

Robert Ashley Releases His Most Accessible Work

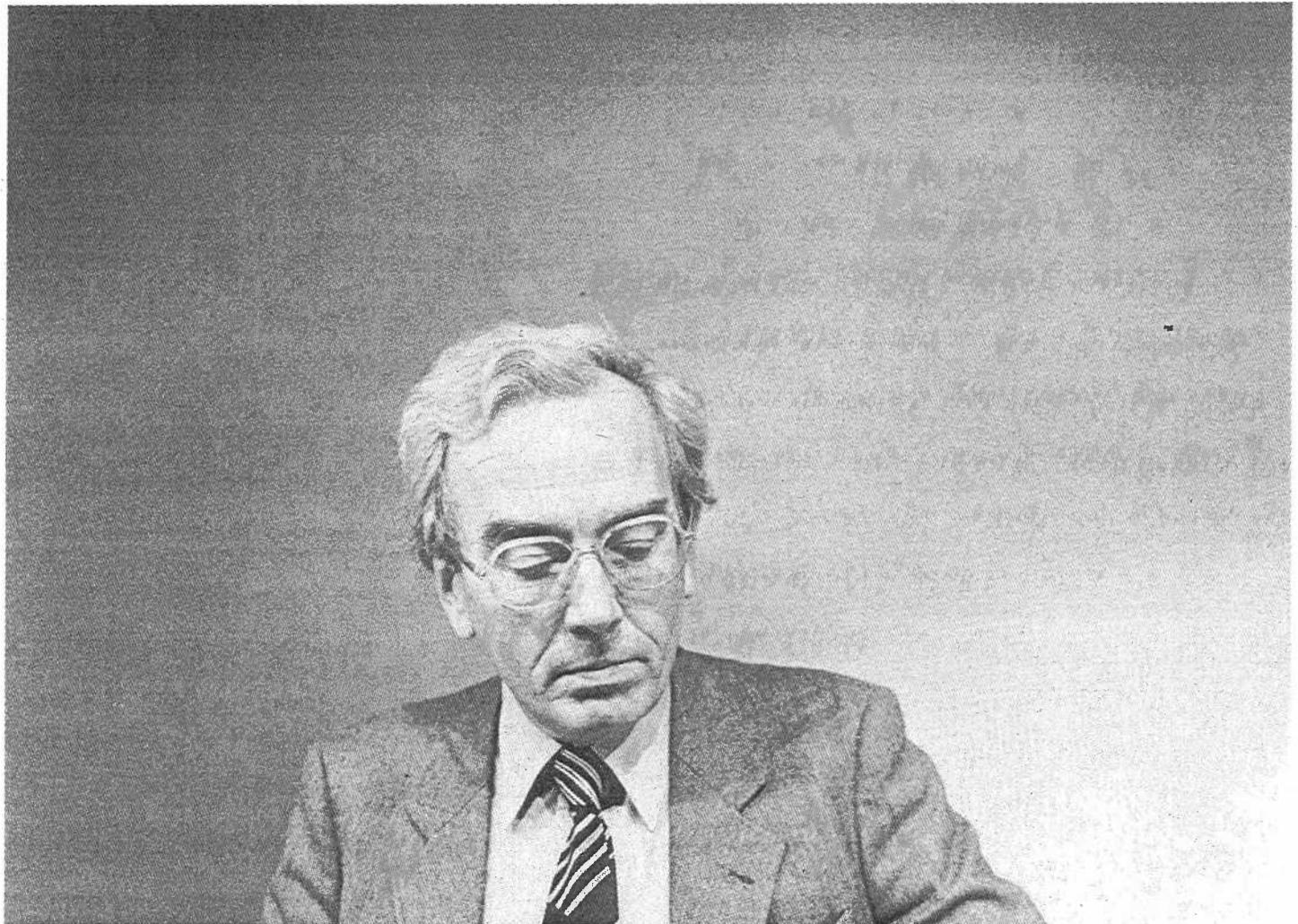
OPERA RAD

BY KYLE GANN

I'll never forget, in 1973, coming home from the record store with the old Sonic Arts Union recording of Robert Ashley's *Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon*. My friend Marcus and I played it at my parents' house and listened with growing concern as the female narrator calmly recounted an act of sexual violence in lines like "I remember . . . he put his finger between my legs and got it wet, and tried to put that finger in my mouth." After a mutual glance, we whipped the disc off the turntable; this was one avant-garde work that could wait until after my parents went to bed.

