

## **Roomful of Teeth: The Genesis for a New Shape and Sound**

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Describing Roomful of Teeth proves quite a challenge. The album, a collective effort of seven composers, eight vocalists, and one director, starkly diverges from typical choral music for an unprecedented audio-sensory experience. Put simply, listening to Roomful of Teeth feels like reading a book you just can't put down.

The album opens softly, like a candle being lit for the first time, with operatic chordal bursts in "Passacaglia." Yet, this traditional, open vowel transforms abruptly into a wailing and closed one. Unconventional vowels are quintessential to the sound of Roomful of Teeth, particularly those produced with atypical mouth and throat shapes. While such experimentation is prevalent throughout, it is particularly glaring in the yodeling of "Cesca's View," the closed-to-open humming in "Sarabande," and the hard vocalizing through clenched teeth in "Montmartre."

"Passacaglia" is only the introduction to this first way Roomful of Teeth deviates from choral and a cappella norms. Like "Allemande," the ninth track, "Passacaglia" features another unorthodox technique: an inserted spoken monologue, where a monotonous voice recites a string of nonsensical numbers. This stand-alone narration in "Passacaglia" is merely an introduction to that of "Allemande." "Allemande" uses narration as its framework, with speakers first instructing a dance, then reciting geometric formulas, and finally speaking in cacophony. As components like a slow bassline are added to the background of the recitations, "Allemande" builds. Eventually, the stage is set for a solo soprano to sing the lyrics "round and around." The vocalists then repeat this staggered, self-referential phrase, evoking the listener's feeling of being physically surrounded by voices. The effect for me was one of deep intimacy, as if I were being woven into the central fabric of the piece.

Constructed intimacy allows the album's experimental moments, such as the breathy, sensual rhythmic exhalations in Caroline Shaw's "Courante," to draw listeners in with invasive idiosyncrasy. But "Courante" does not just establish closeness: it draws us in with the intention of dragging us along on a completely through-composed journey. Through-composition is shaped by a linear string of seemingly random sections characterized by tempo changes and starkly different motifs. Ultimately, the technique creates a sense of forward momentum.

While many of Roomful of Teeth's pieces are through-composed, "Amid the Minotaurs" most exemplifies this lack of cyclical structure. We are thrown between whole new worlds as motifs fragment rapidly. The first, a moving, ocean-like melody, transitions into a shout-chorus framed by what sounds like a sing-songy nursery rhyme. This section transforms from one that is jazzy and soulful, to a textured and rhythmic chorus of shouted vowels, to a segment sung robustly in unison, to finally a fragment distinguished by loud, passionate belting.

Through-composition resurfaces again in the tenth track, “Quizassa.” In “Quizassa,” just when I thought the movement of the piece was happily settling into a danceable, rhythmic motif, I was abruptly thrown into a different section characterized by chromatic notes reminiscent of plucked strings from a violin. This far into the album, the feeling of being dragged along from theme to unrelated theme struck me as exhausting: it required me to intellectualize the music’s complexity rather than simply enjoy it. However, though these rich pieces require much attention to follow, I was not compelled to stop listening. This speaks to the power that Roomful of Teeth’s alluring music possesses: constructed intimacy, curiosity and through-composition fuel its unwavering control over its listeners.

Conversely, it should be noted that not every song on Roomful of Teeth is through-composed. While only one piece, “Run Away,” is arranged purely conventionally with mirrored verses and choruses, many other pieces employ a cyclical structure. “Ansa Ya,” for example, opens with a vocalized, inflection-dependent sound most closely related to that of a cuckoo clock. While this final song on the album builds to a climax of full-bodied harmonies steeped in intense feeling, it does not end on such a grand note, and instead returns back to the jarring, rhythmic cuckoo-clock pattern. In addition, “The Orchard” ends in the same way it begins, with a chordal movement in the lower register and a toggling two-note repeating pattern by the sopranos. Finally, “A E I O U”, like a pendulum, continues to return to vocalized vowels of its title throughout the piece.

Overall, Roomful of Teeth is an album completely dependent on the concept of shape, with respect to the physical shape of vocalists’ mouths and to the diversity in structural arcs. Though I would not call the album “easy listening,” its shapes give it a purpose beyond its music: it tells a story that is more important in its movement than in its content. Like twists and turns in a novel’s plot, the exploratory medley of techniques embarks on a journey into a new, genre-less realm of a cappella music that is beautifully written and masterfully executed.