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**ENCLAVE REVIEW**

Janet Cardiff:  
The Forty Part Motet  
Visual Centre for Contemporary Art,  
Carlow  
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One thing leads to another. In a review for *Enclave 7*, I mentioned in passing that I had heard Thomas Tallis's forty-part motet, *Spem In Alium*, in a church in Paris some years ago. In fact, tears of bliss were running down my cheeks a little over half-way through this relatively short but wonderful piece of music. It is possible to listen to CD or other recordings of *Spem* and to enjoy and appreciate them. It is possible to enjoy, as I did before beginning this review, the sound of a recording floating in from another room. But the evidence suggests that *Spem in Alium*, from the first, was close to being an installation as well as a composition. It was with a very strong memory of a performance approaching the way in which the work was originally conceived that I set out for the Visual arts centre in Carlow, where Janet Cardiff's installation, *The Forty Part Motet (A reworking of "Spem in Alium" by Thomas Tallis 1573)*, is to be

found until January 2014.

We might like to imagine artists trawling for ideas in the depths of the psyche and then looking for buyers when they come back to dock, but it doesn't necessarily work like that. Very often, classical composers have worked to the instructions of patrons or employers, whether religious or secular. The need to work within certain restrictions and conditions may sometimes be frustrating; it may also be a stimulus to the imagination and ingenuity of the composer. And what do liberated artists do but imprison themselves in structures of their own devising so that the imagination has something to work against? In Thomas Tallis's case, in the second half of the sixteenth century, it seems that the stimulus to creation was a challenge from an English patron on hearing that an Italian composer, Striggio, had written a work for forty voices. Tallis couldn't simply break the forty voices into sections that would sing in unison; the task he set himself was to manage forty individual voices within the conventions of the time. (Free or atonal polyphony was not an option.) Tallis had therefore to find a way to allow those voices to maintain their identities and not to dissolve into a vocal blur.

If we are to believe Thomas Wateridge, a student of the day, *Spem in Alium* 'was songe in the longe gallery at Arundell house', an aristocratic residence in London. According to Philip Legge, a recent editor of the piece, the owner of the house also had a country residence, Nonsuch Palace: Nonsuch also possessed an octagonal banqueting hall with four first-floor balconies, which intriguingly suggests the architectural features that Tallis incorporated into his composition: it is conceivable he designed the work to be sung not only in the round, but perhaps with four of the eight choirs singing from the balconies.

The idea is both attractive and plausible. We don't need to insist on the balconies in order to appreciate the beauty of Tallis's formal solution. If the singers are grouped in eight sets of five (each encompassing voices from low to high) and then deployed around the performance space, the spectators can experience an extraordinary range of effects: a single voice, music being passed from group to group in rotation, music crossing from one side of the space to another, multiple balanced sets of voices sounding together from all sides... In a space like the *Église Saint-Louis-en-l'Île* where I first experienced *Spem in Alium*, the church setting, the appropriate scale of the building, the beauty of the music, the quality of the singing and the acoustic (all, from my point of view, the happy outcome of a glance at a poster a few hours earlier as I stepped off the bus from Charles de Gaulle Airport) combined to create what I can only call

musical ecstasy.

I had arrived in after most of the relatively modest audience and so, by chance, was seated in the very centre of the church. We had heard classic English choral music from the Oxford Voices and a range of Russian Orthodox works sung by the New St Petersburg Voices. One piece began with a mass of resonant Russian basses: it was as if the sound rose into audible existence from the depths of the earth, from somewhere below human hearing, from the home of unindividuated sound. The concert concluded with the two choirs coming together and taking up positions all around the church to perform *Spem in Alium*. The sense of perfection that was offered was not a denial of my position as an audience member on a particular wooden seat, but to the individual on that wooden seat the technical resources and resourcefulness of the composer, in the service of an aspirational music, offered a sense of what human imagination and existence at its finest can construct and be: the joyous experience may well have been intensified by a counterpointed awareness, conscious or unconscious, of the fragility and rarity of such perfection. For someone of a religious disposition, as Tallis was, music such as this is as far as human creation can go in reaching towards the transcendent.

The decision to go to see the installation at once raised the question of how the memory of Tallis in Paris could be conjugated with the Tallis in Carlow. Would Cardiff's treatment of Tallis in Carlow's version of the white cube – the stripped-down, undecorated space that seeks to induce an intense contemplation of the art-work – have the power to assert its own reality? If sports stadiums are today's cathedrals, art centres retain a suggestion of the cloister. The self-mutilation and shock tactics of some artists might seem to run counter to this idea, but there is a curious line that connects them to the torn and greenish flesh of Grünewald's dead Christ or (we may imagine) the lurking awareness of the virtual audience beyond the cell-wall in the drama of self-flagellation.

