

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

The Ecology of Collaboration: An Interview with Liza Lim

Madeline Roycroft

Liza Lim is one of Australia's leading composers. Born in Perth in 1966, she completed her BMus at the Victorian College of the Arts, MMus at the University of Melbourne and received her PhD from the University of Queensland. As Director of the Centre for Research in New Music at the University of Huddersfield from 2008–2017, Liza Lim established the highly regarded Divergence Press and CeReNeM Journals, as well as the Huddersfield Contemporary Records label. Now based in Melbourne, she maintains a part-time role at Huddersfield and from 2017 is Professor of Composition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. She is also Visiting Professor of Composition at the Shanghai Conservatory during 2017.

Lim has been commissioned by some of the world's pre-eminent orchestras, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, and Bavarian Radio Orchestra, and she was composer in residence with the Sydney Symphony from 2005–2007. She has collaborated with ensembles such as MusikFabrik, Ensemble Intercontemporain and Ensemble Modern, and has been particularly associated with the ELISION Ensemble since the group's inception. Lim has composed three operas: *The Oresteia* (1993), *Moon Spirit Feasting* (1999) and *The Navigator* (2008), all of which ELISION have performed in seasons across Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide,

Tokyo, Moscow, Paris, Zurich and Berlin. Her fourth opera, *Tree of Codes* (2015), commissioned and presented by Cologne Opera, Musikfabrik and Hellerau in Cologne and Dresden, was described as 'a major contribution to the music theatre of our time.'

Liza Lim connects her compositional practice to areas of thought and knowledge such as Australian Indigenous aesthetics, Asian ritual forms, Sufi poetics, and the textile arts of weaving and knot-making. She is also particularly interested in the role of 'empathy and intuition in an ecology of collaboration', as explored in her recent work *How Forests Think* (2016) for Chinese sheng and ensemble. After its premiere by Wu Wei and ELISION at the Bendigo International Festival of Exploratory Music in 2016, *How Forests Think* subsequently toured to festivals in Zurich and Huddersfield and was awarded Instrumental Work of the Year at the 2017 APRA AMCOS Art Music Awards.

Your work for sheng and ensemble *How Forests Think* (2016) has recently been named Instrumental Work of the Year. What was the inspiration behind this new work?

The title comes from the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn's book *How Forests Think*, which is a very intriguing text because it analyses the essential interconnectedness of all things, or, how there's a kind of mind that links all things together. Not only human beings and animals, but also objects like rocks and plants. The text is grounded in Kohn's studies in a number of South American communities and the Amazon rainforest, which is a great place if you ever want to study entanglement, as the density of all the systems is extraordinarily rich. A key moment for Kohn is described in a story he tells right at the start of the book about jaguars: if you want to sleep in the forest, you must lie face up, so that the jaguar can see you are a being that can look back and it won't attack you. So, it's the thought that not only humans have stories about jaguars, but jaguars might also have ways of representing humans, and Kohn extends that relational concept across the whole ecological network. Everything has its own subjectivity and its own way of perceiving or sampling the world, so the idea that we're separated from the things around us is just a construct. That was something I wanted to highlight in this piece.

How did you go about translating this concept into the music?

At various points, the piece stages different situations of breathing and listening. It opens up a lot more at the very end, and the musicians—who are highly tuned, highly sensitive and enormously skilled people—are given space to 'place' events, which appear as boxes of musical material in the score. The score invites the players to place sounds into the performing environment, so they have to respond to what other people are doing. I've suggested sounds, but the music is about listening to itself and the content is what arises from that situation. In this context, music is what arises from people existing and breathing together in the same space, so that's how the piece points towards some of Kohn's thinking.

So the piece becomes freer as it develops?

Yes, the final movement has the most open space. The sheng is asked to improvise in response to what the player can hear. The materials in the cor anglais and cello are more determined, and they appear earlier in the piece as well, but over time people really shape things in their own way. At the very end, the only sonic behaviour that's going on is whistling and breathing 'like animals and insects,' which is the direction I've put in the score.

