"*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." —Caroline Shaw, *Partita for 8 voices*

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Four Dances, Eight Voices:

A Cultural-Semiotic Approach to Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 voices*

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Introduction

Caroline Shaw's Pulitzer Prize-winning composition *Partita for 8 voices* is a work

in four movements, each titled with the name of a Baroque dance. Drawing on historical

forms, modern harmonies, and global vocal techniques, Shaw eloquently marries the

ancient and the contemporary, the traditional and the novel. This paper will explore the

semiotic effects of this marriage and what this confluence of elements means in the

modern age.

The four movements of *Partita* are Allemande, Sarabande, Courante, and

Passacaglia. In suites and partitas by Bach and Handel, a more traditional ordering of

the first three dances would be allemande, courante, and sarabande (with a movement

or two bookending the middle movements). Shaw's ordering is perhaps influenced by

symphonic forms; a fast first movement is followed by a slow second and a playful

third. The Passacaglia often finds its place at the end of a dance suite, especially for keyboard instruments.

It is important to note that these Baroque dances are themselves perverted versions of earlier forms. In the Renaissance these were mainly courtly dances, and they were intended to be danced to. As the music accompanying these dances became well-known, the music ceased to be functional and instead these dances became signifiers of the court, aristocracy, and the high class. They were forms in which to work, to manipulate, and subvert—for example, Haydn's minuets feature prominent rests that delay expected material and would therefore have been considered undanceable in the Renaissance.

Shaw's interpretations of these forms are in this spirit of structural malleability—a meta-subversion hundreds of years after the original shift in signification. The modern connotation of such dances includes a learnedness or class distinction, as does the majority of the Western classical cannon. The contemporary listener would never expect such movements to be played anywhere except the concert stage—being asked to dance to any piece of music by art musicians would likely startle all but the most radical of 21st century audiences. Dances are abstractions—modes of operation and form. They are no longer physical acts.

Shaw use sonly the structure, meter, and prototypical rhythms of these dances to subvert their modern implications while maintaining a semblance of recognizability. To

utilize older harmonies, embellishments, melodies, or timbres could render her music stifled or claggy. The older elements lend a sense of coherence to a modern audience while the newer elements provide interest and firmly place the work into the contemporary musical-cultural paradigm. It is the combination that allows for both accessibility and intrigue.

The a cappella ensemble itself is often a signifier of older Western musical styles —far more likely to evoke images of churches and religiosity than groundbreaking compositions in new music (although of course exceptions such as music by Meredith Monk exist). This is countered by the use of microphones. The present, full-bodied mix of the voices in both live and recorded performance is a sign associated with contemporary popular music. It connotes vocal jazz, Top 40 music, and collegiate a cappella. A composition by any composer, from Hildegard to Brahms, would be at least partially modernized by a close-mic recording. The pristine quality of the recording also prevents the borrowed elements of world music from sounding like anthropological or ethnomusicological data—they are vibrant and crystalline, not masked by the stereotypical static of a field recording.

Allemande

The piece begins with a set of square dance calls describing the dance steps of traditional allemande choreography and uses the prototypical allemande rhythm (two sixteenth pickups followed by a strong downbeat) to present them. This initial

impression immediately brings together the two disparate worlds of Baroque art music and contemporary American folk music. The whirlwind of dance calls spirals into an eminently danceable theme, quickly obfuscated by unrhythmicized text from Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings. The theme is then implied by partial harmonies decorated with pitch bending autochthonous to the Georgian polyphonic singing tradition.

A brief breakdown follows, stacking varied linear vocal lines: melodies with pansori-influenced tails, unrhythmicized speech, rhythmicized speech, unrhythmicized plainchantesque melodies, and a repetitive rhythmic arpeggiation. The breakdown escalates to a return of the allemande rhythm, this time pitched and contextualized by an ascending progression of tertian and secundal harmonies that cascade into unrhythmicized melodies.

Another implication of the theme follows and then vanishes into an art music rendition of a chord-scale theory V–I cadence; from this point on there is no sense of a regular, danceable beat. Shaw linearly stacks unrhythmicized melodies over chords in B Ionian/Lydian (over B Major) followed by E Harmonic Major/Minor (over E Major), creating the impression of a dominant-tonic relationship while using melodies not quite fitting the audience's expectation. The melodies over strong held vowels give an impression of a folk music from a European culture unknown to modern anthropology —there is a combination of familiarity and mystery even though only previously known elements are combined.

