

Roomful of Teeth: *Roomful of Teeth* and *Render*

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in a cappella music; however, it has primarily been focused on settings of popular music. In the realm of classical music, purely vocal music has been less recognized than purely instrumental music or vocal music with instruments. This is beginning to change. For example, it can be seen in the recent increased recognition and number of awards received by multimedia composer and vocalist Meredith Monk, who is listed by Roomful of Teeth as an influence. It is significantly evident in Roomful of Teeth group member Caroline Shaw's 2013 Pulitzer Prize for *Partita for 8 Voices*, as it is the first a cappella piece to be so recognized.

The 21st century has also brought an increase in numbers of young composers and musicians who straddle the borderlands—between the roles of composer and performer, between pop and art music, between concert music and performance art, between tonal and atonal, and between folk and classical traditions, to name a few. Roomful of Teeth situate themselves firmly in these borderlands. Many of the composers they work with are also performers, and most have been popular music performers and draw on both classical and popular traditions in their work. Their intensive work with expert performers of vocal traditions from other cultures brings them to a culturally sensitive multiculturalism in the way they appropriate techniques from other cultures.

Roomful of Teeth, founded in 2009 by Artistic Director Brad Wells, is a self-described vocal project. The group includes eight singers: Sopranos Martha Cluver and Estelí Gomez, Altos Caroline Shaw and Virginia Warnken, Tenor Eric Dudley, Baritone Avery Griffin, Bass Baritone Dashon Burton, and Bass Cameron Beauchamp. The singers, who have active careers apart from the group, come together for annual residencies at Mass MoCA to learn vocal techniques from around the world and to commission new works.

Their first CD, self-titled *Roomful of Teeth*, was released in 2012 and received a Grammy for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance in 2014. The four movements of Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices* are interspersed with nine compositions by composers William Brittelle, Judd Greenstein, Caleb Burhans, Sarah Kirkland Snider, Rinde Eckert, and Merrill Garbus. Their second CD, *render*, was released in 2015. It features Wally Gunn's three-movement *The Ascendant*, with percussionist Jason Treuting of Sō Percussion, interspersed with works by composers Missy Mazzoli, William Brittelle, Caleb Burhans, Eric Dudley, and two works by director Brad Wells. Brittelle, Snider, and Greenstein are the cofounders of New Amsterdam Records, which released both CDs.

The music on both CDs is exquisitely performed. The singers have mastered vocal techniques from many traditions, including Tuvan throat singing, yodeling, belting, Inuit throat singing, Korean P'ansori, Georgian singing, Sardinian cantu a tenore, and bel canto and are able to switch seamlessly from one to the other mid-phrase or even mid-note. Each voice is clear and beautifully in tune yet well balanced and blended with the others. The recordings themselves are high quality, with enough resonance in the performing space to give depth to the sound but not so much that it muddies the clarity of the vocal lines.

Roomful of Teeth (2012) has no program notes but does include texts for the three pieces. The remaining pieces are either textless or have only isolated textual fragments that are treated more as a sound source than for meaning. The singers are vocally precise and use a wide variety of vocal timbres but the dynamic range is relatively static. Although the number of male and female voices is equal, on this recording women's voices dominate most pieces. The overall

approach is minimalist, with much use of ostinos and repeated patterns and simple harmonic progressions. Several of the pieces seem like collages of techniques and styles that exploit the singer's capabilities but do not serve expressive or compositional purpose. Certain vocal gestures are used repeatedly across several pieces so that the overall effect is somewhat repetitious. The most significant piece on this first CD is Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices*, both in terms of the length and the quality of the composition. The title of the piece, and of its four movements *Allemande*, *Sarabande*, *Courante*, and *Passacaglia* reference historical dance suites. It was created for Roomful of Teeth and inspired by conceptual artist Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 305*. The movements are neither presented in order nor consecutively on the CD. Shaw uses the voices orchestrally; they flow seamlessly from singing to speaking and back again, using the group's many different vocal techniques to create a shifting kaleidoscope of color. Her composition technique draws from minimalism, layering patterns and colors to create well-crafted structures, usually in arch form. *Allemande* incorporates square dance calls and texts taken from LeWitt's drawing, throat singing techniques, nasal timbres, drones, and a hymnlike passages. *Sarabande* begins with a unison hum in the women's voices that swoops up into interesting and dissonant long chords. After a belted melody in the middle of the movement it ends with sweeping timbres of overtone singing. *Courante* opens with Inuit-inspired highly rhythmic hocketed breath sounds in the women's voices. The middle section quotes the American folk hymn "Shining Shore" then breaks back into breath sounds and ostinato patterns. The final section combines the hocketing breath sounds—now performed by the male voices—with the women's hymn melody above it. The breath sounds grow faster and faster like a train speeding up to the end. *Passacaglia* is a set of variations on a repeated chord progression that experiments with timbre. It expands to a fuller texture with the return of the Sol LeWitt text. As with the opening movement, the voices quickly switch between various vocal timbres including throat singing and a rasping rattle sound, broad nasal timbre, and choral textures. The orchestral way in which she uses the vocal textures and the way the piece is structured after an instrumental partita are surely factors that influenced the Pulitzer committee's decision.

