

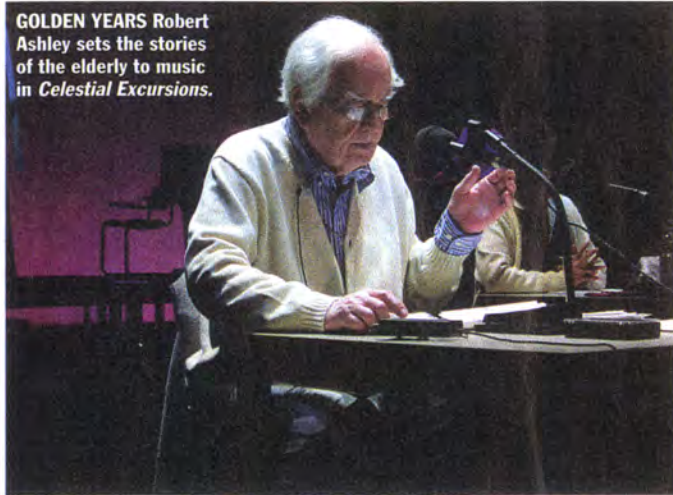
MUSIC

CLASSICAL & OPERA

Mighty mouth

Robert Ashley spins time-tripping yarns into a futuristic opera **By Steve Smith**

GOLDEN YEARS Robert Ashley sets the stories of the elderly to music in *Celestial Excursions*.



Opera has always been the most stubbornly anachronistic of musical art forms. From its inception in the 16th century, composers have turned to ancient history and musty literature for their subject matter, a trend that continues today. Musically, a Eurocentric redivism remains the norm; few contemporary operas, even those created by young American composers, transcend reheated verismo or angst-fueled expressionism. For all of its considerable charm, an opera like Mark Adamo's *Little Women* (now onstage at City Opera) is suffused with the quaint aroma of a faded age.

idealistically) intended for widespread dissemination on television and only limited to the confines of a stage out of grudging pragmatism. A combination of rapid-fire spoken narrative, subtly intoned choruses, video and choreography, Ashley's operas share more in common with the music of Laurie Anderson, Mikel Rouse and even latter-day Residents—all indebted to Ashley—than with Verdi and Puccini.

"The problem is that there's no other word than opera for long narrative musical forms," Ashley says on the phone from Berlin, where *Celestial Excursions* received its premiere at the end of March.

"Well, if I say it's opera, it's opera! Who's running this show, anyway?"

Naturally, there are exceptions to every rant. In recent years, Philip Glass, John Adams and Jake Heggie have expanded upon operatic convention to varying degrees. The topmost position in any list of modern innovators, however, is held by Robert Ashley, a 74-year-old downtown New Yorker whose latest opus, *Celestial Excursions*, opens at the Kitchen on Wednesday 9.

Like most of Ashley's operas, *Celestial Excursions* was (perhaps

"When I started working in this tradition in the 1960s, I called it electronic music theater. But that didn't mean anything, even to me. I finally said, 'Well, if I say it's opera, it's opera! Who's running this show, anyway?'"

No matter what label his works have borne, Ashley's speaking voice—a gentle Midwestern twang now grown rustic with age—has long been the centerpiece of his art. Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1930, Ashley began to compose

while in college during the 1950s, a time in which the artistic freedoms ushered in by John Cage were countered by an increasing difficulty in securing funding and performances for adventurous fare. Like many postwar American iconoclasts, Ashley became his own foremost interpreter. He formed tightly knit ensembles with like-minded friends and embraced electronics to extend his self-reliance.

From seminal early works such as "She Was a Visitor" (1967) and *Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon* (1968) to the sprawling opera cycles *Perfect Lives* (1978–80) and *Atalanta (Acts of God)* (1982), Ashley's music has consistently demonstrated his fascination with the cadences of everyday conversation in English, a language that he feels is ill-suited to the melismatic arias of European opera. "People love the sounds of the voice," Ashley says. "There's a magic in being able to listen to words without the tension of having to respond."

Stylistically, *Celestial Excursions* is a continuation of its predecessor, the autumnal, deeply humane *Dust* (1998), which was built around the shambolic monologues of homeless people. The new piece features the same ensemble: vocalists Sam Ashley, Tom Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert and Joan La Barbara, pianist "Blue" Gene Tyranny and sound artist Tom Hamilton, all new-music luminaries of who have worked with Ashley for more than a decade. (Performance artist Joan Jonas, another longtime associate, provides the visual elements of the production.) This time, Ashley drew upon the stories of another marginalized segment of the population, the elderly.

