

PROCESSES OF REVELATION

Liza Lim's music evokes dream states and transitory places, asking questions about culture and identity with both flexibility and rigour. Tim Rutherford-Johnson takes a look at the ideas underpinning Lim's work and describes its unique, sound-led character.

Opening a Liza Lim score for the first time, one is struck by its mix of precise rhythmic and pitch notation, and generalised, graphical indications of timbre and sound production. A flurry of microtonal demisemiquavers under a 9:8 tuplet might, for example, be followed by a hand-drawn wavy line and the instruction 'sweep bow'. When one listens, however, the contrast between the controlled and the speculative dissolves, revealing something utterly new and original.

Liza Lim's biography tells a similar story of transition and revelation, of constructing secret gardens within and between places, cultures and traditions. Although her parents are Chinese she grew up first in Brunei and then Australia. Her education in these two Commonwealth countries was therefore informed by British educational priorities and Western values, but she considers herself to have always lived 'in a quite in-between space'. Although this mixed cultural background has brought its own personal difficulties it has also given her

a privileged position as an artist, able to step back from allegiance to any culture and observe and analyse its true form.

I interviewed Lim last November in Paris, the morning after her third opera, *The Navigator* (2008) was given a semi-staged performance at the Opéra Bastille. *The Navigator* itself exemplifies that privileged position: it owes certain thematic and musical debts to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* but, as Lim says, 'A German composer would never go there, they would probably have to deconstruct it much more...destroy it in some way!'

Lim's second opera *Yuè Ling Jié* (*Moon Spirit Feasting*, 1999), proved to be a much more provocative cultural confrontation. Subtitled 'A Chinese Ritual Opera' it was a conscious attempt to address certain aspects of her personal background, which expanded outwards into questions of Chineseness in general. Lim's approach is never less than sensitive – her background research for each piece is conducted with an ethnomusicologist's attentiveness – but this did not prevent *Moon Spirit Feasting* from running into trouble. At one talk at which Lim spoke about the work, some Chinese student composers voiced their offence at what they saw as inauthentic cultural appropriation. Lim's response today is key to understanding this dimension of her work: "Everything,

‘No culture stays static, it’s in constant dialogue with everything around it’

including the hybrid, has its own authenticity. The notion of cultural purity is an absolute illusion. No culture stays static, it’s in constant dialogue with everything around it”

The real strength of Lim’s music, and possibly the source of its challenge, derives from her analytical approach to cultural examination, a sort of ethnographic modernism. As a result, her ‘Chinese-inspired’ music doesn’t sound Chinese; likewise, her more recent music, which is inspired by Australian Aboriginal culture, doesn’t sound Aboriginal. The more ‘authentic’ route

demanding by conservatives can lead in fact to appropriation and casual mimicry; what Lim does instead is engage with the structures that make up different cultures’ expressions of life force.

She denies using a systematic approach – and the flexibility of her scores would seem to bear this out – but nevertheless often refers to Christopher Alexander’s theory of pattern languages. A ‘pattern’ is an abstracted, highly generalised solution to a design problem – a place for waiting, for example – that is made up of a balance of forces and desires: in this case, an entrance to the



LIZA LIM IN REHEARSAL WITH CONDUCTOR LOTHAR ZAGROSEK

waiting place, room for those waiting to congregate, some form of comfort and so on. The pattern may be applicable to several situations – waiting room, bus stop, etc – but its form is fixed. A ‘pattern language’ is the collection of interlinked patterns that make up a more complex structure – a doctor’s surgery or a city transit system.

In recent pieces, such as *Invisibility* (2009) for solo cello or *Songs found In Dream* (2006) for ensemble, the pattern language of Aboriginal culture – patterns of ritual, secrecy and knowledge transfer between initiated individuals – is unfurled

to produce music of exceptional vibrancy and presence. Interpreting the pattern language of Aboriginal art, in particular that of the Yolngu of Arnhem Land, with whom Lim has spent time, becomes a study in concealment and revelation.

Her starting point is sound. Individual sonic moments are first broken down into their constituent forces and parameters. These forces may be physically embodied, such as the performer’s action upon her instrument, or acoustical, such as the balance of sounds that make up a particular timbre. Once identified, these patterns may be reformed and developed

THE NAVIGATOR, PRODUCTION BY ELISION, DIRECTOR BARRIE KOSKY

In *Songs Found in Dream*, the process of revelation is the music



WITH BAVARIAN RADIO ORCHESTRA IN MUNICH

into a musical continuity. The approach is modernist in origin but is less abstract in both its cataloguing of parameters and its manipulation of their values.

So one parameter might be the relative tension of a string, or an intensity of noise: both of which are profoundly different concepts from the more traditional parameters of pitch of dynamic, even if their relative spectra of sonic results overlap. The results are highly dynamic and flexible, but grounded in something (the pattern form) that only reveals itself over time. In *Songs Found in Dream*, for example, the process of revelation is the music. The songs of the title are never quite stated: they are a secret knowledge that remains out of reach. Instead we hear the moment

of their discovery, the emergence rather than the fulfilment or completion, as though we are glancing into a newly opened world rather than describing and reifying it.

Ironically, Lim herself is still somewhat 'hidden' in Britain. She is greatly respected in Europe, Australia and the USA, in all of which she has had major premieres and commissions recently, but although she holds a prestigious academic seat here (as Professor of Composition at Huddersfield University, and Director of the Centre for Research in New Music) she is still a rare name on British concert programmes. That situation may be on the turn, however: once again ELISION are performing her music at Kings Place in London,

and two CDs from the University of Huddersfield's CeReNeM label feature recent pieces *Invisibility*, *Songs Found In Dream* and the brilliant trumpet solo *Wild-Winged One* (2007). It's high time Liza Lim's secret knowledge was shared a little more widely.

The premiere of *The Guest* for orchestra and solo recorder, performed by Sudwest Rundfunk Orchestra conducted by Rupert Huber, takes place on 15 October at Donaueschinger Musiktage. www.swr.de

Spirit Weapons for solo cello and *The Quickening* for soprano and qin (Chinese zither) will be performed by ELISION at Kings Place on 15 November. www.kingsplace.co.uk



Photography: Justin Nicholas

Listening post 



Songs Found in Dream



Invisibility



'Angel of History' aria,
The Navigator