

Tokaido Road

A Journey after Hiroshige

Chamber Opera for 3 Singers, Mime and small chamber ensemble
With projection of Hiroshige's woodblock prints and contemporary photographs by Wynn White.

Music: Nicola LeFanu
Libretto: Nancy Gaffield

Tokaido Road was commissioned by Okeanos, to be premiered at the Cheltenham Festival, 6 July 2014. Funds for the commission were provided by Britten Pears Foundation, John S Cohen Foundation, Leche Trust, Radcliffe Trust and Cheltenham Festival.

In 1832 the young artist Hiroshige set out on Japan's great Eastern sea-coast road: Tokaido Road, linking Edo (Tokyo) and Kyoto. His paintings from the journey, the famous woodblock prints 'Fifty Three Stations of the Tokaido', made his fortune. Till then, prints depicted geisha or actors; now, the secrets of a hidden country were revealed.

In the opera, we meet young Hiro discovering the landscape in all its perilous beauty. Through projected images, mime and sung poetry, we travel with him. The journey was dangerous: as well as contending with natural disasters - earthquake, flood - travellers had to scale cliffs and ford rivers. To constrain travel, the military government had forbidden bridge-building.

Hiro savours all his adventures - not least the amorous ones - and his paintings bring to life everyone he met: old men and beautiful women, samurai and geisha, pilgrims, porters and passers-by.

Hiroshige in old age is present in the opera too, reflecting on what had gripped his imagination twenty-five years earlier. Behind every welcoming inn and tea-house ('station') on the Tokaido, there was another story: persecution, dispossession, famine. Hiroshige braved the government censor by publishing prints that show the horror of death through starvation. His work reminds us of the power of art to bear witness.