

MONOCHORD - by Ellen Southern (July 2012 – March 2013)

Monochord for Tape and Voice is a structure which can create different sound-world each time depending on the singers, and frees the performers from the conventional ranges of SATB. It grew from an initial process-based version for four voices and hand held tape machines, which I created for a composers workshop with the BBC Singers at Morley College in July 2012 (see news item on website below).

The piece was based on the concept of taking these four particular singers' ranges - their two highest and two lowest sing-able notes - and combining them to 'find' the single resulting chord which will form the harmonic basis of the work. The piece requires the singers to sing stepwise semitones in contrary motion within an octave - the distinctive 'design feature' of the western equally tempered harmonic system is placed in direct counterpoint to the idiosyncratic human voice and its non-mechanical nature. This creates the possibility of hearing a whole world of consonant and dissonant sounds within the parameters of a single ('mono') chord.

Hear a demo of the work in progress (all parts sung by the composer):

<http://www.ellensouthern.co.uk/resources/Monochord-demo-11th-july-2012.mp3>

Monochord (Ensemble Version)

Deciding to make an ensemble version, I began with the same approach as above - the singers' voices spanned a high Eb to a low Gb, meaning the piece got written in the unusual key of Eb minor. The theme of having 'found' the harmony from the singers this way is embedded in the DNA of the piece, and informs the form, orchestration and lyrics throughout.

This compositional theme also inspired the singers' paper masks (see <http://www.ellensouthern.co.uk/styled/index.html>). They are based on Fludd's C17th engravings of monochords - single stringed instruments used in ancient Greece to determine the natural frequency ratios of the octave, perfect fifth etc, which form the basis of the western harmonic system. I am inspired by how the combination of even just two notes instantly creates a distinctive soundworld - a charged musical relationship. Just as all the harmonic overtones, like a whole universe of sound, are present in a single note, **Monochord** is a homage to the discovery of resonant combinations in life, aligning yourself to another person or a life's work, and the brave step of committing to it.

See a video of the premiere performance here (13 mins):

<http://www.ellensouthern.co.uk/resources/Monochord-at-Testing-Ground-Ellen-Southern-and-Ensemble.mpg>

I premiered **Monochord** (ensemble version) at **Testing Ground**, an experimental performance event I organized on 24th March 2013 at **The Others** artist-run space, London. The ensemble performed both versions together for the first time at **Haunted Voices II**, my second show at **Brighton Fringe** 2013, May 2013. For foto and video documentation of the above, see website.

Peformers - Fiona McAlister, Holly Anne Rolfe, Ellen Southern, Cloe Turpin (voices), with Kareem Dayes / Stefan Knapik (cello), Jennie Howell (percussion) and Adel Sahnoun (flute).

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