

Roomful of Teeth vocal ensemble at Baldwin Wallace (April 3)

by Daniel Hathaway



Founded in 2009 by Brad Wells, Roomful of Teeth consistently proves that the human voice is among the most versatile instruments in music. The ensemble's concert in Gamble Auditorium at Baldwin Wallace on Sunday evening, April 3, demonstrated the astonishing variety of non-traditional sounds that eight sets of vocal cords can produce.

Roomful's techniques include throat singing (both Tuvan and Inuit varieties), belting, yodeling, and other ways of phonating that the group has learned from Korean, Georgian, Sardinian, Hindustani, and Persian vocal

traditions, in addition to one episode of *bel canto* singing that sounded wonderfully strange by comparison.

Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices* commanded the first half of the program. The 25-minute work by one of the ensemble's altos won a Pulitzer Prize soon after its premiere in 2009, and is based on the form of a baroque dance suite. That form dissolves in front of your ears as the singers sequentially visit square-dance calls combined with "technical wall drawing directions" (the Allemande), belted melodies (the Sarabande), Inuit "hocket" like the hiccups late medieval composers gleefully wrote into their motets (the Courante), and playing with vowel timbres (the Passacaglia).

The effects Roomful of Teeth can produce depend almost as much on microphone techniques as on their expert vocal production. They continued to explore those elements in five works on the second half of the program that were written or inspired by the ensemble's annual summer residency at Mass MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts.

William Britelle wrote that his *High Done No Why To* (2010) “represents my initial attempt to synthesize their many amazing extended vocal techniques into a single coherent piece.” In the notes for his *Beneath* (2009), Caleb Burhans wrote, “I was looking to explore the full vocal range of Roomful of Teeth, which spans over four octaves.” For *Montmartre* (2009), Judd Greenstein noted that he had come to Mass MoCA with some sketches. “Once I heard what the group was able to do, I adapted some of these with their varied techniques in mind,” naming the piece after the district of Paris where early 20th-century composers were first inspired by the sounds of world music.

Among the vocalizations in those three works were whistlings, sounds resembling the twang of jaw harps, heterodyning female voices over male-voice drones, the imitation of bells, and varieties of yodeling.

Inspired by a sojourn in the Pyrenées rather than a visit to Mass MoCa, Rinde Eckert’s *Cesa’s View* (2009) for female voices featured virtuoso yodeling by soprano Estelí Gomez. She ended the brief piece on a beautifully-floated high note.

Founder Brad Wells brought the concert to a conclusion with his *Otherwise* (2012), described by the composer as “Sardinian cantu a tenore-inspired singing, belting, and some yodeling, all in a melange to highlight a baritone in full bel canto glory.” That baritone was the indeed glorious Dashon Burton, who brought a familiar Western European-cultivated style into an environment of edgy, female-voice textures, barkings, and bell sounds.

All in all, this was a breathtaking and slightly ear-exhausting evening, stunningly sung by an ensemble that owes some of its techniques to the New Swingle Singers — though that group never sailed quite so close to the wind as does Roomful of Teeth.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 12, 2016.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)