ROBERT ASHLEY
Defining American Opera

Arthur J. Sabatini

Since he began composing and performing in the late 1950s, Robert Ashley has created a wholly original body of work. Continuously productive, his oeuvre encompasses nearly all versions of music and music/sound performance from instrumental and electronic compositions to film music and music videos to multi-sectioned, intermediated staged operas. Ashley has also written essays and scores, and published books as well as dozens of audio and video recordings. A founding member of several ensembles and bands over the years, since the late 1980s, he has surrounded himself with a core group of players and invited artists (videographers, sound designers, etc.) in the development of a series of elaborate, interconnected operas. Over seventy, Ashley's accomplishments are remarkable in scope and significance. He is an unacknowledged influence on a generation of musicians and performance artists and, with new productions yearly and reissues of previous material, it is time to catch up with his ideas and work.

Throughout his career, Ashley has steadily focused on several recurrent themes. As a composer, he is dedicated to the music of sound and language, particularly American vernacular speech and its reworkings into songs, narratized singing, and performance structures. As a theatre and media artist, he has created musical stories on stage (and in recordings) in complex, vividly mediated productions that, as I will suggest below, are in a genre of their own—American opera. As a composer/writer, like Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, and John Cage, he has thought extensively about America music, culture, and performance. Conceptually and in practice, he has consistently approached music as a form of collaboration that involves a variety of creative relationships. The idea of making music, and the theme of relationships among musicians, between couples, and in communities is also key to his thematic sense of American music.

Ashley's music, particularly his large-scale work, transcends boundaries. Generically, works like Perfect Lives (1980) and the recent pieces Dust (2000) and Celestial Excursions (2003), are at once musical, theatrical, operatic, novelistic, and highly intermediated. Stylistically, they draw on staging and performance practices that are recognizable from the post-war Euro-American new music in its experimental and avant-garde traditions. With a preference for tangled, allusive plots, Ashley's music
consists of dramatic songs delivered by characters, singly and together, who spin long narrations sustained by live and electronic music and subtle or soaring choral passages. Compositionally, Ashley's music emerges from the speaking and storytelling features of American speech (male and female), which he recomposes into forms that become a type of American *sprechstimme* (speech song). Ashley songs are not tunes (although he has many), but musicalized recounts, meditations, and metaphysical analyses. In *Dust*, for example, five singers, who represent street people living together in a small city park, stand on stage behind clear glass shields that occasionally fog over or admit shards of light. Their stories revolve around a legless ex-soldier who recounts his ordeals while the other voices intrude on his ramblings, telling of their losses and regrets. One of the women once stood in for Shirley Temple; another wanted to be a country western singer. Some of the extended passages in *Dust* contain commentaries on subjects ranging from theosophy and vegetarianism to gay sex and street fights. As in most of Ashley's works, the characters' psycho-narrated musings overlap and the voices echo each other in passages comparable to those in a William Faulkner novel. To complete the *mise-en-scène* in *Dust*, there are several video monitors and, over the stage, a screen gracefully fills and dissolves with images (conceived by Yasunori Kagegawa) that float like the thoughts of the characters. (*Celestial Excursions*, described below, has a similar structure.)

Ashley's approaches to staging, musical characters, storytelling, and processes he uses for producing his work have evolved over decades. Aligning himself with dozens of artists, groups, and musicians he has followed and set trends in music, performance, and the use of sound technologies. His ideas, which are embedded in his work, essays, and interviews, are of interest apart from reflection on his own projects. They represent an outline of how theories of theatre, performance, music, and intermedia art making in the 1960s spoke to artists who were expanding the boundaries of performance and the repercussions generated by those notions ever since.

For Ashley, the passion of his life as an artist revolves around, as he sometimes refers to it, an “obsession” with music, language, speech, theatre, and stories. In a word, opera, or, more specifically, what should be called American opera. Ashley has passed through roughly three stages in formulating, producing, and defining American opera. In each stage he adds other dimensions to his thought and practice and integrates more technologies. The first stage began in the 1960s when he worked with electronic sound, music ensembles, and a theatre group. As a composer, he realized that his music had to be grounded in a place or landscape and that its sounds and texts needed to represent stories, themes, and practices related to making music and the lives and relationships of those living around him. Opera encompassed all of these criteria, but not European versions of opera, which were absurdly foreign to his conception. Opera in America was, and remains (like orchestras), an urban institution modeled on the European system and its nineteenth-century repertoire. Broadway musicals presented an example to him, but only in their stories and use of the American vernacular. The music, however, was not consequential
enough for someone fascinated with electronic sounds, post-war musical theorizing, and America’s emerging world of avant-garde performance.

