

SPUTTER BOX

A New York City-based clarinet, voice, and percussion trio specializing in contemporary music, improvisation, and interdisciplinary works



SPUTTER BOX

Kathryn Vetter, clarinets

Alina Tamborini, vocals

Peter White, percussion

Sput • ter: to make a series of soft explosive sounds, typically when being heated or as a system of a fault

Box •: a container, perhaps a rug

A Sputter Box performance is a captivating and unique experience from start to finish. While only a trio (clarinet, voice, percussion), this ensemble can move from “mindfully constructed textures that are light as a feather, and then turn on a dime to explode into something practically orchestral without missing a beat” (*Michael Genese*). As the pioneers for the unique instrumentation, Sputter Box is committed to building a diverse and exciting repertoire. They have commissioned over forty works with the majority of their commissioning budget going to composers from marginalized identities. In 2020, Sputter Box was a guest artist and lecturer at University of Massachusetts at Amherst and was the Featured Ensemble Fellow at the 2020 Cortona Sessions for New Music. Sputter Box is a 2021 Chamber Music America Ensemble Forward Grant Recipient and guest artists at the University of Florida in 2021-2022.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Sputter Box created their Sputter (SHRINKS THE) Box album. In March 2020, they called for 1-minute compositions for bass clarinet, soprano, and djembe. Composers were not only limited in their instrumentation but also by Sputter Box’s desire to not disturb their NYC apartment neighbors while recording their parts separately. The project expanded into Sputter Box’s debut album featuring 28 composers from around the world.

Collaboration and community are the core of Sputter Box’s work. Their repertoire is typically influenced by contemporary classical music practices but is often guided by the strengths and backgrounds of the collaborating music and art creators. In the past this has included a residency with composers (Alan Hankers, Joe Krycia, Chris Lucius Newman) and a choreographer (Neil Parsons) where they collectively created three works based on sounds, movements, and theatrics through a series of experimental workshops at Avaloch Farms Music Institute (2019). These works were presented in 2019 at Music for 8x11 Rug at Areté Gallery and Venue in Brooklyn. Sputter Box is currently working on a project with a composer (Mattia Maurée) and a visual artist/choreographer (Pampi) where they are playing a game of artistic telephone by passing around small pieces of visual art, movement, notation, and recordings. In 2022, Sputter Box will be a collaborating ensemble for the Kinds of Kings Bouman Fellowship for early-career composers. Sputter Box’s other upcoming projects include a collaboration with the Millennium Composers Initiative and the Bowery Trio and works-in-progress with composers John Ling, Noah Magnus, Allison McIntosh, Yoshiaki Onishi, DM R, Chris Ruenes, Daijana Wallace, Gregory Wanamaker, and Derek Weagle.



Recordings and Social Media

[Doublespeak](#) by Bethany Younge

[Sept Crimes de l'Amour](#) by Georges Aperghis

[I Will.](#) by Beau Kenyon

[INHALE // EXHALE](#) by Alan Hankers

[Verse for the End of the Century](#) by Victor Ekimovsky

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Press Overview

Classicyl Vine - Shelter-In-Sound: Sputter (SHRINKS THE) Box

December 3rd, 2020

<https://classicylvine.com/2020/12/03/sputter-shrinks-the-box-2/>

“Interdisciplinary art ensemble Sputter Box regularly defies expectation. The trio’s repertoire ranges from theatrical to quietly nuanced for an uncommon combination of instruments: solo voice, clarinet, and percussion.”

