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Room Full Of Teeth

“Vocal Soundscapes,
New Journeys”

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Season 115, Program 38

Aasen-Hull Hall
Sunday, Jan. 31, 2016 | 7:30 p.m.



Partita for 8 Voices
 I. Allemande
 II. Sarabande
 III. Courante
 IV. Passacaglia

Caroline Shaw

—intermission—

High Done No Why To

William Brittelle

Just Constellations

Michael Harrison

I. The Opening Constellation
 II. The Acoustic Constellation

Kalief Browder

Brad Wells

Coloring Book

Ted Hearne

IV. Letter to my father

Otherwise

Brad Wells

Roomful of Teeth:

Estelí Gomez, soprano
 Martha Cluver, soprano
 Caroline Shaw, alto
 Virginia Warnken, alto
 Eric Dudley, tenor
 Avery Griffin, baritone
 Dashon Burton, bass-baritone
 Cameron Beauchamp, bass

Brad Wells, artistic director

Roomful of Teeth is a GRAMMY-winning vocal project dedicated to mining the expressive potential of the human voice. Through study with masters from singing traditions the world over, the eight-voice ensemble continually expands its vocabulary of singing techniques and, through an ongoing commissioning process, forges a new repertoire without borders.

Founded in 2009 by Brad Wells, the group gathers annually at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams, Massachusetts, where they've studied Tuvan throat singing, yodeling, belting, Inuit throat singing, Korean P'ansori, Georgian singing, Sardinian cantu a tenore, Hindustani music and Persian classical singing with some of the world's top performers and teachers. Commissioned composers include Rinde Eckert, Judd Greenstein, Caleb Burhans, Merrill Garbus (of tUnE-yArDs), William Brittelle, Anna Clyne, Fred Hersch, Wally Gunn, Sarah Kirkland Snider, Missy Mazzoli, Michael Harrison, Sam Amidon, and Ted Hearne.

Projects in 2015-2016 include *The Colorado*, a music-driven documentary film that explores water, land and survival in the Colorado River Basin (featuring former Kronos Quartet cellist Jeffrey Zeigler and Wilco's Glenn Kotche); collaborations with NOW Ensemble, Kanye West and the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME); performances with the Seattle Symphony featuring Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*, appearances at new music festivals in the US, Mexico and Vancouver; and partnerships with over a dozen higher education institutions across the country.

Lead sponsorship for Roomful of Teeth's 2015-2016 season is generously provided by Sharon Banker, the Lenore S. & Bernard A. Greenberg Fund, The Aaron Copland Fund for Music and New Music USA. Additional support provided by Herb Allen, Katie Schmidt, Virginia Philhower, Pacific Harmony Foundation, the Amphion Foundation and the Cheswatyr Foundation.

Coloring Book (2015)

“They will never, so long as their whiteness puts so sinister a distance between themselves and their own experience and the experience of others, feel themselves sufficiently human, **sufficiently worthwhile**, to become responsible for themselves, their leaders, their country, their children, or their fate.”

- James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Y. Davis” (1970)

Coloring Book, a new piece for Roomful of Teeth by composer Ted Hearne, sets texts by black American writers.

TEXT

Him. He

He has only heard what I

I felt. He

He is far away but I

I see him.

Him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us.

Us. He

He is so pale with his whiteness then and I

I am so colored.

Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him.

He is so pale with his whiteness then and I

I am so colored.

Zora Neale Huston

from “*How it feels to be colored me*” (1928)

Otherwise (2012)

Otherwise features Sardinian **cantu a tenore**-inspired singing, belting, and some yodeling all in a melange to highlight a baritone in full bel canto glory. The title comes from one of my favorite Jane Kenyon poems but uses no text, only non-sense syllables as lyrics. It’s a celebratory little vocalise for Roomful of Teeth.

-BW

Partita for 8 Voices (2009-2011)

The score’s inscription reads: “*Partita* is a simple piece. Born of a love of surface and structure, of the human voice, of dancing and tired ligaments, of music, and of our basic desire to draw a line from one point to another.”