As for the notation, I had fingering charts, but there are some chords that can be played with only one finger, so the physical setup of the instrument led me to choose particular musical materials. I was trying to work in an ergonomic and idiomatic way. It's kind of like notating for an instrument that plays multiphonics.

Some of the most interesting moments in the music result from equally interesting instructions in the score. For example, there is a line in the sheng part that looks something like the waveform of a heart-rate monitor. This is followed by a direction to 'peel off' the cluster. What does this mean?

That line is connected to vibrato; you can see in the score it's one of the moments of greatest dynamic intensity. The sheng is playing a cluster and it goes up to triple *forte*, so you've got the whole instrument resonating in the most intense way. I've asked him to intensify that further through vibrato. He does a vibrato with his mouth, but he also shakes the instrument, hence the squiggly line. 'Peeling off' the cluster was something I discussed with Wu Wei. If you have all the fingers down to make this cluster, it's the idea of pulling the fingers away from the holes one at a time, each time forming a different cluster. So the performer takes these basic graphic instructions in the score and translates them into this whole physical choreography. As you can see, the performer really has to interpret or make something out of this notation, as I haven't given instruction as to which note is peeled off.

Given that many aspects of this piece rely on human response, reaction and interpretation, would you describe *How Forests Think* as 'indeterminate'?

I suppose you can say there are elements that are indeterminate. But there are also constraints, so the overall point is not that it's indeterminate. The point is more that these people, at the end of this 35-minute piece, have established a sense of community, or a sense of a larger organism. The music, in how it's expressed on the score, tries to open up many opportunities for that idea to express itself.

Would you say that it's unusual for your music to have elements of indeterminacy?

Well, I've been interested and engaged with improvisation for a long time, and have made lots of work in installation-based contexts, such as the seven-day performance cycle *Bardo'-i-thos-grol* (The Tibetan Book of the Dead) which was made in collaboration with artist Domenico de Clario and musicians of ELISION in Lismore and Perth in 1994 and 1995. Also with the same artists, the two-part Summer and Winter Solstice all-night meditation piece *The Cauldron: Fusion of the 5 Elements* (1996). You could say that these were completely improvised. Or perhaps let's call them listening exercises, as there's a very long tradition of that from Pauline Oliveros, who is obviously one of the key exponents of listening as compositional process, but also from Annea Lockwood and Éliane Radigue. Lots of women composers, in fact. So for me, that idea of paying attention, listening and responding—which is the crux of improvisation—has always been connected to elements of spiritual consciousness and ritual. And these themes have been present in my work since the very beginning. So, while my music isn't 'identified' as being improvisatory or indeterminate, these elements have been present for a long time.

There is indeed a fantastic tradition of women composers in this context, which leads us to the next point. You started an academic position at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music at the beginning of 2017, which has allowed you to come on board as director of the Composing Women development program. I think that every Conservatorium should consider implementing something similar. Would you mind telling us more about your role?

Yes, absolutely! There's definitely room for more than one program that opens up opportunities for women. Composing Women is a program that was initiated in 2016 at the Sydney Conservatorium by Matthew Hindson, who has shown fantastic leadership there in terms of identifying the problem and implementing change. There is such a huge gap in both reality and perception of women's participation in music. When you look at the statistics, it's really quite devastating. You might feel, or indeed I have felt—at various times—that we are making progress. We feel like a lot of work has been done. But actually, when you look at raw statistics, they shatter your illusions about how far we've come. We haven't come very far at all!

In Australia, compared to other countries, women's participation probably is slightly better. When you look at the figures of organisations like APRA and the AMC, you see there is roughly a 25-30% representation of women (still not parity I know, but better than in many other countries). On the ground, there is a sense that there are plenty of senior or leading figures that happen to be women. But really, when you look at the statistics there's a kind of ceiling that kicks in, around the 17 to 20% mark, and it has been shown by all kinds of research that there is a perception gap. As the research done by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in the Media shows, if 17% of the people involved in something are women, it feels like 50%. When it reaches about 33%, it feels like a majority! So it's really shocking, this idea that women should only, or can only, occupy that amount of space.

