

Concrete

AE interviews Robert Ashley
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WRITINGS

AE Robert Ashley's *Concrete*, the most recent of his multimedia operas, premieres January 17 – 21 at La MaMa E.T.C. in New York City. Ashley has, in fact, redefined opera. His works are based in multimedia technology and his subjects are typically ordinary lifesize people. Arts Electric asked him a few questions about his work.



Robert Ashley

HOME

AE What is opera?

RA Opera is story-telling in music. In my case the story-telling is most important. I have been criticized much for making opera with "no plot." But this is wrong. There's always a plot, but I'm predisposed to long and complicated stories (plots), which are hard for a listener to put together unless they hear the piece many times. My problem. (It's going to change in the next one – a pure mystery story in which all of the bad guys get shot by all of the good guys. Just for a change.) But we're talking here about *Concrete*.

AE How did you come up with the idea for *Concrete*?

RA For the past few years I have been interested in the stories and language of marginalized people, the ones who have no celebrity and are rarely heard or paid any attention to. *Dust* was about the homeless people who lived in the park in front of the building Mimi and I live in in New York. *Celestial Excursions* was about the people who are old and live in the various "assisted living" homes across the U.S. *Concrete* is the reminiscences of an old man who has a lot of time to think about weird questions (why are all of the buildings in NYC so perfectly aligned vertically when the earth is supposed to be round?) and to think about people he has known and loved who are now old, but who did brave and reckless things with their lives when they were young – things that will forever be secrets to all but a few people. They were professional gamblers, cardsharps, smugglers and con-men. Now they are old and retired and living with their secrets. I have special qualifications in all cases. The homeless lived right outside our building and I got to know them in a way. For family reasons I spent a lot of time in an "assisted living" institution. And as for *Concrete*, I am old and have a lot of time to think, and the people (unnamed) were my dear friends and I saw them in action.

The reason for my interest is that the language, stories and ideas about themselves of the "marginalized" people are different. Really different. They make for good opera. They make for good story-telling.

AE Is this part of the unfolding of a long-term thought or is each an independent idea?

RA There is no concise answer to this question. I have composed some 60 hours of opera in the last 40 years. It is sort of my life's work. They all seem part of the unfolding of a long-term thought, but maybe that's just me. What is consistent throughout is my interest in the American language and how it should be set to music – reflecting my view that the relationship of the music to the language has been so consistently dismal in American opera (since the beginning) and that I want to do it differently.

AE How do you compose your operas?

RA Invariably there is a vision (that I barely understand) of a new kind of music and a vision (that I barely understand) of a story to be told. I work on them at the same time, barely able to tell the difference in what I am working on.

The new kind of music usually comes from the inspiration in the use of a new hardware or software that I have not used before. I want to see what it will do. I want to see how I can use it in an original way. I have an idea about using the hardware or software long before I have mastered it. I try to make it do what I want it to do.

The story to be told comes usually in a flash, a moment of inspiration, a recognition of the story as something that is important to me. But there is still the problem of writing it, changing it to fit the musical idea, editing, adding rhythm and cadence, holding fast to the American speech. This can take months. (But of course I'm working on the hardware or software at the same time, so the two things interact and influence each other.)

The past two operas, *Dust* and *Celestial Excursions*, got about as far as I could go with sequencer logic: perfect synchronization, specified pitches, pre-recorded orchestra and such. That got to be boring. I didn't want to do it again. In *Concrete* the voice parts are entirely free of meter, tempo, when to come in, etc. I wanted pure story-telling in song. The singers take their pitches and inflections from the orchestra, which changes continuously for every performance and is different for every performance. Otherwise, they are more or less free.

For the orchestra I composed some 60 orchestral samples on the E-Mu Proteus 2000.

These were edited in Pro Tools and transferred to Ableton Live and assigned to eight different tracks according to their different characteristics. So using Live and its many internal processing devices I can very gradually alter the sound of every sample, combine samples and move almost imperceptually from one sample and its processed sound to another. In this job I am guided by the singers in their style of telling the stories. In other words, the orchestra is following the singers as best I can do it.

I told the salesman I've been dealing with for years at Sweetwater that I should be recognized as the oldest composer to be using Ableton Live. He asked, "How old are you?" "76." "Boy, that's old. But just keep doing it." Thanks, kid.

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