

Time Out

New York

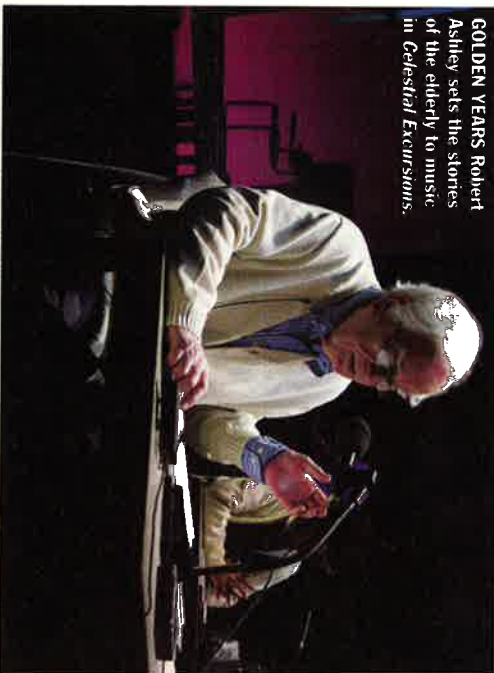
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MUSIC CLASSICAL & OPERA

Mighty mouth

Robert Ashley spins time-tripping yarns into a futuristic opera **By Steve Smith**

GOLDEN YEARS Robert Ashley sets the stories of the elderly to music in *Celestial Excursions*.



Opera has always been the most stubbornly anachronistic of musical art forms. From its inception in the 16th century, composers have turned to ancient history and dusty literature for their subject matter, a trend that continues today. Musically, a Eurocentric-re-civism remains the norm; few contemporary operas, even those created by young American composers, transcend reheated verismo or angst-fueled expressionism. For all of its considerable charm, an opera like Mark Adamo's *Little Women* (now onstage at City Opera) is suffused with the quaint aroma of a faded age.

“Well, if I say it’s opera, it’s opera! Who’s running this show, anyway?”

Naturally, there are exceptions to every rant. In recent years, Philip Glass, John Adams and Jake Heggie have expanded upon operatic convention to varying degrees. The topmost position in any list of modern innovators, however, is held by Robert Ashley, a 74-year-old downtown New Yorker whose latest opus, *Celestial Excursions*, opens at the Kitchen on Wednesday 9.

Like most of Ashley’s operas, *Celestial Excursions* was (perhaps

while in college during the 1950s, a time in which the artistic freedoms ushered in by John Cage were countered by an increasing difficulty in securing funding and performances for adventurous fare. Like many postwar American iconoclasts, Ashley became his own foremost interpreter. He formed tightly knit ensembles with like-minded friends and embraced electronics to extend his self-reliance.

From seminal early works such as “She Was a Visitor” (1967) and *Purposful Lady Slow Afternoon* (1968) to the sprawling opera cycles *Perfect Lives* (1978–80) and *Athanta (Acts of God)* (1982), Ashley’s music has consistently demonstrated his fascination with the cadences of everyday conversation in English, a language that he feels is ill-suited to the melismatic arias of European opera. “People love the sounds of the voice,” Ashley says. “There’s a magic in being able to listen to words without the tension of having to respond.”

Stylistically, *Celestial Excursions* is a continuation of its predecessor, the autumnal, deeply humane *Dust* (1998), which was built around the shambolic monologues of homeless people. The new piece features the same ensemble: vocalists Sam Ashley, Tom Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert and Joan La Barbara, pianist “Blue” Gene Tyranny and sound artist Tom Hammon, all new-music luminaries of who have worked with Ashley for more than a decade. (Performance artist Joan Jonas, another longtime associate, provides the visual elements of the production.) This time, Ashley drew upon the stories of another marginalized segment of the population, the elderly.

“I’m getting old myself,” Ashley says, “and for the past six or seven years, I’ve spent time with people who are even older. Everything in their lives is in the past; the future is whether they can get out of bed and what they’re going to have for breakfast. I became fasci-

nated with the way they tell stories in a strange form of English, in which a story that happened in the past is told as if it was the present.” Intentional or not, the scenario suggests a parallel to Ashley’s own position—that of an aging maverick overlooked by the masses, but with a wealth of tales to share with all who will take the time to listen.

***Celestial Excursions* opens at the Kitchen on Wednesday 9.**