

UC San Diego | Arts and Humanities | Music

Lyreloom

Nov. 13, 2019, 7 p.m.

Conrad Prebys Music Center Experimental Theater

Michael Jones, percussion

An Elemental Thing (2017)

Liza Lim (b. 1966)

Psappha (1976)

Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001)

Intermission

The Basketweave Elegies (2018)

Peter Garland (b. 1952)

About *Lyreloom*:

Lyreloom takes its name from its two components: “Lyre”, in reference to song and personal expression, and “Loom”, a tool used to weave disparate elements together. Each of these works, in their own way, asks the question of whether expression is found in the cells of each component, or whether it requires breathing life into the whole to find meaning and beauty. Lim’s work is an examination of the expressive capabilities of even the most humble, solitary component. Xenakis’s deals equal parts with the fragmented poetry of Sappho and in the brutal, visible separations that come from timbre and memory. Garland’s work itself seeks to be a musical equivalent to the deeply personal and careful practice of weaving baskets. By framing these pieces this way, it is my hope that they will provide different perspectives on the relationship of art, personal expression, and material.

An Elemental Thing takes its title from Eliot Weinberger's collection of essays by the same name, and is directly influenced by the essay within entitled "The Stars." The portion Lim takes for her piece, which the performer attempts to realize through their manipulation of the woodblock to achieve speech-like qualities begins:

"The stars. What are they? They are chunks of ice reflecting the sun; they are lights afloat on the waters beyond the transparent dome; they are nails nailed to the sky, they are holes in the great curtain between us and the sea of light..."

The list continues, and covers a vast array of perspectives from history, literature, and mythology from cultures around the world, each looking up at the night sky. In coupling Weinberger's text with a lone wood-block, Lim seems to address our tendency to pour ourselves, our beliefs, and even our entire world-views into seemingly small and distant things. The piece seems to show that even those things that are most distant can be made to feel integral.

Psappha, Iannis Xenakis's first work for solo percussion takes its name from an ancient Greek spelling of the name of Sappho, the famed poetess of antiquity whose work survives into the 21st century mostly as small fragments, some as short as one or two words. The score is presented on a sheet of graph paper covered in dots, void of any metrical markings, and punctuated with often vast swathes of silence. Xenakis's intention seems to be an evaluation of time on the part of both the performer and the listener: the performer must delineate patterns for the sake of memory and expression, imposing their own metric guard-rails in order to embody the piece. The listener, not at all concerned with notation, is in turn left only with pounding yet inconsistent sense of time that Xenakis gives them. This leads to a natural discrepancy between these agents' two experiences of time.

Xenakis's music is typically ferocious and unrelenting, which at first glance seems to make Sappho and her sensual, lyrical poetry an unlikely source of inspiration. Yet, within Sappho's poetry there is intense need for love, beauty, and transcending, be it over grief from a broken heart or from the existential condition of mortality. All of these desires are interpreted by the brutal sound world of Xenakis's musical language, and spread across a score that seems to defy memory even as it triggers it. What the listener is left with is a visceral response, but one that seems to hint that this is only part of what it could be or once was, the rest fading into forgetting.

You may forget

*Let me tell you
this: someone in
some future time
will think of us*

- Sappho, *Fragment 60*

The Basketweave Elegies is a nine-movement work for solo vibraphone by composer Peter Garland. It takes its title from two sources: firstly, it is partially written in homage to sculptor and visual artist Ruth Asawa, famed for intricate, hanging sculptures composed of small pieces of iron wire that she bent into place by hand. Secondly, it references the act of basket weaving, an activity that Garland himself practices. Garland self-professedly lives a "traditional" life rooted in simplicity and authenticity. He has made a career of eschewing the fashions of 20th century modernism in order to connect with musical roots that run deeper, towards something spiritually tectonic.

The work itself is a reflection on the traditional skills and activities (such as basket-weaving but extending to anything that may lack a transactional, economic motive) and how our culture attributes value to certain pursuits and not to others. Art no doubt falls into this conflict, but so do many other things: basket-weaving, gardening, writing letters by hand, etc. What Garland theorizes with this piece is that sometimes these things that seem so inefficient or monetarily useless find their value in that uselessness. The practitioner finds and develops themselves in the flow of these activities that are ultimately autotelic – ends within themselves. The connection to Asawa is glaring: why mold harsh materials into place at risk of injury for the sake of something that will serve only to be an object hanging in a gallery? Each of us has our own analogue to Asawa's and Garland's practices. *The Basketweave Elegies* reminds us to remember why simple, traditional, "useless" acts are important and affirming of our humanity.