

# American Songbook

*Lead Support provided by Holland America Line*

*Thursday, February 13, 2020 at 8:30 pm*

## Roomful of Teeth: COMPOSER NOTES AND SONG TEXTS

### **The Ascendant (2013/2016)**

*Composer: Wally Gunn (b. 1971)*

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. — *Wally Gunn*

#### *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.

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### **None More Than You (2018–19)**

Composer: Eve Beglarian (b. 1958)

My ideas for making a piece highlighting the very different vocal qualities of The Dessoff Choirs and Roomful of Teeth were crystallized by a metaphor I happened to come across in Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*: "Necessity is like a sequence of consonants only, but in order to utter them there must in addition be possibility. When this is lacking, when a human existence is brought to the pass that it lacks possibility, it is in despair, and every instant it lacks possibility, it is in despair."

I asked the members of Roomful of Teeth to try to utter the most famous text about words in Western culture, the opening of the Gospel of John, using only consonants. Of course, it is impossible to do this. In order to make sounds, we use air, and air has shape. But that's what Roomful of Teeth spends the first half of *None More Than You* trying to do:

*N th bgng wz th wrd,  
nd th wrd wz wth gd,  
nd th wrd wz gd.  
nwn hz vr sn gd.*

In response, the Dessoff choir sings lines from Whitman's *Song of the Rolling Earth*, which talk about how the words we need to live are everywhere around us, and even inside us:

*Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines?  
No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the ground and sea,  
They are in the air, they are in you.*

The music the Dessoff choir sings is inspired by the really stunning incarnation moment in the Credo of Josquin's *Missa Pange Lingua*. It's kind of ironic that *pange lingua* means "Tell, tongue" since Whitman says it's better not to:

*I will never henceforth have to do with the faith that tells the best,  
I will have to do only with that faith that leaves the best untold.*

In the course of the piece, the Dessoff singers help the Teeth singers move from the place of stringent necessity to a place of endless possibility, and the last part of the piece is nothing but vowels.

Many thanks to the members of Roomful of Teeth: Estelí, Martha, Caroline, Virginia, Eric, Thann, Dashon, and Cameron, and Brad Wells, the director; to Jeff Cook, who tracked and helped mix the pre-recorded track for this version of the piece; to Malcolm J. Merriweather and The Dessoff Choirs, who initiated the commission of this piece in honor of Walt Whitman's 200th birthday and to the New Music On The Point Festival, which co-commissioned the piece.

*None More Than You* is dedicated with deepest love to Meredith Ward, my chavruta and family member.

*Whoever you are! you are he or she for whom the earth is solid and liquid,  
You are she or he for whom the sun and moon hang in the sky,  
For none more than you are the present and the past,  
For none more than you is immortality.*

—Eve Beglarian

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## **Psychedelics (2017)**

Composer: William Britelle (b. 1976)

*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. —*William Brittelle*

### **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!

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## **The Isle (2016)**

Composer: Caroline Shaw (b. 1982)

*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 and 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)"

—*Caroline Shaw*

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)