

Jonathan Harvey

Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco

Electronic music commissioned in 1980 by the Centre Pompidou, Paris. Composed and recorded by Jonathan Harvey in an 8-track spatialized format at the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique / Musique (IRCAM) with technical assistance of Stanley Haynes. Technologies used included the MusicV software (IRCAM, originally developed by Max Matthews) and CHANT voice synthesis software (developed by Gerald Bennett and Xavier Rodet at IRCAM)

Length: 9'08" - Distributed by Faber Music Ltd., London

Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco

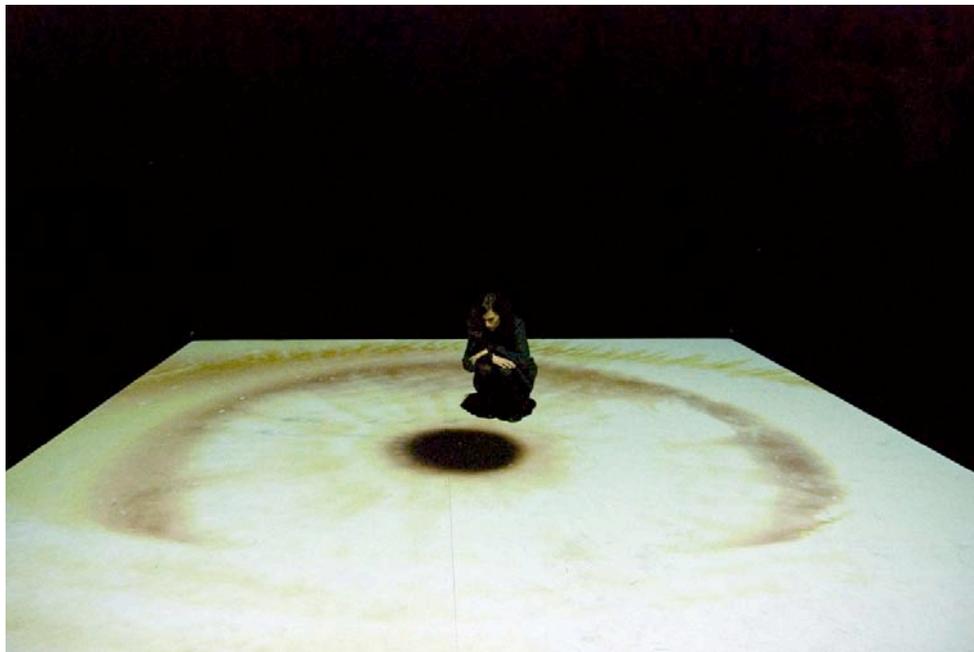
Video installation by Visual Kitchen (Sam Vanoverschelde & Jurgen Van Gemert), 2008

Concept: Lieven Bertels

World première of the installation: Gaida Festival, Vilnius (Lithuania), 25.X.2008

Commissioned by Gaida Festival in the framework of the ISCM World Music Days '08

Nearly thirty years after its realisation, the electronic tape piece *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco* remains one of the most fascinating adventures in electroacoustics and one of Jonathan Harvey's best pieces. On invitation of the Gaida Festival (Vilnius), artistic curator Lieven Bertels and the video collective Visual Kitchen (Brussels) devised a video installation to complement this piece and to invite listeners to engage with the 'surround sound' nature of the piece more actively. The audience is invited to become part of a sequence of abstract video tableaux projected on a square surface on the floor.



Jonathan Harvey about his original electronic music composition:

From 1976 to 1980 my son Dominic was a chorister at Winchester Cathedral. During that period, and ever since, I have written a number of works associated with that wonderful building and choir. Listening to the choir rehearse, as I often did, with the bells simultaneously ringing above, was one of the mingled impressions which started me on this work: it is entirely based on the boy's voice and that of the largest bell.

On this huge black bell is inscribed in beautiful lettering the following text: HORAS AVOLANTES NUMERO, MORTUOS PLANGO, VIVOS AD PRECES VOCO (I count the feeling hours, I lament the dead, I call the living to prayer). The bell counts time (each section has a differently pitched bell stroke at its beginning): it is itself a 'dead' sound for all its richness of sonority: the boy represents the living element. The bell surrounds the audience; they are, as it were, inside it: the boy 'flies' around like a free spirit.