“Sputter Box’s members – Alina Tamborini (soprano), Kathryn Vetter (clarinet), and Peter White (percussion) – regularly commission new works that illuminate the multifaceted aesthetic possibilities of their combined sounds.” – Natasha Nelson

Boston Magazine - The Adventurous Musical World of Sputter Box

February 14, 2020

“‘Experimental’ can be overused—a rock guitarist might fancy themselves “experimental” because they just learned jazz chords—but local clarinet/percussion/vocal ensemble Sputter Box’s program for this show, including “sounds based on visual art that transports the audience to a museum, explorations and manipulations of language, and a passionate theatrical work in seven parts” seems to fit the bill much better. Sorry, jazz dude! Back to the lab!” – Matthew Dinero

Arts Boston - Sputter Box at The Lilypad

<https://calendar.artsboston.org/event/sputter-box-at-the-lilypad/>

“Sputter Box is an interdisciplinary performance ensemble consisting of clarinet, voice, and percussion. On Saturday, February 15 at 4:30 pm, they will present a concert at The Lilypad in Inman Square with works by Alan Hankers, Bethany Younge, Victor Ekimovsky, Jordan Nobles, and Georges Aperghis. These pieces include sounds inspired by the physical act of writing, music based on visual art that transports the audience to a museum, explorations and manipulations of language, and a passionate theatrical work in seven parts.” – Arts Boston

The Statesman - Music ensemble Sputter Box commissions new works for Oct. 10 concert and upcoming season

October 6th, 2019

<https://www.sbstatesman.com/2019/10/06/music-ensemble-sputter-box-commissions-new-works-for-oct-10-concert-and-upcoming-season/>

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the Classicyl Vine

(1) writing on music and the arts (2) a play on schwa

Shelter-In-Sound: Sputter (SHRINKS THE) Box

Sputter Box members Peter White, Kathryn Vetter, and Alina Tamborini discuss their debut album.



Sputter Box (from left to right): Percussionist Peter White, clarinetist Kathryn Vetter, and soprano Alina Tamborini.

nterdisciplinary art ensemble [Sputter Box](#) regularly defies expectation. The trio's repertoire ranges from theatrical to quietly nuanced for an uncommon combination of instruments: solo voice, clarinet, and percussion. **I** Sputter Box's members – Alina Tamborini (soprano), Kathryn Vetter (clarinet), and Peter White (percussion) – regularly commission new works that illuminate the multifaceted aesthetic possibilities of their combined sounds. This summer, the group released their debut album entitled [Sputter \(SHRINKS THE\) Box](#), featuring more than 25 brand new compositions.

As shelter-in-place orders were announced last spring – and access to rehearsal and performance spaces paused – Sputter Box continued to explore opportunities to create within newly imposed parameters. The ensemble sent out a call to composers for new, minute-long works, to be scored for voice, bass clarinet, and djembe, and recorded remotely. The resulting collection of stylish and thought-provoking miniatures, featured on the debut album, highlights Sputter Box's characteristic creativity and edgy interpretive style.

In May, I sat down with Tamborini, Vetter, and White – remotely, via Zoom – to discuss digital collaboration, the ongoing development of *Sputter (SHRINKS THE) Box*, and the unique process of creating chamber music together, while miles apart.

*Continue on below to read the conversation,
and then drop everything to take a listen.*

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NATASHA NELSON: Would you first talk a bit about your recording project *Sputter (SHRINKS THE) Box*?

KATHRYN VETTER: *Sputter (SHRINKS THE) Box* is a project that we started pretty much right when the shelter-in-place order came about. We sent out a call to composers to write us a one-minute composition that we could record separately

from our own homes and then post on our social media pages. I think 36 composers contacted us, initially, intending to write.

Have you worked previously with the composers who have written for this project?

PETER WHITE: It's a mix, right?

ALINA TAMBORINI: Yes.

PW: Mostly not, though.

KV: Yeah, mostly composers who haven't written for us before and whose music we haven't played before. I would say it's kind of a split between people we know and people we don't know.

Have you found the styles of the compositions submitted so far to be very different from one another?

AT: The styles for all but a handful are very much contemporary classical music. "New music-y." There are some that sound like straight-up art song, which is different from what we've done.

