

For Molly Barth and Brian McWhorter, a creative and collaborative atmosphere makes the UO the right place to pursue their risky and challenging music.

finding the balance

BY BRETT CAMPBELL • PHOTOS BY JACK LIU

Molly Barth crouches and stomps, while unleashing high-velocity bursts of staccato notes on her silver Burkart flute. The willowy, black-clad musician is playing “Mollitude,” a wild and whimsical solo piece that renowned American composer Frederic Rzewski recently wrote for her. A few minutes later, rail-thin trumpeter Brian McWhorter ’98 uncorks some similarly virtuosic solos, as well as indulging in an “amplified dadaist ritual”—involving a saw, pieces of wood, spray paint, branches, duct tape, a typewriter, a brick, a bunch of carrots with leaves, and various other gadgets—at a table covered in pink with colorful helium-filled balloons floating above. It’s happening on an early spring evening in 2010, in the lobby of the UO’s White Stag Block in Portland.

Barth, an assistant professor of flute, and McWhorter, assistant professor of trumpet, both recently hired thirty-five-year-old faculty members at the University, are the founding members of Beta Collide, an avant-garde music ensemble whose membership varies with the material it performs. Before arriving at the UO in 2008 and 2006, respectively, Barth and McWhorter had, separately, won acclaim among the planet’s most accomplished musicians on their instruments. As a founder of the dazzling Chicago-based new music ensemble EIGHTH BLACKBIRD, Barth toured the world, performing music by some of today’s finest up-and-coming composers, recording four albums in ten years, and winning a Grammy award. As one of New York’s most in-demand trumpeters and as a member of New York’s respected Meridian Arts Ensemble, McWhorter won accolades while performing hundreds of concerts of some of the most ambitious and challenging current music.

Steady gigs in the heady world of contemporary classical or postclassical music are rare. By the

mid-2000s, both Barth and McWhorter had attained the pinnacle of their profession. Yet, for both, something was still missing. And to find it, they would both take personal and professional risks that would lead them to new adventures—and to Oregon.

Taking Wing

In the summer of 2005, Molly Barth met with the other five blackbirds and their board of directors to discuss the next boost in the rapidly rising ensemble's trajectory.

As their name suggested, EIGHTH BLACKBIRD's climb had been swift. The group had coalesced at Oberlin College's

prizes for performance and programming, commissions for some of America's leading composers, teaching residencies, a solid record deal that produced acclaimed albums of brand new music, national tours, and rave performance reviews from concerts in such prestigious venues as Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center. Now they were poised to make a serious leap onward and upward. The summer retreat would set their course for the next decade.

As the ambitious plans spilled forth—doubling the number of concerts, expanding residency activities, spending weeks more on the road, Barth knew she should be thrilled. Instead, she felt her spirits sinking.



renowned music school in 1996. The school's contemporary music ensemble often confronted the most challenging music and therefore tended to draw the best and most serious players. After some exciting performances demonstrated that the group's chemistry matched its chops, they decided to form their own independent ensemble. Within a year, they'd won the world's largest chamber music competition, one of many prizes to follow.

"I loved it from day one," Barth recalls. "I have such respect for every musician in that group. I learned so much from playing with them."

Barth grew up in New York's Hudson River Valley in the 1980s. She traveled to New York City every Saturday during her high school years to study in the Manhattan School of Music's preparatory division for promising young musicians. In 1991, an intensive summer course with Boston Symphony Orchestra flutists at Massachusetts' celebrated Tanglewood Music Center, along with the thrill of hearing a world premiere performance while sitting behind the composer, made her realize that contemporary music would be her calling—and that she would need to practice five hours a day.

By 2005, after thousands of hours of practice and performances, she had reached her goal. Among the wave of new music ensembles that had arisen in the wake of the pioneering Kronos Quartet, EIGHTH BLACKBIRD had soared highest. After only a few years together, the band had scored major

She had married, and she and her husband, Philip Patti, wanted a child. The group was already touring more than half the year. As much as she loved the performances—"a complete high"—she was tired of hotels, car rentals, and flight delays.

"I realized," she says, "that I have one of the best jobs in the world—and I'm not excited about it anymore. I need balance in my life, and that just wasn't happening."

So after a decade with the group, Barth reluctantly gave her notice—and the couple put their Chicago condo on the market. "Are you crazy?" some friends wondered about the risky move.

Where to go next? Her husband, an aspiring vintner, was offered a harvest internship at Amity Vineyards, just south of McMinnville. They moved to Oregon in August 2006, and Barth soon learned about an adjunct teaching position opening at Willamette University in Salem and started receiving inquiries from the state's leading contemporary music ensembles, Fear No Music and Third Angle. She soon had guest gigs with the Oregon and Eugene symphonies. And two years later, a tenure-track job opened up at the UO.

