**The Bonefeeder**

Produced by the Auckland Arts Festival, this project will draw together the creative talents of writer Renee Liang, composer Gareth Farr, and Director Sara Brodie. The project will feature a cast of between 6 – 10 singers from NZ and Asia, and a Chamber Orchestra using western, Asian and Maori instrumentation. The musicians will include guzheng master, Chen Xi Yao.

*The Bone Feeder* is a 75 minute play, a contemporary reworking of the historical sinking of the SS Ventnor. In 1902 the coffins of 499 Chinese sojourners from Otago and Wellington, being repatriated to their home towns in China, were lost when the Ventnor wrecked near the Hokianga Harbour. The play follows the trials of a young man Ben who seeks the lost bones of his great great grandfather so he can bring them home, and a man named Kwan, who emigrates to NZ in the 1800s and has to decide where he belongs. The play is a fictional exploration of what is a very real and significant piece of history for many Chinese New Zealanders depicting one of the first moments of contact between Maori and Chinese.

The Opera will be adapted from Renee Liang’s play *The Bone Feeder* which premiered in Auckland in 2011*,* after undergoing a development studio season in 2009 and focused on the character of Kwan. Kwan is based on real life historical figure, Choie Sew Hoy, who lived in Dunedin in the 1800s.

**Synopsis**

In 1902, the SS Ventnor sank in the Hokianga Harbour with the bones of 499 Chinese miners bound for ancestral graves in Canton. Over a century later Kwan and his fellow wandering ghosts prepare to mark the anniversary of their arrival with a homemade opera. Their friend The Ferryman, a local Maori with a dry sense of humour, has pledged to help them. They find out that a young man, Ben, has arrived declaring he’ll find the bones and take them back to China. The ghosts realise that he has a deeper reason to look for the bones – he is Kwan’s great great grandson. Guided by a magical cicada, Ben ventures deeper into the ghosts’ territory, but when Kwan meets him he starts to realise that Ben is his link to Aotearoa –his family now live here. But the two argue and Ben leaves without realising that he has already found his ancestor. Ben dives to the wreck, but is drowned. As Kwan mourns over Ben’s body he pledges to stay – his kin now buried on the land. With this decision, his spirit is set free and flies away, in the form of the magical cicada.

**Themes within the work**

A major theme in the work is a longing for home, belonging, and identity. *The Bone Feeder* directly addresses the vexed and emotional issues of migration: What makes someone a New Zealander? What keeps Chinese tied to China despite generations of their family living in NZ? Where is home? The work explores how cultural identity is affected by time, generations, blood ties and relationships to place – universal themes that resonate with Asian and other diaspora communities around the world.

Other themes in the work that will have resonance with Asian, Maori and Pakeha New Zealanders are family relationships and how deeply we hold on to our responsibilities and promises to family, even if it means our own sacrifice.

A final theme in the work is our relationship to the land - in the new operatic-version, the land is represented as a living, breathing entity responding to the emotions of the people living on and in it. Because the bones of the drowned Chinese wanderers are entwined with the earth– it’s the land’s expression of the memories it holds. And the magical cicada (which is made out of jade/pounamu) is the embodiment of that joined spirit. The Ferryman, who represents the tangata whenua, safeguards that relationship.

**Biographies of Key People**

**RENEE LIANG – STORY AND LIBRETTO**

Renee (b. 1973), a second-generation Chinese New Zealander, is a poet, playwright, paediatrician, medical researcher and fiction writer. She is based in Auckland, New Zealand. Her parents emigrated to NZ from Hong Kong in the 1970s. She is married to a Croatian New Zealander and has two young children.

Renee is a multidisciplinary artist, having written in many genres including short and long fiction, poetry, theatre, non-fiction, blogging and arts journalism. She has also collaborated on visual arts works, film and music, produced and directed theatre works, worked as a dramaturge and producer, taught creative writing and organized community-based arts initiatives. She writes in English but often uses Chinese phrases (Cantonese and Mandarin).

Renee organises community arts events such as New Kiwi Women Write, a writing workshop series for migrant women in association with Auckland Council. Under this program she has published five anthologies of migrant writing (New Beginnings), and her small press, Monster Fish Publishing, has also published other works. She is a regular contributor to The Big Idea, a website linking NZ's arts community.

Renee has written, produced and nationally toured four plays: *Lantern* (2008), *The Bone Feeder* (2010), *The First Asian AB* (2012) and *Under the Same Moon* (2014), *The Two Farting Sisters*, a children’s play and *Paper Boats*, a play about the journeys of Chinese-Kiwi women, (2015) with other scripts and commissions in progress.