Twenty-seven Ashley-following years later, you'd think I'd be so inured to him that nothing he could dish out would faze me. You'd be wrong. His new opera, *Dust* (Lovely Music), has hit me all over again with the shocking intensity of *Purposeful Lady*, and I'm a lot tougher now. In his earlier operas, Ashley's elaborate stream of consciousness laid a veil of abstraction over his rambling depictions of life. Not so in *Dust*. It's as though, nearing 70, he decided to drop the veil of artistry and tour us through the private inferno of his psyche, with no escape from the horrible, embarrassing beauty of those private thoughts that we all have but would never admit to.

That's not to say the opera is all Ashley. *Dust's* conceit is that he and four friends, street people, talk on a street corner. There's The Man in the Green Pants (sung by Sam Ashley, the composer's son), who taunts cops by calling them "Motherfuckers Against Drunk Driving"; Lucille (Joan La Barbara), who "used to be sort of cute, but now she's getting older, and the guys don't flirt with her so much"; Leonard (Thomas Buckner), an old



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Yet these characterizations, lithely crooned in Ashley's partly improvised recitative style, ambiguously fuse as all five tell the story of the fifth friend, who lost his legs in an unspecified war. No other Ashley text reaches the level of obscenity maintained here, yet the shocking thing is not so much the dirty words as the candid admissions of cowardice and stupidity that run through the opera like leitmotifs. The climax of the work—still underlaid with the kind of innocent, repeating chords that made *Purposeful Lady* so chilling—is La Barbara's memory of having stumbled across two men making love in a park, who proceed to beat up the protagonist:

"... we see these two guys behind a bunch of bushes, and they're on the ground, and they're hugging each other and kissing. Jesus! They don't even see us. . . . They are really going at it. What's going to happen next is one of those things you read about, but nobody's ever *seen* it. This is shocking! I'd think it was shocking if it was a man and a woman." The reminiscence is interrupted by a soliloquy



ASHLEY HAS MASTERED THE BRILLIANT ILLUSION OF CASUALNESS.

about how weird people look making love, and how self-consciousness interferes with pleasure: "It divided me into two people: the guy doing it, and the guy watching. It's been one of my problems with life. Like, I can't stand to watch people eat. . . . The outside guy appears. And he's just looking."

If there's an organized rhythmic structure here, as in Ashley's earlier operas, you

get no hint of it from listening, so spontaneously do the words pour forth. "Dumbest thing I ever did, dumbest thing I ever did," La Barbara speech-sings. "Now I'm older, I get it, but, you know, you're just a kid, think you're tough. Not even think you're tough, just lou-ou-oudmouth. Just lou-ou-oudmouth kids." When has any other opera libretto, even by Harry Partch, ever hewn so close to

the unselfconscious way people talk? Language evolves, and each new century has to recapture anew some way to bring music and language into intimate contact. Ashley has always represented a new point of crystallization in that process, as perfect in his way as Monteverdi was in wedding music to 17th-century speech, but *Dust* hits a new level. Not only the piece, but the See GANN page 119

more poetic, less naturalistic quality that would expand more easily into opera."

McTeague and View are both bolstered by Bolcom's natural way with a telling tune and an overall rhythmic strategy for each situation. And although both operas racked up prestigious Chicago Lyric premiere runs, he's still trying to improve them. He wants to restore a previously cut choral finale to make it more dramatic by giving the doomed McTeague a new aria "that explodes out at the other people." In View, the Met asked him for new arias to express the frustrations and resentments of onshoreman Eddie and his wife and for more emphasis on the younger lovers' sexual attraction. (View, which premiered last fall in Chicago, goes to the Met in the 2002-03 season.)

And Bolcom has a third operatic adaptation coming down the pike. It's based this time on a movie and nothing else: Altman's *The Wedding*. "It's a basic suburban Chicago wedding," said Bolcom, "and the locale might make the audience like it more or hate it more. I'm thinking in terms of a 21st-century combination of *Figaro* and *Così*." That means audiences can look forward to *Figaro*'s warm humor mixed with *Così*'s *an Tutte*'s merciless sex satire.

