13.5: 2013 - Caroline Shaw, Partita for 8 Voices

The 2013 Pulitzer Prize attracted an unusual amount of attention. To begin with, at 30 years old, Caroline Shaw (b. 1982) was the youngest composer ever to win a Pulitzer. In addition to that, she was only the fifth woman to win in the seventy years of the competition. (Ellen Taaffe Zwilich was the first, in 1983.) Finally, the work itself was out of the ordinary. *Partita* requires amplified singers to employ unusual and non-Western vocal techniques, and at the time of the award only one vocal ensemble—Roomful of Teeth, of which Shaw herself is a founding member—had ever performed it. In fact, Roomful of Teeth had not even premiered the complete work, but had programmed individual movements as they were completed. *Partita* had also not been published and could only be heard on Roomful of Teeth’s eponymous 2012 album, which itself won a Grammy for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance in 2013. In this way, *Partita* was more like a pop song than a classical composition. As a result, it inspired discussion not only about whether or not it was “good” but about whether it even had the necessary characteristics to satisfy the criteria used to evaluate compositional quality.

Roomful of Teeth

We can’t understand *Partita* without understanding the history and mission of Roomful of Teeth. The group was founded in 2009 by Brad Wells, who had a vision for an eight-part vocal ensemble that would break new ground in the world of art music. Most choirs adopt a uniform vocal production technique derived from the European tradition. However, the human voice is capable of producing an extraordinary range of sounds, and there is boundless variety in the techniques used by non-Western and popular singers. The members of Roomful of Teeth learn these techniques from world-renowned experts. In the past decade, the group has studied Tuvan *throat singing*, yodeling, Broadway *belting*, Inuit throat singing, Korean P’ansori, Georgian singing, Sardinian cantu a tenore, Hindustani music, Persian classical singing, and Death Metal singing. All of these techniques have been incorporated into their performances. To accomplish this, Wells commissions composers to write music expressly for the group. Much of this work takes place during an annual
gathering at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams, Massachusetts, where teachers, singers, and composers come together to create new music.

As you can imagine, not just any choir can sing the repertoire that is created for Roomful of Teeth. Although the music is notated, the techniques required to perform it are highly specialized, and any vocal ensemble that wants to take on the challenge will require training. For this reason, few other choirs have ever performed Partita. Roomful of Teeth, on the other hand, continues to perform the work regularly. Some of their concerts are traditional in format, but they also engage with experimental performance techniques. In January of 2019, for example, they performed Partita outdoors in Times Square to the accompaniment of the LEIMAY Ensemble, a contemporary dance troupe.


**Shaw and her Inspirations**

Caroline Shaw (b. 1982) was among the first composers to write for Roomful of Teeth. Her training at the time she began work on Partita, however, was oriented towards violin performance, not composition (or even vocal performance). She only entered a PhD program in composition in 2010. This also makes her unusual. Most previous Pulitzer winners were established figures with degrees, university positions, and long lists of major works. Shaw was essentially unknown.

The inspiration for Partita came from several sources. The first was Sol LeWitt’s Wall Drawing 305, which can be viewed at the MASS MoCA, where Roomful of Teeth completes an annual residency. Wall Drawing 305 is not a work of visual art in the traditional sense (just as Shaw’s Partita is not a traditional choir piece), and might be categorized as **conceptual art**. The “work”
is, in fact, a set of instructions intended to guide draftsmen in placing one hundred points on a wall. These instructions can be followed by anyone in any space to create the drawing. LeWitt was interested in randomness, and he sought to prevent the emergence of patterns in the visual product. No two realizations of any work in his *Wall Drawing* series will be the same.

Shaw was attracted to LeWitt's artistic vision, and she used several of his instructive texts in *Partita*. Her description of the work also ties it to *Wall Drawing* 305: “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.” However, she also cites Times Square as a source for the work:

Since my very first years living in New York City, I have spent a lot of time in Times Square. I used to walk through the area right after I moved there just to take in its unique combination of chaos and magic. It is truly unlike any place in the world. I love to see how many people come to the city and visit Times Square, who are always looking up in awe and confusion and wonder. It is that mix of confusion and wonder that is also deeply in Partita. . . I also like to think about the traffic patterns that move through Times Square, intersecting, crossing, and pausing in different ways, just like the text in the first movement. . .

Finally, Shaw took the title and form of *Partita* from the tradition of Baroque dance suites. Bach used the terms partita and suite almost interchangeably, although his partitas are somewhat looser in form. Shaw would have encountered the term partita as a violinist, since that is how Bach labelled his suites for solo violin. Three of Shaw’s movements share the names of typical Baroque dances: “Allemande,” “Sarabande,” and “Courante.” The final movement, titled “Passacaglia,” links *Partita* with a different Baroque form, for a passacaglia is a set of variations over a repeating bass line. We do not find passacaglias in genuine Baroque dance suites.
To get a sense of how Partita sounds, we will consider the last of the four movements, “Passacaglia.”7 The movement opens with the ensemble presenting a cycle of harmonies. They sing the same chord progression three times, but each time using a different vocal timbre. The first time through, they produce warm, rounded sounds. The second time, they shift timbres mid-pitch, switching from bright to subtle. The third time, they sing in a chest style derived from Bulgarian choral practice, producing a piercing and aggressive sound followed by a gasping sigh.

“Passacaglia” from Partita for 8 Voices. 7. Composer: Caroline Shaw Performance: Roomful of Teeth (2013)

Next we hear the chord progression again, but this time it is overlaid with oscillating figures in half of the voices. These carry into the subsequent section, providing the backdrop for a high melody sung in octaves and then for spoken text extracted from LeWitt’s Wall Drawing 305. During this passage we also hear harmonic overtone singing from the men, who manipulate low pedal tones to produce a rainbow of high-pitched sounds. One by one, the singers switch to reciting LeWitt’s text, until we are left with a cacophony of speaking voices. Isolated pitches extracted from the opening chord progression occasionally pierce the texture.

The cacophony is only resolved by the production of a grating sound derived from Korean pansori singing. This builds in strength before transforming into the opening chord, which inaugurates one final pass through the harmonic progression in chest voice. A second pass begins, but is derailed by the introduction of new chords. More overtone singing ornaments the final harmony of the piece.