

ARTS

Pretentious show insults intelligence

Songs from *Atalanta* by Robert Ashley; January 26 in Kresge Auditorium.

When I see something that is so unbelievably dreadful as to leave me writhing in agony, I usually ignore it; it's often simply not worth wasting the reader's time. On my way in to Robert Ashley's *Songs from Atalanta*, however, the individual who supplied me with a ticket told me that he would go after me "with a chainsaw if a review doesn't appear in *The Tech*." To avoid the possibly messy consequences, I am only too happy to oblige with a review.

Atalanta is a "comic opera in three episodes," according to the program notes. The subject of the opera is the character of three men who "stood apart" from their society by virtue of their genius." The anecdotes were apparently composed and performed "in the spirit of 'divine inspiration'," or heedlessness. "It is my intention to invoke the characters of the opera through this method."

For a comic opera the first 45 minutes were remarkably unfunny. A scan around the audience revealed a large number of stony faces. Two seats away from me someone had shut his eyes. The woman sitting next to me was staring at her knees and appeared to be in intense suffering.

A solo speaker, the "composer" Robert Ashley, stood at a microphone. Most of his words were incomprehensible. It seems that one of the styles of "spontaneous musical invention" required "vocal inflection in the solo voice, irrespective of conversational meaning."

While this was going on a keyboard player created "modal inflection of a given melody" combined with "rhythmic inflection of the momentum in the mixing of pre-recorded instrumental figures" to produce a monotonous electronic noise to further intensify the tedium.

A bank of nine television sets on stage depicted various — mostly still — scenes; as it was impossible to get any meaning out of the other goings-on on stage, these images also added up to precisely nothing.

Finally there was a break in the "music" and the televisions were switched off. Ashley uttered a series of lines solo; a few were comprehensible. One or two lines were funny simply as isolated events. But then the electronic noise resumed, and not being in a masochistic frame of mind I walked out.

It is sadly often true that people who think they are very clever and have endless capacities to generate pretentious prose to try to apprise the rest of the world of that self-evident fact can produce no more than precious nonsense on the stage and boredom, if not pain, in the audience.

The biography of Ashley states that his "operas" are "continuations of his long-time interest in and use of visual media to express musical ideas." Musical tones cannot be represented visually (for an excellent discussion of this, I refer the reader to

Sound and Symbol by Victor Zuckerkandl). Ashley's failure to appreciate this basic tenet makes his work both unmusical and unpoetical. He evokes no images except to himself. Art must fail if it cannot communicate to others.

The National Endowment for the Arts supports this work. It is important to provide funds for experimental art-forms that might otherwise not get off the ground. It is equally important to stop funding those works that fail to display artistic merit beyond the ability to annoy.

Jonathan Richmond

Chamber Music Society satisfies

The Boston Chamber Music Society, Jan. 27, 8 pm, Sanders Theatre.

The third concert in the Boston Chamber Music Society series maintained the high level of technical competence we have come to expect from them, while showing great emotional sensitivity and capacity to communicate with the audience.

The concert opened with Roussel's *Trio in A minor* for flute, viola, and cello, opus 40. The first and third movements, *allegro grazioso* and *allegro non troppo*, featured mainly the flute, played beautifully by Fenwick Smith. Professor Marcus Thompson, viola, and Ronald Thomas, cello, accompanied well, capturing emotively their occasional outbursts of solo material.

The second movement, *andante*, displayed the instruments in turn. Roussel exploited each instrument's capabilities, using harmonics and mutes in the strings, and extreme ranges in all three instruments

to bring about a truly satisfying whole. In this performance each instrument ranged freely over the slowly evolving colors formed by the other two.

Brahms' *Trio in A minor*, opus 114, started a bit roughly, but the last three movements were played very nicely. In the first movement, *allegro*, there was trouble in setting the tempo, Ronald Thomas preferring it slower than Thomas Hill on the clarinet. Christopher O'Riley played the piano sensitively and energetically, but his "body language" was a bit distracting.

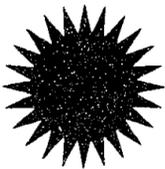
The slow movement beautifully demonstrated the lovely dovetailing of melodies that Brahms had intended but that is so difficult to bring out. The final *allegro* burst forth with energy and exuberance, showing off the technical abilities of all three artists.

After intermission, Lynn Chang, violin, joined Thomas and O'Riley in a rousing

performance of Beethoven's *Archduke Trio*. This trio has been played so much in recent years that a truly inspired performance was required to bring a successful conclusion to the concert. But we were not to be disappointed. The first movement combined sweet lyricism with sheer and unadulterated power. The second movement, a *scherzo*, began simply, and developed, broadening into a complex interplay. The slow movement was played with simplicity and beauty, without overdoing the sentimentality. The finale was carefree on the surface, but a serious complexity lay just below.

Except for some slight disagreement in intonation between the violin and the piano in the upper registers, the performance was excellent. The concert series has been a compete success up to now, and I wait with anticipation for the next three concerts.

Richard Gotlib



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