

NOUR MOBARAK: DAFNE PHONO

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The Brooklyn Rail
December/January 2024-2025

In a semi-black box theater of the Kravis Studio at MoMA, one encounters a hefty string of mycelial structures dangling from the ceiling. Surrounding the central configuration are a few scattered mycelium blocks in abstract forms, with two intriguing exceptions—an angelic figure floating above, and a synthetic serpent lain on the floor. The serpent’s fluorescent green evokes the color of Eduardo Kac’s famous rabbit that became the icon of Bio Art, though Nour Mobarak’s creature glows its hollow life under its fake reptile skin. Despite its idiosyncratic artificiality, the synthetic green form seems to respond to its sinuous counterpart above.

The overall mysterious compositions appear as silent props on a stage—but only until one finds out that the mycelial sculptures emanate sounds, specifically human voices. The voices animate and anthropomorphize each cast, revealing them as marionettes in puppetry or actors in opera. Yet the acoustic extravaganza is a tangle of languages, perhaps illustrating the imperceptible *umwelt* of fungi. Mobarak’s stage extends the operatic ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the total work of art) to nonhuman sensoria. Her mycelial orchestra recalls John Cage’s foray into mycology and the chance music of nature.¹

Dafne Phono revives the lost music of the first opera staged by Jacopo Peri and Ottavio Rinuccini in 1598 based on Ovid’s myth of Apollo and Daphne. Mobarak translates the surviving original Italian libretto into some of the world’s most phonetically complex languages, including Chatino from modern-day Oaxaca, Abkhaz from Abkhazia, Taa (the click language spoken in Botswana and Namibia), and Silbo Gomero (the whistling language of the Canary Islands), and records the voices of native speakers of the languages. Apart from Apollo—the oppressive force—who keeps Italian, Mobarak assigns each character all the other languages, composing the choruses with extensive phonemes selected based on their musicality and sonic expression. She disrupts and decolonizes the dominant operatic language with a wide spectrum of vocal sounds from those endangered indigenous languages. Her composition rests on the decomposition of voices, synchronizing with the stage where the dense bodies of mycelial speakers metabolize the human voices and breathe out the cross-species sounds.

Each mycelial cast represents the characters in the story of unrequited love: the suspended twining form is the nymph Daphne morphing into a laurel tree to escape from Apollo; the solar sphere is the sun deity; the cherub is Cupid; the double cone is Venus; the snake is Python, killed by Apollo; the groups of cylinders are choruses; and the fans on the flanking walls are spectators of the opera, each identified as “divas” across reality and fiction, such as Miss Piggy and Hatshepsut—the famous female pharaoh who successfully reigned in the ancient Egyptian patriarchy—thus replacing the privileged elites of the early audience. The divine shapes of geometric molds are clad in mycelial costumes—even inlaid with glass beads as embroidery, enhancing the charge of anthropomorphism.

Such campy accessories vandalize the modernist ideal of abstraction and purity. Mobarak reverses the Greek

¹ Cage’s dream of capturing and presenting the delicate sounds of mushrooms in the theaters appears in his writing. See in John Cage, Kingston Trinder, and Alexander H. Smith, *John Cage: A Mycological Foray*, ed. Ananda Pellerin (Los Angeles, California: Atelier Éditions, 2020), 8.

myth's Apollonian spectacle and power dynamics by scaling up and spotlighting Dafne over Apollo while collapsing Ovid—the authoritative author—into near absence as a dark, vacuum-suctioning, oval hole in the wall. The clear-cut, tactile void contrasts with the complex anatomies of the other mycelial bodies, whose nonlinear layers of skin evoke the propagation and metamorphosis of invisible sounds, casting the microscopic abundance into being. As a (de)composer of the classics, Mobarak portrays a rhizomatic microcosm where the actor's bodies, sounds, and environments are all in flux, entangled, and bathed in interspecies opera.

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