

Hearing Voices

ALEX WATERMAN ON ROBERT ASHLEY

IN AN INTERVIEW LAST YEAR, composer Robert Ashley recalled a story about his Uncle Willard, who called the police one day to report a UFO in his living room. When the officers arrived, they asked him where the UFO was. He pointed toward a peach pit on a windowsill.

“Willard, that’s not a UFO, that’s just a peach pit,” the Sheriff sighed.

“Well, it may look like a peach pit to you!” Willard replied.

The figure of Uncle Willard, with his divergent take on collectively perceived reality, speaks like one of the characters from Ashley’s operas. We can imagine the sound of his voice coming to us from the hills of Tennessee more than sixty years back. It’s a voice with the timbre of poverty and drinking, a voice that tells stories *almost* the same way every time, always working out the details again to get it just right—stories whose punch lines can make you laugh one time and cry another. It’s a voice that might seem unlikely at first, given Ashley’s beginnings during the early 1960s in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where his earliest compositions, including his first opera, were multimedia productions experimenting with graphic notation, electroacoustic composition, drama, and film. (In fact, several of these were produced for Ashley’s annual ONCE Festival of avant-garde music, theater, and film, which featured an impressive range of participants, from Gordon Mumma and George Manupelli to Pauline Oliveros and David Behrman.) But Ashley’s compositional interests would, during the ’70s, begin to center on the voice and, in particular, the patterns of involuntary speech—a compositional shift that culminated in 1979 with his classic album *Automatic Writing*. For the forty-six-minute piece, Ashley combined four layers of material: two voices (Ashley’s, speaking in fragmented English, and Mimi Johnson’s, whispering French words that seem to be teetering between a waking and sleeping state), an electric organ, and a Moog synthesizer (whose barely audible tones sound as if they might be coming from a next-door neighbor’s apartment). The creative breakthrough helped position him as an important new composer, and his subsequent work—the innovative “television

operas,” productions (such as *Perfect Lives* [1979–83], which premiered on British television in 1984) designed to be filmed and broadcast episodically on network channels—similarly confirmed his role as a pioneer in both electronic media and vocal music.

This past January, three of Ashley’s most recent television operas appeared at New York’s La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club (presented live but recorded here for future programming), all of them featuring the kinds of characters underrepresented in the contemporary arts—the elderly, the homeless—in addition to loners, gamblers, and composers. *Dust* (1998), for instance, is set in the park in front of Ashley’s TriBeCa studio and tells the stories of the itinerant people who used to gather there; *Celestial Excursions* (2003) takes place in an assisted-living facility; and *Made Out of Concrete* (2007–2009) consists of stories from Ashley’s life, sung by four actors sitting at a card table and reading the libretto aloud from decks of oversize cards. (Ashley himself appears in the last work, often obscured by darkness, and delivers his lines from a comfortable chair with a reading lamp beside him.)

What brings these particular works together? Of these productions, *Dust* and *Celestial Excursions* clearly present people for whom the rules of society—specifically, those binding us to home, property, and participation in everyday life—no longer apply. Yet this remove, as portrayed in Ashley’s works, still revolves around the question of language long of interest to the composer. In *Dust*, the characters are homeless not only because they have no home to go to but also because they’ve lost any means of communicating: While they talk to themselves and at one another, there is no reciprocation; no one outside their space seems to hear them. Something similar takes place in *Celestial Excursions*, where Ashley’s subject is the elderly, conveying loneliness and longing, accompanied



Robert Ashley, *Celestial Excursions*, 2003. Performance view, La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, New York, January 17, 2009. From left: Robert Ashley, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner. Photo: Hiroyuki Ito/New York Times.

by moments of wisdom. (As Ashley writes in the program notes, “Old people are interesting because they have no future” even while they are “obliged, as human beings, to make sounds . . . [and] to speak, whether or not anyone is listening.”) These particular individuals, however, seem to fall out of society also due to some sensory loss or malfunction: Whenever any of them speaks—or attempts to—everyone else speaks at the same time. If the idea of listening to more than one thing at once in vocal music has fascinated Ashley for years, here one sees that miscommunication is embedded in his very compositional models.

Equally significant for *Celestial Excursions*, however, is the timbre of the voices: As Ashley notes in the opera’s score, the ensemble uses a kind of speak-singing inflected with accents alien to the traditional world of opera. In parsing the individual voices making up this complete polyphony, one hears each character’s stories in the rhythms of vernacular speech, whereas classical operagoers are used to hearing heightened vowel expressions (especially the *ah* and *oh* sounds, which increase the acoustic range and overall volume of the voice). Traditionally, the stress on these open vowels is often coupled with a suppression of nasal sounds and other timbres affecting the resonance of speech, underscoring the ways in which singing eclipses speech in classical opera. The sung voice there confounds the signified, whereas in Ashley’s world, characters have “lost their voice” within the communities they inhabit—a fact driven home by the composer’s



Robert Ashley, *Made Out of Concrete*, 2007–2009. Performance view, Teatro Comunale, Ferrara, Italy, June 8, 2008. From left: Thomas Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert, Robert Ashley, Sam Achlon, Joan La Barbara. Photo: Marco Caselli Nirmal.

locating the “grain of the voice” in the sonic qualities of the American vernacular.

