

Liza Lim

Myth, ritual and ecology lie at the heart of the Australian composer's work, explains Peter Quantrill

When listening to the music of Liza Lim (shortlisted for this year's Contemporary Award), ideas of argument, agreement, progress and synthesis – the lingua franca of the Western tradition – aren't so useful. *Voodoo Child* (1989) and *Sappho/Bioluminescence* (2020), more than 30 years apart, spring from texts by the sixth-century BC poet Sappho; the mythic nature of the poet's identity, the fragmentary state of her work and its resistance to, yet resonance with, contemporary interpretation all strike chords with Lim's output as a whole.

However, for a key to unlock the door to appreciation of a disruptive idiom which often takes musicians beyond the conventional limits of technique, we might think about 'shimmer': a central concept in Aboriginal art and ritual culture, describing the experienced presence of ancestral and divine spirits, translated for many centuries in sand paintings and in body painting for ceremonies.

We might associate a shimmering texture with extreme heat and light and distortion of perception. It's true that violent extremes of pitch and feeling are never far away in Lim's music, however diverse and disparate its points of origin. As embodied by Aboriginal culture and composed by Lim, however, 'shimmer' represents a more significant harmony (and dissonance) between humanity and nature. Among the most immediately arresting of her large-scale pieces is *How Forests Think* (2016). The soon-established presence of the sheng and rainstick hints at the composer's Chinese heritage, but a long saxophone solo wanders into a tangled sound world of calls and responses, breathing, buzzing, scratching and scurrying underfoot. 'I don't want to be about nature or to emulate nature,' she says to me in a Zoom call from her home in Melbourne, 'but to be with nature; to sing with it.'

'Notation isn't the thing in my head that is the music. It isn't a divine transmission and translation. It's an invitational space for something to happen'

Born in Perth, Western Australia, to Chinese parents, Lim spent her early childhood with her parents in Brunei before returning to Australia, where she has lived more or less ever since. 'I didn't grow up hearing that much music,' she remembers. Any embryonic sensitivity to music came not from her parents but from her instrument-playing grandparents – 'which says something about the mystery of musical ancestry!'

The path of her life rapidly opened up, however, when the 11-year-old Lim enrolled at the Presbyterian Ladies' College in Melbourne. She added composition classes to her piano and violin studies, encouraged by enlightened teachers and a music programme that found a natural place for Penderecki and Berio and free jazz alongside the classics. 'I never felt a sense of



Trying stuff out: Liza Lim, whose work is imbued with an experimental spirit

modernism being difficult music,' she recalls. 'It was just music. I've never bought into this narrative that music history is a progression. If you just come across it, contemporary music is powerful and visceral. Introduce primary school kids to Brian Ferneyhough! Or heavy metal, or whatever.'

A few years after the heyday of the Fluxus movement, she began writing for her string quartet and the school orchestra – including graphic scores 'inspired by Yoko Ono happenings'. She wore out the CBS LP of Berio's *Visage*, which hindsight lends a readily identifiable place in the background of Lim's mature work. Berio had taken the voice of his wife, the singer Cathy Berberian, and broken it up into a 20-minute collage of breathing and sighing and stuttering to make a classic piece of early electronica that uses modern technology to return to primeval elements of human communication: music before and after music. On an RCA LP, the polyphonic complexity of Ferneyhough's *Sonatas* for string quartet also made an impact (she later had a few lessons with him), as it did on a lot of us at a formative age searching for a kind of intuitive, deeply felt modernism.

At university in Melbourne and then in Brisbane, Lim formed friendships with and composed pieces for like-minded musicians who then formed the Elision Ensemble, Australia's answer to the London Sinfonietta or the Schönberg Ensemble. One influential teacher (later to become a notable futurologist) was Richard David Hames, a British colleague of Michael Finnissy and Ferneyhough. 'Then I worked with Riccardo Formosa, who was very craft-orientated. But a lot of what I learnt was through collaboration, through exploring techniques and sounds: trying stuff out.'