

Roomful of Teeth
Williams College
9/28/2018

Concert Notes

The Ascendant (2013/2016)

This group of songs is named after a collection of poetry by contemporary Australian poet Maria Zajkowski, and it is from this collection that all the text is drawn. I was attracted to Maria's poetry because I found it so striking. Her work is spare, detached, taut with restraint, but spiked with devastating releases of feeling which can make your stomach drop, as if you are suddenly in free fall. And the poems stay with you; they have a way of getting under your skin and leaving you unsettled, haunted. With Maria's very generous permission, I have set six of her poems as songs for eight voices and percussion, especially for Roomful of Teeth.

-WG

Text:

The beginning and

by the last tree in the last summer
on the hill where the last sun falls
on the things that at last mean

we are finally unwound
from the hollow arrow
around which we have spun
our ignorant lives

we leave the first last
to wait inside the darkness
where the black snow falls
like the last bird

The fence is gone

The fence is gone,
we are starting to see
our nudity through the branches,
the pumping berries
pinned to our hearts,

I've forgotten if you are me
or I'm you.
We switched bags somewhere.
I have to rummage through
the palings in the yard

for the knothole that used to
show me how to see the world.

I can't frame you in it now
or detect from these piles
of decrepit fence what was
so important that for so long
it needed to be kept in.

Through the night wave

a hand becomes every hand
a hole becomes a home
a place to forget
the ascendant has left
a face in the dark
is what it faces
the glass forest
in all of your lives
the rope around
day and night
into death I am
repeating the unsayable

What we began

when we began we began
I sent myself back but
we never did look into that cloud

there is too much desire to forget
what a waste we can and can't be

tonight apart looks like
what won't be itself in the light

Are we death

are we death now
can we hope at last
that this blue morning has become us
finally is there nothing to believe
coming after us
placing its steps in ours through the dew
free of the urging heart
free of the curse of hair and eyes
are we at last on the mountain

we have so long been under
the tunnel that was a song
is it over
the irritability of being ourselves
the plain fact of being dumb
are we at last over it
can we now be final
final like memory
final like stars
final like mornings
all over again

Surviving death

Every day, surviving death, we send out our horses.
They don't come back.

Here the dry river's a place not to camp,
the night a place not to be.

An army gathers rattling its pans, thinking of home,
an army that will turn your head

to a fire in the sand where those
who've survived this wait out of time

in the dust and the gold,
with the horse you thought was gone.

Psychedelics (2017)

Psychedelics is, in part, an effort to integrate the many vocal techniques and effects mastered by Roomful of Teeth into one (semi-)coherent whole. The term psychedelic here is meant to evoke a plethora of bright and vivid (almost surreal) colors blended and twisted in strange, otherworldly ways. My aim was to create a piece that aggressively challenged the notion of what a long-form choral piece can be - both in terms of its delivery and subject matter. I think the human voice is a magically flexible tool - so much more so than an instrument you hold or blow into. The possibilities are in a sense limitless, especially when working with performers like Roomful of Teeth with sense of adventure and an exceedingly high level of technique.

In terms of actual subject matter, the piece is an attempt, albeit an abstract one, to reckon with a psychological breakdown that I experienced as a young adult, and to parallel that with the seemingly apocalyptic strains of our current collective state - my objective being to humanize and somehow come to terms with the inevitability and, ultimately, healing nature of destruction. In this sense, the term "psychedelic" refers more to the ability to observe startling and strange occurrences with a fluid, dreamlike sense of attachment. I have begun to believe the human apocalypse will happen slowly, incrementally, both in our shared physical world and our individual spiritual worlds, and that apocalypses, similarly to wildfires in the west, are part of a natural process, a shedding of skin, and house within them beauty in the guise of elegy. By fully taking notice of our fate as our culture sinks deeper and deeper into the abyss and we continue to pollute and destroy our world, I think we can take possession of the resulting sadness and heartbreak, we can own the process, and come to accept and embrace our role in it. As I've heard said, "Things only reveal themselves in passing."

Lyrically, my aim was collage rather than traditional narrative - a fabric of text that reflects the growing chaos of stimuli in our society interrupted by moments of clarity and longing. There are a number of cultural reference points, but they are meant to form a swarm of images, not a literal, linear narrative.
-WB

Psychedelics

I. Deep Blue (You Beat Me)

Beneath the pandemonium twilight
lay pink poison thoughts with the hashtag #odeath.

