

Composer & Citizen: Chamber Landscapes

# Roomful of Teeth

Sat 7 Mar 2020, 11.30am

Texts and translations

"Voices can do so much more." Brad Wells, Founder & Artistic Director

Programme order

**Wally Gunn** (b. 1971): *The Ascendant*

**Caroline Shaw** (b. 1982): 'Allemande' from Partita for eight Voices

**Toby Twining** (b. 1958): *Dumas' Riposte*

**Ted Hearne** (b. 1982): 'Your people' from *Coloring Book*

**Caroline Shaw**: 'Passacaglia' from Partita for eight Voices

**Brad Wells** (b. 1961): *Otherwise*

**Wally Gunn** (b. 1971): *The Ascendant*

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**



**Maria Zajkowski** is an award-winning poet, lyricist and librettist based in Melbourne. A regular collaborator with composer Wally Gunn, performed works include *The Ascendant* and her first libretto, *Moonlite* (2019). Her next poetry collection, *What we have except when we are lost*, with MTC Cronin, is forthcoming through Spuyten Duyvil, NY.

## **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.

## Caroline Shaw (b. 1982): 'Allemande' and 'Passacaglia' from Partita for eight Voices

Composed over three summers from 2009 to 2011, in collaboration with Roomful of Teeth during their residencies at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), Caroline Shaw's Partita for 8 Voices was nominated for a Grammy for Best Contemporary Classical Composition and received the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in Music. It is the only Pulitzer awarded to an a cappella vocal work, and Shaw, a singer in the ensemble, is the youngest composer ever to have received the prize.

The score's inscription reads: 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.

Each movement takes a cue from the traditional baroque suite in initial meter and tone, but the familiar historic framework is soon stretched and broken, through "speech, whispers, sighs, murmurs, wordless melodies and novel vocal effects" (Pulitzer jury citation). Roomful of Teeth's utterly unique approach to singing and vocal timbre originally helped to inspire and shape the work during its creation, and the ensemble continues to refine and reconsider the colors and small details with every performance. Allemande opens with the organized chaos of square dance calls overlapping with technical wall drawing directions of the artist Sol LeWitt,

suddenly congealing into a bright, angular tune that never keeps its feet on the ground for very long. There are allusions to the movement's intended simulation of motion and of space in the short phrases of text throughout, which are sometimes sung and sometimes embedded as spoken texture. Sarabande's quiet restraint in the beginning is punctured in the middle by an ecstatic, belted melody that resolves quietly at the end, followed soon after by the Inuit-inspired hocketed breaths of Courante. A wordless quotation of the American folk hymn "Shining Shore" appears at first as a musical non sequitur but later recombines with the rhythmic breaths as this longest movement is propelled to its final gasp. Passacaglia is a set of variations on a repeated chord progression, first experimenting simply with vowel timbre, then expanding into a fuller texture with the return of the Sol LeWitt text. At Passacaglia's premiere in 2009, there was spontaneous applause and cheering at the explosive return of the D-major chord near the end — so just letting you know, feel free to holler or clap any time if you feel like it.

Of the premiere of Shaw's Partita, *New York Magazine* wrote: "She has discovered a lode of the rarest commodity in contemporary music: joy." And it is with joy that this piece is meant to be received in years to come.

## Ted Hearne (b. 1982): 'Your people' from *Coloring Book*

V. Your people  
Your self and your people are indistinguishable  
from each other,  
really, in spite of the quarrels you may have,  
and your people are all people.

James Baldwin  
from an interview with James Elgrably in  
*The Paris Review* (1984)

## Brad Wells (b. 1961): *Otherwise*

*Otherwise* features Sardinian cantu a tenore-inspired singing, belting, and some yodeling all in a melange to highlight a baritone in full *bel canto* glory. The title comes from one of my favorite Jane Kenyon poems but uses no text, only non-

sense syllables as lyrics. It's a celebratory little vocalise for Roomful of Teeth.

**BRAD WELLS**

Aka Pygmy-influenced melody and jazz harmony intersect with three musico-poetic layers: the inner narrative of an immigrant or slave aboard a vessel at sea, the refrain "ultramarine and sienna," and Dumas' famous response to a racial slur.

**TOBY TWINING**

**ultramarine and sienna**

the calm the calm before ultramarine and sienna	my
sizzling white skies slide ultramarine and sienna	my mother
white of the eyes pierced by the light ultramarine and sienna	my mother was
black and white outlines image insists ultramarine and sienna	a mulatto
eyelids tight black silhouettes and white ultramarine and sienna	my grandmother
feelings imprint drift and linger ultramarine and sienna	my grandmother was
shadows charred at night bright ultramarine and sienna	a Negro
echoes intertwine scanning stimuli ultramarine and sienna	my great-grandmother was
demanding entry to our mind ultramarine and sienna	a monkey
eyes and heels released sink deep in the heat ultramarine and sienna	my family starts, you see,
black and white the calm the calm before ultramarine and sienna	where yours ends

the calm before the storm

- zszsanna ardó