Dust is by far the most complex in its vocal compositions. We find five actors seated on park benches with garbage strewn around them: No Legs (played by Ashley, who occasionally takes on the guise of another character named simply, I live in the park), The Man in the Green Pants (Sam Ashley), Shirley Temple (portrayed in down-and-out fashion by Jacqueline Humbert, who has also designed costumes for Ashley’s operas since the early ’80s), The Rug (Thomas Buckner), and Lucille (Joan La Barbara, one of the great innovators of the voice over the past thirty-five years, who has investigated vocal resonance and pushed the limits of the voice as an instrument). The plot revolves around No Legs, who, after losing his limbs in “some unnamed war,” was given morphine and found himself in conversation with God—“nothing to laugh at,” a nameless narrator says. The pair’s exchange, however, was interrupted at the point when a “secret word” to “stop all wars and suffering” either was or was not revealed to No Legs; ever since, he has sat in the park trying to summon that word, which he thinks may be *erasanen*. (In the opera, the chorus repeats this word many times until it’s clear that *erasanen* is a mangled form of “there is an end.”) As part of this effort, No Legs and his friends sing songs he heard in the hospital: They “rehearse” in the park and gather to perform the songs “as best as they can do under the circumstances.” Each singer takes a turn at offering a long soliloquy accompanied by a chorus of the remaining vocalists, who, at times, slip into a kind of doo-wop-style backing, providing a rhythm and pulse that moves the orchestral changes along while

ward. (As one might expect given the virtuosic demands of this practice, the four singers here have worked with Ashley for decades.) This kind of vocal “change-ringing” creates complex layers of words, meanings, and textures. For the listener, there are fleeting moments of clarity, due to the score and the modulating volume at which the singers intone the material (as well as to Tom Hamilton’s ingenious live mixing and sound processing and, crucially, Cas Boumans’s sound-system design): While there might always be two things happening at the same time, a slight shift of one’s head can change the aural dynamics and open up a new set of narratives.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the productions at La MaMa were more spartan than previous stagings, relying much less on large-scale video installations and other visual cues, such as projected text and images, than Ashley has in the past. This theatrical fixedness, producing less visual interference, focused the audience’s attention better on each actor’s voice and on the brilliant aural collaborations. But this quality didn’t make Ashley’s operas any less difficult to pin down; they still seemed to inhabit a world of their own, using layered language to create new narrative forms (akin, one could say, to those of some of the great twentieth-century novelists, like William Gaddis and Thomas Bernhard). This sense was perhaps most poignant at La MaMa in Ashley’s latest work, *Made Out of Concrete*. Ashley is an old man now, and although, at seventy-nine, he is still producing new work at an extraordinary pace, here he took on the subject of his own reminiscences. (The piece’s title might relate to Ashley’s observation in notes for *Celestial Excursions* that reminiscence’s most significant quality is “its persistence.”) All the characters have secrets, and each of

allowing the soloists to stretch and compress their phrases.

Indeed, reflecting the way in which speed has been another technical consideration in Ashley’s composing, the chorus engages in a fast-paced “chasing” of words, where one person leads the sequence and the others follow in order directly after-

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their solos tells another story from Ashley’s life—though some tales tend toward the supernatural. In one story, the character “Robert Ashley,” fast asleep at the American Academy in Rome, is awakened by an invisible force tugging at his bedsheets, only to find out later that a good friend died at precisely the time of the surreal incident. Collectively, the singers in *Made Out of Concrete* function as a Greek chorus, presenting the scenario, posing moral questions, and reshuffling the “deck” of words before the next solo comes in. There are some technical traces of “chasing” in these choruses, but the click track found in the other two operas is absent here. The dialogues are more elastic, and the solos are out of time. The orchestration consists of layers of loops that slowly change and morph but are more or less continuous, giving the impression that they function more as drone than as ostinati. And the orchestra gives no clear markers to the singers as to the beginning of lines, measures, cadence points, and so on. It is through techniques like these that Ashley’s telling of stories makes us recognize how close to mystery, song, and poetry we are at all times in daily life.

Unfortunately, although these operas came alive at La MaMa, it is unclear when they might premiere on that fixture of quotidian existence, television. Ashley’s television opera genre, in all its brilliance, has had limited exposure, and to this day, his operas in their entirety have not hit the airwaves in the United States. (They have appeared on culture-friendly European channels, and shorter works and excerpts have been aired locally a handful of times.) Of course, this void might only prompt one more story Ashley tells about Uncle Willard, who used to sit in his living room for hours, watching a television he never actually turned on—because, he thought, a woman in a red tutu was dancing for him on the unlit screen. One day, finally, his wife yelled at him: “Willard, if you don’t turn that television on when you watch it, I’m going to throw it out!” And so the rest of us, imagining what Ashley’s operas might look like on TV, need some figure to come forward and make people wake up to the fact that the tube needs to get turned on. Let’s hope a television network out there finally listens. □

ALEX WATERMAN IS A NEW YORK-BASED COMPOSER AND CELLIST WHO PERFORMS WITH EITHER/OR ENSEMBLE.