

# A LIVING REQUIEM

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In her new installation, the sculptor Nour Mobarak transforms the hymns of the powerful into the complaints of the weak.

In 1598 the world's first opera, *Dafne*, was composed by Jacopo Peri and Ottavio Rinuccini, who based his libretto on an earlier one: "Combattimento di Apollo col serpente Pitone." The "Combattimento" had been performed nine years before as an *intermedio* during the marriage celebration of Ferdinando I de' Medici and Cristina di Lorena in Florence. *Intermedii*—lavish theatrical performances staged on extravagant sets—were a favorite entertainment of the aristocracy, particularly on special occasions. They involved song, speech, and music, but not all at the same time. With *Dafne*, Peri found a way to keep his performers singing throughout the performance, using a new style called *stile recitativo*, or recitative.

Peri's goal, in his words, was "to make a simple test of what the song of our time was capable of." The dynamics of recitative, however, are far from simple. They involve producing a calculated dissonance between the vocal melody and its musical accompaniment. Instead of following the composition's melody, the singer recites the libretto according to the rhythms and accents of spoken language. By playing with the conflict and consonance between the libretto and the score, Peri found, he said, "a new harmony" that might capture the full range of human emotion.

*Dafne* is both a novelty and a mimicry. It is based on a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, about the sun deity Apollo and the nymph Daphne. After defeating the dragon-snake Python, Apollo insults Cupid, the "little, naked, and blind" god of love, by telling him to leave bows and arrows to big gods like him. To prove his own superior strength, Cupid shoots Apollo with an arrow that causes him to love Daphne, and Daphne with an arrow that causes her to hate Apollo. Apollo chases Daphne; Daphne runs away. In Ovid's telling, she begs her father, a river god, for help. He turns her into a laurel tree, which Apollo then claims as his own. "Always on my golden brow," Rinuccini's Apollo says, "will your leaves and

branches make a garland”—a reference to the Greco-Roman custom of using laurel wreaths as a symbol of triumph.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* includes over two hundred and fifty myths of transformation. An outstanding number of them are stories about sexual violence. Daphne, in flight from Apollo, becomes a tree; the nymph Syrinx, on the run from the satyr Pan, is changed into a cluster of reeds, which Pan then uses to make his pipes. Another nymph, Arethusa, turns into a stream to escape the river god Alpheus, who, undeterred, forcibly joins his waters to hers. “The underside of culture,” as the late literary critic Fredric Jameson once put it, “is blood, torture, death, and terror.” Ovid's poem is an example of this tragic interdependence and a requiem for its victims.

Nour Mobarak's *Dafne Phono* is in the Ovidian tradition. A large-scale installation in the Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Studio at the Museum of Modern Art, this *Dafne* is spoken, sung, and chanted by recorded voices emerging from fifteen sculptures made of mycelium, or living fungal tissue. These elemental forms are hollow within, concealing the speakers through which the voices of the dramatis personae pass, their density, pitch, and tenor molded and changed as they vibrate against those mycelial forms. The sculptures, you might say, metabolize Rinuccini's libretto, which seems, via its connection to Ovid, to stand for the primary texts of Western civilization. The result is an opera, an elegy, an experiment, and a ceremonial recovery of the voice (*or phono*) as a material object.

Each of Mobarak's characters speaks in a different language. Apollo uses Italian, but the play's other figures variously intone Latin, Abkhaz, Chatino, Silbo Gomero, and !Xoon. Aside from Latin and Italian, these languages are known for having the largest number of phonemes of any languages on earth. According to the Endangered Languages Project, there are only about 2,600 speakers of !Xoon worldwide.

As one might imagine, the obsolescence of these languages has been accompanied by the global rise of English, which is, phonemically speaking, quite impoverished. Where English has forty-four phonemes, !Xoon, with its 164 consonants and forty-four vowels, has over 160 distinct sounds. By bringing these dominant and disappearing languages together in one space, Mobarak highlights the link between culture and colonization, and to the historical process by which one language can act as an invasive species, making it impossible for others to exist. When these languages sound together during performance, they exponentiate the power Peri attributed to his recitative: that of using dissonance, or musical disharmony, to capture an otherwise inaudible emotional timbre or tone.

Mobarak has long been invested in questions of transmission and erasure. The Lebanese American artist was born in Cairo. Her father, Jean Mobarak, [speaks four languages](#), and he suffers from a neurological disease that allows him to remember only thirty seconds of the present at a time. The sound piece *Father Fugue* (2019), released as a full-length album by the LA-based label Recital, includes conversations between Mobarak and her father in Italian, Arabic, French, and English, along with snippets of improvised song, rhymes, and other sonic vignettes. Other work, such as 2020's *Sphere Studies*, tests the limits of mycelium as a sculptural material that, like culture itself, transforms and sometimes destroys the environment in which it grows.

<https://www.nybooks.com/online/2024/10/25/a-living-requiem-dafne-nour-mobarak/>