What then, Ashley asked, would constitute “America” opera? His first responses took the form of scored compositions where musicians followed set instructions, as actors might. With titles like in memoriam . . . Crazy Horse and in memoriam . . . Kit Carson (1964), the musicians’ actions were intended as “portraits” of historical American characters and their implicit stories. For Ashley, personalities, narratives, politics, and landscapes would constitute the substance of musical meaning in American contexts. “European music is about its structure and American music is about our history,” he said. From its beginnings, Ashley argues, American music inherently reflects the essential social conditions of “the people who make it” and how they live. As character and situation-derived compositions, the series lines up with Charles Ives’s portraits of Thoreau and Emerson, Copland’s Billy The Kid, and Virgil Thompson’s piano portraits. But they go beyond being purely musical as Ashley’s notions of “character” introduces overt narrative and psychological aspects. In other projects, Ashley collaborated with artists and non-musicians in the ONCE Group, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, whose texts and performances were staged according to musical structures (e.g., tempi, rhythm) so as to have the feel of, if not of opera, a type of musical theatre. In both instances, Ashley’s concern was about how performers work together, as an ensemble or group, to create music as a form of theatre.

A second stage for Ashley’s idea of American Opera advanced through the 1970s and 1980s with his collaborations on operas for television. His Music with Roots in the Aether: a television opera (1976), is a fourteen-hour production featuring composers Alvin Lucier, Philip Glass, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, Gordon Mumma, and David Berhman. Television provided Ashley with an expedient way of approaching music theatrically. In notes for Music with Roots in the Aether, he comments, “the visual style for showing the music being made became the ‘theatre’ (the stage) for the interviews.” The videos consist of conversations between Ashley and each composer in specific settings. Mumma fixes a bicycle on a football field; Berhman and Ashley walk near San Francisco Bay. The talk is about creativity, music and money, technology. After the dialogues, each composer plays one of their own compositions. Music with Roots in the Aether was not meant to be staged but shown as an installation (it also became available on video). Ashley calls the piece an opera in order to emphasize how talk possesses its own musicality and, when set in a given landscape, followed by music, a rudimentary form of opera emerges. While most commentators regard Music with Roots in the Aether as essentially a documentary, I am persuaded that it raises intriguing questions about what, removed from European influences, qualifies as opera in a media age.2

Ashley’s seven part, three-and-one-half hour performance and video piece, and most well-known opera, is Perfect Lives: an opera for television (1976–1982). Perfect Lives is, actually, the middle work of a series, the first part of which is Atalanta (Acts of
God) (1982) and the last a trilogy, Now Eleanor’s Idea (1985). I call this fourteen-hour work, “the operas of America.” It relates the experiences of ordinary, though exceptionally thoughtful (and some peculiar) characters moving from the East Coast and Midwest to the Southwest. Performed in many alternative performance spaces and on festivals, Perfect Lives is a stylized musical mock soap opera about a pair of traveling musicians whose lives intersect with people in a small Midwestern town. Although there is some movement on stage by two backup singers, the story unfolds through song as Ashley, standing in front of a microphone, narrates episodes that include a bank robbery, an elopement, the fate of the town’s most beautiful, lonely girl. Depending upon the theatre, video monitors would be arrayed around or beside Ashley, the singer/actors, the sound and video artists, and a piano player, who, along with Ashley, is the other musician/character. Each monitor would have a different videotape and, often, a live feed of Ashley and the musicians. The video imagery was composed of many sequences, from pans of tractors in a cornfield to shots of the locations where Perfect Lives was being performed.

