

PART IV

Opera. What is it? And who cares? And who cares, because what is it has not a chance in the world of being altered in my lifetime.

It is strange to use the word "poverty" in this audience, where almost certainly everybody owns a car (if not a parking space), a closet full of nice clothes, a kitchen full of food and a mind full of big plans for the future. But, in fact, there is an unacknowledged poverty, and it is probably more important to us than the car, the clothes, the food and the big plans.

We are impoverished in our ability to change music. And for us, now, change is God (to quote my own work). It is impossible for us to imagine taking music to the divine realm of thrill that caused us to become musicians in the first place. We are impoverished, because the resources are so meager. If I dared, and if, in some extraordinary change in my financial circumstances (time and money is no problem, sir), I could make an opera that was different from any opera ever known, that opera would not be played.

If I made the opera for orchestra and voices --- ignoring for the moment what the term "orchestra" might mean --- there would be no orchestra to play it. Every opera company would refuse. Or imagine some opera impresario in a moment of absolute madness deciding yes we will do this, the orchestra could not play the work on six hours of rehearsal. Imagine that I asked for and got one-hundred hours of rehearsal with the voices to teach the old dogs new tricks, what would benefit the singers from those new tricks in the larger world of tomato sauce.

This is not "unduly" pessimistic, invoking the pejorative. It is simply pessimistic, because we are talking about my life. We are not talking about the future of music. I am talking about me. I don't want some pieces of paper in my file cabinet that in a century will change music. I want now. Girls just want to have fun.

Or imagine that with my unlimited resources of time and money I went into the most sophisticated recording studio in the world --- Germany, Los Angeles, Nashville --- and spent some years with my idea (taking time off, of course, to go to the tropics when the imagination simply went dry), where would that recording be heard?

But this is foolish. I don't have unlimited anything.

So what am I do to, burdened with the habit of counterpoint, expected to produce works with voices and orchestra, expected to keep the message alive in the underground, required to be respectable (check out the term, "accessible") and with no resources to speak of?

One answer is to go forward in time. Very far forward. To a time when the poverty of our resources will have fully matured and there will be just musical commodities and, somewhere else, strange people doing strange musical things. To a time when there are no orchestras, to a time when there are just stories in song form. This evokes the image of some perhaps mythical blind Greek, maybe strumming a few strings, but basically just singing his heart out. (And hoping to get paid and not executed.) I must admit that, even though this answer doesn't appeal to me much, because it suggests "folk-singing," which in turn suggests poverty, I am drawn to it, because it is practical. That is, I can continue to make opera, weird as it will seem, unwelcome (and unavailable) as it will be.

I confess that for forty years I dreamed of opera as voices with orchestra, and I have made voices with orchestra. I have pursued the dream against all odds of success (that is, performance) and against all practical suggestions that I have lost my mind and that I am, in fact, not a composer at all. I won't apologize for this mistake. I think I have made some good pieces.

But something has happened recently that I can hardly handle. I am beginning to imagine pure singing. Nothing as pure as just my forlorn and aging voice, but many singers brought together in a new technique. Forget bar-lines, forget harmonic architecture, forget harmony, except maybe a few voices coming together to reinforce a certain line or two. Most important, forget orchestra.

Don't think of Welsh choral groups or church choruses. Think of numbers of singers, or just a few singers asserting their right, politically, to make music out of the incoherent whatever of what is going on in their minds that they can't stop and that they have decided not to stop. Think of just singing. Certainly with microphones. But just singing.

What I can hardly handle is that this imagination suggests pure speech. Or, maybe, impure speech. (It doesn't suggest to me, for instance, "keening" or any of the other non-verbal vocal sounds that people have made for centuries and make today.) It suggests crazed story-telling. It suggests speech, because speech is needed for story-telling.

In fact, many years ago I worked with a group of persons who were brilliant speakers, but who had no musical training: that is, specifically they had no experience in pitch inflections outside of the range of their natural speech and no experience with how to rehearse those special inflections and to reproduce them and to further embellish them. This was the now legendary ONCE Group.

And because I was just beginning and didn't know exactly what I was doing, there was no possibility that I could "teach" them these techniques. And so I just made operas that were extraordinarily "spoken." But not "merely" spoken. There were rules, as in music. Surprisingly, I did come up with compositional techniques that did not use bar-lines, harmonic architecture or even harmony as such, but that allowed the speech to be in the right place at the right time. And I didn't even know what I was doing. None of those works was recorded (because there was no multi-track recording in those days). For me those works were the big ones that got away. I would give almost anything, if you know what I mean. I was very happy. I think nobody, except me and the ONCE Group, thought that we were making music. But I didn't care, because I thought I would live forever and that eventually, sooner than later, something would come along in the way of support.

