

Program note

Liza Lim

Annunciation Triptych (2019-22)

- I. Sappho/ Bioluminescence
- II. Mary/ Transcendence after Trauma
- III. Fatimah/ Flowers of Jubilation

Commissioned by the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra for Musica Viva Munich; BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra for Tectonics Festival (Glasgow) and the WDR Symphony Orchestra for Musik der Zeit/ Acht Brücken Festival.

Sappho, Mary and Fatimah are invoked as icons of women's spirituality and the three works explore themes of revelation and ritual as the connecting tissue between very different cultural worlds: Sappho, the poetess' world of erotic trance and hallucination; Mary, the mother of Jesus and the story of her Visitation by the Angel and Passion Play; and the Lady Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and scenes of her Wedding and Lamentation – these stories are also commentaries on ecological, spiritual and transcultural themes in our times.

1. Sappho/ Bioluminescence (2019), for orchestra

Sappho

Sappho, the poet has been a font of inspiration for so many artists, readers and lovers. Only two complete poems survive amongst the fragmentary remains, some comprising just a phrase, a word or part of a word, of the nine books of poetry by Sappho (c.630 B.C.E.) that are recorded to have been held in the Great Library of Alexandria. Yet her words have gained iconic power over the ages and compel with their extraordinary beauty. We barely know her work; imagination counts for more than the real when we are faced with what is missing. The extant fragments are like depth charges: powerfully explosive in their intensity whilst often dealing in the most delicately suggestive lyrics celebrating the Goddess Aphrodite and her realms of feminine beauty and luminescent passion.

These enigmatic communications from a lost archaic world are also testament to a depth of longing that resides in us. The broken fragments call out to and find resonance with listeners in a contemporary time and space.

*Pick any path of concrete or
crock to this spirited place
whose orchard-body belongingly
offers that flickering, altered aroma
– groves on fire*

from Mario Petrucci's 'Sappho', London, Perdika Press, 2008

έξιης πόθο[ν].νιδων	you would let loose your longing
κωῦτε τις [οῦ]τε τι	and neither any [] nor any
ἴρον ούδ' ύ[]	holy place nor
ἔπλετ' ὅπποθεν ἄμμες ἀπέσκομεν,		was there from which we were absent
οὐκ ἄλσος , [. ρος	no grove [] no dance
]ψοφος] no sound
]... οιδιαι		[

Excerpt from Sappho #94 from Anne Carson's 'If Not, Winter. Fragments of Sappho', New York, Vintage Books, 2002.

This is the 'annunciation' – not only an 'announcement' but a summoning power that precipitates anew in every encounter. Out of damage and contamination there is new growth. Signs of desire persist in radiating the possibilities of renewal that speak resurgence to ruin.

Assemblage

Like a lot of my compositions that bring together varied, at times seemingly incompatible elements and stories, this one also brings an alien creature into the world of Sappho. I have long written works using preparations of one kind or another – I've employed lengths of string, horse hair wrapped around a bow, blu-tac and mutes to transform the way (human) musicians and (non-human) musical instruments interact to make a new hybrid entity. More than just these physical combinations, my works are often made up of imagined composites of plants, animals, elements, spirits and more and these kinds of real-fictional assemblages have been a fruitful way for me to open up a space for speculation in my composing. The poetic assemblage can be used to triangulate ideas that are too complex to see from any one perspective. The assemblage can offer ways of activating and structuring relationships between apparently incongruous things that produce new affects and insights – that is how poetry works after all.

Bioluminescence

The triangulation I use here involves placing the bioluminescence of creatures who produce light in their bodies next to Sappho in order to understand even more intensely the irradiated nature of her poetry. Bioluminescence is the production and emission of light by a living organism as the result of a chemical reaction. Bioluminescence may be generated by symbiotic organisms carried within a larger organism. An intriguing example is the Hawaiian bobtail squid (beloved of eco-philosophers such as Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing and others who 'think with' the creature's symbiotic nature to articulate an ethics of living in troubled times). The squid carries bacteria in its ventral pouch which give off light in a circadian rhythm. The luminescent specks act as a form of 'invisibility cloak' or counterillumination so that the squid blends with moonlight on a starry night seeming not to cast a shadow from the perspective of any prey below. Living cells respond to environmental light and themselves emit light – the world becomes a psychedelic 'eye' or multiple eyes which open and close, slowly or suddenly, across a polyphony of temporal scales. The bacteria, the

squid, the ocean, the firmament, the metabolism of light – from micro to macro, these elements form complex patterns that can be understood as expressions of an ‘emergent mind’ or ‘spirit’.

Orchestra

The third angle of the assemblage is of course the orchestra – an orchard. Suddenly I am in a grove, a holy place. Everywhere I look there is the flickering of living light. Every step, every sound, every silence connotes the pure presence of eros.

