



eL/Aficionado

an opera by Robert Ashley



Photograph by Philip Makanna, 1975

October 21–23, 2021

Roulette Intermedium
509 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, NY
www.roulette.org

eL/Aficionado

Music and libretto
Robert Ashley

Musical direction, sound design and live mix
Tom Hamilton

Performers
Kayleigh Butcher (the Agent)
Brian McCorkle (Senior Interrogator)
Bonnie Lander (Interrogator)
Paul Pinto (Interrogator)

Lighting and stage design*
David Moodey

Producer
Mimi Johnson

Press Representative
Isabelle Deconinck/
Lerner & Deconinck Associates

*after **Jacqueline Humbert's** designs
for the 1994 production

My Brother Called

The Agent has been instructed to go to a café overlooking the entrance to a building where “the department” maintains a safe house, or meeting place. He receives a telephone call in the café. He is instructed to watch the building and to describe in code every person that enters. The code takes the form of newspaper “personals” (repeated throughout by the Interrogators, from the record.) As part of his statement the Agent describes the mysterious apartment. *My Brother Called*, told in the present about an incident in the immediate past, is interrupted successively by two other scenes, each enacted further in the past, and finally by a scene of direct confrontation between the Agent and his Interrogators.

A Simple Border Crossing

The Agent is challenged to reconstruct the events of his first assignment. In this assignment (apparently as a test of his training, the facts of which he recounts) he is instructed to go to a building unknown to him and there to cope with a “surprise,” which is described as a test of “the business of staying alive.” Even as he watches for “the surprise” he must memorize (in code, to be repeated as part of his assignment) every room he passes through in this “labyrinth.” The scene is an antiphonal presentation of the narrative in two moods: the seriousness and naivety of the Agent, against the subtle sarcasm of the Interrogators, who apparently know the story from the inside.

An Answer Is Expected

The Agent recounts the climax of a bizarre assignment to interrogate a child (“find out something about him”), who is being held in a remote safe house by a mysterious couple with a dog. The child has the resources of an occult power. He eludes the Agent’s approaches and invokes the occult power to end the examination. The Interrogators swear the Agent to a lifetime of secrecy about this assignment. (“If we may be somewhat dramatic, you should take it to your grave.”) The scene is a continuous duet between the Agent and the chorus of Interrogators.

Viva’s Boy

The story told in *My Brother Called* is interrupted, finally, by a direct questioning of the Agent’s language and skills. We learn something about the codes and about the Agent’s understanding of his job, but nothing is resolved.

— Robert Ashley, August 1994

Also included is Robert Ashley's note regarding performers' contributions to the original production of eL/Aficionado that featured Thomas Buckner, Sam Ashley and Jacqueline Humbert. The note still applies, and we are grateful to the new cast, Kayleigh Butcher, Bonnie Lander, Brian McCorkle and Paul Pinto, for their contributions to the opera.

The matter of giving credit to individuals for particular contributions to the creation of *eL/Aficionado* is unusually difficult for me, both because of the way I compose music of this sort (opera) and because of the sheer bulk of such contributions over the six-year history of the work.

Most important to explain is the technique of the vocal characterization. In every solo or ensemble part, the singer is given a “character-defining” pitch (that is, a pitch somewhere in the singer’s range that, understandably, forces a certain “character” to emerge.) Around this pitch the singer is asked to invent vocal inflections (pitch changes, vocal techniques, etc.) that express the intent or meaning of the text. The singer is always guided in the vocal inflections by a harmony, explicit in the orchestration, and in some cases by a specific set of alternate pitches. Apart from these technical limitations and apart from the trial-and-error process of what is agreed on as proper or correct, the singer is entirely free to invent the vocal character. So, the written melodies (which I think are obvious to the listener) are only a part of the vocal characterization. Equally important are the decisions made by the singer in practice and in rehearsal and in the spontaneous inventions unique to this recording.

