

January 20, 2009

MUSIC REVIEW | 'CELESTIAL EXCURSIONS'

Layered Dialogues on Effects of Old Age

By STEVE SMITH

Music history is filled with candles that burned bright and fast. Some composers lived too short a life: [Mozart](#) and [Schubert](#), Berg and Webern. Others stopped creating after a productive prime, like Rossini and Sibelius. But longevity can have its benefits for those who endure. Think of the extraordinary emotional insight and depth in [Verdi's](#) "Otello" and "Falstaff," or the vibrant spirit and relative approachability in any number of recent works by [Elliott Carter](#).

Robert Ashley has come into that company with his three latest operas, which are in rotation at La MaMa E.T.C. in the East Village. His idiom of sung-spoken electronic chamber [opera](#) remains as idiosyncratic as ever. But like Verdi in his final operas, Mr. Ashley, 78, has become deeply concerned with evoking recognizable human emotions with these latest works, and like Mr. Carter, he has proved willing to open doors by slightly softening a formidable style.

Thinking in terms of longevity is appropriate when considering "Celestial Excursions," the second opera in Mr. Ashley's current revival, which was restaged at La MaMa E.T.C. on Saturday night. Created in 2003 at the Hebbel-Theater Berlin and presented at the Kitchen in Chelsea that year, the opera deals with old age and its effects. Marginalization, loneliness, senility and the preservation of dignity are accounted for in a barrage of layered narrative strands and fragments, partly based on conversations Mr. Ashley had with elderly people in Arizona.

Mr. Ashley treats his unnamed characters — portrayed by Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Thomas Buckner and Sam Ashley, his son — with respect and affection. At times he is among their number; elsewhere he is an interrogator in an assisted-living center, trying to impose order upon their wayward statements and impulses. Mr. Ashley does not disguise the unwitting humor in what his characters say, but the laughter here is born of recognition.

In Mr. Ashley's abstract score, supervised by the sound designer Tom Hamilton, guitar twangs, electric-bass burps and jazzy keyboard figures (improvised by the pianist (Blue) Gene Tyranny) float and ricochet over moody electronic strains. The vocals, though more spoken than sung, frequently allude to the nostalgic strains of old pop songs.

For the current revival Mr. Ashley and David Moodey, who designed the lighting and sets, have streamlined the staging of "Celestial Excursions" to its benefit. Mr. Ashley and his vocalists still deliver their lines like newsreaders seated at tables. But (Blue) Gene Tyranny is no longer part of the scenery.

And the performance artist Joan Jonas, whose constant motion in the original production was distracting, appears in isolated interludes during the work's final section. Through intentionally awkward actions and a gaze that shifts from commanding to imploring, she poignantly evokes an effortful cling to corporeality.

"Celestial Excursions," along with two other operas by Robert Ashley, "Dust" and "Made Out of Concrete," are running in rotation through Sunday at La MaMa E.T.C. Annex, 74A East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 475-7710, lamama.org.

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)