2. Mary/ Transcendence after Trauma (2020-22), for orchestra

The work forms the second part of ‘The Annunciation Triptych’. It is about 20 minutes in duration and is made up of five sections:

- i. Still Life with foetus and Angel
- ii. *Audi, Pontus* (Hear, O Sea)
- ii. *Audi, Tellus* (Hear, O Earth)
- ii. *Audi maris magni limbus* (Hear, O great earth-girdle of the ocean)
- iii. her wild consent
- iv. *Sidera super terram cadent* (the Stars fall over the earth)
- v. Mary – Tree of Light

The biblical story of ‘The Annunciation’ tells of the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary. He calls her name and foretells that she will give birth to the Christ child: ‘And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. [King James Version, Luke 1:35] Mary speaks: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.’ [KJV, Luke 1:38]

The work deals with various aspects of ecstatic hearing and speaking. At the opening, everything is heard from Mary’s perspective: she hears a foetal heartbeat and an amniotic song from deep within her body; she senses the arrival of the Angel as an overwhelming sonic halo. In the work, this multi-faceted sensory experience of hearing is also reflected in the quotation of a brief fragment of chant from the *conductus* ‘Audi Pontus’ found in the Codex Las Huelgas, a Spanish manuscript of music for women’s voices from c.1300 held in the Cistercian convent of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas. The text refers to the Book of Revelation (Chapter 6: 12-13) with its prophetic visions of catastrophe which I connected to an imaginary ‘Passion Play’ of Mary’s visions of a future of thorns, ash and tears. The sonorous Latin text with its exhortation to all corners of the earth and sea to ‘Hear’ a message of cosmic collapse in which ‘the stars fall over the earth’ prefaces the second and fourth parts of the orchestral work.

Audi, Pontus

*audi, pontus / Hear, O sea
audi, tellus / hear, O earth
audi maris magni limbus / hear, O great earth-girdle of the ocean;
audi homo / hear O man
audi omne quod vivit sub sole / hear all that lives beneath the sun.
prope est, veniet / he is near, he will come
Ecce iam dies est / See the day is already here
dies illa, dies invisa, dies amara / that day, that hated day that bitter day
qua celum fugiet / when the heavens will flee
sol erubescet / the sun blush
luna fugabitur / the moon be put to flight
sidera super terram cadent / the stars fall over the earth
Heu, miser, heu miser / Alas O wretched
heu, cur, homo ineptam / alas O man, why
sequeris leticiam / do you pursue false happiness?*

Against this melancholia, a brighter reference point for me is Fra Angelico's iridescent 'Annunciation' painting for the Cortona Altarpiece (1433-34) which depicts the exchange between Mary and the Angel in gilded letters. We can read the Angel's words but must invert our gaze to make out Mary's speech written in reverse and upside down, addressed as it were, to a divine power looking from above. (Meantime, In the top left-hand corner of the painting an angel with a sword of fire banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.)



Angelico, *Annunciation*, The Cortona Altarpiece, 1433-34 (public domain)

These esoteric texts and depictions also summon up a strange mix of resonances with our own times. In wrestling with this story, I looked for a reversed vantage point in thinking about spiritual power, taking my cue from Fra Angelico's representation. I fixed on the element of human agency expressed in Mary's words of assent in the face of a terrifying announcement and in powerful confrontation with a barely believable message of incarnation.

After hearing comes speaking.

In my piece Mary speaks her truth, or her own annunciation in a section entitled 'her wild consent' featuring a bass drum answered by a solo piano and horn. The final section called 'Mary – Tree of Light' speaks of a transmutation. Beyond the extinguishment of stars, there is illumination. Out of a woman's trauma emerges a forgiveness so immense that it has the power to shift the fabric of the world.

3. Fatimah/ Jubilation of Flowers (2021-2022), for soprano, orchestra and singing audience

This work forms the third part of the 'Annunciation Triptych'. I wanted to explore the figure of the Lady Fatimah al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them), as the 'seed of light' that radiates into the world.

One of the questions or challenges of the 'Annunciation' theme is that something is being announced, but can one answer? Can one respond to it? I have thematised this in the cycle as a relation between a profound receptivity through hearing and a speaking forth that is a spilling over after having been filled up — receptivity generates response. It is in the third and final part, 'Fatimah', where this dyad: the state of receptivity passing into voicing, comes to fruition. The music is set in a devotional, elegiac register. Through Etel Adnan's words, the soprano sings of the luminosity of a woman, of flowers whose beauty and seeming fragility contain an unshakeable resilience that rises above violence. The words for me condense lamentation and love into lyric space.

In the musical work, the intention is that the singer begins her song from amongst the audience — she is 'one of us' — before making her way to join the orchestra on stage. A little later, there is a section of audience participation where the listeners are invited to join in singing/humming to the resonance of the orchestra — a very simple, natural and hopefully non-coercive gesture (!)

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Etel Adnan's partner Simone Fattal and to E. Tracy Grinnell and Rachael Wilson of Litmus Press for their graciousness in allowing me to set these words which are just one part of the expression of Etel Adnan's (1925-2021) extraordinary light as an artist and poet. 'Fatimah/ Jubilation of Flowers' is dedicated to her memory.

She moved through crowds
like a bunch of flowers
breathless was I like a young
mare
she was a light-wave through
my hands
nations were at war
and men falling faster than
leaves on that Indian
summer

but she was the beginning of
the day
flowers do not grow on rifles
believe me they rise and never
bend

they use colours as we use words
they recite poems in my ears
they never die, oh no!
we only cease to see them...
as I stopped seeing her in my dreams.

Excerpt from *The Spring Flowers Own & The Manifestations of the Voyage* (The Post-Apollo Press 1990) is used with permission granted by The Estate of Etel Adnan. All rights reserved.