

The Emperor and the Nightingale

Book and Lyrics by April-Dawn Gladu
Music by James Woodward

Excerpts from scene two

Scene Two
Inside the Emperor's thrown room. A lush throne is
Up Center. A flustered MUSIC MASTER rushes on.

MUSIC MASTER

So much to do. So much to do. Everything must be pleasing. Where is the Choir?
Where is the Choir? CHOIR!

*CHOIR dashes on stage. The Choir is a group of 5 puppets controlled and
voiced by one actor. They are jostling and bickering with each other, as
usual. (Quick character reminder: **Sying** is the opera diva who sings
every line, **Ping** is a copycat who only repeats what someone has just
said, **An** is gentle and kind, **Lao** is old and grumpy, **Fan Che** lives with her
head in the clouds.)*

Get out of my way!

SYING

Out of her way!

PING

Excuse me please.

AN

Excuse me please!

PING

Out, out, out!

SYING

In my day, children let their elders walk before them!

LAO

Walk before them!

PING

Shù dǎo hú sūn sǎn.

FAN CHE

Hun? I didn't hear you!

LAO
(can't hear Fan Che)

FAN CHE

When a tree falls, monkeys scatter.

PING

(pause)

What she said.

MUSIC MASTER

Silence! Ānjìng! Ānjìng! Since you apparently have the time to bicker, I am assuming you finished rehearsing your parts for tomorrow's Grand Opera!

AN

Have no fears Music Master, we will sing your beautiful new opera tomorrow, right after the Dragon Parade. Your first opera as Music Master of the Imperial Court will go down in history for its grace and brilliance.

MUSIC MASTER

Thank you An. I can always count on you to say something kind. But what about today's show? The "New Year Presentation of the Gifts" is very important. Each region of China has prepared special gifts for the Emperor that show off the best of their work. I've been working on this presentation ever since the Emperor named me Music Master eleven months ago, and it must be flawless.

SYING

Don't worry, the audience will weep after my solos!

LAO

(sarcastic)

I know your singing always makes me cry.

PING

Solos? Did she just say solos?

LAO

Yes, she did. I thought we each had one solo? If anybody is getting more than one solo it should be me! I am the oldest and most respected!

SYING

Yes Lao, you definitely are the oldest, but the Emperor likes my voice the best.

MUSIC MASTER

Why do you think that? The Emperor always praises you equally.

SYING

Because when I sing he closes his eyes and makes happy sounds.

LAO

Happy sounds? Happy sounds? Those are snores! Your singing bores him to sleep!

AN

Lao, please don't say such unkind things to Sying.

PING

Yeah, unkind things are not kind! Even if they are true.
SYING gasps.

AN

Lao! Ping! You should both apologize. Right Fan Che?

FAN CHE

Jiě líng xī líng.

LAO

Speak louder! You're too quiet!

FAN CHE

Whoever hung the bell on the tiger's neck must remove it.

MUSIC MASTER

Ān jìng! Enough! Ān jìng! Lao and Sying, no bickering! Today is too important! Sying, you know that you only have one solo in the song. I sing the introductions of each region of China, and then you all take a turn singing about the gifts that that region is giving. Remember, your region is West, so you are singing a gentle solo about flowers: the narcissus, the peonies and the peach blossoms. I worked hard to make your solo as delicate and light as a sunbeam. You will sound perfect! So you sing last.

SYING

I should sing first!

MUSIC MASTER

No Sying, we've been through this at every rehearsal. You are singing West, which means that you sing last. The sun sets in the west, so west is last. Last! Last! Got it?

SYING

Saving the best for last. I got it.

MUSIC MASTER

(mutters to self)

I will not scream. I will not scream. I will not scream. Fine. Lets move on. Now, Choir, have you prepared the Royal Court to bow at the proper time?

LAO

In my day children knew how to bow to their elders.

MUSIC MASTER

Lao, do you mean that you haven't taught the Royal Court to bow?

LAO

Ummm... it's a little hard with my sciatica.

PING

Ummm... sciatica.

MUSIC MASTER

An?

AN

Circumstances being what they are...

PING

Yeah, yeah, circumstances...

MUSIC MASTER

Sying?

SYING

Oops.

Oops. PING

Fan Che? I'm afraid to ask. MUSIC MASTER

Wàn niàn jù huī. FAN CHE

What did you say? LAO

FAN CHE
The thousands of thoughts have turned into ashes.

MUSIC MASTER
(mutters to self)
That's just great. Not screaming. Still not screaming.
(to audience)
Ladies and Gentlemen of the Royal Court, yes, I do mean you sitting over there and you sitting over hear, and even you, with the _____ (*pick on an adult in the audience*) let me remind you that when the Emperor sits, and the gong sounds, it is customary for you to bow. You may do this from your seats. Let us practice. First, lets hear the sound of a gong. (*gong sounds*) When you hear that sound you make a fist with your right hand. This one. No sir, your other right hand... Ancestors preserve us!
(*Adjust this dialogue to playfully suit the moment.*)
Place your left hand over your right, like this, and bring them close to your stomach. Now bow low to show respect to the Emperor. Yes, excellent! So when the Emperor sits, the gong will sound, and we will bow together.

