Spiritual Ecstasy and Earthly Desire

An interview with Liza Lim

Liza Lim (born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1966) writes music that is often ritualistic in nature, but always delivers a visceral punch. It is a highly lyrical – indeed ecstatic – music, but unafraid of delving into the darker, uglier side of human nature. Lim has been drawn to many cultures beyond the Western concert hall, including a range of Asian and Aboriginal Australian musical practices. Since 2008, she has been Professor of Composition at the University of Huddersfield, in the United Kingdom. This interview took place in June 2014, between BBC and ABC radio studios in Manchester and Sydney. There was minimal editing.

Andrew Ford: Your piece The Green Lion Eats the Sun [2014] is so new that not only have I not heard it, neither have you. But I was interested to read what you wrote about it in a recent blog article, and particularly what you had to say about the conscious and unconscious minds. Is there less will in this piece than in some of your others?

Liza Lim: That’s an interesting question. The Green Lion Eats the Sun is a piece for double bell euphonium, a very unusual instrument that Melvyn Poore has developed together with an instrument builder. Basically, there are two bells, so the sound comes out of one bell and then you can switch to the other bell. So it means there is the possibility of having two worlds of colour, really – you can put a mute in one of the bells, you can really divide up the instrument. So it prompted this piece.

I wrote most of it in an airport – a very unpromising location – but it came together in a really unusual and exciting way for me. First, there was the structure of the instrument with these two worlds; then the ideas I wanted to explore, the idea of worlds of consciousness – one side somehow conscious, the other side unconscious, but you could only access one of them at a time through a switch; and then there was my own experience of being in this airport and actually being in a kind of altered state of consciousness, either through boredom or giving in to the situation of a seven-hour delay and deciding to enter into this act of writing of a piece that I’d actually been stuck on. So it was a very unusual moment of breaking through writer’s block, the material object of the instrument, certain ideas about the structure of consciousness and then my own state, all coming together in a very particular way.

AF: It sounds to me, because of the nature and location of the process in this case, that there was not much planning in the piece. Does that mean that it’s less organised – or less consciously organised – than most of your other pieces?
LL: Well, that’s interesting because, as I said, I’d really been stuck on the piece for about two years. I’d been trying to enter into it but just couldn’t find any sort of doorway, so it was only on this particular day at Boston Airport that I managed to get into it. So there’s an unconscious process, but there was a lot of work at a conscious level before that. Until that day I’d been unable to bring the sides together, this sense of being caught up in the creative flow and more pre-planned, structured ideas. That’s the curious thing: you can plan all you like, but you can’t necessarily make the creative process flow; it’s not there at your bidding all the time.

AF: I get the impression in your music that sound and the quality of sound are paramount. I can’t imagine you arranging one of your pieces for other instruments. It seems that every note that you write comes attached to a particular instrument in a particular range, often played by a particular player. Is that your source of inspiration?

LL: Yes. Sonic reality, the fact of vibration in the world, is really important. Imagining the sound in a really concrete way is what actually leads me on, I think, a lot of the time; it’s the thread that I follow. There’s a sense that the music teaches me ways of listening and thinking as much as my trying to manipulate it.

AF: Let’s talk about one of your first pieces – almost a student piece, really – Garden of Earthly Desire [1989]. It seems to me that you’ve been a very consistent composer – this piece already sounds as much like Liza Lim as your more recent pieces – so it makes sense to go back to it. And also it’s a good example of the physicality of your music – an early example, but a strong one. Perhaps you could talk about the beginning of that piece: what did you want to usher into being with that oboe?

LL: Oh, gosh. Yes, okay. The beginning of Garden of Earthly Desire has this oboe, and again it’s like a thread of sound that sets up something for the whole piece. It’s the beginning of the journey. It has qualities that recur, I think, in a lot of my music. There’s a sense of establishing a point of reference, which is then ornamented and then expands and takes you on a journey. And that’s connected to your other question about the quality of sound being important in my music. It’s a thing that you hold on to, almost in a physical way. It’s something that you travel along. This is one aspect of the embodied and physical quality that I’m looking for in the music that I make – that one can actually be inside it through the qualities of the sound, rather than always having the perspective of being an observer. I want people to have a more immersive relationship to the sound.

