

Review: An Opera Saw Red-Pill Culture Coming. Now, It's Back.

Robert Ashley's 1994 opera "Foreign Experiences," a portrait of a paranoid mind in free fall, is part of a wave of revivals following his death.

🎁 Share full article 🔗 📌 💬 1



A scene from "Foreign Experiences," Robert Ashley's 1994 opera that is being revived at Roulette in Brooklyn. Whitney Browne



By Joshua Barone

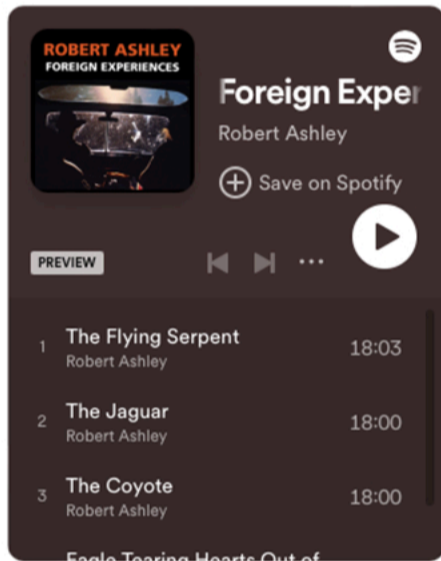
May 10, 2024

Foreign Experiences ✔ NYT Critic's Pick

The makings of opera are quite simple. Strip away the clichés of an opulent art form populated by Viking helmets and powdered wigs (and more than 400 years of history), and you end up with DNA shared by Claudio Monteverdi, Richard Wagner and Meredith Monk across centuries: an artificial, elevated form of speech that reaches for the sublime.

Few composers have tested the fundamental qualities of opera as much as Robert Ashley, who [died a decade ago](#) at 83. He stretched language and banality to operatic extremes, exalting discarded bits of life as if they were cosmic, in stylized declamation that is every bit as musical as Mozart.

Hardly mainstream, Ashley's works were often performed as he wrote them, then talked about more than staged. Since his death, though, there has been a wave of fresh recordings and revivals, the latest of which is "Foreign Experiences" (1994), now running [at Roulette in Brooklyn](#). A portrait of a mind in free fall, red-pilled before we were talking about red-pilling, it is essential viewing for those interested in the possibilities of opera.



Picture an opera made entirely of a mad scene, and you have "Foreign Experiences," an installment in "Now Eleanor's Idea," Ashley's tetralogy whose construction recalls another four-work saga, Wagner's "Ring." In "Experiences," the protagonist, Don Jr., spirals in isolation after a move to California, and from his apartment he imagines paranoid adventures in esoterica, in search of truths about power and wealth. He comes to conclusions like, "If you have to ask, you can't afford one, I always thought we ought to have that carved into that stupid mountain with the four guys' heads."

Don Jr.'s thoughts come quickly; "Foreign Experiences," alone in "Now Eleanor's Idea," is set to 90 beats per minute instead of Ashley's usual 72. And those beats matter to each line of the opera's 50-page libretto. This is a work of extreme mathematical precision that, in performance, shows no signs of being precise at all, with manic speech unfurling over ambient synth chords that reflect both the mood and sound world of "The X-Files."

Ashley's score, though, details how many beats are given to each line: four in Acts I and IV, and three in Acts II and III. (Despite those differences, each act comes in at 18 minutes.) He details which letters fall on which beat, and where the chords change. Vocalists are given pitches to speak-sing their lines like an incantation or trance.

Lines can be just a few words, or entire verbose sentences; regardless, they have to fit the same number of beats. In that sense, the musicality of "Foreign Experiences" is not so different from rap. And, like rap, it's not easy.

Recent revivals of Ashley's operas, thankfully, have been taken on by superbly qualified teams. They have been produced by Mimi Johnson, his widow, with musical direction, sound design and live mixing by his collaborator Tom Hamilton. For better or worse, there is a vintage quality in the stage and lighting design by David Moodey, which is based on Jacqueline Humbert's from 1994, a simple arrangement of rusted, corrugated metal lecterns made to look like a tribunal.

Most important, many of the same vocalists have appeared across the revivals. Gelsey Bell's wonderful singing, for example, has the same affection and musical instincts that Ashley applied to the contours of words and phrases. Still, "Foreign Experiences" is visibly, mystifyingly difficult; at the opening on Thursday, cast members held copies of the score, and occasionally flubbed a line or an entrance. But in an opera with the tongue-twistiness of Sondheim and the exposing transparency of Mozart, not to mention a dense libretto befitting a work three times its duration, you can forgive a mistake or two.

Each performer, representing Don. Jr.'s fractured mind, had ferocious command of the material: Bonnie Lander, Dave Ruder, Kayleigh Butcher and Aliza Simons were charismatic interpreters; Brian McCorkle, at one point, alternated between faux-manly vocal depth and Truman Capote-like Southern effeminacy. Paul Pinto, the most prominently featured singer, was captivatingly unhinged, his technique and lovely tone warped to frantically switch octaves and follow tunnels of complicated thoughts with a breathless, unbroken line.

And there are so many thoughts to get through in Ashley's wry libretto, which name-drops the catastrophist writer Immanuel Velikovsky and Plato in the same breath. It is stuffed with digressive mundanities and vapid statements like "very great hip book, I keep it by my bed," or the non sequitur "I read a book that said dying in the Arctic is actually sublime." A memory might be interrupted by the aside "this story is hard to interpret," or get lost in connections about the number seven, with its biblical and broadly mystical implications. More than a constellation of ideas, it is a universe.

What does it all mean? Choose your entry point and take a guess. You might as well be making sense of Wagner's "Ring."

Foreign Experiences

Through Saturday at Roulette, Brooklyn; roulette.org.

Joshua Barone is the assistant classical music and dance editor on the Culture Desk and a contributing classical music critic. [More about Joshua Barone](#)