

DECLASSIFY

Episode 10: Asian-Australian Intersection

Guest: Kezia Yap

Host and Transcription: Victoria Pham

Date of publication: 09/11/2020

SUMMARY

This week, Declassify welcomes onboard composer and interdisciplinary artist, Kezia Yap. Kezia, another Sydney Con graduate, is currently an MFA candidate at the Victorian College of Arts where her work current work interrogates how cultural identity and the Asian-Australian experience can be explored through interdisciplinary creative practice. She is quickly gaining reputation internationally, with her works performed around Australia, as well as in Europe, Asia and the USA. Her current collaborations are with prominent female new music performers Hannah Reardon-Smith, Flora Wong, Kaylie Melville and Madi Chwasta, producing three new works as part of the SHARING SPACES project, supported by The Australia Council for the Arts. In this episode, host Victoria and Kezia, unpack the experience of being Asian-Australian, how the questions of cross-cultural dialogue and identity inform our work and experiences growing up in Australia, and the intricacies and often, contradictory nature, of being an emerging composer wanting to compose for orchestra.

TRANSCRIPT

VP: Hello Declassifiers! Yes, I am using that term now. Welcome back for another week and another podcast, and this time I get to welcome our amazing guest, interdisciplinary artist and composer, Kezia Yap. Kezia and I studied composition together at the Sydney Con, but she is currently studying a Masters of Fine Arts at the Victorian College of Arts, and her work seeks to interrogate how cultural identity and the Asian-Australian experience can be explored through interdisciplinary creative practice. So, I'm certain that we're going to have an excellent and enlightening conversation about our respective experiences as Asian-Australians and both working as composers and artists. Welcome Kezia!

Kezia Yap (KY): Hello!

VP: I was trying to figure out how to introduce you, other than as an interdisciplinary artists and composer, so perhaps it would be interesting to unpack how you got to this point in your creative practice. How did you develop from a classical music background, that I should add you still engage with, to your interdisciplinary practice now?

KY: So, my entryway into music would have been learning the piano growing up so I started learning the piano, I think I was 4 years old. As a lot of Asian children will, it's going to be piano or violin so I got piano and my sister got violin and I did that for about 18-19 years of my life. I don't want to brag, I was relatively good at it and my parents obviously made me practice quite a fair bit. Growing up I never really enjoyed practicing, and I never found a thrill of the performance, I always felt nervous and I didn't like being in front of people, so I turned to composition and started composing in Year 7. I was really lucky to go to a school where they offered composition lessons with a composer-in-residence, and so I started doing that. It was kind of during school and my down time hobby and decided to pursue it after school and went to the Sydney Conservatorium of pursue it.

So, I guess, I wouldn't necessarily call the music that I write "classical music". I'd probably leaning towards new music, or art music, or experimental music. I guess the name itself feels far removed from classical music itself. So yeah, I've started studying at VCA in Melbourne,

and I'm doing a Master of Fine Arts and Visual Arts, just to expand my practice a little bit, and try and delve deeper into the concepts and the ideas I'm really interested in.

VP: Now you mention that you don't think your music sits within in the classical world, why do you feel like there's this distinction both artistically and through the terminology?

KY: I guess classical music; the term classical music has a huge weight of history that comes with it. It implies a canon of work that is mostly going to quite Eurocentric and from America as well. So in that aspect, there's already a lot of pressure being a composer of classical music, and as well as that I just guess, aesthetically or in a marketing kind of way, as a composer you want to differentiate your music from what's already existing and from different sorts of community, you want to be spreading yourself out a bit or sitting in different pockets of the music community depending on what you're interested in or what kind of music you want to develop. So, I guess in that way I've kind of moved away from classical music. My music certainly doesn't sound like the music I grew up playing on the piano and that's probably why I don't classify my music as classical music.

VP: That makes sense to feel this especially. Even when you're studying music history in a conservatorium, and you get to that point where you study contemporary classical music it's often as if there is a sharp distinction between the seemingly continuous stream of history and this erratic, random "new stuff" and they're almost intentionally taught in a way that they're distinctly separate from the classical music canon. Is this why you chose to expand your practice into visual art or integrating visual art into your work?

