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Meet the Artist: Ellen Southern



Bristol-based artist Ellen Southern takes experimental music to extraordinary new heights. Choral singer come performance artist, her work draws on the history of singing to create a fresh style rooted in vocal traditions. Having relocated to Amsterdam then Poland in the 1990s, disillusioned by an increasingly corporate, London-centric art world, she collectively set up an arts workshop and events

venue, and has been devoted to multimedia practice ever since. Her current polyphonic (many-voiced) work seeks to instil the multi-dimensionality of fine art into contemporary sound performances.

Like with any visual medium, Southern uses sound as an expressive vehicle. Her work centres primarily on voice and diverts from common conceptions of classical music, influenced instead by Medieval, Early Renaissance, and Tudor scores. Removed from the grandiosity of classical traditions, she appreciates these periods for their more plaintive qualities and the inherent intimacy they impart upon audiences. Approaching music later in life, out of fascination rather than an aim to specialise, she considers herself free to dare with the potential for unexpected melody. Her layers of voice upon voice sung with varied intensities takes what may seem incongruent by established structures and shows they can in fact be rather harmonious.

Since returning to Bristol, Southern has co-developed the “experimental, dark-ambient duo” Dead Space Chamber Music, with guitarist Tom Bush. By merging conventionally disparate genres the pair have found crossover that overcomes stylistic and cultural barriers. At the same time, Southern continues her exploration of sonic intimacy with ensembles of willing friends, once again avoiding strict stylisation to cherish the organic process of singing. At their latest Centrespace show, her current quadruplet explored on site acoustics by

creating a vocal procession down the alleyway leading to the gallery that lent an edge of ethereal mystery.



In movement the most integral quality of Southern's work is made present: immersion. Driven by multi-dimensionality, she shows herself to be hugely knowledgeable of and innovative in harnessing the properties of sound for dramatic effect. Exploiting spatial dynamics is a deep-rooted idea, inspired by 'cori-spezzati' or 'polychoral' methods of composers such as Monteverdi (d.1643) and the Gabrieli's (16th Century), who varied their arrangement of voices about different spaces to work with subtleties of timbre and echo. Influential as these composers have been on Southern's work, she stresses her approach explores a microtonal sound-world more akin to Gesualdo (d.1613), and the small-scale intimacy of William Byrd house-singing (d. 1623). As such, the *act* of singing combines with physical orientation to make her performances experiential and truly immersive for her audiences.

Southern's emphasis on reading a space is

reiterated by her solo project, *Site Singing*, in which she travels to English Heritage sites to interact with the acoustics of locations through sound. As her environs change – from an abandoned Victorian Bridge, to a medieval barn, to ancient Long Barrow ruins – she adopts new sounds to suit, completely discarding the conventionally ‘polite’ female voice. The “sound-sketches” she creates astonishingly use just her own voice and echo to create polyphonic forms and textures. It is a deeply sensory experience, motivated by a curiosity of the body’s capability, with mesmerising results. What recordings she *does* make are published to her [online blog](#), inviting the listener into another form of immersion in which vocal works made in isolation can “be whispered via headphones directly into individual ears”.

Whilst also creating visual accompaniments to her performances, Southern is finding the current art world more accommodating than during her student days. “Being an artist in 2016,” she says, “is something to aspire to. We’re no longer seen as pitiful or looked at as though lazy.” The appreciation is certainly positive for boosting local economies yet it also presents new challenges for communities. In connecting too closely with the wealthy institutionalised art world, Southern fears gentrification will undercut upcoming artists and disable opportunities of the less privileged. Bristol’s forerunning culture falls marginally within what is healthy but, due to rising costs of living, the balance is tipping. As she rather poetically

warns, we – the artistic community – must be “careful not to drink from the poisoned chalice of our own success”.

Despite this, Southern is open-minded about taking part in larger, structured events, which have previously included Brighton Fringe Festival and Sanctum’s 24hr performances over 24 days in Bristol last year, where Dead Space Chamber Music was spotted for a show at Cube. Even so there’s no rush, no pressure on her work. She wants every performance to be atmospheric, carefully thought out for audience enjoyment. In our world of instant gratification and shortening attention span, Southern’s less-is-more philosophy is not only refreshing; it’s the dawning of redemption.

[Click here](#) for an exclusive video of Southern’s performance at Centrespace, courtesy of the artist.

Follow Ellen Southern and Dead Space Chamber Music on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) for updates on all their latest performances.

www.ellensouthern.co.uk

INTERVIEW AND WORDS BY LORNA KING, EDITOR





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