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THERESA WONG

TO EXAMINE THIS MULTIPLICITY

BY SOPHIA VALERA HEINECKE

A 2024 Guggenheim Fellow in Music Composition, cellist, multi-instrumentalist, vocalist and intermedia artist – Theresa Wong has collaborated with a vast array of similarly open-minded, experimental musicians and artists over the course of her career, including Fred Frith and Ellen Fullman. Currently Wong maintains a lean 2026 concert schedule, to focus on composing for the multidisciplinary opera Vox Lumina. Along with expanding her visual art to deepen this pursuit, which she considers a culmination of her practice of two decades, her upcoming album – Weather Eye with Italian guitarist Francesca Naibo – is slated for release this May. In celebration of her 50th birthday this month, the NY-born, first generation Chinese American returns to NYC from the San Francisco Bay Area, where she has long resided, to perform for a week at The Stone at The New School in various contexts – including solo, duo and trio.

NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: You have a foot planted in several disciplines. What has informed your journey as a multidisciplinary artist?

THERESA WONG: Growing up, I felt like music was my primary language, my first love. I was so focused on music. I always had art sort of next to that. My mother studied painting, and she also really encouraged me. We were always drawing and painting: Chinese brush painting and Western painting. Looking at art was a big part of growing up. I studied product design in college, worked as a designer in industrial and graphic design. Twenty years ago, while living in Italy, I first encountered experimental music. I grew up with classical music and studied some jazz, but I was unfamiliar with experimental music, free improvisation or multimedia art. A light bulb went off for me there. I realized I could create music and art from the perspective of a designer: somebody who thinks conceptually, who works with materials in new and innovative ways. I realized I could do this with the material of music, sound and performance. Since then, I've been really trying to bring those worlds together.

NYCJR: Thinking of your design background, I think of good design as rooted in usability and systems. The way that you speak about music reminds me that sound, and language, are vital systems. You also speak four languages, including Italian.

WONG: With different levels of fluency, but, yes, Italian, German, Cantonese and English. I spoke Cantonese with my family growing up and English at school, then subsequently learned German and Italian.

NYCJR: We talk about deep listening, but deep looking – it's really the same thing, right?

WONG: It's just a way of quieting yourself, really paying attention. I love the way that people say, "this song reminds me of the time when I was a certain age." Sometimes I'll look at a painting or a photograph that

I adored when I was fifteen, and then I'll have that same feeling that music gives me: simply looking at something recalls your sense of yourself in a certain time of your life. I was 27 when I ended my career as a designer, switched back to music, then went back to graduate school at Mills College.

NYCJR: I am so taken by your attention to intonation and the difference between that and tuning. I wonder if there was a natural progression in your consideration of intonation as important, similar to tuning, as you developed your musical practice?

WONG: Definitely. Cantonese has seven sounds, and every syllable can mean something different depending on intonation. Language, tuning and intonation are deeply connected. Each language conveys something subtly different. Even with the same words, the nuances in naming and sound speak to the diversity of human experience. There's the universality, but there's also the specificity of our experiences in tuning and the world of intonation is very similar because we've really developed Western musical practice to primarily use a 12-tone, equal tempered system. And that is so related to the globalization of our cultures and the evolution into monocultures. It's the same way of saying something, the same way of creating harmonies. Whereas if you look at our histories and cultures around the world, there have been many intonation systems. Many of them, for example, like Chinese music, have become unified into the 12-tone equal system. We've lost so much nuance, just like we've lost many languages and minority cultures.

What my musical trajectory has brought into my life is a study in the spectrum between every note. I feel this area has largely grown out of composition and working with my partner, composer and Long String Instrument inventor Ellen Fullman. It's actually harder to bring tuning into the free improv world, but slowly I'm finding collaborators also willing to bridge both realms. There's so much to be explored!

NYCJR: What was it like for you to put out your first album *The Unlearning* on Tzadik, having not too much of a background in "jazz," per se, or more accurately – freely improvised music?

WONG: That was an extremely thrilling moment in my life. I proposed those pieces to John Zorn. When I was still living in Italy as a designer, a very dear friend of mine introduced me to many artists through records on his label from the Downtown improv scene. I saw diversity there. I saw racially, culturally and creatively diverse artists. I saw myself reflected in that scene and I felt that it was a place I could belong.