AF: And a more visceral response?

LL: Yeah, well . . . It is about physicality, it is about the body. One listens not just with the mind but with the body. The gestural quality of my music invites, perhaps . . . I would like to think . . . sometimes . . . a gesturing within the body as well. It isn’t just an
intellectual exercise, but is something that can be brought inside
the body as a way of listening and understanding and being with
the music. And I guess that’s a quality that I’m always looking for
in any music: you know, this way of being inside the music and
living through the music. It’s a more interactive experience.

AF: There’s also an eroticism to that piece, it seems to me, and
quite a lot of your other pieces. I don’t know how to explain that,
it’s just an impression. But is it your impression too?

LL: Um... sure! Yes, I mean... an erotic quality, a visceral qual-
ity, a physical sense of entrancement and entrainment... It’s really
a key aspect of what I’m looking for when I’m making music, and
also what I’m looking for when I’m listening to other music. The
sense of being taken into another state is the erotic as well, this
sense of being in the flow, merging with something, being... yeah,
being in an altered state.

AF: But against that – or maybe it’s not against it, maybe it’s part
of it – there are often quite violent moments, quite violent gestures,
quite violent sounds – sounds that come apart, sometimes very
beautifully, but sometimes not so beautifully...

LL: Yeah...

AF: ... sometimes in a rather worrying way.

LL: Sure.

AF: Is that related to the eroticism, do you think, or is it some-
thing different?

LL: Well, I think that element of what you call violence or eroti-
cism, they are connected in that they’re about more extreme expres-
sive states. And so, for instance, the quality of distortion that I’m
very interested in in music is something that I will connect to
heightened emotional states, and that could be in the zone of the
erotic or the pleasurable or the joyful, but it could also be in the
zone of the painful or the violent or the grieving. I think there is
a kind of continuum there. Looking for kinds of expressivity that
take you away from the more everyday, medium level of living.

AF: There’s also a word that you used when you were talking about
Garden of Earthly Desire, and that was ‘debris’. What did you mean
by that? What is musical debris?

LL: [Laughs] I don’t remember... Yes, debris... Well, I had an
idea about the structure of Garden of Earthly Desire, because, you
know, it’s quite a long piece. It’s half an hour, and it’s made up of
these multiple sections in which musical materials recur – but
they’re often fragmented, you only recognise a little bit, because
they’re broken up and recombined. So the idea of musical debris
is perhaps an indicator of the sort of forces that are moving through
the music. This is kind of simple, but there is something explosive
that results in fragmentation, and there’s the attempt to put things back together as well.

AF: Jumping ahead nearly a quarter of a century to Tongue of the Invisible [2011], there’s an ecstatic quality to that music as well. I know you’ve described it as a spiritual ecstasy, but do you think it is related to the erotic ecstasy of Garden of Earthly Desire?

LL: Sure ... In Tongue of the Invisible, there is the theme of the divine ecstasy: it’s based on poems of Hafez, the great Sufi mystic, and in that Persian Sufi poetic tradition, there’s always this really interesting mix between images of earthly eroticism—the lover and the beloved—and at the same time the spiritual. So earthly kinds of metaphors also stand in for spiritual ones; earthly longing is also connected to this longing for the divine. I find that intriguing. I love that kind of fluidity, that ambiguity and shift between different modes—not necessarily staying in one or the other but constantly fluctuating and transforming.

AF: And fluctuating and transforming between the mind and the body in terms of the actual physicality of the music, because often watching your music being performed is quite an important part of the experience. I mean the players: the way they work, the way their bodies are almost choreographed by your music ...

LL: Well, that is an ideal, that the musicians are so within the experience of playing that there’s a merging that goes on there too.