Sarabande

The main motive for the second movement is a humming, pansori-abstracted gesture that falls, rises, and emerges on a specific pitched vowel. Harmonies and melodies are placed and maneuvered around this gesture which also serves as the rhythmic foundation of the movement.

One of the signature markers of a sarabande is its continual emphasis on the second beat of a triple meter. In Shaw's Sarabande, this emphasis is present in nearly every bar, but the idea of the triple meter becomes extended to indefinite duration. The first several bars are in triple meter but by the middle of the movement this sense of regularity has been lost, replaced by plainchantesque melodies over (and under) drones emerging from the pansori-abstracted gesture.

These melodies begin in a western European straight-tone style which is quickly supplanted by unison group belting by the lower four voices. This tone quality is markedly unfamiliar within the Western art music context—contemporary Western listeners are likely most familiar with the tone from musical theater and some perhaps from Eastern European folk musics.

The motivic gesture from the beginning returns, followed by a fade out of a pseudo-canon between overtone singing and humming over a B major chord. This pseudo-canon evokes a large space—as though a high-pitch chant has a delayed echo in

the top of a steeple. This final section acts as a microcosm of the movement, working from the pansori-abstracted gesture through plaintchantesque melodies.

Courante

The courante is by far the most rhythmical movement. Its most fundamental component is an inhale-exhale gesture inspired by Inuit throat singing traditions. After a full exposition based on this breathing gesture, a hymn tune is introduced—"Shining Shore" by George F. Root. Immediately after this introduction the two elements are simultaneously developed and interwoven into what could very broadly be considered an ABC_{AB} form.

This C section features significant hocketing, techniques from Tuvan throat singing, and an accelerando that terminates at nearly three times the speed of the movement's opening. There is also an extended development featuring parallel fifth motion in the lower four voices against the gestural drone of the inhales and exhales—a juxtaposition which places indigenous American traditions and European organum in close contact. This unites two old forms of music making inside a modern harmonic structure, adding to the paradoxical feeling of simultaneous archaicness and contemporaneity of the piece.

This feeling is built upon in the following section as Shaw reiterates the hymn tune, harmonizing it in the upper four voices as the roles reverse and the lower voices take over the gestural drone. The breathing gesture is quick, making the music

expressive of excitement and energy. However, the hymn tune lines are relatively slow and are much higher in pitch space, lending them a sense of lightness and sanctimoniousness. This contrast of sacred with what may come across as primal to the Western ear exemplifies another paradoxical balancing act present in the vertical layering of *Partita*.

Passacaglia

A prototypical passacaglia is built on the foundation of a ground bass which can be varied and have variations stacked on top of it. These variations within the ground bass are most often modulation, diminution, and augmentation. In the first three iterations of the ground bass of Shaw's passacaglia, there is variation through vowel changes ([ɔ], [ɐ], [æ]), dynamic (p, mf, ff), and registral shift (all mixed, chest to head, belt to semi-pitched exhale).

In the next section rhythmicized and unrhythmicized melodic cells begin to intermingle and more text from Sol LeWitt is introduced. The music begins to crumble into a disorderly chaos until there is only overlapping speech. The speaking continues as series of unrhtyhmicized pitches imply the presence of the ground bass, starting off sparsely and growing denser. At the climax of the piece there is an ensemble vocal fry glissando from speech to a forte [æ] iteration of the ground bass.

Upon the return of the ground bass, it becomes unclear whether it was ever really gone. There is an implication that the ground bass was always there, whether

unnoticed or simply hidden. In fact, it was masked by rhythmic alteration, formant filtering techniques, and Tuvan throat singing timbres. On occasion this masking is so strong as to essentially render the ground bass unhearable to most audiences.

The final instance of the ground bass is altered and ends partway through, an uncharacteristic ending for a passacaglia. The motive could be considered to be pitch-centric around D, and yet it ends on E-flat, another surprising twist. This is coupled with a tongue formant filter that gradually reduces low overtones and strengthens high ones, recalling the end of the second movement.

Conclusion

The defining characteristic of Shaw's writing in the *Partita* is its combination of novelty with tradition. The forms and structures are recognizable as established over centuries to the educated listener, while the sounds themselves and their digital nature impart an entirely different meaning to any Western listener. This combination of signifiers generates a new set of compound meanings defined by contemporary listenership.