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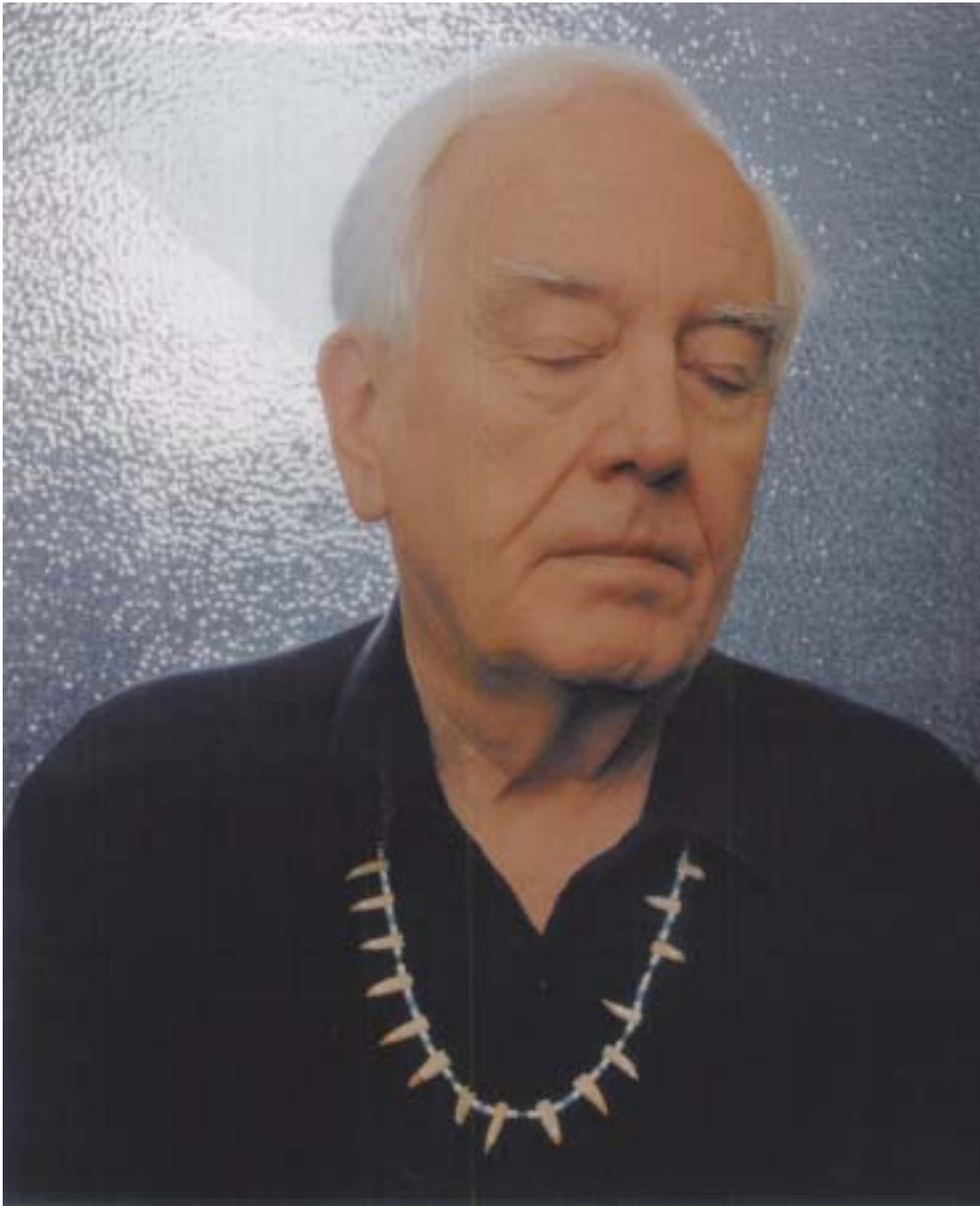
Robert Ashley

Meet the electronic pioneer who took opera into the multimedia age. By Thom Holmes

Built for Speed

Textually hyperdense and accelerated for the televisual age, the multimedia music theatre of composer Robert Ashley has been called the future of opera, as well as the first to exploit the unique rhythms of the American voice. Following this year's premiere of his new work *Celestial Excursions*, Thom Holmes meets the composer to discuss his founding role in the Sonic Arts Union, his love of TV, and his celebration of life on the margins.

