



**CHRIS
BROWN**

Theresa Wong

Kyle Bruckmann

**SOME
CENTER**

"The musical present is multiplicity,"

Chris Brown observed at the dawning of the twenty-first century.¹ Our time is characterised by progressive erasure of inherited boundaries that have separated cultures, traditions, disciplines and practices. Identities are in flux. Previously discrete languages become conflated, disparate resources are pooled and assigned new roles, freshly energised. In short, Brown pointed out, in contemporary life "there is no single line or center, only networks of inter-connected centers, each with many different frontiers."²

As the title of the piece *Some Centre* neatly indicates, even a relocated vowel may register expressive plurality, a small adjustment in spelling, a lexical retuning that may carry us to another time or place, another century or continent. The revolution in electronic culture and digital media that we are collectively experiencing creates unprecedented fluidity in our awareness of the here and now, reverberating with dramatic implications for our grasp of who we are, yet Brown's essay "Pidgin Musics" is by no means a farewell to the past. On the contrary, while refusing to cling to twentieth-century solutions to twentieth-century problems, he is excited by the prospect of "growing strong hybrids that can synergistically activate the musical intelligence of their ancestors."³

Brown's compositions *Some Centre* (2019) and *First Light* (2016), performed with such assured lucidity and subtle shading by the three members of The Chromelodia Project, engage with significant precursors in music and in literature, drawing upon their words and innovations, their insights and

adventurous spirits while, in the process, transporting those uncompromising benefactors to a different frontier. Brown makes songs from poems by Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) and Jackson Mac Low (1922–2004), and his settings make use of the 43-tone tuning system devised by Harry Partch (1901–1974). Those three artists cultivated eccentricities, in the literal and positive sense that they refused to cling to some center fixed and endorsed by unquestioning orthodoxy.

Emily Dickinson, in seclusion in Amherst, would have understood Brown's enthusiasm for synergistic activation of ancestors who may enlighten and enliven. "We do not think enough of the Dead as exhilarants," she wrote, "they are not dissuaders but Lures."⁴ Dickinson's profound admiration for Shakespeare did not restrict or intimidate her; rather it galvanised and encouraged her to roam within the boundless potentiality of poetry. Biography tells that she stayed at home; her poems show her in free flight, agile, inventive, subversive and ecstatic. Straightforwardly linear conceptions and the tick-tock of mechanical measurement ran counter to her experience of temporality. A later poet, Susan Howe, has noted that Dickinson's "re-ordering of the forward process of reading is what makes her poetry and the prose of her letters among the most original writing of her century."⁵

Jackson Mac Low's extensive and varied body of work undoubtedly places him amongst the most original writers of his century. Nonetheless he readily acknowledged the influence of precursors, notably Gertrude Stein, Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage. In 1958, in New York where he was at the time studying ancient Greek, Mac Low enrolled in Cage's course in experimental composition at the New School for Social Research. Cage opened up fields of possibilities and then invited students to devise and perform their own pieces.

¹ Chris Brown, "Pidgin Musics," in *Arcana: Musicians on Music*, John Zorn, ed. (New York, NY: Granary Books/Hips Road, 2000): 116.

² Brown: 117.

³ Brown: 116.

⁴ Quoted in Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1985): 77.

⁵ Howe: 51.

As a writer Mac Low was inclined, from the outset, to take his bearings from the ear; the printed page came to life when the body and voice became involved. The impact of Cage's advocacy of chance operations soon became discernible in his own work. "I wanted to see what could be accomplished using these methods with verbal material," Mac Low reflected at a symposium in 1980, "not using the same kinds of methods that John did, but methods using the principles of chance and indeterminacy."⁶ In the early '60s, he started to present performances of poems arrived at through aleatoric procedures. Retaining whole words yet dispensing with syntax, fracturing sense on the page while foregrounding sound in performance, Mac Low was in effect erasing the borderline between poetry and music.

Later he would compose with smaller units, incorporating syllables and phonemes to enrich the sonic scope of his readings. Some of these poems resemble mantras, visual scores offering multiple options for non-linear interpretation. "The acoustic sounds and the patterned variations of their recurrence affect the listener's experience of time, and provide a metaphor for its transcendence."⁷ An apt assessment of Mac Low's mantric incantations and their effect, although these words were actually written by Chris Brown to describe three of his own pieces, released on the CD *Iconicities*.

