

80805-2 [2 CDs]

KATE SOPER
(b. 1981)

IPSA DIXIT

THE WET INK ENSEMBLE
Kate Soper, soprano
Erin Lesser, flute
Ian Antonio, percussion
Josh Modney, violin



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IPSA DIXIT (2010–16)

Disc 1 [TT: 42:53]

1. **I. *Poetics*** 15:41
Text by Aristotle (abr. Soper), Sophocles
2. **II. *Only the Words Themselves Mean
What They Say*** 11:17
Text by Lydia Davis
3. **III. *Rhetoric*** 15:42
Text by Aristotle (abr. Soper)

Disc 2 [TT: 47:53]

1. **IV. *The Crito*** 14:14
Text by Robert Duncan, Plato (abr. Soper)
2. **V. *Metaphysics*** 19:41
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3. **VI. *Cipher*** 13:48
Text by Jenny Holzer, Ludwig Wittgenstein,
Pietro Bembo, Michael Drayton, Sigmund Freud,
Guido d'Arezzo, & Sarah Teasdale

KATE SOPER

IPSA DIXIT

THE WET INK ENSEMBLE

“Premiered on December 9, 2016, at The Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY, a breakthrough work that plumbs the composer’s fertile musical imagination to explore the relationships between idea and expression, meaning and language.”

Those were the words used in the official announcement when *Ipsa Dixit*, an evening-length concert work by the composer and vocalist Kate Soper, was named a finalist for the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Music. For all its evident concision and matter-of-factness, the statement is filled with complexity and ambiguity. A breakthrough, how, apart from the obvious fact of Pulitzer recognition? In what way does the work plumb Soper’s fertile imagination? How can a musical work explore relationships between notions more closely related to rhetoric and linguistics?

The statement, one might go so far as to suggest, is an unproved dogmatic assertion, a statement of truth lacking evidence in support. There’s a term for that, one that Soper cites in her own program notes for the composition in question. In fact, she derived her work’s title, and its thematic core, from the notion:

Ipse dixit (Ip-sub dik-sit): noun (Latin). Literally “he, himself, said it.” An unproven yet dogmatic statement which the speaker expects the listener to accept as valid without proof beyond the speaker’s assumed expertise.

The term, attributed to Cicero, is a Latin translation of *autòs épha*, a Greek phrase used by followers of Pythagoras when they argued not on the basis of evidence or proof, but simply by invoking their master’s authority. (Mindful that we live in a time of “alternate facts” and “fake news,” it feels more than coincidental that Soper completed *Ipsa Dixit* with the 2016 U.S. presidential race as background noise.)

That the Pulitzer committee means for its statement—which is itself based in turn on the recommendation of a blue-ribbon panel of musical experts—to be accepted

at face value is clear. That the claim is unproved . . . well, one might argue that’s the point of the CD you now hold in your hands. You now have at your disposal the means by which to test the statements laid forth by a brain trust that determines one of the most distinguished awards in our culture.

Shall we examine the evidence?

That *Ipsa Dixit*—the title a feminized “ipse dixit” that translates as “she, herself, said it”—is a breakthrough work seems a reasonable assertion, if not necessarily for the most obvious or conventional reasons. The composition—a six-movement sequence for soprano vocalist, violin, flute, and percussion, composed from 2010 to 2016, with alternating quartet and duet sections spanning some 90 minutes in total—certainly is among the larger works Soper has created.

Technically, though, Soper’s opera *Here Be Sirens* (2012–14), is 10 minutes longer, and involves three vocalists and a more intricate staging. You understandably might surmise that it is the more complex creation. Another opera, *I Was Here I Was I* (2013–14), also lasts 90 minutes, and involves a chamber ensemble, not the pocket-size complement of the present work.

But complexity is subtler than it might seem, sometimes. One thing this recording of *Ipsa Dixit* makes clear—even without the benefit of seeing the elegantly spare staging that the director Ashley Tata devised for its premiere production at EMPAC, or the evocative projections that Bradley Peterson designed to accompany its performance—is that the composition involves unusually intimate interplay among its participants. In the course of the piece, Soper takes up the instruments of her fellow artists, who in turn lend their voices as speakers or singers.

