



## ELISION ensemble

# The Navigator

„The Navigator is an opera about extreme passion, about Eros and Thanatos, Desire and Death, the hazard of lovers, and of war and choices made between annihilation and creation.

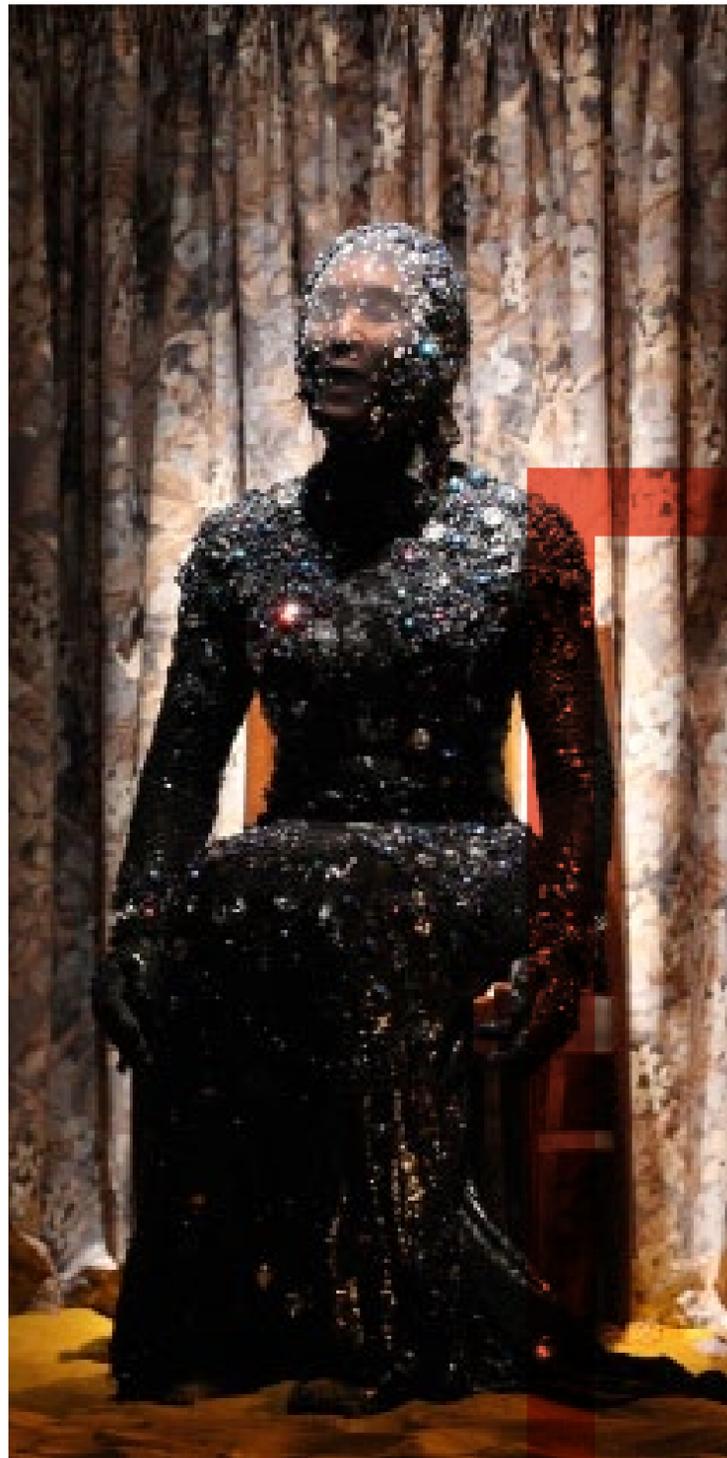
The subject of The Navigator is the erotic paradox – or perhaps more precisely, the structure of the paradox that is theatricalised in Eros – the name the Ancient Greeks gave to the divinity of desire. The Greeks described Eros as the ‘weaver of fictions’, ‘the bittersweet’, pointing to the ambivalence, the dilemma of sensation and the illusory conditions that underpin the erotic. The journey then is not so much a linear journey from one place to another, but more a to-and-fro; a place of deferral. What is desire but a longing for that which is out of reach – a trajectory of longing that moves endlessly to an impossible vanishing point? A triangular geometry is created in which the lover yearns to be one with the beloved, yet also strives to maintain the distance that is the condition of the erotic (think of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Stendhal’s On Love, Roland Barthes’ A Lover’s Discourse, Sappho’s poetry).

The opera’s journey plots the co-ordinates of desire – a staging of shifting positions: of distance and nearness in musical space; convergence and divergence of different temporal forms. The figures in my opera, the characters of the Navigator, the Beloved, the Fool, the Crone and the Angel of History, move in shifting constellations to describe

some of the disorientations of ecstasy – the special kind of mad aliveness when all the senses are sharpened and one can access states of transformation. The opera is not about narrative form or psychological development – instead it describes a series of states of being.

