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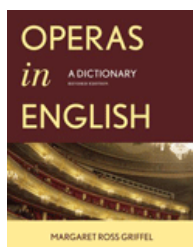
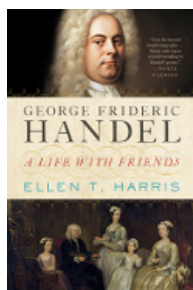
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RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Varispeed pushes the possibilities of opera forward with Robert Ashley's *Crash*

Six people, dressed in ordinary clothing, sitting in a row at desks adorned only with microphones and glasses of water, and talking for ninety minutes: is it opera?

Rising Stars in Concert, Lyric Opera of Chicago

The spring concert of Rising Stars in Concert, sponsored by and featuring current members of the Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center at Lyric Opera of Chicago, showcased a number of talents that will no doubt continue to grace the stages of the world's operatic theaters.

The Singers Sparkle in New York Opera Exchange's *Carmen*

New York Opera Exchange's production of *Carmen* from May 8th to 10th highlighted that which opera devotees have been saying for years: Opera, far from being dead, is vibrant and evolving.

'Where'er You Walk': Handel's Favourite Tenor

I have sometimes lamented the preference of Ian Page's Classical Opera for concert performances and recordings over staged productions, albeit that their renditions of eighteenth-century operas and vocal works are unfailingly stylish, illuminating and supported by worthy research.

The Pirates of Penzance, ENO

Topsy Turvy, Mike Leigh's 1999 film starring Timothy Spall and Jim Broadbent, dramatized the fraught working relationship of William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan; it won four Oscar nominations (garnering two Academy Awards, for costume and make-up) and is a wonderful exploration of the creative process of bringing a theatrical work to life.

Manitoba Opera: *Turandot*

There's little doubt that Puccini's *Turandot* is a flawed, illogical fairytale. Yet it continues to resonate today with its undying "love shall conquer all" ethos, where even the most heinous crimes may be forgiven by that which makes the world go 'round.

Mariachi Opera *El Pasado Nunca se Termina* Comes to San Diego

On April 25, 2015, San Diego Opera presented its second Mariachi opera: *El Pasado Nunca se Termina* (*The Past is Never Finished*) by Jose "Pepe" Martinez, Leonard Foglia and Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán.

Antonio Pappano: Royal Opera House Orchestral Concerts

Ambition achieved! Antonio Pappano brought the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House out of the pit and onto the stage, the centre of attention in their own right.

Bedřich Smetana: *Dalibor*, Barbican Hall

Jiří Bělohlávek's annual Czech opera series at the Barbican, London, with the BBC SO continued with Bedřich Smetana's *Dalibor*.

Orlando Explores Art Without Boundaries

R.B. Schlather's production of Handel's *Orlando* asks the enigmatic question: Where do the boundaries of performance art begin, and where do they end?

The Virtues of Things

A good number of recent shorter operas, particularly those performed in this country, made a stronger impression with their libretti than their scores.

Król Roger, Royal Opera

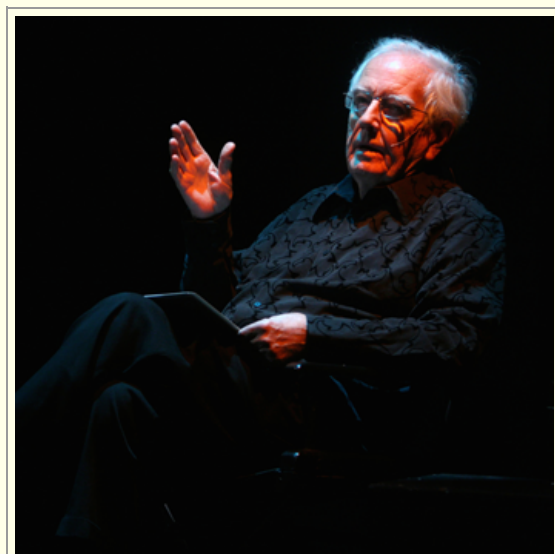
It has taken almost 89 years for Karol Szymanowski's *Król Roger* to reach the stage of Covent Garden.

