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Talking Singing

Peter Kivy

Laurie Anderson
Americans on the Move:
Parts I and II
The Kitchen
4' 4 Broome St. (April 13-14)

The marriage of music and text has always been a troubled one, and usually morganatic. (We always put songs in the *music* library and catalog them under the *composer's* name — and rightly so.) But it has been a persistent dream in our musical culture, particularly since the end of the 16th century, to create an art form that would somehow put tone and text together on an equal footing: that is to say, an artform in which text and music would each preserve its *particular* genius while together remaining one work of art rather than two.

Where the words have been *sung*, the dream has never been realized. For either the composer has prevailed, in spite of his esthetic declarations of equality with the poet (as in the cases of Gluck, Wagner, and Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli*), or else, in sacrificing music to the words, the artwork has gone under entirely, as in the justly forgotten 18th century movement known to historians of music as the Berlin School of Song.

But suppose the words are *spoken* rather than *sung*? After all, to *sing* the words is to beg the question in favor of music right from the start. Words that are *sung* are already music, not speech. Thus,

it might be argued, for there to be an artform in which the particular qualities of music and language are both truly preserved, the text must be recited, with the music left to its usual devices, restrained only by its recognition of the "sentiments" of the text and the text's right to be heard.

Laurie Anderson's *Americans on the Move* is described in The Kitchen's press release as "a series of talking songs about movement and distance." I suspect those who are aware that this approach to the "setting" of a text has any history at all probably think of such history as a rather short one, beginning perhaps with Woody Guthrie's "talking blues" or Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. Actually, it begins in the 18th century, with a species of composition which its inventor, Georg Benda, called the "duodrama." It might be instructive to examine these "origins" briefly.

It would be easy enough for me to describe what Benda's duodramas were like, but fortunately we have an eyewitness account by someone with far better credentials for the job: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He writes to his father: ". . . I saw a piece of this kind performed twice and was absolutely delighted. . . . You know, of course, that there is no singing in it, only recitation, to which the music is like a sort of *obbligato* accompaniment to a recitative. Now and then the words are spoken while the music goes on, and this produces the finest effect." Mozart himself tried his hand at this sort

of thing in his unfinished *Zaide*. Why it is unfinished is, I think, easy enough to conjecture. The "pure" musician in Mozart quickly saw that without singing, a composition with text ceases to be music. It is fortunate for us that in this case the pure musician did prevail to give us *Don Giovanni* rather than *Zaide*.

The lesson I am tempted to draw from this bit of music history is that the combination of music and spoken words, where the two occur simultaneously, seldom if ever emerges as music. (The *sprechstimme* of Schoenberg and Berg is not a counterexample to this generalization, since *sprechstimme* is speech in tones, not speech *ordinaire*.) And this conclusion was confirmed for me by Anderson's *Americans on the Move*. Those who want a truly musical experience had better go elsewhere. But this is not in the least intended to be an adverse judgment on Laurie Anderson's imaginative, sensitive creations, any more than adverse criticism of my dentist would be implied by advice that fallen arches are someone else's business.

What *is* Anderson's business is an appealing *melange* of instrumental sounds (clarinet, violin, organ, saxophone, percussion, electric piano) and spoken voice, electronically manipulated and transformed, along with slide projections that are both tastefully and judiciously handled.

Anderson herself has an enormously alluring, almost hypnotic voice which she is well able to manipulate in the most interesting ways, with or without electronic aids. Her aim is clearly social criticism. But her critical tone has a softness about it, and a fine sense of humor: signs that we are dealing here with art, not mere diatribe. Even where the criticism is most

sharp, there is an affection for its objects. The objects, after all, are *people* and their social institutions. And when the satirist and critic forgets that, or is unable to love the objects of his or her aversion, the cure becomes worse than the disease, and we begin to cut off pickpockets' hands.

There were 11 "pieces" on Anderson's program (which lasted about an hour and a half). The prevailing technique was monolog with "sound accompaniment." (Why I do not call it "musical accompaniment" will, I trust, be clear from the previous remarks.) One piece, called *Walk the Dog*, displays Anderson's fine sense of incongruities. Another, *You're the Snake Charmer*, will astound you by the variety of sounds and *tones* that can be made by merely tapping the various parts of a live microphone and its stand. A piece called *Electricity in Los Angeles*, rather in the style of the "talking blues," with violin accompaniment, gives a delicious description of a "religious sect." Needless to say, not everything came off. A skit involving the crashing plane and the proverbial laconic pilot has the ring of a cliché; and something called *This Is the Time: And This Is the Record of the Time* struck a note of pretentious profundity which was, I am happy to add, almost entirely absent from the rest of Laurie Anderson's performance.

Anderson's *Americans on the Move* can be recommended both as art and as entertainment. What it cannot be recommended as is *music*. Perhaps Georg Benda wouldn't have recognized *Americans on the Move* as an offspring of his creation. But it is, with all of the charms that Mozart saw in the original "duodramas," and all of the compromises that made one of the greatest *musical* minds the world has ever known reject it in the end. ●