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Dusted Reviews

Robert Ashley - Celestial Excursions

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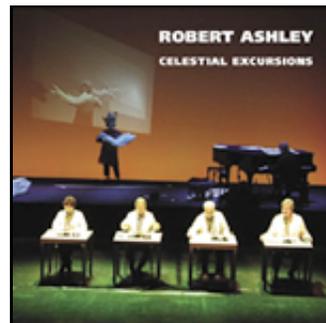
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Artist: Robert Ashley

Album: Celestial Excursions

Label: [Lovely](#)

Review date: Jan. 23, 2006



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Ashley’s music personifies perfectly a phrase from one of Messiaen’s texts – “Infinitely simple.” Almost every aspect of this three-act opera is transparent, and even the sections boasting the most activity bespeak the avoidance of confusion resultant from density. The musical material here couldn’t be more straight forward – the trappings of drone, occasional but reserved electrosquall, a long-held chord or two, sometimes just a fifth or single tone. The vocalists – the usual cast of singers associated with Ashley productions – sing and speak in traditional fashion, and there’s even a chorus here, ready to comment on, or around, what’s being said. Yet, despite echoes of musical or theatrical tradition, Ashley’s operas are some of the most innovative I’ve ever heard in the English language, and this latest one is stunningly refined, both in terms of composition and execution.

To say that the plot involved aging, or being old, or the monumental inward struggles associated with the way old people are treated in this country, would reveal nothing about the level of detail present in music and libretto. The theme of old age unifies the many intertwined anecdotes, clinicalities, poetic musings and reminiscences here in the way that music unified Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody*; it provides a frame, a place to begin, the dimensions of which are only partly unveiled to leave room for individual detail. Every beat knew jazz, and so it became a self-explanatory idiomatic component of Kerouac’s conversational fabric. Everyone’s confronted or tried to ignore the process of aging, by proxy or head on, and so Ashley leaves us only with nakedly moving detail.

As with other operas, Ashley is concerned with exposing subtleties in the human voice, these in turn bringing increased emphasis to the microdetail of his non-linear narrative. There’s a powerful juxtapositional section in the first act, called “Is it light yet?” where explanations concerning different types of alcoholism and associated depression are heard simultaneously to the repeated mantra “The Doctor said ...”; it’s recited with urgency, busily, over what might be described as a relaxed but efficiently funky bass line. Many of the individual syllables are emphasized by a touch of added reverb/delay, as if bolding them or setting them in strangely detached relief. Equally poignant, even more so because so heartbreakingly intimate, is the recurring motive of the love letter, first delivered in Ashley’s unmistakable drawl:

She asked me to write a love letter.

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Something she can hide
in a shoebox in the drawer.
No names, no promises,
just something she can look at
to remind her what the day is for.

Lonely lady, middle of the afternoon.
Lonely lady, come in feeling blue.
Love letter on a paper napkin,
Folded, addressed to you, lonely lady.

How precious you are,
I mean to me.
How priceless you are,
will always be.
How special you are
no one can see,
but I'll keep it a secret, ...
Sincerely, ...

This is only one textual trope employed by Ashley. His creations – I hesitate to call them characters too firmly – speak in language that ranges from the mumbled phrases of love or regret to the fiery “stream-of-consciousness” pronouncements of baptism by universal emotion, that expose, shamelessly but metaphorically, the deepest levels of experience. One of my favorites comes in the third act, emanating from one who obviously serves on an admissions committee at some college or other; there is no need for pretense in the narrative, no need to hide the subjectivity of the human relations behind the admissions process, partly because the speaker is un-named.

The voices in this drama usually have no names, and are sometimes even stripped of gender identity. All plots are jumbled, temporally fuzzy, yet somehow placed in sharp but shifting focus from moment to moment; the music encapsulates these vagaries perfectly, remnants of popular song form and jazz floating amidst a static brew of constant pitch that continually threatens to stagnate but never quite achieves this easy out. The instrumental ending, cascades of shimmering keyboards, provides a flowing conclusion to a work whose clarity and complexity work in gorgeous tandem.

By Marc Medwin

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