four ranks. The highest officials were ranked from one to thirteen, which was my father's designation. My mother lagged a level behind; she had not

joined the Party until 1949, in part, family legend has it, because she had a big mouth and did not keep all her thoughts to herself. Workers made about forty yuan a month, equivalent to about five dollars by today's valuation. Pay at the highest levels could be upward of three hundred yuan. My father made one hundred sixty, my mother one hundred twenty. They were entitled to better housing than were officials or comrades of lower levels, but not as good as people at higher levels. Likewise, they were fed from special stores of food but not the best and were entitled to different levels of hospital care. My father could travel by train first-class (called soft-bed level); my mother was entitled only to a hard bed—fortunately, they rarely traveled together—while the lowest classes were permitted only seats, no beds. The highest of the high ranks might have had the whole train car or a Soviet-made car and driver for their personal use. The first Chinese-made car, the Red Flag (Hongqi), was the pride of Mao Zedong and became the official car of the Chinese head of state. Today's Chinese leaders prefer Audis and Mercedes. You can still ride in a Red Flag; just call a car service—or buy one.

My own background was officially *geming junren*—revolutionary military. It held great prestige. I was very proud of it.

Class background—*beijing* (spelled and pronounced differently from the city name in Chinese)—was everything in New China. Where you came from and who your people were and what they had done before the Communists took power remained of greatest significance to your survival. To have a military, worker, or farmer background made you a pillar of the new society. But if your family had been in trade before 1949, then your background was bourgeoisie entrepreneur, and that was very bad. If your ancestors had been landlords, they were reactionaries and you were equally despised and poorly treated. One of the worst backgrounds was having relatives overseas, *haiwai guanxi*. It was especially bad for you if your relatives had gone to Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States, or Europe; then you were treated like a spy. (The immediate family of my wife, Martha, had relocated to Hong Kong, for which her relatives in China suffered unspeakably.) And, of course, having

been a KMT made you a counterrevolutionary, which made it difficult and sometimes impossible to find employment, education, and housing or even to maintain the right to live.

But to have a good background—and by the time I was born, there was nothing better than my parents' senior revolutionary background—meant a higher rank, a better position, a higher salary, better housing, and great prestige. Revolutionary military seniority was decided according to when you began to serve the country during the revolution. The most senior of all were those who had joined the Red Army in the late 1920s, especially those who had participated in the Long March in the early 1930s and who had fought in the anti-Japanese war.

Later, as the Cultural Revolution approached in the mid-sixties, the boundaries of bad backgrounds expanded. As Mao Zedong became an absolute ruler, the proletarian purity of class and family, stretching backward over generations, became a bloody goal. Yet even an otherwise faultless background could change overnight because of some newly apparent or implied wrongdoings by just one member of a family. Suddenly, the whole family had a bad, antirevolutionary background, and friends and extended family members would shun them as enemies. Such was the case with my family. My parents' earliest, adolescent, heartfelt fervor would come back to haunt them and to ruin me.

In 1954, though, Little Deer's universe consisted of the similarly privileged in a large military *dayuan* (residence compound). How I loved my parents' uniforms! I am still drawn to those shades of brown and green. The military uniforms in the early days of the People's Republic of China were much influenced by those of the USSR in color, style, and quality of the material, which varied depending on rank. My parents' uniforms were of very fine materials. (Later, during the Cultural Revolution, all ranks wore cotton, and the red collar and the single red star on the cap replaced the gold stars that previously differentiated the various ranks.)

All of the Zhongzheng ensemble members lived and worked together in the same buildings. My parents lived in the north building with the orchestra members. The singers and the dancers lived in

In three generations in China, how drastically things will change. My mother's father represents the old traditions. My mother wears her People's Liberation Army uniform. At age two, I have barely begun my journey from Mao to the Met—but I'll get there.

the south building. Both buildings had three upper floors each, and my parents' apartment was on the ground floor. At the end of the hallway was the infirmary. To this day, the smell of disinfectant invokes in me the memory of being in a bright, sunny, clean place with none of Beijing's otherwise inescapable dust. I often wandered into the perfectly sanitary world of the infirmary and watched the doctors and the nurses with long white robes over their uniforms. Even when there were no patients, everyone was always cleaning, mopping, and washing windows. I was crazy about the smell of disinfectant.

