



Photographs by Stephanie Berger for The New York Times

Joan La Barbara, left, and Thomas Buckner in Robert Ashley's new opera, "Concrete," which opened on Wednesday at La MaMa E.T.C.

Four Singers, Playing Cards, Breaking the Rules of Opera

Robert Ashley has never worried that the works he calls operas bear little resemblance to the traditional variety, and there's no reason he should start now. Far more than

**ALLAN
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**MUSIC
REVIEW**

Philip Glass's operas, which are considered revolutionary for their stripped-down narratives and vocal lines that are ritualistically repetitive rather than flighty and virtuosic, Mr. Ashley's works jettison the standard operatic yardsticks.

His latest, "Concrete," which opened on Wednesday evening at La MaMa E.T.C., has no stage action to speak of. Four singers sit at a table playing cards with a giant deck and chattering about mundane mysteries of life. Often they pick up on one another's thoughts as if they were actually only one speaker, broken into four voices. Between those ensembles, each singer rises for an extended solo piece, delivered standing still, or at most with choreographed hand gestures. Think of it as an "Alice in Wonderland" version of Samuel Barber's chamber opera "A Hand of Bridge."

There isn't a lot of melody, either. Mr. Ashley writes in his own stylized version of Sprechstimme, a way of projecting text that is more tuneful than speech but less than song. This

composer's version preserves speech rhythms, but where the melodies in Sprechstimme usually leap around at least a bit, Mr. Ashley's barely amplify the inflections inherent in spoken English.

Mr. Ashley does provide an equivalent of an orchestral score: it is electronic, and performed live by him. He has said that this element will change in each performance to match the impulses of the singers. Presumably he was doing some of this matching on Wednesday, but much of the accompaniment was an ambient wash. Occasionally — and increasingly, toward the end — assertive bass tones and 1950s sci-fi movie effects expanded the score's texture and topography.

What the work offers in spades is narrative. The four singers — Jacqueline Humbert, Thomas Buckner, Joan La Barbara and Sam Ashley — are given long, involved yarns about old friendships, within which are wrapped the strategies of card sharps and racetrack gamblers, and the details of near-fatal car crashes, boating accidents, cocaine deals gone awry (and not) and spooky visits from dead friends.

Mr. Ashley's texts are both engaging and provocative, and they are the work's most striking component. It could be argued, in fact, that "Concrete" (the title comes from a recurring, apparently autobiographical line about urban life, "The old man lives in concrete") is more of a literary or theatrical work than a musical one.

"Concrete" continues through Sunday at La MaMa E.T.C., 74A East Fourth Street, East Village, (212) 475-7710.