Spitalfields music festival

Cover Her

Litha Efthymiou

Monday 7th July | Rich Mix

Composer
Litha Efthymiou

Director
Jenny Ayres

Associate Director
Helen Tennison

Costume and Set Designer
Hannah Sibai

Dancer/ Choreographer
Harriet Parker-Beldeau

Actor/ Scriptwriter
Jenny Ayres

Soprano
Keren Motseri
Percussion
Ryoko Imai

Harp
Lise Vandersmissen

Cello
Willem Stam

Rehearsal Musician
Cameron Smith & Clara Gatti Comini

Research Consultants
Dr Kati Ihnat, Dr Melanie Shaffer and Cathrien Hoijinck

Cover Her is a multi-disciplinary performance juxtaposing the stories of two women:

Eulalia is a thirteen-year-old Christian living in fourth-century southern Spain, whose story is told through the libretto and dance.

Based on a Christian hymn, the libretto describes the night Eulalia leaves her family home and runs to the pagan Roman governor, begging to be martyred. Despite his objections, Eulalia insists that she wants to preserve the purity of her body and offers herself up to die for her faith.

Eulalia is publicly and brutally tortured in the Roman arena, earning the title of 'an athlete of Christ'. Through her death, she is understood to be united with Christ in heaven, as if she was his bride, clothed in a veil of purity.
The second story, set in the present day, follows Woman as she begins to testify in court. As she addresses the jury directly, she publicly shares her experience of abuse as a young gymnast and the ongoing effects of this into her adulthood.

This modern-day narrative, set alongside Eulalia's medieval story, highlights the enduring expectations placed on women, both then and now, to conform to idealised standards of appearance and behavior in order to achieve a perceived greater good - whether spiritual, physical, or material – and the pressure and suffering that this entails.

Through these two stories, Cover Her invites us to reflect on our modern lives and consider the price of our ongoing expectations of femininity.

Cover Her is a co-founded production between composer Litha Efthymiou and the research team at Radboud University Nijmegen - historian Kati Ihnat, musicologist Melanie Shaffer and Arabist Cathrien Hoijinck.

Their NWO-funded project explores how martyr saints were created in early medieval Spain through performative multi-media approaches. The piece was premiered in The Netherlands in May of this year.

Litha Efthymiou
Composer

Litha Efthymiou is a London based composer whose music has been described as 'powerful' (Timmy Fisher, Bachtrack), 'brilliantly realised' (Tamara Gausi, Time Out) and 'cutting edge' (Helen Wallace, Kings Place Magazine).

Her work has been performed in venues including Kings Place, Southbank Centre, Royal Albert Hall, Bristol St George's, Handel and Hendrix in London, and the Sage Gateshead, by ensembles and soloists including the Ligeti String Quartet, violinist Darragh Morgan, Harpsichordist Jane Chapman, and the London Symphony Orchestra. Her music has been broadcast on BBC Radio 3. Litha has been the recipient of awards from Arts Council England, PRS Women Make Music, the National Lottery, Hinrichsen Foundation, RVW Trust, and the Wellcome Trust.

Litha undertook her PhD in composition at the University of Bristol, supervised by composer John Pickard and she currently teaches composition at the University of West London. As well as composition work, Litha also writes about music and has published journal articles and book chapters for Contemporary Music Review, Context, Airea, Intellect, and Act.

With thanks to NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research), Radboud University, Nijmegen and the international team of scholars who generously helped shape the piece by offering feedback on early iterations of the work as part of the Veneration in Motion conference at Radboud University, 2023.

Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
STANLEY THOMAS JOHNSON FOUNDATION

SCENES and LIBRETTO

1. Procession
2. Eulalia the Virgin Martyr

A holy virgin, nobly born,
And nobler still in how she died:
Eulalia
Eulalia

Her bones adorn
Emerita, her place of birth;
Her guardian love protects its earth

This place that's been so greatly blessed
By her lies far off to the west–
A city rich and powerful,
Made greater by her martyrdom
Eulalia
And by the stone that marks her tomb
Eulalia

She'd
She'd seen twelve courses of the sun,
Twelve winters had run on, when by her
Strength upon the crackling pyre
She terrified the brutes who racked her
Eulalia

Still young, she'd early on made known
Her face
Her face looked towards the Father's throne,
And she was destined not to wed.
Still little (Eulalia),
She had put away
The toys with which most young girls play (Eulalia).

She scouted roses, scorning amber;
Golden necklaces she'd spurn (Eulalia, Eulalia).
Her mien was serious and stern (Eulalia, Eulalia),
Her step sedate, and in her manner (Eulalia, Eulalia),
She was more adult than child.
Eulalia x3

3. Courtroom
4. A Treacherous Night

She sneaks away at night, unseen,
Flees through the gated fence, and makes
Her way across the desolate fields.

Through the rough wasteland, feet torn,
She runs, despite the slashing thorns.
And troops of angels guard her there,
Amid the frightening, silent night,
To serve her for a guiding light.

That's how the host of patriarchs
Pursued a pillared beam of light
Able to pierce the pall of night.
(It clearly marked the shining path
That cut through all the hellish darks.)

Like them, the pious girl had earned
Along her way, the light of day,
Free from designs of palling darkness
As she fled Canopus' realm
And won, above, her starry way.

Striding hard all night, soon she
Has covered many miles before
Dawn spreads out in the eastern sky.

5. Arrival
6. Confrontation

"What is this madness,
I ask
Apollo? Venus? Isis? Nothing.
Maximian himself is nothing.
Both are worthless; both are nothing.

Even if Maximian,
The mighty lord
Does prostitute himself to his
Own gods and make him theirs, why does
He harrass those of noble heart?
Why?

7. Torture/abuse

Your pious leader and fine judge
Feasts on the innocent, on their blood
His meat. He makes good souls his food
And rips their decent flesh; he loves
To torture those who love our God.

So come, you torturer. Burn, slash,
And tear this body born of clay;
To kill so frail a thing's not hard.
But that will never drive away
The vibrant soul that lives within."

8. Reflection
9. Accent to Heaven and a Story of Hope
10. Veneration and Celebration

Her tomb
Her tomb's now in Emerita,
Famed city of Vettonia
Which the well-known river Ana
Passes by, and with green, rapid
Waters, bathes those stately walls.

Here, where the sheen of marble, white
And lustrous, foreign and domestic,
Bathes the nurturing church in light,
The sacred soil holds her remains–
Her honored ashes–in her bosom.

Above, the blushing rooftop glows
From panels lined with gold, while chiseled
Stones checker the floor so that
You see a meadow made of roses,
Or glowing pink with sundry posies.

Pluck the purple violets;
Snip off the blood-red crocuses.
Our kindly winters do not lack them.
The cold won't grip the land; it's mild,
So baskets brim with flowers piled.

O girls and boys, give her these gifts,
Leaves from the verdant trees.

And so her bones we venerate,
And so the altar covering
Those bones. Placed at God's feet, she'll see
Us, all her people

Sung text: Carmen III, Prudentius, Peristephanon, from Preface. Daily Round. Divinity of Christ. Origin of Sin. Fight for Mansoul. Against Symmachus 1. Translated by H. J. Thomson. Loeb Classical Library 387. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949.