

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: Roomful of Teeth with the Oberlin College Choir (Feb. 16)

by Daniel Hathaway



Brad Wells' groundbreaking vocal octet, Roomful of Teeth, spent a few days last week on the Oberlin College campus, giving demonstrations, holding master classes, and answering questions before joining Greg Ristow's Oberlin College Choir in a jaw-dropping, larynx-challenging concert in Finney Chapel.

On Friday evening, February 16, Roomful treated a large audience to Caroline Shaw's now-iconic *Partita for 8 Voices* before moving on to dazzle the crowd with pieces by Missy Mazzoli, Judd Greenstein, and Toby Twining in which the ensemble's astonishing range of vocal effects was on full display. Then Wells led his octet in breathtaking performances of William Brittelle's *Psychedelics* and Merrill Garbus' *Quizassa* confidently backed up by the 60 voices of the Choir.

This ensemble has few analogs on the concert circuit. Perhaps the closest — and only when the repertoire turns jazzy — is the Swingle Singers (now The Swingles), who also depend on the sensitive mixing of individual singers to enhance their voices. Beyond that, there's no comparison. What other ensemble draws on Tuvan and Inuit throat singing, yodeling, belting à la Broadway, death metal vocal technique, and the ethnic traditions of Korea, Georgia, Sardinia, Hindustan, and Persia?

Shaw's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Partita* was inspired by the vocal capabilities of the ensemble, but also helped define Roomful of Teeth's color palette and interpretational approach. Details may evolve from performance to performance. Based on the idea of the Baroque dance suite, its first three movements incorporate square dance calls, technical wall drawing directions, Inuit-inspired hocket, and an American folk hymn, while the fourth uses the variation format of the Passacaglia to

explore vowel timbres and textures. Above all, *Partita* is grounded in the joy of singing, an emotion that is expressed individually by the stage demeanor of the members of the octet as well as by the concert attire they each choose.

Mazzoli's *Vesper Sparrow* is short, tonal, and hints at pop music, although the composer notes that it's based on imaginary birdsong and her own take on Sardinian overtone singing. Roomful gave it the exuberant performance she said she wanted to create.

The engrossing singing and energetic personality of alto Virginia Warnken Kelsey were featured in Judd Greenstein's *Run Away*, a modified takeoff on Tuvan singing. And soprano Estelí Gomez yodeled her way through Toby Twining's *Dumas' Riposte*, whose text is a clever comeback to a racial slur set to the unlikely but fascinating combination of Pygmy-influenced melody and jazz harmony.



During Brad Wells's commentary, the Oberlin College Choir made a quick and efficient entrance from both side aisles, joining Roomful of Teeth in William Brittelle's year-old *Psychedelics*. The composer describes the surreal work as the abstract attempt to deal with his psychological breakdown as a young adult in "a swarm of images, not a literal, linear narrative." The performance was riveting, the coordination between the Octet and the Choir nothing short of amazing.

Quite different in style and execution was the final piece, Merrill Garbus' *Quizassa*, an infectiously rhythmic work based on Bulgarian and other Eastern European choral traditions, with an infusion of Inuit throat singing.

Quizassa brought down the chapel. For an encore, Brad Wells gave the cheering crowd one of his own pieces, *Otherwise*, featuring the powerful vocalizations of Oberlin alum Dashon Burton.



Photos by Yevhen Gulenko.

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