



Downtown diva Dora Ohrenstein

MATHIEU ROBERTS

## In the Saddle

By Kyle Gann

"Urban Diva"

Dance Theater Workshop is a generous stepmother to new music; the space has racked up a reputation for downtown's best-produced events. Dora Ohrenstein's "Urban Diva," a program presented there October 8 and 9 (I heard the second night), was as smooth a musico-theatrical gig as I've seen below 34th Street. The pieces ranged from pop to operatic to c&w, from inconsequential

to masterpiece, but Ohrenstein's vocal and theatrical versatility fused them into plausible continuity. With mercurial shifts of style and voice, she changed from an opera diva having a bad night to a suicidal depressive to a disillusioned cowgirl, until it seemed a shame to think that she spent years with the Phillip Glass Ensemble going "Oh-may-oh-may-oh-may-oh-may..."

Ohrenstein was expertly backed: Philip Bush on piano and synthesizer, Mary Rowell on violin and electric guitar, Bill Ruyle on percussion. All the pieces were

commissions except one, and most were composer/poet collaborations. In *Diva Demento*, Jed Distler aimed at operatic slapstick and often hit it, following a text by Deborah Margolin that vamped endlessly about "what a thing is the human brain." Italian opera platitudes, more Handel than Puccini, misfired one after another, the funniest being when Bush insistently pounded the soprano's opening note, only for Ohrenstein to begin a whole tone lower. Daryl Runswick's *Lady Lazarus*, a solo-voice setting of a Sylvia Plath poem (the only non-commission), was merely an expressionistic recitative, but it gave Ohrenstein a chance to flit virtuosically among violent emotions.

*Dish* by Anne LeBaron, a talented downtown harp improviser, was a set of pop songs based on poems by Jessica Hagedorn, and the first was a knockout. "Seeing you again makes me want to wash the dishes," crooned Ohrenstein as a refrain, and Bush's Gershwin-esque chords never got a bit too artsy. The song was framed by tape loops of romantic banalities; for example, "I knew you were special the minute I saw you," in a sleazy voice. These loops ran collagelike over the succeeding songs, and blunted the otherworldly edge LeBaron had so nicely set up. In Anthony Davis's *Lost Moon Sisters*, Ohrenstein sleepwalked from stage right at the beginning of each verse. Marimba and violin played angular lines in ear-arresting unison, the piano swept through ostinatos of sometimes 11, sometimes 10 beats. Davis's bittersweet textures and off-center rhythms were lovely, and suited the ritualistic repetitions of Diane di Prima's text. His relent-

less dependence on ostinatos, though, is a tiresome tic in a long piece.

Nothing in the earlier music I'd heard by local conductor Linda Bouchard prepared me for the effective theatricalism of her *Black Burned Wood*. The protagonist of the John O'Keefe poems she set was ostensibly an adolescent girl, but white-smocked Ohrenstein looked more like a mental patient relapsed into second girlhood. "No. No. No. No. Don't let it be. Don't let it be," she shouted, as the instruments behind her kept up a thicket of thorny gestures recognizably in Bouchard's tense style. And the return of monosyllabic repetitions in later poems, with verses such as "Go/go/go/go to the house/Don't go to the house," offered Bouchard a well-centered form that she took good advantage of.

But the most experimental and touching work was by the oldest composer, Ben Johnston. He has written everything from Native American-inspired theater pieces to minimalist percussion works to purely consonant string quartets, but I'd never heard anything like his *Calamity Jane to Her Daughter*. Performed not quite in its entirety, this was a setting of apparently apocryphal letters the Wild West heroine wrote to her illegitimate child. The forgeries ("your mother's a misfit in a home like you have") were honest enough that you wanted to believe in them, and Johnston's setting accessed a jaunty c&w vernacular. You would have thought these songs were by a hip 35-year-old from the redneck bar circuit, rather than a distinguished sexagenarian experimentalist.

One thread that runs through

Johnston's music is pure tuning (he was an early Harry Partch protégé). Bush's synthesizer was tuned with pure 11th and 13th harmonics, and Rowell, given the harder job, followed along perfectly on violin. The funny thing was that, rather than sounding weird, the scale's twang fit humorously with the loping Western idiom. When Calamity sang a hyperbolic recipe for 20-pound cakes, the slow synth chords started out perfectly consonant and grew buzzy and eerier as they modulated, a common Johnston effect made possible by just intonation. Southern hymnody underlies his music as well, and the music gathered pseudo-Calamity's prose into comfortable cadences of waltz rhythms and lullabies.

Johnston was my private teacher for three years; living in different cities, we used to meet in between at a Zen temple in Chicago he attended, and he introduced me to Zen meditation. He also introduced me to a vibrant view of music history as heard through tuning; one insight, for example, was that Chopin's use of pivot harmonies was still within the possibility of pure tuning, whereas Brahms thought about harmony in a more abstract way that made just intonation no longer possible. Nevertheless, I don't think any more objective audience member would disagree that the final song, performed in near darkness and without instruments, was heart-breaking. Jane announced that she was going blind, and mourned, "I can't live on to enjoy an avaricious old age." Delivered with Ohrenstein's warmth, sincerity, and beautiful tone, it was the most touching musical moment I've had in a long time. ■

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