In Tongue of the Invisible, I tried to relate some of those Sufi ideas about journeying, wandering, being bewildered, being lost, but also finding something, coming into community, being entranced and finding union as well. I tried to map that to things that the players could also experience, so it wasn’t just a description or an illustration of those states, but that they would have experience of wandering and bewilderment and union and community. And I did that by incorporating aspects of relatively open or improvised sections in the work, together with much more structured sections. So there was a real dialogue between composition, offering a way of listening and working with materials, and improvising and elaborating materials for the musicians, and that offering is taken up in various ways. I mean, there’s a whole section where the jazz pianist Uri Caine completely improvises but based on a little fragment of a melody. In other parts that melody is something that I’ve composed out but which is ornamented by other musicians. So there’s a sense in which the whole group is this organism, experiencing the music, bringing their own personalities and histories, their own stories to it. And that’s part of the piece as well. So that was a really interesting and beautiful project to work on, in the sense of deliberately trying to create this aspect of community.

AF: Do you want the listener to be aware of when the dots stop and the improvising starts, or are you, on the contrary, hoping that the experience of listening to the music will be relatively seamless?
LL: I don't think it matters, really, whether the audience is aware that some things are improvised and others are read from the page. I actually think that everything involves improvisation, even in the most heavily instructed music there's always performer choice, the element of what they bring to it. I don't think you can crush interpretation. But no, I don't think it's necessary for the audience to realise that some sections are improvised and some are scored, but one certainly picks up on different energy levels or different qualities that come with those approaches. And I think that's interesting too. That's part of the texture of the experience.

AF: The musical influences that come from exploring Sufism and Sufi chant, these are things that you've also drawn on, and other vocal techniques from the Middle East - ululation, for instance. What are you hoping to introduce to your music, or perhaps find in your music, by using these techniques, which, after all, come with the resonance of another culture?

LL: In a way, it's not such a deliberate project to create the resonance of Islamic chant in my music. But it totally seeps in, and it's to do with what I've listened to. Different kinds of music - and where I've been when I've listened to it - all come into who I am and then make their way into my music. I think the process is more that there are certain kinds of music that I love, and they ultimately also find their expression in what I'm writing. Certainly in *Tongue of the Invisible* there's this element of a kind of Sufi melisma, a heightened chanting. But it's sung by a

Western-trained opera singer, so it's transformed again - though Omar Ebrahim, the singer, is very aware of those ecstatic vocal traditions and can really get inside that expressive world.

AF: What about your use of Chinese music? Can you describe how that affected your work?

LL: There are lots of different aspects of Chinese culture that I've reflected on in my work: more obvious things like the colourful street operas performed during the Hungry Ghost Festival in Penang, Malaysia, which was the subject of my second opera, *Moon Spirit Feasting* (1997–99), to more hidden aspects of style and gesture that come from the playing tradition of the 'scholar's instrument', the guqin or zither. These interests were kind of reawakened by a recent trip to China. I definitely feel an affinity for both the over-the-top, clashing vibrancy of Chinese performance as well as the more refined, meditative, rather arcane aspects of guqin music.

That was my first trip to mainland China and was so interesting as there's such an obsession with national identity wrapped up in pride for history, with continuity of traditions, desire to assert one's position in the world. My own 'China' is made up of family experiences as part of the migrant diaspora in South-East Asia - that's a rather different place, a hybrid position where identity is made up of perhaps more piecemeal knowledge and things that have travelled and transformed, been forgotten and half-remembered or in some cases, held in quite crystallised ways that belong to a more distant time. But I also get suspicious of this
utopian, never-never land of ‘tradition’. I get a bit nervous with the rhetoric of ‘national identity’ as well as ‘multiculturalism’ that has been such a strong part of the Australian cultural discussion. There’s a romanticism there which can all too easily end up in a pretty compromising position with some nasty parts of history – ‘tradition’ quite often has a past that’s in collusion with slavery, genocide, colonialism and so on. The romance of nationalism often denies the ugly parts of history but, more worryingly, turns a blind eye to how that past continues to reach out and affect the present and shape continuing conditions of power. Cultural matters are intimately political!

