

Liza Lim, born in Perth, Australia, lives between Melbourne, Australia and Huddersfield, where she teaches composition at the University as well as directing the Research Center for New Music. Her music features prominently at the international music composition, having received important commissions from organizations such as Ensemble Contrechamps, the Holland Festival, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Angeles Philharmonic, Festival d'Automne of Paris and Salzburg Festival among others and has performed multiple projects with ELISION, MusikFabrik, Ensemble Intercontemporain, and Ensemble Modern. Her music, very personal voice and unusual force, is the result of multiple latent energies that seem to break sometimes violently, showing the existence of different realities that can only be glimpsed, according to the "shimmer" aesthetics of Australian Aborigines, one of the influences that presents her music from *Songs found in dream* (2005). As Alex Ross said: "In her work, rough, plain melodies meet up with displays of avant-garde virtuosity; voices sing and squawk, instruments emit pure tones and raw noise. Lim exemplifies a younger generation of composers who have revived modernism by kicking away its technocratic façade and heightening its visceral power."¹

Mari Carmen Asenjo.- To start with, for those who have not heard your music yet, could you tell us, as a listener, what distinctive feature has your music among the many proposals that make up the current compositional scenario?

Lisa Lim.- The expressive use of instrumental colours and their transformations is probably the constant in 30 years of my compositional work. I am always looking for sounds that reflect an individualised, personalised approach to how they are produced. I want to hear the 'dialect' of a performer's touch and sensibility rather than a more standardised approach to musical languaging. This is why collaboration with particular performers and the musical attunement that is possible through a shared working process has been so central to my work.

¹ Ross, Alex, «Singing in tongues», *The New Yorker*, en <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/singing-in-tongues>.

M. C. A.- Could you talk us about teaching at University of Huddersfield?

L. L.- I've been Professor of Composition and the Director of the Centre for Research in New Music at the University of Huddersfield since 2008. It is a deeply inspiring place in terms of the sense of commitment and openness to musical experimentation from staff and students and it has an extraordinary legacy in terms of its Festival of Contemporary Music (hcmf//). I love the idea of Cage, Boulez, Xenakis etc wandering the streets of this Yorkshire town in the 80s in search of a curry. And there always new voices – in recent years, Maja Ratkje from Norway, the British/German composer Rebecca Saunders, and the Catalan composer Hèctor Parra have been the featured composers at the festival.

M. C. A.- It can be perceived a changed between *Garden of Earthly desire* (1988) and *Invisibility* (2009), for instance, (two works separated from one another). In what moment of your career it occurs and what that change is based in?

L. L.- Threads from that very early large-scale (30-minute) ensemble work, *Garden of Earthly Desire* still persist in some of my work – the sense of melodic ornamentation and a more fractured counterpoint. The 'cello features prominently within the ensemble work; it's always been one of my favourite instruments so maybe there is also an evolutionary link with 'Invisibility'. The newer elements of my work found in the 'cello solo, particularly a strong rhythmic drive, emerged in the mid-2000s when I was highly influenced by my contact with aspects of Australian Indigenous art and ritual and the striations and finely shimmering patternings of the dance, music and design culture found amongst Yolngu clans in the Northern part of the country.

M. C. A.- In an interview conducted by James Saunders and Christopher Fox², you talked in about observation and analysis of sound's behavior as an important part in your sound universe, especially in terms of timbrical research. In that interview you mentioned

² Saunders, James y Fox, Christopher, *Interview with Liza Lim*, en <http://www.james-saunders.com/interview-with-liza-lim/>

the idea of “meta- instrument” as something you were working about in that time. Could you talk us about this concept?

L. L.- The idea of a ‘meta-instrument’ is not an approach unique to me – Luigi Nono, Richard Barrett and Caspar Johannes Walter, to name three rather diverse composers, employ this idea of a group of instruments acting together as one new entity. There is also Helmut Lachenmann’s idea of instrumental writing as a quasi ground zero in which the composer constructs the format of the instrument as if from first principles. The work of all of these composers has had an impact on my work (amongst many others!). In my case, I found the approach of analyzing the sonic and gestural behaviours of an instrument and then mapping it on to a whole group very useful to breaking beyond the traditional parameters of performance practice in relation to Asian instruments, eg: koto (Japanese 13-string zither), erhu (Chinese 2-stringed violin), angklung (Indonesian percussion). I felt that, for instance, allowing a whole group to ‘become koto’ in its gestures and reverberations was a way out of surface imitation of a tradition whilst opening up new vocabularies for compositional structure.

M. C. A.- «The Garden of Forking Paths», by Jorge Luis Borges, tells of a time branched, forked, that combines simultaneity and succession, like « [...] an infinite series of times, growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time». This conception of time reminded me of the way you describe the temporal evolution and how events unfold.