Aspects of two great epics, The Mahabharata and Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, are symbolically pivotal to the opera. It is not the stories themselves that are important, rather certain energy patterns of risk and transformation. The idea of the gamble comes from the dice game scene in the great Indian epic The Mahabharata. Briefly, King Yudishtira is drawn into a dice game where he stakes all that he owns, including his kingdom, his brothers, himself and his wife. Because of his unstoppable addiction, he gambles and loses everything, including that which is most loved. The opera begins at this catastrophic moment of total loss. So the gamble is about an extremity of desire which might lead towards ecstasy (lovers) or perhaps towards disaster or annihilation (war).

– Liza Lim  
Interview with Jérémie Szpirglas  
(6 June 2009)



## Music

The prelude to this 'alchemical dream opera' is played by a Ganassi recorder, an instrument long associated with lamentation, the erotic, and pastoral and supernatural realms. A counterpoint is provided by the sound of cicadas: a high pitch of desire and the rustle of the quivering feathers of an entrapped Angel of History.

„Cicadas were an image of desire for the Greeks – they had a story that once upon a time, the cicadas were human. When the Muses arose, they were so enamoured of music that all they wanted to do was sing and forgot all else, perishing in this suffused state of desire.

The recorder is another image of this trope of desire. The Ganassi flourished in 15th Century Venice in a school of recorder playing that was highly virtuosic and full of extravagant ornamentations. As an instrument, it was associated with the supernatural, the melancholic, the pastoral and the erotic. That particular tradition died out when Baroque recorders came to supremacy but strangely, it was an Australian instrument builder, Fred Morgan, who spearheaded the revival of the instrument about forty years ago. So its use for me is also tied up with strange pathways in recapturing and remaking the past – it is both 'authentic' and recreated – a product of research and imagination. I love the expressivity of the Ganassi recorder – the immediacy that the sound has, with its closeness to breath – it registers every subtle shift and nuance in the body.

These various kinds of instruments emerging from different historical periods, for me, create different musical spaces – sometimes very congruent, sometimes clashing. Each instrument comes out of particular sound worlds – each with its own performance histories, different physicalities and aesthetics of listening and expression and somehow the mix provides me with access to a highly textured mix of gestural languages and 'affects' (to draw upon a very Baroque understanding of music). Instead of a smooth and historically coherent ensemble, you end up with a lot of 'boundary situations' – the electric guitar against the recorder is one extreme example. I like to work with these polarities, finding ways of weaving connections across boundaries or intensifying the differences and the friction between elements which then forms part of the expressivity of my musical language.“

– Liza Lim  
Interview with Jérémie Szpirglas

## About

„In late 2004, I sat alone in the darkened concert hall of the Sydney Opera House listening to the Sydney Symphony under Gianluigi Gelmetti play the rapturous music of the Prelude to Tristan und Isolde. From that moment, I wanted to write an opera about ecstatic engulfment and the ambiguous space of desire. I avidly followed performances of Wagner's opera – in Brisbane, in Paris and in Essen. From there The Navigator began to evolve.“

„One of themes that I was really drawn to in the Tristan und Isolde story – which is perhaps not the first theme one usually thinks of – is the theme of the chaos of false signs: in an early Breton version of the story, Tristan is waiting: does Isolde's ship fly the white flag of good news or the black flag of disaster? Tristan hears the report of a black flag and dies just as Isolde arrives. Are we actually that reliable witnesses to our own desires or do our projections cast a veil on whatever we experience? Ouch!

[...]

I wasn't thinking of Aboriginal myths but the librettist Patricia Sykes, interestingly, read very widely on myths surrounding the Greek Pleiades, the constellation which also figures very prominently in Australian Aboriginal stories about the Seven Sisters, But I think you can see that I am working

more with certain abstract patterns that are expressed in these great classic stories without necessarily 'setting' the story. Myths are incredible storehouses of deep cultural knowledge so I find them endlessly fascinating, relevant and alive.“

– Liza Lim  
Interview with Jérémie Szpirglas

### Liza Lim

(born 1966, Australia)

Liza Lim's work as a composer is focused on intercultural exchange, looking particularly at Chinese and Australian Indigenous art, aesthetics and ritual culture. Her projects encompass opera, chamber & symphonic music and site-specific installation. Recent commissions include Ensemble musikFabrik & Holland Festival, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Ensemble InterContemporain, Salzburg & Lucerne Festivals, Bavarian Radio & SWR Orchestras, Sydney Symphony and Festival d'Automne à Paris. She has been closely associated with the ELISION Ensemble with whom she collaborated on three operas. She is Professor of Composition at the University of Huddersfield, UK.

Her music is published by Ricordi (Milan, London & Munich).