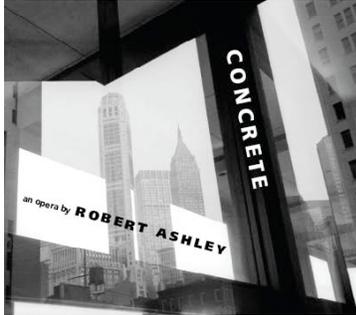




CD Feature/ Robert Ashley: "Concrete"

Consider no one trustworthy: The answer to whether we should keep a secret or spell it out remains ambiguous.



Let's start with something trivial: Form and content mutually influence each other in music. In a recent radio interview, Robert Ashley almost casually mentioned that he was drawn to writing operas for television not so much because of the popular aspect of it, but because he appreciated the delicate interaction between the medium and its audience: "I've always liked my work to be in the most intimate scale", Ashley elucidated, sadly admitting that, in the past, realising this vision hasn't always been possible. With the arrival of "Concrete", however, it looks

as though he has finally taken his ideal to temporary perfection more than thirty years after his first experiments in multimedial theatre.

This is how you've got to approach the work, too: Not as trying to somehow revolutionise our listening habits or as offering radical breaks with tradition. But as a momentary acme in a process which has occupied Ashley's creative energy for almost his entire career. "Concrete" once again features a small cast of select vocalists, including long-time companions Thomas Buckley, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara as well as his son Sam Ashley. For most of its duration, it depicts a uniquely recognisable interest in the way composition and language mutually influence each other, delineating a space where speaking, singing and storytelling merge into a hallucinatorily heaving sheet of sound.

Following and imitating the "quickly changing subject matter or the quickly changing continuity of thought" of an old man alone in his room, as well as "reminiscences of persons from his past", "Concrete" could be about many different things at the same time: About aging in the big city; the confluence of past, present and future; chance and determination; lives lived regularly and lives lived less ordinarily; surviving and dying; the sweetness of golden memories and the naked hurt of regret. Ashley's main character keeps lapsing back into time, experiencing entire lifetimes within a quarter of an hour's length, supported by rippling and curling electronically manipulated orchestral textures and intermittently interrupted by polyphonic soliloquies in which all members of the ensemble personify the different strands of images and thoughts running through his head.

Most significantly, however, "Concrete" is about secrets and about the subtle and tragic ways in which they influence our destiny. Ashley approaches the subject matter from various aspects and angles, as though the old man were weighing the arguments in his head. In "Insatiable Desire", the sharing of secrets is a proof of friendship, while friendship itself is a

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mystery on "Planet Gilbert". The title of "Interchangeability", meanwhile, refers to the strangely similar pair of love and gambling, both defying conclusive determinability, regardless of the system applied to making them work.

In the seminal opening piece "Ideas about thinking", the mystery lies in the enigmatically sensual and sexual aura surrounding a female friend. One night, they dance and our hero pulls her up close, propositioning her. She neither blushes nor bluntly refuses. Instead, she pulls him back to arm's length, laughing and continuing the dance. "How can you not love somebody who does that?" the old man wonders. Over the years, this short scene, as innocent and inconsequential as it may have seemed on the surface, grows in significance, binding their lives together without either of them knowing why.

"Secrets are just things left untold", Ashley astutely remarks, but their dramatic impact on the characters of "Concrete" belies this sober and supposedly objective perspective. Even after one and a half hours of musing, the answer to whether we should keep a secret or spell it out remains ambiguous: "The problem is in telling it to people that don't believe", the narrator regretfully notices at the end, pointing to the fact that the elusive and fragile nature of the mysterious risks being broken when passing through the gate of language.

On the other hand, the very last lines of the libretto lead listeners down into the dark cave of locking it all up within one's mind: Afraid of being taken for a fool, the narrator decides that "the perfect republic" isn't suited to musicians and poets such as himself and that he can only tell stories and sing to himself, an old man trapped in the concrete walls of his unspeakable innermost truths. "No wonder we've got problems", the choir drily remarks.

Ashley follows these thoughts down to their source, to a place which is intimate to the most radical degree. It is so utterly personal, in fact, that all trustworthiness in the main character must seem delusive. As an audience, you can simply enjoy the deep, intuitive and immersive aspect of "Concrete", but to come to any noteworthy conclusions, you must force yourself to consider no one trustworthy. The tender balance between being on the inside and outside at the same time, of experiencing something spiritually relevant and coming to very practical solutions is the immediate result of the form Robert Ashley has awarded to this operas- and that, to sum things up, isn't trivial one bit.

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