

# AMERICAN ORIGINALS

Interviews with  
25 Contemporary Composers

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# ROBERT ASHLEY

*b Michigan 1930*

Robert Ashley studied composition with Ross Lee Finney and Roberto Gerhard at the University of Michigan, and later with Wallingford Riegger at the Manhattan School of Music. During the 1960s he co-organized the legendary ONCE festivals and became director of the highly influential ONCE group, a music-theatre collaboration that toured the United States from 1965-9. In 1969 he became Director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland, California, and from 1966 to 1976 he toured extensively with the Sonic Arts Union, a composers' collective that included David Behrman, Alvin Lucier and Gordon Mumma.

During 1975-6 he produced his first television opera, *Music with Roots in the Aether*. In 1978 the Kitchen Center in New York City commissioned *Perfect Lives*, an opera for television produced in collaboration with Channel Four. He has also written extensively for dance (*Problems in the Flying Saucer*, 1988, for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company) and orchestra (*My Brother Called*, 1987, for solo voice and orchestra).

*How important was the experience of the ONCE Group for you?*

The ONCE Group was active in the 1960s and I think the last performance we gave was in 1971. There were about ten people in the basic group. Most of them were not professional musicians. They were architects, painters and writers who were all very good at musical ideas, but they didn't pretend to be violin players or anything like that. So we did almost exclusively vocal music, which was good for me.

*Did that involve mixed media?*

Well, not too much. Everything then was supposed to be mixed-media, but it was actually very crude compared to a typical rock concert now. Technically, it was something that would have to happen in America, because we didn't then (and don't yet) have a tradition of producing opera. What the ONCE Group was doing was essentially small-scale, avant-garde opera. Whatever mixed media we used was mainly incidental to the idea of telling a story. There were artists in the ONCE Group working on their own projects which were much more like mixed media, with light projection, live electronic music, film and that kind of thing. But the ONCE Group proper was a sort of portable, touring opera company that did mainly vocal pieces with very elaborate storytelling.

*Were they group compositions?*

They weren't group compositions in the sense, as I understand it, that theatre people use the term. Theatre people speak of technical exercises that are used to develop material. We never did that. I would write the piece, or somebody else would write the piece, and then the group would work on it together, but mainly on the technical question of how to produce it. One person took responsibility for the staging, another for the

lighting, another for the electronics and so forth. Everybody would find their responsibilities within different pieces, depending on the circumstances.

*In what ways did this differ from your work with the Sonic Arts Union?*

Sonic Arts Union was totally different. We were four composers living in different parts of the country, and basically we got together for practical reasons to give concerts and to tour. We were friends, and we were all getting opportunities to do concerts in the US and Europe. It was an administrative and technical arrangement. We were performers in each other's pieces, of course, but the idea was to combine our concert activities so that we had more possibilities to perform.

*I believe you and Gordon Mumma built your own electronic devices. Was that for financial reasons, or because you couldn't find what you wanted anywhere else at that time?*

That was the prehistoric era – there was nothing unless you made it yourself. Now, of course, things are totally different, but that change has only happened in the last couple of decades. Even fifteen years ago you couldn't buy electronic equipment that was portable. The so-called performance instruments, the Polymoog or the Fender Rhodes, you couldn't lift them.

*Are you still involved with electronics?*

I'm too old to be involved from the design point of view. I don't know why age has anything to do with it, but it seems to. I don't try to keep up with the catalogues and the grapevine, and you have to do that to be really involved. I was still designing when I went to California in 1969, and I designed the studios at the Mills College Center for Contemporary Music with Nick Bertoni, who was the engineer. But that was the end of my designing career – you stop because your eyesight starts to go. Of course, everyone uses electronic instruments now, but the idea of designing has really changed. Electronics circuit design has mainly gone back to engineering studios because the tools for designing are expensive and specialized.

*Do you think it's a disadvantage for musicians that they are less involved in designing the equipment that they use these days?*

Well, it's a trade-off. There is still a lot of unexplored sound territory, because most electronic instruments are made to satisfy some sort of consumer profile – an important part of which is that you don't want to scare anybody – and so commercially-available instruments all do more or less the same thing. If you're in a situation where you have to design the materials for the sounds you use – whether you are designing electronics or computer programmes or whatever – it makes your sounds more original, more unique. But it takes you longer to do it.