KY: Sure. So, I decided to start studying visual art for a number of different reasons. Some of it is very logistic like applying for grants, it really widens the pool of grants that you can apply for. A lot of my music, recently from, has drawn inspiration from a range of different artforms like painting, poets – taking poetry as inspiration – and things like that, and so I wanted to develop a better literacy in those fields as well, in a way. So, I thought studying visual arts would be an interesting way to do that. As well as that, I befriended a few visual artists who opened up my way of thinking about creating, and about music, and about interdisciplinary art, and at the same time I began becoming really interested in exploring this idea of cultural identity, and what it means to be Asian in Australia and I wanted to be able to do that through my creative practice. And at the time I felt as though music wasn't really enough for me to

explore what I wanted to be exploring. I guess music sits in a bit of a box where I didn't want to be taking music from other cultures and trying to pass it off as part of my own. And so I guess looking more interdisciplinarity, I was hoping to be able to tackle these questions that I had and these tensions that I felt, both culturally and within creative practice by drawing from more places and more mediums.

VP: It sounds like you have bigger palette to work from in order to address and ask these questions.

KY: I think so, and I think in a way it's really interesting stepping into visual art because it feels as though people are more well-versed at dealing with things like cultural identity and really conceptual ideas, and so even having those conversations with people in my cohort and other visual artists it shed so much light on how I can even be approaching a musical practice, or composition on its own, or approaching a more interdisciplinary practice as well, so it's really cool. I'm really enjoying it.

VP: And what are you, in terms of the research element of your work and practice, interested in investigating and expressing?

KY: So I guess in recent years, I've been kind of grappling with my own cultural identity. I'm been trying to understand if I'm Australia, if I'm Chinese, if I'm Malaysian, or if I'm all of these things at the same time and what that means for me and the community of Asian-Australians as well. I guess it started as a way of reflecting on how I grew up. I grew up being quite resentful of being Asian, especially in Australia when you're surrounded by lots of, can I say white people? Yeah, being surrounded by very stereotypical Australians – blond hair, blue eyes and fair skin – I used to always be the odd one out and being the only Asian in my group of friends, for example. And so I, as any kid would, you don't enjoy being the odd one out in the group, or the weird one, or the one having dish snacks for recess. So I've been reflecting on that a lot and kind of thinking about why I grew up like that and why I felt like that, and also trying to make amends for the hate that I had for myself as an Asian, and kind of try to bridge the gap between me and my Asian heritage as well, because I spent so much of my life trying to move away from that. So as a composer and as an interdisciplinary artist (I guess I can call myself that now), I'm trying to do that through my career and through my creative practice. And for me that's the most empowering way to be doing it.

VP: It is because it forces you to really, I mean you mention before how talking with visual artists has been different than what it was like to work in the classical music world, the way that they ask questions about themselves and apply it to their practice, and I think they have better understand of the power of their representation and their artwork and the weight of what that means. That may be down to how art theory and practice is talked about within visual art schools, and it's in a way that I don't think the Conservatorium particularly prepared me for. But it's great to hear how you can inform yourself about your own heritage and then express it and talk about it like you are now, for other people to connect with.

KY: Yes, well I guess, one of the stark differences that I've noticed between the "music world and the "art world" is that as a composer I find it a lot easier to be anonymous in music. My name, if I'm having a piece performed, my name just appears on the program and you don't get to see who I am unless I have to bow or if I'm acknowledged by who's playing, and so it really exists as music. It doesn't exist as Australian music and it doesn't exist as Asian music. Whereas, I've noticed in visual art, the artist is so connected with their work so their work tends to express them and their culture as well, whether they want it to or not. There's been lots of research and discussion in terms of First Nations Artists and their work being labelled as indigenous art whether they want it to or not, because they are indigenous artists. So inherently, the work that I put out as an artist is going to be classified as Asian-Australian Artists whether I want it to or not. So, there's been a really interesting discussion happening around that as well.

VP: And has that affected the process in which you approach a new work or when you are writing a piece of music?

KY: It does and it doesn't. It really depends on what the piece is, I guess. I feel like I function very differently in terms of writing the music, and kind of doing the research and the art for my degree. I recently finished a piece that I sent in a couple of days ago and that has nothing to do with cultural identity at all. I was given a concept to work with and I took that and kind of went from there. And I guess, who knows, maybe in years when I've kind of accumulated a library of my own work, maybe there will be links made between the works, and maybe there will be moments of cultural identity embedded within those musical works, but at the moments they kind of feel like discrete works all in their own way that I've infused with things that I like, like aleatoric gestures or organic sounds interactions. It feels like I'm working between

two very different kinds of brains when I'm going between different mediums and different ways of working and I'm hoping that over time as I keep plugging away at both, it'll be able to coalesce and synthesise into one more robust and wholesome practice.

