Helen Grime

“Limina” for orchestra (2019)

HELEN GRIME was born in York, England, on April 13, 1981, and lives in London. She wrote “Limina” in 2018 and the first part of 2019; the piece was jointly commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Tanglewood Music Center, with generous support from the Harriett Eckstein New Commissions Fund. The score is dedicated to Ellen Hightstein, director of the Tanglewood Music Center. “Limina” was premiered in Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood by the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra led by TMC Fellow Killian Farrell on July 15, 2019. These are the first Boston Symphony Orchestra performances of the piece, and the first BSO performances of music by Helen Grime.

THE SCORE OF “LIMINA” calls for three flutes, three oboes (third doubling English horn), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, two trombones and bass trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (three players: suspended cymbal [bowed], vibraphone, marimba, large bass drum, glockenspiel, tubular bells, large tam-tam), harp, piano, and strings. The duration of the piece is about twelve minutes.

Helen Grime was born in York, England, but raised in Ellon, Scotland, near Aberdeen. As a child she attended music schools in Edinburgh, where she was enrolled in a nurturing, broad-based music program. Grime learned piano and oboe and began experimenting with improvisation and composing. In school she was encouraged to take lessons in composition; impressively, the prominent English composer Sally Beamish was one of her early teachers. She studied both oboe and composition at the Royal College of Music, where her composition teachers were Julian Anderson and Edwin Roxburgh. While still at college she was invited to collaborate with ENO Studio and Tête à Tête opera for a chamber opera, Doorstepping Susanna, and appeared as soloist in her own Oboe Concerto. In 2004, the year she received her master’s degree from the RCM, her Chasing Butterflies for 100 violas, a BBC Radio 3 commission, was premiered at the Edinburgh Zoo. She wrote her sparkling orchestral work Virga in 2007 on commission for the London Symphony Orchestra, which premiered it in Barbican Hall under Yan Pascal Tortelier’s direction.

In 2008 Grime was a Composition Fellow of the BSO’s Tanglewood Music Center, and her chamber work Into the Faded Air was performed by TMC Fellows. That same summer the TMC celebrated the centennial of the American composer Elliott Carter with an all-Carter Festival of Contemporary Music, which featured several performances led by the English composer-conductor Oliver Knussen, a frequent mentoring presence at Tanglewood. Knussen, as he did with many younger composers, soon became a champion of Grime’s music. He arranged for the Aldeburgh Festival to commission her chamber ensemble piece A Cold Spring, the premiere of which he conducted at Aldeburgh in June 2009. He led her orchestral work Everyone Sang at Aldeburgh in June 2011 and at Tanglewood in August 2012; later that same month he conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra in the world premiere of her brief Night Songs at the BBC Proms.

The success of these works and of her earlier Virga—which, having been performed in half a dozen countries under such conductors as Pierre Boulez, Daniel Harding, Stéphane Denève, Mark Elder, and Catherine Larsen-Maguire, is her most-traveled piece—has naturally led to
further commissions, particularly for large ensemble pieces. Between 2011 and 2015 she was composer-in-association with the Hallé Orchestra, for which she wrote *Near Midnight* and her Double Concerto for clarinet, trumpet, and orchestra. For two years she was composer-in-residence at London’s Wigmore Hall, which commissioned the concerto for piano and orchestra she wrote for her husband, the pianist and composer Huw Watkins. Other concertos include those for violinist Malin Broman and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra and for percussionist Colin Currie, premiered by the London Symphony Orchestra under Marin Alsop’s direction in January 2019.

Sir Simon Rattle chose Grime as one of several composers to write pieces for his first season as music director of the London Symphony Orchestra in 2017. For that commission she wrote a piece in two parts: the brief *Fanfares*, premiered at the LSO’s opening concert of the 2017-18 season, and the three-movement *Woven Space* (which incorporates *Fanfares*), premiered in April 2018. Her most recent orchestral work is *Meditations on Joy*, co-commissioned by the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the BBC. It receives its world premiere performances in Berlin next month.

*Limina* is one of many works commissioned by or performed at Tanglewood since her fellowship year. Her TMC-commissioned Clarinet Concerto was premiered during the Festival of Contemporary Music in 2009; her Ten Miniatures for solo piano was performed in 2010; the orchestral *Everyone Sang* and the chamber work *Seven Pierrot Miniatures* were played in 2012, and her *Embrace* for clarinet and trumpet, commissioned for the 75th anniversary of the Tanglewood Music Center, was premiered in 2015, during which summer she also served on the TMC faculty for the first time. She has also taught at the Royal Holloway, University of London, and currently teaches at London’s Royal Academy of Music.

“Limen” (of which “limina” is the plural) signifies the threshold at which one state of being becomes another, or, more subtly, that transitional area in which one perceives such a change. In *Limina* the thresholds connect musical ideas representing expressive states. The idea of perceptual states dovetailing with one another was inspired by a chapter in the Norwegian author Tarjei Vesaas’s 1963 novel *The Ice Palace*, which describes a young girl’s emotions as she moves between chambers within a frozen waterfall. Although some of Grime’s previous works have links to imagery or literary ideas, *Limina*’s connection to Vesaas’s narrative was unusually explicit and direct; *Limina*’s episodic structure was suggested by the chambers of the ice palace and the girl’s corresponding mental state as she searches for a friend with whom she had had an intense experience. The composer relates that this specificity of imagery and of the scene’s architectural armature gave way to purely musical concerns once she was fully engaged with the compositional process. The work’s energy, nuance, and multi-leveled activity require a high level of virtuosity and cohesion among the players.

*Limina* is characteristic of Grime’s work in that its broader spans of mood and its expressive development are produced by means of precise, energetic motifs. Even ostensibly sustained, static gestures are treated to changes in dynamic, tone color, and articulations like accents and tremolos; every moment has a latent vigor that can be tapped to propel the musical narrative. The overlap of contrasting ideas and small rhythmic variations among similar parts “blurs” the impact of any expressive state, paralleling the girl’s unsettled blend of fear, joy, and confusion. The music also contrasts the girl’s physical fragility with the dispassionate strength and coldness of the ice.
Limina begins in icy brilliance, with a trumpet call that remains in the ear even as it disappears. As the music continues, one becomes aware of constant shimmering, glinting activity in other levels of the orchestral texture—the upward-swooping woodwinds, the delicate vibraphone chords, fast arpeggios in muted violins between the trumpet phrases, a broken chorale in winds. The music develops in increasingly expansive waves, gradually accumulating power. The submerged ideas subtly but progressively become a foreground of varying transparency through which other details can be heard. A recurring and important element is the arpeggiated figure played by three solo violins, representing a kind of dream state that is perhaps the most direct connection to the girl of Vesaas’s story.

The warming, humanizing expansion of the strings into the bass register prepares the middle part of the piece, its more definite pulse and distinct melodic figures aligning the music’s various layers. Density and intensity increase, leading to a big, sustained chord that ushers in the final passage, marked “Ecstatic and tender.” The once-obsured chorale for winds is still disrupted by the strings’ breathless textures. The massive, inexorable surges of the orchestra are in the end outlasted by the quiet, questioning music of muted violins.

Robert Kirzinger

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