

Lost in Time

By Kyle Gann

The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin

Time is an illusion of consciousness. Beneath life's fragile facade, the pain you experienced the first time someone rejected you is as accessible to you today as though it happened only a moment ago. Time is contemptuous of straight lines; it loops, twists, and spirals, but our logic follows only the one-dimensional surface trace. Time philosophers from Augustine to Husserl missed this point because they restricted themselves to linear thinking, but composers explore those curves directly. That's why (I'm theorizing) theatrical and literary works that acknowledge time's cyclic, reiterative nature have a special appeal to musicians: for instance, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the film *Groundhog Day*, and P. D. Ouspensky's novel *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*, the last of which Peter Gordon turned into an opera at La MaMa April 16 through 24.

Wilder's plays are too fleshed-out to violate, but Ouspensky's sketchy, brief, 1947 novel (which I searched out because the opera so intrigued me) begs for adaptation; for once an opera may have been better than its book. *Strange Life* opens with Ivan (Jeff Reynolds) saying goodbye to his fiancée Zinaida (Tamara Walker) at a train station. Ivan keeps feeling he's forgotten something important, while Zinaida is angry that

he won't accompany her to her vacation in the Crimea. In Scene 2, Ivan learns from Zinaida's brother (Dave Clemmons) that Zinaida has married someone else. Ivan's life, he feels, is ruined. If only he could go back and start over, he'd do everything right. He stumbles into the house of a magician (Wilbur Pauley), who claims that he can take Ivan back to age 14, "but it won't do any good." Ivan insists, and the next thing he knows, he's dressed in schoolboy clothes and surrounded by 14-year-olds who look ominously familiar.

Even with its Gurdjieffian mystical overtones, such a sitcomy setup could have fallen flat in the wrong hands, but librettist Constance Congdon added touches to Ouspensky's novel that made Ivan's moments of realization especially chilling. Music depicts temporal overlaps through counterpoint, and the counterpoint here runs between Ivan's memories of adulthood and his teenage behavior. They turn out to be strangely harmonious, since he thinks school is just as stupid at 14 as he did at 26. Seeing his mother alive again years after her death fills him with pain and compassion along with the horrible old feeling of having to submit to her martyred authority. "Mother, I meant to tell you that time is an illusion," he sings at her funeral. Of course Ivan repeats the same mistakes at each step: gets thrown out of school, seduces his uncle's mistress, gambles his money away misremembering which



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Time keeps on slipping, slipping, slipping . . .

numbers are going to come up. The temptations always outweigh the fate he knows he's setting in motion.

A stylistic chameleon overflowing with natural musicianship, Gordon is in his element in this type of work. If anything, he seems more comfortable as a latter-day Kurt Weill, diffracting characteristic idioms through his own intuitive prism, than inventing the austere avant-gardisms of his celebrated *Love of Life Orchestra*. Despite his long association with Robert Ashley, he hasn't monkeyed with the operatic genre but turned out a conventional and convincing piece of stagework riddled with spoken dialogue. The music's mellow pop styles tinged by Slavic accents are flexible enough to include one lively Caribbean dance in which Ivan is

bewitched by his female fantasies (choreographed with fetching simplicity by Donald Byrd). Gordon's orchestra—keyboards, violin, bass, and percussion—sounded bigger than it was: violinist Kenny Kosek doubled on mandolin, and the amazing "Blue" Gene Tyranny ventriloquized his synthesizers throughout the hall to sculpt a deep, three-dimensional musical space.

The music went crazy only at the moments when time relinquished its forward motion, spinning dizzily in hypnotic cycles and incidentally revealing minimalism's relation to altered time perception. The climax set Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence to music: Ivan and Zinaida's farewell recurred over and over again, blurring into repetitive choreography in an audio-

visual minimalist subtractive process. (In the book the opening chapter repeats itself almost verbatim.)

Poised between musical and opera, the work required singers of both types, with the better actors (Reynolds and Walker) taking central roles and the better singers doubling up on peripheral ones. Pauley's deep bass, for example, was wonderfully sepulchral in his magician role, less characteristic for Ivan's disciplinarian schoolmaster. The best female voice was April Armstrong, playing a series of sirenlike women who repeatedly make Ivan forget his resolve to find and marry Zinaida. Gordon has a knack, heard in many of the choral numbers, for making odd rhythms and scales sound attractively natural.

Through two hours of accelerating buildup, you wait to find out why Ivan's life is so inevitable, what ultimate purpose his mistakes were meant to lead to. Then the final two minutes let us down with a bump. When Ivan asks the magician how to get free of the repetitive treadmill of existence, the magician merely replies, "Listen." What we heard was, first, the "silent" hum of the building's electric current, then a briefly sustained drone in Gordon's instruments. Blackout. Admittedly, the book's solution was hardly stageworthy: the magician mumbles on about self-sacrifice, ending with a virtual invitation to join the Gurdjieff cult. That's the trouble I've always had with Ouspensky. Just as he's about to answer Life's Big Question, he changes the subject, and you could hardly expect Gordon to do it for him. I'd answer it myself, but I'm out of space. ■

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WHO

The record it took 500 years to make.

It began somewhere in Spain