Renee holds a Master of Creative Writing and a Post Graduate Diploma in Arts (Theatre Writing) from the University of Auckland, a medical degree and a specialist qualification as a paediatrician. For her activities in arts, science and medicine, Renee was named a Sir Peter Blake Emerging Leader in 2010. She won the Royal Society Manhire Prize in Science Writing for Creative Non-Fiction in 2012. Her play *The Quiet Room* was shortlisted for the Adam Play Award in 2013, and won the teen section of Playmarket’s Plays For The Young in 2014.

**GARETH FARR – COMPOSER**

Gareth Farr was born in Wellington, New Zealand. He began his studies in composition and percussion at the University of Auckland in 1986. The experience of hearing a visiting gamelan orchestra in 1988 prompted his return to Wellington to attend Victoria University, where the characteristic rhythms and textures of the Indonesian gamelan rapidly became the hallmarks of his own composition.

Farr continued with postgraduate study in composition and percussion at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where his teachers included Samuel Adler and Christopher Rouse.

In 1993, at the age of 25, Farr was appointed composer-in-residence by Chamber Music New Zealand, the youngest ever composer to hold that position. At the conclusion of the residence, Farr returned to the Eastman School to begin a doctorate in composition. As well as composing Kembang Suling (for flute and marimba, his most popular work to date) and three works for orchestra during this time, Farr also introduced audiences to his on-stage alter-ego, the percussion-playing drag queen Lilith LaCroix.

The inclusion of his works in four events at the 1996 New Zealand International Festival of the Arts kick-started his career as a dedicated freelance composer. Since then, his music has been heard at (or especially commissioned for) high-profile events including:

* The 50th anniversary of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra (From the Depths Sound the Great Sea Gongs)
* The opening of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa, a work hailed as ‘music with a powerful and moving impact that transcends idiom and individual taste’)
* The 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney (Hikoi, a concerto for percussionist Evelyn Glennie and the NZSO).
* His music was also performed by the NZSO in Beijing as part of the 2008 Olympics, and in the opening ceremony of the 2011 Rugby World Cup.

In 2006 Gareth was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit, for his services to music and entertainment, in 2010 he was a recipient of the prestigious NZ Arts Laureate Award, and in 2014 he was awarded the Distinguished Alumni Award from The University of Auckland.

Farr’s music is particularly influenced by his extensive study of percussion, both Western and non-Western. Rhythmic elements of his compositions can be linked to the complex and exciting rhythms of Rarotongan log drum ensembles, Balinese gamelan and other percussion music of the Pacific Rim.

In addition to his music for the concert chamber, Farr has written music for dance, theatre, television and film. He has won four Chapman Tripp theatre awards including his soundtrack to *Vula*, a NZ/Pacific Island theatre piece that went on to perform extensively overseas including Australia, the Netherlands and London. In 2006, the Royal New Zealand Ballet toured the country with their brand new work *The Wedding*, featuring a score by Gareth Farr.

making.

In 2007 Farr was appointed as Composer-In-Residence for the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra culminating in 2008 with the premiere of Ex Stasis a symphonic song cycle for four soloists. In 2008 Farr also celebrated the world premiere of his work Terra Incognita, for bass baritone solo, choir and orchestra, performed by Paul Whelan and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra.

More recently his string quartet Te Tai O Rehua was commissioned and performed in 2013 by Australia’s Goldner Quartet; his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra was performed in 2014 by the NZSO with soloist Tony Lee; and Relict Furies was commissioned by and performed at the 2014 Edinburgh International Festival, with soloist mezzo-soprano Sarah Connolly and the Scottish Ensemble to critical acclaim.

**Sara Brodie – Director**

Sara’s work as a director and choreographer spans opera, theatre, dance, and music. She has most recently directed *The Coffee Cantata* for Wanaka Festival of Colour and *The Urban Rhapsodies* for the Cuba Dupa Festival in Wellington. Earlier this year she directed *La Calisto* for Opera in a Day’s Bay Garden, her eighth show for the company. Operas in 2014 included; *Don Giovanni* (New Zealand Opera) and *Ainadamar* (New Zealand Festival).

She has been involved with the development and creation of the premieres *Gao Shan Lui Shui* (High Mountain Flowing Water), a NZ/China collaboration composed by Gao Ping and choreographing/directing *Fault Lines* a dance-theatre production about earthquakes with the Leshan Song and Dance Company of Sichuan, for the Melbourne and Christchurch Arts Festivals. *Faultlines* also played in Auckland supported by AAF and at Le Place des Arts, Montreal, Canada and toured China, Wellington, Sydney and Canberra.

She also directed *Tracing Hamlet* – a community based immersive deconstruction of Hamlet (Wanaka Festival of Colour, Erupt Festival Taupo), *Skydancer* for Capital E National Children’s Theatre and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, the children’s opera *Kia Ora Khalid* (Capital E), writer Graeme Tetley’s *Riverside Drive*, *North:South* interweaving poetry and music, *Hohepa* (a new opera by Gillian Whitehead produced by NZ Opera and NZ Festival Festival), *Fatal Desire* (Asia Pacific Arts Festival), and *The Seven Last Words* (Chamber Music NZ). Preferring not to draw distinctions between genres, a highlight was creating *The Kreutzer* (2007 STAB commission, 2009 Auckland and Christchurch Arts Festivals).