Turning his back on the conventions and preferences of Western music since the European Enlightenment, Harry Partch devised a 43-tone scale. Brown describes this idiosyncratic tuning system as "a treasure-trove for learning to compose with just intonation. I've found it to be much more profound than I'd ever realized in its applicability to music that doesn't have to sound like his, such is the rigor as well as the creativity of Partch's music theories. I'm surprised that it is not more generally in use."⁸ The fact that Partch

resourcefully designed and built new instruments in order to play a music that was uniquely his own has undoubtedly deterred some later composers who might have made fruitful use of his innovations.

Despite his radically independent spirit, Partch was susceptible to a wide range of influences. His scholarly research mined history and looked to other cultures for alternatives to 12-tone equal temperament. He was attracted to the speech rhythms of ancient Greece and the European Middle Ages. He admired the rhythmic refinement of Native American dances, especially those of the Yaqui people he had encountered in the Southwest. He openly acknowledged indebtedness to Chinese lullabies, music-hall songs, Jewish and Christian hymns and Congolese puberty rites. An eclectic constellation that confirms Partch's affinity with Mac Low, who proudly declared himself "a diehard pluralist and impurist,"⁹ and also with Chris Brown, eloquent advocate of strong musical hybrids.

Science was not excluded from Partch's inquisitive research. Especially important to him was *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (1863) by Hermann von Helmholtz. Partch recognised a kindred spirit in this German pioneer of acoustic science, who in 1852 had written: "When I go from my justly intoned harmonium to a grand pianoforte, every note of the latter sounds false and disturbing."¹⁰ In *Genesis of a Music* (1949), an elaborate exposition of his own theories, Partch grants priority to the uneducated ear, free from conditioned desires and unhampered by conventions of instrumental technique. He was striving for "an emotionally dynamic music, which will win response from persons who don't give a tinker's damn that 3/2 is 1/50 of an equal semitone wider than the vibrational ratio they hear."¹¹

⁶ "A Symposium on Text-Sound," in *Aural Literature Criticism*, Richard Kostelanetz, ed. (New York, NY & Edmonton, Alberta: RK Editions, 1981): 156.

⁷ Chris Brown quoted in liner notes for his own *Iconicities* (New World Records 80723-2, 2011): 2.

⁸ Brown, written communication with the author, March 17, 2020.

⁹ *Aural Literature Criticism*: 160.

¹⁰ Helmholtz quoted in Sir James Jeans, *Science and Music* (Cambridge University Press, 1961): 185.

¹¹ Harry Partch quoted in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs, eds. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998): 211.

Writing in 1942, for the periodical *Modern Music*, John Cage celebrated the fact that Harry Partch had finally realised an ambition nurtured for twenty years, the fabrication of a prototype of his Chromelodeon. “This is an instrument that looks like an old-fashioned Harmonium, has the ordinary keyboard, but that produces Partch’s overtone-inspired forty-three-tone scale,” Cage reported.¹² Today, performing in The Chromelodia Project, Chris Brown uses a MIDI keyboard to control a software synthesizer that functions as a virtual piano. Retuned, so that at the touch of a button he can play any two contiguous 43-tone octaves at a time, this instrument is in effect a twenty-first century Chromelodeon.

Like a prism dispersing soundwaves, it opens out the expressive range of this exhilarating trio, which also features Theresa Wong’s cello and voice and Kyle Bruckmann’s oboe. The Chromelodia Project was launched in 2016. *First Light* was written that year. Brown recalls that an acutely attentive and collaborative quest for acoustic sonorities to match his own electronic instrumentation was a crucial part of the compositional process. “The Chromelodeon provided Theresa and Kyle with pitch references to tune to, but the room really bloomed only when the acoustic instruments locked into it, and to each other.”¹³

The purity of its intervals is not for Brown the principal attraction of just intonation. Rather, he values its potential for expansion of pitch and tonality. “I cut my teeth in experimental music playing the tone cluster piano pieces of Henry Cowell,” he explains, “and here was a new opportunity to compose many different varieties of cluster chords whose pitches have overtones that align harmonically, resulting in a whole range of consonant and dissonant possibilities.”¹⁴ *First Light* emerged from his exploration of tone clusters on virtual Chromelodeon. Brown found himself gravitating towards

non-progressive harmonies reminiscent of those heard in certain pieces by Cage and Morton Feldman and, progenitively, in Erik Satie’s music.