Each movement takes a cue from the traditional baroque suite in initial meter and tone, but the familiar historic framework is soon stretched and broken, through “speech, whispers, sighs, murmurs, wordless melodies, and novel vocal effects” (Pulitzer jury citation). Roomful of Teeth’s utterly unique approach to singing and vocal timbre originally helped to inspire and shape the work during its creation, and the ensemble continues to refine and reconsider the colors and small details with every performance. *Allemande* opens with the organized chaos of square dance calls overlapping with technical wall drawing directions of the artist Sol LeWitt, suddenly congealing into a bright, angular tune that never keeps its feet on the ground for very long. There are allusions to the movement’s intended simulation of motion and space in the short phrases of text throughout, which are sometimes sung and sometimes embedded as spoken texture. *Sarabande*’s quiet restraint in the beginning is punctured in the middle by an ecstatic, belted melody that resolves quietly at the end, followed soon after by the Inuit-inspired hocketed breaths of *Courante*. A wordless quotation of the American folk hymn “Shining Shore” appears at first as a musical non sequitur but later recombines with the rhythmic breaths as this longest movement is propelled to its final gasp. *Passacaglia* is a set of variations on a repeated chord progression, first experimenting simply with vowel timbre, then expanding into a fuller texture with the return of the Sol LeWitt text. At *Passacaglia*’s premiere in 2009, there was spontaneous applause and cheering at the explosive return of the D-major chord near the end — so feel free to holler or clap any time if you feel like it.

Of the premiere of *Partita*, New York magazine wrote that I had “discovered a lode of the rarest commodity in contemporary music:

joy.” And it is with joy that this piece is meant to be received in years to come.

-CS

High Done No Why To (2010)

High Done No Why To was written while in residency with Roomful of Teeth and represents my initial attempt to synthesize their many amazing extended vocal techniques into a single coherent piece. I decided to use words as «sound» instead of «lyrics» in order to stay focused on texture and harmony (rather than getting caught up in an external narrative). The ending of the piece was written from midnight to 6am on the eve of our final rehearsal of the residency and is meant to bring a sense of catharsis to the end of a somewhat restless and angular piece.

-WB

Just Constellations (abridged) (2015)

Ever since the 1980's, when I started working as La Monte Young's composition and tuning assistant, I have wanted to compose a work like *Just Constellations* for specialized singers exploring gradually evolving constellations of tones in extended just intonation tunings. However, it was not until Brad Wells asked me to compose for Roomful of Teeth that the opportunity finally presented itself.

The abridged version of *Just Constellations* is approximately ten minutes in duration and comprises two justly tuned chords and modes: The Opening Constellation and The Acoustic Constellation. These are the first and last of the four constellations of the complete version of the work. The Opening Constellation is derived from the tuning of “The Opening Chord” from La Monte Young's epic *The Well-Tuned Piano* based on the harmonic primes 2, 3 and 7. The Acoustic Constellation is based on the fourth octave of the harmonic series and uses what is often referred to as the “acoustic” mode, using the 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, and 16th partials of the harmonic series (I replace the 13th partial with 27/2).

“Just intonation is the tuning system of the later ancient Greek modes as codified by Ptolemy; it was the aesthetic ideal of the

Renaissance theorists; and it is the tuning practice of a great many musical cultures worldwide, both ancient and modern.” (Gilmore, Bob, *“Maximum Clarity” and Other Writings On Music*). It is any musical tuning in which the frequencies of notes are related by ratios of whole numbers. The two notes in any just interval are members of the same harmonic series and are called “just” or pure. Historic just intonation uses only notes derived from multiples of the prime numbers 2, 3 and 5, while “extended” just intonation includes higher primes such as 7, 11 and 13. Just intonation can be contrasted with equal temperament, which dominates most Western instruments, and compromises the purity and harmonic integrity of music for the convenience of having 12 equally spaced notes.

-MH

Just Constellations was commissioned by Roomful of Teeth and supported by fellowships from Yaddo and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

Kalief Browder (2016)

Far less publicized but no less tragic than the fates of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin (and many others), Kalief Browder's life was lost at the hands of U.S. law enforcement over years rather than minutes or seconds. In 2010 at the age of 16, Browder was arrested for the alleged theft of a backpack. A well-liked African American high school student in the Bronx, he never swerved from avowing his innocence. Only after serving over three years in Rikers Prison was he released without trial and with the charges dropped. Two of those years were served in solitary confinement, in a 12 X 7 foot cell, during which he was sometimes beaten and regularly hungry (still young and growing). He would notice pieces of bread, left uneaten, on other inmates' trays and ask, ‘can I get that bread?’ As Jennifer Gonnerman wrote in her extraordinary profile in *The New Yorker*, “[s]ometimes they would slip him an extra slice or two; often, they refused.” In June 2015 at the age of 22, two years after he was released, he succumbed to the psychological trauma of prison and hanged himself.

-BW