

The music of Elizabeth Brown revels in paradox, but of a subtle kind. The strangeness of the music sneaks up on you; its liquid, mellifluous quality masks a far more radical stance. Seemingly irreconcilable instrumental timbres coexist peaceably: *shakuhachi* with string quartet, theremin with guitar, Partch instruments with theremin. The music is blessed with an old-fashioned gift for clear and singable melody . . . except for the fact that the tune keeps bending and melting. There is a genuine romantic sensibility, yet it exists in a soundworld that can only be avant-garde. But the *avant-gardisme* is in turn presented within a sensibility that is tender, sweet, and toy-like. In short it expresses a genuine innocence, something we encounter far too rarely in an era of postmodern irony.

Brown's is the classic American story of an artist boot-strapping herself from a culturally barren landscape into the leading artistic environment of her age. Born in a small town in southwestern Alabama (the "big city" nearby was Selma), she did not actually get a flute (her "life instrument") until she was sixteen. She had only the vaguest idea of composition, yet she remembers that once, early in her first piano lessons as a child, she began to fill manuscript with notes, not knowing what they really meant, but knowing they were essential and important (something she wouldn't do again until she was almost thirty). An initial exit to college in Mississippi was followed quickly by escape to the College Conservatory of Music at University of Cincinnati, and then graduate study at Juilliard, where she supported herself for years as a full-time usher at Lincoln Center. Along the way she established herself as a fixture of the freelance performance community in New York (an intensely competitive one). And she found herself composing, creating works that raised attention (she first came on my radar performing a beautiful work for *shakuhachi* and string trio, *Migration*, at a Bang on a Can marathon in the 1990s), and garnered increasing support, including such recognition as a commission from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, Asian Cultural Council, and US-Japan Friendship Commission.

One of the life-changing experiences of Brown's life was her discovery of the *shakuhachi* (Japanese bamboo flute). On an orchestra tour to Japan (her very first foreign travel destination, even before Canada) she first heard the instrument and a chance encounter allowed her to buy one. She showed an immediate talent not only for its performance, but for understanding the multiple and minute subtleties of the *Kinko* school, as presented to her by her teacher Ralph Samuelson. This as a result revealed to her the joy of exploring and "adopting" other instruments that had been ignored, discounted, or marginalized within the Western tradition—theremin and even *dan bao* (Vietnamese monochord).

Perhaps by now it is clear that Brown is very much a performer, as well as a composer. The two are smoothly blended; she would probably take being described simply as a "musician" as the ultimate compliment. Her performing self imbues her music with the following qualities:

- i) It is gracious and satisfying to play. As a successful professional Western flutist, her perfectionism has led her to be an outstanding performer on both *shakuhachi* and theremin as well. Thus, any player of her music is led to master her/his part because from the very outset it projects an understanding of the performative act that inspires confidence and rewards effort.

- ii) It is idiomatically, economically, and imaginatively notated. Even for more unconventional instruments, there is a precision and ingenuity in the symbols chosen or invented to evoke specific physical actions and concrete sonic results.

iii) It refuses to sacrifice flow or lyrical impulse on the altar of any too-abstract dogma or concept.

As a result, Brown is a “gentle maverick.” Though her music bespeaks an ironclad intelligence and steely will, and evidences ties to all sorts of American experimental traditions, it still desires to give pleasure to performer and listener alike. It is eclectic, but seamlessly so. Its many sources and influences blend into an organic whole that seems to have always been there, but which she fortuitously discovered. Above all, it is *personal*, the work of an unpretentious, deep, and questing spirit.

Examining this program in greater detail, we begin with *Seahorse* (2008), an immersion in the world of Partch. The title is quite literal, as the composer states that the piece is a portrait of the activities of the title’s animal. The sound of the deep throbbing and wheezing instruments, in just intonation, plunges us into what feels like an underwater environment. While unmistakable in its roots, Brown’s distinctive touch is also immediately evident. Part of this is the solo theremin, whose ethereal sound contrasts strongly to Partch’s self-proclaimed “corporeality.” It sings along with and floats above the propulsive accompaniment. (The composer notes that the way seahorses swim is very suggestive of how it feels to play the theremin; one has to be very still, and move minimally, which can create dramatically varying effects).

Brown also does things I’ve never heard before in Partch’s world—at the end of the first section, “Mosquito Waltz,” there is an extended passage for harmonic canon and guitar accompanying the theremin, producing a plucking and scraping that feels almost the equivalent of extended interior techniques for the piano. In the second and third movements, the “juststrokerods” provide sustained, glistening high pedals that extend the electronic timbre of the theremin into the work’s acoustic domain (and vice versa). The result is a genuine timbral fluidity (astute readers will notice it’s impossible to write about this piece without some punning!). Brown had a long creative association with Newband’s Dean Drummond (who passed away in 2013); this is her third work for the ensemble. (*Seahorse* was commissioned and premiered by Montclair State University’s student Partch Ensemble that Drummond directed, but Newband is featured in this recording). In every case she’s worked extensively on the instruments herself to intuitively understand their capacities and make them her own. At the same time, even a casual glance at the score shows a firm, indeed daunting grasp of the intonational mathematics involved, as well as an open but precise approach to notating music in this less traditional context.