— Robert Ashley, August 1994

eL/Aficionado was commissioned by Mutable Music Productions for Thomas Buckner. It was performed multiple times from 1987 to 1993 as *My Brother Called* or *eL/Aficionado*. In 1993 the opera was incorporated into Robert Ashley’s monumental opera tetralogy, *Now Eleanor’s Idea*, which also includes *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*, *Foreign Experiences* and the stand alone opera, *Now Eleanor’s Idea*. The tetralogy was premiered in July 1994 at the Festival d’Avignon and was performed in November of 1994 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s “Next Wave” Festival.

A new recording of *eL/Aficionado* featuring the current cast was made for Lovely Music in July 2021 at Robert Ashley’s studio. The first recording was made in 1994 with the original cast: Thomas Buckner as the Agent and Robert Ashley, Sam Ashley and Jacqueline Humbert as his Interrogators. That recording has been continuously available since then. Both are available from Forced Exposure. www.forcedexposure.com

More information on *eL/Aficionado*, including the full libretto, can be found at www.robertashley.org.

Robert Ashley (1930 – 2014) is particularly known for his work in new forms of opera. In Ann Arbor in the 1960s, Ashley organized the ONCE Festival and directed the legendary ONCE Group, with whom he developed his first operas. Throughout the 1970s, he directed the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College and toured with the Sonic Arts Union. He produced and directed *Music with Roots in the Aether*, a 14-hour television opera/documentary about the work and ideas of seven American composers. His opera for television, *Perfect Lives*, is widely considered to be the precursor of “music-television.” Stage versions of *Perfect Lives*, *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*, *Foreign Experiences*, *eL/Aficionado* and *Now Eleanor’s Idea* toured throughout the US and Canada, Europe and Asia during the 1980s and 1990s. *Dust*, followed by *Celestial Excursions* and *The Old Man Lives in Concrete* toured from 1999 to 2012. He finished his last two operas (*Crash* and *Quicksand*) in 2013. *Crash* was presented as part of the 2014 Whitney Biennial; *Quicksand* was presented by The Kitchen in early 2016. www.robertashley.org

Described as having “a sound that is well-suited for the strange world of new music” (Chicago Classical Review), **Kayleigh Butcher** (mezzo-soprano) has gained critical and audience acclaim as a soloist and contemporary chamber musician. She is a founding member and the director of Quince Ensemble, an all-female, a cappella vocal quartet that explores experimental vocal techniques and improvisation. She is also a founding member of Shepherdess, a violin and voice duo, and LOVELOVELOVE, a vocal trio with fellow Robert Ashley cohorts Paul Pinto and Bonnie Lander. She currently resides in Brooklyn. www.kayleighbutcher.com

Tom Hamilton has combined the activities of audio production and music composition into an artistic career of over five decades. Since 1990, Hamilton has been a member of the composer Robert Ashley’s touring opera ensemble, performing sound processing and mixing in both recordings and concerts. He has served as Music Director in productions of Ashley’s operas *Crash*, *Improvement*, and *eL/Aficionado*, and composed and produced the music for productions of Ashley’s *Quicksand* and *A Last Futile Stab at Fun*. His audio production is found on over 100 recordings of prominent contemporary musicians. Hamilton’s music references the 1970s era of analog electronics, and contrasts structure with improvisation and textural electronics with acoustic instruments. He employs “aural scores” to

connect performers to a changing context of electronic sound, prompting the use of “present-time listening” by both performer and listener. Hamilton is a Fellow of the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, and his work has been awarded in the Prix Ars Electronica.

www.lovely.com/artists/a-hamilton.html

Bonnie Lander is a multifaceted professional musician whose career encompasses performance, curation, composition, and improvisation. Immersed in the eclectic world of new and experimental music, she has performed in a great variety of concert programs, with a wide selection of collaborators in improvised music, new opera, new chamber music, and composition. Versatile, dramatic, with a “stratospheric legato” and a “signature ability to embody a seemingly endless supply of vocal timbres and personalities,” Lander combines an intuitive, spontaneous use of the voice with resonant operatic technique, in order to create a performance experience that is virtuosic, intimate, and sonically overwhelming. Lander is a founding member of Rhymes With Opera, a NYC based chamber opera company now in its 12th year of programming new works for the operatic voice. www.bonnielanders.com

