Datebook

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Photos by Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Juxtapoz publisher Gwynned Vitello listens to sound artist Janet Cardiff's installation "Forty Part Motet" at Fort Mason.

MUSIC REVIEW

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By Joshua Kosman

There are a lot of different things going on in "The Forty Part Motet," Janet Cardiff's majestic and entrancing sonic installation that is in residence at Gallery 308 in Fort Mason Center through January. The piece plays deftly with ideas of motion and space, of time and repetition, of expressivity and distance.

And yet at its heart, "The Forty Part Motet" could scarcely be any simpler. It takes one splendid musical work — "Spem in alium," a virtuoso display of compositional ingenuity by the 16th century English composer Thomas Tallis — and transforms it into an immersive mosaic of sound.

The 2001 installation, which is being co-presented here by Fort Mason Center and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, is almost aggressive in the spareness of its visual presence. It consists of 40 loudspeakers on stands, arranged in a large oval in a bare exhibition space, from which a performance of Tallis' masterpiece — recorded by the choir of England's Salisbury Cathedral — plays on a continuous loop.



Janet Cardiff uses 40 speakers to present 40 voices in a choral piece.

The Forty Part Motet: Noon-8 p.m. Wed.-Sat., 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sun. Through Jan. 18. Fort Mason Center, S.F. Free; advance tickets recommended. (415) 345-7575, www.motettickets.org.

Yet to step inside that oval is to experience a remarkable shift in perception. Suddenly, the music becomes a physical presence in a way that invites an entirely new understanding of what's going on.

The sense of awe and wonder that results is very much in keeping with the nature of this music, because "Spem in alium," written for eight choirs of five

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Photos by Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

"The Forty Part Motet" uses 40 speakers to present 40 voices — recorded by the choir of England's Salisbury Cathedral — in a piece by Thomas Tallis.

Voice by voice, humanity is heard

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voices apiece, was designed to astonish a listener with the intricacy of its counterpoint. Voices enter singly or in groups, singing melodic lines that offer elaborate imitations of what has come before. The textures range from a single voice to all 40 singing at once, and Tallis plays the eight subgroups against one another in a rich, shifting spatial drama.

All these qualities can be heard in any performance of the piece, whether live or on disc. What Cardiff adds to the equation — and what gives "The Forty Part Motet" its experiential charge — is the opportunity to interact physically with the music from a multitude of perspectives.

Because each of the 40 voices has been recorded individually and is emerging from a separate speaker, a listener can walk around within the installation space and hear the music in any of countless ways.

Stand at the center and you get the full wash of vocal texture coming at you from all directions. Put your ear close to a single speaker and you can isolate an individual strand in Tallis' contrapuntal tapestry.

Stand in between two speakers for an intimately blended duet, or back a pace or two to hear one voice — like some kind of Renaissance Motown trio — backed by the singers on either side. Walk along a bank of five speakers to hear the music of one choir peel off like a deck of playing cards, or lean into a silent speaker to encounter a stillness more weighty and present than a simple rest would suggest. It's roll-your-own listening.

What Cardiff adds to the equation ... is the opportunity to interact physically with the music from a multitude of perspectives.

If the music were the only thing happening in "The Forty Part Motet," that would be memorable enough. But Cardiff adds an inventive side note to the work that turns it into a trenchant and moving comment on the role of technology.

"Spem in alium" lasts 11 minutes, and the repeating loop lasts 14. In between performances of the music there comes a short interlude that exposes the human actors behind this ostensibly high-tech creation.



Laura Callen from the Adoption Museum Project listens to the work, co-presented by Fort Mason Center and SFMOMA.

As the tape continues to roll, you can now hear the singers in all their everyday humanity — preparing for the performance itself, chitchatting about mundane topics, yawning, laughing, blowing their noses. It's as though each loudspeaker had gone through some sort of anthropomorphic process, revealing the homunculus within.

Perhaps the most wrenchingly moving sections of "The Forty Part Motet" are the quiet spaces between the music and the intermission sections, when that transition is about to come into play. In that pregnant silence, you can hear a profound transmutation, in one direction or another, about to begin.

And with that gesture, Cardiff pulls back a curtain on the entire transaction between the technological medium and the humans on either side of it. In an instant, the speakers become vehicles not just for the transmission of musical sound — that's what speakers generally do, after all — but for a particularly intimate human connection.

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