VP: And I understand it's a bit difficult because I've gone through very similar things and tensions, trying to integrate aspects of my cultural heritage into my classical music. Firstly, it's because for some of them, you physically can't because Western instruments don't have the same capabilities as some Vietnamese instruments because they all can't play microtones in the same way, so if I try to manufacture that in a Western setting, I will feel like I am inadvertently doing a process that could be called Orientalist. So, I've kind of avoided doing that altogether.

KY: it's really interesting that you bring that up. Because even though you are Vietnamese, because you're working in a Western medium, it's going to always have to be appropriated and it's going to have to be colonised into a Western, Classical traditional form and that's one of the lingering questions in my mind is how can we approach non-Western music with the training that we have. Because I was trained in Western classical music, and that's the language that I use and I haven't learnt anything else, really, so how can I expand that to maybe even for my own language or vocabulary within music with which I can convey or communicate different meanings through that. So, I've been working a bit with graphic notation, based on Western classical notation as well, but trying to take it out of the score, as a score, and pushing the limits of that notation to a point where it's kind of its own expression.

VP: So is that why you've really focused on graphic notation? I mean, it is one of the contentious if not philosophical questions being that notation is a standardised expectation in classical music, and it's a great tool for everyone to learn what is fundamentally a language that is heard and not seen, but when it comes to other cultures we don't necessarily have this visual notation that is so standardised. So, for example, in some Vietnamese music we have tablature so what is visually significant is a depiction of gesture of how you create the sound on the music rather than a visualisation of what the desired sound is at the end.

KY: Oh, that's really beautiful.

VP: Yeah, it really is.

KY: That's almost like choreography or dance notation in a way. I guess that creates such a different embodied experience by notating that way. It's almost like it's a more personal way of engaging with music, by kind of showing your body what to do to create sound rather than indicating what sound you need to create, so yeah, that's really nice.

VP: I don't know what it's like for Malaysian traditions or for Chinese traditions. Because when I was really young, I was really lucky in that I went to a very multicultural school, so we had musical programs for the different communities that lived in the area. There wasn't a very big Vietnamese community but there was a big Chinese community where I grew up, so we did Chinese music practices, so I learnt Chinese drumming and there was no notation, but it was all spoken, so someone would teach you how to do the movements and how to march with the drum. So that was a completely different experience from learning classical piano and all about putting your finger in a certain way to play Hanon et cetera et cetera...

KY: That's really interesting. Unfortunately, I've never had the chance to do that but I would like to learn more about it. For me as well, my background is Malaysian-Chinese or Chinese-Malaysian – I'm not really sure which way it goes. I know my ancestry is Chinese but I'm already one step away from that, and also being Australian, that takes me two steps away, so it's always a bit of a tension to figure out do I look at my culture or Malaysia at being where I draw information and where I explore my cultural heritage or do I look at China? So, I'm still kind of tackling a lot of these questions and I'm very, very new in the sphere in which I'm working so I'm only really scraping the surface.

VP: So, coming from a place where you're investigating the complexity of engaging personally and artistically with cultural heritage, other than the musical language form that is notation, what other processes have you undertaken in bringing this into your practice?

KY: So, I'm stepping out of my comfort zone in a lot of ways in my research that I'm doing at the moment. I've been really wanting to push myself to try new things during this degree and I'm absolutely not trained as an artist at all. I dropped art in Year 9 in high school so I'm not great and don't have many skills, and visually not very good at stuff, but what I've been doing is I've been working and trying to push myself to do things that I'm not used to, like painting or painting objects that I found. And that, in a way, has been a really interesting experience of

I guess investigating what I am and what I'm not, and through these works that are in development at the moment, who knows if they'll go anywhere, we'll see, but I've been working on these bought ceramic Chinese teacups and painting them to resemble Chinese blue-and-white ceramics with my very, very poor skills and my very inexpensive materials. I basically bought them all from the dollar store because I was really interested in this idea of 'why don't I make a bad Chinese thing?' to reflect me as a bas Chinese person, not morally bad, but as a Chinese person I don't speak the language, I'm not that familiar with the culture, I've never really been to China, in a way I'm not a Chinese person at all and the only thing that's Chinese about me is the way I look – in my day to day life, and so why don't I try to reflect that in making these really terrible objects. So that's one of the things I've been doing. Do you want me to talk about the orchestra piece?