Amid the minotaurs by multiinstrumentalist and composer Brittelle uses a text by the composer about football coach Bear Bryant. The piece moves disjunctly from one vocal technique to another and from one textual idea to another using surface text painting and a wide variety of vocal styles. It is the weakest piece on the CD from a compositional standpoint, but does feature a lovely solo by alto Virginia Warnken.

Three compositions by Greenstein are featured on the disc. *Montmartre*, named after the neighborhood in Paris where western composers began to emphasize the importance of texture and sound in musical form, begins with a duet between throat singing men and yodeling women. It goes on to include a wide variety of vocal timbres and textures, including an overarching melody that rises above the rest of the voices before coming back to the opening material to create an arch form. *AEIOU* uses the vowel sounds in their Spanish form to create the form. It combines yodel sounds, a low throat sung drone, and straight-tone vocal timbres. The piece uses longer and higher sounds as it progresses, then ends with a very low throat drone. *Run Away*, with text the composer, features an alto solo beautifully performed by Warnken over a dissonant male voice drone based on Tuvan singing. Later in the piece the other female voices pick up on and double or repeat some of the aria-like lines.

Multiinstrumentalist, singer, and composer Burhans provides Warnken a chance to shine in *No*. She performs a lovely, melismatic and Romantic sounding aria over the other voices, which maintain a close sustained harmony based on repeated patterns beneath. Particularly

effective is the way he uses repetitions of the word “no” at different speeds and pitches to create an interesting and varying pulse.

Snider contributed *The Orchard*, with text by Nathaniel Bellows, an American writer, musician, and visual artist with whom she has collaborated on other works. Cameron Beauchamp powerfully performs the lyric bass solo, which is accompanied by a variety of vocal techniques including yodeling, breaths, and grunting in layers of overlapping ostinato to create an arch form.

Cesca's View by writer, composer, and musician Rinde Eckert highlights soprano Estelí Gomez's yodeling prowess against a backdrop of close barbershop harmony from the remaining women's voices. The piece has a simple arch form, with the center section more rhythmically active.

Merrill Garbus, the experimental indie pop founder of tUnE-yArDs music project, contributed two interesting compositions. The highly energetic *Quizassa* begins with the women's voices singing Georgian style and quickly expands to include breath drones, R&B growls, vocal noise, humming, yodels, and yelps. *Ansa Ya* features Caroline Shaw as alto soloist. After a yodeling opening it builds up layers of different textures and sound qualities, ranging from passages that sound like vocal exercises to belting to homophonic choral texture. Some text fragments that are not in the CD liner are featured prominently.

All of the pieces on their second CD, *Render*, were written specifically for the ensemble through their residency program at Mass MoCA. The disc includes brief liner notes for each piece as well as texts for the three compositions that use texts. The notes focus on information about the text sources and ways that the composers wanted to use the vocal resources of the group. They do not include much information about the music. As a whole, the compositions included in this recording are more interesting pieces in that the vocal techniques seem more integral to the compositions, and they display more use of different textures and dynamics and a more equal use of male and female voices.

