

Real-Life Ring

By Kyle Gann

Robert Ashley

It's June 21. As the door to composer Robert Ashley's loft swings open, singing is already in progress. Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Marghreta Cordero, Amy X Neuburg and Sam Ashley (the composer's son) stand in the middle of the space. While one chants a long monologue, the others will suddenly burst in, perfectly in rhythmic unison. They all wear headphones that, I later learn, supply them with beats, cues, and reference pitches. Singing, they close their eyes and shape the air with their hands, like dervishes caught up in ecstatic glossolalia. They hit those choruses as if inspired by the collective energy of ancient ritual, yet, during pauses, they'll wave at newcomers and glance over their scores casually. Ashley père himself, though, is the only person with guts enough to shout extraneous comments while rehearsal is going on. After all, this isn't religion, it's technology: more specifically, it's opera.

That was an early preview (for critics) of *Foreign Experiences*, one of the four Ashley operas finally coming to Brooklyn Academy of Music's Carey Playhouse November 16 through 19 (two each night). They form a tetralogy called *Now Eleanor's Idea*, sort of like Wagner's *Ring* only with more subplots, wider-reaching metaphors, and fewer Norns. Ashley occupies an odd position. His operas are so original in form, and

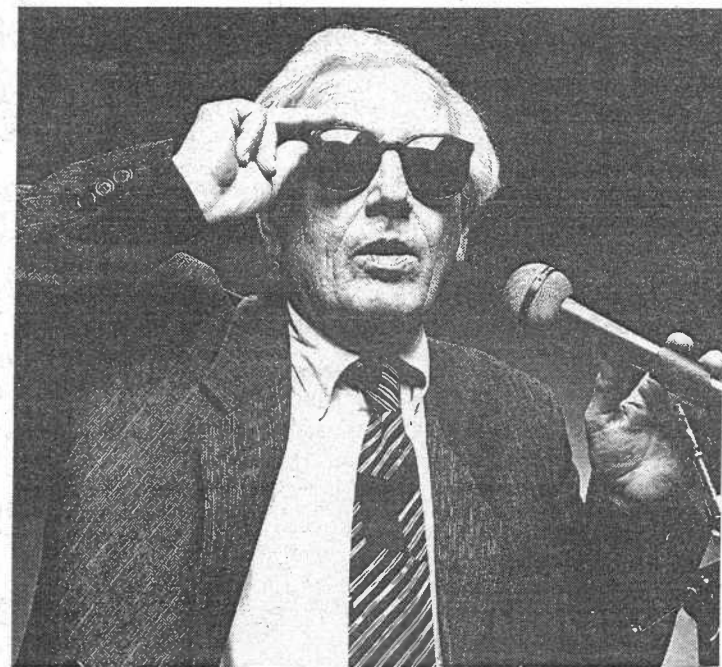
express their content so obliquely, that the more attached you are to operatic conventions, the more trouble you'll have following him. And yet, he's no specialist's composer, steeped in musical analyses, but an omnivorous observer who takes his source material from the outer world. His pieces are addressed, not to the music community, but to the larger public, where they find enthusiastic fans among those who can get past the surface weirdness. Each opera is drawn from extramusical research. For *eL/Aficionado*, for example, he diligently read *Fortune* magazine, *Forbes*, and the *Times* business section all through the '80s, and while the opera contains no overt references to the business world, its imagery is inspired by the language of finance.

"I got the idea," he says, "that the language was intended to conceal something. The people who should have been blowing the whistle on Mike Milken and those guys were pretending that everything was all right. It suggested the language of espionage, of deception. In *eL/Aficionado*, Don [played by Ashley's right-hand baritone Tom Buckner] has been sent into a foreign culture, but it's not like the spies of the 1940s, who were trying to get the plans for the atomic bomb and knew what they were doing. Instead, he's sent in and becomes part of the culture. When he's called back, he doesn't know what he knows that's valuable. So he has to be debriefed. It seemed to me

that there must have been a lot of that going on in the financial world. The people certainly knew what they were doing was illegal. But they were so deep into it that they had to be debriefed as though they were spies. I imagine that debriefing must have been as peculiar a question-and-answer situation as what happens in the opera."

The tetralogy's final installment, also called *Now Eleanor's Idea* (sort of a title song), is based on interviews with the Hispanic low riders, a culture built around custom-built cars and bikini-clad girls. Ashley became fascinated by the low riders while teaching at Mills in the '70s, and wrote half the libretto for *Now Eleanor's Idea* 14 years ago. But at the time, he says, "I couldn't make any contact with the low riders. They didn't trust me. In the bigger cities, they're associated with crime and drugs, so they have reason not to trust anybody." Later, however, he gained entrée through a prominent low rider in Santa Fe, and made three trips to do tape and video interviews. Marghreta Cordero, a singer from that Santa Fe culture, returned with Ashley to perform with the group. In the opera, Eleanor (sung by La Barbara) becomes a kind of TV oracle for the low riders, answering questions actually drawn from *Low Rider* magazine's lovelorn column.

Similarly, *Improvement* (*Don Leaves Linda*) takes off from Frances Yates's books on occultism in the Renaissance, and *Foreign Experiences* from the Carlos Castaneda books, which represent for Ashley "this new wave, born-again Christian phenomenon that Castaneda had picked up on." Those unfamiliar with Ashley



Omnivorous observer Robert Ashley

JACK MITCHELL

need to be warned that such information doesn't flow from the operas in a narrative way: you have to listen with all those ideas in the back of your mind and let the connections sink in. Ashley's operas are intended, after all, for the non-linear TV medium, but television stations have yet to show much interest. The stage set Jacqueline Humbert designed for the BAM production evokes the Southwest with simple, abstract icons quite unlike the fast-changing, more realistic images Ashley imagines for the ultimate video version. For his well-known earlier opera *Perfect Lives*, originally performed with only himself as vocalist, he created a complex system of video images to accompany the live performance. Here, with seven excellent singers at his disposal, he's focus-

ing on the singing.

"That's not a disclaimer. I don't mean, boy, if I had a lot of money I'd make BAM look like NBC. I like this difference between stage singing and television. Because now we've got seven singers and can stage the piece, I'm trying to preserve the difference between the stage version and the television version. You can't do a stage production like a television production because you can't change the scenery fast enough." Since the preview I heard, Ashley's singers have premiered all four operas in Avignon and Strasbourg; they also presented *Improvement* all over Japan, and *eL/Aficionado* in Holland. They're well rehearsed, and the performances of this long-awaited, widely reputed work should be fantastic. ■

MicroFest Autumn '94 Nov 10-12 at 8pm

NEXUS...

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