As a series of what he terms “chorales” took shape, Brown looked to his bookshelves in search of a structural armature. The opening poem in his first edition of Mac Low’s *22 Light Poems* (1968) met that need. Words in each of the eleven stanzas of “1st Light Poem: for Iris—10 June 1962” form phonemic clusters:

Light from a student-lamp
sapphire light
a shimmer
smoking-lamp light

The arc of the poem is luminously recursive, lustrous and incantatory. A flickering play of lexical light within it offers flashes of associative illumination; it also casts transient auditory shadows. Brown’s setting of the poem is at once sensitive and robust, relishing the expanded range of nuanced intonation that Partch’s ingenious tuning provides, while rigorously underpinning his own compositional design.

As Brown’s keyboard sounds the pitches of each chord, his computer generates percussive electronic tones in rhythms whose duration corresponds to ratios used to tune those pitches. “An E-natural in this piece is tuned to a frequency that is 3/2 times the frequency of A,” he elucidates. “This results in the 3/2 pitch playing in a tempo that is 3/2 times the tempo in which the A (the 1/1 tonic ratio) is played.”¹⁵ Such details are enlightening, yet for Brown, as for Partch, they are essentially the clandestine means to deliver an involving and uplifting musical experience for performers and for listeners, including those “who don’t give a tinker’s damn” for technicalities.

¹² Quoted in *John Cage*, Richard Kostelanetz, ed. (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1971): 69.

¹³ Brown, written communication with the author, April 3, 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Brown, written communication with the author, April 7, 2020.

The score for *First Light* has eleven sections, one for each stanza. Each includes a chart for improvisation with notes allocated to each player, although octaves are unspecified and rhythmic values are entrusted to the interpreter's judgement. Within these improvisatory passages, however, Brown has grouped notes in phrases that anticipate the following section. He compares this process to an extemporized *alap* in Indian classical music, where pitches of the mode are introduced without meter, prefatory to the melodic articulation of a raga. So there is steady movement towards the next song, even though individual musicians have latitude to choose their own route. Despite its sophistication, in terms of compositional craft and technological know-how, the central issue in Brown's music has remained across several decades the full engagement of instrumentalists, who bring their own sensibility and vitality to the composition, responding interactively to challenges and opportunities that arise from moment to moment.

For the song cycle *Some Centre*, Brown chose five poems by Emily Dickinson to be his structural guide, and then took an improvisatory route to arrive at harmonies in just intonation suitable for the character of each setting. During that initial stage he also wrote software modelled on the Rhythmicon, a 16-note keyboard with each key defining a distinct rhythmic pattern, built by Léon Theremin in 1931 in order to realise Henry Cowell's vision of congruence between pitch and temporal ratios. Whereas Theremin's design was strictly algorithmic, Brown felt sufficiently confident, in the wake of Cage, to introduce an aleatoric dimension. "Pitches I play on the keyboard are echoed by the computer with real-time synthesis, using the same duration proportions as define the notes. When I play a chord, the order of notes that are echoed is randomly selected. The changing pitches and durations provide a foil for the other players in their improvisations."¹⁶

¹⁶ Brown, written communication with the author, April 3, 2020.

Verbal instructions outline the character of each improvisatory passage: the first, "sprightly, accelerating, abrupt and contrasting;" the third, "mysterious, lingering, blurry, erratic;" the fifth, "brittle heaven, psychedelic, snapshots." Dickinson's poems are themselves precise notations of agile thought and sensation. They record motion and are themselves restless, tightly constructed yet tantalisingly elusive. In the course of her astute reading of Dickinson's poetry, Susan Howe remarks that "progress seems to be forward but where forward is—uncertain."¹⁷ The contingencies of twenty-first-century temporal and spatial relationships would surely not have been entirely alien to the reclusive nineteenth-century artist portrayed by Howe, "alone at a real frontier, dwelling in Possibility."¹⁸

Performing *Some Centre*, Wong's voice nurtures each individual word in a manner that might mirror the emergence and crystallization of poetry within Dickinson's imagination. Her singing appears to savour the shape as well as the generative capacity of language, its physical articulation as well as the range of meanings that arise within its intricate network of relationships. Her voice soars and falls as it spins that crisscrossing web, registering recognition or surprise, amusement, desire and—not least—delight in artistry. All the while, Brown's precisely notated music, together with those transitional improvisations, suggests other levels of synchronous activity.