The main piece on this CD is Gunn's *The Ascendant*, a three-movement work which adds drumkit to the mix. The title and texts are taken from a collection of poetry by New Zealand poet Maria Zajkowski. All three movements show the composer's characteristic use of ostinato, echoes, hocketing, and canon. The percussion tracks are simple and repetitive and add an unobtrusive layer to the sound. *The beginning and* starts with a long section comprised of a rhythmic male ostinato on the syllables “oh ah” overlaid by a female melody in high close tense harmony. After a slight buildup of intensity, the female voices take over the ostinato. *The fence is gone* has multiple layers: women's voices in very tight dissonances; solo female voice on quicker moving pop-sounding percussive repeated phrases; a lower pitched legato phrase usually sung by male voices. The text is primarily sung by a solo female voice. *Surviving death* begins with a long humming passage, first with female voices and then joined by male voices in a humming/breath ostinato which continues until close to the very end of the piece. The text of the poem is sung by female voices in unison in a distant-sounding folk style. The texture builds toward the end with the layering of multiple female voices repeating the same fragment of text. On the final phrase only a single female voice remains.

Artistic Director Brad Wells contributes two pieces. *Otherwise* features a wide variety of vocal techniques going on in seven voices while bass baritone Dashon Burton sings a powerful melismatic aria over it. Although the aria is beautiful, the mix of styles that accompany it seem more like a catalogue of techniques than a composition. *Render* is an ethereal, slow moving, reflective and full-textured piece. Low drones on the repeated syllable “nu” provide a gentle

pulse over which melismatic and melancholic melodies soar and glide. Both pieces were inspired by literature but are textless.

Composer/Performer Mazzoli's *Vesper Sparrow*, based on a poem by Iranian-American poet Farnoosh Fathi, makes effective use of text painting to imitate birdsong. Although the text, as modified by the composer, is given in the liner notes, most of the piece is textless. It combines the bird sounds with Sardinian overtone singing. The piece effectively combines different singing timbres and techniques as it slowly builds to a concluding dramatic finish.

Brittelle contributes one piece to this CD. *High Done No Why To*, with a text based on a phonetic transcription of a phrase by one of the group's Inuit throat singing coaches, is his attempt to synthesize their many techniques into a coherent piece. It includes some very interesting rhythmic moments, and much use of strong juxtapositions between sections and styles, including jazz harmonies, breath percussion, growls, and whistle tones. It is a more effective composition than his piece on their first CD.

The other returning composer, Burhans, contributes *Beneath*, which draws its title from an episode of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It is an exploration of the range of the group, beginning with very low throat singing and very quiet, slow moving long notes. It very slowly builds intensity, dynamics, and texture as it rises in pitch. Towards the end of the piece it reaches a high point, pauses, and then abruptly switches character as it creates a rhythmic ostinato in the male voices over which female voices soar. At the end the male voices drop out and the soaring voices end the piece alone. Although the ending seems abrupt to me, on the whole it is a beautiful and evocative piece.

The remaining piece on the CD, *Suonare/To Sound* is by ensemble member, composer, conductor and pianist Eric Dudley. The piece is a play on the sounds of language, and superimposes an English version of the text set in low long notes with an Italian version set in a high register two-voice bel canto style. It is a lovely little piece.

The way Roomful of Teeth is extending vocal possibilities is exciting. They are, however, limited in some ways by their choice of composers. Most of the composers they have worked with are strongly influenced by minimalism, and make much use of repeated ostinatos and drones. With the exception of Shaw's piece, this limitation is evident in their first CD. Upon repeated listening the pieces begin to sound like each other because they draw on limited harmonic, textural, and dynamic resources, and even show a tendency to use the extended vocal techniques in similar ways. The pieces on the second CD, though they also come from a minimalist aesthetic, have a greater variety. On the whole, their extended vocal techniques are used in more integrated and interesting ways on the second CD. As they continue their yearly residencies at Mass MoCA and develop relationships with new composers—for example, they commissioned a work from Pulitzer-Prize winning composer Julia Wolfe during their most recent residency—I hope that they begin to build repertoire that has the compositional strength and variety to match the strength and variety of their vocal techniques.

Lynn Gumert is a composer who specializes in vocal music, both solo and choral. She is a singer with and artistic director of Zorzal Music Ensemble, a vocal-instrumental ensemble devoted to the performance of Sephardic, Latin American Baroque, and *nueva canción* music. She currently studies Music Therapy at Montclair State University.

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