

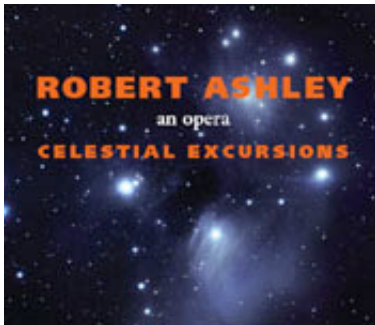
OPERA TODAY

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ASHLEY: Perfect Lives; Celestial Excursions; Foreign Experiences

Robert Ashley has the uncanny ability to sprinkle diamonds amidst great swaths of apparently trivial and quotidian detritus—diamonds that trigger the nervous system in an intensely stimulating fashion.

Ashley puts into close proximity two dramatic states—the first, a long, process-like state of suspended intelligence, a kind of cultivated stupor, the second constituting brief, extremely clear moments of heightened awareness, a sort of penetrating focus that cuts through the trivial and then transforms it into the meaningful.



If my description sounds like life under the influence of a cocktail of antidepressants laced with the occasional stimulant, so be it, for Ashley's oeuvre, more so than any other composer's work in this reviewer's experience, comes the closest to confronting consciousness in a modern world of tailored pharmaceuticals. This is not to say his work is programmatic, designed by intent or by accident to resemble the workings of a sedated mind, for it is anything but sedate. Instead Ashley's work confronts us with the same kind of consciousness that a life on Prozac (or vodka, or mushrooms, or trancing) mixed with occasional lapses into recreational pharmacy must confront us with. It addresses the potential for a deep and prolonged depression derived from the consciousness of the fact that the world our parents promised us so as to get us to sleep at night—filled as it was with regularity and good design—is a phantom, and it makes no sense (in opera or in the conduct of one's daily affairs) to pretend otherwise.

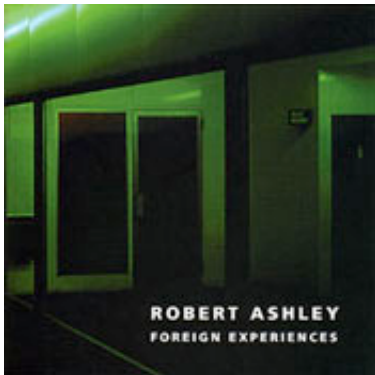
Ashley's operas follow in the mold of Beckett's drama. As much as it hurts to recognize this fact, the world is comprised of characters taking ultimately random trajectories amidst great swaths of trivial and quotidian detritus. If we can find a few diamonds sprinkled in the refuse, we are much the better for it. Our world, if it doesn't make complete sense, makes a kind of sense, sometimes brilliantly. Ashley's opera, if they don't make complete sense, make a kind of sense, often brilliantly.

To reiterate, Ashley puts into close proximity two dramatic states. The first of these—Beckett like in quality—takes us through a long process of seemingly random verbiage produced as if one were flipping channels through a dozen talk radio shows. This is the quintessential North American experience of the meaning of meaninglessness, a kind of Zen mindedness produced unintentionally (but not without design) by the unbridled proliferation of individually innocuous media. The flow produced thus in Ashley's work has a

chant-like quality, hypnotic and drone-like, which the musical accompaniment to the drama compliments perfectly. Into this ribbon of detritus, Ashley sows little snippets of lyric with a deceptive regularity, snippets of extreme importance to us, both as listeners and (in a sense that makes his work so important) as citizens, or at least denizens, of our modern world. Although it is quite impossible to say precisely what the relevance of these phrases is, either to the work at hand or to our interests (and even our best interests), we are riveted by them. They are redolent of meaning, if they don't actually mean anything themselves. Here are two such snippets from *Foreign Experiences*, the end of scene 10 in Act 1:

Take a shower shave and sauce
 Kiss the wife goodbye
 Finish up the drugs
 Make a few phone calls
 Check with my broker

Opinion blew him up against the wall
 Then having suffered enough or having
 Been cleansed depending on your point of view
 He was accepted as a neighbor they even started
 Speaking English he could buy a loaf of bread he could
 Get his shoes shined....



