

CS 41 Mahakala_mixdown.mp3

[00:00:00] I'm Colleen Phelps, the host of Classically Speaking. Once again, we've produced an episode not realizing that a huge national event was going to occur right before the release, but I think we still have the right piece of music for you. Is it going to fix our unrest? Not on its own. Is it going to make you feel better? I don't know. But here's what I've got. The piece presented here is a well-timed invocation, and behind it lies a story of innovation in a time of uncertainty. Enjoy.

[00:00:39] What do we need in 2021? Protection? Compassion? Wisdom? Contemporary music, ensemble chatter Bird, along with composer Leila Adu, has just the thing. Mahakala.

[00:00:52] I'm Colleen Phelps and this is classically speaking. Like so many projects in 2020, Chatterbird's residency with New York based composer Leila Adu had to be totally reconfigured. But the challenge of taking a concert piece, Adu's Mahakala, oratorio for two singers and chamber ensemble and planning its release as a video project instead was made more profound by the source material, a Buddhist meditation to Mahakala a dharmapala, or guardian of Buddha's teachings. An imposing figure, to be sure.

[00:01:32] Uncertain times confront us all, every creature, every one

[00:01:36] Mahakala is a deity, a Buddhist deity, a different manifestation of this god of love, which has always protection forces like a dark cloak and amulets and things to protect against dark forces.

[00:01:50] The Mahakala of Tibetan Buddhism is just so cool looking. He's an imposing figure for sure. And you can find him in a lot of gorgeous, elaborate drawings, often very dark blue or inky black skin, full bodied with a literal Buddha belly, three eyes with flames as brows, a beard made out of gold hooks and a crown adorned with skulls. But remember, this is a scary guardian of peace.

[00:02:22] Yeah, it's really like a I think, a protective energy of compassion. That's what it is.

[00:02:26] Even with the piece being conceived before the pandemic, Adu was initially drawn to the global connection of the meditation as it reads.

[00:02:35] First, I thought about climate change, ways to protect the planet,

[00:02:38] a global connection that got more and more powerful as the year went on. And for Adu, herself a black woman, there was also the implication of the color of Mahakala's skin

[00:02:49] black as a protector as opposed to black As always, a negative thing in imagery of, you know, religion, including pretty much every religion. I'm living here and I'm always thinking about, you know, issues that affect black people here. So I just had this thing I was thinking was a black is being this powerful, encompassing force and being fierce, but also being a protector. And I just thought, OK, the planet really does need protecting right now.

[00:03:24] Continues on Broken.

[00:03:31] So I really like the text that I have because it tells you what these symbols mean, it doesn't just tell you the symbols. Like if you see paintings of a deity like this, it reminds me a little bit of when you see very old Christian paintings and, you know, Jesus on a rock means something as opposed to when he's not on a rock, like, they kind of mean things. And then now we have to sort of study these things to understand what they meant. But I think at the time, they really were clearer. I think the thing that really came across to me in this text is that it's active, it's being in the world using tools, doing things. That's what came across. So it's calm on one side, but it's also very active. And I think to me, it's really saying have the calm and insight and energy to do what you need to do to be a good human.

[00:04:40] The Mahakala Puja, when prayed in a monastery, can go on for about three days and it sounds like this. What Adu did was take selections from the full text in a fresh English translation and pair it with a very Western instrumental ensemble. It's Leila Adu in a nutshell, drawing European classical tradition together with ancient musical and spiritual ideas from around the world and doing so with all sincerity, because those are her backgrounds.

