

## HOOKED ON PHONETICS: A festival at the borderlands of music and language

Rob Arcand on "Chorus: A Sound Poetry Festival"



Chorus: A Sound Poetry Festival, November 11, 2022, Artists Space, New York. Joan La Barbara. Photo: Joshua Wildman, courtesy of Artists Space.

"WHAT CAN A BODY DO?" Gilles Deleuze names this as the central question of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, which places the body at the center of a philosophy of expression. The inquiry was motivated in part by Spinoza's commitment to radical contingency—Deleuze goes on to suggest that "We do not even know of what a body is capable"—but it's a question that feels broadly in tune with the artistic form known as sound poetry, which harnesses human vocality to newly expressive ends. Taken up throughout much of the twentieth century, with precedents dating as far back as humankind has been mouthing syllables, this loose category of cultural production was the focus of "Chorus: A Sound Poetry Festival," a recent two-day event at New York's Artists Space, where poets, musicians, and other acousticians gathered to celebrate the open-ended and indeterminate sonic possibilities of the body.

Organized by Sean McCann, the composer, curator, and sound engineer behind the Los Angeles-based record label Recital Program, the event stands on the shoulders of a rich lineage of international sound poetry festivals dating back more than fifty years. In April 1968, the Fylkingen Centre for Experimental Music and Art partnered with the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation's Literary Unit to host the first event in the series, which took place at Stockholm's Museum of Modern Art and featured poets from Sweden, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Throughout its history, the festival has relocated from Stockholm to London, Amsterdam, Toronto, and New York, where the sound artist Charlie Morrow co-organized and performed in the 12th Annual International Sound Poetry Festival in 1980. Morrow's involvement with the 2022 Artists Space event coincides with the release of a new box set from Recital documenting the 1980 edition of the festival, which helps situate both efforts within the tradition established by the International Sound Poetry Festival.

The event was guided as much by efforts to preserve sound poetry's history as to showcase current work. Both nights began with an unreleased composition by the late French poet and musician Henri Chopin, which McCann uncovered in the vast archive that Morrow maintains as part of his New Wilderness Foundation (which he co-founded alongside the poet Jerome Rothenberg) and its experimental record label offshoot, New Wilderness Audiographics. Beginning in the late 1950s, Chopin created otherworldly tape collages that recast the voice as something deeply mechanical, and his work helped bridge the gap between Dada and Futurism-inflected strains of sound poetry and the alphabet-exploding Lettrism movement with which he was tenuously associated.



Chorus: A Sound Poetry Festival, November 10, 2022, Artists Space, New York. Sean McCann.

Time-based art is inherently ephemeral, and whether because of sound poetry's sparse documentation—largely limited to decaying magnetic tape and ancient handwritten scores—or its eclipse by related but more prominent artistic movements like Surrealism and Fluxus, the form has always seemed to resist canonization. While Copin's towering influence lingered over much of the festival, many performances evinced a strained relationship to the musician and his history, challenging the stability of an already unfixed term with new ideas about what sound poetry is, or what it should be. Following the first night's Chopin recording, the poet Julie Patton opened with bells, a shaker, and a melody from a plastic children's toy before singing in an operatic style that relished in the timbral qualities of each word. The performance was one of many that situated the artist's voice within a broader instrumental practice: Sydney Spann and Kiera Mulhern both placed it amongst droning tones from percussive field recordings, while Mike Pollard and Eric Schmid cued harsh noise from a sampler with little audible connection to Chopin. With each set, the genre was stretched further to accommodate a sprawling assortment of practices with only a cursory regard for any historical throughline.



Chorus: A Sound Poetry Festival, November 10, 2022, Artists Space, New York. Julie Patton.

Working more directly in conversation with sound poetry and its traditions, vocalist Thomas Buckner revived Robert Ashley's "When Famous Last Words Fail You," which he originally debuted alongside Ashley at Carnegie Hall as part of an American Composers Orchestra performance in 1997. As with Ashley's dreamlike operas, the composition used the self-assured tone of traditional broadcast media to new ends, finding a wide-eyed charm in language delivered through Buckner's slickest radio announcer elocution. Loren Connors and Suzanne Langille played a piece for guitar and voice which spoke to the challenges of Connor's decades-long battle with Parkinson's disease, meditating on the delicate conditions that make a life in the arts possible. With their longstanding connection to New York, Connors and Langilles shed light on sound poetry's deep roots within the city's experimental music scene, even when it proliferated under other genre labels.



Chorus: A Sound Poetry Festival, November 11, 2022, Artists Space, New York. Suzanne Langille and Loren Connors.

Toward the end of the festival's second night, Joan La Barbara returned to her piece "Solitary Journeys of the Mind." Like much of her work since the 1970s, the composition pushed the human voice to its limits, using yelps, clicks, and whispers as independent phonemes in service of a complex and triumphant whole. La Barbara remains an immensely virtuosic improviser, and the guttural physicality of her set provided a striking counterbalance to the tightly-edited assemblage of Chopin.

Charlie Morrow closed out the festival with a suite of his earliest poems at the request of McCann. Warm and full of life, Morrow reflected fondly on his earliest days as a composer before singing open, ghost-like notes, whistling like a windstorm, and eventually enlisting the audience to participate in a sequence of bellowing honks inspired by multiple underwater species known as toadfish. The piece was initially part of a series of studies in nonhuman communication that Morrow took up in the late 1960s, which was explained at the festival with utmost simplicity. "One of those toadfish will start [with a honk] and then the others will imitate," he said, going on to describe how the fish compete with one another to lead the group.

Light and charming like much of Morrow's output, this brief moment of audience participation led into a rendition of one of the composer's numbers pieces before the night finished out with two dream chants. "Some people find that if you close your eyes, you will find yourself in a slightly lucid dream state and have some images," he said. "And so I'll take you with me." After thoroughly exploring what the body can do as an instrument, it only made sense to seek out-of-body transcendence in the end.





Chorus: A Sound Poetry Festival, November 11, 2022, Artists Space, New York. Charlie Morrow. Photo: Joshua Wildman, courtesy of Artists Space.