Prodigy on the Run

Brian McWhorter counted off and the band launched into an old jazz tune. He had studied and played a lot of jazz at the UO, but this was a far wail from the avant-garde music he'd been playing in New York City. But then, this gig was a world away, unlike any concert he'd ever played. McWhorter's hastily assembled band stood on the floor of Baton Rouge's

downtown convention center, amid 5,000 Hurricane Katrina refugees.

As unlikely as that gig was, McWhorter had come to expect the unexpected since he enrolled in the UO, a dozen years earlier. “There was a real implicit emphasis on creativity” at the music school when he arrived in 1993, he recalls. “From my freshman year on, it was always, ‘What kind of cool projects are you doing?’ It was never OK to just do a recital of standard pieces.” There was always pressure to do something cool and interesting. And not just from faculty members but also from students.

His mentor, George Recker, now associate professor emeritus, never let McWhorter rely solely on his exceptional technical skills but pushed him to be more creative. McWhorter thrived among the talented and ambitious students of the school’s jazz program and was stimulated by his guest appearances with Professor Charles Dowd’s renowned Oregon Percussion Ensemble. “Dowd was such an inspiration,” he says. “All the shows he put on were so creative—they were real events.” (Dowd died earlier this year.)

McWhorter also formed the After Quartet, one of the most exciting student ensembles in the 1990s—“just a bunch of crazy artists throwing everything they had into doing cool things” like original film scores and other multimedia performances. The group even toured nationally. “I lost tons of money on those tours, but I learned so much,” he says.

After his many rewarding experience at the University, McWhorter’s stint at New York City’s famed Juilliard School proved disappointing. “It’s a great school. I had a great teacher there and great opportunities,” he acknowledges. “But as soon as I arrived, it was clear I didn’t really belong.” In contrast to the UO’s rich creative collaborations, Juilliard emphasized solo practice, traditional methods, safe repertoire. McWhorter caught a break when a composer offered his teacher a thorny, complex piece to play in performance. The professor directed it to his restless young phenom from Oregon. “I literally had no money, so I had to say ‘yes’ to everything,” McWhorter recalls. “Much of my career traces back to that opportunity.” He nailed that piece and that led to other offers to perform often ferociously complex avant-garde works that demanded masterful technique and willingness to push boundaries. “I was an unconventional student for that school,” he says, “so I got the unconventional gigs.”

“In New York,” he explains, “there was a hole in the market for generalists who would do ‘out’ things that required virtuosity and improvisation, so I got a lot of work.” On one of those gigs, with the American Sinfonietta on an orchestra tour in Germany, he met a violinist who would eventually become his wife. Lisa McWhorter is now assistant concertmaster of the Eugene Symphony.



In 2001, the twenty-six-year-old McWhorter joined New York’s Meridian Arts Ensemble. A generation younger than the other members, he revitalized the group and joined it in hundreds of concerts, on national tours, in an annual summer teaching gig at the Manhattan School of Music, and on recordings of new music by innovative composers like Elliott Sharp, Margaret Brouwer, Mark Applebaum, and many others.

Only four years after obtaining his master’s degree, McWhorter was actually making a living playing new music in New York City. Yet after five years of scurrying from rehearsal to rehearsal, gig to gig, hustling around town in taxis from eight in the morning till after midnight, a weary McWhorter was losing track of the music that really interested him—and worse, getting bored with too many generic gigs. “I caught myself sitting next to cats who had been doing what I was doing for a long time, and I saw my future there,” he says. Not a pretty sight. He needed a change of pace. For a musician so accustomed to taking risks, leaving New York’s high-pressure avant-garde would be the biggest risk of his career.

Hoping academia would offer a calmer lifestyle in which he could still explore the creative boundaries he’d tested at the UO, McWhorter joined the music faculty at Louisiana State University and headed south in 2005—just in time for Hurricane Katrina.

Within days of the hurricane’s landfall, thousands of refugees from New Orleans were streaming into shelters not far from McWhorter’s house in downtown Baton Rouge. McWhorter wanted to see if he could raise morale using his musical gifts, so he volunteered to organize a free series of concerts, featuring local musicians, for the displaced people. As the musicians began cranking up some jazz, the refugees seemed to light up, pulling their sleeping bags right up close to the players, children edging in even closer. The musicians offered more jazz, a little hip-hop, and other styles. The audience called out requests, commented on the tunes, even joined in the singing. When the band slipped in a few crazy “out” tunes, the audience, who were overwhelmingly poor and African American, eagerly embraced even the avant-garde improvised music the red-headed Portland native played.