As a small boy, in good weather I sometimes played outside in the courtyard among the gardens and the trees. There was a greenhouse, tended by an old gardener who used to put potted flowers in the garden. When I was old enough, I sneaked grapes from his grapevine. I remember the rustling leaves of the *yang* trees, which

I know now as poplars. Those I must have heard in the afternoons, when young men and women performers were often outside cleaning the compound. Mornings were practice hours, and mostly what I remember hearing was a strange cacophony of sounds coming from the different windows, like a chorus, an orchestra, and a ballet forever warming up.

But these were not the daily sounds of my early life, for, unlike my brother, I did not live with my parents during those years. In the six years that separated my brother and me, our parents had become too busy traveling around the country and throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to look after their children. While my father was touring with the ensemble, my mother often went off to the minority areas and collected folk music, to provide ideas for her compositions. Sometimes my parents composed together, working the whole night. And as important in the official hierarchy as they were, they had only two rooms in the four-story building complex, one of which was their studio. The building was more a dormitory than an apartment. Everyone living there shared a common bathroom.

So when I was almost two, they hired a nanny, and I, and eventually my little sister, Lin, who's three years younger than I am, went to live with her. Hao Qian, whom we called Tian Mimi, was in boarding school. Four of us—including my nanny's daughter and, on weekends, my brother—lived in a traditional single-story Beijing walled quadrangle, or *siheyuan*, about ten minutes' walk from my parents' apartment. Formerly home to one family and now totally controlled by the Zhongzheng, the building housed four different families.

Although my sister and I might eat with our parents when they were in Beijing, most often we returned to our courtyard and to our Gugu, as we were told to call our nanny. *Gugu* means "Auntie" (specifically, "father's sister"), which made her part of the family, and she truly was to my sister and me. She was in her late thirties and so pretty. A small woman, she had smooth and delicate features. She always encouraged me to read and write, although she was illiterate. We loved her dearly. I remember once my parents

teasingly asked us, "Who will you follow when you grow up—Gugu or us?"

"We'll go with Gugu!" we cried excitedly. She was the one we wanted to impress.

We had no bathroom, which was not unusual in the 1950s. (Even today, many old dwellings in China lack toilets; public facilities remain quite common.) We would proceed outside to the shared public bathroom or use a chamber pot. We bathed in public bathhouses, perhaps twice a week in winter.

Our home with our nanny was just one room, on the smaller side of the quadrangle. My sister and I shared a bed. We had no hot water; we boiled it on a stove in our room. Cabinets divided the space to provide some privacy, especially for Gugu's daughter, Gin Zelin. She was several years older than I was. Just before I reached school age, a young engineer fell in love with her. Sometimes they went out to dance. Ballroom dancing was very popular then, as it is now (like tai chi, it is often practiced outside in the parks and the streets). Even Chairman Mao loved to dance, although it was banned (as were all other "bourgeois" entertainments) during the Cultural Revolution. One day the boyfriend came looking for Gin Zelin, but only I was home. So he picked up a chair and started to practice his dancing.

"What kind of dance is with a chair?" I asked.

"A waltz," he said, "*one*-two-three, *one*-two-three, *one*-two-three."

I thought waltzing was very strange.

My wife, Martha, loves ballroom dancing, but I am not much good at it. Sometimes I think I should practice with a chair.

At seven, I entered the boarding school for the children of army officers. The school occupied the Wanshou Temple (Temple of Longevity), which had been built as a Ming dynasty Buddhist shrine. Later, it was used as an imperial residence before the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, and it currently houses the Beijing Art Museum. My classroom truly was a temple, with soaring ceilings and tall, graceful windows. On weekends, chauffeur-driven cars lined up to fetch the children of high-ranking leaders. My parents were not

important enough for the use of a car and driver. (Until the early 1990s, no one could own a car privately.) I joined the rest of the children from our compound on the Zhongzheng ensemble bus. This was the military, and, of course, we children were well aware of our parents' rank. I was a little sad that my father was not a general, only a lieutenant colonel, and that my mother was but a major, one rank below him.

What I liked most was reading and drawing. I was sure I would grow up to be an artist. I wasn't much good at any of my formal school subjects, probably because I preferred to draw during my classes. My drawing teacher liked my work and predicted that I would be a painter one day. But my parents were not inclined toward such a future for me. My mother made sure to tell me stories of famous European painters who had died as paupers. I wouldn't want to be a starving artist, would I? If there were starving musicians or composers, she never mentioned them to me.

