

Hong Kong Arts Development Council, Asia Society to present North American premiere of *Mila* in New York and San Francisco

Chamber opera explores the plight of Hong Kong's domestic workers

"...quirky, quintessentially Hong Kong, and bold." –TIME magazine

Hong Kong (August 6, 2019) – *Mila*, an original chamber opera exploring the cultural richness and diversity of Hong Kong that played in a sold-out four-night run at Asia Society Hong Kong Center to great acclaim in January 2018, will have its North American premiere in December 2019 in conjunction with Asia Society New York and San Francisco. Performances will take place at the Angel Orensanz Center in New York City (December 7) and the Wilsey Center for Opera in San Francisco (December 12), presented by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in collaboration with Asia Society.

Mila, a 70-minute one-act opera in four scenes, is the product of an international creative team including American-born composer Eli Marshall, prominent Hong Kong playwright Candace Chong Mui Ngam, award-winning theatre director Chu Hei Chan, and New York-based music director Neal Goren leading the Hong Kong Music Ensemble. The performance will be sung in English, Cantonese and Tagalog by a cast of performers from Hong Kong, Manila and the United States.

"This original chamber opera is part of our mission to provide a platform for local talents to collaborate with seasoned international artists in creating new and innovative works," said S. Alice Mong, Executive Director of Asia Society Hong Kong Center. "It celebrates the coming of age of Hong Kong's growing pool of creative talents while also examining and raising awareness of some of its unique social issues. We are proud to be sharing this creation with our fellow Asia Society chapters."

"The Hong Kong Arts Development Council has long been committed to nurturing and supporting Hong Kong artists and artistic creation," said HKADC Chief Executive Winsome Chow. "Our efforts in promoting Hong Kong artists on global platforms have increased in recent years. We are delighted to collaborate with Asia Society to bring this original Hong Kong cultural-focused chamber opera to New York and San Francisco, showcasing Hong Kong talents to audiences and professional arts practitioners in the U.S."

Named after the story's protagonist, *Mila* explores the tensions and relationships within a Hong Kong family—an American husband, his Cantonese wife and their son—and their domestic helper *Mila* from the Philippines. Despite marital tension in the home and her employers' growing distrust, *Mila* remains dedicated to her Hong Kong family, soon noticing and becoming troubled by their child's precarious mental state—a situation that touches an old wound from her past.



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9 Justice Drive, Admiralty, Hong Kong
亞洲協會香港中心
香港金鐘正義道九號
Phone 電話 +852.2103.9511, Fax 傳真 +852.2877.5343
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The four-member cast includes Hong Kong-born soprano Amanda Li as Ma'am, New York-based bass-baritone Joseph Beutel as Sir and Hong Kong-born soprano Joanne Shao as both Boy and Rosa. The Manila-based soprano Stefanie Quintin performs the title role.

Mila brings to light Hong Kong's pressure-cooker social environment, examining the territory's tensions in a 70-minute intersection of home life and the workplace, with a glimpse at the culture's all-consuming educational rigor. The opera was originally commissioned to celebrate Asia Society Hong Kong Center's sixth anniversary on the site of the former armory of Hong Kong's Victoria Barracks in Admiralty.

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About the Creative Team

Eli Marshall, composer

Eli Marshall's orchestral works have been performed in seven countries, with other works premiered at the German Parliament, South Korea's Gak-won temple, and the Smithsonian Institution. He moved to China in 2003 on a Fulbright Fellowship and in 2011 relocated to Hong Kong, where he remains a permanent resident. After his *Unde Pendet Aeternitas* for voice and orchestra (written for tenor Warren Mok and the Macau Orchestra) won ASCAP's 2007 Kaplan Prize, Marshall contributed to the score for Wong Kar-wai's 2008 *Ashes of Time—Redux* featuring Yo-Yo Ma. His music for Ann Hui's *The Golden Era* (2014), featuring the London Symphony Orchestra and vocalist and sheng virtuoso Wu Tong, was nominated for Best Original Film Score at the 35th Hong Kong Film Awards. A recipient of the Douglas Moore Fellowship for American Opera, he was the founding artistic director of the Beijing New Music Ensemble and currently holds a visiting faculty position at Cornell University.