*More recently you've been working with recorded media – records, film and so on*

For the last fifteen years I've been working on the idea of opera-for-television and I've finished production on two of these. One is called *Music with Roots in the Aether*; there are seven two-hour programmes, the main 'characters' are composers (David Behrman, Philip Glass, Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley and myself), and the dramatic materials are the musicians and musical performances. It is a very 'avant-garde' opera form. And it came out very well. It has been shown in closed-circuit to many thousands of people, and recently it has started to be shown on television in the US. The other project is *Perfect Lives*, an opera in seven half-hour programmes that I produced with The Kitchen Center in New York in collaboration with Channel Four in Great Britain. It is the middle part (or middle group) of a trilogy of 'serial' operas for TV that will have a total duration of fourteen hours. I picked the middle group to begin with because it was the easiest to produce. The first part of the trilogy is a group of three programmes of ninety minutes each called *Atalanta (Acts of God)*. We have been performing these pieces on stage for about five years and now I'm trying to get them produced for television. The last part of the trilogy is a set of four operas of ninety minutes each called *Now Eleanor's Idea*. I've begun working on this group by producing audio recordings for commercial release before we take them to the stage (and before the television production), because of the complicated

technical requirements of the productions. The trilogy is – this is preposterous to say – a kind of history of the consciousness Americans have of their ‘origins’ – something Americans think about a lot. The trilogy is a travelogue across the USA from the east coast to the west coast, and it’s also a sort of historical travelogue from the time when Europeans first arrived until the future, when they all get to LA and just disappear

*The telling of stories seems to be an important part of your work.*

I think that’s what everybody’s trying to do right now I’ve always done it. We do it because we are interested in our ‘origins’

*That couldn’t have been very fashionable in the 1950s*

I’m afraid that I have not been very fashionable until the last few years. I’m glad everybody’s starting to see it my way Now everybody’s telling stories, so that’s great. If I tell better stories, it’s because I’ve been at it longer

*Where do you get the material for your stories?*

I use things that have happened to me and seem important because I haven’t been able to forget them. I have a problem in that I think that what has happened to me is the only thing I can really understand. *Perfect Lives*, for instance, is mostly a collection of things people said to me or ideas I got specifically from things that were said in my presence. As many as possible of those sayings are verbatim in the text. It is a collection of dozens of short portraits of real people, all of whom are more or less ‘impersonated’ by the characters in the plot. The plot is a fictitious interpretation of a real event that I use to demonstrate a love story The interpretation of the event is otherwise both sublime and corny Everything in the plot happens in the period of a few days. That same interpretation of the real historical event is the basis for ‘co-ordinating’ what happens in *Atalanta (Acts of God)* and in *Now Eleanor’s Idea*.

*Do you put yourself in any of your stories?*

Yes, but in spite of what I just said, autobiography is a different idea, and I can’t do that. It’s like trying to make sense out of your



life. My life doesn't make any sense to me, so there's no point in trying to make sense of it for anybody else!

*Does your work with recorded media (TV and film) require a different approach to your work with ONCE and the indeterminate instrumental pieces?*

Well, the ONCE Group was a wonderful thing to do. The situation for composers here is probably no harder than in any place else, but it's hard for a different reason. In the US there is virtually no connection between composers and the Establishment. The Establishment would like to pretend there is, for whatever reasons, but it's not true. (I mean the Establishment in the sense of who's got the money to carry out big ideas.) When you're young, you think the reason everything is so hard is because of your age. But you get older and nothing changes. It's as if there are two cultures going on in parallel. Things may be a little better now than thirty years ago, but not much. One problem with this arrangement is that the young composer doesn't actually know what he or she is destined to do until it's very late – in many cases too late. American composers fool around with every idea under the sun in the process of finding out who they are. So the element of luck is very big. I was definitely lucky. It wouldn't have been possible for me to develop what I am apparently good at without working through something like the ONCE Group. You don't have relationships with orchestras or opera companies or radio studios or publishers or whatever. There's none of that. It doesn't exist. You start your own band, just like in popular music. If you are lucky in that, as I was lucky in having the ONCE Group, the experience forms your ideas. The problem is that the scale of your ambitions (for the music) has to remain only as large as what you can do by yourself, and that's frustrating enough to make many composers just give up when their energy or their self-esteem runs out. So working with the ONCE Group was wonderful for me; what we did amazed everybody and it was famous around the world, but finally it had to stop. We were operating on exactly the same scale of ambitions as, say, Wagner, but we had no money and there was no money in sight. When you get to the point where what you are doing is just trying to give people an idea about what *might*

happen, you have to stop out of respect for the music. It is a very serious moment.