It was mostly the colors, the shapes, and the shades of light and dark in my world that attracted me. The sounds—and that included my parents' music—often bothered my ears, especially as music became the soundtrack for the increasingly strident politics of the Cultural Revolution. Then, any tones of "bourgeois" tenderness simply ceased. The practice-hour noise in the compound courtyard began to seem more pleasing, more natural than what my mother and her colleagues composed and the Zhongzheng ensemble orchestra played as my father conducted. Their music was thoroughly military, without nuance, unfailingly upbeat, relentlessly loud, and amplified on top of that. There were no differences in sound or revolutionary content from one song to the next, no soft passages, no dreamy refrains. The harmonies were boring, without variation—repeat, repeat, repeat.

My father began to take me to his rehearsals from time to time when I was only a few years old. The colors and the smells of the hall fascinated me and became the best part of the Zhongzheng ensemble. Every time I went to a rehearsal, the light in the concert hall was dim, the curtain very thick and purple, the backs of the seats deep red. I still recall the smell of the dust stirred up by the

In 1964, my father conducted Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, *the* Pastorale, *with the symphonic orchestra of the People's Liberation Army, the premier military entertainment unit in the country. This was his last concert of Western music before the Cultural Revolution.*

dancers as they rehearsed on the wooden floors. The revolutionary good-guy singers and actors appeared in bright stage light. Dimming lights foretold the approach of bad, counterrevolutionary characters. I liked to run through the hall and the rehearsal rooms, touching everything, including the bronze Russian-inspired statues in the lobby. It was all so different from what I saw, smelled, and felt in the dusty gray streets, in the grim department stores, in my parents' apartment, at school, and at home with my Gugu.

I lasted only two and a half years at boarding school. In the middle of the third year I had to leave, not because of my poor scholarship or

my drawing fixation, but because I had contracted a scalp disease that affected the roots of my hair. I had to be treated in a hospital and at home for what was said at the time to be only the third case in Asia of what probably was a fungal disease. The doctors prescribed a variety of medicines to be applied directly to my scalp. When these didn't work, they tried ultraviolet light treatments. Again, no improvement. So the doctors told my parents that they would have to pull out each hair, one at a time, from the root. Thus, dutifully, night after night my parents took turns carrying out this painful process. They used music to distract me, and that's how they ended up ruining even Western music for me. They had been taught at the conservatory by Russians and East Germans in the finest Western repertoire—Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Chopin, Prokofiev—and had amassed a large collection of recordings, at least a hundred of them. As the hair torture began, they put one of their precious recordings on the gramophone. When they were finished for the evening, they lifted the arm of the gramophone and the music ceased. So conditioned did I become to this horrific treatment that as soon as I heard the music begin, I felt sick and woozy.

The disease still was not eradicated after months of this nightly misery. The new hair came back, the infection was still visible, and the musical plucking torture continued. I had to wear a special hat all day. The disease went away eventually, although I never returned to the boarding school. It is a miracle that I have hair today, not to mention a musical career.

I did not hear any of my parents' classical recordings again until a bittersweet moment six years later as my family was preparing for their banishment from Beijing. I certainly never heard that kind of music anywhere else. All the songs we sang at school voiced revolutionary praise of Chairman Mao, like the ubiquitous "The East Is Red":

The east is red, the sun rises.
China has brought forth a Mao Zedong.
He amasses fortune for the people,
Hu er hei yo, he is the people's liberating star.

Chairman Mao loves the people,
He is our guide,
To build a new China,
Hu er hei yo, he leads us forward!
The Communist Party is like the sun,
Wherever it shines, there is light.
Wherever there is a Communist Party,
Hu er hei yo, there the people are free!

By the mid-sixties, we had to sing this song every morning at the start of school, and along with other revolutionary songs, it blasted from speakers throughout the city all day long, beginning at sunrise. Even the bells in the belltower ding-donged its so-so-la-re/do-do-la-re tones. There was no escaping it, anywhere.

At the boarding school, the teachers, the facilities, the food, and our clothing all had been of a much higher quality than at the neighborhood public school, which I now attended six days a week. It was tough making friends at first. I was *ganbu zidi*—a child of an official. The difference in our status was instantly obvious just by the clothes we wore. I remember pleading with my mother to get me some old clothes because my new ones made me so uncomfortable around the other kids. Their families were from the old, pre-1949 Beijing. They were not the poorest, but compared with my family, they were nonmilitary and of much lower Communist status. These differences became more of a real problem for me in middle school, where I got into fights over rank and status. Now, though, in the regular world that I had just entered for the first time in my life, my classmates and I eventually warmed to one another. I was able to reconcile my pride in my revolutionary background with the revelation that it was much more fun to play at their homes after school than it was at mine. But this freedom soon came to an awful end, when I was forced to confront the big black beast with eighty-eight teeth: the dreaded *gang qin*.