Candace Chong Mui Ngam, story and libretto

One of the *South China Morning Post's* 25 most inspirational and influential women in Hong Kong, playwright Candace Chong is a recipient of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council's Best Artist Award for Drama in 2010 and a five-time winner of the Hong Kong Drama Awards for Best Script. Following a 12-month stay in the U.S. facilitated by an Asian Cultural Council grant, she became the translator for David Henry Hwang's 2011 bilingual Broadway comedy *Chinglish* and was featured in the 2013 Contemporary Chinese Playwriting Series co-presented New York's Signature Theatre and Lark Play Development Center. Her 2012 play *Wild Boar* had its English-language premiere in Chicago in 2017. Chong's 2005 play *French Kiss* was filmed as *Heaven in the Dark* (2016) starring Jacky Cheung, and she adapted her highly acclaimed 2009 play *Murder in San José* for the screen as *Fatal Visit* (2018) starring Sammi Cheng. Her first opera libretto, for Huang Ruo's *Dr. Sun Yat-sen* (2011), premiered in Hong Kong and later made its North American premiere in 2014 in a new production by Santa Fe Opera.

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Chu Hei Chan, stage direct

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Chu Hei Chan graduated from the School of Drama, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts in 1991 with a major in Acting and was awarded the Advanced Diploma (Honours) in Performing Arts. After graduation, he furthered his theater studies at London's Ecole Philippe Gaulier. In 1993, he co-founded Theatre Ensemble, where he has been a director, playwright and actor. He founded Horizon Theatre Studio in 2004, Theatre Horizon in 2006, and the Hong Kong People's Fringe Association in 2012. Currently Artistic Director of Theatre Horizon and Chief Coordinator of Hong Kong People's Fringe Festival, he has performed in major theatrical productions for various professional troupes in Hong Kong. He has won Best Actor and Best Director (twice) at the Hong Kong Drama Awards, as well as a two-time Best Director for the Hong Kong Theatre Libre. Recent works as director include *The Black and the Blue of a Man (North-East Village Edition)*, *Century-Old Dreams of a Fishing Harbour Trilogy*, *The Garden Party (North-East Village Version)*, *The Blue Bird*, *The Lutings*, *Skylight* and *The Massage King*.

Neal Goren, music director

Neal Goren is the founding Artistic Director and Conductor of New York's Catapult Opera, which opens its inaugural season in 2020–21. Previously, he founded Gotham Chamber Opera, conducting all of the company's 18 productions including critically acclaimed runs of Haydn's *Il Mondo della Luna*, Mozart's *Il sogno di Scipione*, Milhaud's *Les Malheurs d'Orphée*, and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (with period instruments). Guest conducting appearances include Respighi's *La bella dormiente nel bosco* for the Lincoln Center Festival and Spoleto Festival USA, Mozart's *Magic Flute* at New York City Opera, and Britten's *Turn of the Screw* for France's Opera de Nantes and Angers. As a recital accompanist, he has collaborated with many of opera's leading vocalists, including Leontyne Price (as her exclusive musical collaborator), Kathleen Battle, Harolyn Blackwell, Thomas Hampson, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson and Hermann Prey. He has been a member of the faculty of the graduate opera department of New York's Mannes College of Music since 1992, the Accademia Rossiana in Pesaro, Italy and the Harlem School of the Arts.

Hong Kong New Music Ensemble

Founded in 2008, the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble (HKNME) has been cited by CNN as "one of Hong Kong's most progressive groups of musicians." Widely praised for its innovative programming, the Ensemble's productions include concerts, educational outreach events, and interdisciplinary collaborations and research projects with artists from different artistic fields. With a core of 15 members, performing in a variety of combinations and settings, the HKNME has performed both modern repertory, contemporary masterworks, and numerous premières by composers from Hong Kong and overseas, including many commissioned by the HKNME itself. In addition to collaborating with such organizations such as Zuni Icosahedron, the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, and Guangdong Modern Dance Company, the HKNME has also organized events in partnership with the Hong Kong Arts Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, and the Goethe Institute Hongkong. A regular collaborator with music departments in educational institutions across the territory, the HKNME was in residence at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts from 2013 to 2015.