L. L.- Yes, Borges’ work has always been very fascinating to me as is Italo Calvino’s. The sense that one can trace multiple pathways through the world is very appealing because it opens up the sense that there are multiple realities within which we can live and several perspectives from which one can understand things. That sense of the coexistence of other temporalities is also very strong in Aboriginal cultures – the idea of the Australian ‘Dreamtime’ which in a Western translation connotes ‘Creation as ancestral past’ is understood and experienced by Indigenous people as a living timeflow –

it is past/present/future simultaneously – it might be thought of as the quantum field of all creative possibilities.

M. C. A.- *Invisibility* (2009), for solo cello, has just been played in San Sebastian, by Séverine Ballon, who is dedicated to. Can it be said that this work is the result of the Aboriginal culture research? Could you talk about the concept of this work and how it is reflected in?

L. L.- The first piece I wrote that reflected on this idea of ‘shimmer’ was the ensemble piece ‘Songs found in dream’ (2005). There is one section in which the ensemble plays breathy/air sounds in highly rhythmic unison and this was inspired by an extraordinary silent dance I witnessed performed by a group from Aurukun in which wing-like arm movements were perfectly co-ordinated via a song which everyone was singing internally. I loved that idea of hidden impulses and forces shaping the surface of something and it gave me an important insight into a culture of hiddenness and revelation that plays a very central role in various Aboriginal cultures. ‘Shimmer’, the flickering play of light to create visual illusion or rapid oscillations of sound, is often a marker of the presence of spiritual power and at the same time protects the viewer from the potential danger of that power. ‘Shimmer’ is therefore both veil and indicator of something sacred and I love that double-sided meaning to the concept. In ‘Invisibility’, the ‘cellist makes use of a guiro bow where the hair of the bow is twisted and wrapped around the wood creating a serrated surface not dissimilar to the South American guiro. Every stroke of the bow over a string transforms the sound so that it becomes a granular, shimmering and unstable and rather than a single tone, one hears several layers of pitches, harmonics, noises and rhythmic details – it transforms the stringed surface of the ‘cello into a 3-D sculptural world.

M. C. A.- You have ever mentioned working with energy from the performer himself at the time of production of sound, as well as the relationship between the performer's body and the sound generated.

L. L.- There is a wonderful tradition in the ancient scholar's instrument of the Chinese guqin (7-string zither) that all the noises made by the performer including rubbing sounds and creaks are like the breaths of the instrument; and that in silence, one is still in touch with the vibrations of the sound that has died away via the contact of the body of the musician. One hears through one's ears, through one's fingers and ultimately the whole body is in resonance as a receptor for musical experience; the connoisseurship of silence through touch in particular, is at the heart of the meaning this tradition. But we find in various traditions from all over the world, that an instrument is much more than a passive tool and has an animation and personality of its own (you can see that thinking in the beautiful features carved into the scrolls of early stringed instruments (humans, dragons and lion heads etc). Therefore, there is a dialogue between the spirit of the performer and of the instrument and one is acting upon the other like in a dance - through that one can perceive a certain living and energetic bond between things and it's this quality I am very interested to experience in any kind of music making.

M. C. A.- I would like to conclude this interview making a reference to the great article that Alex Ross dedicated to you last year concerning the interpretation of your work *Mother Tongue* (2005) at Miller Theatre in 2014, April, that was played by soprano Tony Arnold and members of the International Contemporary Ensemble. In relation to the texts used, primarily in English, interspersed with words from other languages, some of them on the point of disappearing. Alex Ross writes that all words merge to create a multilingual everything. Could you talk a little about this?³

L. L.- The text for 'Mother Tongue' was written by the Australian poet, Patricia Sykes (I also collaborated on the opera 'The Navigator' (2008) with her). The texts includes words from Finnish (the language of the soprano Piia Komsa who premiered the work), Australian Aboriginal desert languages of the Walpiri, Yorta Yorta and the Kukatja, the click language of the San people of the Southern Kalahari region, the 'secret' women's language of Nushu from the Hunan province in China etc. The inclusion of these words

³ «Texts are mainly in English, but are interspersed with words from other languages, several of them nearly extinct. [...] What's striking about Lim's treatment of these words is how they blend into a multilingual whole», Alex Ross, *ibid.*

was quite talismanic – a way of gesturing to the knowledges and the regions of sensibility that are special in these different ‘tongues’. I guess the music unifies these different sources as it carries them along though I hope that they also still retain their own aura in some way rather than becoming undifferentiated. Words are fascinating things – rather as I was saying about instruments, they can carry magical impulses of spirit expressing some deep levels of humanness.

(Interview by Maricarmen Asenjo Marrodán)