Varispeed pushes the possibilities of opera forward with Robert Ashley's *Crash*

Six people, dressed in ordinary clothing, sitting in a row at desks adorned only with microphones and glasses of water, and talking for ninety minutes: is it opera?

**Rising Stars in Concert, Lyric Opera of Chicago**

The spring concert of Rising Stars in Concert, sponsored by and featuring current members of the Patrick C. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center at Lyric Opera of Chicago, showered a number of talents that will no doubt continue to grace the stages of the world’s operatic theaters.

**The Singers Sparkle in New York Opera Exchange's Carmen**

New York Opera Exchange’s production of *Carmen* from May 8th to 10th highlighted that which opera devotees have been saying for years: Opera, far from being dead, is vibrant and evolving.

**Varispeed pushes the possibilities of opera forward with Robert Ashley’s *Crash***

According to Robert Ashley, the composer himself, “Well, if I say it’s opera, it’s opera! Who’s running this show, anyway?” The composer, who died in March of last year, was known for anecdotally libretti and “television operas” that invite close listening and that range in tone from tragic to comically, bewilderingly existential.

*Cruzh*, the last of his operas, was performed at Roulette by Varispeed, an experimental music group consisting of a younger generation of Ashley disciples: Brian Corcorke, Dave Ruder, Gelsey Bell, Paul Pinto, Alica Simons, and Amirtha Kidambi. First performed last year at the Whitney Biennial, *Cruzh* was reincarnated for four nights in April by director Tom Hamilton and producer Mimi Johnson. The opera is divided into six acts of fifteen minutes each, during which three of the speakers, in a Cageian fashion, take turns talking for 30 seconds each: “Thoughts” rambles, as if partaking in a phone conversation, about fourteen-year life cycles, evil short men, and the frustrations of neighbors; “Crash” swirls out a string of poetic fears and musings; “The Journal” stammers out descriptions of each year from Ashley’s life. Meanwhile, the other three voices murmur quietly in the background. The members of Varispeed rotated through the parts so that, by the sixth act, each had taken his or her turn assuming each of the voices and their varying tempos and amplifications.

**Roulette TV: ROBERT ASHLEY // Crash: Act 1 from Roulette Intermedium on Vimeo.**

Unlike other of Ashley’s operas, which feature loosely outlined piano or electronic parts, *Cruzh* is distinct in its accompaniment: each of the three entrances of thought, which thread in and around each other like a braid of multicolored ribbons, is joined only by the quiet but quick mumbling of three other voices and an array of three different photo projections. This symphony
by Ashley. But I was right to do it. It seems to have every going for it: excellent principals comprising experienced old-hands and exciting new voices, infinite gags and japes, and the visual éclat of Agostino Cavalca’s scenery so important to Ashley, but also allowed the audience to “hear the singing and the texts without the typical visual distractions”, as Ashley desired. In combination with lighting designer David Moodey’s skillful spotlight maneuvering and Kate Brehm’s stage management, the photo projections did not hammer home a message but allowed the viewers to form their own responses alongside their listening. This was the rare opera experience wherein the visual and aural experiences were united with not a blip of disjunction.

More straightforward than Ashley’s other operas, which can be oblique and convoluted in narrative and musical structure, Crash delivers a wondrous yet meditative experience. Written at the end of the sixteenth-fourteen-year cycle of his life—and it’s surely no coincidence Ashley died just before his 84th birthday, considering his self-imposed significance on the number—the opera feels as if Ashley is looking back on his life while also looking towards the future, using the voices of young people to explore concepts of voice, storytelling, and, yes, opera.

Rebecca S. Lentjes

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