There is a comic seriousness to Perfect Lives. One character, a bartender, complains about his wife’s devotion to boogie woogie piano music; another character, a philosophical sheriff, solves the mystery of the bank robbery in his living room in a chat with his wife. In fact, the title “an opera for television” is something of a pun, since after some 40 live productions, the material was recreated for video and audio recordings. It was part of Ashley’s design not to make a documentation of the performances, but to make an original video work. The videos of Perfect Lives became edited remixes of audio and videotapes used in the live performances, which varied greatly, and they are not like what any audience might have seen in any given concert or theatre. Similarly, Atalanta (Acts of God) is represented on different CDs but also in a composite video titled Atalanta Strategy.

The genealogy of all the operas of America is established in Atalanta (Acts of God). It is organized around extended anecdotes related by an artist (Max Ernst), a jazz musician (Bud Powell), and a storyteller from Tennessee (Ashley’s uncle). Their stories originate in Europe and the East Coast. The entire opus, however, is not yet completed. Ashley is currently developing a forty-nine opera project he calls The Immortality Songs. This is a sequence related—although I am not exactly sure how—to episodes in Atalanta (Acts of God) and includes Celestial Excursions, When Famous Last Words Fail You, and Your Money, Your Life, Goodbye.

In Perfect Lives, one thread of the story concerns the lives of the female tellers in the bank. They were all mysteriously changed during the robbery and wind up migrating to the West and Southwest. Their stories appear in a trilogy: Improvement (Don Leaves Linda), Foreign Experiences, and Now Eleanor’s Idea. In Improvement (Don Leaves Linda), Linda experiences life as a single woman and comes to grips with her subjectivity and new relationships. In Foreign Experiences, characters related to the tellers become estranged and turn to mysticism in California. Eleanor, another teller, becomes a radio broadcaster in New Mexico for a call-in radio show for Hispanic-American families who are part of the low rider car culture. They
recount their history and talk about their private lives. In a 1995 production in Sante Fe, low rider cars were on stage for the performance and sections of the work were done in Spanish.

With various side stories and soliloquized essays in song (on the Tennessee Valley Authority dam, memory systems) the complexly formed “operas of America” are an allegory of American history and consciousness and portrayals of the fate of love and relationships over a few generations. In the course of them, Ashley delves into the power of architecture, Greek myth, Renaissance occultism, spiritual adventuring, and the meaning of music. Ashley’s language and music are audacious and poetic. He is fearless about addressing ideas in sung passages, musicalizing inner speech, and overlaying multiple voices. His texts flow with a literary and theatrical resonance, without leaving a conversational style. Here are a few lines from Perfect Lives in which The Narrator, Ashley, sees the lonely beautiful girl, possibly his lost love, at dusk:

She's standing in the doorway of her mother's house.  
The doorway to the back porch.  
The backyard is the south.  
Behind her the great northern constellation rises in the majesty of its architecture.  
Well, maybe that's a little too much.  
Let's just say that the contradictions are behind her.  
And in the backyard, god, this set of circumstances that is indescribable with our geometry.  
A picnic of sorts.  
A celebration of the changing of the light.  
And we glide through the chaos facing her . . .

The import of the passage, which occurs at the end of the opera, summarizes themes of longing and change amidst the constancy of the cycles of the stars and our ways of understanding the “perfection” of the cosmos. The “little too much” quip is Ashley’s way of self-monitoring his operatic ambitions or the limits of the genre itself, that is, if he were merely writing operas. But, like his favorite authors, Faulkner and James Joyce, Ashley is more intent on creating a mini-universe of interrelated stories, themes, characters, landscapes, and philosophical explorations. In scope and content, the operas of America are unlike any other musical undertaking by an American composer and are surely a reference point for American opera.

The third period in Ashley’s pursuit of American opera commenced in the late 1980s in concentrated work with a group of singers and musicians that has lasted into the present. It has involved him in synthesis of music, text, images, and performance in works such as Dust and Celestial Excursions. More compressed and elegant in performance, the pieces deepen Ashley’s attention to American digitized
and electronic sounds, and singular characters. In most of these pieces, which focus on isolated communities, singers stand apart from each other as a chorus on sparsely designed and sharply lit stages amidst multiple videos, projections of images or texts on large screens. The music is layered and post-minimalist, based on strict, though subtle rhythmic or tonal formulations. Voices and electronic sound in the form of long modal chord structures frame the performance, often with a keyboard player who plays onstage.