She had employed a similar tactic previously in *Voices from the Killing Jar* (2010–12), an arresting song cycle in which she explored female complexity, capacity, and agency through a sequence of lively, hyper-literate vignettes. Soper also played piano, percussion, and clarinet in that work; in turn, one ensemble member spoke and another sang. But in *Ipsa Dixit*, even more than in *Killing Jar*, such instances of shared or exchanged roles act as strands of counterpoint in relation to the texts Soper uses. Any gesture might amplify or refute what’s being stated or sung.

The ambiguity of roles and permeability of boundaries is among the more instantly striking features of *Ipsa Dixit*. The work's confident enactment, both in its handful of live performances to date and also on this recording, readily demonstrates the excellence and versatility of these four specific performers—Soper, the flutist Erin Lesser, the violinist Josh Modney, and the percussionist Ian Antonio—and offers compelling evidence of the close bonds they formed working together in Wet Ink, a potent and uncompromising New York City new-music collective.

In terms of its gestation, *Ipsa Dixit* is unusually extensive: a six-year process of sporadic activity and continual discovery. The initial spark came with the creation of “Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say” (2010–11), a duet for soprano and flute with text by Lydia Davis, which ultimately would become the completed work's second movement. A program note for the piece, which Soper composed for herself and Lesser to perform, explained how that compact work had helped her to envision and realize expansive new potentials:

Writing as a composer/performer opens up the pre-compositional realm to lots of useful improvisatory tangents and fresh timbral discoveries, and working closely with flutist Erin Lesser, without whom this piece would not exist, led to many happy surprises that eventually made their way into the final score. Lydia Davis' work proved the perfect vehicle for this project, invoking an unhinged virtuosity and idiosyncratic, multi-layered reading that took me from screwball comedy to paired musical gymnastics.

Virtuosity, idiosyncrasy, comedy, and gymnastics: Soper would sustain and expand upon these attributes throughout the remaining segments of *Ipsa Dixit*, while also adding further characteristics and nuances. Next came “Cipher” (2011), a pas de deux of stupefying physicality and agility for Soper and Modney, which would become the cycle's sixth and final movement. Soper derived the movement's texts, which examine or illustrate collisions of language, music, and meaning, from diverse and divergent sources. From her program note:

Visual artist Jenny Holzer prepares a rationale; Ludwig Wittgenstein warns of conundrums; Renaissance humanist Pietro Bembo fêtes the phonemes; Sigmund Freud scrutinizes dream reality; and Jenny Holzer reappears with a moral that may not be as forthright as it seems: “people can understand you when you say something.”

Remember that last quotation. We'll come back to it.

Then came “The Crito” (2012), an eloquent, intricate dialogue in words and music for Soper and Antonio, which would become the fourth movement of *Ipsa Dixit*. The text, from Plato and Robert Duncan, concerns Socrates, sentenced to death in Athens, and his friend Crito, who wants to help Socrates avoid his fate. In the course of debating what he knew to be an unjust sentence, the famous philosopher convinces himself, through the powerful arguments he constructs on his opponents' behalf, that he must succumb to the law.

The performers play distinct roles in the movement—Soper is Socrates to Antonio's Crito. Yet both musicians vocalize, and both play percussion, the effect underscoring at least temporarily sensations of camaraderie and common cause. According to a program note that seems eerily prescient now in light of recent cultural and political developments, Soper was grappling with the idea of reason defeated by zealotry:

Why does Socrates choose to obey laws which he knows to be wrong? . . . Could it be that the increasingly uncontrollable presence of the laws Socrates is imagining short-circuits even Socrates' renowned logic? Can the overpowering rhetoric of a warped and tyrannical righteousness obliterate the truth, even when everything is at stake?

In these duets—indeed, throughout what would become *Ipsa Dixit*—the music can shift gears unpredictably and dramatically, a kind of antic modernism that charms more than it challenges. Likewise, Soper's vocal performances balance a crystalline purity in conventionally sung material, an easeful facility with demanding techniques, and a kind of egghead charisma that entices a listener to work hard trying to keep up with the lofty ideas she's juggling.

