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# Laura Bowler

## Selected Reviews

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### The Blue Woman

Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House, July 2022

“The singers go through a pretty comprehensive compendium of avant-garde vocal techniques, delivering Lomas's elliptical, stream-of-consciousness words. And the cellists, sitting between them, are similarly required to explore a range of sonorities that includes everything except, well, nice cello tunes. The victim's inability to "move on" is conveyed by passages where the music seems trapped in an endless loop. Electronic effects and brash percussion bangs and clangs to add to a sense of dislocation and dysfunction.” – **Richard Morrison, *The Times***

“Eight women face us within blue walls: four singers in front, four cellists behind... Bowler's score, conducted by Jamie Man, plays with our perceptions. We can see the singers and cellists, but there are other sounds compounding them that seem to come from nowhere, generated by a percussionist, or the voiceover of Lomas's words – or, mainly, the detailed electronic manipulation of all of the above. The cellists – Louise McMonagle, Su-a Lee, Tamaki Sugimoto and Clare O'Connell – use every possible technique, swooping and swooning and scraping. The singers – Elaine Mitchener, Gweneth Ann Rand, Lucy Schauer and Rosie Middleton – move from speech to song and back again so fluidly that the notes feel like bright spots of colour on the words. It's episodic, static, fragmented – yet tensely atmospheric...*The Blue Woman* doesn't signpost a way to catharsis. But the feeling it leaves is one of defiant resilience – not quite hope, not yet, but not despair either.” – **Erica Jeal, *The Guardian***

“The Blue Woman is an unnamed woman; the Blue Woman is everywoman. We see the one woman, silent, on a screen that fills the upper half of the stage. She writhes on the floor of an empty room. She walks the streets, endlessly. She dances, manically. Below her, on the stage, are four women. Everywomen. Above each of them hangs a single light, as if each is trapped in her own cell. Behind each of them sits a cellist. All are bathed in deep blue light, the blue of depression, of sorrow, of the water in which they feel themselves to be drowning. They sit, they stand, repeatedly, seemingly at random, their movements exuding fear, pain, loss, loneliness. And these women sing. They give voice to the silent woman above them. The Blue Woman is just one of countless victims of sexual violence whose story is never heard, or never believed. We see her perhaps like the agonized, unnamed figure in Munch's *The Scream*, but now at last we hear her too. And her voice is almost unbearable to listen to.

But listen we must. *The Blue Woman* is a work about the trauma of rape. The abuse of women on the opera stage is nothing new, but their stories are always mediated by men. Now these women bring women's perspectives, they tell it from the other side... Laura Bowler's fractured score matches the text virtuosically, achieving an extraordinary range of sounds from the barely audible to the almost deafening. All manner of extended techniques on the cellos are mixed with the voices and an atmospheric electronic score, along with percussion in the pit, conducted by Jamie Man, to produce a well-blended soundscape projected into the auditorium which adds to the overall sense of disorientation...If there is any hope, then the soft unison on all four cellos at the very end offers a glimpse of healing, of rediscovered wholeness.

*The Blue Woman* is a strong and progressive artistic endeavour. Long overdue, it lets women's experiences be heard in the opera house. It is not a comfortable watch...but it is nonetheless absolutely necessary.” – **Jonathan Cross, *Opera Magazine***

“The inner intensity of the music fits the subject and the performance from all involved is stylish and professional”  
– **Richard Fairman, *Financial Times***

“Composer Laura Bowler scores the text for four female voices and four solo cellos (Daemons? Aggressors? Inner voices?), who go through the full gamut of extended techniques, from scrubbing pitchless sound right up over the bridge to stroking soft flutters with a loose wire on the strings. Electronics smudge and blur the palette, while percussion keeps us peremptorily on track, marking time in this meditative blur of space and experience.” – **Alexandra Coghlan, *The Daily Telegraph***

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“A modern Gesamtkunstwerk, *The Blue Woman* moulds music, singing, poetry, and film into a unique artistic experience. But unlike a Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk with a vast narrative scope, *The Blue Woman* has a narrow, almost solipsistic, focus, choosing to deepen rather than expand its focal point.

Unflinchingly navigating the psychological landscape of a woman processing the trauma of a sexual assault, it is an intensely intimate artwork that challenges the boundaries of opera.