Photos: Chris Buck



“Popular music always “ends after three minutes,” remarks Robert Ashley without a hint of judgment in his voice. In his TriBeCa studio in downtown New York, we’re talking about the operas he’s been writing since the mid-70s, which leads to a discussion of popular song. He pauses, forging his next sentence. “Popular music, when it works, reminds us of something we already know, or it reminds us of something we’ve already experienced. It turns back the hands of time to something that we know from experience. It puts a label on that thing.”

Even at 72 years old, Ashley exists in defiance of history, and he continues to move ahead at an

accelerating clip. He is always composing and touring, completing a new opera about every three years and following it with select performances that might take him across the United States and over to Europe and Japan. He edits his conversation with great care, as if determined to verbalise the best take of each thought. He and partner Mimi Johnson live in an old brick warehouse that was converted into residential lofts back in the 70s. She runs Lovely Music, the record label devoted to documenting key works of the American electronic and electroacoustic avant garde. The two are longtime residents, occupying two floors — one for their studio and the

other for their living space. Today, the windows are open due to the warm weather. Ashley’s computers, keyboards and recording equipment are clustered in the centre of the space underneath a marquee-like canopy. The tent is there to protect the equipment from falling crumbs of concrete and ceiling plaster while the roof undergoes repairs.

Despite the disruption, Ashley never loses his train of thought. “That’s why so much popular music has to do with love,” he continues. “It puts a label on it and when it’s good, that label really works. It can’t do anything but that, no matter how hard people try. No matter how hard Bob Dylan tried or John Lennon tried, you can’t make popular music into anything except a labelling of your own experience that you never realised needed a label.” He sits up straight and places the palms of his hands firmly on the table in front of him. “Opera doesn’t do that. Opera is supposed to present you with characters in the same way that a great novel presents you with characters. In that sense, it becomes amoral. You’re supposed to be able to see it because it’s brought to you. That’s totally different than labelling an experience. You have to continually refer back to what human beings know. My job is to establish those characters.”

We have just crossed the line where popular music ends and opera begins. Welcome to Robert Ashley’s territory.

Ashley often talks about history, perhaps because he had such a hand in forging it. He and his contemporaries were initially linked to John Cage and David Tudor through a variety of encounters and collaborations in the 1960s, and then went on to become the most consistent practitioners of American experimental music into the 70s. This ‘post-Cage generation’ — Ashley, Gordon Mumma, Alvin Lucier and David Behrman — acquired their initial momentum through their founding of The Sonic Arts Union (1966-76), a mutually supportive thinktank for live experimental music. If Cage and Tudor

represented the first wave of live electronic music production — the use of magnetic tape and the amplification of small sounds — then Ashley, Mumma, Lucier and Behrman in their different ways represented four extensions of that abstraction, each indicating musical practices that are still being explored and utilised today.

Ashley's contribution consisted of his attempts to seamlessly integrate electronic performance with human performance. One of the earliest and most notorious examples was *The Wolfman* (1964), where he played his own vocals through loudspeakers simultaneously with a tape composition and controlled the feedback by putting his mouth up against the mic. The avalanche of noise was "so overpowering to the listener that no one ever understands how the sound is made".

The Wolfman was emblematic of the performance pieces Ashley tested during his years of work in Ann Arbor, Michigan, particularly with Gordon Mumma for Milton Cohen's Space Theater (1957-64), and with Mumma and others for the ONCE Festivals (1961 and 1965). Ashley was constantly experimenting with combinations of available technology and live performers. His 60s portfolio is a melange of performance approaches, including purely electronic works for tape such as *Big Danger In Five Parts* (1964) and *Untitled Mixes* (1965), and soundtracks for the experimental films of George Manupelli.

