

Classical & Opera

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FIGURE OF SPEECH Musical raconteur Robert Ashley takes center stage in his three latest operas at La MaMa.

Sweeps week

Avant-garde opera mage Robert Ashley pulls a hat trick in the East Village. By Alan Lockwood

Vocal music's cutting edge resounds, sumptuous and sly, in Robert Ashley's operas. And after decades spent forging narrative routes in the avant-garde, the 78-year-old composer is currently testing new ground, adapting country-and-western studio techniques and becoming "totally absorbed" in best-selling mystery novels by Michael Connelly and Robert Crais—he admires the canny story lines, and is translating the genre's curt exchanges into orchestral textures. Ashley's not shy about accessibility—his 1987 opera, *eL/Aficionado*, sourced *Fortune* and *Forbes* magazines, and he hopes to return to television. That medium supported some of his

pioneering efforts: England's Channel 4 coproduced the seven-part *Perfect Lives* (1978–80), and Channel 13/WNET commissioned *Music Word Fire* (1981). It's just more means of penetration for his glimmering, all-too-human musical world.

"I've thought of my audience as two people watching television."

On Thursday 15, Ashley's three most recent operas go into rotation for 11 days at La MaMa E.T.C. Annex. The neutral staging of *Dust*, premiered in 1998, has been updated by set and lighting designer David Moody, its homeless raconteurs now sprawled across park benches. *Celestial*

Excursions (2003) and *Made Out of Concrete* (2007) feature altered sets and scores. In the former, arias by institutionalized retirees have been offset by keyboard excursions. The composer himself handles new numbers in *Concrete*'s eternal casino, in his signature spoken song, to better orientate the work's vast musings in a mute man's mind. His seasoned team of vocalists—Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Thomas Buckner and Sam Ashley (the composer's son)—intersperse giddy narrative "conversations" as unmoored as anything in *Così Fan Tutte*.

"In the three operas we go from the park, which is the largest area, to one room, the old folks' home, then into the guy's head," Ashley says, seated at a table in his downtown studio. "You can't get any smaller than that. But the scenes go from small to huge: *Concrete*'s reminiscences are really long [averaging about 15 minutes]."

Early in *Dust*, a character is admired for talking "so cautiously / Every word separated... by a pause." Such spaces are fleeting in Ashley's vocal panoramas, wherein deviously refreshing connections lie arrayed in the quotidian weave. A cardsharp in *Concrete* becomes a major-airline pilot, then a horse-track gambler's lover tells him she's screwing the pilot on transatlantic flights. ("As a frequent flyer, this is unnerving news," quips La Barbara's character.)

As the audience follows Ashley's flow, they absorb potent musical nuances. In *Dust*, "The Priest" rings with spare gospel chords, and the opera's concluding "radio" songs are confounded by choral interjections. Blue Gene Tyranny's funky organ punctuates *Celestial Excursions*, in which the new passages start as outlandish keyboard parts, then form a solemn atmosphere laced with snarelike patters (during which performance artist Joan Jonas is featured). "I found the third act didn't balance the first two acts, so I added interludes before each [vocal] solo," Ashley says, noting with a wry laugh that he "used to be able to play piano." (His 1954 master's degree, from the Manhattan School of Music, was in composition and piano.)

For his most recent piece, Ashley radically liberated his compositional tactics. Tom Hamilton, who's handled live mixing and audio processing for the composer since 1990, says that in previous operas, text lines were rigorously divided "with bars, beats and a tempo. In *Concrete*, the organizational resources for the singers are very different: They don't hear a click track in their ear," he explains. "Long strands of orchestral material change in the mix, providing textural and harmonic support, but what the singers pick out of that is up to them."

The La MaMa performances will be professionally videotaped; having pioneered music television the early '80s, Ashley insists that the medium still best suits his work. "The pieces go so fast and they're so intimate," he says. "I've always thought of my audience as being two people watching [their] television. You don't have to bring the chorus on and off; you don't need the huge stage for Maria Callas." Might he find a similar intimacy in those mystery novels? "Yeah!" he exclaims, his brilliant grin as challenging as it is disarming.

Robert Ashley: *Three Operas opens Thu 15 at La MaMa E.T.C. Annex.*