Words, Words

By Kyle Gann

It may be that music can no longer break into public consciousness without words. In his *Laws*, Plato himself couldn't figure out how instrumental music, alone of all the arts, could possibly represent anything. Modern audiences are no smarter than Plato. The moment in which pure sonic forms represented the highest musical expression was a European moment, and it's over. We live in a visually and verbally attuned society, perhaps the least auditory one that's ever existed (evidence, according to writers such as Joachim-Ernst Berendt, of a profound lack of soul). Hardly anyone understands what music means anymore without being told. Minimalism became a sensation only at the moment it was joined to text and image, in *Einstein on the Beach*. The biggest new-music superstar, Laurie Anderson, is the most word-oriented of all. Only Glenn Branca has managed to transcend new music's limited audience without words, perhaps proving how loudly you have to shout to get a point across without them.

Because the classical establishment clings to the assumption of instrumental music's prestige, it can only conceive of words as something added on, and thus of opera as an exercise in setting words to music. That anachronistic assumption requires Uptowners to remain willfully blind to one of music history's most patent facts, that certain composers have an operatic drive and the others usually needn't bother trying. Uptown, an opera commission comes as a reward for writing a passable violin concerto, assigned regardless of whether one has ever shown a proclivity toward even vocal music, let alone dramatic (I think of Roger Sessions's ill-fated *Montezuma*, Jacob Druckman's unproduced Met commission, the Chicago Lyric's abortive debacle with William Neill, and their present project with Shulamit Ran). That's why, as Robert Ashley tours his Downtown operas on three continents, Uptown operas rarely earn a second production. Intended as grand monuments to cap off a symphonic career, they are actually one-shot disposables.

Mikel Rouse's *Failing Kansas* (at the Kitchen February 2 to 4) following so closely upon Ashley's *Now Eleanor's Idea* provided a great opportunity to locate a Downtown operatic paradigm very different from *Einstein*, one in which words are central. Neither Ashley nor Rouse has to "set" words to music. Words *are* the music. Both composers write their own text, both rely on their own voices, both have worked with video or film collaborators, both speak over a musical background that abstracts vernacular styles, and both appear in their operas as a kind of central, narrative persona (though this was less true of Ashley in *Eleanor*). Those surface similarities make the profound generational differences stand out with juicy distinctness, which in turn opens up a wide field for future Downtown operatic developments.

First off, their personas: Ashley's a spellbinding preacher, Rouse a cool pop singer. Where Ashley let loose his stream of consciousness in a crescendo of energy, Rouse repeated isolated phrases (taken from the archival materials surrounding the murder that formed the subject of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*) with suave rhythmic exactitude, inflecting them with the kinds of patterns he uses in his instrumental music: "PERry Dad and THEIR husky dog, Perry DAD and their husKY dog." Aside from their diverse rhythmic styles, though, even deeper differences flow from the fact that Ashley's operas were born in the information overload of the '60s, Rouse's opera in the minimalism of the early '80s.

For Ashley's generation, the world seemed more inexhaustible than it does now, and listeners were assumed to be more active participants. He can spin out endless reams of words, while Rouse more ecologically treasures his sculpted phrases as though they're the only ones he has. Ashley overlayers texts to create the lifelike ambiguity of too much information. Rouse's overlayerings, echoing phrases in different rhythms, promote clarity by driving the phrases into your head. *Now Eleanor's Idea* drew its tension from the centrifugal force of the dazzling non sequiturs, as you labored to relate them to a common center. In *Failing Kansas*, the repetition of disconnected phrases creates autonomous verbal images that no longer require context: "fun to flirt, fun to flirt," and the recurring "Aw, come on, baby, get the bubbles [rest] out of your blood." Ashley's model is glossolalia, the evaporating and infinitely renewable breath of the gods. Rouse's recurring phrases remind you that words too are objects, as permanent and tangible as pearls. At the moment in *Failing Kansas* when the murderer Dick is accused, his protest is drowned out by earlier promises he had made: "No witnesses, a cinch, the perfect score, no witnesses, a cinch. . . ." Once spoken, words have their own lives independent of us.

Ashley's genius for words makes him one of the few figures who transcended the '60s post-Cage scene to create a permanently valuable body of work. Perhaps *Failing Kansas*, the best major work I've seen by someone of the new generation, illustrated its rhythmic fun on a verbal as well as musical level, and may provide the push totalism needs to stick in the public mind. I imagine the operatic establishment listening to both composers (if at all) and saying, "That's not opera, they're not setting words. Besides, they're not ready for an opera commission, they haven't written their symphonies yet." Nevertheless, these two works, along with Branca's symphonies and other important premieres, have made this the most significant season since I came to the *Voice*. But if you read the Sunday *Times* music section, you'll realize that what's going on in the world of historic recording reissues is even *more* exciting.■

ANDREW GOLDBERG

Rouse: driving the phrases into your head