CRASH AND GETTING ME STARTED: HOW ROBERT ASHLEY CHANGED MY MIND

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The recent loss of composer Robert Ashley (1930–2014) prompted in some of us a grab-bag of reflections – private but perhaps peculiarly shareable. My first encounter with Ashley's music was when I was working in college radio in Chicago. We used to receive CDs from the label Lovely Music Ltd., among others. I suppose it was my first full-blown exposure to what we now call post-minimalist music, although these CDs did include earlier sound-art minimalism such as Alvin Lucier's. I'm not sure whether I got to hear William Duckworth's, Joan LaBarbara's, David Behrman's, Robert Ashley's, or 'Blue' Gene Tyranny's music first, but despite some scepticism, I did find all of this music strangely attractive in ways I didn't expect.

Despite obvious stylistic differences between these musical artists, none of this music seemed to be trying to push the envelope, either in terms of how much could happen in any particular short span of time (how intricate it was), or in terms of what kind of new or unexpected sounds one might get a chance to hear. It was often overtly and unapologetically tonal and repetitive, but without the kind of hardnosed abstract patterning I had grown to admire in the early works of Reich or Glass. Worse still, some of it had voices talking about seemingly trivial matters over a bland wash of background electric keyboard playing. Huh?

Being an avid fan and sometimes evangelist for the music of Babbitt, Boulez, Schoenberg, Shapey, Carter, Cage and the like, I was not predisposed to this 'Lovely' music. It had none of what I typically admire and a lot of what typically turned me off. And besides, what kind of wise guy would call himself 'Blue' Gene Tyranny?

I had thought that for me to enjoy it, so-called minimalist music (and art) had to also be semantically, associatively, affectively minimal, or miserly – the Romantic 'modernist', Platonic straw man of the 'absolute' pure autonomous artwork – a hobby-horse that Ad Reinhardt (1963) rides in his 'Art-as-art', 39 rules for timeless art, attempted as if purely through negation. These were the implicit caveats that enabled my attraction to the early works of Reich and Glass, I suspect. In the days before embodied mind (cognitive metaphor) theory and neo-process philosophy started to hold sway, I was under the spell of Reinhardt's neo-platonic ethos. Yet as I scratched my head, something prompted me to keep scratching the surface of this music from Lovely, and yes, it did start to rub off on me. I kept going back for more. Lovely's Mimi Johnson kept sending what I asked for, and, yes, we

kept airing them (along with Babbitt, Cage, Xenakis, and all the rest) to all the Chicagoans who would listen.

So why did I like it at all? I grew to admire aspects of all of these artists for different reasons which I won't explain here, but why did I grow to like Ashley's works? All the operas of Ashley's that I know are basically just a half dozen or so people, each sitting at a small table, talking one at a time. These operas are pretty slim on action, and even slimmer on arias. In fact they utterly lack everything we typically go to the opera to experience: no Dance of the Seven Veils, no mournful Pensiero or Pilgrims' Chorus, no Ride of the Valkyries, no spectacle, and certainly no operatic Sturm und Drang. Yet I always find Ashley's operas highly entertaining; perhaps because they excel at doing what operas are usually too overblown to do well: tell stories. As a genre, opera is busier dramatising stories than just telling them; Ashley creatively answers the question of how the latter could be done within the opera genre. How? With taste, perfect pacing, and a peculiarly detached buoyant empathy, Ashley cleverly lets words do the talking.

