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ALERT

TOP STORY

off book

Off Book: In Davenport, Angel Lam animates a world long past in 'Unearthing the Heart'

Nina Baker

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Quad City Symphony Orchestra musicians practice on stage before performing "Unearthing the Heart: The Thousand Grottoes of Dunhuang" at the Adler Theatre on Saturday, Feb. 7.

Contributed

Nina Baker

The legend goes that ticket-holders howled and rioted in the Théâtre de Champs-Élysées in Paris during the 1913 premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s “The Rite of Spring.”

Stravinsky’s ballet was rhythmic and primal. Dancers wore pagan costumes and stomped raucously as dancers sacrificed a young girl to a fertility god. Some found the ballet superb; others called it barbaric. During the supposed riot, at least one duel commenced.

Stravinsky’s music spurring a riot is likely an exaggeration, though concert-goers did describe the audience as loud and clamorous. The “Rite of the Spring” has earned the title of having classical music’s most notorious premiere, and when classical fans think of any piece’s debut, some recall that infamous evening in Paris in 1913.

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Nina Baker

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On Saturday, the Quad City Symphony Orchestra premiered composer Angel Lam's work "Unearthing the Heart: The Thousands Grottoes of Dunhuang." Unlike Stravinsky's premiere, there were no riots, duels or shouts. The reception was far less controversial and far more commendatory, earning a swift and lengthy standing ovation for Lam (who was in attendance), the symphony and the accompanying Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company. ⊗

Lam is a Grammy-nominated New York-based, Hong Kong-born composer who has worked with orchestras around the world, including Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. Like "Unearthing the Heart," many of her compositions integrate elements from the stories and history of the Silk Road. Saturday's premiere was inspired by the oasis city of Dunhuang, on the edge of the Gobi Desert in China. ✕

In 2022, the League of American Orchestras selected the Quad City Symphony Orchestra as one of 30 orchestras taking part of the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation Orchestral Commissions Program, which commissioned new works by women composers to be performed at American orchestras. That resulted in the Quad City Symphony Orchestra presenting a different work by Lam in April 2025. The League of American Orchestras later commissioned “Unearthing the Heart” and selected the Quad City Symphony Orchestra as the premiere orchestra for Lam’s new work.

The music of “Unearthing the Heart” draws from the hundreds of cave temples in Dunhuang that are decorated with Buddhist wall paintings and sculptures.

Lam described herself as a spiritual person who felt deeply moved by the stories in Dunhuang. As she spent time there, she wondered if maybe the Buddhist view of reincarnation was true, she told Saturday’s audience before the premiere.

The music and accompanying choreography held particular meaning for Lam because of her own spiritual experiences and because of choreographer Zhongmei Li’s involvement in the piece, Lam said.

Zhongmei choreographed the accompanying dance in tribute to her late husband Richard Bernstein, a journalist who opened Time Magazine’s first bureau in China in 1979. Zhongmei and Bernstein first fell in love in Dunhuang, decades before Bernstein died in 2025. That shared experience, rooted in love and discovery, became the emotional and artistic heart of her choreography, according to Zhongmei’s choreographer statement. ⊗

“Unearthing the Heart” begins with resounding percussive hits and soft sounds of falling sand. She later integrates legato string themes that listeners easily find compelling. Lam’s themes were reminiscent of some of the more delightful, established melodies in famous works like Antonín Dvořák’s Eighth Symphony. Cosmic and mesmerizing, Lam’s music transports its listeners to the long-past world of love and loss in Dunhuang. ✕

The drawback of witnessing a world premiere is that we cannot listen to the piece again once it's over. We must wait for it to come online, somewhere.

Serendipitously, the Quad City Symphony Orchestra paired Lam's work with "The Rite of Spring," a piece the orchestra planned to perform long before they knew they would pair it with another dance-heavy world premiere.

The Quad City Symphony Orchestra makes its concerts more affordable and accessible than other orchestras of its high caliber. Once again, the orchestra brilliantly performed a well-paired selection of classical music. To write bluntly: Go to the Quad City Symphony Orchestra. Those who miss these concerts miss some of the best artistic output of our region.

Photos: Pleasant Valley places 8th in the IHSA State Dual Team Wrestling Tournament in Coralville on Saturday

