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Robert Ashley **Celestial Excursions**

Lovely Music 1007 CD

It's not for nothing that Robert Ashley is sometimes referred to as "the godfather of experimental opera." An early proponent of electronic music (and co-founder of the ONCE group), Ashley's recent work has become preoccupied with the rhythms of everyday speech. While this might seem to bear a superficial similarity to the Steve Reich of *Different Trains* or *Tehillim*, or the John Adams of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling & Then Saw the Sky*, I actually hear a music that is sonically akin to classic Laurie Anderson recordings but methodologically similar to Anna Deveare Smith's writings. Like Smith, Ashley is fond of taking patterns of conventional speech—here purportedly the chatter of the elderly, in its restraint and its abundance—and artfully reassembling it, both in his own libretto (lovingly reproduced in a thick booklet here) and with electronic processing (abundant on this recording). The lengthy piece is for five vocalists (Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, and Ashley himself), accompanied by "Blue" Gene Tyranny (piano), Robert Ashley and Thomas Hamilton ("electronic orchestra") and, though this is impossible to detect on the audio version, Joan Jonas (choreographer and dancer). The performance is a seamless whole, with a constantly droning synthesizer background making the transitions between rotund electric bass, ringing chorus, and

harsh guitar seamless ones. Repetition and incantation dominate, with a gentle reverberation giving the entire 111-minute performance a trance-like effect. Sonically it's a lovely contrast with the often perambulating, uncontrollable speech—overflowing with different voices, cadences, articulations, and reflections (and each foreground voice, speaking of loneliness and memory, is framed by softly ululating background voices too). But the texts merit attention too, filled as they are with melancholy remembrance, quirky observations, elegies, and rants: "The only thing that counts is what people don't understand"; "Everything is from memory"; or "It's only poetry if it's against the law." There's more percussion and more extended atmospherics in the latter part of the opera, including some somewhat busy instrumental sections. (And there is also much humor here: "If Beckett wrote in French, he must've had a baguette for breakfast. You can't write in French after having oatmeal for breakfast.") Ashley's preoccupation here is the uncertainty of old age, the dimmed and fraying perceptions of one's "twilight years." He is successful in conveying a sense of disorientation with the multiple overlapping, frequently staggered vocals. It's a work that takes time to get into, but it's wonderfully textured stuff.
Jason Bivins