Wagner goes East: Chinese Encounters with European Opera

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When Hector Berlioz first listened to Chinese opera at the World Fair in 1851, he was quite shocked: what he heard where, in his words, “wild cat-howls, turkey cluckings and death rattles,” but certainly not anything like operatic music of the kind he was appreciative of. Reacting to this kind of critique, a French sinologist, Louis Laloy, in his 1910 publication La musique Chinoise, would argue about Chinese opera that “if a European ear is more surprised than charmed by such tumultous sounds, we have to remember the words of that Chinese who, coming out of one of our opera houses said to me: ‘When one does not understand, one finds that there is too much noise.’”

In drawing on evidence from some 150 years of operatic exchanges between China and Europe, this paper discusses how the road was paved from the kinds of reactions mentioned above to the genuinely enthusiastic Chinese reception of Wagner's Ring performed at yet another World Fair, the Shanghai Expo in 2010. The paper thus deliberates the transcultural qualities of European classical music and music making between China and Europe in the long 20th century.