VP: Yeah, absolutely. Because you just mentioned not being able to speak the language but are you leaning it?

KY: I thought about it, I'm not at the moment and I would really like to but I'm really intimidated by it. I have really high expectations of myself and I've learnt other languages before quite basically, and it's not a brag, but I really enjoy learning languages, and I find that I can try and pick stuff up quite quickly if it's quite basic, but I have this distinct memory of being in high school and I had a group of friends going on a school trip to China and I wasn't going, but they were. And I was hanging out with one of my friends and they were looking through the Chinese phrase book, and I tried to say a very basic thing like hello or how are you, and it was terrible! I had never sounded less Chinese in my life, even when speaking English, so I guess I'm a bit intimated by learning the language and of meeting expectations, and I guess I'm intimidated because everyone says it's one of the hardest languages to learn.

VP: Yeah, that's true. Just tonal languages and a lot of Asian languages that are tonal and it becomes so difficult to differentiate the subtleties if you're not surrounded by it.

KY: Is Vietnamese tonal?

VP: That's a good question yes. But our language is hard because there are so many markings, something like 22 combinations, so the difficulty comes in distinguishing each of those vowel sounds, which I can't actually do, so me too with the language barrier.

KY: Do you speak much Vietnamese?

VP: Ah, around my relatives I can understand pretty well. If it comes to speaking fluently, fluently then it's a no. I can kind of speak and I can kind of read, but it's also kind of... stunted... is the word I'm going to use for my Vietnamese language skills, which I'm also deeply embarrassed by because I have ease with picking up European languages and I should be able to do the same thing with my own language but I can't.

KY: It's funny that you say that you're embarrassed by it, because I also feel a lot of shame about it. And kind of speaking previously about growing up and being really resentful about being Asian. I think language was one of those things where I was really proud about not speaking Chinese, and I know that's really awful and it sounds terrible -to be proud to not speak a language and to be distanced from a culture. I used to get asked where things are around Central station in Chinese and I would really proudly reply "Oh sorry, I can't speak Chinese." It used to be a pride thing, but now it's turned into real shame, and really shameful for not spending the time or the effort learning it. I understand it's not 100% my fault, I wasn't brought up with the language, I was brought up speaking English and it's only my fault part of the way, but I could be doing so much more. Because I think language is a really big part of being able to connect to a culture, specifically my own culture and it's a way of communicating with a lot of family and even things like learning what different foods are called, and I struggle with knowing which Asian green is which, if I knew the names and understood them in the language the names are in... even small things like that, it's a bit stupid.

VP: But I definitely see your point. It does make things easier because aspects of turns in phrases, and connotations can give you an insight into how certain things are viewed by the certain culture so language is definitely an important one.

INTERMISSION I

VP: For our first musical intermission is a work by Kezia Yap. *If/when we meet again*, is composed for a quartet of instruments and explores a musical framework for interactions and perceived points of arrival. This work is performed here by Ensemble Mise-en in 2019 at the Oil Tank Culture Park, Seoul.

Follows a 3.5 minutes excerpt of if/when we meet again

VP: And is this why you're using language in this new orchestral piece you're working on?

KY: So quite recently I've been interested in how language can be used in creative practice to enhance cultural practice, if that makes sense. So essentially, I've been interested in finding ways that language can be used in my creative practice to help me bridge the gap between my cultural, racial and ethnic heritage. For me, I think it could have been a number of different languages, it could have been Malay, it could have been – my mum's parents speak Hainese, but I felt like what a lot of my family speaks as well is Mandarin and it is also a very helpful language to know. But I wanted to find different ways to use language as a vehicle through which to learn more about myself, and learn more about my family and their story. So one of my experiments that I worked on in terms of using language was kind of following on from a collaboration that I did last year with another Melbourne based artist called Angie Pai. We made a work, a performance work, in which we looked at this idea of practice and repetition, and how that is so intrinsically linked into how and what we do, because we're from Asian backgrounds so this idea of learning, repetition and practice is quite ingrained in how we do things. So we did a performance work where we built a large frame structure, we filled it with rice, and it looked really cool but we kind of repeated the same gesture for about 10 minutes. We would have liked to do it for longer but that was just the time frame that we had, so I thought this idea of repetition is really cool, how can I use it in my practice to aid my own exploration of cultural identity?