Brian McCorkle is a composer, performer, digital artist, co-Director of Panoply Performance Laboratory (PPL) for over a decade, and a founding member of Varispeed Collective. His collaborations with Varispeed have been praised by The New York Times as “impressive,” and Posture Magazine calls his voice “chillingly resonant.” He performs regularly as a multi-instrumentalist and vocalist, flouting genre while drawing from decades of experience as a professional musician in a wide array of contexts; since the pandemic he has also been creating digital compositions which work with speech recognition, Big Data, and ideas surrounding what New Music can and should be. McCorkle’s operas with PPL have been described by The Guardian as “working to distill a bevy of sophisticated ideas into word and action.” www.brianmccorkle.work

Paul Pinto is glad to be making sounds and imagery for people. He’s a multi-disciplinary creator and performer, and band member of thingNY, Varispeed and LOVELOVELOVE. He’s performed Peter Maxwell Davies’ *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, originated the role of Balaga in Dave Malloy’s *Great Comet of 1812*, and wrote the autotuned opera *Thomas Paine in Violence*, and the dance arias *15 Photos*. During COVID times, Paul has created music for the Prototype Festival, *Antigone* (Colgate University), *Mad Forest* (Fisher Center), and *Tartuffe* (Moliere-in-the-Park), co-created

online shows with thingNY, written a singing string quartet for Rhythm Method, and made music videos for his songs *Just Love* and *Dr. Peetee*, and with Katelyn Halpern and Erin Rogers. Now he's creating a multimedia installation about *Whiteness* with Kameron Neal, a multichannel music video called *I pass'd a church*, a song cycle for Quince Ensemble called *The Approach*, and a multitude of other gifts for a multitude of performers at a multitude of distances. www.pfpinto.com

David Moodey has collaborated with Robert Ashley since 1999, most recently designing for the remounting of Ashley's *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)* at The Kitchen. He is the principal designer and production manager for Molissa Fenley and Robert Ashley. His design for Fenley's *State of Darkness* earned him a Bessie award for lighting design. He designed for Peter Boal's three seasons at the Joyce Theater, New York, and in 2017 for a production of John Henry Redwood's play *The Old Settler*, directed by Michele Shay at the Billie Holiday Theater in Brooklyn. He has also designed lights and sets for over a dozen shows at NYU's Experimental Theatre Wing since 2000. He currently holds an International Alliance of Theatrical State Employees Local One position with Jazz at Lincoln Center as one of the heads of the Appel room. www.davidmoodey.com

Mimi Johnson is founder and director of two renowned and long-lived cultural service organizations, Performing Artservices (1972) and Lovely Music (1978). She was married to Robert Ashley and continues to produce his work. Johnson serves on the boards of directors of the Destina Foundation, the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, Roulette and Object Collection.

Founded in 1978 by four artists in a TriBeCa loft in NYC, **Roulette** has grown into an internationally recognized performing arts venue and presenter of experimental music, dance, and intermedia featuring some of today's most prolific artists and their extraordinary emerging counterparts. Historically, Roulette presents 120 annual performances alongside an additional 150 community/rental events, serving up to 70,000 annual visitors in our 12,000-square-foot venue in Downtown Brooklyn. In addition to its robust live programming, Roulette presents a monthly podcast, weekly and monthly radio shows, and weekly TV segments on Manhattan and Brooklyn public access. Our mission is to support artists creating new and adventurous art in all disciplines by providing them with a venue and resources to realize their creative visions, and to build an audience interested in the evolution of experimental art. Visit roulette.org.