The ONCE Festival became a remarkable laboratory for New Music and mixed media before Ashley and Mumma wound it down in 1966 in Ann Arbor to concentrate on other outlets and contexts for their music. While Mumma went to work with Tudor, Cage and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (see *The Wire* 216), Ashley extended his forays into electronic music theatre into works he called operas for voices, dancers and tape. Drawn from his own *That Morning Thing* (1967), *She Was A Visitor* (1967), for speaker and chorus, was an early work featuring the soothing

drone of his voice. The repeated line "*She was a visitor*" cascades gently, sleepily, into a chanted murmur, as an accompanying chorus freely repeats given phonemes from the sentence. Ashley likened it to the process of rumour mongering, where the content of the original message becomes distorted and transformed with repetition.

But one morning in April 1968, he decided to stop composing altogether. Fully intending the decision to be final, his reasons were many, such as the economic pressures of trying to produce concerts while eking out a living with day jobs. With little money available for composers, he began to believe that "there was no reality" to his dreams. He had also been deeply discouraged by one of the last performances of the touring ONCE Group, when the audience physically assaulted the musicians.

"The performance we did at Brandeis [1968] was a beautiful piece called *Night Train*," Ashley recalls. "It involved, among a lot of other things, giving the audience something when they came in. The idea of the piece was that we were aliens trying to make friends with the Earth people. So, everybody who came in along with their ticket got something edible, like an apple or an onion or a fish or a loaf of bread or something like that. Somehow in the middle of the performance the audience kind of lost it and started attacking us. They were throwing things... Besides the hard pieces of vegetable, like an onion, we were passing out lights. [Architecture professor] Harold Borkin had a group of ten or so students there who were soldering one end of a flashlight bulb to one end of a battery and then soldering a wire to the other end of the battery. When the audience started throwing those, I knew we were in deep trouble. We got through the performance but it was very ugly. It was very discouraging. I had had enough. I didn't compose music for another five years."

Though he had stopped composing, Ashley didn't remove himself entirely from the world of New Music. The Sonic Arts Union gave him a way to perform without having to actually compose. He also took the job of Director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Oakland's Mills College in 1969, revitalising one of the most influential music programmes in the country after several of its founding members — most notably Morton Subotnick and Pauline Oliveros — had left to pursue other opportunities. Ultimately, it was Mimi Johnson who challenged Ashley to return to composing, saying, "Well, if you are a famous composer, you've got to compose music."

But where to begin? During his sabbatical, technology and the arts had evolved significantly. By the early 70s, video production equipment was affordable for independent artists, and experimental electronic music flourished with the accessibility of synthesizers, integrated circuits, and other by-products of the burgeoning computer industry. "I had been working for years on an idea of an opera whose characters were all my composer friends," says Ashley, "and they would be represented in the opera by their music and by their conversation. I tried to make it work in about five different ways. Finally, when I figured out that I could do it on videotape it just came together very quickly."

This work became Ashley's first extended 'opera' for television, *Music With Roots In The Aether* (1976). *Aether* is a 14 hour TV opera/documentary featuring the work and ideas of seven American composers: David Behrman, Philip Glass, Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley and Ashley himself. More portraiture than conventional operatic narrative, these video profiles lovingly showed the artists in action rather than attempting to explain their work. After premiering at the Festival d'Automne à Paris in 1976, *Aether* has been shown in different countries on TV or as an installation.

Ashley followed *Aether* with *Automatic Writing*: 46 minutes of music so quiet that it's mostly inaudible at normal volume settings. The underlying keyboard sound making up one layer of its texture is so muted, it sounds like it's coming from another room. The base element of *Automatic Writing* is the spoken voice, close-miked, uttering what Ashley characterises as "involuntary speech": random comments, mutterings and disconnected conversational fragments picked up off the street. But, more than the words, for Ashley the shape and timbre of the voices, the levels of amplification and the musical accompaniment are all significant musical resources. "In *Automatic Writing* I had become interested in the idea of characters in an operatic or dramatic sense," he says. "Of characters actually being manifested through a particular sound. I was fumbling around looking for ways I could work in an operatic sense that would be practical. I didn't want to start writing things that wouldn't be performed for 25 years without forming a group."

