

# Finnegans Opera

By Kyle Gann

Improvement (Don Leaves  
Linda)

eL/Aficionado

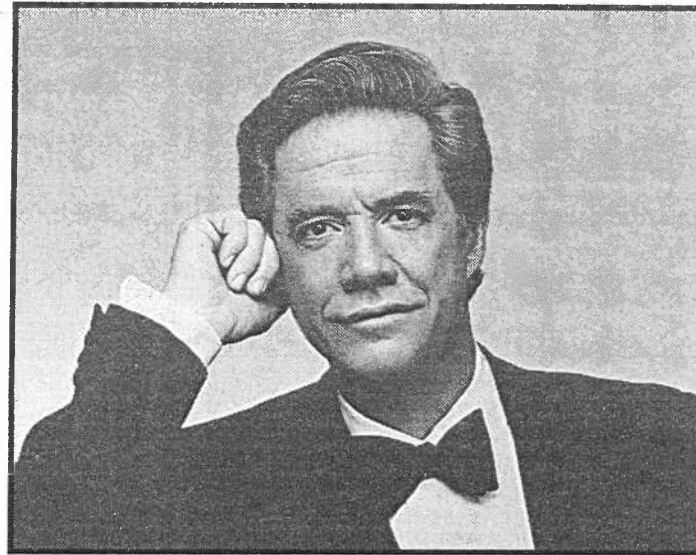
**New opera is** in a catch-22. If it imitates European models, it isn't original. And if it is original, it isn't opera, because it fails to imitate European models. Listeners bemoan the primitiveness of recent American operas, the gaudiest example being last month's *The Tedious Demise of Klinghoffer* at BAM. When I point to Robert Ashley's video/text/music works, though, they admit that they're exciting, then add, "But they're not really operas." People *define* opera as something that can no longer be successfully created; perhaps they secretly enjoy weeping over its grave.

It's interesting, though, that Ashley's symbolic dramas, chanted over a harmonic, improvisatory, open-score accompaniment, have performance assumptions identical to those of Italian opera's *real* golden age—1600 to 1680. *Improvement* (*Don Leaves Linda*), premiered at Merkin Hall October 7 and 8 (I heard the latter), was unbelievably daring in medium, six singers in hit-or-miss unison with a tape of themselves, sometimes blurring the text, otherwise creating a Cubist perspective of differently nuanced echoes. "To continue," Ashley began illogically in his husky whisper, "I must explain an idea that I am

inadequate to communicate in the music."

Considering that they inhabit a new format, Ashley's operas have become amazingly diverse in mood, style, density. If *Perfect Lives*, the first bar opera, is raucous and colloquial, *Improvement* is intense, static, deluged with rivers of words from a modern Greek chorus. *eL/Aficionado* (which followed October 9 and 10) is light *pianissimo*, meditative. That they followed *Klinghoffer* made for revealing comparisons. In the latter, Alice Goodman's libretto from hell gave us irrelevant descriptions of the hostages' sandwiches, rendered ludicrous by contrast with John Adams's grandiloquent orchestral rhetoric. But *Improvement*, musically unpretentious, sang of the contents of Linda's purse in a simple chant that raised them to mythic status. (Those contents referred to occult memorization techniques practiced by Renaissance magi.)

I enjoy in Ashley's operas what I enjoy in Robertson Davies's novels: the erudition, the interrelations among stories, the implicit psychological background. Davies is into Jung, while Ashley's background is one of impassive Buddhist objectivity, observing emotions without surrendering to them. Connected to the Self, Ashley's characters see their actions from higher perspectives. Linda, left by Don because as a couple they had "crossed the threshold of tolerable similar-



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Thomas Buckner croons a velvet landscape.

ity," muses coolly about her underreaction: "These outward appearances show nothing about me, if I may use the word, spiritual or my intellectual well-being, though commonly they are taken to do so."

*Klinghoffer* tried to make old-fashioned opera from recent history; *Improvement*, ancient in subject matter, pinpointed 1990s emotions. At a party, a doctor interrupted Linda in midthought with an officious "Just a moment, please," and the jarring repetition drove home the male authoritarian dismissal of women as uncomfortably as Anita Hill's Senate testimony. Part of Ashley's psychological precision lay in his rhythm, which is so effortless that you never notice the technique. Sang Linda, "He was not in a good mood. He hadn't intended to do what he did": the change from slow duple to quick triple rhythm had a naturalness that no

one else has achieved in English since Virgil Thomson.

Ashley's expanded cast of usuals was the best it's ever been. As Linda, Jacqueline Humbert drew modern opera's most sympathetic and self-sufficient heroine with sexy fluidity. Thomas Buckner's dark, unyielding Don was the perfect foil, and he crooned the velvet landscape over which *Aficionado* floated. Brilliant talents went underused: in *Improvement*, Joan La Barbara sang a few lines in a clear, authoritative alto, and pianists "Blue" Gene Tyranny and Joseph Kubera sustained *Aficionado* with an 88-minute, Satie-esque chord sequence in slow waltz time. Sam Ashley, a chip off the composer's block, enlivened *Improvement* with a ghostly falsetto as Junior Jr., and *Aficionado* by yelling when everyone else was whispering. Adam Klein was a steely and suitably oppressive Doctor. ■

*Improvement* was the first Ashley opera I loved more than even *Perfect Lives*. Paradoxically, *eL/Aficionado* was more opaque despite its far lesser density. Bare lists of personals ads went on for tens of minutes at a time, and only the poignantly self-referential final scene reflected back on them in such a way to alter perspective. The piece almost seemed to reveal itself backwards, and I'd have to rehear it awhile before I could say it ultimately made sense.

For on the surface, Ashley doesn't always make sense. He's opera's James Joyce, obsessed with layering and obscuring what he's written. Those of us who've watched *Perfect Lives* grow from a text with a beat into an info-overload video extravaganza know how well you have to have memorized the simple version to navigate the complex one. *Improvement* and *Aficionado* were at medium stages, and not all of their embedded gems showed. Because I'd heard a rough mix of *Improvement*, I know that it contains a charming pop-song parody, "Tarzan Song". In performance, it was obliterated (except for the trumpeting of elephants) by the shouting of the two Ashley's. That was a shame.

Just as Joyce's published first draft of *Finnegans Wake* elucidates the book, the ideal approach to Ashley's operas would be to have several versions available, a spare one for initiates, more complex accretions for diehard fans. Like most operas, Ashley's require work to assimilate. Still, no other new music theater so rewards effort by getting under your skin and molding your consciousness. Call 'em operas or don't, but they stick in your head forever. ■

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