



Profile

The Temperature of Time

A profile of composer Wang Lu



Wang Lu • Photo © Deirdre Confar

first met the composer Wang Lu on a warm weekend in south Brooklyn in the spring of 2008. The International Contemporary Ensemble, where I'm a pianist and original member, was about to premiere her "Siren Song." It was by far the craziest-sounding piece on the program. "This one is beyond the beyond," I said to one of my colleagues.

There had to be some motivation behind the delirious writing, which was as funny as it was ferocious. Looking demure and speaking very energetically in somewhat broken English, she launched into a story. As she later summarized in a program note: "An old eunuch buys a young wife because he is drawn to the beauty of her face and wants to eventually have her buried with him when he dies. The moment he first sees her, we hear his monologue [in a] high, shrill voice: 'What an exquisite beauty standing in front of me. With her oval peach flower-colored face, I must tell myself, this could only be heaven or hell.'"

When she finished, everyone's mouth was open. It was unusual for us to have such a clear storyline for a piece—real program music—and, moreover, images that no one would have expected.

Lu had just started to explore one of her musical preoccupations: a "transliteration," as she calls it, of spoken dialects. In this case, she was working with a dialect of Xi'an, her hometown and an ancient capital of China. The speech has huge intervallic leaps and quick, wide glissandos with pitch shakes. She heard a "dry, panicking, yet seductive old male voice" in her head while composing. The dialect is extremely musical, but sounds bizarre when embodied by instruments.

Years later, the musical language of "Siren Song" coheres. Each gesture seems almost inevitable, as natural as conversation. "With inspiration from language, you establish syntax, and then you breathe," Lu said to me recently. "With contemporary music, when I'm lost, I don't know how I breathe."

An Atlas of Time

by Wang Lu

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9. Siren Song

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More than any composer I know, Lu's music is genuinely unpredictable—you simply never

know what guise it will assume, and where it will lead you. My first reaction to each new work is usually, “This is *out there*.” But this quickly transforms to appreciation. Lu makes the rarest kind of new music: it knocks you sideways, but then, mysteriously, a fully studied logic materializes. A contour appears where you might have thought there was none, and every note belongs. It’s not just that the music confounds expectations—although it does, without fail—but that it creates dreamlike, yet complete scenes, worlds, and musical languages.

Lu lived in China until her early 20s, first studying piano—a self-described teacher’s pet—and then discovering her predisposition towards composing. Her father was a longtime tenor in a Beijing opera troupe, and she admired him especially because of all the other things he routinely did in his company, like choreographed martial arts and percussion playing. Lu finished her degree at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music and enrolled at Columbia University, whose doctoral program for composition cultivates a powerhouse of distinct creative voices. Major awards and fellowships followed: Guggenheim, the American Academy in Berlin, and the Fromm Commission from Harvard, among many others. A body of work emerged which is resourceful, audacious, and a little nuts. She started teaching at Brown University in 2015.

After the 2008 performance, further experiences thrust me deeper into Lu’s imagination. Her “Cloud Intimacy,” a quintet whose premiere I played at Lincoln Center in 2016, used fragments from “Tristan und Isolde” interspersed with acoustic imitations of cell phone sounds, to show how easy it is to swipe left on a dating app. “This can’t possibly work,” I said to myself when we started to rehearse. It was too much of a gimmick, extravagantly silly and even corny. But when we recorded the piece the next year, the elements slid into place. In Lu’s music, humor becomes a basic grammar, with no implied distance from the piece’s subject. She has this in common with Helmut Lachenmann. Lu takes humor seriously, which makes the listener do so too. “We need to have fun, because the work is so hard,” she told me. She’s drawn to the light, fast pace of comic theater, and she’s writing her second staged opera now.