Automatic Writing was frequently lauded as an early Ambient piece, in the wake of the late 70s recordings of Brian Eno and Jon Hassell, because of its quiet, tinkling qualities. At the same time, its sparse repetitions caused others to bracket it with the minimalist pulse works of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Consisting largely of spoken dialogue, it was also dubbed a 'text sound' composition. While all those descriptions are superficially accurate, most attempts to categorise *Automatic Writing* are ultimately unhelpful, for they fail to take account of the way Ashley was attempting to access a new form of musical storytelling using the English language. He recalls, "I went toward the idea of sounds having a kind of magical function — of being able to actually conjure characters. It seemed to me that in a sort of psycho-physical sense sounds can actually make you see things, can give you images that are quite specific."

The watershed composition in Ashley's portfolio is *Perfect Lives* (1983), an opera for TV in seven half-hour episodes. *Perfect Lives* evolved from the two-part *Private Parts* (1979), the two 'private' parts eventually becoming the bookends for the bigger work. In *Perfect Lives*, Ashley's hypnotic voice is at the centre of a maelstrom of pulsing electronics. He tells the story of two musicians conspiring to stage a prank bank robbery in a small Midwest American town. A series of encounters with other characters — an eloping couple, elderly people at a rest home, the sheriff and his wife — leads to a solution of the mystery behind the robbery.

Ashley was working on *Perfect Lives* during a period flushed with innovative approaches to opera: Philip Glass and Robert Wilson had staged *Einstein On The Beach* in 1976, and Laurie Anderson was producing her mammoth *United States I-IV* (1979-83). Glass and Wilson's opera is emphatically instrumental — one couldn't escape the familiarity of the Glass sound. Anderson's *United States* is determinedly visual with its barrage of projected images, but a great many American voices speak through Anderson, as the work's sole performer. In contrast, Ashley's operas focus on a union of character, story and an abundance of words. The instrumental portion of his music, while always integral to the performance, is subsumed by the continuous chattering of the characters. There's no cult of personality, only people and their stories.

Perfect Lives has been called both the first American opera, and the future of opera. Not only has it been performed live. It's also one of Ashley's only productions to achieve some success on the small screen, having been shown on TV in half a dozen countries. With its voices buoyed up by electronic rhythms and chords that flap along with the words like the decorated tail of a kite. *Perfect Lives* set the pattern for much of the composer's subsequent work.

His development of characters, accessible electronic scores, precision timing, even his choice of musicians and vocalists all evolved from it.

Ashley likens his operatic output between 1980-95 to a TV series without a name. It consists of three groups of operas, of which *Perfect Lives* is now considered the middle sequence. The first is a trilogy called *Atalanta (Acts of God)* (1985), which interprets the story of Europe's origins through anecdotes about surrealist painter Max Ernst, shamanic storyteller Willard Reynolds and bop pianist Bud Powell. While *Perfect Lives* revels in the values of present day middle America, the third installment is a quartet known collectively as *Now Eleanor's Idea* (1993) and relates the history of religion through episodes about Judaism, Protestantism, Catholicism and the 'religions' of big business and science. In Ashley's world, the individual is always at odds with the establishment. The underlying theme of his work is the sanctity of the individual in an unforgiving world.

Ashley's most recent works, such as *Dust* (2000) and, currently, *Celestial Excursions* (2003), take a more inward look at the human condition. *Dust* features the imagined thoughts of various park dwellers and down and outs who "live on the fringe of society". Five readers occupy transparent booths facing the audience. The front pane of each booth is electronically modulated between opaque and clear, obscuring or revealing the readers as required. Overhead, many of the words spoken are projected on a large video screen, like afterimages of voiced ideas.

Celestial Excursions ventures into the confined quarters of an old people's home, whose senile residents struggle to remain tethered to reality. It premiered in Germany last March, and made its US debut in April in New York. This trajectory reveals how his works have evolved thematically from a broader concern with government, religion, history, and culture to a closer, more microscopic

view of the individuals who make up Western society. "The characters I am interested in," he elaborates, "are marginal, because everybody is marginal compared to the stereotypes. Even though I am very interested in their profoundly good qualities, even though I'm not interested at all in evil, the characters in my work are as bizarre and unreal as the characters in William Faulkner. They just happen to be ordinary people who are spiritually divine. And that's why I can't get on television."