"I'm getting old myself," Ashley says, "and for the past six or seven years, I've spent time with people who are even older. Everything in their lives is in the past; the future is whether they can get out of bed and what they're going to have for breakfast. I became fascinated with the way they tell stories in a strange form of English, in which a story that happened in the past is told as if it was the present." Intentional or not, the scenario suggests a parallel to Ashley's own position—that of an aging maverick overlooked by the masses, but with a wealth of tales to share with all who will take the time to listen.

***Celestial Excursions* opens at the Kitchen on Wednesday 9.**

Listings

Opera and Musical Theater

★ **Antony and Cleopatra**
Carnegie Hall. Sun 6 at 3pm, \$15–\$45. Steven Sloane leads the New York Concert Singers and American Composers Orchestra in Samuel Barber's maligned 1966 opera, with Gregg Baker and Carol Vaness in the title roles. See Mon 7 for a related event.

★ **Ariadne auf Naxos**
Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center. Thu 3 at 8pm, \$25–\$160; Wed 9 at 7:30pm, \$25–\$160. Richard Strauss's opera-within-an-opera boasts Deborah Voigt in the title role, Natalie Dessay as Zerbinetta, Susanne Mentzer as the Composer, Richard Margison as Bacchus and Wolfgang Brendel as the Music Master. On Wed 9, Christine Brewer assumes the title role and Kristine Jepsen is the Composer.

★ **La Bohème**
Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center. Sat 5 at 8pm, \$195; Thu 10 at 7:30pm, \$25–\$160. The Met presents Puccini's greatest hit sans Broadway glitz: Hei-Kyung Hong is Mimi, Angela Maria Blasi sings Musetta, Frank Lopaldo is Rodolfo and Mariusz Kwiecien sings Marcello.

★ **La Bohème**
NYST, Lincoln Center. Fri 4 at 8pm, \$30–\$100; Thu 10 at 7:30pm, \$25–\$100. City Opera's production features Angela Marambio in her house debut as Mimi, Adina Aaron as Musetta, Gerard Powers as Rodolfo and Michael Corvino as Marcello.

★ **Carmen**
NYST, Lincoln Center. Sat 5 at 8pm, \$30–\$110. City Opera revives the tuneful Bizet drama, with Katharine Goeldner in the title role, Carl Tanner as Don José and Nicole Foland as Micaëla. Paulo Szot makes his City Opera debut as Escamillo.

★ **Celestial Excursions**
The Kitchen. Wed 9–Sat 12 at 8pm; \$20 in advance, \$25 at the door. Through Apr 19. Robert Ashley unveils his newest opera. See "Mighty mouth," page 131.

★ **Flavio**
NYST, Lincoln Center. Sun 6 at 1:30pm, \$30–\$110; Wed 9 at 7:30pm, \$25–\$100. The latest installment in City Opera's acclaimed Handel series stars David Walker as the titular king of Lombardy, Bejun Mehta as Guido, Jennifer Aylmer as Emilia, Maria Zifchak as Vitige, Mika Shigematsu as Teodata, Keith Jameson as Ugone and Jan Opalach as Lotario.

★ **Godfrey's Moon**
Bowery Poetry Club. Mon 7, Tue 8 at 7:30pm; \$15, students and seniors \$12. Poet Anne Elliott and composer-pianist Jed Distler present a new collaborative work.

★ **Little Women**
NYST, Lincoln Center. Sat 5 at 1:30pm, \$30–\$110; Tue 8 at 7:30pm, \$25–\$100. City Opera presents Mark Adamo's clever, heartfelt adaptation of the classic novel. Jennifer Dudley is Jo, Caroline Worra sings Amy, Julianne Borgis Beth, Jennifer Rivera portrays Meg and Chad Shelton is Laurie.

★ **Metropolitan Opera National Council Grand Finals Concert**
Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center. Sun 6 at 3pm, \$20–\$60. Catch a glimpse of the opera stars of the future.

★ **Parsifal**
Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center. Fri 4 at 6:30pm, \$50–\$250; Mon 7 at 6:30pm, \$90–\$105. The Met revives Wagner's final drama with a stellar cast: Plácido Domingo in the title role, Violeta Urmana as Kundry, Falk Struckmann as Amfortas, Nikolai Putilin as Klingsor and René Pape as Gurnemanz. Valery Gergiev conducts.

★ **Tri-Sci-Fi**
The Flea. Sun 6 at 7pm, \$20. The New York Art Ensemble presents *Space: An Opera in Capsule Form*; Ed Wood: *The Sinister Urge*; and Henry David Thoreau: *One Step Beyond*, a trilogy of unusual chamber operas by Edmund Cionek and Dennis Deal.

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