And when the Emperor says gōng xǐ fā cái, which means -

LAO
New Year's Congratulations and Prosperity

SYING
Or Happy New Year!

LAO

No, it means New Year's Congratulations and Prosperity!

SYING

Happy New Year!

LAO

In my day, we said –

MUSIC MASTER

Can this moment please not be about you? (*To audience*) I apologize for my Choir. They haven't learned yet that bickering gets you nowhere, only dedication and

MUSIC MASTER & PING

Practice, practice, practice.

*****scene break*****

The Emperor arrived with much pomp. The Music Master and the Imperial Choir have just finished singing "The Presentation of The Gifts." The Emperor was so pleased that he was about to reward them with a gift, something that had never happened before, when the Nightingale's bells were heard.

EMPEROR

Come forward child. What is your name?

MEI

My, my name is Mei. I come from the fishing village. My Po's name is Levonne.

EMPEROR

I know of your village, and the wisdom of your grandmother, but I do not know of your Nightingale.

MEI

She came to us yesterday when we were preparing for the New Year. Her voice gave us such hope and joy that we asked her to come and sing for you, as a New Year's present.

MUSIC MASTER

What interest would the mighty Emperor have in your little birdie song?

SYING

He has me!

AN

He has gold!

LAO

He has silk!

FAN CHE

He has kumquats!

PING

Mmmm, kumquats.

EMPEROR

I would be honored to hear her song.

MEI

Nightingale, the Emperor welcomes you.

The NIGHTINGALE enters and performs a joyous song for the Emperor. During the song, the EMPEROR becomes visibly more relaxed and his breathing calms.

LAO

In all my days, I've never experienced anything so beautiful.

EMPEROR

That was... breathtaking. No, that was... breath-giving! Who are you, ethereal creature? What goddess are you in disguise, sent to walk among humans? Guan Yin, the Goddess of Compassion; Hsi Wang Mu, Goddess of Long Life? Tell me please. I must know!

Nightingale responds by dancing.

EMPEROR

What did she say? Tell me quickly!

MEI

She says she is a simple bird, who receives joy by sharing her song.

EMPEROR

Then let us give you lots of joy! Stay here with me Nightingale! Sing for me tomorrow after the New Year's Dragon Parade! Sing to make China weep with joy and laugh with rapture!

Nightingale responds.

MEI

It would be her honor.

SYING

(whispers to a shocked Music Master)

But your opera... my solo...

MUSIC MASTER

(to Sying)

I'll take care of this! No bird will replace us! I won't be sent home in disgrace.

(to Emperor)

What a brilliant idea, my Emperor! Surely the bird can create a grand opera that celebrates the deeds of your most honored ancestor Zhao Kuangyin who founded the Song Dynasty!

EMPEROR

No, no, I don't need another grand opera. I just need this Nightingale to sing for me forever! When she sings I feel so free. So unfettered. She has lifted a weight from my soul.

MUSIC MASTER

Yes, yes, of course mighty Emperor. We all feel the same, don't we? Don't we?

CHOIR nods heads emphatically.

But the Nightingale, with all due respect, is A BIRD. Birds fly away, oh Emperor. You can not expect a bird to keep a promise. Whereas the Choir and I have prepared a spectacular -

EMPEROR

(Cuts him off)

Your words are wise Music Master.

Emperor claps his hands twice.

Servants, seize the Nightingale.

The DANCERS (or other servants/guards) grab the Nightingale. She is startled, and initially resists, but quickly stops struggling.

MEI

(whispers)

No. What can I do? What can I say?

EMPEROR

Now you will sing for me whenever I wish. Music Master, you were right. I am the Emperor, no one rules the empire but me!

MEI

(to herself)

I must say something. Just do it Mei, just say it!

Nightingale speaks to Mei.

MEI

No, you mustn't sacrifice yourself. This is wrong.

(to Emperor)

Gr- Gracious Emperor –

EMPEROR

Yes? Oh, Mei! I am very grateful to you for giving me the Nightingale. Since you have been blessed with the ability to understand her speech, naturally you will stay here at the palace with the Nightingale so that you may tell me what she is singing about. I will send your village a chest of golden apples as a token of my gratitude.

MEI

No sir –

EMPEROR

No golden apples? You are very bold. Perhaps a robe of pure silk for your grandmother?

MEI

No gracious Emperor, I mean that the Nightingale can not stay here with her wings all but clipped. Her wings must be as free to fly as her voice.

Emperor starts to get agitated and his breathing gradually becomes labored.

EMPEROR

You dare disagree with me? You? A fishing peasant? It seems Po LeVonne's wisdom did not pass down to her granddaughter. Well listen well, Mei. You and the Nightingale will stay here for as long as I say and do whatever I command. Do you understand?

Nightingale does a small dance while still being restrained. EMPEROR visibly relaxes while she dances. MEI translates.

MEI

Yes, most wise Emperor. It will be as you say.

Sound of a gong. All bow to the Emperor, including the audience.