“To this day, I’ve never had a reaction from an audience like that,” McWhorter says. “It was as if everyone was thirsty and my band was providing the water.” Those concerts taught a lesson: music was about people. “I realized then that music was healing,” he explains. Since then, “I don’t want to just do music for music’s sake anymore. It has to be applicable to something bigger.”

A year later, Recker retired from the UO, and the school hired McWhorter to fill his former teacher’s position, bringing him full circle back to the cradle of his creative journey. Since then, he has presented vanguard music in places and ways that reach listeners who might never make it to a Beall Hall concert. McWhorter’s Sound-Bytes series—brief, free noontime concerts of new music in the middle of campus—

has drawn SRO crowds. And he's extending those principles beyond the UO. Inspired by his Katrina experience, McWhorter strives to create events that are "socially relevant and culturally viable." Last October, he coproduced Eugene's contribution to the 350 Day of Action, a coordinated global event aimed at raising consciousness about global warming. McWhorter rounded up a total of 350 classical, jazz, African, choral, Balkan, and Brazilian musicians as well as dancers of many styles for the concert, which included members of the Eugene Symphony performing the powerful slow movement of Beethoven's *Symphony no. 7*.

Creative Collision

McWhorter and Barth's main creative outlet is Beta Collide, which in only its second year has notched Eugene and Portland performances featuring some of the region's finest musicians. A new CD, *Psst...Psst!*, features their trademark fireworks as well as a lovely, ethereal piece by UO Professor Robert Kyr, and even a Radiohead remix. A performance in Korea is scheduled. When McWhorter approached Barth about forming a group, "we talked about how Meridian and EIGHTH BLACKBIRD worked and decided that while we loved the experience with those groups, our goal has never been to be on tour six months a year, but [instead] to have this as one of many things we do," Barth says. "We wanted to have an ensemble that wasn't necessarily fixed in membership, although we've played with the same people often. We wanted to experiment with more improvisation and open ourselves up to as much as we could—artists, dancers, physicists."

Barth calls McWhorter "a constant source of inspiration—full of levity, full of wisdom," and says that with only the two of them making decisions, they're more willing to take programming risks than with their previous ensembles. "Our philosophy is 'let's see if it works, and if it doesn't, then we've learned a lesson from that.' That approach of just going for it is kind of freeing. But we're trying to find a balance, to find as many different pieces that will appeal to us and to the audience."

That pursuit of balance represents a change in direction. Meridian used to pride itself on playing music so challenging that it sometimes drove listeners away at intermission. "I got into that [attitude] for a while," McWhorter admits. "I'm not saying you have to pander to audiences, but I need to reach out more. I learned that from teaching." That change in artistic direction, and the exhausting travel involved in performing with the New York group while based in Eugene, finally prompted him to leave Meridian last spring.

"When I first left New York, every time I got on a plane I thought, 'What am I doing?'" McWhorter recalls. "You have all these connections, this network, and you miss out on the big gigs and audiences." Even though the move to Oregon improved his emotional, psychological, and even physical health, "in New York, I was never the weird guy—I was just part of the scene. Now sometimes I feel like I'm coming from another planet." But he's found a supportive environment for




his sometimes left-field ideas at the UO, and especially with Barth. "She's complementary to me in so many ways—very thorough, super methodical, but also highly creative," he says. In proposing performance ideas involving, say, carrots and typewriters, "it's a real vulnerable state we put ourselves

in all the time, and it can be a real challenge psychologically, so it's a good dynamic to have that kind of confidant you can really trust and rely on."

Teaching (both in the academy and beyond) provides the kind of direct connection between music and people that McWhorter craves. "If I had to choose between playing trumpet and teaching," he insists, "I'd give the trumpet up." As teachers, "what we curate ideally is human potential and growth and paradigm shifts in perspective. Isn't that what we're hoping to do as artists anyway? In a way, teaching feels more direct and meaningful."

Barth, too, has found new passion in teaching. "Every day I think how lucky I am to be working at the UO," she marvels. "There's such a wealth of knowledge here, and not just in music." This fall term, for example, she's coteaching a class with an art professor. "My students have diverse interests, and I'm trying to give them a strong foundation that will make them employable," she says. "But I'm also trying to bring what I did with EIGHTH BLACKBIRD and provide more creative outlets for students," including bringing in a renowned Venezuelan flutist this year as artist in residence to help expose them to a wide range of music.

"Balance is the theme of my life these days," she continues, while walking in a Eugene park with her six-month-old son, Antonio. "If during a week any one thing gets too top heavy, I get back to work on something else"—teaching, solo playing, Beta Collide, performances with orchestras or at music festivals. "It's the balance I always craved in EIGHTH BLACKBIRD," Barth says. "People told us we were crazy, quitting two great jobs to move across the country" with nothing guaranteed. "It's like I tell my students—follow your instincts. I did, and it all worked out." 

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