

Radar - Field Report

New York: Bright Lights, Small Farm-Elizabeth Brown's *Rural Electrification*

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Sometimes it happens like this: You encounter an image—verbal, aural, doesn't matter—and find yourself seduced by your own improvisations on the world it suggests. When the notice came for a production of a new chamber opera by Elizabeth Brown, it announced not only the chance to hear her intriguing music live—opportunities that are strangely rare—but also reeled out an example of such an attracting image. It came packaged in the guise of a quote from Franklin D. Roosevelt, of all things:

When rural Americans finally got electricity in the 1930s and 40s, decades after the cities, many went outside just to look back at their illuminated houses—it was wonderful, just like going from darkness to daylight. Corners of rooms, or a loved one's face, were magically lit. As one Rural Electrical Administration worker said, I've seen this happen, the lights come on, hundreds of places, and it's an emotional situation you can't describe—something happens, lightning strikes them, and they all at once are different.

It is this moment that Brown has taken up as her starting point to create *Rural Electrification*, a 55-minute piece for voice, theremin, and recorded sound. Lit only by the deep glow of an oil lamp and the projections flickering against the back wall, the vocalist (a role sung here by Stephanie Skaff) makes her entrance—a young farm girl, Dorothy Gale on a fair weather evening. The scene is set by Brown's recorded soundtrack of hums, whistles, and the delicate whir of mechanical language. The composer herself takes up residence in the corner as the soloist at the theremin, an instrument she selected specifically for its marriage of the human and the electrical. The sound she coaxes from it carries none of the usual horror-show implications, but rather colors in a solid, soulful line, more similar in character to the cello.



Composer Elizabeth Brown

Rural Electrification has two remaining performances, May 26 and 27, 8 p.m. at the Old American Can Factory. For details, visit XO Projects. Inc.

The minimal scoring evolves over the course of the piece, but its tenor is largely laid out in the first 15 minutes. The vocalist pens a series of letters to her sister that chronicle the family's adjustment to the electrical age, and though the underlying emotion will alter, the basic musical themes and form are carried throughout. It's a journey that begins with plenty of wide-eyed excitement—young Mary Alice hopes to win an essay contest for a Frigidaire—and the ad man in the speaker delivers the golden promise that the hook up to the grid will allow her to "live a life of leisure in your spotless home." Her letters are a vocal duet with the theremin, no small feat of intonation (though Brown's characteristic propensity for sliding between pitches in her chamber music generally aides the strategy's success in practice here). Snatches of familiar tunes—an "E-I-E-I-O" meditation on progress

and a twist on "You Are My Sunshine" addressed to the light bulb—deepen the piece's "Is it *really* better living?" question, though the work refrains from getting too caught up in any sort of moral message. Lothar Osterburg's accompanying video carries a Monty Python-esque animated whimsy, and musically things are kept rather sheer and echo-y—offering buoyancy even to the darker lament that the family must work harder and stay up late because now there's an electric bill to pay.

As one might logically expect when considering the day-to-day life of a young farm girl, no large surprises appear over the course of *Rural Electrification*—neither in the plot, nor musically—and therein lies its significant charm. The venue it was presented in—the Old American Can Factory near the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn—is an 1880s complex that only heightened this sense of nostalgic romance for a time none of the modern-day, city-dwelling audience members would have been around to personally experience. They likely left the production, however, feeling that they had been able to glimpse it.

Brown herself boasts a bit more firm a connection, having grown up on an agricultural research station in Alabama (though presumably the lights had already been on for decades at that point). Still, it was difficult not to suppose that her writing in this work was drawn at least tangentially from her own history. Really, though, anyone who has ever driven down a rural highway at night carries at least the defining image of this piece in their memory—the shock of light cast out from the windows of a distant house. What is forgotten is the total cloaking blackness that came before. Mary Alice, her excitement replaced by exhaustion, shoulders this task and remembers for us. "It used to be so dark," she recalls. "I miss it..."