

## BOOKS

*The Music of Liza Lim*, Tim Rutherford-Johnson, Wildbird, 2022, 236 pp., A\$49.95.

This first monograph about Liza Lim's music is written by critic and musicologist Tim-Rutherford Johnson. Lim's work played an important role in Rutherford-Johnson's previous book, *Music after the Fall* (University of California Press, 2017). The author's knowledge of the subject is comprehensive, and he employs an analytical approach that brings together musical details and cultural materials in fluent fashion.

Lim's catalogue is too extensive to cover every work in detail, and it must have been difficult to choose which to omit. A good balance is struck here, with pieces that show the tendencies of each particular genre – solo works, chamber music, installations, vocal music and opera – affording the reader a considerable amount of material that applies to Lim's significant approaches to writing. Rutherford-Johnson cross-cuts the analytical material with relevant biographical data that delineates particular chronological sections in Lim's work.

A precocious composer, already by age 23 Lim was creating chamber music that demonstrated central concerns of her work. *The Garden of Earthly Desire* (1988–89) was commissioned by ELISION, a group with which she has worked to the present day. Inspired in part by puppet theatre, Hieronymus Bosch's paintings (including the one for which the musical work is titled) and tarot cards as storytelling, a trope derived from Italo Calvino's 1973 novel *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, this kind of polyglot assemblage mirrors the extended musical vocabulary of this and most of Lim's compositions. Her interest in Asian instrumentation and aesthetics, and ways to combine them with a Western ensemble of extended instruments, are illustrated in the analysis of *Koto* (1994). Lim goes to great effort to make these works into dialogues between instruments on equal footing, avoiding East/West comparison as a conceit, instead allowing a cross-pollination of material.

*Weaver-of-fictions* (2007), for solo Ganassi recorder, is extracted from her third opera, *The Navigator*. The instrument has a much wider range than a conventional recorder, over three

octaves. A treatise by its sixteenth-century inventor, Silvestro Ganassi, provides the composer with a plethora of ornaments to adorn the piece. The title comes from Patricia Sykes' libretto for the opera, and it is associated with the poet Sappho. As Lim recounts in the book, the recorder was used in Renaissance music to depict 'erotic, pastoral, and supernatural themes'. It was thus ideal for teasing these out at the beginning of *The Navigator's* third act and also to create evocative allusions as a stand-alone piece. Genevieve Lacey of ELISION was the dedicatee; as with so many of Lim's pieces, it was created for a particular performer and is a highly personal endeavour.

Until her recent composition of a piano concerto, Lim had not spotlighted the instrument in her large-scale works. In 2008, she wrote a short solo piece for the instrument, *The Four Seasons (After Cy Twombly)*. Rutherford-Johnson takes advantage of Lim's composing in an unusual (for her) context to explore different aspects of her work, including polyphonic layering and strands of rhythms.

*Invisibility*, for solo cello, was analysed in *Music after the Fall*. Rutherford-Johnson returns to it here in a context in which more intricate technical details are explored. Based on Yonglu art, *Invisibility* is perhaps the ideal piece with which to discuss Lim's over-20-year-long respectful engagement with Aboriginal culture, and the concept of shimmer, also important to understanding her music. Lim says it is the key work in her repertoire, and it certainly is treated as such here.

Lim's vocal music is either opera or for solo voice. *Voodoo Child* (1988–89) was her first vocal work, commissioned by Radio Bremen. In 1987, Lim was studying in Amsterdam with Ton de Leeuw and, briefly, Brian Ferneyhough. Sappho's poetry became a touchstone during this time, and has continued to inspire Lim for over 30 years. In *Voodoo Child*, the poem 'Sappho 31', one of the more famous excerpts, is treated in a bifurcated ensemble deployment. When the soprano sings, sustaining instruments, many performing glissandi and microtones, accompany her. When she is silent, this makes way for more percussive sounds,

particularly those of the piano – a seemingly simple device, but elegantly deployed. ELISION's soprano Deborah Kayser has been the dedicatee of several pieces, including *The Quickening* (2002–2005), in which she joined qin (Chinese zither) player Yang Kunwei. Lim's programme note was the first time in which she mentioned the shimmering quality associated with a number of her works dealing with Aboriginal art. Although based on Chinese culture rather than Aboriginal, *The Quickening's* musical and expressive qualities relate it to the later collection of shimmer pieces.

To date, Lim has written five operas and the music-theatre piece *Atlas of the Sky*. Rutherford-Johnson suggests that each demarcates a part of her chronology in which a distinct interest resides: the Melbourne art scene, non-Western cultural traditions, her shimmer period, in which she returned to composition after a few years off, ecology and, most recently, heterogeneity and massed sounds. Several of the operas' arias and instrumental solos can also be counted among the works for voices, as they are considered modular in construction. Lim's earliest opera, *The Oresteia* (1991–93), remains an important piece, conceptually and qualitatively. Rutherford-Johnson outlines and explicates each scene of the opera, in so doing creating a template for dramaturgy and the interaction between singers and the ensemble that serves to survey the other theatrical works, too. More recent operas, *The Navigator* (2007–2008) and *The Tree of Codes* (2013–15), also receive thoughtful analytical treatment.

Installations were a particular interest during Lim's early days in Melbourne, and she returned to them in the 2010s. Her collaborations with the artist Domenico de Clario provided some early meetings with performers who would become part of her collaborative circle. Collaborators on installation works include koto player Satsuki Odamura, cellist Rosanne Hunt, and the Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart. de Clario also ignited a passion in Lim for the poetry of Rumi, whose writing has become an abiding influence.

Lim has a complicated relationship with the orchestra. Apart from *The Compass* (2005–2006), a piece for flute, didgeridoo and large orchestra, for over two decades Lim preferred ensembles of more manageable size, thereby maintaining the aforementioned intimacy in collaboration so

important to the genesis of her work. Thus, Rutherford-Johnson focuses on *The Alchemical Wedding* (1996), for chamber symphony, *Speak, be Silent* (2015), for violin solo and 15 musicians, and *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus* (2017), for 12 musicians. *The Alchemical Wedding* was a co-commission for ELISION and Ensemble Modern, based on the idea of a marriage between Red King and White King, symbols in medieval alchemy. Another influence in the opera is the poetry of Rumi. These seemingly disparate topics are woven together into a series of disparate sections that illuminate various timbral combinations through heterophonic melodic development and tempo shifts. *The Compass* addresses Lim's engagement with Aboriginal culture in the largest of the shimmer pieces. It also contains a chant that Lim composed in native language for didgeridoo player William Barton, which during the course of the work is used as thematic material. *Speak, be Silent* is Lim's response to 'sounding together, sounding apart'. Not your typical violin concerto, the soloist and ensemble try to sound as sonically disparate as possible. Contrasts become overwrought with the ensemble trying to usurp the soloist and the violinist pushing back with fervidly angular gestures, muscular bow pressure and intense multi-stops. The make-up of the piece and its evocative title suggest a plethora of possible narratives: whose speech is being suppressed? *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus* is about man's destruction of the environment. Lim's works may allude to different cultural and social structures, but she seldom writes music with overt extramusical activism. Even here, the music is not programmatic, instead using the patterns of plastic pollutants in the oceans as a structuring principle. Still, it is hard not to hear in the trumpet's keening solo and microtonal violin notes a kind of bereavement.

One wishes that more books on music were as legible as *The Music of Liza Lim*. It uses a clean font, and the musical examples are clear, even the handwritten ones, making following the analyses straightforward and pleasurable. A well-annotated chronology, bibliography and list of works make this a valuable reference tome. Highly recommended.

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