[00:05:27] I have a bit of a funny background music, I studied composition in New Zealand and really what I was studying was the second Viennese school. And if your listeners are very familiar with that, that Schoenberg and Viburnum Berg, so never repeat anything if you repeat it has to be backwards, retrograde or inversion. And so I really began to be trained. And I'm very atonal, a rhythmic form of classical music. That's how I started out instrumentation and vocal music and orchestration. And it didn't quite sit well with me because on the other hand, I have my own practice of being piano singing pianists for all these years writing songs. I played gamelan for seven years, which is purely a repetition and really influenced a lot of minimalist genres around the world and also a lot of African music. I'm half African and so it didn't sit well with me to never paint stuff. So in a way, it's weird coming to the United States because I think I've always been doing a form of minimalism inspired by the same things that informed minimalism, but not really listening to American minimalism. So I come to music with repetition from I would say, yeah, music of the world and being in the United States, of course, I've heard these teachers more, but it's just natural for me because I love rhythm. Then, you know, that just comes out and the music. I think I really love writing for large chamber ensemble because it has all those colors, but still a band, an orchestra. I love writing. It's harder to communicate with an orchestra. I like the single wind single string because you get all those beautiful colors and it's close enough to orchestra, but it's more malleable. You feel like you could maybe just, you know, uh, write the piano. I think I wrote it. You know, I made it easy for me to give up. I wanted to sing the work. It was a unique opportunity for me to write for my voice with someone else and thinking about things where we need collective power. There's another voice there that could sing that with me is a very discordant and with upbeat drums. And it's really, really evocative and emotive. It's not as pretty, but it's beautiful. There's a line that keeps coming to my head, which is the body of passion, is fully awake, focused and engaged, and every time I did an 80 hour work week like, say, three words for this piece after work, teaching in school or whatever, I would think the body and passions play awake, focused and engaged. Like I can do this. There's some of the most powerful images that I've ever come across. You know, I do count, I pray myself quite a lot and, you know, I kind of want to not sing in part of these bits, just sort of mumble kind of and just have this as a you know, as a calming space, because it's something, you know, I have a problem is that it's a I felt OK to use that chant piece because even Lama will say it really can have this you know, this chant is soothing, chant. And of course, I think of these

chants as something that you can do whatever religion you are, if you have no religion, ohmanipadmehum is a spreading compassion. Just a way to, I guess, show love to this show. Love for everybody. .

[00:09:37] With Laila Adu in New York, chatter bird here in Nashville, a video artist in Abu Dhabi and a pandemic, how did they put it all together in the end? Find out after the break.

[00:10:34] After the December premiere of Mahakala oratorio, I hosted a streamed post concert talk. The honesty expressed by each member of the creative team was pretty refreshing while they were all committed and excited. They didn't shy away from the fact that it was challenging.

[00:10:50] The key is really planning, planning, planning, planning, planning.

[00:10:54] For me, it was even like my first time to play my instrument, to really play my instrument. Since March,

[00:11:00] there was a lot of chances for something to go bad

[00:11:02] in every rehearsal. I never had more than six people.

[00:11:05] That's Joe Lee who conducted.

[00:11:07] So what they saw here tonight was was a combination of four different recording sessions.

[00:11:20] It just feels emotionally sort of powerful just because it's it's been such a long, difficult project and there are so many obstacles along the way.

[00:11:32] And that's Jesse Strauss. He's the percussionist and certainly played the producer role for this project. He pointed out that because the recording process was split up for the musicians, the premiere itself was a unique experience.

[00:11:44] It sort of allowed us to see it through the eyes of an audience member that is hearing a piece for the first time.

[00:11:51] Chatterbird artistic director Celine Thaxton felt the same way

[00:11:54] tonight to really sit and sit with it and see it felt like a release. And it was just a wonderful, wonderful thing together with everyone. So I'm really excited

[00:12:12] One feeling that was universal, all of the musicians knew they needed to learn to stop worrying and love a click track.

[00:12:19] I was very skeptical because all of my experiences, literally all of my experiences with a click track have been iffy.

[00:12:29] And for Adu, the presence of the click actually influenced how she composed the music itself.

[00:12:34] So I didn't feel excited about it, but I leaned into it and I just decided, OK, I'm going to have each song at a tempo. It's going to stay there. It's going to be too hot to

speed up and slow down, because within a click track, what I know from having recorded so many albums with the click track is that you can actually have an organic rhythm if you have a drummer there, that kind of or a bass player. But because the rhythm section kind can kind of like can play around the click track and make it sound like there's no click track. I mean, most albums we listen to had a click track, I'd say.