So, I experimented with, it was two fold, I wanted to learn how to write my Chinese name. I felt that it was a way of learning or kind of meeting the Asian me or the Asian version of me. My Chinese name is my middle name, so my name is Kezia Xuchan Yap, I should at least know my name right? But that's that thing, I don't even know how to say my name properly. So Why don't I engage with my own person and my own name, just practicing writing it and incorporating sound into it, because it becomes a really rhythmic exercise as well, by constantly repeating and writing the same characters? So I did that for a little while but it didn't really lead me anywhere but at least I knew how to write my own name. But yeah, I thought language would be a really interesting way to help me explore who I am and what my culture is.

So, I'll lead on to the orchestra piece you mentioned. Because I study at Melbourne University I was really lucky to be given the opportunity to workshop a piece with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and so with this in mind, Mandarin as a language could be really interesting to work with because it's a tonal language. Tonal languages, they kind of almost are melodic in themselves when they are spoken, and maybe this is something I can explore through music. I thought of this idea of translation and how funny it was that I don't know any Chinese at all, but I'm essentially, with Western classical music as a language, I spent 4 years at university learning, I've spent my whole life learning this language and I'm essentially – I'm pretty fluent in music. I wanted to try out seeing if I could loosely translate text in Mandarin or Chinese into music, and that was kind of trying to make a translation of a language I didn't know into a language that was meaningful to me. So that's kind of what I did, it was a bit of a process and one of my objectives in it as well was to try and compose in a way that I wasn't used to. So using lots of extra musical elements and ideas to inform the way that the music was put together. So, I spent a bit of time trying to figure out what if I mapped these tones, these words and these sentences have a down tone, so down tone is going to have this kind of timbre. Or these characters repeat, so I'm going to make, whenever we're dealing with these characters, I'm going to have everyone crescendo. So trying to map things like that, I wanted it to be a really well-woven work, so it wasn't just like here's this and this is the outcome, I didn't want it to be an exact mirror.

VP: And what text did you choose to musically translate and why?

KY: So, the sentences that I used are the only sentences that I really know in Mandarin which is this is my mother and this is my father so (repeats in Chinese) ... probably butchered that as well, but that's ok we're learning. So, I came up with all these formulas and all these ways of potentially mapping data to sound, or ideas to sound, and it got very overwhelming, so then I was recommended to read *Uncreative Writing* by Kenneth Goldsmith, and he spoke in one of his essays about the physicality of text. So, I thought, what if I just put these characters over the top of the score and it becomes like a colouring in exercise. So, I did that, I used some of the formulas and mappings I had established before, to create this framework from which I could work in, and so I made all these rules that I tried really hard not to break and I wrote a draft version of the score which was a direct, almost an imprint of the characters on the score, and then I also had to write an orchestral playing version which was written a lot more idiomatically, because the original print or overlaid image version was full of what an

orchestra would consider an error or something wrong. For example, a lot of my horn lines were in my Horn 2 part because that was where my text and my score intersected, and so moving into the playing score, I had to move a lot of those lines to the Horn 1 part, and there were other sections – bigger, fuller sections – maybe 5 or 6 instruments not playing the chord, and I went – it needs the body so I need to fill out that chord. I tried really hard not to add material where there wasn't already, so it was a lot of filling out or doing extra orchestration so that that piece was then, I guess, more literate for orchestra. It was more meaningful for orchestra. I was kind of hard on myself for trying to bend the rules I set for myself, I went 'this is what I want it to be,' I don't want to be bowing down to the orchestra and I wanted this work to be able to stand up on its own, not necessarily a musical work but a creative work that meant something. But in negotiating how those rules were bent, I started to think orchestra music exists as a dialect, if music were a language, of Western classical traditional music were a language. So, you can write music but you need to make it so that it means something for orchestra and that it makes sense for orchestra. Because it's all well and good to plug something into Google translate but it spits something out that often is not quite right, so you need to make meaning out of it.

VP: Well, in a sense you've already answered my next question which was, how do you reconcile balancing the visual aspect of the score with the musical? As if you go and sit down and listen to the music, its primarily an auditory experience, so if you have a character imprinted – I'm lucky and have seen the score – on each page, how did you link up the physical gaps or the visual gaps between each character starting and ending?

