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AMERICAN COMPOSER: ELIZABETH BROWN

by Kyle Gann

This composer creates a quilt of non sequiturs that's as beautiful as the Mona Lisa—winking.

Elizabeth Brown writes the only music I know of in which the flute might be playing "London Bridge Is Falling Down" while the cello is sliding through a long glissando underneath, yet nothing feels incongruous. There's a kind of imaginary quality to her music. It's as if not only each piece but each passage is based on some strange conceit: a bird sings while a pianist plays Mozart and a cellist shakes like a bowl of Jell-O. Each conceit morphs into the next in a stream of non sequiturs, and yet every juncture is smoothly blended, no seam visible. It's elegant, quiet, thoughtful, well-crafted music, and as bizarre as hell. Imagine walking into a Magritte painting: fish protrude from the vase instead of flowers, the chairs are bolted to the ceiling, but the wallpaper is lovely and the furnishings tasteful. That's a little what listening to Elizabeth Brown is like.

The Philip Glass-ish alternation of two notes, or two chords, is a typical Brownian starting point, or sometimes ending point. Ah, you think at first, she's a postminimalist. But while her framework may be postminimalist, her delight is in interrupting it, obscuring it, lulling you into one expectation and slipping off someplace else. Against that restful ostinato odd dissonances enter. You think you misheard at first, but the dissonances stick around and create their own points of stability. And, creepiest of all, some of those pitches start to waver and glide, and the music goes in and out of focus, and you'd think the vinyl record was warped except that you're listening to live performers on the stage in front of you. For another pervasive Brownian device is the glissando, a trait that she shares with two other recent composers, Lois V Vierk and Gloria Coates.

In Vierk's and Coates's music, the glissandos are part of the overall process of the piece, and become fairly constant, sweeping up and down the ranges of the instruments (foregrounded in Vierk's music, a background in Coates's symphonies). For Brown, the glissandos are smaller, and decoratively blur the edges of otherwise conventional harmonies and melodies, an even more disconcerting effect. As with Vierk, Brown's original inspiration is Japanese music. She plays not only the flute but also the shakuhachi, a Japanese wooden flute, and frequently writes for it in an otherwise Eurocentric chamber context. Her

maintained by Dean Drummond's Newband ensemble. Those instruments play forty-three pitches to the octave, which give Brown's sliding tonality even more play than usual, and she augments Partch's microtonality with effects such as a tremolo on a synthesizer being gradually bent by turning the pitch wheel. The third movement, "Alabama Rondo," opens with a rousing rendition of "Oh, I've come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee," but uses a common melodic tic to segue into a quotation from Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. (Brown was raised in Alabama, though she studied flute with new-music star Samuel Baron at Juilliard and now lives in the sedate Park Slope area of Brooklyn.)

The strangeness of the glissandos and unusual instruments (besides shakuhachi, she's included glass harmonica, toy accordions, Native American flute, and theremin in classical chamber ensembles) is a kind of wry cover for the real strangeness of Brown's music, its playful stream of consciousness. For example, halfway through *Liguria* for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano (1999), the piano suddenly bursts forth with "Au clair de la lune, / Mon ami Pierrot," which is quickly re-submerged into the original texture—although afterward the tune continues to haunt the woodwinds. It's a quality that occasionally calls Charles Ives to mind, and in fact Brown's *Lost Waltz* for chamber orchestra (1997) comes closer to the type of musical thinking one finds in Ives's Third Symphony than any other piece I can think of.

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glissandos, then, notated via an extensive but commonsensical array of symbols, include mainly the pitch bends that occur at the beginning and ending, and sometimes in the middle, of notes in a shakuhachi melody.

And so in a Brown chamber piece (and most of her works are for the chamber medium—"intimate, lyrical and melancholy," as she characterizes them), a facade of normalcy can dissolve quickly. Take *Figures in a Landscape*, a 1995 work for piano quintet, though with bass instead of second violin. The harmonies in the opening are just as tonal and lovely as Copland in his mildest populist vein. A few minutes in, however, the violin line starts wavering up and down in pitch by quarter tones. (In performance instructions, she even exhorts players to sound "like a slightly warped 78 r.p.m. record." Will future composers write, "Stick on this note like a scratched CD?") The piano comes in with straight-pitched interpolations as though oblivious to the fact that the violinist sounds as though he's fallen underwater. An accompaniment in pizzicato quarter notes tries to give a matter-of-fact clarity to an inescapably eerie scene.

That's one fish-in-the-flower-vase moment. Others even more playful come in *Delirium* of 1997, one of the two works Brown has written for the fantastic Harry Partch instruments

As with Ives, though more melancholy, there's an impression of tonal normalcy in *Lost Waltz*, a quiet C-sharp minor always in danger of breaking into A major, and occasionally slipping into B-flat major without explanation. High string melodies worthy of Mahler float perilously above glissandos in the low strings, and seeming irrelevancies—"Zip-a-dee-doo-dah" in the clarinet, for instance—dot the landscape. Several times, just when the music seems permanently off its rocker, that haunting C-sharp minor theme quietly re-announces itself as though nothing had happened, centering the music back where it started. And once, in the middle of the piece, the "lost waltz" of the title suddenly finds itself in a heady swirl of 3/4.

These understated surprises draw us into complicity with the composer, as though Brown were whispering intimacies for our ears alone. We're used to surrealism being a colorful, gaudy, attention-getting style, but no one expects a smooth, introverted surrealism. There are lots of self-consciously "postmodern" composers writing fragmented collages meant to provoke us. But by keeping her musical surface serene and beautiful, and sliding off into truly weird directions underneath, Brown seems to look at each individual listener with a cocked eyebrow, to see if we got the joke. ■