



[Laurel MacDonald](#) is a woman of few words. Spoken words, that is. But when the words take the form of lyrics, and those lyrics are set to music—whether heard or imagined—hers is a voice that knows no bounds; a voice that soars into the farthest

reaches of the room, contained only by the limits of the physical space.

Imagine this: a small dish of water and a dropper full of ink. A grade-school experiment to understand the process of diffusion. With wonder and delight we watched how in a matter of a few seconds, a single drop of inky blue completely permeated every molecule of water. This is the image that comes to mind when I listen to Macdonald's music.



Photo by Valérian Mazataud

Now imagine this: a vast room, heavy with the weight of unspoken anticipations; a formal, institutional space, where silence is the rule, designed for quiet reflection. Then out of this silence, a single female voice. Sharp and clear, it hovers for a moment like an aural spirit, then begins its slow diffusion outward. And as it moves, it is met by first one voice, and then another, until twenty-nine voices, both female and male, have joined in the chorus. But this accounting comes afterward, for it is on the level of affect—that which is felt on the skin, and in the organs, before the brain has had the opportunity to fully process what it is experiencing—that one first engages with a work like Qui.

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As originally conceived by experimental composer John Oswald, the sound installation *A Time to Hear for Here* (2007)—which includes *Qui*, and which was commissioned by the Royal Museum of Ontario for installation in the Thorsell Spirit House (or atrium) of the new crystal expansion—was inspired by a desire to, as Oswald said at the time, “paint this contemporary Sistine Chapel with a fresco of sound.” And it was to singer, composer and long-time associate Laurel MacDonald that Oswald turned to make this idea manifest, collaborating with her on the adaptation and arrangement of the original text, Josquin des Prez’s 15th-century choral piece *Qui habitat in adjutorio altissimi*, and working with her to record and mix the twenty-nine performers, each of whom sings in their mother-tongue.

But though the installation in its intended medium was fully realized and continues to be experienced by visitors to the museum, MacDonald felt compelled to take the project even further. “I was so in love with the music,” she explains, an artist for whom the heart seems one of the primary creative forces, “and this idea kept coming to me... that I would really love to make a video of the singers performing this piece.” So this is what she did.

The result is the video installation [XXIX](#), which with the blessing of John Oswald, had its Toronto premiere this past fall during *Nuit Blanche*. What is interesting here is the fact that MacDonald has produced a performance video that is performative in the most literal definition of the term, offering no thematic or aesthetic interpretation of the audio track. That audiences loved the work, however, anointing it with the Scotiabank People’s Choice Award, comes as little surprise, for though the visual component may seem redundant in conceptual terms, what it offers is a chance to observe the workings of the human body as it performs the decidedly supra-human task of producing insanelly beautiful music. And so we bear witness to the body as instrument, noting the vibrations of the vocal chords, the muscles of the jaw, and the movements of the tongue, and at the same time, the body as conduit, as time-machine, carrying the voices of a distant age into the present day.

[>>WATCH XXIX EXCERPT<<](#)

This transmission of ancient voices, which in some instances includes musical texts dating as far back as the 12th century, is something that has also come to characterize much of MacDonald’s work in the digital realm. And here, as with other projects, the locus seems more emotional than conceptual or philosophical, stemming as it does from a passion for the music and a desire to investigate its possible manifestations.

The ongoing multimedia project that is [Video Voce](#) speaks to these interests, focusing as it does on the interplay of traditional vocals and new technologies. As MacDonald explains, there were two major elements that instigated the development of this project in terms of its components: “There was the problem for me as a performer in how to create the sound that I am interested in onstage without having a band, because the logistics of performing with a group of musicians are such that it makes it difficult to perform regularly [...] and there was an interest in creating a more theatrical event, more multi-layered.”

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And so with *Video Voce*, which differs in form each time it is performed, MacDonald has endeavored to create an aural experience that one rarely encounters in the presence of a single performer, using recorded elements and the live recording and looping of her own voice to create what is really a cacophony—in the best sense of the word—of sound. Here, as in previous projects, the musical component of the work was developed in tandem with composer, sound designer and creative partner, Philip Strong. But though Strong is often present offstage, providing live accompaniment for the performance, there is little that is improvised. As MacDonald explains, even when things feel a bit loose from the audience’s perspective, the structures and motifs in the work are all carefully planned out in advance.

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What is not preordained, however, is the natural dynamism of MacDonald's performance, and it is this that provides the visual heart of the work. There is something mystical about the persona that she brings to the stage. Focused and intense, she stands perfectly still behind her bank of knobs and dials, though her hands—when not occupied by the task of attending to these aforementioned knobs and dials—move in frenzied circles, tracing rune-like shapes in the air as though transmitting messages by code. In the presence of such vocal control, MacDonald could never be mistaken for a woman possessed, but like the performers in *Qui*, of which she is also one, she seems a conduit, as though the music is somehow passing through her on its long and important journey from somewhere else.

As the title of the work suggests, what MacDonald seeks in the video component is a visual manifestation of what film theoreticians working in the realm of sound call the *mise-en-bande*—a less reductive term than *soundtrack*, which on a figurative level sees the manifold layers of sound compressed into one homogeneous track. In doing so, MacDonald proffers a break from the traditional hierarchy of image over sound, but here, though she moves into a more experimental mode than with *XXIX*, the visual text remains fairly traditional in its tropes, employing a series of graphic patterns and loops and squiggles to mimic the modulations of the voice. And so despite the fact that in performing at festivals like *Mutek* and *SOUNDplay* MacDonald has become part of the discourse surrounding electronic art and music, what seems to resonate most is about as far from the realm of new media and technology as one can imagine: the power and possibilities of the human voice.

[>>WATCH NENIA SIRENES EXCERPT<<](#)

A similar tension exists in the pieces MacDonald has created outside of her performative projects. In videos like *ad superni* and *nenia sirenes*, both from 2008, the visuals function as a sort of hypnotist's pendulum. They do not imagine or interpret the ideas or themes in the music, but simply busy the eye, and in doing so, work to free up the brain from having to process what it is seeing and to focus solely on the *mise-en-bande*. To listen to the music with the eyes closed is to experience the work in a similar manner, as the mind is set free to create its own visualizations of the audio text. To watch the videos in silence creates an experience altogether different, for the images in isolation, with their psychedelic patterns and digital tropes suggest an entirely different kind of audio accompaniment, and so the sudden introduction of the soundtrack creates a sense of surprise in the viewer, containing as it does these references to the music of a time long past.

Where MacDonald and her projects go from here has yet to be determined. For though she studied art and design in college, it is only in the last few years that she has begun to make these forays into the visual and digital realm. This year, she has embarked on a period of study and experimentation as a resident of the Canadian Film Centre's Media Lab in a program focusing on interactivity in media and art. How this notion of interactivity will find its manifestation in MacDonald's work remains to be seen, as she is not currently in development on any new projects, but it seems safe to say that it too will be used to expand the limits of the human voice in its analogue form, and to subvert the expectations inherent in new technologies through interpretations of the distant past.

[>>VIDEO INTERVIEW WITH VIDEO VOCE<<](#)

[>>VIDEO VOCE IN PODCAST - MUTEKLIVE058<<](#)

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