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Forty Harmonious Voices Drown Out Your Woes: Cardiff at MoMA

Jan. 10 (Bloomberg) -- Videos of self-flagellating performance artists and paintings of mangled bodies open the current installation of the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection of contemporary art. These works kindly remind us that the world is still full of death, destruction and general dissatisfaction.

So the sudden sound of 40 singing voices arrives as an unusually potent balm. They emanate from an installation by Berlin-based Canadian artist Janet Cardiff called "Forty-Part Motet: A Reworking of 'Spem in Alium' by Thomas Tallis" (2001), one of the highlights of the museum's collection.

It consists of 40 high-fidelity speakers on tall stands -- about average ear height -- arranged in a circle in a corner room. Depending on when you enter the installation, you will hear nothing, muffled coughs or the slow-building contrapuntal voices of what seem to be angels on earth.

Cardiff, 48, recorded each voice individually in the Salisbury Cathedral Choir as the group performed "Spem in Alium," a motet composed by Tallis in 1575. The title is part of a line in the work, "Spem in alium numquam habui praeter in te Deus Israel," which translates as: I have never put my hope in any other but in you God of Israel.

Punk Singer

Silent, each standing speaker looks like the machine version of a punk singer, skinny, black-clad and indifferent. Impatient visitors shrug and leave, feeling like victims of yet another conceptual art piece about the impersonality of institutions or some such.

Then a throat clears loudly from one speaker, announcing the start of the 14-minute piece. Cardiff also recorded the moments before the performance, as choir members cough, shuffle their feet and discuss the last take. Each speaker emits one voice. Press your ear close to one, and it reveals private conversations: "Sounded a lot better after that one," one man pronounces.

A high soprano cuts through the air, and the room's atmosphere immediately changes. The formal museum-going experience -- couples shuffling past great works, art students peering in to read wall labels -- dissolves as visitors cluster in the center of the room, letting sound wash over them. Waves of polyphonic chants in Latin, from eight choirs with five singers each, echo off the

museum's stone floors.

Transformation

I have rarely been so moved by a work of art in a museum or, for that matter, by a piece of music in a performance hall. The fusion of Elizabethan devotional music and contemporary installation art accounts in part for the appeal of ``Forty-Part Motet."

By including the initial banter and coughing fits of the choristers, Cardiff lets us in on the transformation that the singers make from ordinary, frail people into vessels of harmonious noise.

The work gently pummels you with sound into a general state of receptivity. In this condition, it's advisable to march directly up to the museum's top floor, filled with the Cezannes, Picassos and Mondrians that kick-started the modern and contemporary canon, which Cardiff joins.

``Forty-Part Motet," part of MoMA's ``Take Two. Worlds and Views: Contemporary Art from the Collection," is up through March 21 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd St., New York. For information, see <http://www.moma.org> .

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