After the ONCE Group broke up I didn't do anything for four or five years, except teach to make a living. Then I thought I could possibly find some sort of support making music for television. And indeed I got more money and support for *Music with Roots in the Aether*, which is cheap by TV standards, than I had ever got for a stage piece. So it's good for me to think in terms of television, even if I can't work as a composer of opera 'in television' Nothing much has changed as regards my chances of having a work developed by a major opera company

*Is the attraction of television for you mainly financial, or also to do with the nature of the medium – the ability to reach a wider audience?*

It's financial. But also it has to do with the style of producing the work. Television is a form of 'real time', like music.

*When working with film, are you making a piece for posterity or do you think in terms of a once-only broadcast?*

The reason I haven't worked with opera for motion-pictures is mainly a technical one – but that technical reason is why movies are what they are. Motion-picture production stops every minute or so and repeats what has just been done in order to 'improve' it. The idea of movies is that there is really only one version and your job is to find it. The best television is real time captured, like music. The subject matter of television exists whether or not the camera is there, which is not true of movies. But which is true of music. The way I work on developing a new piece is exactly the way it's always been done in music. And when the piece is 'finished', it's ready for the camera. By the time I got *Perfect Lives* on tape we had performed it hundreds of times. There were thousands of hours of history in the piece, so the recorded version is only one version of the opera. It's not meant to be *the* version. The idea is to be able to feel that quality in hearing and seeing the television broadcast.

*You once said that you view all your work as inherently theatrical. Is theatre a necessary element for all your music?*

I think it is now. In our situation, in the way music exists in America and probably all over the media world now, there is no 'given' language, a language you can use without feeling self-conscious. There are too many styles and too many complicated ideas that the composer has to acknowledge, if only to himself. You can't tell a story without thinking of how you are doing it. Everybody is totally conscious of technique. When you are in that situation as a composer, you automatically associate every musical thought with a reason, and that reason makes the music theatrical. You can't help it. You can imagine a naïve approach to music in a culture where there is a uniform musical language. The stories you tell in that language, or the constructions you make, are ideas independent of the need to make a new language. This is probably a fiction in itself, but if for instance you live in a small town and you don't know that there is anything outside of that town, your work only has to do with where you are in the town, and where you are has a specific meaning. But today it doesn't matter much where you are in the town. You think of your work in terms of the whole world. You think, 'I'm going down to the grocery store in this little town on the sea-coast in England, and somewhere there is London and somewhere there is Paris and somewhere there is Beirut, where they are killing people right this minute.' So you're self-conscious. You are constructing your voyage to the grocery store in the context of South Africa, Israel, Russia.

*So you go to the deli in global terms?*

You go to the deli in a very complicated way, because you've got all this stuff going on. And that's the way you write music. You can't do it in any other way. You start to work and you think, 'They're killing people in Israel. What am I doing?'

*So your music is intended to be very self-reflective?*

You can't help it. There is no such thing as being innocent any more. Everything is theatrical. If it's not, you're a fool.

*Usually an audience just wants to be entertained, but you make them feel self-conscious. Do you think people view an Ashley concert as some kind of 'therapy'?*

Well, I don't know I don't think my music is much different in the matter of self-consciousness from most other serious music. I have big audiences and they probably go to hear everything else they can. The question of what 'entertains' you is complicated. I mean, I don't know why anybody goes to anything. I know the reason I go, but I don't know about anybody else. I am perfectly happy listening to music even though I'm self-conscious. In fact, I think that's supposed to be the idea. Why else would we need music? When I go to a concert I don't forget about South Africa. I am listening to the music and thinking about that at the same time. In some way I am 'comparing' the musical experience to the thought. It's the civilized thing to do.

*So you've never regarded art as a kind of drug?*

No.

*Yet many composers would like their music to alter peoples' consciousness so that they lose themselves in the music and forget all external preoccupations*

I don't think that's possible. It's not possible for me.

*You have a number of Cage's books on your shelves. How much of an influence has he been on you?*

John was an influence on everybody He was one of the few people who tried to write about how you do it. Everybody has read John Cage's writings.