The entire production is stripped of traditional operatic pageantry...Composer Laura Bowler's music is corporeal, hijacking the nervous system and sending shivers shaking down the spine. Its atonality is often onomatopoeic, evoking screams, shudders, and squeals through the four on-stage cellos.

Conductor Jamie Man electrifies Bowler's music with a jittery tempo, melting the score with searing anxiety. Sometimes it crescendos to a dull but oppressive drone, and sometimes it gasps for breath over the relentless hour long run time. Relentless is the operative word here. Even as the music settles, there remains an underlying trepidation throughout.”

– **Alexander Cohen, *Broadway World***

“*The Blue Woman* is not so much an ‘opera’ as a soundscape of a soul – a soul shattered and lost, found and re-formed. In this experimental new work, composer Laura Bowler and librettist Laura Lomas embody the psychological aftermath of sexual violence, presenting the traumatised inner landscape of one Woman and her search for her former self...The singers utter fragments, tentatively lyrical then slipping into speech, the overlapping repetitions a palimpsest of memory and experience. At times they are individuals; then the layered voices merge with a recorded voice-over, pull apart, re-entwine, seeking whole-ness. A fraught and fragile cello fabric supports and counters the voices in ethereal whispers, melancholy moans, cries and stutters broken by sudden vibrato-rich outbursts. Hands writhe up and down fingerboards; bows dig in with sul ponticello grittiness; wire curls on steel. Deftly shaped by conductor Jamie Man and enriched by ambient percussion and electronics, the instrumental canvas is the sound of a psyche, its colours, textures and taste: an aural limbo” – **The Stage \*\*\*\*\***

## Distance (world premiere) Sound Festival Aberdeen (October 2021)

“Nowhere more so than on sound's opening night, courtesy of the brilliantly imaginative, deeply compelling *Distance* (\*\*\*\*\*) composed by Laura Bowler, and featuring soprano Juliet Fraser in Aberdeen and the Talea Ensemble streamed in live via Zoom from New York, neatly covering both the pandemic and the climate emergency (indeed, sound 2021 was an entirely flight-free festival). That the piece worked at all was a breathtaking technical achievement, but it was *Distance*'s artistic ambitions that really wowed. Merging multiple video feeds, live and recorded sound, and an exquisitely strange sound world conjured through Bowler's intricate music, it pranced nimbly between experiences of flight, and reflections on the data flow that was making the piece possible at all, with some self-deprecating humour thrown in lest that sound too po-faced. *Distance* felt like the unveiling of something truly important and inspirational.” – **David Kettle, *The Scotsman* \*\*\*\*\***

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### **Houses Slide (world premiere) Royal Festival Hall (July 2021)**

“In a week of flash floods, the world premiere of Houses Slide was all too timely. Who doesn’t currently feel they might be atop a crumbling cliff, metaphorical or otherwise. The composer Laura Bowler and librettist Cordelia Lynn have created a work for soprano and ensemble on eco catastrophe...Directed and conceived by Katie Mitchell and conducted by Sian Edwards, Houses Slide was powered by 16 bicycles: an off-grid world-first that sounds crazy, and nearly was, but couldn’t have been more serious.

Tapping and clicking, blowing or breathing into their instruments, [the London Sinfonietta's] sounds gradually turned to music, at once impressionistic and honed, meticulous, multilayered. A swirl of taped voices (using submissions from the public) catalogued loss and change, in insect and bird life, weather, landscape, remembered since childhood. The phenomenal Australian actor-soprano Jessica Aszodi, cycling throughout, was the pivot.” – **Fiona Maddocks, The Guardian**

### **Selected reviews for Laura Bowler**

“the connotations of Bowler’s music are rich and multi-layered, but quite apart from that, it is so, so refreshing to hear a composer seeking to tap into something genuinely extreme, a quality that often feels lost from the contemporary concert hall.” – **5against4**

“Laura Bowler’s *Salutem* provides a forceful representation of multiple epochs of human civilization, affording the ensemble the chance to let loose: even scream with abandon.” – **Sequenza 21**

“There’s no denying Bowler’s defiant charisma: a cross between Cathy Berberian and Pussy Riot.” – **The Spectator**

“a triple threat composer-performer-provocatrice.” – **The Arts Desk**

“A challenging piece with a lot to say, Bowler wielded just enough humour to reinforce the points she was trying to make, but if FFF is going to be appreciated properly, it needs to be seen, heard and taken very seriously indeed.” – **5against4**

“Edgy and violent.” – **BBC Music Magazine**