The main gallery in Carlow is perfect for Cardiff's purposes. Visitors encounter a white, high-walled space into which only diffused sunlight enters. Forty speakers - eight sets of five, each one on its own tall stand – are deployed in an oval formation that surrounds two plain-white, backless benches. When there are few visitors, the atmosphere is coolly contemplative. There was nobody in the gallery when I arrived. Having taken my bearings, I sat, with my eyes half-closed, and let the music happen around me. This resembled the Paris experience, but in a different key: the music was (more or less) the same but the light

and the whiteness, not to mention the fact that I knew that I was listening to recorded voices, induced a feeling of disembodiment. At this preliminary level, the experience of *Forty Part Motet* could be described as an abstraction or de-realisation of a piece of music written to be performed by forty voices emanating from living, breathing human beings.

This would not be very different from listening to *Spem in Alium* in the house of a rich modernist architect with an outstanding sound-system. There is more to Cardiff's work than this. Just as the music itself is on a loop, the work triggers a kind of mental looping – an unresolved to-and fro between embodiment and disembodiment – for listeners who stay with it and explore its possibilities. Let's imagine that you enter the room while the music is playing. Almost as in a church, you sit and listen, allowing the music to wash over you, noticing perhaps how the sound moves around the space. The music ends. After a significant pause, you hear various sounds: loud throat-clearings, bursts of laughter, humming, snatches of conversation; then the forty singers are called to order and the performance begins again. The effect is to remind you that this abstract musical design is woven from the voices of forty individuals, variously young, less young, older, gregarious, hesitant, confident, eager, blasé...

At this point, you may be approaching the installation with less reverence: you feel free to go to a speaker and listen more closely to check why someone is laughing, or hear a hesitation between the terms toilet and lavatory as boys joke, or hear someone older fantasise about dying on the glorious ultimate chord of the piece, or catch a boy asking for advice on how to avoid a recurrent mistake... You become an invisible eaves-dropper on the performers, an *auditeur* rather than a *voyeur*, except that the former word doesn't have the same associations. The thought that this reminder of the singers' individuality and concrete existence is also mediated in disembodied form through the speakers may vaguely trouble you. You have now been moving around the space, making your own decisions about which person/speaker to focus on. When the music resumes, you may feel inclined to continue your wandering.

In effect, Cardiff is not just presenting the music in a different context and with a reminder of the world surrounding the music, of the reality of the performers, of the curious moment of transition when forty individuals suddenly become servants of an artistic design or that other moment of transition when the music stops. Because of the one-to-one correspondence between singer and

speaker (the work, we are told, did not involve giving each of the forty singers a separate microphone during a collective performance: it was recorded voice by voice and then constructed), Cardiff's work offers intimate experience of the grain of particular voices, the tiny flaws that were less audible first time round: a wobble on entry here, a touch of shrillness there. This makes the experience of listening, even from a central position, subtly different: in a church or hall, a sung note may register amid the after-life or echoing of earlier notes. Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet* lends itself to use as an individually regulatable tool for understanding how the music works; in effect, it proposes a kind of spatial or spatialised score.

Thinking perhaps of those Russian basses in the Église Saint-Louis-en-l'Île, I stood by a speaker from which a fine bass voice had sounded earlier. Now I was able to hear in close-up the richness of the voice, the confident striking of the note on entry and the firmness and clarity with which the words were intoned. I could experience the whole work from the point of view of this one singer: I could follow the role of 'my' voice, see how it fitted into the whole, how it sometimes dropped out for entire passages and then (I found myself becoming almost nervous...) had to surge precisely into action. This kind of listening, briefer samplings of individual voices, walks around the work, walks in and out of the work, a return to a seat in the centre for another immersion in the whole - these are all at the visitor's disposition.

While the level of choice involved suggests that the installation must have a distancing effect, this does not appear to be inevitable. The piece has been travelling the world for over a decade and has been set up both in church and in art contexts. There are many reports of intense audience responses, of people needing to sit down, of weeping, of near-religious experience. It is likely that most of those who visit the installation will not have heard *Spem in Alium* before or will not have grown up in familiarity with the English choral tradition or its affiliates. Regardless, then, of the estranging possibilities inherent in Cardiff's work, a section of the audience will give themselves to the music or find themselves overwhelmed by it in a way that is clearly more transcendental than analytical. This points to a very significant aspect of the installation.

Cardiff's sub-title describes it as a treatment of Tallis's *Spem in Alium*. In one sense, and almost literally, this is a very conservative work: Tallis's music is not chopped up, rewritten, transposed, mocked, parodied or pulverised: with whatever qualifications, with whatever reframing, it retains its integrity. The relative popularity of *The Forty Part*

*Motet*, we may surmise, lies in the way it offers an unthreatening, non-institutional avenue towards the transcendental. Or we might say that, in a secular art institution, the nature of this work and the conditions of the moment may induce an experience that is felt as unselfconsciously transcendental or sublime. I would be very surprised to learn that all this was foreseen by Janet Cardiff as she planned the piece. The trajectory of her work before and since - marked more by subtle unease than by a desire to comfort - clearly indicates otherwise. (In Irish literary terms, an imaginary equivalent might be Trevor Joyce's *The Poems of Sweeny Peregrine* somehow becoming the *Anam Chara* of its generation but with no effect on the writer's subsequent explorations.)

