

Flamingos on the Roof

By Calef Brown • Houghton Mifflin, 2006



Reviewed by
David Thaxton

Readers seeking rhyme or reason will find a good dose of the former and a whimsical bit of the latter in Calef Brown's *Flamingos on the Roof*, his latest collection of

twenty-nine original poems. As a freelance illustrator, Brown has published artwork in numerous newspapers and magazines. He has recently ventured into writing children's books of poetry and poetic stories. His writing is a combination of fanciful imagery, sly wit, and surreal humor that not only entertains, but also provides fertile ground for musical exploration.

The poems themselves balance on a line somewhere between utter nonsense and a peculiar sort of wisdom in the same vein as Shel Silverstein or Edward Lear. His language is often full of both visual and aural imagery with relentless alliteration and satisfying rhymes that are a joy to read aloud and imaginatively stimulating as well. Similar to medieval times when the court jester was the only one who could safely speak truth to the king, Brown's humor provides a similarly effective vehicle: "If you happen to glance / at Medusa by chance / you turn to solid rock. / Sally's curse is even worse - / she makes you stop and talk."

Brown's illustrations are fantastically off-the-wall with a child-like quality that provides a perfect counterpoint to his poetry. In the example of "TV Taxi," the illustration actually completes the poem by depicting the occupants of the taxi cab watching television and talking on a cell phone oblivious to things like a volcano, flying saucer, dinosaur, and leprechaun outside the car—a not so thinly veiled commentary on our media-addicted society.

Each poem unfolds with delicious rhythm that cries out for musical interpretation. While the meters are typically simple to interpret, many selections may benefit from a degree of experimentation. This metric foundation readily opens itself to the use of speech, body percussion, or instrumental ostinati. Conversely, with such descriptive language, one could also create a sound carpet or orchestration with non-pitched percussion and found sounds that would make an effective accompaniment.

When one is working with free verse poetry that is currently the most common contemporary genre, the verse often resists adaptation to melodic song form. However, as Orff practitioners know, simple children's poetry and nursery rhymes often provide powerful skeletons on which to attach and experiment with melodic lines. *Flamingos on the Roof* fits this mold well and adds an element of whimsy to the practice.

Additionally, many of the poems invite movement interpretation and pantomime. While children will likely enjoy swaying with the ebb and flow of the sea in a "barnacle built for two," or acting out a campfire encounter

with a vampire, the most fantastic example is "Combo Tango" in which they can "Freeze like an igloo / Stomp like a buffalo / Drop like a yo-yo / Swing like a golf pro." I would recommend when reading it to set up a rhythmic form that allows ample time for movement exploration. This is a wonderful way to internalize and personalize the poetry in the most powerful of modes for young learners.

Flamingos on the Roof is a marvelous addition to the library of teachers who enjoy language-based musical exploration. With so many potential points of departure and playful possibilities, it's a smart buy.