I cannot, of course, recreate in my own prose the experience of enjoying an Ashley opera, but I can recount an example that is particularly memorable to me. It's the apocryphal 'Story of Tomato Soup' (aka 'Empire') from *Atalanta (Acts of Gods)*, part of his *Perfect Lives* trilogy. It begins: 'But this is the story of tomato soup and empire. Curiously, Northern Europeans conquered the tomato . . .' and continues circuitously through to the Great Depression, in which, when ordering tea at a diner, it was the teabag you had to pay for, not the hot water; you were not charged for hot water, but only for the teabag to dip into the hot water. We also then learn that you couldn't just walk into a diner and use their ketchup. Did they charge for ketchup? No. Ketchup was free if you ordered French fries, or a hamburger, or something else to go with the ketchup. Then after some intervening narration about this particular down-and-out Depression-era man trying to make his way through a tough time, we learn that he, with not a penny to his name, goes into a diner, sits at the counter and orders hot water for tea, but asks them to hold the tea: he'll have just the hot water. He then flavours the hot water by using some of their ketchup which, after all, you can have for free, as long as you order something to go with it, which he just did: the hot water. And so tomato soup – acquired for free – was born. So the story goes.

As the punch line was landing on my ears, I had the distinct impression of how a Sophoclean drama incrementally unravels a riddle built on solid logic; yet this was wry, sunny, optimistic, in an American vernacular vein, an Oedipus upside-down inside-out in an alternate universe. Such moments stick to my ribs. Perhaps (post-)minimalist music didn't have to be semantically, associatively, affectively minimal, or miserly, absolute, pure, autonomous. A story artfully told with the light touch of minimalist background music: couldn't that be another kind of opera? Couldn't that be another legitimate avenue of (post-) minimalist music?

In the early 2000s I read a book called *Changing Minds*, by Howard Gardner, which tries to explain the diversity of ways that various artists and public figures (Sigmund Freud, Nelson Mandela, Pablo Picasso, Martha Graham, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Igor Stravinsky) changed many peoples' minds. After reading that book, I had a lot more appreciation for all the ways my own mind has been changed, and for the artists (and writers) whose work did that

changing – I'll take some credit too for having a mind willing to be changed.

CRASH

Ashley's most recent and final opera *Crash* (2013) was premiered at the Whitney Biennial in 2014, apparently with all the performances selling out.[1] Fortunately it was performed again in April 2015 at Roulette in Brooklyn and I was able to attend the last of four performances.

Crash interlaces three streams of text whose content is interrelated; each stream is delivered by a different 'character' but the vocalist performing each character is rotated in each consecutive act. There are six acts and six vocalists. Each act pairs each character with a different vocalist. It's a sort of combinatorial gambit for maximising variety – something right out of Babbitt's or Carter's playbook, but deployed in an utterly different game.

Character 1 speaks, or casually lectures, as if in an intimate telephone conversation, about theories of (1) multi-year long cycles of climaxes and nadirs in a person's life; as well as (2) physical stature of people; and (3) everyone's problems with neighbours. Before giving the floor to the next character, Character 1 always ends his/her speech casually affirming: '..., yeah' which creates an amusing semantically inflected repetitive cadence to the entire evening-long affair. Yeah.

Character 2 speaks in a kind of breathy pitch-inflected sing-song chant: a somewhat soothing, almost haunting, colloquial American Sprechgesang that has no place anywhere but in Ashley's perfect concoction. Peculiar maladies are the subject of Character 2's text.

Character 3 speaks autobiographically, recounting formative events of the man-subject's life (half the time rendered by a female vocalist). Character 3 has an endearing vocal mannerism of pausing before and stretching out certain words, another feature that contributes a distinctly musical quality which I quite enjoy.

For odd-numbered acts, the three vocalists seated at the small tables to the left of stage centre rendered the three characters. Meanwhile the vocalists seated at tables to the right of centre stage accompanied with vaguely rhythmic drone chanting, a sort of muttered pitched chit-chat, the pitch material an unobtrusively triadic-pentatonic harmonisation. There is no instrumental or electronic accompaniment. For the even-numbered acts, the roles of right- and left-side vocalists switched, so that those on the right rendered the three characters, and those on the left rendered the backdrop of chordal muttering.

There is visual accompaniment: 'Three simultaneous, but not synchronized photographs depicting vast, beautiful landscapes'. Without being distracting or apparently relevant, these subliminally imbued the sense of well-being one gets from being in a wide open space. The projections served as faux windows onto the outside world. Thus in a sort of inversion of the usual relationship between visuals and music or text, the mise-en-scène of Ashley's *Crash* become an ambient background, dynamic scenic wallpaper, setting a mood without attracting attention, like Rorschach-blots perhaps, as fodder for free-association.