[00:13:13] The original plan for the project was an audio visual performance, including Adu's oratorio setting of this meditation alongside a swirling and disorienting video installation from artist Aaron Sherwood,

[00:13:28] I really wanted to improvise along with the musicians as they're playing. So they create a system where I could control a

[00:13:34] beautiful kind of spinning fractal, you know, glitchy mandalas and his partner is a dancer. And she works with her. And I was just like, wow, I love these guys.

[00:13:46] The result was he turned what could have just been documentation of a new piece of music into an even more fully formed work of art that goes with some of the words, you know, the delusion and that kind of stuff.

[00:14:03] I just I like this other layer and that it makes it another thing.

[00:14:06] What it's doing in various ways is analyzing the movement on screen or perhaps off screen and then and then taking that movement and doing something to the stuff that's happening on screen. And really all that analyzation of movement is making the pixels flow in different ways on screen.

[00:14:33] A commissioned piece of music is an act of trust, the players trust the composer to create an experience, and the composer has no choice but to put their work in the hands of the artists.

[00:14:43] I do really trust musicians. I trust that the musician. Just feels that look at me I'm bassooning! They feel a note and they just want to play it loud or they you know, it just there's just a beautiful vibration that comes out these instruments. That's why I still write for them. Even though I play piano and do electronics. I teach music technology, actually, but I write for them because I just love the vibration of instruments. And so I'm thinking of all these instruments vibrating. And my biggest bummer about this piece, but I just couldn't be in the room with that. I love orchestrating I really, really like writing for large groups. It takes a long, long, long, long time. I really love brass because when they're there, you just feel triumphant. And so it's sad that you can't just have them every single virus if you've got, like, harp and violin or viola or something. And I trust music, it's not all about words because words have a meaning and they filter through its music. But you don't you know, I think it really helps to hear those words. But there is meaning in the music itself. It's like cooking a meal for people you love, you know, like playing instruments, people you really like. It just feels really good.

[00:16:27] The last question of the post concert talk came from the audience and given the subject of Mahakala, it was about compassion. What role does music play in showing compassion to the world? Adu shows the answer in her work. In addition to composing and performing, she's taught music in prisons through the organization Musicambia, and she's currently on the board of a record label called Die Jim Crow.

[00:16:50] Die Jim Crow is the country's first record label for formerly incarcerated and currently incarcerated musicians. It just feels so far away. I feel like people in prison unless you know someone partly what you know, the project is showing people that people inside may have done something terrible. Of course, some of those people might have done something, but some of people doesn't care about that's your worst day. And then there's all these other days.

[00:17:26] This is I'm home, by Cedric Johnson, it was the first studio recording that was cut for Die Jim Crow.

[00:17:43] You know, a lot of people have so much goodness to give society. I've had some really terrible things happen to them, really bad start in life. We just get to hear stories of people that we don't usually hear from. that could be, again, our neighbor. They could be people really close to us or just upstate or whatever that is. And so part of it is giving people a chance to hear us, to hear the stories outside. It's giving people skills inside. And partly, you know, I know from teaching music that, you know, having communication with someone, being creative, collaborating with a group, creating taking different roles. These are all things that are really a luxury for people inside. And I remember I used to have a landlord in Brooklyn who she was a lovely lady, but she just said, oh, I'll have these prison programs, why do I have this money? And I said to her, well, you know, these people are coming out and they're going to be your neighbor. Would you rather that somebody was sort of just left to rot inside or would you rather they were learning music and learning things and coming up with skills and happier and more fulfilled and something to give society? I said in my class is this international web of kindness through music and they're like, what are you talking about? But it's true! You don't need, like lots and lots of money to do these things. You just need, I guess, dedication and care. And then these things can happen. My sort of bigger aim is to just help on this crusade, I guess that we would have to just sheer kindness with each other.

[00:19:35] A little more in depth on meditation and Macala with local percussionist Kirby Shelstad in the show notes at Nashville Classical Radio dot org. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio. The show is edited by Anita Bug and mastered by Carl Pedersen. I'm Colleen Phelps. Mahakala, oratorio by Leila Adu, is still available for viewing on YouTube. Die Jim Crow releases can be found on Bandcamp. Other music in this and past episodes can be found if you search for classically speaking on Spotify. Happy New Year from us at your backstage pass to classical music, classically speaking.