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Dr Susan Lim on Cosmic Rhapsody

Interview

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Technology in music is a hot topic currently. AI is seen mostly as a threat to the creative process of composing music. Yet there are opportunities too, and the *Lim Cosmic Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra*, recently premiered at the Barbican and newly released on Decca Classics, looks to explore the positive side.

The piece is the second part of the ALAN Trilogy, whose first instalment – the *Lim Fantasy of Companionship* – was released on Signum Classics in 2021. The ALAN team is a substantial one, collaborating not just in music but in animation, with accompanying films such as the one shown at the premiere. For the recording a high calibre cast includes pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, the City of London Choir, London Voices and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Robert Ziegler. At the creative heart of the project are composer Manu Martin and creators Dr. Susan Lim and Christina Teenz Tan, who wrote the lyrics / libretto for the film and the vocal elements of the score. Presto spent time with Dr. Susan to discuss the project and its ultimately uplifting message.

Her eclectic training has contributed towards the realisation of the concept. “My father was born in Indonesia and my mother in Malaysia. They became Singaporeans and I therefore benefited from the local educational system. I got a scholarship to go to the Monash University in Melbourne to pursue medicine. That was a breath of fresh air, because I could explore a bigger space. I was very interested in culture and music, and there was not a lot in Singapore growing up. That really opened my mind – I went to concerts like Deep Purple, Uriah Heap and Santana. I did six years of med school in Melbourne, and came back as a doctor, and then I went for my exams to the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. I graduated as a surgeon, but I decided I didn't want to just spend my life doing routine cutting, although that was very rewarding. I wanted to apply my mind, so I went to Cambridge and got a scholarship at the Churchill College to pursue a doctorate in transplant immunology in Cambridge, which were some of the best years of my life.”

Classical music has also played a part in Susan's career. “When I started big time surgery, like transplantation, those operations went on for 15, 16 hours. While it was deeply interesting to the surgeon and the immediate team, it became boring for the rest of the room – ten or twelve runners who were standing, waiting to be called. I used to bring my sound system into the operating room and played a variety of music – obviously not much rock! – but a lot of jazz and classical. The Pride and Prejudice soundtrack by Dario Marianelli was something that caught my attention, and it didn't click at the time, but Jean-Yves Thibaudet came on my on my radar as he played on that. I loved listening to Dawn from that soundtrack. I understood that genre in music had a time and a place for different aspects of my life.”

Music and science are now inseparable in Susan's life. “They're intertwined. I take a lot from science and inject it into music because these are my big loves. In the *Lim Cosmic Rhapsody*, for instance, the London Voices sing the genetic code of synthetic DNA to celebrate robotics.”

The Lim Cosmic Rhapsody may be a fusion of music and science, but it is consistently high in emotional content. “Hats off to Manu Martin the composer for that,” says Lim, “he is a very emotional man. I feel we are on the same wavelength. With Christina, I wrote all the lyrics to the 17 songs of the *Cosmic Rhapsody*, which inspired the entire piece. Each of the tracks draws inspiration from the lyrics, so it's like I'm telling him the story over and over again. We got on fabulously well. The palette of his music is rich and emotional, especially when using the duduk.”

The recording sessions were clearly a joy for Susan. “When we recorded in Abbey Road I actually sat among the musicians, because I wanted to feel the music. Being next to Dirk Campbell playing the duduk was amazing, and Jean-Yves Thibaudet on the piano too – he's in a class of his own, so expressive and emotive. What I respect him for most, probably as a surgeon, is his precision – because he is very technical. We've just recorded the *Symphony Of The Oceans*, the third part of the ALAN trilogy, and he is so disciplined, yet so humble.”

The similarities between performing an operation and a concerto are not lost to Lim. “I'm also a robotic surgeon, and I did partner with a machine called the da Vinci. The partnership between man and machine is what drove me to write about a partnership between a human and inanimate. When I look at the musicians in the recording studio, I just imagine that here is a human partnering with an inanimate to create something so good that neither could do it alone.”

With the threats from AI all too real within the creative industry, here is a more positive approach. “That was the inspiration to create the ALAN trilogy,” she says, “because I felt from my own experience in medicine that the partnership of human and AI can do a lot of good. Of course it's also something to be cautious about, but I feel we have to work with it because it is the future.”

The *Lim Cosmic Rhapsody* is also a response to COVID, and the fires in California which closely affected the recording. “I feel very emotional right now working up to the world premiere. It is very fresh in my mind, because when we filed into Abbey Road in November 2021, Fiona Gillott, who was managing the studios, said we were one of the first to come back into Studio One. There were only so many that could be there from the ALAN team and thank goodness we were recording in sections. A lot of the orchestral members were masked, and it was the first time the London Voices had been back since COVID. It was very moving, and although we all had our own stories and personal crises, we would leave that all behind and record the music.”

