

An idea for a new piece of music by Liza Lim usually begins with a connection to a particular performer and with a desire to understand that musician's relationship to their instrument. In the case of Claire Chase, it was when Lim was brought into the impressive presence of Claire's contrabass flute, nicknamed Bertha, that the world of *Sex Magic* opened up. Bertha stands a full head higher than Claire onstage and is, indeed, an almost human presence in performance. The relationship between huge flute and performer is an intimate one: Bertha seems to dance with Claire, to sing duets with her, to breathe with her, to embrace her, at times to merge with her.

The contrabass flute also calls to mind ancient big flute traditions around the world such as the giant flutes of Papua New Guinea or the Yidaki (Didjeridu) of Northern Australia. The Yidaki tradition in particular, with its virtuosic overblowing and multiphonics, makes the wind instrument sound like a deep, throbbing drum with many rhythms, colors, and harmonic worlds contained within its sound.

These big flutes also have a social, ritual power in their societies. In many cases, it is forbidden for women to hear or see them, much less to play them or take part in their rituals. Lim's decision to imagine *Sex Magic* as a ritual centered around a giant flute and make it about "the sacred erotic in women's history" seems in this context both daring and utterly logical. In a live performance of *Sex Magic* the audience enters an opulent and richly colored ritual space, set up with three altars. Two of these altars are low tables on which are laid cowrie shells, pebbles, bells, tambourines, beans, flowers, and other offerings. Each of these altars vibrates with transducers tuned to octaves below the pitch material of the flute. Moving into the subfrequencies below human hearing, these altars physicalize the music into a ritualistic offering. The third, central altar is a shimmering, garlanded stage on which Claire and Bertha stand together. They are surrounded by an array of percussion instruments, most of which are triggered, via a system of contact microphones and transducers, by Claire playing certain keys on Bertha. Part of the magic in *Sex Magic* lies in how Claire and Bertha are at the center of a world of sound which appears to be activated by the pure energy of their performance together.

It is surprising how powerfully this sense of ritual communicates in a purely audio recording. In the gloriously seductive opening section, Pythoness, deep notes on the flute, rich with overtones, are in counterpoint with a keening melody created by feedback from the skin of the floor drum on which the bottom of Bertha is resting. Claire makes the melody by pressing and moving Bertha on the drum skin as she plays. This is the voice of the prophetess, full of beauty and strength and wisdom.

In the first of the ensuing Oracle sections, the flute sings a salutation song to the Cowrie shells on the altars. The bongos and bass drum join in and eventually the altars respond, vibrating. In the second Oracle, Womb-bell, the flute intones deep, glowing, resonant bell-like sounds and the altars shimmer in response. In Oracles iii, deep red rage is voiced by a duet between Bertha and the thunderous bass drum and builds to a bloodcurdling scream from the Aztec death whistle. Bertha is silenced in Oracles iv, Throat Song, while Claire plays and sings into an alto ocarina. If the Aztec whistle sounded unnervingly

like a real woman screaming in terror, the ocarina sounds exactly like a woman singing a stratospherically high, gentle melody in duet with Claire's voice. Bertha's voice returns, entirely alone, in Oracles v, Moss—on the Sacred Erotic, to sing a long, sensual song in which melody and breath sounds and overtones combine. The Oracles section ends with a silent meditation, framed by two strokes of a prayer bowl. Liza Lim describes Skin Changing as a drumming ritual. The percussive power of the entire installation is unleashed in overlapping patterns, with bass drums, bongos, percussive breathing, loud key sounds on Bertha and the vibrating altars. Only at the end of the section does melody emerge in a low, slow, solo for Bertha in counterpoint with the rhythm of Claire's breath as the voice of the flute slowly disappears into the deep.

The final movement, The Slow Moon Climbs, opens with a lyrical and reflective long melody for Bertha. A low sound sets the two altars vibrating. The drum feedback melodies join again, echoing the opening of the piece, this time making slow, beautiful harmonies with multiphonic chords voiced by Bertha. The last sounds we hear are altars buzzing and vibrating. They have heard, absorbed, and perhaps accepted everything that has gone before.

Vibration, says Lim, is about connectedness. It's remarkable that *Sex Magic*, a work that so powerfully connects a performer, her instrument, the sounds beyond it, the present, and the ancient past had its beginnings in a world utterly broken apart by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The gestation of the work happened on Zoom and WhatsApp during lockdowns. The premiere took place with only three people present in a large venue in Queens, New York, broadcast online to a global audience, including the composer watching on the other side of the world. Subsequent live performances have, gradually, brought more people physically into the ritual. This recording provides an invitation to connect in a particularly intimate way with the power of this remarkable work.

—GILLIAN MOORE