

Political Intercourse

By Kyle Gann

Conrad Cummings

Politically, I feel left out of things. The stuff I review is outside the lines of fire. Take the NEA. For all the good it's done the composers I write about, the music panel might as well have walked away 12 years ago and never come back. Historically handled by dinosaurs like Ezra Laderman in thrall to the orchestra lobbies, NEA music money has mainly aided dead and might-as-well-be-dead composers. (Why is there never any flak about giving tax dollars to dull artists?) What hurt innovative composers was the termination of the Inter-Arts program. To qualify as intermedia, they had to find visual and theater artists to collaborate with, and they did. Now that Inter-Arts is kaput, they can't exactly holler, because they were using it as kind of a backdoor scam anyway, or at least a shaky reason to interdisciplinize their work. Composers said the NEA sucked years before Republicans picked up the chant. Now, as the NEA self-destructs, they're saying, "So what?"

I'd love to hear some new music politically potent enough to make Anne-Imelda Radice's skin crawl. That's why I hope Conrad Cummings's opera *Photo-Op* starts a trend. Given its stage premiere this past month at La Mama (I went June 11), *Photo-Op* is a trenchant, witty, and rather vague attack on our political system, with



Mr. and Mrs. Candidate

libretto by James Siena and background film by Bill Morrison. Its climax is a heartfelt, Oliver Northish aria, "I love my country so much I want to fuck it." (No NEA money involved, natch.) Musically, Cummings is a post-minimal Virgil Thomson, repetitively satirizing waltzes, marches, and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" with a dry American twang. You can hear four *Photo-Op* songs on Cummings's new, eponymous CD on CRI, but they sounded even better in context, separated by poignant instrumentals.

At least 23 people filled the stage, but only six made sounds: two powerful singers—Larry Adams and Margaret Bishop—and Cum-

ummings's ensemble of electric keyboard (himself), violin, cello, and woodwinds. The singers played ostensibly rival, but apparently complimentary, politicians, smiling broadly and doubletalking. No plot, nor even development, emerged. Fake Secret Service men in black suits and sunglasses kept you nervous from the moment you entered. Newscasters mimed from a broadcast booth, the candidates worked out on exercise bikes and drank orange juice while taking phone calls, and at one point Bishop was assassinated, only to rise and sing moments later. Some of the sharpest points came from the film, which set Nixon and other politicians gesticulating wildly be-

hind ironic lyrics.

Cummings's musical style is weird, but its logic ultimately convinces. Similar to those of Philip Glass and John Adams, it's often more rhythmically varied than either, with quirky metric accents drawn from speech patterns. The music is hard-hitting in its clarity, and leaves ambiguity to the words, which are set with a varied repetitiveness reminiscent of Handel. As in real politics, meaning wasn't inherent, but was supposed to accrue from repetition. In virtuosic 16th-note scales with a machine-gun staccato, Bishop and Adams intoned, over and over, "By keeping things exactly the way that they are/We'll find truth in the smallest things/That are just as good as the big ones that/Keep this country great." When they promised the voters "A bright new future for you and for me," it was the words "for me" that got reiterated into a mantra.

Is *Photo-Op* really an opera? It's usually a stupid question, but this hybrid production, directed by Bob McGrath, forced the issue. *Photo-Op* certainly wasn't the kind of opera the production assumed, but rather a cantata surrounded by distracting mimes. The music painted an impressionist, nonlinear picture, but the production was photorealist. Forced to satisfy operatic demands, Adams and Bishop had to fill out nonvocal passages of their songs with clumsy slo-mo gestures, and were often left staring helplessly into the audience. Sometimes the stage action was hectic while the music was sad and introspective; other times the music climaxed while nothing happened onstage. The result was that you frequently had to figure out where to refocus

your attention. And with all those people onstage, the chorus you kept expecting would have added welcome variety.

Nor did *Photo-Op* delve beneath the surface of our election-year circus. While it presented the ludicrous spectacle of a campaign without ideas, platform, or meaningful disagreement, it never alluded to the moneyed interests, the background intrigues, that prevent our public servants from working for real change. But perhaps that's not opera's place. As David Mamet says in my favorite anti-political-art essay, "Corruption" from *Some Freaks*, the artist who uses art to impress a conclusion on the audience misuses power. "The desire on the part of the artist," writes Mamet, "to inform, to change, to motivate, may be laudable, but it is inappropriate in the theatrical setting. The audience has come to engage in drama..." And again, "Only when the artist renounces the desire to control the audience will he or she find true communication with the audience."

In that sense, *Photo-Op* was political without being ideological, and left you to your reflections. Flatly, without exhortation or commentary, it depicted an aspect of politics we're all aware of without paying it much attention. I can't imagine a more succinct symbol for our alienation from politics than *Photo-Op*'s disturbing final cadence, in which the politicians gazed serenely at the audience (us voters) and sang in stately unison: "God... damn... you." As a new-music political statement it was a trifle broad, and needed a production capable of driving it home but it was certainly a beginning.

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