In 1980 the sounds were recorded and taken to IRCAM, the sound-research institute in Paris that commissioned the work. There they were manipulated by computer and cross-bred with synthetic simulations of the same sounds. These latter being purely digital creations, could be internally transformed to an amazing degree, one could for instance move seamlessly from a vowel sung by the boy to the complex bell spectrum consisting of 33 partials. The entire pitch structure is based on these partials with their curious, haunting intervals: the harmonies are selected from them, and one transposed selection glissandos to another.

In entering the rather intimidating world of the machine I was determined not to produce a dehumanised work if I could help it, and so kept fairly close to the world of the original sounds. The territory that the new computer technology opens up is unprecedentedly vast: one is humbly aware that it will only be conquered by penetration of the human spirit, however beguiling the exhibits of technical wizardry; and that penetration will neither be rapid or easy.

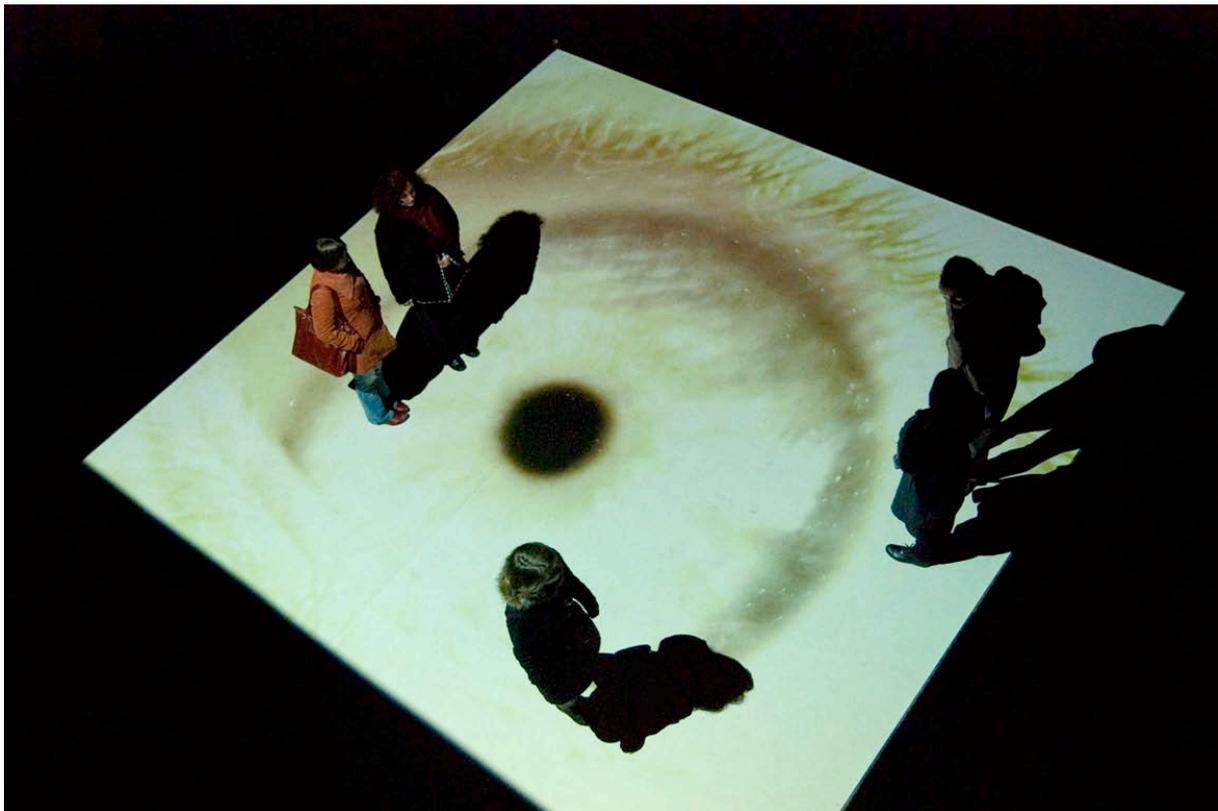


Sam Vanoverschelde (Visual Kitchen) about the visuals:

Upon listening to Mortuos Plango we realised that the piece wouldn't need a video with a strong narrative, but would benefit from an abstract visual complement that could subtly invite the listener to take centre stage and be immersed in the complex sound field the composer has conceived here.

