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Opera Rad

Robert Ashley Releases His Most Accessible Work

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I'll never forget, in 1973, coming home from the record store with the old Sonic Arts Union recording of Robert Ashley's *Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon*. My friend Marcus and I played it at my parents' house and listened with growing concern as the female narrator calmly recounted an act of sexual violence in lines like "I remember . . . he put his finger between my legs and got it wet, and tried to put that finger in my mouth." After a mutual glance, we whipped the disc off the turntable; this was one avant-garde work that could wait until after my parents went to bed.



Ashley has mastered the brilliant illusion of casualness.

Twenty-seven Ashley-following years later, you'd think I'd be so inured to him that nothing he could dish out would faze me. You'd be wrong. His new opera, *Dust* (Lovely Music), has hit me all over again with the shocking intensity of *Purposeful Lady*, and I'm a lot tougher now. In his earlier operas, Ashley's elaborate stream of consciousness laid a veil of abstraction over his rambling depictions of life. Not so in *Dust*. It's as though, nearing 70, he decided to drop the veil of artistry and tour us through the private inferno of his psyche, with no escape from the horrible, embarrassing beauty of those private thoughts that we all have but would never admit to.

That's not to say the opera is all Ashley. *Dust's* conceit is that he and four friends, street people, talk on a street corner. There's The Man in the Green Pants (sung by Sam Ashley, the composer's son), who taunts cops by calling them "Motherfuckers Against Drunk Driving"; Lucille (Joan La Barbara), who "used to be sort of cute, but now she's getting older, and the guys don't flirt with her so much"; Leonard (Thomas Buckner), an old man lost since his brother-in-law Mickey died; and someone (Jacqueline Humbert) who, as a kid, was a stand-in for Shirley Temple: "It is hard to see the Shirley Temple in her now. She is somewhat older. I suppose Shirley Temple is somewhat older now too, so probably you can't see the Shirley Temple in Shirley Temple."

Yet these characterizations, lithely crooned in Ashley's partly improvised recitative style, ambiguously fuse as all five tell the story of the fifth friend, who lost his legs in an unspecified war. No other Ashley text

reaches the level of obscenity maintained here, yet the shocking thing is not so much the dirty words as the candid admissions of cowardice and stupidity that run through the opera like leitmotifs. The climax of the work—still underlaid with the kind of innocent, repeating chords that made *Purposeful Lady* so chilling—is La Barbara's memory of having stumbled across two men making love in a park, who proceed to beat up the protagonist:

" . . . we see these two guys behind a bunch of bushes, and they're on the ground, and they're hugging each other and kissing. Jesus! They don't even see us. . . . They are really going at it. What's going to happen next is one of those things you read about, but nobody's ever *seen* it. This is shocking! I'd think it was shocking if it was a man and a woman." The reminiscence is interrupted by a soliloquy about how weird people look making love, and how self-consciousness interferes with pleasure: "It divided me into two people: the guy doing it, and the guy watching. It's been one of my problems with life. Like, I can't stand to watch people eat. . . . The outside guy appears. And he's just looking."

If there's an organized rhythmic structure here, as in Ashley's earlier operas, you get no hint of it from listening, so spontaneously do the words pour forth. "Dumbest thing I ever did, dumbest thing I ever did," La Barbara speech-sings. "Now I'm older, I get it, but, you know, you're just a kid, think you're tough. Not even think you're tough, just lou-ou-oudmouth. Just lou-ou-oudmouth kids." When has any other opera libretto, even by Harry Partch, ever hewn so close to the unselfconscious way people talk? Language evolves, and each new century has to recapture anew some way to bring music and language into intimate contact. Ashley has always represented a new point of crystallization in that process, as perfect in his way as Monteverdi was in wedding music to 17th-century speech, but *Dust* hits a new level. Not only the piece, but the stunning performance: Humbert's, Buckner's, La Barbara's, and Sam Ashley's dictions sound at once completely off-the-cuff and yet so polished that their word-arabesques could be etched in stone.

In fact, as so often with Ashley, there are hints that the entire opera's casualness is a brilliant illusion. If the words pour forth in a spontaneous flow, why is it that each of the friends' scenes lasts precisely nine minutes, 57 seconds? The angst is leavened by four honest-to-goodness, lyric-rhyming songs on CD 2, the closest Ashley's ever come to pop tunes. Or call them electronic c&w, for over "Blue" Gene Tyranny's noodling organ the lyrics touch on deliberate musical and textual commonplaces, painting pictures of heartbreaking nostalgia. Saddest is the old-man portrait that Buckner sings:

"I want to fall in love just one more time I want the world of magic one more time Look forward to tomorrow one more time. . . . Dream about someone all day just one more time And finally we touch just one more time. . . . To know I've given pleasure one more time. . . ."

In a late style he's developed that is likely to be widely imitated, each song segues into the next with split-second timing, like diffracted aspects of a split consciousness. This candid snapshot of a psyche is structured down to the pixel.

Is *Dust* Ashley's greatest opera? It is certainly his most accessible, and is bound to win over fans who didn't have patience for the verbal curlicues in *Now Eleanor's Idea*. I do slightly miss the more oblique poetry of *Improvement* and *Perfect Lives*, but I also admit that I haven't been so punched in the gut by an opera in 20 years. As an older man's brutally honest work, *Dust* gives the same impression as the late sonatas and quartets do in Beethoven's output: a new simplicity, in a way, but coming from an emotional realm that seems beyond everyday consciousness. The text's realism is so palpable that autobiography seems the only plausible explanation, and I pity the poor first biographer who undertakes to separate Ashley's life from his so closely entwined fiction.

In a healthy culture, that work would have already begun: We would be attending conferences about Ashley's output, unraveling his symbolism, charting out his intricately detailed musical structures, no doubt all to his irreverent amusement. Instead, as a massive and greatly threatened classical music industry clings to its arias, orchestras, and categories ever more tightly, Ashley remains the hardest nut for the classical mavens to swallow. As with Harry Partch 40 years ago, John Cage 30 years ago, and Morton Feldman 20 years ago, his very status as a composer is denied by the people in power—and yet, like those figures in their day, he may very well be the greatest one living. He's given us an amazing series of prototypes for what opera could be in Millennium Three and, in *Dust*, a theater-text-music work worthy to open a new era.

Expanded Classical Music Section: Part 2

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