KY: I think at the outset I was really determined not to through-compose, because I've done that before and that's led to a lot of dead ends and a lot of frustration so I'm going to set up myself a process and then I'm going to follow it. So, I set up a lot of different processes for myself, lots of different limitations and parameters, but then I think I got to the point where I felt too limited and I got really, really stuck. So, I thought, I've just got to do it, maybe I'll just through-compose with the parameters that I have, cause I was also getting close to a deadline. So, I don't know if that answers the question at all. I also fell back onto old habits and ways of writing, that from the outset, I was determined not to do but I started to accept that in the process and thought about the layers of translations that emerged through the piece and this part kind of being that I'm using my own musical language and my own cultivated way of writing music to fill some of those gaps in. In that way, it was a more personal piece, and it

might sound like a lot of the previous pieces I've written but maybe that's fine, it doesn't have to be breakthrough or breaking

VP: So, do you feel more connected to your cultural heritage through these processes?

KY: So funnily enough I actually don't feel closer to my Chinese or Asian heritage through writing this work, but I have found that there are parallels with my practice as a composer and being Asian-Australian in a way. This is going to sound a bit academic but there is a book written by Ien Ang, she's written a book called 'On not speaking Chinese.' She was born in Indonesia, she lived in the Netherlands and she now lives in Australia, but she's ethnically Chinese so she has gone into a lot of diaspora experience as a Chinese person in Western culture, and she talks about how she personally doesn't speak Chinese, which I relate a lot to, and how she's had experiences where people expect her to speak her Chinese. Like in western society, people go up and try to speak Chinese to her and she'll probably reply with "sorry, I don't speak Chinese," and people are really taken aback and she's been labelled as a fake Chinese, because she doesn't speak Chinese. So, I thought about that, by being Asian-Australia, a lot of people expect for me to speak Chinese but I don't meet that expectation, and it's a failure to meet that expectation.

Similarly as a composer, I don't know why but people always ask you, 'so do you write for orchestra?' and a lot of the time, most composers are going to say no. because working with an orchestra of writing for an orchestra is an opportunity that not many composers are afforded in their careers, which is kind of ironic because you spend four years of your degree learning how to write music and I guess it's not spoken about, but lots of people are doing that to eventually write for the orchestra, like we go through orchestra and how to write for different instruments and those that are in the orchestras, but you never get to put those skills to work. So, when you actually do get the opportunity, like I feel as though I've spent all this time training for it, I get really intimidated by it, I get really inadequate, and I feel like a bit of an imposter and I feel really uncomfortable working with the medium. Even though as a composer, what is publicly perceived is that you write for orchestra because that's classical music and orchestra is the face of classical music. So, in both ways, as an Asian-Australian and as a composer, I feel like I'm failing to meet what's expected of me and that, I felt, came out during the process of writing this piece, which is really interesting.

INTERMISSION II

VP: For our second musical intermission is the work *Kezia* in the spirit of what Kezia currently talks about through her integration and exploration of the Chinese language in her work, *a structure of silences: an exploration of ma*. This piece is performed here by Keiko Murakami at the University of Buffalo Festival in 2018.

Follows a 4-minute excerpt from a structure of silences: an exploration of ma

VP: And did you get to workshop the piece with Melbourne Symphony Orchestra?

KY: Not yet, we were supposed to workshop in October but who knows with COVID and with restrictions, but I think the orchestra is far too many people to be having in one place and at one time at the moment, so I'm yet to find out.

VP: I mean, you mentioned just then, that writing for orchestra is something we are all trained to do and yet, we never really get the experience to. For example, if you're someone who's really young, say under 35, you'll probably if you're really lucky have 1, maybe 2, chances to write for and then work with an orchestra. That's not really much of a chance. In contrast, if you're a performer you practice your instrument and a certain set of repertoire so you can master it for a workshop, like a masterclass. But as a composer, if you get a single chance to write for an orchestra, there is a relatively high chance that you're not prepared for it because there is no way to prepare for it, and because of the practical element of how an orchestra, particularly a professional orchestra is run, one or 2 rehearsals, for your new piece to be prepared for a premiere. So in order to prepare in a way that's so in the orchestral language that those trained musicians are accustomed to, so they have 1-3 hours to rehearse your piece to the level or style you want, there are so many creative limitations for you to actually express anything that you might want to, because there is no time to do it. So, it's an interesting balancing act of a lack of experience and a curbing of creativity.