Despite all the international premieres and tours, the TV screen remains Ashley's preferred medium. "I've been thinking in terms of television for 25 years," he says, "despite not having much success in making television and not much encouragement. The television situation for anyone like myself now is pretty discouraging. It is so much more conservative than it was 25 years ago."

But Ashley remains hopeful, even though he knows that the production of radical video work for television has hit a long dry spell. "The game is not over," he declares. "It's just that in the last few years the corporations and advertisers saw television as a huge resource. So I didn't win that game. I have a strong feeling that perhaps the disgruntled public will force television to come up with some new subject matter. That may open up the door for music. If it does, the door will only be open for a few seconds. Somebody may get in there."

Aiming his work at mass audiences reflects his belief in empowering alternative voices in society. His characters, unglamorous and marginalised, run counter to TV stereotypes. "My feeling," he argues, "is that everybody, in our unhealthy, neurotic media environment, is on the fringe, except for the stereotypes. There's nobody like the people on television. They don't exist in the real world, including the newsmen and the weather reporters. It is becoming more and more peculiar that even

people who have a very serious real-life existence — like professional athletes — you can see them being transformed yearly into stereotypes."

The key to Ashley's work is speed. Television has accelerated human perception and nowadays it's infinitely faster than 25 years ago, when he was making his first video works.

"Tempo has been entirely neglected in opera for 100 years," he explains. "It's about time we got interested in tempo, because it has made a big comeback in many aspects of our lives." The pace of commercial radio is a case in point. "I'm fascinated by the speed in format radio. The announcers speak at an unbelievable tempo. But they make it sound so casual that you think that they're

talking at an ordinary pace. You think that they're sounding like you. Actually, they're talking twice as fast as I am. I've never heard people talk faster than this, and I know people who really talk fast. Within 12 seconds they give you the news, the weather, everything, plus two or three ads. It's totally incredible.

"The essence of my music," he continues, "is that the syllables go by as fast as they do in the American English language and the pitch stresses, which make one syllable more important than the other syllable, are all within a range of half an octave. It's like you squeeze it in one direction and expand it in another direction. I've always been interested in tempo because it's a big, big factor





Scenes from Robert Ashley's *Celestial Excursions* at Berlin's Hebbel Theatre, spring 2003, with (bottom) the composer as narrator. Photos by Mimi Johnson

in vocal music. The other factors, like melody, have been used up for the time being."

For the last ten years, Ashley has composed for the same group of accomplished vocalists: Tom Buckner, Jackie Humbert, Sam Ashley and Joan La Barbara. A frequent collaborator on the electronic elements of his music is fellow composer Tom Hamilton. This ensemble recently completed eight performances of his latest piece, *Celestial Excursions*, at The Kitchen in New York's Chelsea district. Ashley and Hamilton are now busy producing a CD based on this run.

Celestial Excursions — scored for five vocalists, electronic orchestration and piano — doesn't sound like most people's conception of opera. At the premiere, Ashley's four vocalists and the composer himself sat unassumingly at their own small tables, lined up facing the audience in front of the stage. At stage left, keyboardist Blue Gene Tyranny (aka Robert Sheff, a longstanding composer and performer on NYC's avant music scene) took up position at a grand piano. The rest of the stage was the operating theatre for improvising dancer Joan Jonas, who moved silently and ghostlike throughout the night, articulating the nuances of Ashley's wordy, rapidfire libretto with her body. Additional music, composed by Ashley using MIDI software, was played through a Kurzweil keyboard controlled by Hamilton, positioned at the rear of the theatre.

The 'plot' of *Celestial Excursions* revolves around four elderly people who've been placed in an assisted-living home. "They're not the kind of active elderly people that you read about, like business guys, Wall Street guys, or John Cage," explains Ashley. "These people are the kind of people who have been marginalised in our society, even by their own families."