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Asia Society Hong Kong Center is a locally funded, independent non-government organization established in 1990 by a group of Hong Kong community leaders. It is affiliated with Asia Society in New York, founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller III to promote mutual understanding and strengthen partnerships between Asia and the US in a global context.

Asia Society Hong Kong Center is dedicated to providing educational platforms that present balanced perspectives and promote critical understanding of topics relevant to Hong Kong, Asia and the region's role in the world. Across the fields of arts and culture, education, business and policy, it seeks to provide insights, generate ideas and promote collaboration to address present challenges and create a shared future. Its home in Admiralty at the former Explosives Magazine of the old Victoria Barracks, made possible under Private Treaty Grant from the government, was the result of careful conservation, restoration and adaptive re-use which transformed the heritage site into a cultural, artistic and intellectual hub in 2012 to offer a broad variety of cultural and education programs to the community.

The original commission of *Mila* was a continuation of the Asia Society Hong Kong Center's "Rising Stars of Asia" series, launched in 2012 with support from Mr. and Mrs. Robert Miller to promote artistic development and collaboration between talents in Hong Kong and the region. Additional support for the New York and San Francisco performances has been provided by the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office. The production is also dedicated to the late Mr. Washington SyCip, former Honorary Trustee of Asia Society and Founding Chair of Asia Society Philippines, whose support helped make this initial commission possible.

About the Hong Kong Arts Development Council

Established in 1995, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) is a statutory body set up by the Government to support the broad development of the arts in Hong Kong. Its major roles include grant allocation, policy and planning, advocacy, promotion and development, and special projects. The mission of HKADC is to support and promote the development of ten major art forms in literary arts, performing arts, visual arts as well as film and media arts in Hong Kong. Aiming to foster a thriving arts environment and enhancing the quality of life of the public, HKADC is also committed to facilitating community-wide participation in the arts and arts education, encouraging arts criticism, raising the standard of arts administration, and contributing on policy research.

Development strategies of HKADC include supporting promising artists and arts groups in the pursuit of excellence, promoting arts administration to improve the management of arts groups, improving the arts environment and proposing policy recommendations, enhancing public participation,

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developing arts space for artistic creation and production, fostering strategic partnerships and attracting private sector resources to support the arts. Implementation of these strategies is in the form of providing diversified grant schemes such as Year Grants, Project Grants, Cultural Exchange Grants, management and operation of arts spaces to provide arts studios to artists, providing scholarships, internship and attachments, organizing arts surveys and art form specific year book production, leading delegation of artists to various international arts expos and festivals, as well as organizing Hong Kong wide annual projects such as Arts Ambassadors in Schools, Hong Kong Arts Development Awards.

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Event Details

Preview and Discussion: *Mila*, a new chamber opera of Hong Kong

Mon 2 Dec 2019

7 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

Asia Society

725 Park Avenue

New York, NY 10021

Members \$15; Students/Seniors \$17; Nonmembers \$20

***Mila* (New York)**

Sat 7 Dec 2019

3 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

7 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

Angel Orensanz Center

172 Norfolk Street

New York, NY 10002

Members \$30; Students/Seniors \$40; Nonmembers \$50

***Mila* (San Francisco)**

Thurs 12 Dec 2019

7:30 p.m. – 9 p.m.

Taube Atrium Theater / The Diane B. Wilsey Center for Opera

401 Van Ness Avenue

San Francisco, CA 94102

Members \$50; Nonmembers \$100

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For further information and press queries, please contact:

May Tam/Hong Kong (mtam@asiasociety.org);

Joanna Lee/US (jchlee23@gmail.com)

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