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ARTS AND LEISURE

Video Portraits of Avant-Garde Composers

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Ashley: "I wanted to make portraits of my friends."

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Proclamations about "schools" and stylistic categories among composers are generally greeted with suspicion, and rightly so. The French—both the artists themselves and their critical endpropagandists—have been especially eager to accompany any artistic endeavor with a broadside of polemics, sharply defining and isolating the new "movement" from its antecedents and surroundings. When you look at the work rationally, however, all sorts of indebtedness to the past and affinities with the present become observable.

Yet the categorizing impulse serves a valuable purpose, too. For instance, take Robert Ashley's new series of video portraits of nine American avant-garde composers called "Music with Roots in the Aether." The series—shown at the Whitney Museum last month and on display from 7 to 11 P.M., Tuesdays through Saturdays, from this Tuesday until June 18 at the Kitchen, Wooster and Broome Streets (call 925-3615 for the exact screening schedule)—has its ab-

stract virtues, to be sure. The films seem to be imaginatively conceived and professionally executed (with camera work by Philip Makanna, a San Francisco bay area filmmaker), the interview material is lively and informative, and the music-making attractive. More to the point they represent a determined effort by Ashley, who is himself a leading post-Cageian experimental composer, to define a grouping of American composers that has neither been perceived as such nor been taken very seriously by the new-music establishment in this country.

The composers Ashley has chosen to include are himself, David Behrman, Philip Glass, Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, Roger Reynolds and LaMonte Young. Each film is two hours long, roughly apportioned into an interview segment of one hour and a performance segment of one hour. Both halves take place within vaguely theatrical settings worked out by the interviewer and Ashley: Riley and Ashley talk on a hilly field at Riley's ranch in the Sierra Nevada foothills in California, for instance, with an omnipresent goat named Coco, and then Riley plays one of his electric organ im-

provisations in a similarly natural setting. Lucier's interview takes place during the performance of one of his compositions which utilizes dancers and high-frequency sounds, and in a setting that includes stark concrete walls, a canoe and Lucier in a trout-fishing outfit, casting flies.

So far, Ashley has completed the Behrman, Glass, Lucier, Mumma, Oliveros, Riley and Ashley tapes, and these will be on view at the Kitchen. There is also the possibility of future showings on television when the Reynolds and Young segments are completed, and there is an upcoming project for an analogous group of European composers.

These nine American composers haven't advocated their affinities because they aren't especially verbal about their work. The French bombard us with polemics out of the very natural verbosity of their culture. Americans are more dour, and American musicians—Virgil Thomson and a few others excepted—have never been great talkers or great writers. In addition, the composers that emerged in the 1960's, and these nine epitomize that decade, were an especially non-verbal lot. Perhaps non-verbal is the wrong word, since they talk fluently and provocatively for Ashley. It's just that they never really felt inspired to advertise themselves, Norman Mailer fashion, in print. Nor did phonograph records serve their purposes very well, since for most of them a form of visual theater was integral to their art.

It is certainly possible to question Ashley's assumptions in grouping these nine. He himself happily admits that "I wanted to make a portrait of my friends," and one could argue that apart from age (they're all about 40) there are as many differences as similarities in their work. One could also wonder about the exclusion of others that seem to be part of the circle—Steve Reich, David Tudor and Salvatore Martirano, to name three.

But even with quibbles, one can see what Ashley means, and his very act of juxtapositions makes one rethink the nature of the past 15 years of American music. Ashley is eager to dissociate his group from the music of John Cage and his immediate disciples, Christian Wolff and Morton Feldman. "We were never concerned with chance procedures, or with the kind of abstractions that Cage was interested in," Ashley argues.

Instead, Ashley's circle has made self-performed, non-notated music. It can be directly improvisatory (like Riley's) but it doesn't have to be. Yet all of this music relies on a more intuitive, inspirational basis than the cerebral concoctions of such East Coast academics as Milton Babbitt and Charles Wuorinen and their non-academic ally, Elliott Carter. Akin to this reaction is a deliberate espousal of simple techniques and simple music. "I was living in a wasteland," Glass recalls of his student days in Paris and the Domaines Musicales concerts organized by Pierre Boulez. "[It was] dominated by these . . . maniacs, these creeps, you know, who were trying to make everyone write this crazy, creepy music."

Horrified by the post-serial excesses all around them, these composers turned instead to the art world and to Oriental meditation for inspiration. Not

all of them are so extreme as Oliveros, who says now, "I haven't been working with musical ideas for a while, but on my mode of consciousness." But all of them make music that is conceived with a meditative rapture in mind. The prevalence of theatrical settings or concepts in their music fits in here, too, as part of a general concern for the expression of self in a more direct, untraditional way than has been popular since the Romantic period a century ago. Not that this music is "Neo-Romantic," in the sense that it appeals blatantly to a broad audience in conventionally rhetorical terms. But in its own, sometimes austere and even cerebral way, it reaches out to the average person as folk music does.

It might strike some as unseemly that Ashley has included himself in the series, but there are two good reasons for that. One is that he is legitimately a part of this circle, and an important one

—even if his work has been seen mostly in the Midwest (he was active in Ann Arbor, Mich., all through the 1960's) and the West (he has directed the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland, Calif. since 1969). He seems to be spending most of his time here, now, so perhaps we'll get a more sustained exposure to his major works.

An even better reason to include himself is that this film series, starting from music but spilling far beyond the conventional borders of that art, is itself a fine example of the work of these composers. "I'm not a documentarian, but I couldn't get money saying I was to do a piece," Ashley says. (Support for the series as a "documentation" was readily forthcoming from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Martha Baird Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and Broadcast Music Inc.) "Most of my big pieces have had to do with portraiture. These are my portraits of these guys, and the whole series is one big theater piece." ■