

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

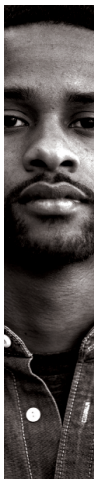
Eidolon: A Chamber Opera based on the poetry of Hilda Doolittle

Friday, March 1, 2024 | 1:30 pm
Edward M. Pickman Hall

Sid Richardson, composition

Curator Note

The presentation today at Longy is of the first two scenes of a work-in-progress. It was made possible by the generous support of the Longy School of Music of Bard College. I would like to give special thanks to President Karen Zorn, Dean Judith Bose, Professor Alexandra du Bois, Professor Amy Beth Kirsten, Professor Donald Berman, and my artist-in-residence colleagues Samantha Wolf and Bahar Royae for their support and assistance over the past two years here at Longy. This has been an incredible journey that would not have been possible without the out-of-the-box thinking that makes the Longy School of Music a unique and wonderful institution.



It's

LONGY SEASON
23-24

Personal

EIDOLON

(2021-)

Sid Richardson (b. 1987)

Scene i. The Amen-Temple

Scene ii. The Beach

Helen: Sonja Tengblad, soprano

Eidolon: Charlotte Ensley, mezzo-soprano

Achilles: Daniel Haakenson, actor

[countertenor]

Aleksis Martin, clarinet

Ross Jarrell, percussion

Yvonne Cox, harp

Eidolon, for soprano, mezzo-soprano, actor, mixed chamber ensemble, and fixed media, sets to music poetry from *Helen in Egypt* (1961) by Hilda Doolittle (aka H.D.), a semi-dramatic lyric narrative that revisits and rewrites the myth of Helen of Troy. I am drawn to H.D.'s late poem because of its relation to themes that interest me in my own work, namely multiple identity, mysticism, memory, dream states, and Greek drama. According to H.D. and Euripides in his play *Helen*, the Helen that went to Troy was an eidolon, a phantom or specter "conjured out of air" by the gods. H.D. takes this idea and runs with it in her own epic poem, which takes the form of a series of three-line choral stanzas interspersed with prose.

We acknowledge that the Longy School of Music of Bard College is situated on the traditional lands of the Massachusetts, Wampanoag, Narragansett, and Pawtucket nations, among others. We recognize the devastating impacts of colonization, including genocide and atrocities that forcibly displaced them from these lands. We are grateful for their centuries of stewardship and recognize the profound resilience of these nations. Longy is committed to fostering awareness and understanding of this history.



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My new work deemphasizes traditional narrative in favor of new dramaturgies rooted in the psyche of the heroine, Helen. The multiple representations of Helen are presented in various ways in the production: with an onstage soprano, a stage double (the eidolon) in the mezzo-soprano, and also by prerecorded, electronically-processed vocal samples that diffuse into the concert space to create sonic "doubles." The structure of *Eidolon* springs out of the form of H.D.'s poem. It begins with Helen's own "defense" or "pallinode"—a song to counter the negative portrayals of Helen in traditional texts. She is aware of how negatively she has been defined by the masculine world, which H.D. associates with death, war, chaos—Freud's death drive. The journey of Helen over the course of the work is one in which she ultimately transcends male definitions of womanhood by negating them through a commitment to life and love. In the end, she merges with the poem's mother Goddess, Thetis, in an ecstatic final aria.

The other characters consist of Helen's foil, the eidolon or "fake" Helen (of Troy), who represents woman as body/spectacle/desired object. Musically she is both pitted against the real Helen (of Egypt), and at times combined with her to reflect the dualities in H.D.'s complex poem. In the H.D., Achilles has been returned to Egypt over Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in the underworld. His memory of the Trojan War has been wiped, but vestiges of that trauma remain in his interactions with his new mate, Helen. He is portrayed by an actor because for the majority of the work he has forgotten how to sing, the masculine "death-cult" of the Greek army at Troy has separated him from his feminine side. As he gradually remembers his love for his mother, the sea goddess Thetis, he moves away from the masculine world of war, and, over the course of the work, is reborn as the "new Mortal." In the end, he rediscovers his singing voice. The ensemble of three instrumentalists, clarinet, harp, and percussion, function as a Greek chorus. They augment their instrumental parts with vocalizations that comment on the drama and they interact with the onstage Helen.

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