Abstractions Come Home: A review of "interstices," by Laurelyn Whitt and "Sound Weave," by Theta Naught and Alex Caldiero

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_abbott/37/
I’m reading Laurelyn Whitt’s beautiful new book in the light of the setting sun. A breeze thinks itself into desultory existence. A plume of smoke drifts over Utah Lake from a fire in Goshen. I decide to listen to some jazz while I read. But when I reach for a CD that feels wrong. The poetry is its own music; and the cricket-structured gathering twilight is perfect for these delicate poems about borderlands, interstices, ecotones, ambiguous creatures, immigrants hopeful and uneasy, displaced natives, uprooted languages, lost and remembered companions.

A poem about exactly what I’m experiencing this evening, “Between Day and Night,” evokes the tentative twilight shapes that contradict “the univocal and dogmatic,” and ends with lines both troubling and promising:

and appearances
are all that they seem.
There’s a weight of philosophical consideration in this poem, a weight natural for the philosopher Whitt is, but because she’s a poet as well, it’s a weight lightened and made agile by Nietzsche’s dancing spirit.

“Duet for Full Moon and Train” also probes the haunting line between appearances and reality, between consciousness and nature, between nature as a construct of poetry and words as elemental sounds:

That night in the Blue Ridge foothills, eyes full of moon and ears of train . . . I strung words between the moon & a train,

watching the slack go swiftly out of them

as they pulled taut, then began to fray.

When they snapped a spill of words was released forever to the dark seas coupling earth & sky.

They will dissolve there, as language should, into the elements.

A whole set of poems burns with the terrors and strategies of immigration and emigration, themes Whitt is especially attuned to as the descendent of Sicilians and Native Americans. Poems about animals (a fox, amphibians, a beloved lost dog, deer standing on the grounds of the dynamite factory poised on the fault line at the mouth of Spanish Fork Canyon) manifest an uncanny connection with other creatures. And poems like “Facing West,” which I take as the story of a widow in the grip of Alzheimer’s, simply rip a reader’s heart out:

Her body goes slack; then faces west again.

Yet there are times when
she calls out for him

his name lost long ago;

the imprint of her husband’s body, unshakable.

She remembers and trembles, the way a feral dog might, carrying with it still

the touch of hands on its muzzle

the sound of a certain voice;

an irreversible learning.

When the night finally falls and I can no longer read, I listen to a recording Whitt made of the poems, a response to the request of a sculptor sharing a residency in Maine. The voice is soft, precise, unassuming, powerful and personal. Intimate.

*Sound Weave*
Theta Naught / Alex Caldiero
Differential Records, 2006
$12.00

While there is plenty to read and see in the liner notes of *Sound Weave* — a set of striking blue-toned photos of mountains and lakes, night photos of a full moon
and lightning over a city, and the texts of Alex Caldiero’s poems printed in white over the photos, there is no way around the fact that vibrations of breath and gut and steel and wood and electronics are the essence of this brilliant collaboration between a self-styled “Sonosopher” and a group of musicians whose name “Theta Naught” and the titles of several tracks (“fibonacci’s pi,” “axioms that satisfy”) reveal their obsession with mathematics (Darren Corey – Drums, Greg Corey – Lap Slide, Peter Romney – Cello, Jared Stanfield – Keys, Ryan Stanfield – Bass).

Theta Naught most often performs without a vocalist, and Caldiero doesn’t work regularly with musicians (although he has a history of occasional collaboration with dancers and sculptors and musicians). Still, when they got together for a performance at Utah Valley State College a year or so ago, the overflow audience could scarcely contain its excitement at an intriguing weaving of sounds and ideas. The current CD, finely engineered, a thing of aural beauty, necessarily lacks some of the sparks of the live performance, but has its own special and substantial delights.

Improvisation between these musicians and poet begins with someone laying down a groove. Sometimes it’s the voice, sometimes the bass, or the drums and the cello, and the instruments often trade off as the groove continues; but each of these songs, whoever’s got the groove, features ongoing improvisational conversation in the context of that groove. Neither poet nor musicians knew what song or poem the other would offer when they began to record a track for this album on a long day last March, but once one or the other laid down a groove – a rhythm and sonority and minimal melody – the pattern was set that played out over the next minutes. Caldiero’s poems stretch to the measure of the music and the music adjusts to the words; just how the two are transformed by working together is apparent in the second CD of music without words and the one poem, “to harpo marx in heaven,” done a cappella.

“Who we are is how we sound together,” intones Caldiero. He repeats the declaration, breaks it into individual syllables, letters even, stretching and clipping the sounds while the electric bass and then drums add layers, interwoven with keyboard effects and bent magic from the lap steel. There is meaning, of course, in the sentence, just as there is meaning in measured notes and numbers. But marrying music and words, at least in this case, diminishes the chord of linguistic meaning and enhances the voice, with its articulated words, as sound among other sounds.

“Won’t you sit down,” the poet asks, his voice rising in question. The cello’s deep, constant line rises, and, conditioned by the voice, we hear a question. The bass breaks tone like a voice, and the voice growls assent. Vocal cords and cello strings resonate the same sustained note. Abundant rhymes “In the Wee Hours” (“Yr plumbing’s bad / Yr drumming’s mad / You’re just like yr dad / & his dad & his dad / & the mother you never had . . .”) work like musical harmonies; and the hearing mind feels like its abstractions have come home.
interstices is available from Ken Sanders Rare Books or from Logan House Press (see their website).

Sound Weave is available from Slowtrain Music, Orion's Music, Sam Weller's Zion Bookstore, Ken Sanders Rare Books, Vagabond's Café, and in Provo, Velour Live Music, or from Theta Naught's website.

Photo of Theta Naught bow at cross-cut purposes by Don LaVange

Photo of Alex Caldiero performing with Theta Naught at UVSC by Don LaVange