
Senior Projects Spring 2024


Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2024

Olga / An Ode to our Mutual Cord

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Recommended Citation

Pratt, Talullah Calderwood, "Olga / An Ode to our Mutual Cord" (2024). *Senior Projects Spring 2024*. 238.
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Olga / An Ode to our Mutual Cord

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
Of Bard College

by
Talullah Pratt

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2024

My senior project consists of two parts, an album and a live performance in Bard Hall. The first part, *Olga*, is an album of studio recordings featuring primarily voice, electronics, violin, and metal sound sculptures. Each piece is a composition crafted from fragments of solo improvisation. My interests included both the use of lyricism as well as more abstract vocalizations, including syllabic stringing devoid of linguistic emphasis and prolonged drones. Themes that emerged included the constraints and limitations of more feminine vocal archetypes and aesthetics in contemporary music, the result being a kind of tension between such “ethereal” paradigms and more unfamiliar sonic elements which manifested in contrast.

As I continued with the project, I felt increasingly drawn to the utilization of physical objects and electronics to expand my understanding of my voice, particularly through metal sculptures serving as extensions of it. In this way, constructing new instruments out of metal allowed for the creation of new manifestations of the voice, resonating beyond my physical form. In the performance, *An Ode to our Mutual Cord*, two metal stringed instruments are played along with an ensemble consisting of bowed bass, violin, and four vocalists. One of these instruments is made of a single, tunable bass string attached to a large, thin aluminum sheet. Bowed, this string produces resonant bass tones generated by metal vibrations, with pitch variations achieved by touching different points along the string. As I taught myself how to play it, often doing so by tuning my voice to the pitch being played, I also came to realize that its shape visually resembled a human vocal cord. The other instrument is a smaller cylindrical piece of hollow metal with three tuneable bass strings attached that can also be bowed or plucked.

The performance begins with an improvisation led by the larger metal instrument, accompanied by the rest of the ensemble and continues into three compositions performed by the ensemble. In the latter half, I present a processed version of the piece *Olga* using Max MSP,

where vocalizations undergo chopping, looping and stretching. Finally, I use multiple ring modulators programmed within Max MSP for live vocal processing that generate both the sum and difference in frequency between my voice and various different oscillators. The result is the ability to transition live between different vocal textures, creating a choir of synthesized voices with which I can sing.

This project has provided me with the opportunity to expand my musical practice by exploring the intricacies of vocal resonance beyond the constraints of the physical body as my primary medium. Additionally, I've had the privilege of collaborating with an exceptional group of musicians and artists with whom I now share a mutual cord.

Special thanks to my wonderful teachers and collaborators:

Matt Sargent

Sarah Hennies

Julianne Swartz

Mina DeVore

Athena Allen

Ursula Wolfe

Zizi Zhong

Ivy Knight