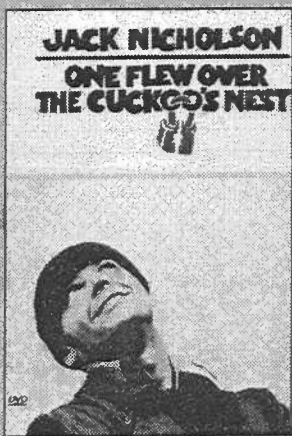


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KYLE GANN

A for Annoying

American Composers Orchestra

Carnegie Hall
December 7

In a daring departure from their habitual routes, the American Composers Orchestra commissioned a work from arch-Downtowner Robert Ashley. What he gave them was not an orchestra piece at all. He gave them A's. The entire orchestra, cued by conductor Dennis Russell Davies, played A's, in all octaves, as intermittent drones. Meanwhile, Ashley's right-hand singer Thomas Buckner kept up a crazily energetic monologue that seemed to be a satire of someone accepting a Nobel prize. He was periodically mimicked by a sultry chorus of Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, and Sam Ashley, cooing platitudes like "Makes you wanna cry," "Ya know what I mean," and "As if." It was a tremendous waste of an orchestra, and was loudly booed as such by one disgruntled audience member.

On the other hand, it was also the most exciting and original piece I'd heard at an orchestra concert in years. In *When Famous Last Words Fail You*, as the work was jauntily titled, Buckner described a future where gene manipulation is out of control, in which one day you might be a black male who likes to cook and within a few weeks slowly metamorphose into an angry white female who hates to. "I myself," he raved, "saw the person I understood to be my own grandmother playing second base for the New York team for three seasons before . . . over 20 million viewers, it is said, saw the organism change into what appeared to be . . . a decrepit sharecropper!" Missing bodies would be "found weeks later, still fucking ruthlessly and none the worse for wear." Manically delivered, this was higher-octane material than the ACO audience has been cozily led to expect over the years, and the boosers may have been responding to any number of irritants.

Uptown and Midtown organizations have been gingerly courting Downtown music this last year or so, and Downtowners are in danger of becoming respectable. The ACO themselves recently held a forum to ask musicians how it could become more relevant, and at their previous concert played works by nominal Downtowners Frederic Rzewski and Ingram Marshall. All this is welcome. The danger is that the Downtowners will misbehave—that is, continue behaving as they normally do—and give Downtown's stuffiest critics abundant chances to say, "See, what did I tell you!"

In that sense, *Famous Last Words* was a disastrous PR move. Wouldn't it have been great if Ashley, after three decades of redefining opera, had at age 67 redefined symphonic music as well in his first-ever orchestra work? Wouldn't it have been nice if he had politely made the orchestra seem relevant instead of underlining its superfluity? Sure, but if the classical world had wanted input from one of the century's greatest and most radical composers, they should have approached him long before he was 67 and rather set in his text-focused ways. Imagine Ashley, after all those years of electronic-video trail-blazing, taking out the Kennan orchestration

book and thinking about string doublings? No. Ashley's genius, aside from blindingly imaginative operatic narratives, is for the obsessive sculpting of production detail. You can't do that with an orchestra: the amount of rehearsal would never be sufficient, the notation never unambiguous enough. So he defaulted to his other performance mode, a text presented with the barest minimum of accompaniment.

And if it was the worst orchestra piece on the program, it was also the most entertaining. The evening began with Lou Harrison's *Symphony on G* from 1948–54, an early 12-tone work—limpid in its transparent orchestration, but not yet representative of Harrison's mellow personality. This was followed by the world premiere of *Microsymph* by 38-year-old Sebastian Currier, a cute, 10-minute symphonietta of the type



A tremendous waste of an orchestra—but also the most exciting piece Gann's heard at an orchestra concert in years

churned out in the 1940s by such neoclassicists as Morton Gould and Harold Shapero, only updated slightly by collage elements. *Frauenleben*, a work for viola by Europe's woman-composer pioneer Betsy Jolas, was played with athletic grace by soloist Kim Kashkashian; it was a rather dour, Bergian essay whose chromatic wanderings and portentous pizzicatos betrayed no hint that it was written post-1965.

No work on the program proved you can still do something new with an orchestra, but at least Ashley proved you can still do something new. Currier's retro cuteness and Jolas's dogged allegiance to midcentury angst represent dominant trends in recent orchestral music, and also the reason I never went to an ACO concert until lured by the wild promise of an Ashley premiere. I hope the boredom of droning those A's, evident in the mistuned performance, won't convince the ACO that Downtown is unrewarding territory. In Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's opera *The Mother of Us All*, Susan B. Anthony says to a man who offers to help her feminist cause, "And if you do and I annoy you, what will you do?" "I wonder if I can help you," he answers, withdrawing. Listen, classical music establishment, it's true: Downtown music has a tremendous new energy that may blast your audience away. But what will you do if we annoy you? **V**