San Diego Opera Celebrates 50 Years of Great Singing

San Diego Opera, the company that General Manager Ian Campbell had scheduled for demolition, proved that it is alive and singing as beautifully as ever. Its 2015 season was cut back slightly and management has become a bit leaner, but the company celebrated its fiftieth season in fine style with a concert that included many of the greatest arias ever written.

Hercules vs Vampires: Film Becomes Opera!

In the early sixties, Italian film director Mario Bava was making pictures with male body builders whose well oiled physiques appeared



16 May 2015

Varispeed pushes the possibilities of opera forward with Robert Ashley's *Crash*

Six people, dressed in ordinary clothing, sitting in a row at desks adorned only with microphones and glasses of water, and talking for ninety minutes: is it opera?

According to Robert Ashley, the composer himself, "Well, if I say it's opera, it's opera! Who's running this show, anyway?" The composer, who died in March of last year, was known for anecdotal libretti and "television operas" that invite close listening and that range in tone from tragic to comic to cosmically, bewilderingly existential.

Crash, the last of his operas, was performed at Roulette by Varispeed, an experimental music group consisting of a younger generation of Ashley disciples: Brian McCorkle, Dave Ruder, Gelsey Bell, Paul Pinto, Aliza Simons, and Amirtha Kidambi. First performed last year at the Whitney Biennial, *Crash* was reincarnated for four nights in April by director Tom Hamilton and producer Mimi Johnson. The opera is divided into six acts of fifteen minutes each, during which three of the speakers, in a Cageian fashion, take turns talking for 30 seconds each: "Thoughts" rambles, as if partaking in a phone conversation, about fourteen-year life cycles, evil short men, and the frustrations of neighbors; "Crash" swirls out a string of poetic fears and musings; "The Journal" stammers out descriptions of each year from Ashley's life. Meanwhile, the other three voices murmur quietly in the background. The members of Varispeed rotated through the parts so that, by the sixth act, each had taken his or her turn assuming each of the voices and their varying tempos and amplifications.

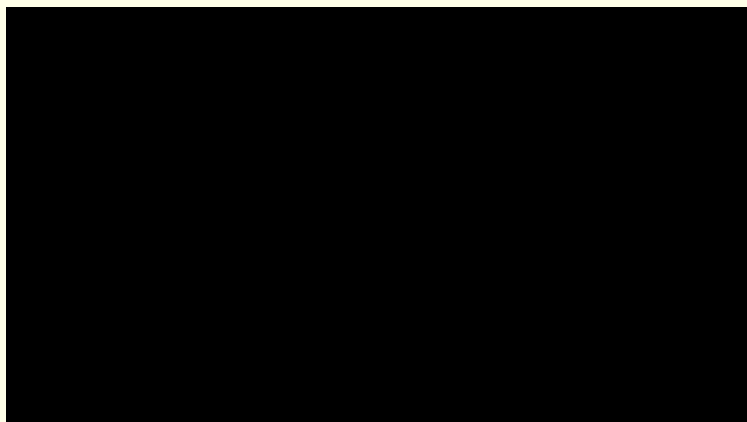
Varispeed pushes the possibilities of opera forward with Robert Ashley's *Crash*

A review by Rebecca S. Lentjes

Above: Robert Ashley

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Roulette TV: ROBERT ASHLEY // *Crash*: Act 1 from Roulette Intermedium on Vimeo.

Unlike other of Ashley's operas, which feature loosely outlined piano or electronic parts, *Crash* is distinct in its accompaniment: each of the three trains of thought, which thread in and around each other like a braid of multicolored ribbons, is joined only by the quick but quiet mumbling of three other voices and an array of three different photo projections. This symphony



spectacular on the screen.

J. C. Bach: *Adriano in Siria*

At this start of the year, Classical Opera embarked upon an ambitious project. *MOZART 250* will see the company devote part of its programme each season during the next 27 years to exploring the music by Mozart and his contemporaries which was being written and performed exactly 250 years previously.