KY: It's definitely a funny place to be. I think the orchestra as a medium to be working with and to be making sound and music with, the potential of the orchestra is so expansive. There is just so much really interesting things that can be explored with orchestra but there is never the time or the place to do that. So, it feels as though the evolution of music for orchestra is a lot slower than the evolution of music for chamber ensembles, or for soloists. Like, I don't know, I don't think I've ever, ever seen a piece for orchestra performed with really interesting electronics, but that kind of music is a lot more common in chamber and solo music. Like it's a lot more widely accepted, perhaps not by really classical musicians because it's not what they're interested in which is totally fine, but a flute and tape piece is definitely not unheard of. It's common since the 60s and the 70s, and to think that the orchestra hasn't reached that as well is very interesting to think about.

VP: There's also an element of tolerance associated with it, and maybe trust too. So, if someone like Steve Reich wanted to do something with a professional orchestra and full-blown electronics they would probably be a bit more willing or at least set more time aside to try something like that, because they trust that this composer has had several decades of experience working with large ensembles. But if you're emerging, I don't think there would necessarily be that much time allotted to you, or trust really, to try out something seemingly crazy as to integrate electronics with orchestra.

KY: Sure. I'm quite lucky in that I've had many opportunities to work with orchestras before and they've been lovely and they've been really good experiences, but it's always unavoidable to feel a little stupid as an emerging composer coming in to sit in front of that many people who are playing your music. And even the small things like, even questioning the dynamics that you've set – do you want this really pp? or just p? – you're really put on the spot and they seem like really simple questions but they can often be very difficult to answer, as you've never really gotten to work with that many musicians in a room. And so, it's very easy to feel like you're not up to the task or not a very good composer, and it's quite a step to be working with orchestra and of course, some people love working for orchestra and maybe don't fit into that box. But I would say for the majority of emerging composers, composers who are studying, those under the age of 35, working with orchestra can be really intimidating.

VP: It's true because they set aside half an hour or a set of time, sometimes you feel like if you can't answer them fast enough, especially when with a professional orchestra, there won't ever

be time to rectify or clarify basic things like dynamics or rests, and for you to feel like you have a grasp on your own craft because you're faced with all of these musicians in a room.

KY: Yeah. Like for me, I need a little bit of time to answer a question, I need to think about what I've listened to and I need to think about the different parts that are happening at the same time and then they start asking, 'oh, do you want the flute a little bit louder in this part?' I need to think about it, for example. So, the time it takes me to answer, and I'm not sure – it's totally fine to be not sure because when have you had to think about that before. I feel that it creates this impression that you don't know what you're doing, which I'm sure for me is the case – I have no idea what I'm doing and it's all a learning curve – but it perpetuates this stereotype of emerging composers as not being good enough or not knowing how to write for the orchestra, or kind of not putting enough effort in which, look, a lot of the time is not really fair because writing for orchestra is a mammoth task, at least 10, maybe 10. How many are there? Especially if it's double wind orchestra.

VP: Sometimes around 30 or 40.

KY: It's a lot of instruments and a lot of sounds to be balancing and so it can be really difficult, especially if you don't have that experience and you don't have the people to be working with to test out your ideas, to know exactly what you're wanting. I already find it really challenging to imagine what something is going to sound like with that many people playing it. So, yeah these are just scraping the surfaces of writing for orchestra, especially for emerging composers.

VP: And you really need the experience of working closely with musicians, which either happens with working with individuals and chamber musicians so that you get that intricate knowledge that is really hard to do on your own even if you're studying and reading orchestration. Like if someone doesn't know what the lowest note is on a trombone, or the glissando interval on a trumpet because of their valve system? You get that from working directly with people and experience from doing that. If you haven't had as much of a chance to work with every instruments that is available in an orchestra, you will definitely begin to feel out-of-your-depth even though it's totally fine if you do. Sometimes it's now even knowing all these things, because a composer is responsible for providing parts for each musicians. And if you're not experience, how are you supposed to know that "oh, this part is for double bass

or percussion, the staves should be at least 8mm in thickness because their further away from their stand than a flute part which software will automatically set at 6mm or 7mm?"