NYCJR: Do you see any parallels between the way that album was cultivated and released and the way you now put out music on your own label fo'c'sle?

WONG: For *The Unlearning*, we recorded it over three days at a church on Cape Cod. We had to strike all the microphones every day, so we photographed their placements. The engineer and I documented everything very carefully, and that was the very first entry in what has become this megadocument of almost every recording session and concert I've done. It's not quite everything, but that opened up the engineer part of me that is excited about details and how things are done. That beginning technical passion has just grown into all aspects of music making. For the label, I love the process of mixing and mastering, organizing liner notes, creating cover art and packaging design – putting

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a world together around a work of music and shaping it. I just feel it's all an exciting, creative process, which brings together my background in design, music and language.

NYCJR: I would love to hear about your latest release, *Journey to the Cave of Guanyin*. To me, that universe seems so insular, yet so expansive. I felt I could hear cycles of recovery, even this scientific concept for revolution, that as you reach the end of a revolution, which is a cycle, things seem to sort of speed up. I wondered about just the specific choices for mixing and mastering to create that kind of expansive universe of space in the sound, how that might counterbalance how you were feeling in your life at that time?

WONG: That album was made, interwoven amongst other things happening, over a period of about two years. I went through getting COVID, which turned into pneumonia and pleurisy. Those six to nine months of being very sick were followed by getting a breast cancer diagnosis and another year of going through breast cancer treatment. I had begun composing the *Guanyin* pieces before that. Right before I went into surgery for breast cancer, I thought I'd better record all my pieces so that when I'm recovering, I can mix. Little did I know I could not do anything for several months. Listening to most music would literally hurt my body. But I would put on noise cancellation headphones, lie in bed and listen to those pieces. It became this little cocoon for me. And I thought, "I don't know if anybody's going to care for this album. It's kind of weird and growly—but I certainly need it." The mixing happened much later in my recovery, but I was in a moment of crisis when I recorded a lot of those pieces, preparing for my treatment. I always knew this album was going to be sort of drone-based pieces. Just the simple idea of a drone immediately connects with meditation and contemplation, quieting the mind. "Beauty and terror": that was part of such a beautiful poem I came across during my treatment that (Bohemian poet Rainer Maria) Rilke wrote: "Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final." I just burst into tears when I read that. Like the worst day of my treatment, I got news of the Guggenheim Fellowship, and I was in tears out of beauty and terror because how could those two things happen on the same day? I wanted these pieces to be like a painting, a film in my mind of a weary traveler. I wanted to create a cave metaphor. I saw myself getting off the boat, after years of pounding the pavement, going up into the hills to seek solace. All this illness made me think, "I need to recharge and take stock," perceiving cycles of the body.

But this album has also grown out of years developing certain ideas. For example, in *Harbors*, a work I composed with Ellen Fullman, we specifically try to avoid the role of the cello being like a solo over the drone of the (55-foot, 24-string!) Long String Instrument, because that's just not interesting to us. In that piece, I started performing in four channels. Eventually, it turned into stereo, just two channels, but cross-panned through four speakers so that you're getting the left channel diagonally and the right channel diagonally as a listener. I do that now for my solo work too. What I love is that it's obliterating the role of the cello as the solo, the lead voice, the single voice. Rather, the cello becomes an environment, an atmosphere, a place. The last pieces on *Journey to the Cave of Guanyin* use the extremely detuned string. The first time I did that was 2006 on a piece called "Nightwatching" on the album *Venice Is A Fish*. That sound, I remember thinking, that's the most beautiful sound. I can't just make one piece with it. I keep using that, discovering its nuances, tuning it differently, and that's an element that just keeps coming back up from the ground. Creating is like tilling a field to me; you add different elements, you put

new seeds in the ground, there's different weather, you fertilize it differently...and ideas regenerate in another season as something new.

NYCJR: I'm excited to hear about how you're thinking of space for *Vox Lumina* and how bodies will interact with the sound in the space of that live work.

WONG: *Vox Lumina* is like, ooh, what's the next adventure in song making? I've had all this other experience with tuning, recording, spatialization and collaborating. Now, this whole new universe is opening up in a different way. I do feel that it is part of embracing all parts of myself. To examine this multiplicity, it seems right to do so in the language of many different media.

