

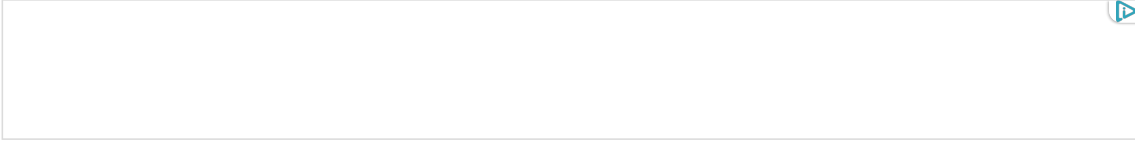
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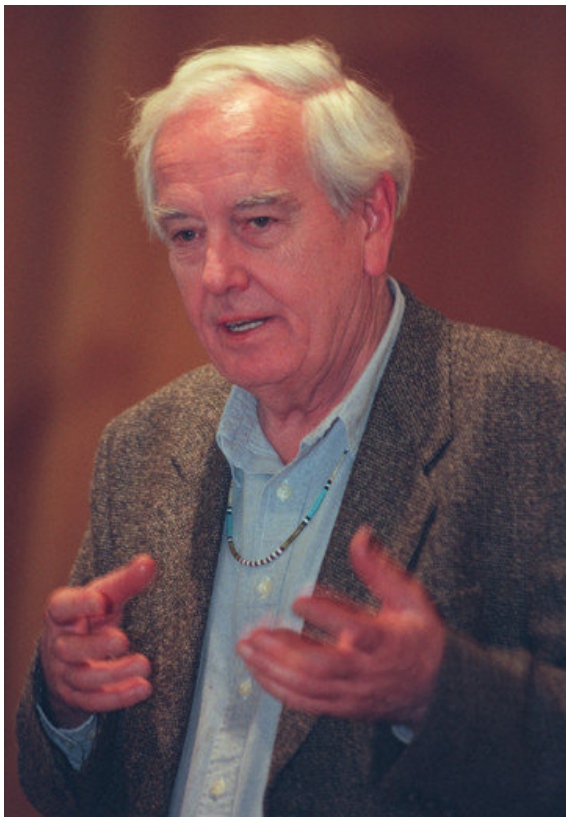
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Robert Ashley, a true pioneer in opera

An Appreciation: Robert Ashley, whose 'Crash' will premiere at the Whitney Biennial next month in New York, was a maverick's maverick who made operas that don't look, sound or act like operas.

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Composer Robert Ashley. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times / March 16, 1998)

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By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Music Crit
March 6, 2014 | 1:26 p.m.

On announcing the death last week of composer Robert Ashley in New York at 83, the composer and critic Kyle Gann wrote on his blog that Ashley was "the greatest genius of 20th-century opera. I don't know how long it's going to take the world to recognize that."

I think I do. A little while, but not too much longer.

Let's not argue about the greatest genius of opera in the 20th century. It's enough that Ashley was one of the greats and a true pioneer. Some might even want to argue about Ashley's lack of recognition. He was a sage to a small but significantly influential community in the avant-garde. He was a rock star at festivals of his works in Berlin and the Hague.

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The art world had a clue. Three short Ashley operas, including the premiere of his final one, "Crash," will be performed next month as part of the Whitney Biennial in New York. When

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Ashley walked into any concert hall in New York, usually wearing a suit, people recognized him.

The University of Illinois Press understood that Ashley was important enough that he be included in its series of monographs on American composers, and that indispensable study by Gann came out last year.

Still, Ashley was a maverick's maverick, meaning that even maverick mavens missed him. He never made it into any of the San Francisco Symphony's notable American Mavericks festivals over the years even though he had once been head of the legendary San Francisco Tape Music Center, the experimental electronic music studio, where, among other things, Minimalism was born.

Ashley's name does not come up at all in Michael Broyles' "Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music," published by Yale University in 2004. Once on a panel in Washington, D.C., about American opera, I brought up Ashley as deserving recognition and discovered that even prominent major American opera company managers had never heard of him. They looked at me like I was crazy.

At an international conference about opera in the 1980s held in Rome, I brought up Ashley and Italian opera professors also looked at me like I was crazy — they *had* heard of him.

There is, of course, a reason for this, and it is not because Ashley was some kind of a reclusive eccentric outsider or ahead of his time. It is not because his work is inaccessible or impossibly avant-garde.

PHOTOS: LA Opera through the years

Ashley's operas were about regular people and he envisioned them for television, not that the networks were interested. He could raise the money to videotape only his early "Perfect Lives." But these works weren't practical for opera companies either, since their very essence is to stand apart.

"Perfect Lives," for instance, concerns a singer, Raoul de Noget, and his friend, Buddy, "The World's Greatest Piano Player," who enter a small Midwestern town, entertain at the Perfect Lives Lounge, and team with Isolde and her brother to rob a bank. The story, itself, has no beginning or end. "It's all digressions," Ashley wrote.

In fact, Ashley is one of the all-time great masters of disguising insight as digression and embellishment. It's all embellishment too, he used to say, and the more the merrier.