All the vocalists delivered their lines with perfect timing and inflection. Yet Amirtha Kidambi's rendition of Character 3 in Act I

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[1] A 15-minute excerpt from the 2014 Whitney Biennial is viewable at: http://vimeo.com/116173216 (accessed 24 September 2016).

Example 1: Beginning and ending of Lutosławski's Third Symphony. © Copyright 1983 by Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, PWM Edition, Kraków, Poland. Transferred to Chester Music Ltd.

especially got my attention. I can't forget the passage that goes like this: 'We had a pony for a couple of years; we had a goat, and [pause] chickens. Chickens are hard to [pause] deal with, but we had rows of grapes and grapes give [pause] grape juice. When the grape juice goes **bad** in the making, you feed the [pause] grapemash to the chickens. Next morning the [pause] **chickens** were all **drunk**'.

And this: '. . . only five people in the world understood Einstein's theory . . . [about a minute or two of intervening text seemingly about something else] . . . It was taking up a lot of my time just thinking about five people'. In another act, when Gelsey Bell renders Character 2, we learn more about how people seem to suffer a 'nadir every 28 years', then a few minutes later, we hear the recounting of an anecdote, happening, as it turns out, 14 years after one of the highpoints of his life. Things had taken a turn for the worse. After much intervening text we hear 'I said to my friend that I was thinking of killing myself. My friend said: "hey, friends don't do that to friends". Yeah, except every 28 years. Yeah'.

Though tragic it was also a comedic call-back, a beginning cleverly repurposed as an ending. There are many such moments in *Crash*. Perhaps feeling myself in a musical setting, these textual mini-epiphanies stimulate my musical memory, reminding me of other experiences, such as when I first heard Lutosławski's Third Symphony (Example 1), when the Da-Da-Da-Da, which starts the symphony and its various processive subsections, serves ultimately to end the piece in a compelling flash of encapsulation that blindsided me when I first heard it.

A very familiar example is the rondo of Haydn's 'Joke' Quartet. The opening melodic gesture (beginning of Example 2) serves also as a surprise closing of the movement (end of Example 3) – as if cheekily only it knew from the get-go that it could do so:

Example 2:
Haydn, String Quartet in E-flat 'The Joke', op. 33 no. 2, fourth movement, opening

. . . then after 150 or so intervening measures:

Example 3:
Haydn, String Quartet in E-flat 'The Joke', op. 33 no. 2, closing

At the performance of *Crash*, I found myself desperately trying to catch and remember many of Ashley's lines, and because Ashley's work is ostensibly a musical work, I found myself being struck by certain resonances of experience with other music. I like the way his text would sometimes keep circling back around to the same word, with each occurrence accruing different shades of meaning because of its recurrence. I find such passages of prose amusing, witty even. Especially after the text moves on to other material and then casually returns, a delightful impression is felt – as when I notice the curling

Example 4:
Schubert, 'Unfinished' Symphony,
first movement, second theme.

Example 5:
Milton Babbitt, *Around the Horn*
(1993), bars 1–6.

around of a pitch or a pitch-pair recurring in the second theme of
Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* (Example 4) or the opening of
Babbitt's *Around the Horn* (Example 5):

> 'Year four was my first cup of [pause] coffee. My mother had to go work so she
> made me a cup of [pause] coffee. From that moment through the rest of my life
> I have drunk as much [pause] coffee as I can . . .' (excerpt from Ashley's *Crash*).

Am I just free-associating intertextuality? Sure. Why not. Here my
free-associating is mediated by Ashley's work. Some of my favourite,
most personal, perhaps even most original thoughts, arise mediated
by other peoples' work. In particular, Ashley's pieces have inspired
me to hear the music in speech and hear the unique 'music' (the affin-
ity I find) in the peculiarities of different peoples' speech and in their
way of telling their stories. For that I thank you, Mr. Ashley.