The environment consists entirely of other old people. "There's a new set of rules that comes with being there," he continues. "That gives rise to very peculiar and personal

meditations. The things they say and the things they apparently think about are not necessarily the things you would associate with good citizenship. They're strange sometimes. Sometimes they're very radical. They go to extremes." Ashley plays the part of a counsellor at the assisted-living home. He says, "Basically it's just a dialogue between him and these four other people who are complaining about getting old."

The score runs to more than 130 pages, with the text laid out in parallel columns. Each vocalist has a column to read. The piece would be daunting for any ensemble not accustomed to working with Ashley. To maintain timing and an even pace, each vocalist wears an in-ear monitor playing back a click track tuned to middle C, and Ashley's voice counting the measures. The pulse is a rapid (for opera) 100 beats per minute. "Everybody is singing all the time," explains the composer gleefully. "We start with a solo by Joan [La Barbara] and the other three voices are a kind of chorus. I tried to make all of the choruses different in some recognisable way so that you don't get the same chorus activity for each piece. In the dialogue itself, there is a calculated rotation of the voices speaking to the counsellor. The pattern of that rotation changes according to the plan of the piece."

The work is dense with words, with the singers hovering around the pitch most comfortable to them. This is part of Ashley's design for working with English. "I have never liked the way American composers have tried to adapt American English speech to a European style," he states. "Which, if you don't listen to every opera that has ever been written by an American composer, has basically come down to one syllable per note. My idea is that American English doesn't have the kinds of vowel sounds that allow for vocal embellishment of the vowel sounds as in Italian, and of course Italian is our model. There are very few pure vowels in American English. Most American English vowels are diphthongs or vowel sounds that are

attached to resonant consonances.

"My main idea has been to make American English sound like American English in the same way that *Tosca* sounds like spoken Italian. I want it to sound like the way we speak English. That means that the syllables have to go by at a faster rate."

The words are spoken, declared, sung and spouted as if from a secret interior dialogue. The piece's texture is dictated by the threads of voices that unwind, combine and sometimes weave together in a torrent of symmetrical patterns. The traditional way of developing character in stage productions is by placing them in dialogue with other people. *Celestial Excursions* defies this convention by presenting characters without context. "There's no excuse, there's no context at all," says Ashley. "Which I thought would be appropriate to this idea of a group of old people in a home. You don't know where they come from. You don't know who their relatives are. They have no relationship to each other or at the most a casual relationship. All you have to go on in terms of character is just what they tell you. What's on their mind. In this opera I was hoping that I could have five characters who were clearly characters unto themselves but are not presented to us as the result of a story."

The instrumental accompaniment to *Celestial Excursions*, created by sampling the vocal patterns of the singers and arranged into 'orchestral libraries' controlled by Tom Hamilton, shifts continuously from a symphony of chords and articulated notes to waves of quiet noise that lend a haunting reverberation to the prevailing atmosphere. Blue Gene Tyranny's amplified piano part is, by design, disconnected from the singers. "There are so many amazing sounds that can be made on the piano with some combination of the three pedals, and that you rarely hear in ordinary piano playing. So I asked Blue Gene to make up a programme of those very unusual

sounds for himself and to think of his piano playing as accompanying Joan."

Constantly changing shape with the aid of a rack of clothes, capes, masks and long linen drapes, dancer Joan Jonas provides what Ashley calls "additions to my very dumb, simple idea of a person just getting ready for the day".

'Dumb, simple' ideas such as these have been the lifeblood of the composer's work for nearly 50 years. Throughout it all he somehow manages to rescue everyday moments and launch them onto the stage with a gripping fascination. He shares this ability with some of the greatest writers and artists of the 20th century. If James Joyce were alive today, he would probably be trying to write operas like Robert Ashley.

Ashley is thoughtful as the light of late afternoon dims, taking in the clamour of traffic and voices that rises from the street, six floors below. "There's nothing that makes you happier than going fast," he concludes. "That's one of the basic rules of life."

Robert Ashley's major works are available on *Lovely Music* and *Alga Marghen*, who have just issued *The Wolfman*. *Thom Holmes is the author of *Electronic And Experimental Music: Pioneers In Technology And Composition* (Routledge 2002)*