We have two submissions that are written in more popular styles. One of those pieces, called "Through Distance" by Daijana Wallace, is marked "Like an R&B Ballad" and that was really cool. It's about how distance affects people. I like the R&B Ballad because it's so different from what we normally do. Another one, called "Happy Tune" by Niles Loughlin, was pretty pop-y, so that was fun to do. It sounded like a really fun jingle.

KV: Most of the composers have written their own words, too. Some texts have been taken from poems, but I would say the majority have been written by the composers.

AT: There are a handful of pieces with lyrics that are very relevant to right now.

PW: A good number, yeah.

AT: Brendan Sweeney wrote a PSA (Public Service Announcement) about washing your hands following the CDC guidelines. He asked for visual components to accompany the vocal part in the video recording and I thought that was cool. Another composer wrote about a personal experience during COVID.

KV: Some are hard to tell, too: some could be about [the current moment], or about someone's feelings now, but in a more abstract way. And some are very obviously about now, such as the PSA about washing your hands. It's definitely a variety, I think.

In what languages have the texts been written?

AT: There was one in French. Other than that, they've all been in English.

Did the call for scores include any specific requests apart from the indicated instrumentation?

PW: Definitely. I specified the six kinds of sound possibilities of the djembe. There are more, but I had to limit it for this. It can be a good compositional exercise to limit your parameters a little bit, and it gives the composers a chance to write for a drum you don't hear very often in a classical percussion setting, you know? So I gave them the six sounds; they added finger rolls, for example, here and there.

Photo credit: JT Anderson.

Would you describe those six sound qualities?

PW: They're a mix between muted sounds, open sounds, and slaps. You have your muted bass, you have your open bass, slap bass—that sounds like bass guitar terminology, so I'll say bass slap. Then going up: you have an open high sound, and then a closed slap sound, and an open slap sound. That's the sound lineup.

What specifications were composers given for bass clarinet?

KV: I limited range a little bit so that they wouldn't write so high—most of my limitations were to avoid disturbing my neighbors too much. I encouraged them to keep [their writing] in the lower range, especially because bass clarinet is kind of the bass voice in the ensemble, especially when we just have djembe.

I specifically indicated what extended techniques they could use. I limited multiphonics and quarter tones. I think three composers have emailed me asking if they could use multiphonics, and some have used quarter tones. I always say yes because they promise to limit them. I just didn't want to get 36 pieces of just

multiphonics. There are just so many things that take extra time and we knew this was going to be a quick project.

Has the vocal writing in these compositions differed from that of other pieces you've sung, Alina?

AT: Compared to my opera life, absolutely! They fit the mold of what we've been doing nicely and they've been challenging but accessible. I limited range for the vocal part, too, just to avoid singing much higher than C above the staff on my little microphone. I bought a new mic, so that was nice.

I always indicate in our calls for scores that I can do *Sprechstimme* and *Sprechgesang*, and no one's ever done that for Sputter Box. But someone did some! I thought *Wow, that's cool.*—I've never actually had the opportunity to do that outside of *Pierrot Lunaire*.

There weren't too many extended techniques. They've all included traditional techniques, but written in a contemporary style. I will also say we asked composers to try to avoid extended periods of improvisation. We do improv together, and we've done a lot of improv together. Improvising over one another, though – where one person records a part, then the next person, then the next – could have been really challenging, especially if we had a bunch of improvisation pieces. We did get one piece with a graphic score. Graphic scores aren't necessarily intimidating, but —

KV: When you're recording separately—

AT: —I was really nervous. But we had a Zoom call and talked about it, and it turned out really cool!

Which piece was that?

AT: Joey Bohigian's! It turned out really well, and it was successful even in these alternate styles of recording.

KV: In general, we asked the composers to keep in mind that we are recording these separately, so maybe it's best to limit extreme hocketing. Rhythmic challenges that might not be a challenge in person suddenly become very difficult. And what I've found, actually, to be the most difficult is when I'm recording along with someone who has lots of rests. It's actually better when they write all three of us, all the time.