The trio becomes an embodiment of a creative process. The oboe's keen timbres and the cello's warmth seem to emanate respectively from neurological and bodily zones, while Brown's combination of piano chords and rhythmic electronics encompass corporeal features and fleeting mannerisms, physical pulsation and flashing synapses. This music does not merely set poems; it enacts poetic conception. Its five parts convey a variety of moods, ranging from the watchful agitation of "Fame"—where Dickinson muses on the song, sting and wing of a

¹⁷ Howe: 77.

¹⁸ Howe: 76.

bee—to the erotic exhilaration of “Eden”—where the bee enters a flower “and is lost in Balms.” The bee draws in nectar to produce honey; the poet draws in experience of being in the world and translates that into art.

Beyond being a cycle of songs, *Some Centre* is a multi-faceted drama of attentive engagement and imaginative transformation. It invites us to take a fresh look at Emily Dickinson through its refractive lens, just as *First Light* offers a new perspective on Jackson Mac Low. Both compositions place Harry Partch in unfamiliar and revelatory light, illustrating the value of his original thinking and independent spirit as a resource for composers breaking their own chosen ground. The musical present is indeed multiplicity, a pre-echo of a future adumbrated by Chris Brown in 2000, where interaction over distances in time as well as space and culture may bring about further fabulous collaborations and strong hybrids.

— Julian Cowley

Julian Cowley lectured on a wide range of literature before becoming a freelance writer with a focus on contemporary music. He has been a regular contributor to The Wire for more than twenty years.

Texts for *Some Centre*

5 Poems by Emily Dickinson

1

The Show is not the Show
But they that go —
Menagerie to me
My neighbor be —
Fair play —
Both went to see —

2

Fame is a bee.
It has a song —
It has a sting —
Ah, too, it has a wing.

3

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind
As if my Brain had split —
I tried to match it — Seam by Seam —
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before —
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
Like Balls — upon a Floor.

4

Each Life Converges to some Centre —
Expressed — or still —
Exists in every Human Nature
A Goal —

Embodied scarcely to itself — it may be —
Too fair
For Credibility's presumption
To mar —

Adored with caution — as a Brittle Heaven —
To reach

Were hopeless, as the Rainbow's Raiment
To touch —

Yet persevered toward — sure — for the Distance —
How high —
Unto the Saints' slow diligence —
The Sky —

Ungained —it may be — by a Life's low Venture,
But then —
Eternity enable the endeavoring
Again.

5

Come slowly — Eden!
Lips unused to Thee —
Bashful — sip thy Jasmines —
As the fainting Bee —

Reaching late his flower —
Round her chamber hums —
Counts his nectars —
Enters — and is lost in Balms.

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Text for *First Light*

1st Light Poem: for Iris—10 June 1962

by Jackson Mac Low

The light of a student-lamp
sapphire light
shimmer
the light of a smoking-lamp

Light from the Magellanic Clouds
the light of a Nernst lamp
the light of a naphtha-lamp
light from meteorites

Evanescent light
ether
the light of an electric lamp
extra light

Citrine light
kineographic light
the light of a Kitson lamp
kindly light

Ice light
irradiation
ignition
altar light

The light of a spotlight
a sunbeam

sunrise
solar light

Mustard-oil light
maroon light
the light of a magnesium flare
light from a meteor

Evanescence light
ether
light from an electric lamp
an extra light

Light from a student-lamp
sapphire light
a shimmer
smoking-lamp light

Ordinary light
orgone lumination
light from a lamp burning olive oil
opal light

Actinism
atom-bomb light
the light of an alcohol lamp
the light of a lamp burning anda-oil

“First Light Poem: For Iris—10 June 1962” by Jackson Mac Low, from *22 Light Poems*, Black Sparrow Press, 1968. Used by permission of the Estate of Jackson Mac Low.

Chris Brown (b. 1953), composer, pianist, and electronic musician, makes music with self-designed sonic systems that include acoustic and electroacoustic instruments, interactive software, computer networks, microtonal tunings, and improvisation. His compositions are designs for performances in which people bring to life the musical structures embedded in scores, instruments, and machines.

