

# Where the River Ends

**Robert Ashley Focuses His Cosmic Worldview on Old Age**

by Kyle Gann  
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Although he took some flak for biting the hand that fed him, I appreciated John Adams's accurately caustic remarks in the April 9 *New York Times* about the undistinguished history of the Pulitzer Prize for music; they carried more weight coming from someone who had won it. If the Pulitzer judges made even a cursory attempt to honor composers who had produced works of enduring worth, one person who would have received it long ago is Robert Ashley. Yet Ashley, adored by a cult following, remains startlingly unknown to the classical-music power brokers.

That's because he writes not to the profession but to the future and to individuals ready for the truth of his music. And at 73, in *Celestial Excursions* at the Kitchen, he squarely faced a truth that most of us try to avoid dealing with: the truth of old age.

Seated at desks, Ashley's usual crowd of speaker-singers—Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, and himself—were all dressed for elegant old age, in white cardigan sweaters and grayed hair where needed, the women in pearl necklaces. It was unclear exactly what the situation was. Ashley interrogated the others, who were in an old folks' home or asylum of some kind, and who replied with the patient calm typical of his protagonists. As always, the music was dotted with what Ashley considers his "pop songs," which have become both funnier and more conventional over the years. Some were as crazily imaginative as ever—like one about Samuel Beckett needing to have a baguette for breakfast every morning so he could learn to write poetry in French—others newly sentimental, like Ashley's refrain "Lonely lady/middle of the afternoon." In his previous opera *Dust*, Ashley took a lunge toward vernacular accessibility. In *Celestial Excursions* he muted that a little in favor of his usual Zen philosophy, and hit an exquisite balance between pop song and abstraction.

I find it difficult to prefer one of Ashley's operas over another; they all seem like segments of some vast interconnected narrative, mutually referential and each with its own strengths. But if *Celestial Excursions* doesn't have the engaging plot of *Perfect Lives*, the cogent philosophical narrative of *Improvement*, or the mind-blowing autobiographical frankness of *Dust*, I think it may well be the most musically beautiful thing he's ever written. The underlying electronic beat was subtle, but lively and infectious.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny's piano accompaniments have never been more

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The power of rhythmicized speech  
photo: Hiroyuki Ito

crystalline, sometimes zinging our attention with a single perfect note and framing every scene with delicately traced incomplete lines. Most of all, Ashley's use of voice and text has become more musical. The composer who taught us the beauty of speech rhythms turned here to the power of rhythmicized speech, composing word rhythms in more detail than he used to and with a springy bounce to the language. As each actor spoke a monologue, another would quietly sing the words in unison on a drone, like an electronic echo or a live acoustic harmonizer, a stunning effect. Simultaneous voices created a quiet chaos, but the main narrative was always audible. The homely phrases that draw us into his operas—"We see this all the time," "You know what I mean?," "I love that stuff"—ricocheted between chorus and soloists with chorus-line precision, yet lively unpredictability. It's always a challenge to catch the intricacies of an Ashley text on first hearing, but in this case even if you lost the thread of the story, the gently propulsive music was pleasure enough.

As always, this was a carefully devised strategy, and he lets you know it. "The only thing that counts," he advised us at one point in mid-opera, "is what people can't understand. If you make it so they can understand it—you are a fool." Just because you don't understand doesn't mean you can't be deeply moved. One line that recurred several times, finally bringing the opera to an abrupt end, was "The river deepens when it gets down to the sea, the river deepens." What can anyone tell us about old age more important than that?

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