

For Your Ears Only

BY KYLE GANN

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Rouse plays the host of his mesmerizing and mystical talk-show opera.

photo: Hiroyuki Ito

To take one of many examples from Mikel Rouse's talk-show opera *Dennis Cleveland*: There is a passage in the final "Madison Square" scene in which Rouse, as Dennis, is rapping, "I've been waiting for this, a potential arcade," and so on, and the chorus enters with a chorale heard earlier in the opera, in a different meter, key, and seemingly even tempo. The effect is much as though you're sitting in the opera house listening to and watching "The Ride of the Valkyries" from *Die Walkure* and quietly the "Magic Fire" music from a different part of the opera enters superimposed, so that you're listening to both at the same time. Through the end of the scene, the music adds layers of already-heard material, until you're listening to at least four at once.

The fact that, in Rouse's work, you can hear those layered musical passages at the same time without their getting muddy is not because Rouse has secretly crafted them to work together harmonically, the way Mozart did his three dances in different meters at the climax of *Don Giovanni's* Act I. Rouse's feat is post-classical: Those overlapped passages work together because he has masterfully placed them in different auditory spaces in the recorded backgrounds (which is not the same thing as simply separating them spatially, but requires different treatments in reverb, phasing, and other techniques I hardly understand).

No more elegantly audible cognitive dissonance can be found in any score by Pierre Boulez or Elliott Carter than this passage. I know the effect exists because as I write this, I am looking at it in the score and hearing it on the recording. For someone to convince me that that passage does not exist—say, an uptown classical critic who didn't hear it—would entail overcoming patent epistemological obstacles. And yet, it is not only because I am privileged to own the score that I've noticed that effect. Without particularly waiting for it, I heard that passage when I attended *Dennis Cleveland* at the John Jay Theater May 4, and I remember being awed by it the first time I ever heard the work in 1996. There are many such layerings throughout the opera, smooth and unobtrusive but available to anyone listening closely.

In fact, Rouse's feat in *Dennis Cleveland* and his subsequent theatrical works (the others available only on CD and DVD so far) is as though he took that superimposition of dances in *Don Giovanni*—a passage often cited as a precursor to the rhythmic layerings of Carter and Stockhausen—and expanded the effect as the basis for his entire work. Like the dances in *Don Giovanni*, and quite unlike the complexities of Carter and Stockhausen, the different layers in *Dennis Cleveland* retain their independent recognizability, making the effect truly mesmerizing and mystical, and not just an academic affectation.

It has been Rouse's aim, as a member of the totalist generation, to preserve in his music the levels of complexity one finds in serialist music, BUT—and I wish I could make this *BUT* five inches high on the page—to simultaneously make the complexity audible and recognizable by relating it to clear tonalities and beats, AND at the same time to place the complexity in the background, so that it does not disturb the completely defensible pleasure of listeners who are more superficially enjoying the 4/4 beat and rhyming lyrics on the surface. The aim itself is elegantly complex, and requires masterful imagination. And this is precisely Mozart's aim in *Don Giovanni*, to keep the musical surface serene and flowing, but outline the complexities of the stage action in a backgrounded tour de force that cognoscenti can't help but notice.

One problem the totalists face is that some of their most elegant achievements, like Mozart's "artless art," can slip by unnoticed. So when Anthony Tommasini complained in his review in the *Times* (clinching his argument with an inaccurate quotation from the libretto) that "the layered elements are mostly drowned out by the blaring surface stuff," it only proves that totalist rhythmic complexity is indeed calculated to not intrude on the listening habits of the unsophisticated. Much of the audience, laughing at the lines and clapping to the infectious songs, didn't seem aware of the complexity, and certainly wasn't disturbed by it. I and others I spoke with were dazzled by the intricacy of the simultaneous different meters, similar in effect to (and originally patterned after) African drumming. As for cognoscenti who might be expected to hear the subtleties and couldn't—well, many of New York's fine music schools offer remedial ear training.



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