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Recording - Robert Ashley. *Celestial Excursions*. Lovely Music LCD 1007. Web: www.lovely.com.

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By Warren Burt

Since the 1970s, Robert Ashley has been creating a series of operas that, along with those of Stockhausen (*Licht*) and R. Murray Schafer (*Patria*), must count as the major contributions to music theatre in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The approach of each of these composers is unique, of course, but they all share a sense of nonlinear narrative—in each of their works, events and stories are presented which add up, in a metaphorical way, to a narrative that is more powerful than the simple linear explication of a mainstream Hollywood-style plot. Ashley is rewriting the book on opera. His latest operatic work, *Celestial Excursions* is a particularly powerful example of this, and if you want to hear a beautiful piece that defines a possible future for opera, get this CD. The theme of the opera is old age, old people's memories, and the experience of being old. Love, loss, frustration, boredom, regret—it's all here. And in this opera something is added that was only hinted at in many of Ashley's earlier operas (*Improvement*, *Private Parts*, etc.) but here appears full blown—a sense of compassion for his characters. This first began to appear in *Dust*, Ashley's opera about homeless people, and in this work, especially in the first act, is present quite beautifully. The sense of humour and irony that has marked many of Ashley's earlier works is here as well, but occasionally—such as in most of the first act and right at the end of the third—the irony dissolves, almost like a veil (goodbye, postmodernism!), and we are left with the most pure sense of empathy and compassion for the characters. At least, that was my experience.

Celestial Excursions is a beautiful work, filled with stunning moments, where intricate vocal textures and complex electronics merge with gorgeous harmonies to create a sense of progression that is full of continually pleasing sonic surprises. Elaborate hockets, four-voice homophony where all voices perform the same text slightly out of phase, and a plethora of other ensemble techniques are used to present the texts. And the texts themselves, also by Ashley, are beautiful in their own right. Wistful, regretful, sarcastic, lonely, amazed, horrified—all these points of view are represented by the various characters and their stories. There's also one honest-to-goodness drop-dead gorgeous pop song—"Lonely Lady"—that forms the spine of most of the first act. If the pop music world still picked up tunes from contemporary operas, as it did in the early twentieth century, Ashley would have a number one hit on his hands. Ashley and his electronic collaborator Tom Hamilton have been producing elegant synthesized orchestrations of the accompaniments for his operas for quite some time now, but in the third act, they produce four orchestral preludes to the four main incidents in the act. These preludes are worth the price of admission by themselves, especially "Prelude to Therapy," a polyrhythmic tour de force.

Ashley's ensemble has been together for over two decades, and it's very apparent here. Over these years, his four singers (Jacqueline Humbert, Thomas Buckner, Sam Ashley, and Joan La Barbara) have, along with Ashley himself, developed a unique performing technique, approaching the unusual demands of these operas with complete ease, facility, and virtuosity. Of late, they've also developed incredible pitch facility and fluidity. They can go, as an ensemble, from a babbling spoken voice heterophony, turning on a dime as they leap onto an intonationally precise doo-wop chord, before suddenly turning to conventional acting voices, or a solemnly intoned chanting. Their performances in *Celestial Excursions* are never less than thrilling, and in the second act, "Asylum," are of almost hair-raising beauty.