In 2011, she co-wrote (with Teina Moetara) and directed *Hear To See*, for Capital E National Theatre for Children’s national tour, which received the Chapman Tripp Most Original Production award featuring a through written score of taonga pūoro by Richard Nunns. She has directed *The Tempest* for Wellington Summer Shakespeare, *Pitcairn* for the Auckland Theatre Company’s Next Stage showcase and a variety of plays, including adapting Shakespeare for young audiences.

Sara was made an Arts Laureate in 2015. She directed *Nixon in C*hina for the Auckland Arts Festival in 2016.

**Gao Ping – Chinese music advisor**

Gao Ping is a pianist-composer, born in Sichuan province, known for evocative textures and piano vocalization, and is the receipient of high musical honors. Growing up as a young pianist at the Sichuan Conservatory in Chengdu, Gao Ping was affected by China’s concurrent transformation from a collective to a market economy. This transitional phase between old and new -- and the productive cultural clash between East and West - left traces that would later be evident in his music. From his mother, Luo Lianglian, the singer and teacher, Gao Ping gained a fascination with vocalization, while his father Gao Weijie initiated him into the Society for Exploration of New Music at its inception. The Beijing-based musicologist Li Xi’an has referred to Gao Ping as a leading member of the “sixth generation” of Chinese composers after the “fifth generation” composers such as Tan Dun and Qu Xiaosong.

As a pianist, Gao Ping’s repertoire is extensive; he has performed to acclaim all over the world. In 2008, Gao Ping premiered his Piano Concerto with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. His pianistic proclivities and understanding of contemporary music have led Gao Ping to become sought after by living composers, including George Crumb and Frederic Rzewski. His recitals present thought provoking programs, and often feature improvisations which composer Jack Body described as “astounding.”

While completing his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, he won the 2003 Auros Compostion Prize (Boston) and was resident at the MacDowell Colony for Artists.

Since 2004, Dr. Gao was composition lecturer in the School of Music at the Canterbury University in Christchurch, New Zealand. In New Zealand, his music has been presented by Michael Houstoun, John Chen, Christchurch International Arts Festival, New Zealand String Quartet, and NZ Trio. Gao is the recipient of the 2010 CANZ (Composers Association of NZ) Trust Fund Award. In his most recent works, Gao returns more fully to China. Gao Ping now lives and teaches in Beijing.

**Xi Yao Chen – Musician**

Chen XiYao is a Chinese-born classical musician. He is an award-winning guzheng (Chinese zither) player. He currently lives in New Zealand.

Yao was born and brought up in a well-known traditional Chinese musical family in Beijing, China. His grandfather, Cao Dongfu was a famous composer and guzheng master, as well as one of the founders of the China Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and the Sichuan Conservatory of Music. His mother, Li Bian, is a guzheng professor who holds the "National First Rank" Performer title in China and is the only Guzheng Master granted the title of “Son of the East” from the Chinese Government in 1997. His father Chen Chuan Rong is a professional conductor and Erhu [two-stringed violin] player.

Yao began learning Western classical music theory and piano when he was four years old, and the guzheng at eight. In 1997, Yao played a guzheng solo in the 13th International Youth Arts Festival in Japan and won critical acclaim from international professionals. He has featured on TV and in live shows on Beijing TV and China Central TV. In 2001, Yao won the Gold Medal in the Beijing Regional competition and the Silver medal in the National competition of the China National Fresh Young Artists ompetition organised by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Arts.

He is a member of the China Musicians Association (guzheng branch), member and teacher of China Nationalities Orchestra Society and an examiner for the China National Arts grading system.

Yao arrived in New Zealand to study in 2002. After gaining a degree, he now teaches and performs and plays as a solo guzheng and piano performer. He completed his study at Wintec in 2011, gaining Wintec's first ever Master of Arts (with Distinction) by an international student. The culmination of his year-long masters study was the recording of 11 traditional and contemporary guzheng music pieces. This genre is slowly disappearing in modern China. Yao now works as Chief Music Consultant at the NZ School of Traditional Chinese Music and Performing Arts Charitable Trust in Hamilton, New Zealand.

In 2009, on behalf of the Trust, he was invited by the British Council of New Zealand to join the *“People in Your Neighbourhood*” project with a selection of New Zealand Artists and the Urban Soul Orchestra from UK to perform at the World of Music, Arts and Dance (WOMAD).

Yao has taught in New Zealand since 2002. In October 2011, Yao became the first Chinese artist to be presented with the award for ‘Outstanding Services to the Arts’ from Arts Waikato.