

Lucie Vitkova and audience in František Chaloupka's *Eva a Lilith*



## Opera Days Ostrava, Czech Republic 6.24-6.26.2012

Over the last 12 years, the biennial Ostrava Days festival in the Czech Republic has built a reputation as a showcase for contemporary orchestral music in Europe. Under the guidance of founder, director and chief conductor Petr Kotik, the Ostravské centrum nové hudby (Ostrava Center for New Music)—the organizing body behind the fest—has grown to include a renowned summer institute which attracts composers from around the world to teach and to present at the festival.

This year, the programming expanded to include another alternating-summer festival. Working in association with the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre, the Center for New Music presented three nights of contemporary opera at the end of June. Though it was less than a third the length of the Ostrava Days fest, and presented far fewer pieces, the programming and performance did its sister festival proud.

The festival opened June 24 with John Cage's 1991 work *Europera*, among the composer's final efforts and the oldest piece in the program. The hour-long piece is scored for two singers, a pianist and a Victrola player, each following a sequence of selections from pre-existing operas of their own choosing. It was staged in an ornate and compact gold-leaf opera house in the Ostrava Center. The Victrola opened the concert playing faintly from the rear of the stage. It was the only activity for two minutes before mezzo-soprano Katalin Károlyi rose from her seat to sing as the other singer—the Brazilian soprano Martha Herr—exited to sing from offstage. Herr returned after some minutes and took position at the front of stage, donning a partial

rat costume. At the nine-minute mark, the piano made its first entrance. In this round of chance gestures, even the lights were subject to random assignment, leaving the house lights on as much as (if not more than) the stage lighting, a startling move even in 2012. The pianist played at times without depressing keys. The singers drew from Bizet, Handel, Mozart, Rossini, Tchaikovsky and others. The Victrola seemed to pull the audience backwards and forwards through time. Ultimately, it didn't feel like an opera so much as a visit from the ghosts of operas, and a striking way to announce the contemporary.

The second night opened with a piece by the 30-year-old Czech composer František Chaloupka, a former student of the Ostrava institute. *Eva a Lilith* was exciting as a work of music, theater and voyeurism. As the audience was let into the large Jirí Myron Theatre, they were guided by ushers not to their seats but onto the stage where a plywood structure some 20 feet tall with a 300 square foot base awaited. Eight open doorways allowed the audience to try to gain vantage. Inside, the Brno-based Dunami Ensemble (with the composer on electric guitar, complemented by electric bass, reeds, percussion and vibraphone) played a slow and tense soundtrack. The score followed simple repeating themes with passages seemingly left for improvisation. The two principals—Eva (Lucie Páčová) and Lilith (Lucie Vitková)—played pianos, saxophone, accordion and percussion, singing and at times screaming. Occasionally one performer would step outside the structure (being banished from Eden, perhaps) to peer at the other and move slowly about the stage. On one of her sojourns, Vitková delivered a piercing, wordless aria. She is a young and fierce performer who animated last year's Ostrava Days festival not just with her own composition but with her accordion playing and after-hours folk danc-

ing, and she proved to be a key presence in Opera Days as well.

The second half of the night, and in fact the second half of the festival, was given over to the brilliant Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino. His haunting 1998 work *Infinito Nero* was the highlight of last year's Ostrava Days festival and Katalin Károlyi returned this year to sing it again. The piece—for a single vocalist with chamber ensemble—floats without momentum, a frighteningly quiet work employing as a libretto the trance-induced ravings of the 17th-century mystic Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi (who seems to be lost between good and evil in a sea of blood). The audience was seated on the stage around the ensemble, which slowly rotated on a turning platform, with Károlyi at the center like an animated corpse. Syncopated pops and flutters and reeds built into a slow terror kept pace by parade bass drum.

Sciarrino's *La porta della legge* (2008), based on an excerpt from Kafka's *The Trial*, closed the festival with an impressive synthesis of stage and video design, three singers and a full orchestra. Like the previous night's pieces it progressed slowly, built on gradually evolving repetitions: "motifs" would be too strong a word for the piano chords and cello slides that slowly shaped into a fine rhythmic net. The movement onstage was slow as well, fitting for a story after all that takes place over the course of some fraction of eternity (even if the running time was a mere 75 minutes). The fact that it was composed as a dialogue made certain that there was some action on stage—at least as opposed to *Infinito Nero* where most of the movement was due to a motor under the stage—but even so, the simple moving of a chair seemed an extreme gesture. The actors at times even froze in a running stance, as if motion were merely a concept, not an act. Likewise the music, even with its shifting undercurrents, seemed un-