In *Celestial Excursions*, the characters are five people living in a retirement home who talk continuously, and not necessarily to each other, about their remembrances of love and relationships, violence and crime, the Holocaust, a mystery story one of them is reading. The men, wearing cardigan sweaters, and women, modestly dressed, sit at desks facing the audience. One of the characters is cynical; another wistful; another pensive. There are non-singing performers onstage, also, whose movements are visible. In the New York production at The Kitchen, in April 2003, the singers were Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, and Ashley. During *Celestial Excursions*, The Silent Character (Joan Jonas) performs choreographed movements on a raised stage behind the singers, waving a broom-like pole that throws off shadows on a large screen. Next to her, “Blue” Gene Tyranny, a long-time Ashley associate, provides a pianistic commentary on the stories. The dancer, pianist, and their shadows are “characters” themselves. Jonas’s movement has a back and forth repetitiveness about it that suggests an aging person’s tentativeness, in action and thought. The piano voicings invoke images of how musical acts of thinking and speaking are; and how real yet incidental others’ talk and stories can be.

Of course, Ashley is not the only composer to endeavor to create American Opera. Using him as a key figure, however, American Opera is recognizable, particularly in the context of experimental music and performance art. It is post-European in its structure, with texts, composed music, and sound, delivered in a performance style for speakers and singers that de-emphasizes acting, action, emotionalization, and spectacle. It is thoroughly intermediated and sonically dense, narratively and imagistically detailed, and, often, featuring interdependent sections in different media. In contrast to European opera, American Opera is neither plot, action, nor costume-and-set driven in any traditional sense, although it could be said to follow a tradition of operatic work that begins with Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson, Harry Partch, and, after Ashley, Steve Reich, Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, and Mikel Rouse.

There is something grand and extraordinarily consistent in the trajectory of Ashley’s musical thinking and the depth of his overarching narrative and production designs.Thematically, the plots and characters in his operas, for the most part, revolve around people whose lives are relatively ordinary but whose imaginations and self-understanding are as complex and wondrous as music. I think there are worlds of meaning in Ashley’s titles: *That Morning Thing, Perfect Lives, Foreign Experiences*,
Celestial Excursions, Dust. As a musician, his attention to the contours and flow of American speech-as-song is unfailing as is his sense that to successfully create American Opera, it is necessary to work continuously with an ensemble, or, as he prefers to call them, a band. To explain the unfolding of Ashley’s ideas, however, requires briefly filling in the background of his experiences and charting his creative choices.

Ashley did not, of course, set out to write opera or even new or experimental music. Born in 1930, he grew up in rural Michigan in a family of storytellers, though his father was a musician. He attended the University of Michigan, left for Manhattan, married, became a father, enlisted in the Army, then returned in the mid-1950s. As a young pianist with little awareness of what it meant to be composer, he felt alienated from European classical music traditions, which were the main subjects of music education. Fortuitously, he encountered new music, avant-garde art, and a collective of like-minded artists in the late 1950s and 1960s in Ann Arbor. Later, in California in the 1970s, he worked with other artists when he became the Director of the Mills College Center for Contemporary Music. He was one of the organizers of the first New Music America Concerts at The Kitchen in 1979, and has since lived in New York City and performed internationally.

In Ann Arbor, Ashley applied himself to research on speech, acoustics, and architecture and began to forge numerous collaborative relationships. He composed music for piano, wrote film music with George Manupelli, and was part of Co-operative Studio for Electronic Music with Gordon Mumma. He met Milton Cohen, who Ashley credits as introducing him to the work of John Cage. A painter-sculptor, Cohen designed and produced events in his loft, which he called The Milton Cohen Space Theatre. An intermedia environment, it contained revolving platforms with mirrors, moving panels, and raised stages. Film and slide projectors cast images on multiple, geometrically-shaped screens. Live musicians and dancers moved through the space and, like Happenings, performances were vaguely scripted and open-ended. Sonically, the emphasis was on live mixing and creating what Ashley called “collages.” One of Ashley’s tapes for the Space Theatre, A Gathering of Seasons (1960), contains a sustained flow of electronic sounds that evenly weaves in whistling, plucking, and string-like chords with rumbles and echoing moments of insects fluttering and human or animal growls. The Space Theatre, which, incidentally, was transported to the Venice Biennale in 1964, became one of the performance sites for ONCE Festival events until 1964.

