

CDs AND DVDs

Liza Lim, *Annunciation Triptych*. WDR Sinfonieorchester, Măcelaru, Hindrichs. KAIROS, 0022003KAL.

For many years, Liza Lim's relationship to the orchestra was one of stops and false starts. Three relatively early works – *Cathedral* (1994), *Sri Vidya – Utterances of Adoration* (1995), for choir and orchestra, and *The Tree of Life* (2001) – were all withdrawn, effectively so too her 2004 commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic, *Ecstatic Architecture*, written for the opening season of Walt Disney Concert Hall. A year-long residency with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 2004–05 produced two works, although both are short and somewhat anomalous: *Immer Fließender* (2004), commissioned as a 'companion piece' to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, and the fanfare for orchestra *Flying Banner (after Wang To)* (2005).

A year after that residency, Lim described the challenge of orchestral writing in an interview with the critic Gordon Kerry;¹ it had to do, she said, with 'how to activate a large mass of sound without losing the detail of colour and gestural nuance that has been so central to my musical language'. I would suggest a related, deeper challenge, too, which is that Lim's music is fundamentally melodic, concerned with lines of connection between sounds, gestures, timbres, instruments and even people. Her music often begins from the idea of a thread, drawn out and extended from the personality and character of a musician and her instrument. That thread can become complex and multidimensional, woven around itself and others, transforming and penetrating, tying between and wrapping around; but it is almost always there. This may be why, when writing for orchestra or large ensemble Lim has, until recently, found most success in writing concertos, or at least works with a significant solo component: *Machine for Contacting the Dead*, for 27 musicians including bass/contrabass clarinet and cello solos; *The Compass* (2005–06) for flute, didgeridoo and orchestra; and the recorder concerto *The Guest* (2010). Even *Pearl, Ochre, Hair String*

(2010), arguably her first major non-concerto work for symphony orchestra, began life in a solo work, the 2008 cello piece *Invisibility*, which served as a sort of study for the work's opening.

Not one to shirk a compositional challenge, however, Lim has addressed the orchestra head on with *Annunciation Triptych*, a 45-minute trilogy written between 2019 and 2022, and given its complete premiere on 29 April 2022 by the WDR Sinfonieorchester, conducted by Cristian Măcelaru with soprano Emily Hindrichs. (The present recording is mostly live from the premiere with some pickups made the day after; any audience noise has been edited out.) On this evidence, it is fair to say that not only has Lim mastered the medium, but it has given her something too in return.

It is tempting to describe *Annunciation Triptych* as a summation. Certainly, those familiar with Lim's work will spot a number of well-known touchstones: Sappho, whose texts appear in two of Lim's earliest works, *Voodoo Child* (1989) and *The Oresteia* (1991–93); the references to Islamic culture, via Fatima, wife of Muhammed (peace be upon them) – a prominent thread from *The Alchemical Wedding* (1996) to *Tongue of the Invisible* (2010–11); the fascination with ecological concerns that has emerged since *How Forests Think* (2015–16); and the overarching themes of motherhood and female desire. And there are plenty of musical icons, too: buzzing distortions, tangled polyphonies, ecstatic drones and sweeps of spectral harmony.

But for all that, this is music unlike any Lim has written before. Seth Brodsky's rich and wide-ranging liner notes identify, in the middle of *Mary/Transcendence after Trauma*, an enormous Tristan chord (another Lim motif, nodding to her third opera, *The Navigator*, inspired by the story and sound of *Tristan und Isolde*). This is, he says, 'one of... the strangest moments in Lim's entire body of work'. And it is certainly striking, but I would say no more than the late Romantic feel of the whole *Triptych*: as well as Wagner, Bruckner, Strauss and Mahler are also here. Of course, for Lim, Romanticism is not a stylistic choice but a topic, just as the symphony orchestra – its scale, its history, its internal relationships – is a topic. Those massive, glowing chords are just as easily deconstructed as

¹ Available at <https://limprogrammenotes.wordpress.com/2011/07/29/the-compass-2006/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

constructed ('a cosmic Cheshire grimace whose tones fall out one by one like loose teeth', as Brodsky brilliantly puts it). Măcelaru and the WDR Sinfonieorchester handle this balance well, presenting every gesture sincerely while allowing each the possibility of collapse, eruption or transformation, never letting them lapse into irony.