Film, namely Jacques Tati's *Traffic*, was a starting point for Elliott Carter's new but very first opera (completed at age 90!). But his one-acter, *What Next?*, leaves Tati at that point, and Paul Griffiths's surreal libretto goes its own independent way. "The movie has a scene about a chain of car crashes, after which the passengers gradually revive and do setting-up exercises,"

Carter told me. "I wanted to start with that kind of catastrophe, but Paul took it from there." The characters, among them a wedding couple, sing in atonal, mostly delicate phrases to cross-purposes. "Having Rose [the bride and also an opera singer] sing throughout was my idea," said the composer, much of whose previous music seems to have been inspired by cinematic cross-cuts and montages. "In fact, the whole opera has each singer doing an aria throughout the opera but being interrupted by everyone else in turn."

Jake Heggie, composer of *Dead Man Walking*, which San Francisco Opera unveils next fall, has insisted to interviewers that he worked directly from Sister Helen Prejean's book and bypassed Tim Robbins's movie. Yet Heggie told me that the far bigger size of the film's audience was something he and librettist Terrance McNally had to think about, while sticking to the rather different book.

Meanwhile, the trendy Poul Ruders's version of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has just been premiered in Copenhagen, and this June, Opera Theater of St. Louis introduces its third Minoru Miki opera, *The Tale of Genji*, based on the gigantic 11th-century classic romance. Tobias Picker is completing a Met commission for an opera based on Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Composer Elliot Goldenthal and wondrous theater wizard Julie Taymor have been trying for a few years to install their *Beowulf* show; they call it *Grendel* after the mother (father?) of all monsters. Who knows what else is coming soon to an opera house near you. ▮

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stunning performance: Humbert's, Buckner's, La Barbara's, and Sam Ashley's dictions sound at once completely off-the-cuff and yet so polished that their word-arabesques could be etched in stone.

In fact, as so often with Ashley, there are hints that the entire opera's casualness is a brilliant illusion. If the words pour forth in a spontaneous flow, why is it that each of the friends' scenes lasts precisely nine minutes, 57 seconds? The angst is leavened by four honest-to-goodness, lyric-rhyming songs on CD 2, the closest Ashley's ever come to pop tunes. Or call them electronic c&w, for over "Blue" Gene Tyranny's noodling organ the lyrics touch on deliberate musical and textual commonplaces, painting pictures of heart-breaking nostalgia. Saddest is the old-man portrait that Buckner sings:

"I want to fall in love just one more time
I want the world of magic one more time
Look forward to tomorrow one more time . . .
Dream about someone all day just one more time
And finally we touch just one more time . . .
To know I've given pleasure one more time . . ."

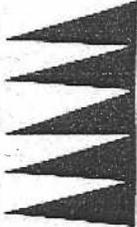
In a late style he's developed that is likely to be widely imitated, each song segues into the next with split-second timing, like diffracted aspects of a split consciousness. This candid snapshot of a psyche is structured down to the pixel.

Is *Dust* Ashley's greatest opera? It is certainly his most accessible, and is bound to win

over fans who didn't have patience for the verbal curlicues in *Now Eleanor's Idea*. I do slightly miss the more oblique poetry of *Improvement* and *Perfect Lives*, but I also admit that I haven't been so punched in the gut by an opera in 20 years. As an older man's brutally honest work, *Dust* gives the same impression as the late sonatas and quartets do in Beethoven's output: a new simplicity, in a way, but coming from an emotional realm that seems beyond everyday consciousness. The text's realism is so palpable that autobiography seems the only plausible explanation, and I pity the poor first biographer who undertakes to separate Ashley's life from his so closely entwined fiction.

In a healthy culture, that work would have already begun: We would be attending conferences about Ashley's output, unraveling his symbolism, charting out his intricately detailed musical structures, no doubt all to his irreverent amusement. Instead, as a massive and greatly threatened classical music industry clings to its arias, orchestras, and categories ever more tightly, Ashley remains the hardest nut for the classical mavens to swallow. As with Harry Partch 40 years ago, John Cage 30 years ago, and Morton Feldman 20 years ago, his very status as a composer is denied by the people in power—and yet, like those figures in their day, he may very well be the greatest one living. He's given us an amazing series of prototypes for what opera could be in Millennium Three and, in *Dust*, a theater-text-music work worthy to open a new era. ▮

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