The ONCE Festivals and Ashley’s work with the ONCE Group were, as he often states, the most formative for his ideas and collaborations. A theatre/performance art ensemble made up largely of non-musicians, ONCE was co-founded by Mumma, Cohen, Ashley, composer George Cacioppo, architect Harold Borkin, visual artist Mary Ashley, and others. Lasting from 1961–1968, ONCE was intentionally multidisciplinary and experimental. Festival events and related performance, film, and lecture series occurred all over the city. Groups such as the ONCE Chamber
Ensemble and Festival Orchestra, the ONCE Theater Ensemble, and the Sonic Arts Union were regular performers. Visiting artists included John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Morton Feldman, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Robert Rauschenberg, The Judson Dance Theatre, and dozens of European artists. In those years, American artists were ardently engaged in investigations of avant-garde performance, art, and new music. Questions that concerned them centered on defining American art and the relationship between American art and European classical music, art forms, and genres. Issues of technology, collaboration, politics, popular culture, and the role of artists in society were always in the air. For a while, Ann Arbor, along with San Francisco and New York, became a significant crossing point for exchanging ideas and exploring new music and all forms of experimental performance.

Ashley’s engagement with artists and the theoretical and practical aspects of performance and production were far-reaching during the ONCE years. He composed instrumental, electronic, and film music and also performed as a pianist and conductor in concerts. As a writer, director, and performer, he collaborated with the ONCE Group that performed scripted and unscripted theatrical events, many verging on performance art and paratheatre. For Ashley, the orchestration of voices, movement, timing, and use of sound technologies, made the pieces musical, even as they looked like theatre or performance art. Working with the ensemble became momentous for him and focused his explorations of speech, music, and sound in relation to theatricality and the social act of performance. His experiences and reflections on these elements became the foundation of his artistic practice to the present.

Ashley and the ONCE Group’s ideas were concurrent with those of Cage, Judson Dance Theatre, and Brechtian-inspired theatre groups of the 1960s. Just as theatre practitioners were inquiring into texts, acting, audience responses, and performance techniques, musicians were challenging the traditions of printed scores and approaches to chance, improvisation, and performance. New music raised questions that pertained, firstly, to the practices of composition, notation, the construction of new instruments, and the structuring of electronic and computerized sounds. To compose and perform new music also implied examination of the historical and social aspects of production and performance, musicians’ roles, the invention of techniques for performing on new instruments. The combination of music and sound in dance, theatre, film, video, and performance art in new spaces and environments posed yet other problems. Of course, theatrical and musical productions also share similar concerns regarding staging, direction, performer training, and rehearsal. And, both realms involve contingencies, such as directorial, solo or ensemble interpretations, not to mention economics and politics.

Before describing ONCE Group pieces, it is necessary to say more about his idea of music. For Ashley, music is more than content, places, relationships, and collaboration. As his writings and the experiences of his work demonstrate, he conceives of the production of music and sound, phenomenologically and ontologically, as
theatrical. Sound itself is material for him, in a physical sense. It is also, of course, temporal. Thus, his music and performance structures persistently converge with the theatre’s enduring questions: presence and absence, illusion-making, characters and relationships, human perception and behavior and performance, consciousness; the voice, words, landscapes, and representation across media. Manipulating the voice and sound through electronics provided clues on how theatricalized the production of music and sound can be. *The Wolfman* (1965) is an example. In it, Ashley, wearing wrap-around sunglasses, stands in a pool of light in front of a microphone on a stand. Using feedback, which becomes increasingly loud, he glares and growls at the audience. Describing *Wolfman*, he said, “I wanted the sounds to emanate from the performer’s actions. It was theatre from the beginning . . . It’s the first piece in which I had to deal with the realization that the symbolic act of producing the music, the sound, can become so illusionistic that people actually don’t see what you’re doing.”

