

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

When the World as You've Known It Doesn't Exist

Ellen Reid

Although Ellen Reid sang in choirs and played piano as a youngster, she did not begin composing music until after her freshman year at Columbia University. She had grown interested in musicology and the sociology of music and was thinking of going into ethnomusicology, but a professor there — the trombonist, composer, and musical experimentalist George Lewis — raised the idea of her becoming a composer. After she received her bachelor's degree she taught at an international school in Thailand for a couple of years, acquiring a firsthand appreciation for that country's musical traditions. She returned to the United States for graduate work at CalArts (California Institute of the Arts), where she earned a master's degree in 2011, studying composition with David Rosenboom.

Reid quickly staked her place as a composer of breadth and originality — so quickly, in fact, that she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2019 for her opera *p r i s m*. That work, to a libretto by Roxie Perkins, features a cast of two solo singers and four plot-driving dancers. It was premiered in November 2018 as part of the Los Angeles Opera's *Off Grand* series, and since then has received further airings in New York — including a chamber version of the *Lumee's Dream* aria on a Philharmonic GRoW@ Annenberg *Sound ON* program this past October — and, several months ago, in São Paulo, Brazil. The opera considers a survivor's psychological struggles in the aftermath of sexual assault.

Reid has assumed a leading role in the Los Angeles arts scene, having been commissioned to write works for all four of that city's most prominent musical organizations: the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Master

Chorale, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (where she began as creative adviser and composer-in-residence this past fall), and Los Angeles Opera. She identifies herself as a composer and a sound artist, suggesting the extent to which her work is not restrained within what was traditionally considered the composer's domain. Many of her works are multidisciplinary collaborations: some are immersive, and others are site-specific. Her *Playground*, for example, was an interactive sound sculpture in which participants engaged with a swing set tricked out with such sound-making additions as car mufflers, tail pipes, and gas containers. She provided the music for *Thought Experiments in F-sharp minor*, an artwork by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, for which musicians of the Los Angeles Philharmonic were arrayed on different levels of Walt Disney Concert Hall as the audience circulated through the space. She was one of six composers who contributed to *Hopscotch*, by director Yuval Sharon and The Industry, a "mobile opera" played out in various locations in Los Angeles, during which audience members were transported along predetermined routes in vehicles, repeatedly changing cars along the way.

In Short

Born: March 23, 1983, in Oak Ridge, Tennessee

Resides: in New York City and Los Angeles

Work composed: 2019, on commission from the New York Philharmonic, Jaap van Zweden, Music Director, as part of *Project 19*

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 10 minutes

Her oeuvre ranges through orchestral pieces, chamber music, choral works, jazz collaborations, compositions using electronic sampling, and works drawing on non-Western musical traditions. It should not be a surprise that a composer strongly connected to Los Angeles should also become involved in film music. Reid composed the score for the 2014 feature film *The Midnight Swim*, a drama-mystery written and directed by Sarah Adina Smith; she also contributed music to Smith's 2016 film *Buster's Mal Heart* (which also featured music by the Los Angeles underground artist Mister Squinter). With composer Missy Mazzoli she co-founded Luna Composition Lab, a New York-based mentorship program for young self-identified female, non-binary, and gender non-conforming composers.

Reid has synesthetic tendencies as a composer, though not as a listener. She explained in an interview:

When I write, I think a lot about color, and these pieces have really different colors, which I think then makes the orchestra-

tion sound different. ... It's almost like the color happens first, and then I search for the color with the sound.

Ellen Reid composed *When the World as You've Known It Doesn't Exist* as part of the New York Philharmonic's *Project 19* commissioning initiative, through which 19 women are writing new works to celebrate the centennial of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. In this work, the specific musical color involves a much-divided string section (the strings sometimes sounding simultaneously in up to 12 separate parts), prominent percussion lines, and the inclusion of three soprano singers employed selectively for textless tones — an unorthodox inclusion in an orchestral piece.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes, three clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, tam-tam, tomtoms, vibraphone, suspended cymbal, piano, strings, and three soprano singers.

In the Composer's Words

My piece is not directly about the 19th Amendment, but it is about unabashedly presenting my artistic voice. This, at times, feels like my most political action.

When the World as You've Known It Doesn't Exist begins in a musical landscape of exhausted and disembodied questioning. The piece then moves through waves of blazing anger and strength toward something close to acceptance. Its musical vocabulary consists of clouds of sound, exaggerated contrasts, large drop-offs, and surprise.

I enjoyed focusing on rhythm as a central theme in this work; a rhythmic ostinato spirals into focus as the piece progresses, alternatively taking on a driving identity and a jagged, antagonistic character in different sections of the work. The largely chromatic melodic material points toward the numb and disoriented mood I evoke in the beginning of the piece. One of these melodies is at first presented tightly coiled and, like the work's rhythmic ostinato, it spirals outward as the piece progresses.

One of music's greatest attributes is that it can mean something different for each listener. While the work holds much specific significance for me, I hope each listener has their own journey.

