

COMPOSITION

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## How Forests Think

*Liza Lim*

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*How Forests Think* reflects on the work of anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, who writes about forest ecologies as the 'living thought' of human and non-human selves. Each of these selves may have its own subjectivity, creating the world with its own registers of knowledge, sensation and meaning. These selves organize into communities: in ancient forests, a stump may be kept alive for centuries by the surrounding trees through underground fungal networks that nourish the old connections and keep a song going. One might think of a forest as a choir, or certainly as an ensemble. Stories, dreams and thoughts inhabit multiple forms in a living matrix; they ask us to look beyond our limited human gaze and limited human time-span.

*How Forests Think* is music made from assemblages of instruments whose qualities are like tendrils looking for places on which to clasp and entangle themselves. Its forms are emergent, like plants growing toward light and water; like mycelial strands entwining with tree roots. The music emerges out of criss-crossing conversations, patterned like roots, vines, and fungal networks; or like airborne, insect and animal-borne cross-pollinations, where one thing looks for the best fit with another. Larger forms grow out of this forest of associations, in which difference moves from the individuated to the general and into new instantiations. The music 'thinks' into the future through processes of amplification (towards distortion or simplicity) and through affinities that bridge difference.

The work is made up of four sections: I 'Tendril & Rainfall'; II 'Mycelia'; III 'Pollen'; and IV 'The Trees'. At various points in the work, the music enters into a more improvisational space where patterns of breath are intensified. The following is an excerpt from the 'The Trees', where the score is made up of islands of text instructions and musical notation where the placement of events relies on the musicians' awareness of their own and of the ensemble's breathing.


In the music, one is listening to living things breathe; one hears the unpredictable rhythms of rain falling and a trace of the wind in the trees. Neither the wind, the weather, nor any growing things can be completely controlled, contained or resisted. There is a tempest of forces that dwells in the forest. That tempest is also a song in us.


*How Forests Think* for sheng & ensemble was premiered by Wu Wei and ELISION conducted by Carl Rosman on 3 September 2016 at Bendigo International Festival of Exploratory Music. The project was supported by Creative Victoria, Playking Foundation & CeReNeM, University of Huddersfield. Other performances have since taken place in Zurich and the UK in 2016, and New York and Shanghai in 2017.

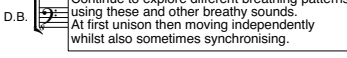
Score excerpt from Part IV: 'The Trees', reproduced courtesy of Ricordi Berlin (2016), 131-5.

Keep texture of events quite sparse; the more dynamic the intervention, the greater the spaces left in-between.

"islands" – Freely place each phrase within the breathing texture of the strings with pauses in between. 45"

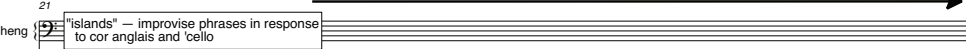
C. A. 

Vc. 


D.B. 


continue breathing patterns but also intersperse "islands" (see material in boxes A - H) 45"


21

Sheng 

"islands" – improvise phrases in response to cor anglais and 'cello 45"

C. A. 

Vc. 

D.B. 

22 30"

Sheng

Fl. very sparse breathy sounds  
[ *pp* - *ff* range ]

C. A. E F G

B. Cl.

Alto Sax.

Tpt.

Tbn.

Cond. (Conductor (sitting within the ensemble))

Perc. very sparse sounds on rin gongs and Tibetan bowl  
[ *mf* - *ff* range ]

Vc. D E molto sul tasto ord.

D.B.


30"

23 30"

Sheng

Fl.

C. A.



B. Cl.

Alto Sax.

Tpt.

Tbn.

Cond.

Perc.

Vc.

D.B.

Very long whistled tones (sometime clear, sometimes breathy) with occasional sound of whistle sliding in contrary motion away from or towards a sliding sung tone. Keep texture relatively sparse [*pp* - *mp*]

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very sparse sounds on roto-tom, tom-toms, bass drum, temple block with brushes and superball  
[*mp* - *mf* range]

**F** ord. h. sul pont. keep same finger distance III am. IV III  
*p* *pp* *mf* *f* *p* *mf* *pp*


**G** ord. h. sul pont. III IV III IV  
*mp* *ppp* *p* *mp*

30"

24 30"

Sheng

Fl.

C. A. 

B. Cl.

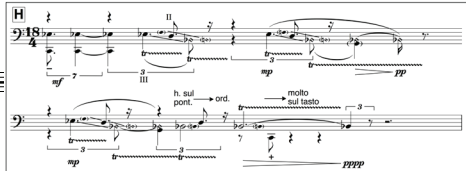
Alto Sax.

Tpt.

Tbn.

Cond.

Perc.

Vc.  30"

D.B.

25

30" 30" 30"

Sheng  
very sparse "breathing" phrases  
[mp - pp] pppp

Fl.

C. A.

B. Cl.  
very sparse whistling and sung sounds as before  
and make soft rustling sounds with percussion instruments  
like animals and insects moving through the undergrowth  
[mp - pp] pppp

Alto Sax.  
very sparse whistling and sung sounds as before  
and make soft rustling sounds with percussion instruments  
like animals and insects moving through the undergrowth  
[mp - pp] pppp

30" 30" 30"

Tpt.  
very sparse whistling and sung sounds as before  
and make soft rustling sounds with percussion instruments  
like animals and insects moving through the undergrowth  
[mp - pp] pppp

Tbn.  
very sparse whistling and sung sounds as before  
and make soft rustling sounds with percussion instruments  
like animals and insects moving through the undergrowth  
[mp - pp] pppp

Cond.  
very sparse whistling and sung sounds as before  
and make soft rustling sounds with percussion instruments  
like animals and insects moving through the undergrowth  
[mp - pp] pppp

Perc.  
Add extra peas to the inside of hand drum (remove Tibetan bowl) and create rain sounds  
mf pppp

30" 30" 30"

Vc.  
'breathing' phrases -  
gradually move into unison rhythm  
[mp - pp] pppp

D.B.  
'breathing' phrases -  
gradually move into unison rhythm  
[mp - pp] pppp