That's a perfect segue to the next question: What has it been like collaborating while you're not in the same room together? Unless you *are* in the same room together . . .

KV: We are not. [*laughs*] We are not violating any social distancing rules.

PW: [*laughs*] We've been relying on metronomes and making [*click tracks*], if necessary. Most of the pieces have been in time, for the most part. There have only been a few fermatas here and there that we've needed to troubleshoot.

KV: Or tempo changes.

PW: Or tempo changes! Yes, which I have to actually make a click for, obviously.

AT: Doing a *ritardando* as a group [*from different locations*] . . . it was challenging. We take those things so for granted.

PW: Oh, yeah. I could program that, but I think that's too much trouble. And it defeats the point, doesn't it?

Would you describe in some more detail the process of recording separately and then putting it all together?

KV: Peter or I usually record first because we often have the most rhythmic, and the fullest, parts. Usually Alina's not singing the whole time.

The first person records while listening to a metronome or a click track. Then, the second person records while listening to the first person's recording, so we have to

have a count-off. I think I recorded one with Peter’s part and a click track, too, because [of the number of] rests.



Photos by JT Anderson.

KV (*continued*): After the second person records over the first person, the separate files get sent to me. I put them together, send them to the third person, which is usually Alina. Then she records, sends me her file, I edit them all together, and make it look pretty.

AT: I think a lot of times it’s the more challenging ones that I’ve recorded at least 20 takes of, and then we put it together and it sounds so *cool!* Then I think, “This is great! This is a bop.”

There is a piece by Josh Trentadue, called “ALL I WONDER,” and I remember recording it separately, [thinking] “This is a challenge to put together,” and it sounds awesome—it’s so cool. I’m excited to play that one again. Josh is co-founder of MCI ([Millennium Composers Initiative](https://millenniumcomposersinitiative.org/)) and the organization’s composer

spokesperson spearheading a collaborative project for us, which we'll still do later once we can have audiences again, of course.

Has any common thread emerged, or has anything surprising come up, in the process of recording these pieces in this unique, tiered way?

PW: I'm actually surprised by just how much chamber music skills are still required despite [recording separately]. You think you'll just plug in with your track and do your thing and it'll be fine, but if someone's off a little bit and they're recording the first take, then everyone else adjusts, and then it kind of keeps unfolding that way.

AT: So accurate.

KV: That's like the one that I recorded with your part, Peter, and the click track. There was a part that you didn't line up with the click track, so I just cut it out and followed you, because it didn't matter if we were exactly with the click track. That's not the point of it.

PW: The click becomes irrelevant.

KV: Right. So it's mostly chamber music, but with a very set leader of the piece.



Sputter Box, pictured with an installation by Project Group GREEM, currently on view at the Charles B. Wang Center Theatre Gallery in Stony Brook, New York.

The installation is featured in an exhibition entitled “The Studio: Through a Surrealistic Lens,” curated by Jinyoung Jin.

AT: Most of the time I just record with Kathryn and Peter’s recordings in my ear. There are a few pieces where I’ll also have the video up, because I’m so used to being able to hear them and see them breathe and move in certain ways. And even though they may not necessarily be thinking about that when they record – you don’t need these grand gestures of pickups and cues – they naturally both do so, anyway, because it’s ingrained in them, having done so much chamber music. So subconsciously, they’re still giving [those cues], and for the ones that are more challenging, I’m able to then look [at the videos] and pick up on what they’re doing, which is really nice.

PW: And I’m able to read you when you don’t even move!

AT: I know!

KV: There was one piece that ended in a fermata. Alina, did you record that one first? She gives no visual cut-off [for the fermata] and then Peter recorded second. I put them together and thought, “Oh wow, that’s exactly together!”

AT: *[laughs]* This is fun. Also, Natasha, we haven’t—

KV: We haven’t debriefed.

