

## Yr Ogof: Site-Responsive Immersive Composition for Bryn Celli Ddu

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### Abstract

Yr Ogof is a site-responsive composition that was created during an artist residency at the Neolithic site Bryn Celli Ddu on Ynys Mon. It is an ethereal vocal piece that uses movement and spatial ambience to create an otherworldly, canonic and hypnotic choral soundscape that reflects on how voice can connect to the ancient landscape. The choral piece has no words and was influenced by the storytelling-like encounters with archaeologists and previous artist interpretations that in the passing-on of knowledge, these encounters shaped the direction of how as an artist I could respond to the site leading to the creation of three immersive iterations and listening experiences of Yr Ogof; binaural installation and performance at Heuldro Festival (Bryn Celli Ddu) and an ambisonic interaction for Everyday is Spatial.

Link to work: <https://soundcloud.com/teddyhunterartist/yrogof>



Figure 1: Bryn Celli Ddu, *photographed by Teddy Hunter*

## Introduction

Off the Northwest coast of Wales sits an island rich in prehistoric history with its unique 'Neolithic ceremonial landscape' (Reynolds, 2019). Ynys Mon, also known as the Isle of Anglesey, is home to Bryn Celli Ddu (Figure 1), a 5000-year-old burial mound that was built 'to protect and pay respect to the remains of the ancestors.' (Cadw, 2022). In June 2022, I was invited by the Welsh Government's historic environment service, Cadw, experimental arts organisation, tactileBOSCH, and TinShed Theatre, to take part in an artist residency to create site-responsive work that would be presented at the annual Heuldro Festival.

Leading up to and during the residency, conversations with archaeologists regarding excavations, discoveries, artist interpretations shaped the direction of my creative response where I learnt of the phrase *Yr Ogof* (The Cave in English) which is commonly seen on maps for unexcavated sites. Before its excavation Bryn Celli Ddu was cited as Yr Ogof. It was this phrase and these encounters that led me to the following questions that directed the way in which the piece was presented and performed at Bryn Celli Ddu.

- How does voice connect to ancient landscapes?
- How can immersive audio be used in offgrid locations with protected status?
- What is the effect of site-specific compositions on the audience/listener?

*Yr Ogof* was composed with the intention of wayfaring, where 'one follows a path that one has previously travelled in the company of others, or in their footsteps...' (Ingold, 2007), then sung as an offering to Bryn Celli Ddu in replace of the traditional ancient offering of ancestral bones.

## Context

Site-specific sound art are pieces that are made in response to a specific space or place and is to be experienced in that location (Hayes, 2017), whereas site-responsive works can be taken out of context of the environment and still make sense. Site-specific or site responsive music often mimics the shape of a particular landscape (Service, 2010) using it as a graphic score to create connections between it, the music and the listener. As a choral piece, the compositional structure of *Yr Ogof* is built on looped phrases and melody lines in canon that reflect the beauty, and immensity of the Welsh landscape of Eryri National Park seen clearly from the top of Bryn Celli Ddu. The ethereal quality of the piece was to evoke the otherworldliness of Bryn Celli Ddu in connection to Welsh folkloric tales. In context to Bryn Celli Ddu other interpretations of creating site-specific works have been to use neolithic patterns on ancient sites (Cadw, 2019).

The Human voice is often used in site-responsive and performance based practices such as vocal art because of how it intuitively reacts to our surroundings (van der Putten, 2018). Whatever one's singing ability, voice is a sound that 'everyone can identify with [...], even if it's singing a song you don't know, it can trigger some really powerful memories and associations.' (Philipsz, 2010). Voice is an important part of being Human, it is a way to connect to one another and other sounds within our soundscape. Voice as an anthropogenic sound (Krause, 2013) is a part of the ecological cycles (van der Putten, 2020) and an important part of our soundscape (Truax, 2012). It is important to mention here that the use of voice within *Yr Ogof* was also chosen as an instinctive response to Bryn Celli Ddu.

The focus of Heuldro Festival is for visitors to connect to Bryn Celli Ddu and understand the archeology through the eyes of an artist (Reynolds, 2017). It also provides an opportunity for the archaeologists to reflect on their findings from a new perspective. Previous artist responses include screenprints where storytelling of the site is through a visual medium. With sound, the music needs to create an image or find a way to reflect the archeology through connecting with the visual landscape. Merging modern technology (immersive audio) and old technology (prehistoric burial mound and landscape) allows us to tell an archaeological story in a new way.

## Methodology

During the residency I designed three iterations of *Yr Ogof* to understand how voice can be mixed for different immersive experiences and still create a connection to the landscape for the listener, what the limitations are for immersive audio in an off-grid context and what effect this has on the listener.

## Installation

The initial idea was to have an off-grid immersive audio installation but with the limitations of the protected site it was not possible to set up anything large scale and intrusive into the ground. Therefore it made sense for a binaural mix to be made with the use of wireless headphones (Figure 1.1).

