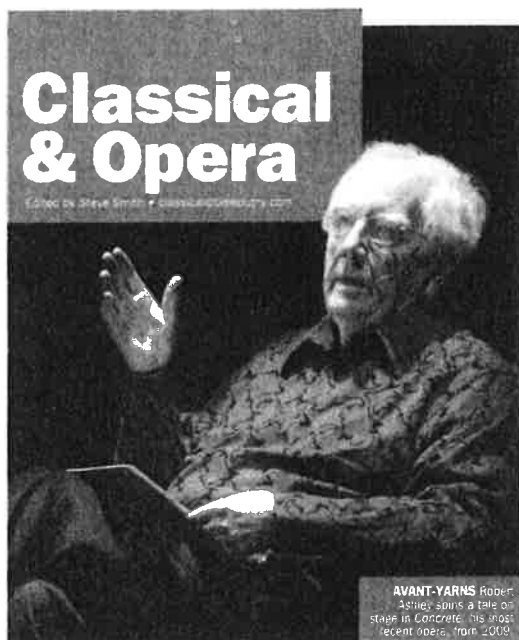


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Music



Opera revolution

Musical visionary Robert Ashley inspires a new generation. By **Amanda MacBlane**

A flock of young musicians has been gravitating toward octogenarian composer Robert Ashley, indicating that his truly original artistic voice is finally settling into its rightful place in history. This week, an unprecedented outpouring of Ashley's music starts with four nights of chamber works at Incubator Arts Project, including an impressive lineup of old and new collaborators as well as a new live version of his seminal electronic work *Automatic Writing*. The groundswell continues with the New York premiere (and first performance in 40 years) of his 1967 opera, *That Morning Thing*, at the Kitchen and a pair of new interpretations of his "television opera" *Perfect Lives*. One, an itinerant live version, will be performed at sites around the East Village by music collective Varispeed. The other, an ambitious new Spanish-language adaptation, *Vidas Perfectas*, directed by cellist Alex Waterman, will screen at the

Irondale Center in December. "Robert Ashley didn't just reinvent opera—he has reimagined the American musical landscape," says Waterman. "He brings us a totally new form of opera that makes sung speech sound like talk, synthetic orchestration sound like unconscious thought and the performance feel like a dream that we can't wake from."

Ashley finds the youthful enthusiasm for his work invigorating, but is unsurprised by the timing. "There's a sort of time lag that's constant," he explains. "You get an idea, and then 30 or 40 years later that idea suddenly becomes more important and moves forward."

In the case of *That Morning Thing*, Ashley's first opera to abandon linear narrative, the political climate when it was written seems uncannily similar to today's. "People get interested in this piece, and then all of a sudden there's Occupy Wall Street!" says Ashley. "That's a real 1960s idea, but it's our idea too."

Regarding the opera's revival, which is part of the visual art performance biennial Performa '11, Ashley is careful to avoid nostalgia, insisting, "I don't want to make it like 1967 brought back." This would prove difficult anyway, as very little of it was ever written down. So with director Fast Forward and a 17-person cast of dancers and musicians, Ashley has been re-creating the three-act opera scene-by-scene from a score that exists mostly in his mind.

"Writing music down on paper is an important idea and it led us to the orchestra, which is amazing," says Ashley. "But it eclipsed the other idea, which is, 'this is the way to do it, and I tell you and you tell her.' That's a different way of communicating, and *That Morning Thing* is in that tradition."

For multitalented musician Dave Ruder, who will be appearing in *That Morning Thing*, the Incubator series and *Perfect Lives Manhattan*, this way of collaborating has been essential to getting inside Ashley's work. "If you were just handed the page and told to perform [these works], you'd probably end up with something pretty flat," he explains. "But having Bob's guidance helps find the musicality in it, and the avenues along which musical investigation will be most fruitful. They're not always obvious. For me, performing starts with making a decision that it can be beautiful to just listen to yourself tell a story."

Sometimes that story is downright peculiar, as in *Perfect Lives*, a seven-episode opera that juxtaposes the surreal exploits of the narrator, R, and Buddy ("the greatest piano player in the world"), including a symbolic bank robbery. It was recorded for television in 1983, with Ashley as R and long-time collaborator "Blue" Gene Tyranny as Buddy.

"When it was done for TV, the idea was that it's cooked; that's the way it was done," says Ashley. "Then these young people come along and say, 'It's not cooked! We have another idea about it.'"

Far from being protective of the original, Ashley welcomes the fresh approaches, explaining, "There's not an ideal *Perfect Lives*, only the idea. The form of the piece is just seven dialogues, and the way those dialogues are framed in music becomes a pattern for all the other ingredients in the opera—the instrumental music, the location, the costumes. There can be other versions as long as people are interested in that text."

Robert Ashley: Chamber Music is at Incubator Arts Project Tue 1, Nov 3-5; Perfect Lives Manhattan is at various venues on Nov 6; That Morning Thing is at the Kitchen Nov 19-21; Vidas Perfectas is at the Irondale Center Dec 15-17.

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