Carried in on a white horse, shown on the zoom cam, rain on the dome.
And in the corridor: bastions of light.

Deep Blue, you beat me.
All the things I've gathered are stuck outside the door.

Nothing is a dream in this world, nothing is a dream.

There's a crack in the dome where the light comes in.

We don't stand a chance...

II. I am the Watchtower

I am the watchtower I watch for dogs...

I am the Yeti speaking in tones.
Xochietl just ate 13 blue popsicles. She is just a runaway.
Oh Labyrinth, she's the pride of the Aztecs!

The Yeti is a poltergeist.

I am the watchtower I watch for dogs...

III. My Apothecary Light

I drive into the blackness like in Philip K Dick
and dream the dreams of Mark Sandman
and wear the jeans of Jean Valjean...

Death is a strange bird and I am a Pontiac.
I've been branded by seagulls and now you've been warned.

There was snow on the beach but it wasn't love.
Endless desire is the only cure for pain.

Crush Reebok!

In my apothecary light...

A single star casts blame on the earth, its light begs karmic reprimand.
The final Fear is psychedelic like a bird in a plane stray from the flock

Sugarbits, transmogrify me!

So everything is quiet, everything is clean.

The carnage has clear intentions

To all who have been blinded in one eye,
I present to you: the Desert!

The Isle (2016)

The Isle begins with a cloud of murmuring voices — a musical imagining of something hinted at in Shakespeare's stage directions in *The Tempest*. The calls for "a burden, dispersedly" and "solemn music" suggest an off-stage refrain and/or perhaps something even more otherworldly. In *Shakespearean Metaphysics*, Michael Witmore writes: "Like the island itself, which seems to be the ultimate environment in which the play's action takes place, music is a medium that flows from, within, and around that *imaginary* place into the ambient space of performance proper. If some of the courtiers from Naples and Milan are lulled to sleep by the island's 'solemn music', the audience can hear this music in a way that it cannot feel the hardness of the boards that the sleeping players lie on." In taking cues from this reading of the play, I've constructed my own musical reading of the island of *The Tempest*. Three monologues, by Ariel, Caliban, and Prospero, are set in three distinct ways. Ariel's initial song of welcome appears, for the most part, homophonically, although its break from the quasi-robotic delivery (into the "burden, dispersedly") points to the character's vaporous & ethereal nature. Caliban's famous description of the island as "full of noises" finds its home in a distraught and lonely monodic song, ornamented and driven by extraneous sounds. Prospero's evocation of the various features and inhabitants of the island (from the final act) breaks apart into spoken voices that eventually dissolve into the wordless voices of the beginning, mirroring his pledge to throw his book of spells into the sea (and possibly to return to the island's pre-lingual state). The harmonic material of the beginning and the end of the piece (the murmuring voices) is a 24-chord progression that includes all major and minor triads of the Western 12-note system (for fun). As Prospero says: "But this rough magic I here abjure, and when I have required some heavenly music, which even now I do, to work mine end upon their senses that this airy charm is for, I'll break my staff, bury it certain fathoms in the earth, and deeper than did ever plummet sound I'll drown my book. (Solemn music)"

-CS

Text:

ARIEL:

Come unto these yellow sands,
And then take hands:
Curtsied when you have, and kissed
The wild waves whist,
Foot it feately here, and there, and sweet sprites bear
the burden.
[Burden dispersedly, within]
Hark, hark, bow wow: the watchdogs bark, bow wow.
[Burden dispersedly, within]
Hark, hark, I hear, the strain of strutting Chanticleer
Cry cock-a-diddle-dow.
Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange:
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell.
[Burden: ding dong.]
Hark now I hear them, ding dong bell.

CALIBAN:

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.

PROSPERO:

You elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves,
And you that on the sands with printless foot
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him
When he comes back; you demi-puppets that
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,
Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime
Is to make midnight mushrumps, that rejoice
To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid,
Weak masters though you be, I have bedimmed
The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,
And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault
Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up
The pine and cedar; graves at my command
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth
By my so potent art. But this rough magic
I here abjure, and when I have required
Some heavenly music, which even now I do,
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.
(Solemn music)