

# Un-Opera

By Kyle Gann

Michael Gordon  
Orchestra of St. Luke's

Let's not call it opera. I'd get more excited about the birth of a new form than about the 47th face-lift of an old one, and these days, if opera isn't revitalized every three weeks, it crosses its eyes, turns blue, and totters backward. Let it fall. "Audio story board" is "Blue" Gene Tyranny's handle for the new form, a music-driven theater genre incorporating text and video. But I like the term post-modern critic Arthur Sabatini coined in a recent *Social Discourse* article: performance novel. Arguing that the novel can transcend print as it has so often transcended its other conventions, Sabatini applies Mikhail Bakhtin's term "novelness" to "whatever form of expression within a given literary system reveals the limits of the system as inadequate, imposed, or arbitrary."

In music, the genre began with Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives (Private Parts)*, and has continued with works by Tyranny, Elodie Lauten, Peter Gordon, and Laetitia Sonami. At Bang on a Can, Michael Gordon gave us a striking new example in his *Van Gogh Video Opera*. (I went June 3.) Since it hailed from a different direction than the others—New Haven, to be exact—it provided a Y coordinate to locate the genre more specifically; so for critical

fun, let's construct a definition, if only to watch the next five composers shoot it to hell.

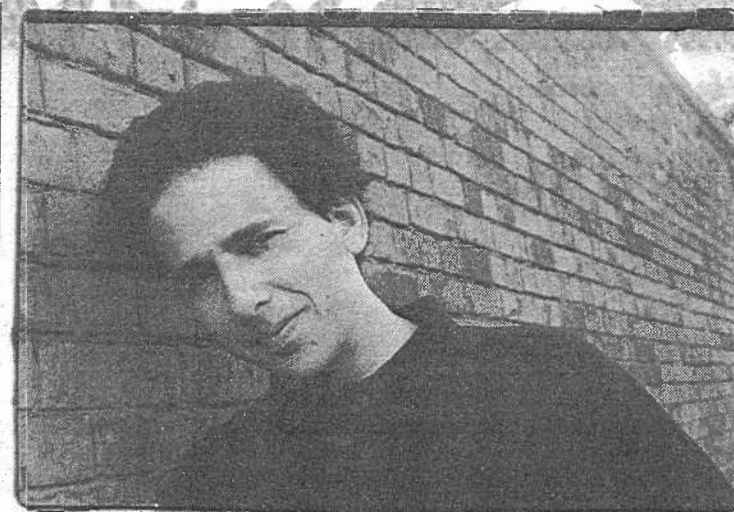
First off, opera is analogue, the perf-nov is digital. In opera, the words, music, gesture all (with luck) emanate from the feelings and, by extension, movement of characters onstage. In the perf-nov, information flows linearly, as in a print medium, but also in parallel video, text, music, and movement streams, adding to the picture in simultaneous and mutually contradictory increments. Opera starts with a totality whose imbalance propels the action. In the perf-nov, the beginning isn't privileged; the piece is a mystery uncovered in hundreds of bits, and your first impression is probably mistaken. In opera you see and hear for yourself. In the perf-nov, as in the novel, you're at the mercy of whatever the multi-dimensional narrator chooses to reveal. Opera is the body empathetically perceived; the perf-nov is a brain, relaying mixed signals at various levels of consciousness and unconsciousness.

By that def, Gordon's *Van Gogh* was true perf-nov. Staging was an afterthought, not a starting point, and the piece's weakest thread. Music was the strongest. Performed by his own oddball ensemble (violin, viola, bass clarinet, with the usual drums and bass), Gordon's asymmetric patterns, his 5-, 9-, and 25-beat ostinat, set a vigorous, sad tone without underlining text. The libretto, in genuine perf-nov manner, was el-

liptic, taken from Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, chosen to most sharply reflect the difficulty of an unrecognized artistic life. Van Gogh defended his unemployment: "I have other ideas than the gentlemen who give their places to gentlemen who think as they do."

Gaps were filled by Elliott Caplan's video: a narrow street in Arles, a homey interior, the obligatory field of waving sunflowers. Video monitors were piled in six impressive stacks of four each, and the images often moved in canon, coalescing into one giant image flowing (linearly) from left to right. Further feeding perf-nov ambiguity, there were three Van Goghs—clear, pop-tinged tenor Evan Ziporyn; expressive soprano Dana Hanchard; and deep, rugged bass David Shapero—and the angular, chantlike lines Gordon wrote for them granted verbal clarity without ever smelling like operatic aria.

Mixed signals are the perf-nov's glory, but its pitfall is that simultaneous strands can mismatch. Some of the lines (told to Van Gogh: "You are no artist. You started too late.") expressed a pain I set aside to feel later, for the music rushed by with its own agenda. Gordon's postminimalism is at the same stylistic point as pre-Mozart classicism: brilliant at delineating its own logic, but not flexible enough to mirror fleeting emotions. (In Ashley's work, where text isn't tied to music, that's no hindrance.) Some lines, though—"I spent my last penny on this stamp"—were hauntingly drawn, and the final scene, Van Gogh's matter-of-fact account of conversations with his fellow asylum inmates, wrung pa-



LONA FOOTE

Michael Gordon, composer of *Van Gogh Video Opera*

thos from only two stark chords. The performance novel as such is still on the drawing board, but the solid power of Gordon's music has arrived.

**Commissioning ensemble** works from outside the classical circuit was a smart '80s idea: rock and electronic composers, the theory ran, would bring new tricks to a tired medium, and they sometimes did. But the theory showed its limits at the June 9 Town Hall concert of the Orchestra of St. Luke's, conducted by David Alan, part of the International Festival of the Arts. Professional symphonist Glenn Branca at least knew the structural ropes. His *Freeform* was a thrillingly slow crescendo of scales with a wrenching harmonic twist in the middle, similar to the first movement of John Adams's *Harmonielehre*. What it needed was a lucid, Rimsky-Korsakov orchestration rather than the waterlogged Copland sonority it tried to

set fire to; the bored, under-rehearsed performance didn't help.

David Byrne was savvy enough to farm out the orchestration for his *The Forest* (originally for a Robert Wilson theater piece) to an expert, Jimmie Haskell, and that was the work's best aspect. *The Forest* had 10 movements: in one Byrne yodeled over neoromantic pastiche, another was a good song, another glisséd eerily from one chord to another. The rest did what Byrne does in such contexts, namely draw out chords over a repeating catchy rhythm. And John Cale's timid *Sanctus* should have come from a precocious high school student infatuated with Elgar, not a late-career rock pioneer. "We love your pop songs, write us an orchestra piece" is analogous to "We love your watercolors, design us a skyscraper." Neither pursuit is more honorable than the other, but they require divergent talents and expertise. ■

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