I was wrong. Our expectations got bigger, naturally, and the operas became more ambitious, but the phone never rang and so eventually we had to give up. But I learned something that changed me forever.

I was still into counterpoint of a more or less conventional nature. That is, the individual lines of speech existed as potential musical lines. If I had multi-track recordings of those pieces now, I could take them into the studio and make of them more or less what I am interested in right now.

If.

If I had wings, I might be a bird.

So, I gave up composing for a few years. Entirely. Almost five years.

Then a new situation, full of promise, developed and I got back into it.

Gradually, very gradually, too gradually to satisfy my dreams of "if" (20 years), I learned what I wanted to do, and I found four singers who can do more or less perfectly what I have come to dream of. These four persons, in alphabetical order, are: Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert and Joan La Barbara. And we are assisted in our explorations by the great sound engineer and composer, Tom Hamilton. I would also like to give credit here to musicians who, earlier, helped me discover how these dreams could be made into music: in order of appearance, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, Paul Shorr, David Rosenboom and Tom Erbe.

I would like to be technical about my ideas about opera for a few paragraphs. What I will say is commonplace for many composers and antithetical for others, but I'll say it.

The simple fact is that American English does not fit European, traditional, operatic models of melody and rhythm. American English is distinguished by an infinitely subtle variety of melodic and rhythmic stresses on its consonants: fricatives, sibilants, plosives, etcetera. The vowels in American English cannot bear the weight of the kind of melodic stresses --- durations and embellishments --- that are used in, say, Italian opera. It makes them sound stupid. I didn't make it happen, but it's true.

There have been some successful exceptions to this rule. The exceptions are in Broadway musical songs from George M. Cohan to about Richard Rodgers (when I stopped listening). Maybe it's still happening, but I don't hear it in, for instance, Andrew Lloyd Weber and I never heard it in Bernstein. Maybe I'm just wrong, because I'm not paying attention, but for me it stopped being successful technically around "South Pacific."

More importantly there have been extraordinary exceptions in American popular music, which exceptions have continued in a kind of avalanche since, say, Chuck Berry (in one style) and, say, Hank Williams (in another). Or Billie Holiday and Patsy Cline. In popular music --- let's take country music as an

example --- the treatment of the vowels --- and I don't know where it came from --- is so special that you almost can't do it unless you learned it before you could learn anything else. And even then it has to be refined by studying with a master-singer.

I heard an interview with a young country singer on the radio --- I didn't catch her name --- about her career. She said, "Well, you spend a couple of years in the studio as a harmony singer, learning the glides..." I think I know what the "glides" are, but I couldn't learn them any more than I could learn North Indian singing or Joe Turner. There are some things you cannot learn.

Back to the technicalities. On the other hand, apart from the glides, you could almost take out the vowels in many a popular song and it would still be a song. I exaggerate horribly, of course, but just to make a point. About American English. The technicality is that in de-emphasizing the vowels, if you don't put in the glides, everything goes faster. Consonants don't take up much time and they can't stand embellishment. So the words just whiz by, and if they don't whiz by they sound stupid. They sound wrong. Consonants are beautiful in American English.

"She's got a ticket to ride" sounds wonderful in song, but it is twice as fast as any six words in any European opera. Except for the diphthong in the last word --- which is an awfully fast diphthong --- the sentence is almost all consonants. Notice how beautiful that last "d" is.

Consonants are beautiful in American English. And they make the words whiz by.

So the composer has to use a lot of words to tell a long story and to make an opera.

There are probably more words in any one of my operas than in the complete works of Verdi. It's got to be that way.

So, above all I am interested in speed and how to make something beautiful out of it. (This is so academic and confessional I am embarrassed. But I think that's what I'm getting paid for.)

The idea of speed, quickness, as a beautiful thing --- as in Bill Monroe, Art Tatum, Anthony Braxton and a few other

musicians I admire in popular music --- has entirely disappeared from our notion of opera. Now we are into turgid tempos (if there is any tempo at all), the projected vibrato and left-over vowel embellishment, which, handed down, is now written into the score.

I would like to explain my use of the term, "speed." I am indebted to Jackie Humbert for giving me this way of explaining the idea.

You can use your car in at least three, different ways: (1) to go to the grocery store; (2) to go sight-seeing on a Sunday afternoon; (3) for the sake of "driving."