“Those three were all completed and a year went by, and then I wanted them to be in proximity, and have a relationship,” Soper said during a lunchtime interview with this writer in May 2018, when asked to recall how and when she realized that the three virtuoso duos were parts of a larger whole. “I think I always knew that they were related, and the experience with the first one had led me to want to have that experience again.” Intuiting that something more would come of these pieces, in 2012 Soper even spontaneously contrived to pose for a press photograph with Lesser, Modney, and Antonio.

Broader thoughts about the cycle began to bubble up while Soper was in Cambridge, MA, on a Radcliffe Fellowship, when she was primarily engaged in writing *Here Be Sirens*. Long before the parts had fallen into their now seemingly inevitable places, Soper illuminated her ideas in PowerPoint talks, and grappled with unwieldy titles like “Language Mazes Are Gilded Cages”—at least, that’s how she remembers it now.

Nor was exploring language and philosophy the only factor involved in creating the putative new work: “I just imagined it would be fun and cool and interesting for us to perform all of them,” Soper says, echoing a motivation that surely extends back to the dawn of social music-making. “I really liked these people, and I just thought it would be fun for the four of us to spend more time together . . . and it has been.”

“Poetics,” the opening section of *Ipsa Dixit*, finally came in 2015, the first of three flamboyantly cerebral quartet movements that took the dialogues and debates of the duos and exploded them into a fresh strain of music theater: one in which instrumental parts not only fall out of accord with the texts they purportedly are meant to support, but also at times refute outright what’s being stated or sung.

Indeed, “Poetics” is a tour de force of musical sleight-of-hand—which not coincidentally represents the foremost challenge in representing this stage work faithfully in an audio-only format. For instance, one running conceit throughout “Poetics” is a hand-held bell with which Soper gesticulates to emphasize what she’s saying. In reality, her bell is mute, its sound produced discreetly by Antonio.

That discovery is the first of several juicy disconnects embedded in “Poetics.” The discrepancy is a critical part of what Soper set out to express, particularly regarding the distance between Aristotle’s dogmatic pronouncements about the function and meaning of art and the more nuanced ways in which aesthetics are determined and perceived in modern times. As Alex Ross described it in a New Yorker review that conveys acutely the vertiginous rush of trying to keep pace with Soper’s musical machinations:

. . . the instrumentalists perform their tasks with increasing halfheartedness—“as if losing interest in the music,” the score says. Eventually, they wander offstage. Soper waves her bell at them in frustration. Before the percussionist leaves, he fails to produce the sound that matches her gesture. She is in the middle of explaining the concept of anagnorisis, the point in a tragedy at which the protagonist arrives at a momentous recognition. What Soper recognizes, in her guise as master-lecturer, is that she needs the other musicians to bring her ideas to life.

Here, too, is a cluster of implicit tangents. Do the instrumentalists deny Soper’s leadership because she is a singer—a position occupied more often than not by a woman, and a musical role historically marginalized among an oftentimes literal fraternity of instrumentalists? Such questions are acutely important for us, the listeners, who in attending a performance by Soper (or listening to her CD) have at least for a time accepted and endorsed her authority: *ipsa dixit*.

We acknowledge her both as the work’s architect and as its featured diva: a duality that Soper, who views herself as a composer who sings rather than a singer who composes, seems keen to investigate. In person she interrogates such conventions further still. For example, she takes the stage last, as any elite singer would, but then descends from her center-stage platform abruptly to declaim the work’s first line:

“What is art?”

What ensues, in less certain and capable hands, admittedly could amount to a hifalutin' TED Talk, one in which dogmatic proclamations are accompanied by dutifully illustrative musical figurations. Instead, in "Poetics" Soper grapples with Aristotle, pokes holes in some arguments while confirming others, and then, after the point of epiphany that Ross described so vividly, pivots to a rich setting of the "O generations of men" chorus from Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*.

