



LEARNING THROUGH DANCING
LIZA LIM

Liza Lim's music focusses on collaborative and transcultural practices. Ideas of beauty, ecological connection, and ritual transformation are ongoing concerns in her compositional work. Her four operas: *The Oresteia* (1993), *Moon Spirit Feasting* (2000), *The Navigator* (2007), and *Tree of Codes* (2016) and the major ensemble work *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus* (2018) explore themes of desire, memory, and the uncanny. Widely commissioned by some of the world's preeminent orchestras and ensembles, Lim is Sculthorpe Chair of Australian Music at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney. Her music has been published by Casa Ricordi (Milan, London, Berlin) since 1992. Website: lizalimcomposer.com. – Address: Sydney Conservatorium of Music, 1 Conservatorium Rd, NSW 2000, Australia. E-mail: lizalimcomposer@gmail.com.

What is a Wiŋo education?

LL: An expansion of mind and heart: learning through dancing with things; finding inner freedom; cultivating fellowship by conversing and dining together.

Dancing with things?

LL: I was immersed in the dance of the changing seasons and took hundreds of photos of the view from my study window in the *Remise* of the Weiße Villa: of flaming autumn colours; of a gang of great tits, sparrows, shy red robins, and *Eichhörnchen* (there is no more perfect name for squirrels) who came to munch on the birdseed I put out on the sill

during the surprisingly brief winter season; and of the procession of spring flowers rising and falling on the lawn topped by showy fanfares of magnolias and rhododendrons. All of these were object lessons in composition that taught me so much about temporal polyphony, about timing and the vitality of organic form.

Nuno Ramos: “If embodiment is everywhere, then notation should be everywhere. Can this curtain be notation or that dried tree outside?”

LL: Musical notation came alive for me as never before. I’ve always had a lively, dialogic relation to notation, but this year, that interface of marks and traces of body on paper attained a stronger living presence. One of the first things I completed was a revision of the end of an orchestral work: *Mary/Transcendence after Trauma*, the middle part of a large cycle of works, *Annunciation Triptych* (2019–22). I saw that the ending I had was too passive and too sure of itself, and so I opened up the last bars and found myself able to write a music of defiant doubt in the form of a surging orchestra that lets loose three wayward trumpets in its receding sea foam. I also completed the last part of the trilogy: *Fatimah/Jubilation of Flowers*, setting music to words from Etel Adnan’s *The Spring Flowers Own*, and again, the garden showed me ways of orchestrating a tidal push and pull. It was an incredible experience to be able to hear the full cycle played by the WDR Symphony Orchestra conducted by Cristian Măcelaru with soprano Emily Hindrichs in Cologne at the end of April 2022. The work was recorded under the guidance of the exceptional *Tonmeister* Günther Wollersheim and producer Harry Vogt, for release on the Kairos CD label.

I remember the dancing...

LL: I think that was my proudest achievement: getting a room full of academics and scientists up to dance the Swedish Polska in my colloquium session with the help of violinist Karin Hellqvist and choreographer Hannah Loewenthal. Our shared experience of dancing the triple-time Polska with its hesitating second step became the experiential basis for thinking together about embodiment and ritual and musical practice. The questions and discussions that ensued are still reverberating in my mind – here’s a sample (edited) selection:

Francisco Bethencourt: “I connected to the dance through my memory of Salsa. How can dance be reintroduced into your music and how could this dance be a departure from previous memories?”

Anthony Ossa-Richardson: “In that dance I felt there was dialectic of embodiment/dis-embodiment. Is there a doubleness there for you?”

Ulinka Rublack: “As a historian I think of dance as registering historical experience; your rendering seems to me to be an exploration of the ghostly. My question is around what these dances registered when they first appeared [as wedding music] at a time when marriage was not necessarily a joyous occasion.”

Daniel Schönflug: “The dance is shared cultural knowledge with layers of inscription/references. But what I see in our bodies is a cacophony of knowledge.”

Mark Hauber: “I didn’t dance; I would have fallen over because there’s an inscription of Hungarian rhythms in my body that feels ‘3’ differently from the Swedish dance.”

Ilya Klinger: “The dance had inclusiveness and was life-affirming, but also contained disruption, distortion, parody, satire, harshness, irony.”

Sabina Leonelli: “...so notation is controlling time?”

LL: “Yes, but I think more in terms of ‘time textures’ rather than counted or measured time. The dance contains ghosts – Karin is recalling past dances, past iterations of her experience as a player. Through its repetitions, interpolations (pockets of time), and deliberate technical and temporal slippages (distortions), the musical form tries to open up a space in which the player can come into a ‘channelled’ relation with both the past and the future.”

Karin Hellqvist: “Freedom sounds different. In this music there is deviation on purpose; things grow when one dares to leave being super-true to the score.”

LL: In partial answer to Francisco’s comment: “Maybe through the music, one is remaking the body – what art can do is ‘re-imagine us into different spaces.’ In the end, the musician *is* the dancer.”

Did freedom become a theme for you?

LL: We are confronted by questions of freedom all the time. Leaving Australia after two years of pandemic lockdowns and encountering a reopened Berlin of concerts, theatre, opera, and in-person gatherings was an ecstatic experience. But of course, Covid continued/continues to shadow everything and the world became even darker when the war in Ukraine

broke out. I was impressed by the way Berliners, Wiko as an institution, and Fellows mobilised in support of the refugees pouring into the city. I felt the melancholy of my colleagues, particularly Mohammad Al Attar, whose Syrian story foreshadows so much of the brutality that is unfolding; the emotional complexity faced by Fellows from Russia and Belarus, and soon after, the shattering grief of guests from Ukraine, particularly the composer Valentyn Sylvestrov, who was in residence for a time with members of his family.