In the first instance, our parents never told us about the drugs, when they were discussing the other parts (our normal routines, from the shower to the broker); the second instance describes perfectly the average North American's reception as a stranger entering a new neighborhood in the friendly global village, where television and the computer have done absolutely nothing to break down territoriality.

The kind of meaning produced here is like that given off by Thornton Wilder's absolutely maudlin peon to American domesticity, the play *Our Town*. The essential meaning is all sidereal, which, despite the playwright's best intentions, draws us back to the play again and again. This is a meaning without a central core; these are lives that derive meaning from convention rather than substance. Substance-dependency on drugs, acceptance by neighbors (and thus access to bread and vodka)—is glimpsed only in haphazard fashion. Substantial meaning benefits from this approach, since to stare at substance for too long is to remove it from one's awareness.

Given these parameters—a sort of evaporated content that gives way every now and then to glimpses of substance—Ashley's work derives its greatest characteristic quality from text enunciation and setting. Ashley, himself, takes many of the principal roles. His is a suitably monotonic voice, roughly articulated in

some barely identifiable drawl (indecipherable to a Canadian, but situated presumably somewhere between the Carolinas and Texas). He sounds like someone overheard in the adjacent restaurant booth, every so slightly agitated or merely overstimulated, who carries on a monologue just slightly above the volume observed by decorum, and thus as good as in your face, since you and everyone else in the restaurant is drawn to it as if it were an aural magnet. This is a person saying in full voice things that are normally whispered in restaurant booths. The text works its way into the psyche as both forbidden and yet necessary, as uncomfortable and yet intensely interesting.

Ashley's characters are made generally to articulate the text in a sort of bare enunciation—in a stupor, or trance like—against sparse accompaniment (monodic, in the sense of the term *monodrama* hearkening back to Peri and the origins of opera as drama). Worked into the flow are songs, duets, choruses, dramatic interjections. In Wagnerian fashion, the singers segue into and out of these indiscriminately; they seldom plant their feet and bring forth an aria.

I liken Ashley's operas to Richard Ford's *Independence Day*. We sense that great things—monumental things—are going on, of which the musical moments in the operas are but mere symptoms. The greatness is left inarticulate, merely sensed, slouching behind the sheer volume of the whole. Like Ford's novel, Ashley's work is centrally American—about American real estate, so to speak. The images that emerge have a particularly American quality about them: witness protection programs will be invoked alongside Death Valley segueing to Death's Door Hospital, to "Somewhere in the Great Southwest," and the Bob Willis Band, the "Milk Cow Blues," Subaru, the sharp sound of a rifle and the subsequent sharp blow to the chest, an adopted daughter, Walnut, an American Indian.

The participants in these operas are familiar faces in the Ashley circle: Sam Ashley, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, Tom Hamilton, Thomas Buckner. Some have been with Ashley since the days of *Perfect Lives* (since the late 70's), and this familiarity is evident in the ease with which they perform his work. Of the three operas under review here, *Foreign Experiences* has a narrative tension unlike that seen before in Ashley's operas—a taught quality that derives from the slightly paranoid nature of a protagonist. The two voices involved in this recording—Sam Ashley and Humbert—retain, however, the hypnotic quality of Ashley's other work, paranoia aside, and the result is a very pleasant discrepancy between the obvious tension of the plot and the trance-like ease of the narrative. This calls to mind, again, pharmaceuticals, as if under heavy sedation one laughingly yields one's now distant body into the waiting arms of a surgeon.

Ashley's work is the central pillar of Lovely Music's ever impressive catalog. Details can be had at their website: <http://www.lovely.com/> . There is a thumbnail bio of Ashley at Wikipedia, with interesting links, and an excellent interview article at <http://www.lovely.com/press/articles/Wire%20No.234.pdf> . Early work is available through the "Art of the States" website and through the ever astonishing [ubu.com](http://www.ubu.com).

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