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Roulette Intermedium 2024 Review: Robert Ashley's 'Foreign Experiences'

(Photo: Whitney Browne)

By Jennifer Pyron

Brooklyn's [Roulette Intermedium](#) presented [Robert Ashley's "Foreign Experiences"](#) (1994) on Saturday, May 11th, 2024 to an audience full of familiar faces in appreciation of avant-garde and experimental music. This work is part of Ashley's opera tetralogy, "[Now Eleanor's Idea](#)," which also includes "Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)," "eL/Aficionado" and the stand-alone opera, "Now Eleanor's Idea."

I have been lucky enough to cover both "[Improvement \(Don Leaves Linda\)](#)," at [NYC's The Kitchen](#), and "[eL/Aficionado](#)," at Roulette, for OperaWire beginning in 2019. The night of "Improvement" is still one of my fondest memories as it was my first Robert Ashley opera experience, and Ashley's recent passing in 2014 was still on my mind. I remember a close friend telling me more about [Mimi Johnson's](#) work and dedication to realizing this tetralogy among other very important works on her label [Lovely Music](#). Founded in 1978, Lovely Music is, according to her website, "one of the longest-lived and most distinctive independent labels active in recording and promotion of new American music."

Most of what I look forward to when Mimi Johnson produces a work is its direct correlation to what the artist intended for the work. This uninterrupted level of realization is crucial when documenting avant-garde and experimental music, so much so that when experiencing one of her productions it is history in the making. Thus, being in the presence of her and the creative cast for Robert Ashley's "Foreign Experiences" is another reason to celebrate the revival of his operatic work as a whole.

Robert Ashley's Thoughts on Opera

Every time I research a bit more about Ashley's works, all I want to do is hear his voice. He speaks and says what needs to be said in a way that no-one else can. I also love listening to his "Automatic Writing" and sinking into the resonance of his tone like a signature frequency that I just can't get enough of. There is such a heady quality, mixed with breathy undertones and ASMR inducing inflections, that even when I don't know what is playing on my computer, I can take a pretty good guess that it is one of my favorites: Robert Ashley.

In this same vein, there is an excellent interview with Ashley by [New Music USA](#) that captures him explaining his ideas in connection to the term 'opera.' Ashley says, "I know that my operas don't sound like [Puccini](#), but the idea of telling a rather complicated story over an hour and a half with a lot of characters where the telling of the story is based on the musical forms to the same degree that it happens in Puccini, but in a different manner, the problem is you don't have any words. I mean I wish I had a different word so I didn't have to use the word 'opera' because this causes a lot of confusion and people ask me silly questions about what right do I have to call my work 'opera,' and I say it's because I don't have another word. There is no other word that everybody understands for the notion of telling a long story based on musical forms."

Obviously, Robert Ashley points to what opera means in the context of musical documentation, but less than obvious to the mainstream opera aficionados is how his operatic works and processes were already shifting the very definition of opera while he was just getting started as an opera composer. If there is one thing to take away from any of Ashley's operas, it is that they push every boundary imaginable with the great intention of not getting lost in the illusion of opera being a siloed experience. In fact, Ashley proves opera needs to breathe, get lost, be found, and do something radically different again in order to stay alive. The beauty of his work lies within the voices that continue to carry his message forward, relinquishing any strong hold toward anyone or anything other than what he authentically is – a game changer.

The rapid vocal inflections and pulsating phonations of his stream of consciousness based libretto is undeniably difficult to execute as a vocalist. Undertaking a role in an Ashley opera requires an amount of precision and complexity that is not for the faint of heart or voice. The cast of "Foreign Experiences" reminded me yet again of this reality.

Stellar Cast Highlights

[Gelsey Bell](#) is a Brooklyn-based multidisciplinary performance creator, composer, and vocalist. Her most recent work is an opera, "מִוֶּמְרָה [morning//mourning]," co-produced by [Beth Morrison Project](#) and [HERE's Prototype Festival](#) in January 2024. OperaWire will be reviewing this work in September 2024 for [Death of Classical's "Crypt and Catacombs"](#) programming.

Bell's knowledge and depth of wisdom when it comes to experimental opera is ever-expanding. She is someone who performs and composes at the highest level imaginable, excavating what it is that makes a performance remarkable and taking it beyond that every time. Her performance in "Foreign Experiences" felt aligned and grounded. Her voice managed to articulate the very detailed and lengthy phrases of every stream of consciousness with ease. There was a sense of playfulness in her approach that really made her work come across as refreshing and rewired. Bell is an Ashley opera master of her own craft.

[Paul Pinto](#) also did a remarkable performance with his voice alternating rapidly between falsetto and middle range, diving into breathy bouts of banter that only Ashley can conjure. Pinto's facial expressions were unhinged in the best way and his eyes were full of every expression he brought to the table. It was as though there was no amount of text that could tire him or take him out of performing some of his best work yet. There is also a true camaraderie between Pinto and Bell that always makes for a fun evening of delightful surprises. It is fascinating how Robert Ashley's work brings people closer together, like an exercise of the mind, body, and soul.

"Foreign Experiences" also included performers [Kayleigh Butcher](#), [Bonnie Lander](#), [Brian McCorkle](#), [Dave Ruder](#), and [Aliza Simons](#). Mezzo-soprano Kayleigh Butcher caught my attention in the past during an Ashley opera and she had the same pure vocal talent at work here. Her voice sounded well-balanced and I could tell she was having fun. Soprano [Bonnie Lander](#) was also enjoying the twists and turns of her role. Her vocal technique supported her phrases and her voice carried a rich timbre into the hall. Composer, performer, and digital artist [Brian McCorkle](#) is another Ashley interpreter of high caliber. His voice supported the tonal blend of the group and I enjoyed his facial expressions all throughout. [Dave Ruder](#) was full of life in "Foreign Experiences." His bio says his work "lives at the intersection of the very ephemeral, the very stupid, the very articulate, the very repetitive, and the very subtle." This line of thought is uncanny with the idea of his voice in my mind as he performed "Foreign Experiences" with an intuitive blend of fecundity and fantasticalness. Aliza Simons was also a standout in this work with her cool and confident approach. Simons recently fabricated a series of translucent ceramic instruments for Gelsey Bell's opera "מִוֶּמְרָה [morning//mourning]," so I look forward to experiencing these in the future too!

Sound & Set Design Details

Musical direction, sound design, and live mix by [Tom Hamilton](#) fit perfectly in Roulette's acoustic hall. This is the most natural setting for an Ashley opera that I have experienced. I could clearly hear every sound's intention and every voice felt actively engaged. This was a live mix that truly felt alive and very present. At times I closed my eyes just to understand where the sound was resonating in my head and body. I love this idea of letting the sound go where it wants and remembering how it felt along the way. The spatialized voice clips inspired me to do some digging around what Robert Ashley called "Electronic Voice Phenomena." Ashley says, "many of the background voices were processed in an extreme fashion to create extra parts in the orchestra. Sometimes they can be heard as ghostly premonitions similar to EVP recordings (Electronic Voice Phenomena). EVP recordings, important in the 1970's (the time situation of 'Foreign Experiences'), frequently feature subtle 'voices' that are either buried in or constructed from noise."

The lighting and stage design, after [Jacqueline Humbert's](#) stage design for the 1994 production, was by [David Moody](#) and created an earthy tone of rusted metal against Roulette's spacious cream and wood colored hall. "Foreign Experiences" resonated well with everyone in the audience and seeing Mimi Johnson and Tom Hamilton join the performers on stage for the final bow was a special moment in time to always remember.