Arcana (2004) was commissioned by Toby and Itzhak Perlman for the twenty-first birthday of their daughter Ariella, herself a flutist. Brown constructed the pre-recorded part in her home studio, and the sounds have enormous presence and scrupulousness, yet also sound refreshingly “homegrown.” There’s a slightly spooky quality to the sounds, but the effect is always tender; this haunted space seems more likely a toy shop or dollhouse. The dictionary definitions of “arcana” are on the score’s title page, and they include evocations of secrets, mysteries, elixirs, and specialized knowledge. The overall tone of the work is richly evocative of all but the last, and it is embodied in the mastery of the extended techniques carefully detailed on the following instructions pages. The piece is no “sonic catalogue,” however; the flute part is designed to seamlessly blend with the world of drones, creaks, and scratches that surrounds it. From the moment early in the work when the flute dissolves into a theremin, we are firmly enmeshed in Brown’s world.

Piranesi (2007) is the musical score to a multimedia collaboration with the composer's husband, Lothar Osterburg. A remarkable artist in his own right, Osterburg is one of the rare contemporary masters of the venerable technique of photogravure, and also makes stop-action animation films using detailed, playful models. *Piranesi* uses one of the latter as its visual component; it is an evocation of the world of the eponymous eighteenth-century Italian artist's engravings, most notable for their vast, elaborate and phantasmagorical prison interiors. Brown wrote the music based on Osterburg's original scenario for the video, but when he heard the result, he completely revised his plans to turn the video into a documentation of his work process (while still retaining the Piranesian imagery). Brown's music easily reconciles itself to such associations, but it also stands as an autonomous concert piece. Perhaps because of her experience as a flutist, she's unafraid to write into the stratosphere, and in fact the work uses the "extra" high octave available on the Moog Etherwave Pro theremin (which is no longer made). But at the same time, it explores the lowest register as well, a realm we don't usually associate with the instrument: listen to the opening of the third movement, "March," to hear a low, rumbling growl underlying the string's strict duple rhythms. Her use of microtones provides an expressive vibrato that lends the music a sound that's iconic, not just ornamental. The theremin is so smoothly blended with the strings that it feels like an extension of their sonority, yet simultaneously asserts itself with a genuinely "vocal" character. This piece above all in her *oeuvre* reminds me of Ravel in its scrupulous use of color and texture, while extending it into a new century with the delicate quarter-tone detunings.

3 Arias from "A Bookmobile for Dreamers" (2011) is a selection of music from another collaboration between Brown and Osterburg. In this case the lead "character" is a charming toy truck of the title, which rambles through settings as varied as a waterfall and the artists' own Brooklyn neighborhood (though rendered as a diorama landscape in Osterburg's signature visual style). In this case the music is a series of deceptively simple songs for the theremin and an out-of-tune (or "moldy" as described in the score) piano. This piece is in fact an "opera" in that it is designed to be a live performance of Brown on her instrument accompanying the film. But she is very much in the foreground, and the piece becomes a loving dialogue between her and the bookmobile, rendered quite immediate in the staging. The music projects a deliberate naïveté, and Brown gives full license to her uncanny knack of writing memorable, expressively deformed tunes.

The same sort of deformation is at work in *Atlantis* (2007) for acoustic guitar and theremin. The theremin exhibits its by-now-evident chameleon character: its capacity to blend seamlessly with any instrument of Brown's choice. But what's particularly striking about this piece is how from the first note we feel we are back in "Partch-world". The key is the use of a slide on the guitar, which gives it a flexible intonation that, while rooted in equal temperament, sounds nothing like. The guitarist strums on either side of the slide bar, up on one side and down on the other, creating a big circular motion, and is asked to slightly wobble the slide at all times. Brown says she thinks of it as above and below water; it's interesting that so many of Brown's pieces suggest dreams and submersion, because this piece also evokes submarine imagery, liquid in both its timbres and drifting pitches.

With *Mirage* (2008) we move to the other great instrumental love of Brown's life mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the *shakuhachi*. The Japanese bamboo flute was developed with a solo literature as a means of meditation for Zen monks, and during the Edo period became a fixture of secular chamber music as well. Brown is experienced in the entire literature of the instrument; indeed, she is one of the major American performers on the instrument (though she has so

deeply assimilated Japanese norms of modesty to never advertise the fact). This inside knowledge of the *shakuhachi* is evident from the first moment of *Mirage*, when an iconic riff is answered by the strings and immediately put into a different harmonic context from any traditional practice. And within a minute a gentle waltz emerges, surely the first time that dance has ever accompanied the *shakuhachi*.