In going to the grocery store, speed doesn't matter, except in special circumstances, and except that you want to avoid a getting a ticket. In sight-seeing, excessive speed can become a negative factor; you can go too fast to really enjoy seeing. Excessive speed focuses everybody's attention on the road and on the traffic. Slow is good. In driving for the sake of driving, speed is almost the sole, essential ingredient. That is, for utmost pleasure, the car should move exactly as fast as the speed the road was designed for. (We forget, probably more than we forget anything in our culture, that roads are designed by human beings, like ourselves, who have applied their skill and education and their taste for driving to making the road as good as possible; that is, safe, efficient and pleasurable. Not unlike a musical composition.) We can take special pleasure in driving too fast or in driving too slow. But in those pleasures we are not in collaboration with the designer of the road. For instance, in the Bay Area of California there are some of the most beautifully designed roads I have ever driven. If one drives those roads exactly at the speed called for, the car seems sometimes to drive itself. It seems to float. This is the special pleasure of "driving." There is no substitute.

One might say that in speech and in singing, tempo, or speed, is everything. That would be an exaggeration, but not much.

For my taste, as I have said, English sounds bad if it is sung too slowly, and it is usually sung too slowly in so-called "serious" music. The vowels are dragged out as if almost every English vowel were not a diphthong, and so the peculiar "speed" of the diphthong is lost. The consonants are treated as an embarrassment. Over-attention to consonants is thought of as a

part of "extended vocal technique" (if that term still exists in teaching voice.)

Footnote: I have read that the earliest Italian operas, say, Monteverdi, were criticized in their time as being more spoken than sung. What could that mean? When I hear Monteverdi now, it always seems like it is being played at half-speed. If I say this out loud, my friends tell me to shut up. But I can't help it. My musical "intuition," which has not failed me yet, tells me that I am not hearing the beautiful Italian of Monteverdi; I am hearing some weird version of Italian fashioned by somebody who lives where the sun comes up only a couple of months a year and everything moves very slowly, because of the cold. Too bad, Monteverdi. That's the breaks. If anybody is still around in a few hundred years to perform one of my 90-minute operas, they will probably decide I didn't know what I was doing and take it to about four hours. To improve the intelligibility. There is a field of scholarship that thinks that the Shakespeare we think is interminable at three and a half hours was done in the Globe in an hour and a half. "To be or not to be." You know what I mean?

Now there is an interesting technical relationship between vocal speed and the "orchestra." Namely, if you sing fast enough and with spectacular grace and embellishment and wildness and abandon, you might not need an orchestra. I have been trying to do this for the past few years. I haven't accomplished anything, because I don't have the nerve. And I don't have the technique. But I am trying.

I would, if I could, replace the "external" orchestra synchronized with the voices by the conductor or by time-code. I would replace it with an electronic orchestra designed to be synchronized with the voices. In this technique, then, the voices could go at any speed in American English and the orchestra would always be with them. This is currently called "processing," or "effects" (as in, "cause and effect"), which is ever so slightly pejorative. If I suggested that I would like to "process" the voices at the Met, can you imagine?

The problem I have at this very moment is that I can't afford it. It can be done, but I can't afford it. I can't afford the equipment and I can't afford the technical assistance. I have the voices, finally. But I can't afford the orchestra of voice-processors. I can only hint at it.

So I will continue with the "sound" of the drone. I will continue with counterpoint; that is, with as many tracks as I can afford. I will continue with my fascination with speed. I will continue to make it possible, through the combinations of the words, for the singers to sing ever faster. I will continue to make operas that will allow the journalists to say, "That's not singing. That's talking." It will be a well-kept secret. I mean, that it is singing.

I will be followed by composers who are smarter and more experienced than I am. And better equipped. I hope.

I don't know about the future of music. As I said at the beginning, it is too big a subject for me. But I think I know the future of opera.

I hope I have covered the subject.

As you might have guessed, I like popular music. That means I like some music that is designed to be a commodity. I wish there were time for more music in my life, so that I wouldn't feel guilty about liking Dolly Parton so much. Or George Strait or Daniel Lanois. (I know these names only because friends have given me the records. The African-American "talking music" performers will have to go un-named, because I don't have the records and I'm not going to buy them. I hear them on the radio.) I would like to not feel guilty about liking the music of people who probably wouldn't like me --- that is, my music --- if they knew me.

One commodity every day, all day, everywhere.

I am short of time.

Did I say nostalgia enough times?

Ideas I didn't have time or patience for:

- (1) absence of mutual criticism among composers
- (2) what could an important "change of commodity" mean --- and has this ever happened in music?