Early pieces featured instruments he invented and built, including a prepared electric piano in the orchestral piece, *Alternating Currents* (1983), and a digitally-controlled analog signal processor for the environmental piece for brass, percussion, and electronics, *Lava* (1992). *Talking Drum* (1995–2000), was a MIDI network installation exploring polyrhythm, distance, and resonance in large architectural spaces. He is a founding member of the pioneering computer network band The Hub, which received the 2018 ZKM Giga-Hertz Prize for Electronic Music. Throughout his career he has composed solos for computer and for acoustic instruments with interactive electronics using self-authored software. Since 2005, he has written music in Just Intonation, also integrating rhythmic structures that parallel the proportions used in their tunings. His music is available on New World, fo’c’sle, Tzadik, Pogus, Intakt, Ecstatic Peace, Red Toucan, Leo, and Artifact Recordings. He has recorded music by Henry Cowell, Luc Ferrari, José Maceda, John Zorn, David Rosenboom, Glenn Spearman, and Wadada Leo Smith; and recorded as an improviser with Pauline Oliveros, Fred Frith, the Rova Saxophone Quartet, William Winant, and Frank Gratkowski. He has also produced three albums of music by the Filipino composer and ethnomusicologist José Maceda.

He taught electronic music and composition as Co-Director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland, California, for thirty years. His articles on live electronic music have appeared in *Computer Music Journal*, *Leonardo Music Journal*, and “At A Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet” (MIT Press). <http://cbmuse.com>

Oboist **Kyle Bruckmann**'s wide-ranging work as a composer/performer, educator, classical freelancer, and new-music specialist extends from conservatory-trained foundations into gray areas encompassing free jazz, post-punk rock, and the noise underground. His creative work within an international community of improvisers and sound artists can be heard on over 80 recordings on labels including New World, Hat Art, Entr'acte, Not Two, Clean Feed, Another Timbre, 482Music, and Sick Room. Current ensemble affiliations include Splinter Reeds, San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, sfSound, Eco Ensemble, Stockton Symphony, and Quinteto Latino. From 1996–2003, he was a fixture in Chicago's thriving underground music scene, founding long-term projects including the Creative Music ensemble Wrack, the electro- acoustic duo EKG, and the artpunk monstrosity Lozenge. He is Assistant Professor of Practice in Oboe and Contemporary Music at University of the Pacific, and teaches also at UC Santa Cruz, Davis, and Berkeley.

Theresa Wong is a composer, cellist and vocalist active at the intersection of music, experimentation, improvisation, and the synergy of multiple disciplines. Her works include *The Unlearning* (Tzadik), twenty-one songs for violin, cello, and two voices inspired by Goya's *Disasters of War* etchings; *O Sleep*, an improvised opera for an eight-member ensemble exploring the conundrum of sleep and dream life; and *Venice Is A Fish*, a collection of solo songs. Wong's commissioned pieces include works for Vajra Voices, Splinter Reeds, Del Sol String Quartet, and pianist Sarah Cahill. She collaborates with many singular artists, including Fred Frith, Ellen Fullman, Luciano Chessa, and filmmaker Daria Martin. In 2018, she founded fo'c'sle, a record label with inaugural releases by Ellen Fullman, Stuart Dempster and David Gamper, Chris Brown, powerdove, and Lijiang Quintet. She has presented her work throughout the United States and internationally and currently resides in the San Francisco Bay Area.

www.theresawong.org

The Chromelodia Project blends just intonation, improvisation, and interactive computer music. The name refers to Harry Partch's Chromelodeon, a reed-organ he used to teach his 43-tone tuning system to musicians. His tuning is foundational for expanding pitch sensibility beyond the equal-tempered scale, since it contains most of the simplest ratios every musician interested in Just Intonation will learn to hear and play. It also offers three to five intonation alternatives for each of the traditional twelve notes to enhance playing in different modes and exploring resonances based on higher harmonics not available in equal temperament. Its ratios have implicit correspondences to rhythm that apply naturally to polyrhythmic textures. The Project's Chromelodeon is an 88-key MIDI keyboard which plays two octaves at a time of a synthesized, physical-model piano (Pianoteq) tuned to Partch's pitch-set.

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CHRIS BROWN (b. 1953)
SOME CENTER

The Chromelodia Project:
 Theresa Wong, cello & voice
 Kyle Bruckmann, oboe
 Chris Brown, piano

Some Centre (2019) 29:37

1. The Show 3:48
2. Fame 2:27
3. Unravalled 6:07
4. Some Centre 10:57
5. Eden 6:19



TT:69:40



0 9322-80822-2 4

File Under: Classical/Contemporary/
 Brown, Chris

First Light (2016) 39:58

6. Student 4:37
7. Magellanic 4:28
8. Evanescent 4:30
9. Citrine 3:01
10. Ice 3:26
11. Spotlight 2:49
12. Mustard-oil 3:42
13. Ether 3:30
14. Smoking 3:18
15. Ordinary 3:02
16. Actinism 3:35



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