If one examines the score, one is struck by Brown's notational confidence. The *shakuhachi* part is written in Western notation, but the Japanese solfège is included above every note. And all the traditional techniques (including the fluttering *korokoro*) are clearly noted so that any player conversant with the literature will be able to perform with security. Essential to the instrument's character is the way that individual notes are shaped and inflected, and Brown not only sculpts every note and gesture on the flute, but crafts the quartet's parts so that they have the same sort of timbral and pitch malleability. The final product is deeply rooted in Japanese practice, yet also fresh in its "otherness." This "dual-citizenship" was obviously convincing to an expert and critical Japanese audience, as it won a major award in 2010 in Tokyo (the SGCM Composition Competition), an almost unheard-of feat for a foreigner.

Saved for last is perhaps the *coup de grace* of the entire program, *Shinshōfūkei*, or *An Imagined Landscape* (2010). In this work Brown makes a particularly daring leap. The instrumentation is "an orchestra of traditional Japanese instruments." This is not exactly a "traditional Japanese orchestra." That would be an ensemble to perform *gagaku*, the ancient imperial court music that dates back to the Heian period. New works written for this formation are not common, but exist, and have a modern tradition to play upon (most notably Takemitsu's *In an Autumn Garden*). But Pro Musica Nipponia is a group that advocates new works that show a tie to the overarching Japanese musical tradition, yet in new orchestrations and arrangements. Brown answers this challenge by scoring for three *shakuhachis*, *nohkan* (the transverse flute from *noh* theater), *shō* (reed mouth organ, from *gagaku*), *shamisen* (banjo-like instrument), three *kotos* (13- and 21-string), and percussion of *ko-tsuzumi* and *binzasara* (small hand drum—from *noh* and *Kabuki*—and a wood rattle, respectively).

The work is in four compact movements, each evocative of a meditative state, though that does not preclude action. The first movement, "Stroll garden," evokes a contemplative walk, and the second, "Aged, mossy rock," pauses to focus attention. In each case, though, the music is rich with detail and activity. The latter is driven by insistent percussion rhythms. The third movement, "Praise poetry—landscape haiku," features the *shakuhachis* in an exchange of poetic statements, thoroughly in character with Japanese literary and musical tradition. The final movement, "Departure," recaptures the energy of the opening, and suggests what the composer calls "longing, and apprehension for a new beginning."

There are melodic twists and harmonic progressions that are uniquely the composer's, and never would be found in a traditional Japanese piece. And yet a fundamental principle of Japanese (and, in fact, most East Asian) music is in play here, i.e., the idea of heterophony, of a single line that is ornamented and placed expressively out of phase with itself so as to generate counterpoint. All the performance techniques are rooted in traditional practice, yet they are also extended so as to evoke a fresh sonic world. Brown's success in achieving this feat from outside the culture is remarkable, and it was rewarded by receiving the Grand Prize in the 2011 Makino Yukata no Kai Concours, Brown's second major Japanese composition prize.

So concludes this tour of Brown's musical world, one of dreamlike sounds, images, textures, colors, and harmonies. One sees the literature of the past, especially the romantic era, transformed through its colored filter. One also glimpses a musical future that is fresh and imaginative, but never afraid of beauty, nor of humane warmth.

—Robert Carl

Robert Carl is chair of the composition department at the Hartt School, University of Hartford, and the author of Terry Riley's In C (Oxford University Press).

Elizabeth Brown (born 1953 in Camden, Alabama) combines a composing career with an extremely diverse performing life, playing flute, shakuhachi, and theremin in a wide variety of musical circles. Her musical language is shaped by this unique group of instruments and experiences. Brown's music has been heard in Japan, the former Soviet Union, Colombia, Australia, and Vietnam, as well as across Europe and the United States. She has received grants, awards, and commissions from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Barlow Foundation, the Asian Cultural Council, Music From Japan, the Japan/US Friendship Commission, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, the Greenwall Foundation, NYFA, Orpheus, St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, and Newband. Brown has been a fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center, the Liguria Study Center, and the MacDowell Colony, and was Artist-in-Residence at the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music, in the Grand Canyon, in Maine's Acadia National Park, and in Isle Royale National Park. She received a Masters Degree in Flute Performance from The Juilliard School in 1977.

www.ElizabethBrownComposer.com

Newband was founded in 1977 by composer Dean Drummond and flutist Stefani Starin. With Drummond's invention of the 31-tone zoomoozophone in 1978, Newband began exploring microtonality and alternative tuning systems, developing an innovative and eclectic repertoire influenced by classical, jazz, and world music. In 1990, Newband received custodianship of the original Harry Partch Instrument Collection. Newband concerts present a stage filled with amazing musical instruments played by an ensemble of virtuosos who move from instrument to instrument with ease.