KY: yeah, it's like learning a language. Like my mum learnt Mandarin growing up but she doesn't speak it because she's never had to use it and so she doesn't practice it or remember how to say anything or to speak Mandarin. I think it's the same with everything like riding a bike, well, maybe not riding a bike. But definitely for writing music, if you're not constantly practicing it, it's not really something that sits within your practice usually, of occurs you're going to forget really specific details, and even things like typesetting. You're going to forget or you're just not going to know how to do that, and so it does require a lot of time and effort outside of the writing itself to be able to put something together really successfully for orchestra.

VP: You're right, the orchestra is its own special little language. So did you feel like when we were both studying at the Con did you feel like when we were studying music there, did it peak your interest in cultural investigations of music, as in through its analysis courses and treatment of such subjects in the history courses?

\KY: I guess the conservatorium model and music education, so Western Euro-centric focus, and that's kind of the universally accepted thing. Like sure, if you go to other Asian countries there might be a group of people who might be engaging with traditional instruments and traditional practices, but a huge amount of people are going to have learnt music by learning piano or by learning violin, and learning Western classical music. So that's kind of become the underlying norm for music and everything kind of grows from there. So perhaps, musical education at a tertiary level could start being or start looking at more ethnomusicology study. I mean, generally I think there could be more exposure and diversity in music in general but of course, that's not what a lot of people going to the Con are looking for, they're going there to be a clarinettist in the SSO and going their to be a soloist, and music from non-western cultures is going to be totally lost on them. The university will be losing money from that. And the university is number one about money and number two about education.

VP: That's true, in fact the money bit is quite a consideration. I remember when I was in high school and we were both lucky in that we both had some composition teachers, and when I was in my last year, I mention this anecdote with Felicity when I was introduced to Liza Lim for

the first time. And it was the first time I had ever seen an Asian woman, and an Asian-Australian woman, writing music not so much in the classical tradition but writing new music having been trained from the new music and there's a second half of the anecdote that I left out when I spoke with Felicity. So I went to a school which was around 90% of the students were of Asian heritage or background, and when we were shown Liza Lim for the first time, the girl sitting to my right said "Eww she's a woman, and oh my god she's Asian, I don't want to listen to her music." And that was a huge problem because that girl... was a girl, and she was of also Asian background. So in a way, we had also internalised our expectations of what a classical composer would look like and should look like, and somehow that would compromise our experience of what is considered "good music" when that didn't match up.

KY: I mean, that's also a result of internalised racism that a lot of us have grown up with being Asian-Australia, of course it's going to depend on where you grew up in Australia. For me, I grew up in the Eastern suburbs of Sydney so it was predominately a more white community whereas, growing up in the more Western suburbs, like in Cabramatta and Strathfield, probably being Asian was a lot more accepted and a lot more normal there. Whereas for me, I'm still dealing with a lot of internalised racism now because of just being very, not anti-Asian, but I really didn't want to be Asian growing up because it was weird and not normal and my parents kept asking my friend to take off their shoes in the house, whereas when I went to my friends' house you wear your shoes everywhere. So of course it's going to be that being like "oh I don't want to learn about more Asian people." I personally didn't encounter Liza Lim as a composer or her music at all, it would've almost been after I finished Uni and her name would've popped up.

VP: And she started teaching at the Con just as we left, I think.

KY: Could've been when I was mistaken for her, we never know. Still the highest point in my career is being mistaken for Liza Lim.

VP: What? That's so bizarre!

KY: I often introduce myself as "hi, I'm not Liza Lim." No, that was very funny, it's still joked about to this day within my closest social circles.

VP: Well, it looks like this is perfect point for us to stop, by getting an official recording of you confirming that you're not, in fact, Liza Lim. I just wanted to say thank you so much for being on. It's been a joy talking with you, not just because I totally relate to your experiences growing up as an Asian-Australian and then all these emerging composer experiences that I'm still going through. But, who knows when one truly stops emerging. Thanks again Kez!

KY: That's ok, I hope this is all ok.

VP: Most definitely, it's been my pleasure to have you on. And as usual I'll make all the links to your work and the books you mention down below for anyone who's looking to delve into cultural practice and identities. So thank you for listening and I'll catch you all next time~

DECLASSIFY is a podcast available for listening and subscription on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. It is hosted and produced by Victoria Pham.

RESOURCES

Kezia Yap

<http://www.keziayap.com/>

Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing : Managing Language in the Digital Age*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

Ang, Ien. *On Not Speaking Chinese : Living between Asia and the West*. Routledge, 2001.