Bethan Langford, Wigmore Hall

The Concordia Foundation was founded in the early 1990s by international singer and broadcaster Gillian Humphreys, out of her 'real concern for building bridges of friendship and excellence through music and the arts'.

Tansy Davies: *Between Worlds* (world premiere)

An opera dealing with — or at least claiming to deal with — the events of 11 September 2001? I suppose it had to come, but that does not necessarily make it any more necessary.

Arizona Opera Ends Season in Fine Style with *Fille du Régiment*

On April 10, 2015, Arizona Opera ended its season with *La Fille du Régiment* at Phoenix Symphony Hall. A passionate Marie, Susannah Biller was a veritable energizer bunny onstage. Her voice is bright and flexible with a good bloom on top and a tiny bit of steel in it. Having created an exciting character, she sang with agility as well as passion.

***Il turco in Italia*, Royal Opera**

This second revival of Patrice Caurier and Moshe Leiser's 2005 production of Rossini's *Il Turco in Italia* seems to have every going for it: excellent principals comprising experienced old-hands and exciting new voices, infinite gags and japes, and the visual éclat of Agostino Cavalca's colour-bursting costumes and Christian Fenouillat's sunny sets which evoke the style, glamour and ease of *La Dolce Vita*.

The Siege of Calais

The Wild Man of the West Indies

English Touring Opera's 2015 Spring Tour is audacious and thought-provoking. Alongside *La Bohème* the company have programmed a revival of their acclaimed 2013 production of Donizetti's *The Siege of Calais* (*L'assedio di Calais*) and the composer's equally rare *The Wild Man of the West Indies* (*Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo*).

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of voices and abstract images allows the focus to fall not just on Ashley's texts but on the spotlighted speaker and the hills and valleys of their inflections, vocal register and timbre, and unique embodiment of the "character". So although the opera is sparse in requisites, it feels inordinately full and rich in tone as the six voices—four voices at any given moment—complement each other in continually new ways. (The interpretations of "The Journal" were most striking in their differences, as each of the members of Varispeed adopted the required stutter in a particular way.)

Despite this sense of evolution in the ever-fluctuating vocal combinations, there was an overall sensation of constancy and meditation throughout the comforting rhythms and switch-offs of the 30-second segments. Each time one of the characters started back up, no matter who was speaking, the carefully intricate yet seemingly stream-of-conscious themes and anecdotes of Ashley's life fell into their familiar patterns. The mathematically predictable structure of the opera was the perfect framework for Ashley's unpredictable and often humorous observations. Each of the vocalists managed to capture the ponderous, philosophical, and psychological ramblings—which in the case of "The Journal" were highly linear and easy to follow, while during "Crash" they were more obscure—with not just humor but sensitivity and musicality.

Another reason, aside from the scrupulous performance of Varispeed, that Ashley's personal accounts and musings never felt heavy-handed or forced were the photographs by Philip Makanna, who collaborated with Ashley on the latter's 14-hour video opera/documentary *Music with Roots in the Aether*. Throughout the "projection score" by Katie Cox, Eric Magnus, and Andie Springer, the abstract and peaceful visual component did not feel like a contrived, maladroit powerpoint sequence as so many new music projections do. Rather, the photographed landscapes not only depicted the American scenery so important to Ashley, but also allowed the audience to "hear the singing and the texts without the typical visual distractions", as Ashley desired. In combination with lighting designer David Moodey's skillful spotlight maneuvering and Kate Brehm's stage management, the photo projections did not hammer home a message but allowed the viewers to form their own responses alongside their listening. This was the rare opera experience wherein the visual and aural experiences were united with not a blip of disjunction.

More straightforward than Ashley's other operas, which can be oblique and convoluted in narrative and musical structure, *Crash* delivers a wondrous yet meditative experience. Written at the end of the sixth fourteen-year cycle of his life—and it's surely no coincidence Ashley died just before his 84th birthday, considering his self-imposed significance on the number—the opera feels as if Ashley is looking back on his life while also looking towards the future, using the voices of young people to explore concepts of voice, storytelling, and, yes, opera.

Rebecca S. Lentjes

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