

Hear Me Talkin' to Ya



Ashley and Marchetti Reunite in a Mind-Blowing Nonconcert

Village Voice November 21 - 27, 2001

by Kyle Gann

Photo: Jennifer S. Altman

Musical evenings rarely come as weird and wacky these days as did the October 25 Interpretations concert at Merkin Hall. We had opera without singers, pianists who played no pianos. "What the heck's going on?" and "Is this music?" came floating back like old friends from the '60s. The concert, if concert it was, paired two old friends, New York's Robert Ashley and Italy's Walter Marchetti. Marchetti last made inroads into American consciousness some 20 years ago with a recording on the Italian Cramps label, since which I've heard neither hide nor hair of him. For Ashley, it was clearly two old friends together again.

Marchetti opened by laying pieces of paper in a line from the piano bench in front of a grand piano to a music stand diagonally across the stage. He then went to the music stand and sat down. Booming electronic tones started up from unseen loudspeakers, and as they dotted out their gargantuan Morse code, Marchetti flipped small strips of paper, like bookmarks, off the stand and into the air. That was a piece called Music in secca. Next, he covered himself in a blanket of clear plastic and sat quiescently on the piano bench as a raucous recording of random piano notes blasted from the speakers. That was Quattro variazioni dolenti.

It's been a long time since I've seen a group of music cognoscenti look so bewildered at intermission. I felt like if I had seen this event 25 years ago I would have understood it perfectly, but in 2001 such Fluxus-style performance can seem quizzical again.

Ashley's works on the second half might have similarly bewildered those who aren't used to his ultraflexible definitions of the word opera. In *Yes, But Is It Edible?*, Ashley came out and played one dissonant piano chord over and over to punctuate a text read by baritone Thomas Buckner, who—modulating his voice sentence by sentence and accompanying it with passionate arm choreography—gave the performance of his career. The "opera" was really a dramatic lecture on Ashley's view of the history of music. Starting with notational experiments of the 1960s, Buckner continued:

"Western music had reached a state of arrogance that was an embarrassment to everybody. . . . It is surely no coincidence for a musician that John Cage proposed that space equals time in notation during the same decade that architects discovered that they couldn't design concert halls anymore. . . . The so-called lost 1960s are, of course, not lost at all. They exist in the file cabinets of composers everywhere in America. What is lost is the musical thrill of the ideas being thrown around and the continuity between those ideas and what is happening now."

With the startlingly autobiographical *Dust* of a few years ago, Ashley took a turn toward making his work personal. *Is It Edible?* was another step on that road, and he could hardly get any more personal than the evening's final work, *Practical Anarchism*: a slice of his life, a text about himself that he read himself. In it, he reminisced about early years with Marchetti, about how Marchetti appreciated the bad Italian food Ashley would cook. And he included in its entirety a fan letter he had written to record producer Daniel Lanois, who's done recordings for Emmy Lou Harris and Willie Nelson. "My operas aren't very popular," Ashley admits to Lanois, "except among the people they're popular with."

I know just what he means. There's a segment of the population that realizes Ashley is the great visionary opera composer of our time, and hardly anyone else is convincible. Why was Ashley, reading a letter he wrote, opera? Because he's taught us to hear it as opera. As Buckner had intoned, "So, let's just think of speech, for the moment, as very fast singing. Or, more generally, very fast music. . . . And imagine hearing that sound just-as-sound, divorceable from meaning, but more agreeable and thrilling when not divorced from meaning. . . . Then examine the 'speech' carefully with your ears—as though you were a composer of music—and notice the great similarities to every one of the formal aspects of music that we so cherish: its variety of pitch, inflection, dynamic range, information rate, and everything else."

Ashley looked tired, much changed in recent years. An enigma to many for decades, he explained himself in words that could hardly be misunderstood. And years from now I suspect we'll look back and see in this concert a lens through which his life's work falls into perfect focus.