For this installation I extended the piece by adding field recordings of Guillemots, Field Sparrows, Woodpeckers and Puffins I had taken from sites around Anglesey during the residency. I wanted the listener to connect to the local wildlife, shifting the focus for the listener to different parts of the soundscape (Westerkamp, 1989) by drawing their attention further than Bryn Celli Ddu.



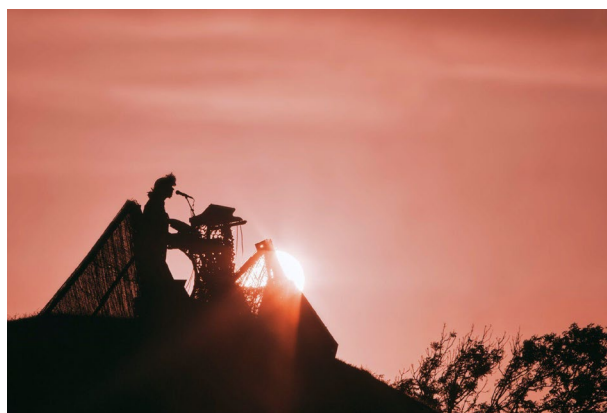
Figure 1.1: Installation with wireless headphones and binoculars on bird feeder, *photographed by Teddy Hunter*

Figure 1.2:  
Installation  
Headphones on bird  
houses, *photographed  
by Teddy Hunter*

Figure 1.3  
Headphones hanging  
from monument  
Tyffyn Bach close to  
Bryn Celli Ddu,  
*photographed by Teddy  
Hunter*

The wireless headphones were installed around the site, along with binoculars (Figure 1.2 and Figure 1.3), inviting the listener to engage with their surroundings through distance by reading the landscape. Wireless headphones also give them the opportunity to move freely around Bryn Celli Ddu, making their own discoveries and allowing *Yr Ogof* and the field recordings to amplify them.

## Mound Performance



(Figure 2: Performance on top of Bryn Celli Ddu for Heuldro Festival, *photographed by Cadw* )

With official permission from Cadw to perform on top of Bryn Celli Ddu (Figure 2), it was important to be able to officially give *Yr Ogof* as an offering. For the live performance I removed one of the main vocal lines of the piece so that I was able to lead the choral piece to allow myself to be part of my ritual. I decided to playback my performance in binaural to see if I could create a similar to the headphone experience. It was not possible to test any sound in the open air with the large PA until the day of the festival, and so there were a lot of unknowns as to what the effect on the audience would be. From my understanding the piece did not create the initial impact that it would have done in an enclosed venue space, however, it allowed for the sounds of the environments to interplay with the music. As sunset was approaching, the birds were getting ready for dusk, the cows from the fields next door were being brought in for the evening, and the audience talking and moving all became part of the piece.

### **Ambisonics**

*Yr Ogof* was mixed in ambisonics and listened back on The University of Gloucestershire's immersive sound system for the Everyday is Spatial conference 2022. As the piece was mixed on this system, the playback of the piece was represented in the way it was intended. The difference between this piece from the others is that it was not listened to at Bryn Celli Ddu. As I had experienced the other two experiences, for me it felt like there was a shift between how the piece was understood and how it connected with the landscape. I would argue that it probably was not understood in the same way it would have been if we were on location, however the audience still responded to the piece in a similar way.

### **Outcomes**

Headphones made immersive audio more accessible for the audience, Although the experience is very different to a full immersive sound experience, it was interesting to see how the audience would engage them, being a family festival some visitors shared headphones, whilst others sat with the piece for some time whilst they investigated the site through an unique and intimate experience.

The performance was not effective as an immersive experience but became a different kind of immersive experience where it brought together my voice and live sounds from the environment. The response from the audience was raw and kind, as a collective experience, some broke into tears and others shut their eyes and were moved by the whole experience of having their surrounding environment intertwine with the music.

The Ambisonic piece felt the most disconnected and lacked a connection to the ancient landscape however that did not seem to take away from the overall immersive experience. The understanding that it was a site-responsive piece enabled the audience to use their imagination of an ancient landscape. They were able to connect with the sound of the Human voice allowing them to be transported somewhere else, maybe a memory of a different environment other than Bryn Celli Ddu

### Conclusion

The residency enabled me to experiment with three different immersive experiences, allowing me the opportunity to find a way of merging new technology with old technology. With a number of my fellow artists on the residency reporting that they had an emotional response when listening to the piece during our time together at Bryn Celli Ddu, my conclusions are that voice and site-responsive works allows us as listeners to find a deeper connection with our landscape whether local or distant because of our deep connection with the Human voice. Our soundscapes and landscape are immersive experiences in themselves, with the addition of using technology to enhance our experience, site responsive works becomes a way for us to stay connected to our ancient landscapes.

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