Cardiff produces installations that combine, for example, quiet tellings of sometimes disturbing dreams, music and recorded sounds. In *A Murder of Crows*, one of a number created in collaboration with her husband, George Bures Miller, the disjunction between the banal objects in the room and the experience of sitting through the work strikes a more sinister note. Thus, one reviewer, Marion Lignana Rosenberg, writes that some reporters, clearly suffering from 'cognitive queasiness', quickly took refuge outside the ring of loudspeakers. What had disturbed them?

Almost immediately, a woman's voice seems to emerge from the gramophone horn, recounting three dreams (or three episodes of one dream). The royal road to her unconscious takes listeners to places where cats and babies are ground into a bloody pulp, an enslaved young man is threatened with dismemberment, and the dreamer stumbles upon a severed leg. [...]

Hundreds of layers of ever-shifting channels make up *Murder's* sound-world. Operatic song morphs into noise and then into bird shrieks; a loud, rushing squall (a tornado? a tsunami?) and other nameless dins crash against listeners. The feeling of vulnerability brought on by the immersive experience, the blurring of inner and outer limits, explains some of this spellbinding work's immense power.

While *The Forty Part Motet* and *The Murder of Crows* might seem as different as a Victorian melodrama and a Japanese Noh play, they both offer the possibility of an immersive experience, greater or lesser interpretative freedom for the audience/participants, and an experience that

engages with a defined space while at the same time blurring, playing with or otherwise questioning definitions and boundaries. In this sense, Janet Cardiff's work is part of a significant tendency in contemporary art. What really matters, however, is not up-to-dateness or adaptability to current artistic or academic fashions, but the artist's engagement with the materials, the power of the poetic imagination at work, the construction of something that survives, that defies analysis and renews wonder.

Those who drift in and out of the gallery are unlikely to return. Some are gone before the singing stops and do not hear the other three minutes on the tape. Those who remain will make their own discoveries or come to their own conclusions regarding the effect of repetition. Would it be possible, for example, to sit in the gallery on a quiet day and, in the space of an hour, have three eleven-minute transcendental experiences separated by pauses and three-minute sessions of chat and noise? Surely, an awareness that this is a product of the age of mechanical reproduction would begin to worm its way into even the most innocently ecstatic listener's consciousness? Would the memory of the first listening be sullied in some way by such rapid repetition?

The concert that I attended in Paris was repeated (though with a change of conductor for *Spem*) the following evening. Fearing disappointment second time round, I hesitated before deciding that the twenty-four hour gap would allow me to recharge and that the music was in any case strong enough to withstand repetition. Arriving early, I had time to read about and identify the English works in the first half and to increase my appreciation of the Russian style. Obviously, there was less sheer surprise at the power of *Spem in Alium* but, performed in ideal conditions, it gripped and moved again. When living, breathing human beings are performing a work that we love, with the possibility of failure, inertia or surpassing achievement remaining open from moment to moment, repetition does not feel like repetition. In the greatest works (even in recordings), repetition is like deepening love, like a face or voice more loved than ever. Repetition is inherent in Janet Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet* (down to the repeated absence of a hyphen between Forty and Part). It makes itself repeatedly available as a tool for exploring *Spem in Alium*; and because it is impersonal, because it is on a perpetual loop, it is (at least for those who are not undergoing an entrancing first encounter with *Spem* by means of it) a tool that can be dropped in mid-cycle simply by wandering away. And the first-time entranced,

too, have to walk away at some point: lingering may easily provoke unwanted dis-entrancement. To walk away in mid-course from the fragility and glory of a live performance of *Spem in Alium* is unimaginable to anyone who has opened up to its power.

*Forty Part Motet*, then, along with its own fascinations, can enrich but not displace the full experience of *Spem in Alium*. I may well revisit *Forty Part Motet* in Carlow before it closes. I am curious as to how that might feel but, though grateful for what the work has revealed to me, I will not be too disappointed if I don't make it a second time. If I heard that I had missed a performance of *Spem in Alium* in a church or hall near where I live, the feeling would be deeper than disappointment. The difference must matter, if art matters.

**Barra Ó Seaghdha has contributed essays, interviews and reviews in the fields of poetry, cultural history, politics and music to a wide variety of publications, from *Graph* and *Reinventing Ireland* (Pluto Press) to the *Dublin Review of Books* (drb.ie). Having worked in the EFL sector for many years, he is currently researching Irish music history at DCU. *The Forty Part Motet* is installed at Visual, 5 October 2013 – 5 January 2014.**