

A Page of Canadian History Retold in the Opera "Iron Road"

Chan Ka Nin

Professor of Theory and Composition at the University of Toronto

My proposed presentation is based on my opera, ***Iron Road***, the first bilingual (English and Chinese [Cantonese]) opera in Canada that is about the Chinese railway workers who helped build the national Canadian Pacific Railway near the end of the nineteenth century. The inspiration of this project is from the old archive photos. They showed the Chinese immigrants in a boat on their way to Victoria, their arrival at the harbour, the living conditions in the wilderness, their worksite in the Fraser Valley, the Chinatowns, their families back home, and their tombs. History is retold in a form of a musical drama in which a young girl, dressed as a man, came to British Columbia to look for her father who worked at a railway site. With Sir John A. MacDonald, his politicians, and The Last Spike as background, the life and struggles of these early immigrants are revealed to the audience in a dramatic way. The story will be illustrated with historical pictures and commentaries, interspersed with excerpts from the opera. These excerpts give a face and voice to the long deceased people. Their life, passions, and tales are re-lived. It is a tribute to their unknowing contribution to the building of a nation that is Canada. This opera has won the Mavor Dora award for the Best Musical in 2001. My presentation will involve a speaker, a singer, and a pianist. I shall provide my own performers and piano. The presentation will be informative, educational and entertaining.