

The Medium Is Not The Message

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I compose operas, among other things. I wrote two this last year, “cheap&easy OCTOBER” and “It’s All True”. It behooves no one to either endlessly rehash tired, old aesthetic arguments nor to engage in attempts to convince art-skeptics of the validity of current practices. With that in mind, I will simply state the obvious fact that the definitions of opera and its components of music, theater, and text (as well as the inter-relations of these elements) have all evolved far beyond their “classic” states (say, the nineteenth century) and have massively changed since their multiple “avant-garde” states (early 20th century, mid 20th century, 1960s-70s). The old ways of thinking and labeling and arguing are just that: old. And boring. And irrelevant to making current work.

Certainly, everything is available to us now. That, in itself, is an empty statement. It should go without saying, and is the starting point for making work. Everything else comes after, and anybody paying attention or with an open mind knows this. The forms that current art-works take and the materials that they use have no inherent interest or content: a composer using video or theatrical gesture is a matter-of-course. The mere presence of theatricality or elements beyond traditional instrumental and vocal sounds is not enough to signal a radical practice. The focus must be on something else besides simply the performative means. Those are a distraction from actual aesthetic content. It is a timeworn tactic (conscious or unconscious) of conventional artists to co-opt the vocabulary of radical practitioners. The language used to describe artwork is a constantly shifting territory. What separates the actual thing from its imitation (from dilettantism) is difficult to articulate due to this contested language, but could not be more obvious in the resultant artwork. You know it when you see it: conservatism will out.

A prime indicator for this is the use of simplistic metaphor and easily digested concepts. This occurs most frequently in this context when the mere use of different forms and materials is mistaken for progressive complexity in the artistic object. I use complexity here not to mean the usual athletic instrumental acrobatics, but rather a complexity of image, intention and meaning, which draws on Carolee Schneemann’s definition in her collection *From The Notebooks 1958-1963*.

Interesting current musical work embeds itself in the world by embracing a permanently incomplete state and the productive paradox of the linguistification of sound and action (as I wrote about in my essay *After Opera*). This is not some “magic-bullet” technique or style like silence or theatricality, but is a way of looking, of hearing, of making. It encompasses all of these music-making tactics (including traditional methods of notation and sound production). Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jean-Luc Godard summarized the idea well with a slogan from their Dziga Vertov film group: “the problem is not to make political movies, the goal is to make movies politically”.

This is why the significance for the work being highlighted here is not whether or not the musicians are playing instruments, but something beyond mere performance techniques or technical methods. These artists make radical work whether for a video camera or an alto flute. What is at stake is something beyond simply the notes on the page or the gestures being made. It is the aesthetic thing being produced. A production which occurs not from the composer, nor from the performer, nor in the hearing or seeing, but in a shifting constellation between all of these elements and the complex localization of this event in anticipation and memory. This permanently vanishing event is correspondingly encased in, and unavoidably relevant to, social and political reality.

Structurally, my opera “It’s All True” deals mostly with ideas of archive and transcription. All the music and text in the piece is derived from the complete live-recordings of a single band - over 1000 hours of raw material. None of the songs are used though, only the incidental and miscellaneous sound (instrumental and environmental) on the concert recordings. Casual strummings, wild out-of-control feedback, half-assed drum flourishes, PAs breaking, activist pre-concert speeches, cops breaking up shows and so on. The selected fragments were then arranged into a final form and transcribed verbatim (I did the music and Kara Feely did the text).

In the face of an overwhelming amount of material, an ocean of guitar feedback and random drum thwacks, I opted to assemble the material I ultimately selected into a fixed arrangement and then transcribe it into standard music notation. This is the first time since I was a student that I have

used standard, metrical music notation. This fact, though central to my both my general practice and my approach to this opera, is purely a pragmatic one and is aesthetically irrelevant to the listener and audience. It is a factoid equal to asking a poet what OS her laptop runs. But in current music, often these trivial facts are presented as aesthetic content. In truth, this is a mirage, a cheap parlor trick to mask artistic traditionalism. The medium is not the message.

In reality, there is no message, no idea behind the piece. I am not interested in the old role of the composer as the master-synthesizer of ideas and concepts that are then delivered to a waiting audience for them to unpack, comprehend and appreciate. Nor am I plumbing my psychological-emotional relationship to sound or seeking to deliver states of metaphysical, experiential beauty to a rapturous listenership. Nor am I interested in tweaking the expectations of a classical music audience, an audience that is as much a mystery to me as the Tea Party here in the US. What I do hope for is that the work generates a productive state in the listener and viewer (a group which includes the composer and the performers).

This productive state arises from contradictory elements within the work, and contradictions between the very notions of “within-the-work” and “outside-the-work”. I try to allow these paradoxes to come through on a basic, notational way (musical material simultaneously functioning and malfunctioning), through inconsistencies of failed expectations, through cheap gags and pointless bursts of disorienting noise. It is also essential that this permanent incompleteness is present on a larger scale in the work, in defining or effacing borders between definitions, and in the attitude towards the source material (in this case, highly amplified incidental and accidental punk rock disjecta).

Theatrically (and textually), these strategies are mirrored by writer/director Kara Feely’s staging. Multiplicity and overload are useful tactics as are amateurism and awkwardness (intentional and unintentional). We try to build this into the very marrow of our work, from the conception through to the writing and the execution of our operas. It is difficult to find performers (musical, vocal and theatrical) who understand how to meander through the scores, scripts and directions. Decisions to work with these methods are not made flippantly. Not every instrumentalist can simply walk across the stage and be interesting any more than a random actor could pick up a violin and credibly play in tune. If a performer is asked to do something stupid, it is important that they do

stupid *well* and *honestly*. Theatricality, as such, is not itself an end. The question remains, what kind of theater and why? Are we talking about René Pollesch or Sun Ra? Gertrude Stein or Ryan Trecartin? They are not the same thing.

One of the best pieces of professional advice I have ever heard given to a young actor or musician is that the only real power they have is the power to say “NO”. So I suggest that current composers and artists simply say “no” to debates about their work. I have been told repeatedly that what vocalists do in my work is not singing (by several “opera” composers), that my compositions are not really compositions (by esteemed “experimental” composers), that what my group Object Collection does is not really theater (by theater artists, producers, etc.), that what we do is not music (by musical artists, curators, etc), that what we do is certainly not opera. And to all this I simply say, “ok” and then get on with making more work and naming it as I see fit. I find it strange, this desire to close off and limit definitions and art-forms, particularly at this late date in “Experimental Music” when nothing, really, is at stake anymore. At any rate, I know which side of the validation equation I would rather be on. It doesn’t bother me. All interesting art has the threat of fraudulence. And I would rather be an interesting fraud than a boring professional any day of the week.

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