AT: Yeah, we haven’t talked about this together yet.

KV: Yeah, so this is fun.

Oh, wow! I’m glad to hear that. Do you foresee performing these miniatures live eventually?

PW & AT: Yes.

Prior to this recording project, was “Sputter (SHIFTS THE) Box” – the concert program performed at Shapeshifter Lab in Brooklyn – the ensemble’s most recent performance with a live audience?

PW: It was, yeah.

Sputter Box performs Doublespeak by Bethany Younger



Performance of “Doublespeak” by Bethany Younge at Shapeshifter Lab in Brooklyn, New York (March 6, 2020).

Visually that venue was really awesome. Different, very cool.

KV: I liked that venue a lot. I think it was the coolest venue we had played in as Sputter Box.

PW: Yeah, that’s accurate.

AT: The lights were changing behind us with the music. That was pretty cool.

AT: More saloon-like.

KV: Yeah, it’s more casual, too. Musically, I think that performance was pretty on par with what we do. We had the Ekimovsky (*Verse for the End of the Century*), which is one of our standard pieces—it’s one of the pieces that was actually written for our [ensemble’s instrumentation]. We had Bethany Younge’s piece, *Doublespeak*, which has become one of our favorites. We ended with the Aperghis (*Sept crimes de l’Amour*), which was the first piece we ever played.

Was the concert different in any way from what you’d done before?

PW: It was just extreme.

KV: Peter’s mostly talking logistics.

PW: I am. It was unique in that way.

KV: It was really stressful to set up; we didn’t really have enough time to load in. But there was a moment once everyone was set—Peter, you looked up at us to see if we were ready, because you start Ekimovsky. All three of us took this collective breath before we started. And it was like, “Okay. Here we are, we’re going to be fine. This is what we do. This is what we’re good at –
– We’ve done the setup, we’ve done the stressful part. Now we get to play the

music.

. . . And that was really cool. That one moment really sticks with me.”

Sputter Box recently added a brand new bonus track, “**PmuD II**” by Yoshiaki Onishi, to the album in October. This summer, the trio was featured as the 2020 Ensemble Fellow for the [Cortona Sessions for New Music](#).

Recent recordings by the ensemble include Cassie Wieland’s “**Go together**” and a rendition of “[I will.](#)” by composer Beau Kenyon. Sputter Box’s recordings are available to download or stream on [Bandcamp](#).

Listen to Cassie Wieland’s “Go together,” here:

Sputter Box performs go together by Cassie Wieland



This is the first article in a Q&A series featuring Sputter Box’s debut album. Stay tuned for interviews with composers whose work is featured on the

album. The interviews in this series have been edited for length and clarity.
#ShelterInSound

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ARTS

Music ensemble Sputter Box commissions new works for Oct. 10 concert and upcoming season

NATASHA NELSON OCTOBER 6, 2019

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Sputter Box, an instrumental trio comprising voice, percussion, and clarinet formed by

classically trained musicians. Stony Brook University graduate students, Clarinetist Kathryn Vetter, Soprano Alina Tamborini and Percussionist Peter White created the group in Fall 2018.
PHOTO CREDIT: FELIX REYES

Performance art ensemble Sputter Box will stage its second full-length concert on Thursday, Oct. 10, at Areté Venue and Gallery in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The concert program, entitled “Music for 8×11 Rug,” will feature premieres by composers Alan Hankers, Joe Krycia and Christopher Lucius Newman. The performance kicks off an exciting season of artistic collaborations for the ensemble.

Sputter Box — a versatile instrumental trio comprising voice, percussion and clarinet—explores innovative approaches to musical performance, often inspired by conceptual modes of artistic interpretation. Formed in fall 2018 by classically trained musicians and Stony Brook University graduate students, Clarinetist Kathryn Vetter, Soprano Alina Tamborini and Percussionist Peter White, Sputter Box presents imaginative programming that encourages audience members to experience and think about music in creative ways. The trio first performed together in three presentations of Georges Aperghis’s 1979 multi-part work entitled “Sept crimes de l’amour”, or “Seven Crimes of Love”. The work served as a catalyst for Sputter Box’s continued collaboration.