Central elements in Jonathan Harvey's piece clearly are identity, family relations and our place in the universe. This inspired me to develop a number of video tableaux all derived from very 'personal' source material: images of the iris, hair and skin texture of my own daughter.

The intimate atmosphere of Vilnius' empty Saint Catherine's church at dusk proved ideal for our installation. A very diverse audience showed up and was curious enough to step onto (and in to) the video image to become part of the installation. The piece is presented as a 9-minute loop, but many people choose to stay two, three or more replays of it, only to discover that in fact each rendering of the video images is slightly different (the video image is created live and despite it being scripted alongside Harvey's original music, the image is never exactly the same.)







Technical notes

Required: 1 video projector, xvga or DVI input, minimum ca. 5000 ansi lumen
8 identical active full-range professional PA loudspeakers
Square projection surface attached to floor, footstep-proof
2 building days, installation ready on afternoon of 2nd day
4 hours for strike and clearing the space

The *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco* video installation provides an audiovisual environment for the surround version of Jonathan Harvey's quintessential electronic score, with an octagonal 'sound cube' listening zone, visually marked by a square image devised by Visual Kitchen, which is projected on the floor from a video projector pointing downwards. The environment invites people to sit or stand on the image. The installation can be hosted in any large, quiet space with very low natural light levels, but is ideally set up in a dark church or other place of worship. If the intended space is not dark enough it would be advisable to minimise natural light by use of curtains or blinds, or by shading the windows with neutral grey light filters (as used in theatre lighting, for example Lee Neutral Density correction filter 299). The Visual Kitchen team should be consulted about exact permissible light level. The installation consists of 8 synchronised audio channels + 1 video channel, running from a computer system (provided by Visual Kitchen) for which a clean and safe technical area needs to be provided, easily accessible for installation and properly safeguarded against theft or interference from third parties.

Video

For the video image a projector needs to be set up by the presenter to project downwards and deliver a standard 4:3 rectangular image on the floor of at least 6,66 m x 5 m (preferably 10,66 m x 8 m or more). If the space used is a church this could typically be from the organ loft. The projector should deliver a minimum of around 5000 ansi lumen (depending on image size and relative darkness of the space). The projecting surface should be square, with the shortest side of the 4:3 projector image as size. (the Visual Kitchen installation will only use a square portion of the (normally rectangular 4:3) video image). The colour of the projection surface should be light (crème, white, silver, light grey...) and can either be the natural flooring or a purpose-cut square, matt screen (dance floor, canvas, ...) and should be securely attached to the floor and withstand footsteps. It should not contain any visible lines or other marks. The presenter should provide the necessary cabling (XVGA/DVI video) from the technical area to the projector. Projector should be able to run a minimum of 1024x768 at 25fps smoothly. Visual Kitchen has a test-video available for download that should run smoothly, without scan-lines. (i.e. horizontal lines cutting the image) available at:
http://www.visualkitchen.org/mntvk/mortuos/MPVV_30sec_testvid.mov

Audio

The presenter shall provide a multichannel sound system (PA) of 8 identical high-quality active loudspeakers (or passive speakers with suitable 8-channel amplification). These speakers should be set up in a cube arrangement, 4 speakers on the floor, pointing inwards to the middle of the square marked by the video projection, and four speakers flying at a minimum height of 2m50, also pointing inwards to the centre of the square projected on the floor. (ideally the latter speakers are suspended from cables, but if that is impossible a ground support rig might be acceptable) Recommended are full-range speakers of recent design such as d+b or meyersound. If 'satellite' speakers are used at least one subwoofer channel should be provided, together with the suitable bass management tools to drive the subwoofer from the 8 input channels. The sound system should have balanced line-level inputs. The sound level of the 8 channels should ideally be easily adjustable. (Although this can also be done within the computer system provided by Visual Kitchen if necessary.) The presenter shall provide 8 audio lines from the technical area to the speaker system equipped with 8 male balanced 1/4" audio jacks (preferably not xlr's with adaptor pieces because of their width and bulk, sound is routed through a Motu Ultralite which only accepts slim version TRS plugs).