And do you reflect the times in your music?

I think that's inevitable... but art is not just some transcription of "reality." It often takes a more indirect route with mysterious forces at play, and its "truths" can resonate in quite unforeseen ways and at unexpected times.

The topic of grief has been a thread in my recent work, particularly the perspective that the Buddhist scholar and ecologist, Joanna Macey, articulates so well in her teachings, in which "owning" or being present to and a witness to grief allows one to reframe it as a compassionate "suffering-with" in order to reconnect to life. The other side of the coin of grief is therefore a kind of hard-won joy... I was so fortunate to work with the great pianist based in Berlin, Tamara Stefanovich, on the piano concerto *World as Lover, World as Self* (titled after Macey's book) that premiered at the Donaueschinger Musiktage in autumn 2021.

I picked up on some of these themes in the work I wrote for the American JACK Quartet towards the end of my residency. The work begins with a section called "Cat's Cradle: 3 diagrams of grief": sonic gestures of percussive shredding, weeping lamentation, and laboured breathing becoming song. The music tracks paths guided by the materiality of the instruments and bodies involved, and it builds form by exploring the relational possibilities of string as a substance – entangling, knotting, weaving... and finally nest-making. The last part of the piece is inspired by this article in the *New York Times*: "Why Birds Are the World's Best Engineers" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/science/why-birds-are-the-worlds-best-engineers.html>), which describes the weird "magic" of mechanical synthesis. Birds use their bodies to compress, rub against, and create friction with sticky, stringy things until individual filaments start to behave collectively, "jamming" together and giving rise to emergent form. The chaotic "stick bomb" of a nest retains just enough energy from the bird's activity for the whole ensemble to maintain its shape.

Speaking of "serendipitous conversations," I have to thank bird specialist Prof. Mark Hauber for this interest in bird behaviour, and papyrologist Prof. Sofia Torallas Tovar

who piqued my interest in the cascading formats (notations!) of Ancient Egyptian spells of increase and decrease that fed into the structure of the expanding and contracting repetitions that occur in the string quartet.

The work, *String Creatures*, will be premiered at the Lucerne Summer Festival before coming to the Berliner Festspiele's orchestra festival Musikfest Berlin in September 2022, which makes a full circle to the Wiko year.

In amongst the turmoil of the world, Wiko was a House of Grace. I am so grateful to all of the staff, steered by the personification of graceful leadership, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger. I was dazzled from the first moment by the way we were introduced to everyone on the Wiko staff across all areas by the academic and administrative staff: special thanks to Daniel!, Jana!, Katharina!, Iris!, Petria!, Nina!, to the staff from the library (Dominik!, Anja!, Stefan!, Kirsten!, Timo!, and others), the reception (Vera!, Maike!, Deniz!, Marie!), to the restaurant and kitchen (Dunia!!), to cleaning (Anna!), to IT support (Gesine!, Frank!), to estates (Dennis!), and many areas of "backstage" activity (sorry not to mention everyone). An institution's culture is created in practice, and at Wiko, there is an extraordinary practice of attentive care and support for everyone working there as well as for the intellectual, creative, and daily lives of the Fellows – something to aspire to in our usual academic and artistic spaces...

My fellow Fellows became like family and I was so moved when they and even some of their kids rocked up to attend my Berlin concerts: *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus* at the Philharmonie and *Sex Magic* at the Akademie der Künste. This performance was part of the "Speicher des Hörens" Festival, where I had the pleasure of having a public conversation about memory, time, listening, and ritual with the composer Isabel Mundry – in Wiko's 40-year history, Isabel was the first woman composer-in-residence (2002/2003); I'm the second in this "lineage" and, pleasingly, the third is Lucia Ronchetti (2022/2023). Then there was the customary Wiko *Gesprächskonzert* that I gave together with the French cellist Séverine Ballon.

I had an incredibly productive year and had the privilege of being able to attend many performances of my music in Berlin and throughout Europe. But the more valuable part from an artistic point of view was having enough time and mental space to gain an inkling of new directions for my work in the longer term. One of the best (and unexpected) compositional experiences of the year, though, was the instant group composition that Fellows contributed to in the colloquium, which was performed then and there by Karin Hellqvist. When I listen back to the music, it's like a giant Proustian madeleine in which

the sounds vividly bring back each person who got up to add a bar to the music, along with the discussion, laughter, and shared insights of the moment.

Publications:

The following compositions are published by Ricordi Berlin:

World as Lover, World as Self (2021), for solo piano and orchestra

Mary/Transcendence after Trauma (2022), for orchestra

Fatimah/Jubilation of Flowers (2022), for soprano, orchestra, and singing audience

One and the Other (Speculative Polskas for Karin) (2022), solo violin with low octave string

String Creatures (2022), for string quartet

Nautilus (2022), for solo contraforte

Articles:

Hellqvist, K., L. Lim, and S. Brodsky (2022). "Elementens Musik." *Portable Gray* 5, no. 1: 83–84.

Lim, L. (2022). "One and the Other (Speculative Polskas for Karin)." *Portable Gray* 5, no. 1: 88–105.