

Sound is  
a vehicle  
through  
which  
we can  
share the  
intangible.

# Prelude / Requiem

by  
Heather Nicol

May 13 - August 27, 2023  
Curated by Megan Kammerer

Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

It is ever-expanding, spreading like waves in all directions. In the choral tradition, the human voice harnesses sound to sing in community. The group becomes interconnected. One singer must listen to their notes and keep track of their timing while simultaneously attuning their actions to that of the entire ensemble. We are continually trying to connect in similar ways through spoken word, in every moment—at home, in the workplace, on streets in protest, across personal (often political) divides, mediated through digital screens. We regularly come to understand each other through sound. Communication breakdown is practically inevitable without aural foundations.

Toronto-based artist Heather Nicol's newest audio work *Prelude / Requiem* considers many of these themes. The twenty-one minute looping score positions itself at both extremes of the human life cycle. A prelude suggests an introduction, an opening, or a new beginning. A requiem is a chant for the dead. It signals a celebration or a solemn ending. This installation is built upon songs for lulling infants to sleep or for easing passage into a final resting place. It uses multichannel sound and light to invite introspection across oral cultures.

The work emerges from a twelve-year research practice in which Nicol captured audio recordings during encounters with family members, friends, fellow creatives, travellers, newcomers, and migrant youth. Some were professional musicians, but most were not. A fifteen-year-old Nigerian refugee shares melodies from home while displaced in Berlin. A new mother sings Bulgarian lullabies to her unborn child. An aging Holocaust survivor recalls Hebrew cradle songs with assistance from his wife.

A deeply resonant masculine voice softly thunders "Let my people go," evoking the spiritual song "Go Down Moses." The ballad's lyrics are drawn from biblical imagery, depicting

the scriptural liberation of enslaved Jewish people in ancient Egypt. It became a symbol of hope and freedom, gaining wide renown during the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The vocalist reiterates it here, recalling his childhood memories of hearing the ballad at home and at church—a signifier of release, perhaps from suffering, or rather a sentimental movement toward comfort.

From a technical standpoint, vocal sounds emanate from three coaxial speakers overhead. They are veiled in illuminated textiles that softly undulate in contrast to the industrial exhibition space. Four secondary ground amplifiers are positioned around the site, featuring percussive elements that travel along the floor.

Fragments of Manuel Cardoso's 1624 polyphonic *Requiem* cut through layers of sighs, whispers, and non-vocal instrumentation. Each recording signals the passage of time—a breath, a movement, or a procession. Their fragments are capsules of connection that preserve the sensitivity, vulnerability, and generosity of each encounter as they celebrate aural gatherings.

Nicol's installation navigates these complexities as each vocalist embodies the action of communing, caretaking, and storytelling. Nicol invites critical questions about cross-cultural encounters, particularly in our current age of neo-globalization. Many recordings were captured in private settings, yet they contemplate very public notions of nationhood, migration, boundaries, and language. Emerging from a time of widespread social dislocation, this exhibition highlights a universal desire for belonging and community, alongside the fragile beauty of our aural connections.

The immersive environment offers a sheltered space where we can practice slow listening as a radical act of care. Visitors are encouraged to engage with their surroundings in new

and unexpected ways. You may slow down and rest in the installation's soft environment. Some might walk among the loudspeakers and listen closely to individual voices, as well as the polyphonic effect of the combined vocalists. Others may recline in custom lounge structures that populate the exhibition floor, enticing them to pause and reflect for prolonged durations as light gently pulsates overhead.

Through an active practice of communal listening, we may experience the potency of voice. We can collectively navigate the sounds that console us and commemorate the aural stories that ease us through fundamental transitions—from wakefulness to sleep or from this plane to the next. We may ponder our instinctive need to be heard and question when we have failed to listen to others. We can recall the songs that have been passed down to us, and perhaps pass them along to others in attendance. By enacting these gestures, we may learn to connect better than we have. We can rediscover empathy, and find solace in the soothing power of our vocal instrument.

— Megan Kammerer

### **Biography:**

Heather Nicol (she/her) is a Toronto-based artist whose practice includes immersive sound installation, sculpture, performance, and participatory actions. Her site-specific interventions explore the architectural, sonic, historic, and operational conditions of her locations. Installations by Nicol have been experienced in largescale concourse atriums such as the National Arts Centre / Centre National des Arts (Ottawa, Canada), Toronto's Brookfield Place (Santiago Calatrava, Arts Brookfield Canada) and New York's Winter Garden (Cesar Pelli, Arts Brookfield USA). Others include a major theatre (Harbourfront Center, Canada), rail terminuses (Union Station, Canada), former transit stations (ZK/U, Berlin, and Eastern Terminal, USA), a decommissioned theme park (Ontario Place, IN/FUTURE, Art Spin, Canada), Chateau de Courannces (Milly, France), and a storage locker facility (Art Spin, Canada).

Throughout her interdisciplinary practice, she has worked with actors, musicians, choreographers, educators, and fabricators. As an independent curator, she has generated site-specific exhibitions in non-institutional settings, as well as projects for the John Paul Slusser Gallery, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, and Critical Distance Centre for Curators.

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