She engages Aristotle with similar rigor and ingenuity in "Rhetoric," contemplating the putative power of sustained argument to persuade with restless, fitful music that seems to resist and thwart sustained, sharp focus. Confronted in "Metaphysics" with one of Aristotle's grandest inquiries ("What is the nature of being?"), Soper literally commandeers and redistributes parts of her collaborators' instruments, while compelling them to make music throughout. What results affirms the integrity and durability of the artistic impulse, despite—or perhaps because of—mutable modes of expression.

So then, ultimately, what is *Ipsa Dixit*?

"I'm really bad at elevator speeches," Soper says, but presses on dutifully: "Ipsa Dixit is about how difficult it is to express human experience through language, despite the fact that there are buildings full of books trying to do this, and despite the fact that it seems like the best way—and the only way."

That contemplative thrust, which Soper enacts through skillful confluences and concatenations of letters and notes, staves and sentences, assures *Ipsa Dixit* its lasting fascination and appeal. Philosophical debates endure because language is slippery and certainty elusive, qualities shared in Soper's musical language. Her surety as a narrator never disguises the complexity of her inquiries or the often-ambiguous answers that might result.

"I came to language because I wanted to be explicit about things . . . and it became clear to me that the only way to do it was to use language," Soper proclaims at the end of "Cipher," quoting Jenny Holzer, whose neo-conceptual art is concerned explicitly with words and phrases, and their resonance within a public sphere. "People can understand you when you say . . . something," she adds in conclusion. And Soper, too, has with *Ipsa Dixit* keenly surveyed

the distance between experienced reality and its linguistic representation—or, to quote the Pulitzer citation, the connections "between idea and expression, meaning and language."

—Steve Smith

Steve Smith is the director of publications for National Sawdust, a performing-arts venue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Village Voice, and other publications, and he previously served as a staff editor and writer for the Boston Globe and Time Out New York.

Composer Program note

What is art? As the opening salvo to a piece of chamber music, the question is a little grandiose, bordering on pretentious. And expecting to arrive at an answer may be as fruitless as putting all your faith into language because 'people can understand you when you say something.' Nevertheless, these two phrases are the bookends of *IPSA DIXIT*, which attempts to sound the depths of the tangled relationship between art, language, and meaning.

"Ipsa Dixit" is the feminized form of *ipsa dixit* (literally "he, himself, said it"), a fallacy in which an assertion is made based not on proof, but on the supposed authority of the speaker alone. The title seemed apt for a work that explores myriad ways in which the truth can be imperiled by an outside force—as when music manipulates the meaning of words, when a soprano's sovereignty over instrumentalists is challenged, or when gut feeling overrules reason. The first movements to be composed were the three duos, in which the connection between art and artifice is teased out via the affective instability of *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say*, the dramatization of friendship in conflict with dogma in *The Crito*, and the labyrinthine investigation of the uses (and misuses) of language in *Cipher*. Once it became clear to me that these three pieces wanted to be woven into a larger tapestry, the works of Aristotle seemed like a good place to hunt for the threads. When Aristotle asks the question ('what is art?'), he has a ready answer ('art is imitation'), as he does for many equally baffling queries, such as: 'why are we moved by poetry?' or 'is a fact naturally more convincing than a lie?' or 'what is the nature of existence?' Each of the six movements in

IPSA DIXIT is dogged by our inability to use language to get all the way to the bottom of things: The pursuit of truth, in everyday circumstances as well as in matters of life and death, restlessly haunts the piece at its surface.

At its heart, though, lies a performance practice that unfolded over almost six years of collaboration with the Wet Ink Ensemble. *IPSA DIXIT* really began not with an intellectual quest, but with my great good fortune in encountering three of the best, most open, and most creative musicians I'll ever know. The finished work is indebted to the patience, talents, and expertise of Ian Antonio, Erin Lesser, and Josh Modney, and is stamped with their virtuosity. I hope that *IPSA DIXIT* can stand as a testament to a unique and fruitful way of working—as well as (to return to grandiosity) a testament to our collective need to keep asking unanswerable questions.