NYCJR: You mentioned *Vox Lumina* is about morphing the self and code-switching between cultures. I wonder if, in this, to even express how you move between different aspects of who you are, multiple media were needed to encounter that?

WONG: Indeed. I am conceiving this piece as both a live musical performance with multimedia, and also as an installation where a person would walk in on their own time, traverse the space and come upon different sculptures, these different pieces, whether they're miniature or big and expansive, that combine projection, film, objects, painting, and that have sound. I haven't figured out how it would work, but we'll experience a song that way. I think all the artists I'm inspired by have elemental parts of their creative voice that are inherent. You are constantly searching to bring them out and cultivate them into the forms they want to be.

For more info visit theresawong.org. Wong curates and plays *The Stone* at *The New School* Mar. 25-28. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Theresa Wong—*Venice Is A Fish* (Sensitive Skin Music-Euphoria, 2008)
- Theresa Wong—*The Unlearning* (Tzadik, 2010)
- Theresa Wong/Frantz Lorient—*Live at zoom in* (Creative Sources, 2017)
- Ellen Fullman/Theresa Wong—*Harbors* (Room40, 2018)
- Theresa Wong—*Practicing Sands* (fo'c'sle, 2020)
- Theresa Wong—*Journey to the Cave of Guanyin* (Room40, 2023-24)

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they played her music, the [positive] judgment was undeniable"), to Deborah Weisz-Van Orden ("I had the great good fortune to meet her, in her later years, and there are no words that really describe what that meant to me; truly priceless...[her] legacy will inspire future generations to come"), to Gunhild Carling ("She is one of my biggest inspirations because of her tone and phrasing and her recordings with Dexter Gordon, who played with my father, Hans Carling").

In the late '50s Liston formed a four-decade partnership with pianist Weston, which culminated with her passing in 1999. Her sound-defining style can be heard on such Weston albums as *Little Niles* (1959), *Highlife* (1963) and *Volcano Blues* (1993), among others. Liston was also arranging for the likes of Ray Charles, Milt Jackson, Clark Terry, Marvin Gaye, Mary Lou Williams and the Motown label. Saxophonist TK Blue met "Auntie Melba" as a high school senior in Lakeview, Long Island. The two became close when in 1980 he joined Randy Weston's African Rhythms: "Melba was a prolific and astounding giant within jazz history...of the highest pantheon in music. May her esteemed legacy be recognized and live onward as a beacon of guiding light for all."

In 1973, Liston accepted an invitation from the Jamaican government for a six-year stint as the Director of Afro-American Pop and Jazz at the Jamaica School of Music. Half a dozen years later, in 1979, she formed a new band, Melba Liston and Company and was also honored at the first Women's Jazz Festival in Kansas City, MO. Francesca Tanksley, longtime pianist with tenor saxophonist (and Weston band alumnus) Billy Harper, played with Liston from 1981 until about 1983, as part of Melba Liston and Company. "Melba had a deep understanding of the music. Nothing that she wrote or played was ever superficial...never commercial...she managed to get a big sound out of this eight-piece group," she recalls.

A 1985 stroke left Liston partially paralyzed, ending her playing career, but she continued to arrange and became an NEA Jazz Master in 1987. But repeated strokes affected the quality of her life, and Liston passed away on April 23, 1999 at age 73—leaving an astounding and remarkable legacy as a consummate artist as well a trailblazer for women in jazz.

For more info visit arts.gov/honors/jazz/melba-liston. "Pioneers of Jazz: Celebrating Melba Liston" (with Allison Lee) is at *National Jazz Museum of Harlem* Mar. 17. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Dexter Gordon—*On Dial: The Complete Sessions* (Dial-Spotlite, 1950)
- Melba Liston—*And Her Bones* (Metrojazz, 1958)
- Randy Weston—*Little Niles* (United Artists, 1958)
- Elvin Jones—*And Then Again* (Atlantic, 1965)
- Randy Weston—*Tanjah* (Polydor, 1973)
- Randy Weston/Melba Liston—*Volcano Blues* (Antilles-Verve, 1993)

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