troubled by alterations in key and tempo. The stage set was effective and brilliantly simple. Projected images of the characters moved over a large screen at one point; at another, curtains from the sides, top and bottom of the stage closed to shrink the tableau claustrophobically to the size of a television set, just big enough for the heads of the two main characters to face each other. The copper and black curtains opened onto a white scrim with white lights to allow for a view into the story's infinite. But being able to see it didn't answer the primary question in Kafka's story and thus in the opera, which is: What is the infinite, both literally and metaphorically? Is this bureaucratic nightmare of a wait the process of getting into heaven? This wasn't the first time Sciarrino used waiting as subject matter. He has described his 1981 *Introcuzione all'oscuro* as an introduction with nothing following it, meant to evoke "an anguish in which the [musical] bridges seem to have spanned infinity." But here in this Kafka waiting room, what was our protagonist anticipating? Was the wait about seeing justice served? Or was it simply to get an identification card renewed? It was clearly ghastly, whatever he was there for.

A waiting room might seem an unlikely setting for an opera, but it was a fitting scene for Kafka living in Prague between the wars, and it's just as familiar a scene today. It might not be the grand tragedy of Verdi, but contemporary opera reflects contemporary times. And in an Eastern corner of the Czech Republic it has a new stage. **Kurt Gottschalk**

## Robert Ashley Brooklyn, NY 4.25-28.2012

**The old man sits alone** on stage at the Roulette performance space in Brooklyn, drifting through time and space in his mind, things he remembers and things he imagines bumping into each other in a stream-of-consciousness, eternal now. There's a voice, little more than a whisper, that begins somewhere inside him and

may not even have the force to become fully audible. It's the voice of Robert Ashley performing his latest opera, *The Old Man Lives in Concrete*.

It's both a new and familiar work. An expansion of his piece *Concrete*, shown at La Mama in 2008 and recorded on Lovely Music, with additional material amounting to eight completely new sections that Ashley calls "songs," but which can fairly be called arias, it's also a prime example of Ashley's concept and style: series of spoken word sections (there are occasional bits of sprechstimme that may come as much from the singer's interpretive notions as the composer's instructions) heard within a bed of flowing, mostly ambient electronic sound.

It's also his finest work yet. Ashley is as much a writer as a composer, and he has slowly been working away from clear, identifiable musical content and into a unique kind of theater. He calls his works operas, and they are, because they are about characters dramatically compelled to express their internal lives through music. They always have extraordinary librettos, even as the musical performers are asked to make less and less obvious music. His ability to write intensely personal interior dialogues is unparalleled. But that has not been able to save most of his works from a shifting point of view that weakens the dramatic and thematic point. In pieces like *Dust* and *Perfect Lives*, he is observing characters from the outside, and writing what he imagines is going on inside their heads, a method that works in novels but is difficult to consistently pull off on stage, where we are supposed to find our way inside a living person, and connect the music and sound to their thoughts. It's engrossing to see one of his operas, but the distance between the audience and the characters, mediated by words that are themselves at some distance from the characters, is often an obstacle to a moving and human dramatic experience.

This new opera has a subtle but profound difference. Rather than writing first person dialogue from a third person perspective, Ashley has written a completely interior, first person piece, with the Old Man, Ashley himself, expressed in multiple

voices. Ashley sat on a high platform, downstage right. His lines set the scene as being inside his head, the main performers seated at a row of desks upstage—Thomas Buckner, Joan La Barbera, Jacqueline Humbert and Sam Ashley—had their own distinctive timbres and styles (Humbert was especially musical and fascinating), but were all different aspects of that one voice. They told stories, perhaps things that actually happened, perhaps things that only happened in dreams, that were all one man's stories.

This single perspective meant every moment added to a complex and enigmatic picture of a man whose sense of time had become entirely separated from the rest of the world. All the songs, even the most elusive, were elements of the complex portrait. The spaces between seconds on the clock became chasms in which the Old Man told stories to himself—"Stream of consciousness, sure. It's not a stream, it's a sorting," he says—some brief, some lengthy and seemingly endlessly discursive, all telling us something about what mattered to him so that it stuck in his memory. The Old Man is so well made that the four-hour duration seems to suspend time and is so involving that it feels like a stimulating, refreshing pause.

Ashley is an American artist, kin to Philip K. Dick and Joe Frank, and his avant-garde means are deeply embedded in American culture. When the songs refer to baseball, Otis Redding and Johnny Carson, it feels like things Ashley loves, without Laurie Anderson's easy mockery. He's a humanist, not a social critic, his characters experience life like we all do. One long song is about the old man trying to explain why it took him forty years to get a joke, and he never quite explains it but the story is strange and fascinating and ends with the enigmatic question, "know what I mean?" As the songs accumulate, the sense of poignancy grows, each detail adding up to a lifetime of puzzling over the mysteries of other people and oneself. His memory reaches for the past, which ultimately seems just out of reach. The final thought: "You can't get the toothpaste out of the tube, because the hole is too small."

**George Grella**

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