www.newband.org

Since 2004, the **Momenta Quartet** has collaborated with more than 80 living composers, presenting concerts juxtaposing contemporary works from widely divergent aesthetics with music from the classical canon. Active in their home base of New York City, Momenta has performed and lectured at Temple, Cornell, Columbia, Yeshiva, and Hawaii Pacific universities; Bryn Mawr, Swarthmore, and Haverford colleges; The Mannes School of Music and the Boston Conservatory, in addition to performances in England, Singapore, and Indonesia. They have recorded for Centaur, Furious Artisans, MRS Classics, and Albany Records.

www.momentaquartet.com

Tokyo-based **Pro Musica Nipponia** is a group of leading composers and top-rank musicians devoted to performing a wide-ranging repertoire of classical and contemporary compositions from both Japan and the West. All music is performed on traditional Japanese musical instruments.

www.promusica.or.jp/english/index.html

Guitarist/composer **Benjamin Verdery** has performed and recorded worldwide with such diverse artists as Andy Summers, Frederic Hand, William Coulter, Leo Kottke, Anthony Newman, Jessye Norman, Paco Peña, Hermann Prey, and John Williams. He is chair of the guitar department at Yale University.

www.benjaminverdery.com

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Archipelago. Included on *Dance of the Seven Veils*. Music and Arts CD 4931.

Blue Minor: Chamber Music by Elizabeth Brown. Troy 627.

Migration. Included on *Bang on a Can Live, Vol. 2*. New World Records/CRI 646.

Travelogue. Included on *Eyewitness*. Innova 556.

Seahorse

Producer and engineer: Adam Abeshouse

Recorded January 10, 2013 at Leshowitz Recital Hall, Montclair State University, New Jersey.

Piranesi

Producer: Elizabeth Brown

Engineer: John Gurrin

Recorded March 27, 2008 at Issue Project Room, Brooklyn, NY.

Arcana

Producer and engineer: Elizabeth Brown

Recorded December 2004 in Brooklyn, NY.

3 Arias from "A Bookmobile for Dreamers"

Producer and engineer: Elizabeth Brown

Recorded March 2012 at the Liguria Study Center, Bogliasco, Italy.

Atlantis

Producer and engineer: Adam Abeshouse

Recorded January 11, 2013 in Westchester, NY.

Mirage

Producer: Elizabeth Brown

Engineer: John Gurrin

Recorded March 27, 2008 at Issue Project Room, Brooklyn, NY.

An Imagined Landscape

Producer and engineer: Makino Yutaka no Kai

Recorded January 29, 2011 in Kioi Hall, Tokyo, Japan.

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MIRAGE

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1. *Seahorse* (2008) 9:09
for theremin and Partch Instruments
Newband: Elizabeth Brown, theremin; Dean Drummond, guitar 1; Jared Soldiviero, harmonic canon 1; Dave Broom, chromolodeon; Bill Ruyle, diamond marimba; Joe Bergen, bass marimba; Joe Fee, zoomoozophone and juststrokerods
2. *Arcana* (2004) 9:32
for flute and recorded sound
Elizabeth Brown, flute
3. *Piranesi* (2007) 13:50
for theremin and string quartet
Elizabeth Brown, theremin; Momenta Quartet: Annaliesa Place and Sharon Roffman, violins; Stephanie Griffin, viola; Joanne Lin, cello
4. *Three Arias from "A Bookmobile for Dreamers"* (2011) 6:55
for theremin and recorded sound
*Bookmusic * Swamp Aria * Lullabye*
Elizabeth Brown, theremin
5. *Atlantis* (2007) 6:52
for theremin and amplified classical guitar
Elizabeth Brown, theremin; Ben Verdery, amplified classical guitar played with slide bar
6. *Mirage* (2008) 11:42
for shakuhachi and string quartet
Elizabeth Brown, shakuhachi; Momenta Quartet
- 心象風景 *Shinshōfūkei*, or *An Imagined Landscape* (2010) 14:37
for Japanese traditional instrument orchestra
7. Stroll garden 3:54
8. Aged, mossy rock 2:43
9. Praise poetry—landscape haiku 4:41
10. Departure 3:04
Pro Musica Nipponia: Makoto Takei and Takashi Harago, 1.8 shakuhachi; Hiromu Motonaga, 2.1 shakuhachi; Kohei Nishikawa, nohkan; Yuji Nishihara, shou; Chizuko Yamazaki, shamisen; Chie Sakurai and Keiko Hisamoto, koto; Noriko Tamura, 21-string koto; No Kyeong Soon, kotsuzumi and binzasara; Yasushi Inada, conductor

TT: 73:00