He also disguised his operas as anti-operas. They do not look like opera, sound like opera or act like opera. They are typically composed around a handful of close collaborators, singers, reciters, musicians, electronic music specialists, among them soprano Joan La Barbara (herself a composer and pioneer in extended vocal techniques) and the pianist "Blue" Gene Tyranny (a.k.a. Robert Sheff).

The librettos, written by Ashley, have the character of Beat stream of consciousness. The music sounds slight. There is no orchestra. There are no arias. Rather, Ashley's texts are rhythmically declaimed or delivered in a patter of combined speech and song. Quotidian topics are common.

"He takes himself seriously," "Perfect Lives" begins. "Motel rooms have lost their punch for him."



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Every line is, by itself, like that, simple and direct. But before you know it, one thing has led to an unexpected next thing. America is his subject. In "Now Eleanor's Idea," the last opera of a tetralogy (also known as "Now Eleanor's Idea"), Ashley's America looks like a science-fiction Los Angeles, where "the modern form of America's four religions — Judaism, Protestantism, Business and Catholicism — have become one." Lowriders perform "The Miracle of Cars." No, of course it has never been performed in L.A. Almost nothing of Ashley's has.

Gann's book reveals that there is a deep structure to Ashley's work and a huge range of musical reference, from Bach to Bud Powell to John Cage. Ashley's librettos are, to my mind, possibly the finest poetry ever specifically created for the lyric stage. They stand alone on the page but shouldn't. It is in their presentation that they become transcendent.

Ashley came out of the avant-garde. He was a co-founder of the ONCE Group at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in the early '60s, where he made raw, aggressive works that questioned the nature of music and composition. In the '70s, he taught at Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland, where he inspired composers to question everything and turn those questions into art, not answers (I was in the department at the time but didn't study with him).

His opera career began as part of the questioning process, to make opera part of life. Indeed, experimental opera companies have taken to performing scenes from his operas in the banks, bars and parks they are meant to take place in.

Ashley wrote about everything, himself included. "So, this is where it gets boring, because it's just about me," he digressed in a half-hour piece for reciter and piano, "Yes, But Is It Edible?" It's about him but in a rhapsodic context of the history of Western music and an investigation about what it means to be a composer. It's also about creativity and all of us.

"Put aside intelligibility, put aside urgency of plot," he goes on to say. "Put in embellishment. Put in Maria Callas and Patsy Cline and Billie Holiday." The time has come to add: Put in Robert Ashley.

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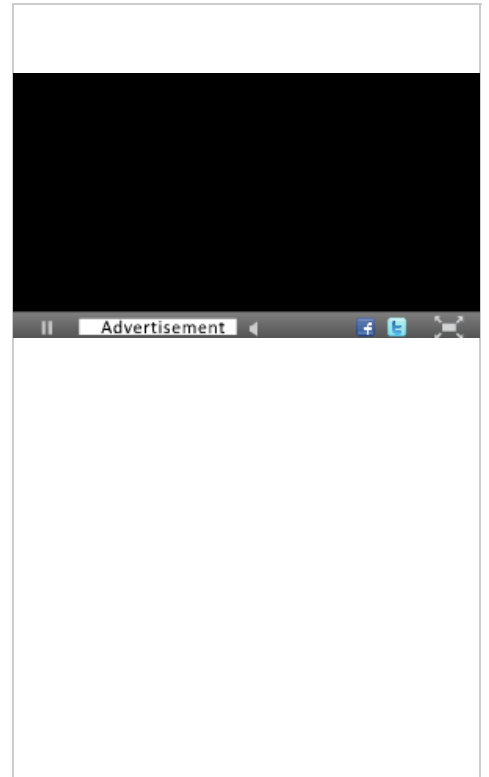
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I also think that a key component to why Robert Ashley's operas are so revolutionary is that every core member of his ensemble has been a creative musician as well. In addition to Joan La Barbara and himself (he was always a member of the cast), his keyboardist "Blue Gene" Tyranny and his live sound processor Tom Hamilton have composed many fascinating works as has vocalist Sam Ashley (who is also his son). The remaining two vocalists of the core group--Thomas Buckner and Jacqueline... » more

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What a wonderfully powerful and persuasive essay, Mark. Thank you. While Perfect Lives and Atalanta are the works I came to know him through, for me Dust and Improvement: Don Leaves Linda are probably his two most poignant. These works really should enter the repertoire of opera companies across the country. While there are a few complex tech issues involved in their presentation, they require a far smaller budget (in terms of personnel and sets) than the Verdi and Puccini warhorses that... » more

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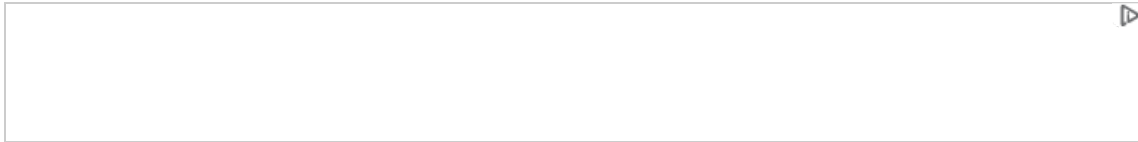
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