And still, despite an abundance of 'moments' (like those chords, like the solos for horn or piano, like the pulsing wooden percussion, like the Copland-esque trumpets of the third movement), Lim's music remains fundamentally concerned with lines. The only difference with an orchestra is that they are more thickly drawn and are stretched over greater distances. Again, Măcelaru and his orchestra excel at maintaining the necessary momentum through a rapidly shape-shifting terrain. When, in the final movement, Emily Hindrichs' soprano arrives (one can't help but think of Beethoven) she feels like a sublime but utterly natural addition, blooming, almost imperceptibly at first, out of those trumpet calls. She sings words by Etel Adnan, from 'The Spring Flowers Own', the image of a loved one moving 'like a bunch of flowers', a 'light-wave', 'the beginning of the day'. Driven by desire, the line keeps moving.

Tim Rutherford Johnson
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Frank Denyer, *Melodies*. Scordatura Ensemble, Luna String Quartet, Mad Dog, Denyer. Another Timbre, at203x2.

In the context of new music, one cannot ask 'what is a melody?' without also asking several other questions. 'What is a melody?' is really asking 'what is a melody *now*?' Can a melody be new or part of a critical project? Why is it that melody should be so controversial? In my view, that which makes a melody a melody is a process of recognition: a melody is what we recognise as one. There's something self-evident and even obvious about it. That's why a brutally materialist definition like 'a sequence of pitches' or 'a sequence of sounds' is so unsatisfying. It is both outrageously over-permissive and still somehow manages to miss the actual point. A melody is human subjectivity in music; it is music which creates a symbolic identification between the music and a listener, mediated through the craft of a composer. I think we in new music might tend to forget this and indeed to forget how astonishing this dynamic can be.

In a very general sense, there are two arguments against melodicism: one, that the psychological identification is nothing more than a matter of trope and proper handling of clichéd material, that nothing actually new can be written through the ideology of melodicism. The other is that symbolic identification – especially heroic identification – has only been permitted to a privileged class of society, tersely 'dead white men', but, more properly, the global bourgeoisie. The identification of self with melody imparts narratives of struggle and triumph, flattening all other artistic dimensions into petty grievance. Now, it is not my intention to litigate these points in this review, but rather to indicate the stakes involved with the topic of melody and to frame the profoundly difficult nature of the task of composing new or relevant melodic music. Not all melodic music necessarily projects a tired Western imperialist identity, though this certainly is a common situation. So it was with great joy that I listened to this music from Frank Denyer, offering such a fresh perspective on melodic music, so clear and direct, yet not lacking in intrigue or depth for it.

The 25 pieces on this release from Another Timbre were composed in the mid-1970s and this is their first commercial release as a set. The gripping third interlude, 'voices', is the only piece to have been excerpted on an earlier release. It is quite a remarkable feat of Denyer's to have made music as an individual that is plausibly legible as the product of a culture: a development of several persons over several generations. The search for archetypical compositional methods is at the forefront of the project. Not one sentence of Denyer's liner notes has been written before a specific type of compositional constraint is described: 'It is now more than half a century since I first became interested in forms of traditional music made from just two, three or four notes.' Thus the all-encompassing search for archetype and the particular compositional restraint are elegantly bound.

Each piece is called *melody* and indexed by the number of notes and the instrumental forces playing. An uneven linear development is charted starting at one note for one instrument and ending at 15 notes for string quartet and percussion. The use of the word 'note' rather than 'pitch' is quite a subtle provocation, and the implications manifest when listening to the music. There is no abstraction from note (as played on an instrument) to pitch (regularly cycling through a number of octaves), therefore no real concept of octave equivalence and so a