

## **Liza Lim**

Born in 1966 to Chinese parents, educated in Brunei and Australia, and embraced in Europe and Australia as one of the leading composers of her generation, Liza Lim is an artist of the contemporary globalized era. Her mixed cultural background has enabled her to step back from cultural allegiances and traditions, and write from an 'in-between place' of her own. As such her music draws on an exceptionally wide range of influences, from modern architectural theory to Australian Aboriginal knowledge systems.

The components of Lim's style, as well as her skill and ambition, were established early, with her first opera *The Oresteia* (1991–3), completed when she was still 27. Ancient texts and stories – from China, Tibet, Persia and elsewhere – continue to feature in her work. *The Oresteia* is also an early example of the collaborative spirit that has defined her career. The text was adapted from Aeschylus with the director Barrie Kosky, and the music was written for the ELISION Ensemble, Australia's leading new music ensemble, with whom Lim has had close musical and personal ties since the late 1980s.

At the same time, Lim began an abiding interest in musical traditions beyond the Western orchestra. *Koto* (1993) and *Burning House* (1995) both look to Japan – in the latter case with Lim writing the score in traditional Japanese notation. Perhaps inevitably, the study of Asian music led her to her own emigrant Chinese identity in the 'ritual street opera' *Yuè Lǐng Jié* ('Moon Spirit Feasting', 1997–9). Later works, including her third opera, *The Navigator* (2008), have expanded her attention to pre-classical Western instruments such as the Baroque harp and viola d'amore. However, nowhere does Lim use her instruments as exotic colour. Instead she studies their performance practice and history in detail, using architectural or biological metaphors to synthesise their language with her own.

At first Lim's interests can seem eclectic. Yet there are recurring themes. One is that of shamanic possession or the fluidity of states of living between the human and the animal, the mundane and the unearthly, the present and the eternal. It is a tense combination of ritual and ecstasy – two words often used in descriptions of Lim's work – and is articulated in her music's blend of rigour and abandon.

Using the full range of techniques available to a composer in the early 21st century, she transforms her players into channellers of these wild forces. Vocalists use whacky whistles in their mouths to change into animal or insectoid voices (*The Navigator*); players become absorbed in lengthy, meditative communion with their instruments (*Bardo'i-thos-grol*, a seven-day installation created with the artist Domenico de Clario 1994–5); the sensations of playing become the door to private knowledge systems (*Invisibility* for solo cello, 2009).

Shamanism has allowed Lim to connect the points of her own heritage, from China to Australia to Europe, all places with ancient stories of animal-human transmutation. A fulcrum of these different backgrounds is *The Quickening* (2005), one of the first works Lim wrote after becoming a parent. Its title refers to the mother first feeling her baby moving in the womb. Motherhood may be its theme, but the work is a typical complex of ideas. It is composed for the quintessentially Lim-like pairing of soprano and qin, the most revered of Chinese instruments; the text, by the poet Yang Lian, speaks of 'cicadas in the body' and 'a ceremony for childbirth'. In the score's preface Lim also refers to the shamanic practices of Aboriginal healers, the 'ecstatic Central Desert art of Aboriginal Australia' and the kinaesthetic performance practice of the qin.

*The Navigator* (2007–8) represents another, still greater coming together. Its libretto is by the Australian poet Patricia Sykes, with whom Lim had previously worked on *Mother Tongue* for soprano and ensemble (2005). The partnership with Kosky was also renewed for the

work's first productions at the Brisbane Festival and Melbourne International Festival of the Arts. And the music was again composed for the musicians of ELISION, several of whom gained new solo and ensemble works extracted from the piece (*Wild Winged-One* for trumpet, *Weaver of Fictions* for alto Ganassi recorder, and *Sensorium* for countertenor, Baroque harp, viola d'amore and harpsichord). *The Navigator* also introduces a new element: Wagner. Lim has said that hearing the *Tristan* prelude in 2004 helped her 'fall in love with music again', and the story (and disguised moments of the music) feed into her own opera. Since *The Navigator*, Lim has widened her circles of collaboration further still, working with members of musikFabrik on solo works such as *Axis Mundi* (2012–13) for bassoon and *The Green Lion Eats the Sun* (2014) for double-bell euphonium, as well as a major setting of the Sufi poet Hafez, *Tongue of the Invisible* (2010–11), which uses systems of improvisation devised in close cooperation with the players.

Music involves people on three levels. The physical relation between the performer and their instrument; the bonds of friendship and collaboration between different performers in an ensemble (and between composer and those performers); and the connection between music and external groups of people, whether the audience in the concert hall or segments of the wider society. Profoundly humanistic, Lim's music is a conduit between all three, in which the actions of a performer's finger on a string or lips on a mouthpiece open up reflection on entire cultural systems and ways of being.

*Tim Rutherford-Johnson, 2015*