The Future of Music for three hours. That is my mandate. Most was talk. Now I will play nine examples. None is more than three or four minutes long. Only two of the nine are complete

pieces. The rest have to be faded out. (This means I have had to take them out of the digital domain and through my console.) Every example is taken from the beginning of the CD or from the beginning of the selection. The examples, of course, can't do justice to the whole work --- the changes, sometimes extremely dramatic --- the effect of listening for 60 minutes.

These are the kinds of things I listen to when I have the feeling that I have lost the vision.

ONE

Steve Peters: "in memory of the four winds" (excerpt)
CD Title: "in memory of the four winds"
Label: pianissimo ppp 01 c/o nonsequitur
P.O. Box 344, Albuquerque, NM 87103 / nonseq@flash.net

I had intended to start with this composition, before speaking. I like the slow fade-in. Later the piece becomes very loud. No short sample could do justice to this piece.

TWO

Tom Hamilton and Peter Zummo:
"Loudspeaker than Words" (complete)
CD Title: Slybersonic Tromosome
Label: Penumbra Music
P.O. Box 282, Grafton, WI 53024 /
<http://www.execpc.com/~penumbra?>

I like the seamless blend of trombone and electronics.

THREE

David Behrman: "Canons (1959)" (complete)
CD Title: David Behrman / Wave Train
Label: alga marghen / plana-B 5NMN.020
Fax: Italy-01-70-300-689/attn:CarCano/Dept T1

A wonderful serial composition, every aspect serialized. "A palindrome as well as a canon, with the two musicians, pianist and percussionist, switching roles at its exact midpoint." Performed by David Tudor and Christoph Caskel. It is very different from David Behrman's recent music.

FOUR

Sam Ashley: "Ear of the Beholder, Eye of the Storm,
Benefit of the Doubt"
(for Thomas Buckner) (excerpt)
copyright controlled by Sam Ashley
sam-ashley@hotmail.com

"a bank of processed sines, each of which either stays at the same pitch, goes down a half step or up a half step" to lead the voice, Tom Buckner's, to different song-tones.

FIVE
Walter Marchetti: "Natura Morta" (excerpt)
CD Title: Natura Morta
Label: Cramps CRSCD 031
Artis Records, Via False 33, 36050 Monteviale,
Vicenza, Italy
Fax: (0444) 552688

I have played this recording, which continues exactly in the manner of the excerpt for 69'27", many times. It heals me. I can't explain it.

SIX
Yasunao Tone: "Jiao Liao Fruits" (excerpt)
CD Title: Musica Iconologos
Label: Lovely Music LCD 3041
info@lovely.com

"Musica Iconologus" is an extreme example of the notion that every sound is a "sign." The sounds come from a computer program that scans pictures and makes the result into sounds. I can't explain it technically, because I don't understand it technically. But I saw a couple of the pictures. Yasunao Tone took photographs or drawings of everyday things (feet, for example) from magazines and made collages in which the everyday things take the place of brush-strokes in Chinese ideograms. (In addition to being a wonderful composer, Yasunao Tone is a scholar of classical Chinese literature.) As he explained it to me, a technician could take the sound samples from the recording and translate them back into visual representations of ideograms at a second remove: feet, not brush-strokes, but clearly ideograms telling the story of "Jiao Liao Fruits" and "Solar Eclipse in October," two poems from what Mr. Tone describes as "the earliest Chinese anthology."

SEVEN

Dolly Parton: "I Am Ready" (excerpt)

CD Title: The Grass is Blue

Label: Sugar Hill SUG-CD-3900

I use this as an example of voices without orchestra. Plus it is beautiful. Also as an example of the question of being able to afford it. The reverb, which breaks my heart, probably costs more than I made last year.

EIGHT

Robert Ashley and Jacqueline Humbert: "Au Pair" (excerpt)

copyright by Robert Ashley and Jacqueline Humbert

info@lovely.com

This is a recording of a first performance of a new composition with a libretto by Jacqueline Humbert. I have included it, because it is an example of the way we use a combination of harmony and text for pitch inflections and an example of processing as orchestra.

NINE

Annea Lockwood: "Feldspar Brook, Mt. Marcy" (excerpt)

CD Title: A Sound Map of the Hudson River

Label: Lovely Music LCD 2081

info@lovely.com

I intended to end the talk with this excerpt. The sound map changes continuously in time, because the river does. And it changes in place over hundreds of miles from the source of the Hudson River at Mt. Marcy to the Atlantic Ocean at Staten Island.