—Kate Soper

Kate Soper (born 1981) is a composer, performer, and writer whose work explores the integration of drama and rhetoric into musical structure, the slippery continuums of expressivity, intelligibility, and sense, and the wonderfully treacherous landscape of the human voice. She likes Machaut, Henry James, and Julie Doucet, and has recently been inspired by the work of David Lynch, Jorie Graham, and Anselm Kiefer. Soper was a finalist for the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in music, and has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Koussevitzky Foundation, Chamber Music America, and the Lili Boulanger Memorial Fund, among others, and has been commissioned by ensembles including the Los Angeles Philharmonic Green Umbrella Series, Carnegie Hall, the American Composers Orchestra, the Tanglewood Music Center/BUTI, and Alarm Will Sound. As a new-music vocalist, Soper performs frequently in her own works and in the works of others, and has performed with groups such as Morningside

Opera, the Mivos String Quartet, the SEM Ensemble, Dinosaur Annex, and the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf. She has been co-director and vocalist for Wet Ink since 2006.

Canadian flutist **Erin Lesser** is an avid interpreter of contemporary music. In addition to working with Wet Ink, she is a member of Alarm Will Sound, a group that has been awarded the ASCAP Concert Music Award, and is a founding member of the Argento Chamber Ensemble and the Due East flute and percussion duo. An alumna of The Academy, she also performs with Decoda, the affiliate ensemble of Carnegie Hall. Lesser has performed at prestigious venues around the world including Carnegie Hall, Walt Disney Hall, the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ (Amsterdam), and Alice Tully Hall, where she performed the American premiere of Morton Feldman's *For Flute and Orchestra* with the Janáček Philharmonic. As a recording artist, Lesser can be heard on Nonesuch, Cantaloupe, Carrier, Hat[now] Art, New Focus, Aeon, New Amsterdam, Albany, and Capstone Record labels. She is Associate Professor of Flute at Lawrence University and a Pearl Flute Performing Artist.

Josh Modney is a violinist devoted to creative music-making. He collaborates with many renowned artists and ensembles as part of a thriving culture of adventurous music that exists at the nexus of composition, improvisation, and interpretation. Modney is violinist and Executive Director of the Wet Ink Ensemble and a member of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE). He performed with the Mivos Quartet for eight years, a new-music string quartet he co-founded in 2008. Modney's playing has been featured on a wide variety of outstanding recordings, including titles on Carrier Records, Deutsche Grammophon, Sound American, hat[now]ART, Nonesuch, and Tzadik Records. Recent highlights include his 2017 release of improvised chamber music with guitarist Patrick Higgins, *EVRLY MVSIC* (NNA Tapes), and Modney's debut solo album, *Engage* (New Focus), a 3-disc set featuring work by close collaborators alongside Modney's own solo compositions and J.S. Bach's *Ciaccona* reinterpreted in Just Intonation. www.joshmodney.com

The **Wet Ink Ensemble** is a New York–based new music ensemble with a 20-year history of outstanding achievement in the programming and presentation of contemporary music. Wet Ink has collaborated with a broad range of renowned artists, from Evan Parker to George Lewis, and is equally committed to promoting the works of young and underrepresented composers, from today's most promising emerging voices to the next generation of artists. Wet Ink's core ensemble is a septet of world-class composers, improvisers, and interpreters that collaborate in band-like fashion, writing, improvising, preparing, and touring pieces together over long stretches of time. Wet Ink is Erin Lesser (flutes), Alex Mincek (saxophone), Ian Antonio (percussion), Eric Wubbels (piano), Josh Modney (violin), Kate Soper (voice), and Sam Pluta (electronics). www.wetink.org

In addition to his work with Wet Ink, percussionist **Ian Antonio** is a founding member of the piano and percussion quartet Yarn/Wire. The ensemble is known for the energy and precision it brings to performances of today's most adventurous music and has appeared at prestigious venues across the globe, including Lincoln Center, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Library of Congress, Edinburgh International Festival, Barbican Centre, and Shanghai Symphony Hall. He is also a member of the percussion ensemble Talujon with whom he has performed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bang on a Can Marathon, and BAM Next Wave Festival. Antonio is a member of the faculty at Purchase College, State University of New York. He has recorded for the Nonesuch, Kairos, Warp, Tzadik, Carrier, and Social Registry record labels, among others. He has also performs regularly with the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf, International Contemporary Ensemble, and the Albany Symphony.

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