The ALAN Song, Lim Fantasy of Companionship for Piano and Orchestra

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Susan expands on the *Lim Cosmic Rhapsody*, and what it brings to the already-recorded *Fantasy of Companionship*. “The *Fantasy of Companionship* was a partnership of human and an AI-enabled inanimate on earth. What I wanted to do was introduce the concept of this partnership in a friendly term, so that the AI enabled inanimate was not foe but friend. This partnership would go through life, and this inanimate – a plush baby lion – had AI implanted in its cotton-filled head, which eventually entangled with the human through the physics of quantum entanglement. That last song – Teleportation, sung by Matthieu Eymard – was astounding, and that was the human and inanimate intertwining, such that two become one, and then they head off into space. It opens up to where we are in this second part.”

Inspiration for the sequel flowed easily. “We were still very happy when the first part, and we got back together in Clocheville in France, where we have always got together. I met them there for the first time when I was skiing. March 2020 was no different, and we had recorded the first part in 2019. Then I got a phone call from my husband, and he said you have to come back immediately, because the borders are closing and COVID has broken out. I couldn't imagine it because it looked so pristine in Clocheville, but thank goodness I did because the borders closed the next day, and the resort. Christina had returned to school in California, and in that same year she was surrounded by blood orange skies because of the fires that had broken out. Between the two of us we felt the planet was suddenly so fragile overnight.”

Lim found hope from an unexpected source. “I read out of the blue that NASA was to return astronauts to space after 10 years on a commercial spacecraft. I wanted to be a part of the mission, to take my beloved team – who were all over the world, communicating only virtually. So I wrote lyrics to a song, ‘Is Anybody Out There?’ – because I imagined being in space. I quickly asked one of our composers, Joi Barua, sitting in Mumbai, if he could write music to my lyrics. Then I asked Samudra Kajal Saikia, our animator, also in India, to quickly animate ALAN in an astronaut suit, and then I sent out a tweet just before lift-off. At that time I felt we were on a mission to space, and that was the start. We went from song to symphony, and although he had a lot of crises Manu Martin rose to the occasion and wrote the *Lim Cosmic Rhapsody*.”

Listening to the music gives the strongest impression of looking down on the Earth from space. “I'm so happy that you feel that, because we wanted to create an overview effect and give that sense of awe at the preciousness of the planet. We wanted to create a morsel of the experience that the female team on the Blue Origin rocket had recently, because most of us in our lifetime will never go to space. That moment, listening to the *Lim Cosmic Rhapsody*, if we could create that transcendence through Manu's beautiful orchestration, would be just amazing.”

One of the sections is entitled 'Beam Me Up' – inevitably drawing parallels with *Star Trek*. “Beam Me Up is an emotional scene, written by Matthieu Eymard, the singer of Teleportation. He's a romanticist at heart and he loves jazz as well, so I thought he would be most suited. What happens is that the ‘humanimate’ has gone to space, just like when we send the unmanned spaceship first. When the safe passage has been established by AI then the human follows. ALAN establishes that safe space, then calls down to Christina to come orbit with me. She is torn, because secretly there is a relationship between her and the boy scientist Joseph, but she then sings to Joseph, ‘Beam Me Up’. The animation we have created around it is heart wrenching, because she's looking out to space from a little studio on the hill in northern California, and is imagining that she needs to re-entangle with Alan, but on the other hand she's going to leave Joseph behind. That song is very emotional.”

We move on to talk about how music can describe the notion of outer space with an uncannily vivid imagery, looking back to Holst's *The Planets* suite – which, incidentally, was programmed to follow the *Lim Cosmic Rhapsody* in its world premiere concert. The sequel – the *Symphony Of The Oceans* – has just been completed at Abbey Road, as we talk. “The musicians are the same who recorded the *Cosmic Rhapsody*, though this time we have two other soloists, the cellist Gautier Capuçon and violinist Lisa Batiashvili.”

She speaks warmly of Andy Findon, who played the shakuhachi and the duduk at the premiere. “He recorded The ‘Song of the Lost Tribe’ on the shakuhachi, and that tribal rhythm really grounded the whole piece. Suddenly we have something that grounds us and instils a community, a feeling of wanting to connect back to our roots – an ancient wisdom in the story that we have.”

The vinyl release for *Lim Cosmic Rhapsody* is an appealing package. “I'm so proud of our animation artist, Samudra Kajal Saikia”, says Lim. “He's been with us since inception and has designed all the covers, artwork and the animation. We're going to get together as a team and watch the drafts just after the world premiere.”

What would Susan like buyers to take away with them, from the music? “I feel foremost that I would like them just to value the preciousness of our planet Earth, to understand its fragility. I want to raise awareness for the environmental challenges that are facing us, but we should all muster up strength and look for innovative ways to solve some of the problems facing us, including looking into space. If I can walk away and feel a sense of environmental consciousness, that we should harmonise our existence more, that would be great.”

The message is also that of remembering to love our home planet. “I'm pretty sure that people who walk out from listening to the premiere would not dream of dropping a napkin or litter to the floor!” The emotional content of the *Cosmic Rhapsody* should ensure that does not happen.

Ben Hogwood

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