White said, “[‘Sept crimes de l’amour’] is unique in that it’s half-theater, half-music—which is what Aperghis is known for. So that was already a big step for all of us.” Building upon the theatrical elements explored in that piece, Sputter Box’s repertory to date integrates improvisation, extended instrumental techniques, and novel approaches to text and singing.

Given the small volume of existing compositions written for Sputter Box’s instrumentation, Vetter said that through commissioning new works, the group is “exploring those different sounds and sound combinations” that are unique to the ensemble.

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Movement also features into Sputter Box’s interdisciplinary interpretive experimentation. As Vetter said, Sputter Box commits to “making sure that each element of [the ensemble’s performance art work] is necessary and has a purpose.” She clarifies, “We don’t just want to include movement in a piece where it doesn’t really fit, or it doesn’t add anything to the piece. [Music and movement] really are in dialogue with each other.”

Sputter Box explores open-instrumentation works as well. Last April, the ensemble’s first recital featured Ph.D. composition student Joseph Bohigian’s “+---+---+---+---+---+---+---+---+---+---+---+---+---+---+---” or “Plus-Minus” for short and Pauline Oliveros’s “The Witness”. Tamborini recalls Oliveros’s text-based work, “It’s a piece that tunes into listening and expectations and attention.”

The recital also included “Museum Pieces” by Jordan Nobles, which draws sonic inspiration from paintings of Mark Rothko and Pablo Picasso, sculptures of Alberto Giacometti, and other visual works.

This past summer Sputter Box spent two weeks in residency at Avaloch Farm Music Institute, working alongside choreographer Neil Parsons and the composers whose works will premiere this Thursday.

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Ph.D. student Hankers, whose composition “INHALE//EXHALE” will be performed Oct. 10, said, “Lately I’ve been really interested in pieces of music that utilize unorthodox playing styles, or maybe [challenging] the conventions of what a performer does with their instrument. For example, this piece is for soprano voice, bass clarinet and percussion, but in a lot of ways the vocalist and the clarinetist are taking on the roles of percussionists as well by playing found objects [such as paper, chains, and keys].”

Hankers considers Areté Venue and Gallery’s intimate space an ideal aural setting for the composition, which sets up an “urban landscape with singing as its centerpiece.”

Hankers adds that “INHALE//EXHALE” “challenges what it even means to write and perform a piece of music kind of challenging the frame that we usually put a piece of music in. When you hear a violin, a violinist playing, the first thing you think is music, right? Whereas, if you hear an airplane, you don’t think ‘music.’ So I’m using sort of the concert stage as a way to frame ordinary actions to create a musical landscape from them.”

Regarding the process of integrating movement into the score, Hankers explains, “I’m approaching it from the sound first, after the sections of the piece have been written, we get together with Neil, and he workshops different movements or ways of either drawing attention to the movement, or using movement to draw attention to the sound.”

Sputter Box’s 2019-20 season will include a collaboration with the Millenium Composers Initiative and a concert in February 2020. The latter will feature a world premiere by composer and Ph.D. student Niloufar Nourbakhsh. Nourbakhsh shares, “When [Sputter Box] mentioned that they also do a lot of theater and action-involved pieces with movement, and they’re going to have a choreographer, that’s something that was really exciting to me.”

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Nourbakhsh’s powerful new composition for Sputter Box, called “Responsibility,” will combine movement, staging, and sung text written by the composer. A selection of Nourbakhsh’s music, including works for chamber ensemble and solo piano, will also be featured in a special portrait concert, part of Spectrum’s Female Composers Festival, curated by Shiau-Uen Ding on March 2020 in Brooklyn.

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