That's one of the reasons to set up a specific program that will create more space for women, and bridge that gap between training and actually operating in the professional world. Again, looking at the statistics, the participation of women at the start of tertiary education is almost 50% of a cohort, but then it drops away by half at the professional level. The training doesn't translate into real life. So the goal of the program is to create translational tools for women.

How is the program structured?

The program is very much based in practice: providing women with opportunities to work with professional-level ensembles, orchestras and so on. Over the last two years, since Matthew set it up in 2016, the ensembles involved were the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, the Sydney Philharmonia Choir, the Goldner String Quartet as well as the percussionist, Claire Edwardes. Going into 2018-19, the partners for the program I'll be directing are the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Sydney Chamber Opera together with NIDA and Carriageworks, the extraordinary American flautist Claire Chase, as well as other projects initiated by the participants themselves. I'm really excited about the possibilities of this program, and really excited to offer the kinds of opportunities that are not usually accessible if you're just acting as an individual. So that's really the point: what can we give these students that really requires institutional support? And then of course we provide the mentorship and financial resources to make it happen, so it's a very serious commitment, which is really exciting, as it goes beyond that lip service. It offers places for four women, which is also an important dimension for me. It's not just one,

or maybe two. When I think about my own career, I've very often been the only woman in a concert program, or in an entire festival! For years and years and years this has been the case and still continues to this day. Navigating that can take up a lot of energy and I'd like to see the situation for women's representation improve dramatically.

Is it a hard issue to raise?

It's a very interesting time actually. Based on my own experiences over the last five years, there seems to have been a rise in consciousness and activity in terms of addressing this issue. Something that I found really powerful was a research project called 'Gender Research in New Music,' which came out of the Darmstadt Summer School in 2016. The American composer Ashley Fure looked at the figures from the last 70 years of Darmstadt, and no matter how many participants there were overall, there was this ceiling for the inclusion of work by women of around 13-14%. That 14% would give you quite a number of women if the overall number of participants were high. But when the total numbers drop, the ratio stays more or less the same. In the last 10 years, the programming of music by women still sits under 20%, even if the overall participation of women as student composers and performers has risen to 40%. So this study highlighted the challenge of building from year to year. While the general figures for overall participation improve, the actual representation in terms of performances, commissions and prizes does not. It's good to look at statistics because they show there's no merit in those old arguments about how women don't put themselves forward, or that women aren't good enough. At an analytical, statistical level, that's shown to be absolute bullshit.

Finally, after being based in the UK for nine years, how does it feel to be back in Australia?

It's great to be back living in Australia and to be involved in teaching and mentoring and getting to know younger, emerging artists both via my work at Sydney Conservatorium and things like Speak Percussion's workshops for high school students. But for me, it's not really an either-or. After I returned to Australia in 2015 I continued working part-time for the University of Huddersfield, so being here doesn't mean I've let go of my other activities and contacts throughout the world. In 2017 I'm also doing a Visiting Professor role at Shanghai Conservatory, so I suppose this carve-up of my time into a variety of part-time contracts, as well as doing professional commissions, is an expression of both opportunities and where my connections lie. There's no straightforward 'home' versus 'not home'. I'm lucky that I can manage that, through travel and also through the Internet; it's extraordinary how you can stay linked to so many scenes around the world! Every person you meet and have a conversation with, every person you do a rehearsal or a concert with; they're all part of your continuing community in some way. In the ecosystem of an artistic life, the reverberations of creative connection and shared experiences are distributed over such a wide geographical area, expanding out across incredibly long timespans. People are so mobile now, so my expectation is that I will continue to find a bit of home everywhere there are friends and colleagues.

About the Author

Madeline Roycroft is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, examining the reception of Dmitri Shostakovich in twentieth-century France. An oboist and journalist, she is co-presenter/programmer of 'Australian Sounds' on Melbourne's 3MBS FM.