Moreover, music and speech, he felt, are inseparable from live performance and the theatricality inherent in song itself. For Ashley, music exists in its own generic, aesthetic, and epistemological zone where audibility, in combination with all the elements of theatre, become indistinguishable. The *mise-en-scène* of his productions are meant to aurally correspond to the music and sonic materials used and are intended as signs representing or relating to visual imagery, movement, characterization, and psychology. This is clear in a 1970s note he wrote, setting himself up to conceive of “the total musical event—including staging, lighting, gesture and movement, and architectural space.” This thinking led him to go beyond approaching theatre metaphorically in conventional “musical” terms (e.g., rhythm, tone) but, as a musician/performer and writer/director, he wanted to become attentive to the theatrical dimensions of pitch, duration, amplification, and structure. Equally important was to discover concepts of direction, collaboration, and performance keyed to audio and visual technologies and mediation in terms of their potential for representationality. In order to apprehend all of these factors, as he was developing his work, Ashley knew that most adequate term to use, often to the annoyance of critics, was opera. As for American Opera, it emerges as a reasonable description of a genre when seen in the context of performance in the 1960s and 1970s.

For Ashley, musicians and theatre groups were similar in terms of how they made work and related to each other. In a program note for one performance, he remarked:

> My work has been involved with speech and electronics since the beginning. I don’t know why. It has been so close to theatre on many occasions that I have feared I had made a mistake in thinking of myself as a composer. But probably I would have been less welcome than in theatre. The link between the two seems to be my interest in the social nature of ensembles. I can’t figure out yet what musicians think they are doing when they play with other musicians or to an audience, any more than I can figure out what
people think they are doing when they talk to each other. Sometimes I just get lost in the sound of words.

For musicians, Ashley wrote the in memoriam . . . compositions as “portraits.” In them, musicians were treated as actors whose personal relationships, not strictly their musicianship, was at stake. The instructions for in memoriam . . . Crazy Horse, for example, asks players in instrumental groups to “determine what is to be played on the basis of their groups’ obligation to produce a certain density of sound. . . .” The language is subtle and ambiguous. It resembles the texts of theatre exercises, which is untypical for musicians, who are rarely asked, in a Brechtian sense, to consider a social concept such as “obligation” while preparing a symphony.

In a 1966 conversation with composers Larry Austin and Karlheinz Stockhausen, Ashley divulged how his thinking about music is infused with emerging practices of theatre groups. Like the demands of director/theorists on actors of that period, he wants musicians to do something other than follow instructions. He remarks on the loss of spontaneity in musical performances resulting from the tradition of continuous rehearsals. He also proposes that the composer’s role needs to be rethought. The composer is “sort of a director . . . as the director of a particular aural object,” which, he says, is reasonable to expect as we move toward a more aural culture. As for method, he states that in working with a theatre group their pieces evolve “through talk, through performance . . . It is literally impossible for me to score.” Although, since 1966, he has scored works in many different ways, fundamentally, his thinking about ensembles and collaboration were set. The key, which he discovers a few years after the ONCE Group dissolves, is to have a reliable band, an ensemble of people who can talk and work together.

Ashley has said that “the ONCE Group proper was a sort of portable, touring opera company that did mainly vocal pieces with very elaborate storytelling.” A work that illustrates his concentration on sound, extended monologues, dialogues, stories, movement, and extensive staging is That Morning Thing (1967), an opera in four parts. It includes Frogs, Four Ways (or, A Cool, Well-Lighted Room), Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon, and She Was A Visitor. With this work, Ashley’s “musical portraiture” became more collaborative, narrative, and theatrically-structured. The texts became linguistically and psychologically complex, with a concentration on interpersonal relationships and women’s voices.

The subject of That Morning Thing were the suicides of three women Ashley knew. At the time, only close friends were aware of the motivation for the work. A 1967 score opens with a statement that the piece “is about a state of mind in which a pathological dependence upon language and a pathological awareness of the physical self are both present . . .” and notes that the “technique of the work is based on the notion of repetition as the physical dimension of music. An unpublished score, with script and diagrams for movement, demonstrates how tuned he was to performance trends of the time and how, as a composer and musician, he adds sonic and musical elements. In its complete form, That Morning Thing lasts seventy-five minutes, with
five male performers, eight female performers, lighting, props, and costumes (including eyeglasses “with protruding lenses”), and sound systems.

