



**Attacca Quartet with
Caroline Shaw
September 9, 2023**

PROGRAM NOTES

Support for the program notes is generously provided by Roberta Viviano.

**MUSIC OF CAROLINE SHAW
(B. GREENVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA, 1982)**

Blueprint (2016)

Caroline Shaw writes:

The Aizuri Quartet's name comes from "aizuri-e," a style of Japanese woodblock printing that primarily uses a blue ink. In the 1820s, artists in Japan began to import a particular blue pigment known as "Prussian blue," which was first synthesized by German paint producers in the early 18th century and later modified by others as an alternative to indigo. The story of *aizuri-e* is one of innovation, migration, transformation, craft, and beauty. *Blueprint*, composed for the incredible Aizuri Quartet, takes its title from this beautiful blue woodblock printing tradition as well as from that familiar standard architectural representation of a proposed structure: the blueprint. This piece began its life as a harmonic reduction — a kind of floor plan — of Beethoven's string quartet Op. 18, No. 6. *Blueprint* is also a conversation — with Beethoven, with Haydn (his teacher and the "father" of the string quartet), and with the joys and *malinconia* of his Op. 18, No. 6.

Plan & Elevation (2015)

Caroline Shaw writes:

I was fortunate to have been the inaugural music fellow at Dumbarton Oaks in 2014-15. *Plan & Elevation* examines different parts of the estate's beautiful grounds and my personal experience in those particular spaces. Each movement is based on a simple ground bass line

which supports a different musical concept or character. “The Ellipse” considers the notion of infinite repetition (I won’t deny a tiny Kierkegaard influence here). One can walk around and around the stone path, beneath the trimmed hornbeams, as I often did as a way to clear my mind while writing. The second movement, “The Cutting Garden,” is a fun fragmentation of various string quartets (primarily Ravel, Mozart K. 387, and my own *Entr’acte*, *Valencia*, and *Punctum*), referencing the variety of flowers grown there before they meet their inevitable end as cuttings for display. “The Herbaceous Border” is spare and strict at first, like the cold geometry of French formal gardens with their clear orthogonals (when viewed from the highest point), before building to the opposite of order: chaos. The fourth movement, “The Orangery,” evokes the slim, fractured shadows in that room as the light tries to peek through the leaves of the aging fig vine. We end with my favorite spot in the garden, “The Beech Tree.” It is strong, simple, ancient, elegant, and quiet; it needs no introduction.

Three Essays (2016-18)

Caroline Shaw writes:

I started writing these three “essays” while listening to the calm optimism of an audio recording of Marilynne Robinson reading from her book *The Givenness of Things*, but I completed it during the turmoil of the 2016 US Presidential election. The title of the first essay refers to the legendary biblical figure Nimrod, who oversaw the construction of the Tower of Babel – a city designed to be tall enough to reach heaven but which resulted in the confusion and scattering of language. This image of chaos and fragmentation, but also of extraordinary creative energy, may serve as a framework for listening to these three musical essays. The Second Essay (“Echo”), is a stylistic contrast to the first and third, in the spirit of a typical “slow movement” nested between two quick ones. The title touches on a number of references: the concept of the “echo chamber” that social media fosters in our political discourse; the “echo” function in the Hypertext Preprocessor (PHP) programming language; and, of course, the sonic effect of an echo. The Third Essay (“Ruby”), returns to the fragmentation and angularity that was introduced in the first essay but attempts to tame it into some kind of logical structure. The title refers both to the programming language Ruby (developed in Japan in the mid-1990s) as well the simple beauty of the gemstone for which the language was named. It’s more a point of inspiration than a strict system of generating material.

***The Evergreen* (2020)**

Caroline Shaw writes:

One day in January 2020, I took a walk in an evergreen forest on Swiikw (Galiano Island), off the west coast of Canada. This piece, *The Evergreen*, is my offering to one particular tree in that forest. I started writing music years ago as gifts for people (whether they knew it or not), or as companions to a piece of art or food or idea. It was a way of having someone hold my hand through the writing process, a kind of invisible friend to guide me through. This tree is towering, craggy, warped and knotted wrapped in soft green, standing silently in a small clearing where the shadows are more generous to the narrow streams of sunlight that try to speak up in late morning.

Moss

What does softness sound like?

Moss is a complex system of very delicate micro versions of leaves that can only be a single cell's width, growing so densely that the thousands of stems feel like a soft, unified, velvet surface.

I began to think of the bow that draws the sound from string instruments. The surface of the horse hair appears smooth to the naked eye, but in fact is covered with tiny ridges. When the player draws the bow along the string, pivoting the bow to allow more or less hair to make contact, they are in fact producing hundreds of thousands of incredibly small nudges and pricks of the string. To our ears, this registers as a single surface, a single line.

One secret ingredient to this process is rosin, a solidified form of resin, or sap, that comes from coniferous trees like pines, firs, and cedars. When combined with the microridges on the surface of the horse hair, the rosin strengthens the grip of the hair along the string, feeding the resonance of the violin's top plate, which was carved from the wood of a spruce tree. The evergreen's very body and vital fluid are a part of every note.

Stem

One violinist holds a single note. Joined, one by one, by the others. They lean away slowly, splitting the pitch, undermining the singularity for a few moments, smearing the paint, then they lean back toward the shared tone. Like the uneven surface of the stem of the tree as it reaches up, imperfectly.

Water

When I was walking, and not walking, in this forest, everything was wet. The snow had almost fully melted when I came through the woods

that morning, so the sound of water dripping was all around. There's a strange sense of depth, optically, when you're in the woods in the morning. Aurally I experienced the same thing. The clarity of water droplets' tones in the foreground and the ghostliness of those further away.

Root

What inflects the unfurling stem of one's life as it draws time up from our roots through our twisted, articulated limbs and sprouts and blooms and leaves and surfaces and planes and points and chords and lines and tunes and angles and tangents and folds and peaks and valleys and accents and cadences and timbres and knots and burls and skin and grain and dust and breath and vapor and the memories of those who came before?

***Cant voi l'aube* (2016)**

Caroline Shaw writes:

Cant voi l'aube sets lyrics from a 12th-century French manuscript, of uncertain origin but attributed to the trouvère Gace Brulé. It is a typical *aubade*, or morning song, in which lovers resent the coming of dawn, since it means they must discreetly separate for fear of being found out. (I thought about calling this song “Pillow Talk” or “Walk of Shame.”) The original music for the text is lost, and rather than trying to recreate a troubadour style song, I decided to carve out a new song with a more modern contour.

***And So* (2019)**

In interviews Shaw has revealed that the lyrics are a combination of her own, interwoven with those of Gertrude Stein, Robert Burns, and Billy Joel.

***Other Song* (2021)**

This first arrangement of this song was created for Sō percussion on Caroline Shaw's solo vocal debut album, *Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part*. Drawing inspiration from popular artists, Shaw sought to compose “sad, really sincere, honest love songs.”

Program notes compiled and edited by Jessica Payette, Associate Professor of Music at Oakland University, and Willa Walker, CMDetroit Vice President Emerita.