That, perhaps, explains a bit my attitude to referencing quite diverse cultural materials. Over time, you can see that my work is not just associated with ‘Chineseness’ or Australian indigenous culture but there’s also Sufi mysticism, there are other cultural lineages that I’m drawn to – maybe it gets a bit confusing from a ‘branding’ point of view . . . There’s a certain dynamic of belonging and not-belonging from my own experience that I think I bring to my musical projects. I’m not interested in reproducing tradition but in perhaps showing something of a gap, or where things don’t quite add up – it’s a modest way of showing that whilst there are analogies and linkages between many things, there’s no totalising essence. I’m going for relationship and conversation with everything – or another way to put it is to say that ‘otherness’ and ‘sameness’ are constantly transforming in their meanings and qualities.

AF: It occurs to me that perhaps you don’t agree with my earlier assertion that your music is very consistent. Maybe you think of each of your works as a new beginning. Is that true, or do you see a thread that runs through everything?

LL: I do see a thread. And when I look at what appear to be a great diversity of interests and projects – whether it’s aspects of Chinese music, and particularly ritual music, my interest in Aboriginal culture, and very recently writing a piece for the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle and being interested in Nordic stories – what brings them together is the broader theme of ways of looking at the world which are non-mechanistic, a body-knowledge that can only be passed down through experience and an oral tradition.

AF: The other piece I particularly want to ask you about, because I suspect it’s a really important one for you, is Songs Found in Dream [2005]. It seems to me to be a summing up, for the time being at least, of your experience of Aboriginal culture – which is reasonably extensive, isn’t it?

LL: Well, Songs Found in Dream was a work written about ten years ago, and it was connected to some quite intense explorations and journeyings to meet artists in Aboriginal communities, and just learning a little bit more about the culture and philosophy and aesthetics, and being totally blown away by the richness and extraordinariness, particularly of Yolngu culture in the north-east part of Arnhem Land. Songs Found in Dream was one piece in
which I tried to touch aspects of that experience, not through any
direct quotations – there’s no element of Aboriginal songs in it, or
even rhythms – but there’s a certain quality of vibrancy I was look-
ing for. And a quality of layers, in which many layers veil other
layers and then come apart and show something else, this element
of veiling and revelation which is such an extraordinary and fas-
cinating part of that culture up north. So it was a way of process-
ing and also wanting to bring that into myself and into my creative
process.

AF: The title alone seems to describe a part of that process, but it
also brings us back to The Green Lion Eats the Sun – those two
sides, the conscious and unconscious sides of creativity.

LL: Yes, I adore that Aboriginal concept of songs found in dream.
There are actually various words – in fact, a whole vocabulary –
to describe something which is found in dream or, let’s say, in non-
ordinary reality, altered states of consciousness. I love the idea that
one would find valuable knowledge or creative power in those
states. In Western culture we substitute the word ‘dreamtime’ to
talk about this creative presence in Aboriginal thinking. It’s this
idea that you don’t construct something, but that you stalk it, you
hunt it, you hunt creative knowledge in those states. I think that’s
found in quite a few indigenous cultures. That’s where music comes
from, that’s where art comes from. It’s not something one can
make in a purely intellectual way; it relies on another state of
consciousness.

Droning On

Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.

Pauline Oliveros

Drones have got themselves a bad name. The musical term pre-
sumably derives from the unwavering buzz of the bee, specifically
the male honey bee or drone (from the Anglo-Saxon dræn), which
is distinguished from other bees by its essential uselessness: beyond
being on call to fertilise a receptive queen, drones do no work and
make no honey; they just hang around in groups, permanently
out to stud. Perhaps this is why P.G. Wodehouse invented the
Drones Club for Bertie Wooster and his friends, none of whom
has a real job; or perhaps he was thinking of another meaning of
the word: a bore, who talks on endlessly like a musical drone.
Boredom is probably the most common negative association of
the word, but if you add to the list of usages those from modern
‘warfare – remotely piloted aircraft dropping bombs on military
targets and unarmed civilians alike – you end up with a thoroughly
unattractive concept. Yet drones or bourdons (the French word is
also bee-related) underpin much of the world’s music, sounding
on and on while other things happen above and around them.