Overall, *That Morning Thing* discloses Ashley’s creative preoccupations and thorough immersion in developing his own version of total theatre, with non-musicians. It would be into the mid-1970s, however, before he would find trained singers and fully expand his skills as a composer of American opera. By then, he had also discovered video and, with *Perfect Lives* and *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, began to write his own texts and scores and flush out his vision of American opera.

The emphasis of *Frogs* was on the politicization of interpersonal and social communications and how language becomes “inadequate” to express emotions or thought. Nevertheless, unintended vocalized sounds contain information that contribute to the environment and understanding. The performance begins with a male speaker (often Ashley), who reads a lecture on language and miscommunication from a prepared text. A track consisting of frog sounds accompanies rhythmic countings made by other male performers, which, in turn, the women follow. Frogs, apparently, communicate through meaningful though not semantic sounds. In *Four Ways*, the men open and close attaché cases and the rhythmic, amplified sound obliterates the women’s conversations. In *Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon*, a woman haltingly recounts experiences she had being kissed and in other erotic and unpleasant oral encounters. In *He Remembers*, male speakers “rate” women, while women teasingly react with one-line rejoinders. As a coda, the group performs *She Was A Visitor*, which requires one male speaker to repeat “she was a visitor” while a chorus isolates phonemes from the phrase and softly sings them. In several cases, this last section was open for audience participation.

A contemporary review of the *Frogs* suggests how effective Ashley was in making his music theatrical.

Speech, in an environment of recorded sound, creates a structure in time very similar to that created in plays. It involves the ear and eye equally in the perception of a series of amplified events set on stage so that we might see them. The concert situation has become the theatrical situation: we now respond to the “total situation.”

When he discusses opera, as he does in many writings and interviews, Ashley can be insightful, sardonic, knowledgeable, and extremely technical. “For me, the experience of hearing an opera is that you accumulate a lot of details that are not significant in themselves,” he has said. Of his ability: “My calling or skill as an opera composer is that I can conceptualize what the relationship is between the pictures and the music to a degree where there’s a language for talking to the visual artist.” Regarding speech and song, he observes,

The simple fact is that American English does not fit European, traditional, operatic models of melody and rhythm. American English is distinguished
by an infinitely subtle variety of melodic and rhythmic stresses on its consonants’ fricatives, sibilants, plosives, etcetera. The vowels in American English cannot bear the weight of the kind of melodic stresses—durations and embellishments—that are used in, say, Italian opera. It makes them sound stupid.

Regardless of what Ashley says, he well knows that for most people—and producers and funders—opera is that spectacle that occurs on great stages in sumptuous halls, with huge casts, and singers adored by fans who wait for them to repeat the enduring arias that, nostalgically, remind everyone of a time when music had a certain majesty and power. Of course, the operas are overwhelmingly from Europe and centuries old. Contemporary European composers write operas, of course, but few travel to the United States. As for American opera, there are abundant examples of it and a tradition that may well emerge here. Meanwhile, as I write this, Ashley [http://www.lovely.com/] has returned from a European tour that includes a weeklong retrospective of his work in Amsterdam.

NOTES


2. See my “ReViewing Robert Ashley’s Music With Roots in the Aether, the first opera for television.” Millennium Film Journal 42 (Fall, 2004): 52–66.


5. Ashley’s core performers are vocalists Joan La Barbara, Jacqueline Humbert, Sam Ashley, and Thomas Buckner; composer/sound engineer, Tom Hamilton; and keyboardist, “Blue” Gene Tyranny (Robert Sheff).


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The entire cast (l. to r. Robert Ashley, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barabara, Sam Ashley, Thomas Bruckner, with Joan Jonas and “Blue” Gene Tyranny in background. Photo: Mimi Johnson. Courtesy: Performing Artservices, Inc.


Sam Ashley in foreground; Joan Jonas drawing on upper stage area, with live feed. Photo: Mimi Johnson. Courtesy Performing Arts Services, Inc. All photos from Hebbel Theater production, Berlin, 2003.
Celestial Excursions score, Act I: Is It light, Yet? Mr./Ms./Mrs. N. Courtesy Performing Artservices.


