

ROBERT ASHLEY at home, in conversation with **FRANK J. OTERI**

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**A Video Excerpt from *Music Word Fire*
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1. Traditions and Influences

FRANK J. OTERI: I've been following your music for over 20 years and am a huge fan of your work which is often hard to describe to people who've never experienced it. It doesn't seem to fit neatly in any particular musical tradition. Where do you see yourself fitting within traditions?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, for one thing there is a tradition in America from the 1950s of composers like myself doing their own production and running their own ensemble because in the beginning of the 1950s, any sort of new ideas were excluded from performances. Many of the people in my generation started doing their own performances with their own ensembles because that was the only way you could get the music done. That was the only way that you could rely on people who would be sympathetic to your music. And the coming of electronic technology meant that composers could actually produce real music. Composers could actually produce real music under their own control. And so I think that I fit within that tradition. I know there is a huge tradition of music from Europe that was being performed in the 1950s, but the financial possibilities of that situation were not available to us. The U.S. government was putting enormous amounts of money into rebuilding Europe after the war. And so that huge activity in Europe in the 1950s and 60s actually sort of recapitulated the European tradition from before the war. There were orchestras, there were publishers, and there were composers, but that situation of the composer writing and the publisher publishing the work and then the work getting performed by an orchestra was not available to us.

FRANK J. OTERI: When you refer to new ideas that emerged in the 50s among a whole generation of composers, certainly you studied music from composers an earlier generation: Wallingford Riegger, Ross Lee Finney, Leslie Bassett... What was the reception to your ideas when you were studying composition? Were they supported? Were they not supported? And when did you feel that you made a shift away from the compositional aesthetics of your teachers?

ROBERT ASHLEY: I think that the 1950s were a kind of turning point for many people like myself because they had been fearless during the '30s and '40s. There was an academic network. I mean academic in the sense that all universities were connected and they played a certain kind of music that I didn't write. I wasn't interested in that at all. I didn't want to write that music. So I didn't feel myself to be a part of that network..

FRANK J. OTERI: What music did you grow up listening to?

ROBERT ASHLEY: I was like every American composer. I grew up listening to jazz. I grew up thinking that I might be a professional musician doing arrangements for *The Tonight Show* or something like that. I didn't actually think of myself as a composer. I didn't realize that I wanted to be a composer until the middle 1950s. I was probably 25 years old before I even thought of myself as a composer. I didn't even know what a composer was. I didn't study composition as an undergraduate. I studied theory and I studied piano and I was a pretty good

pianist playing European piano repertory. It only occurred to me gradually that I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. That wasn't my cup of tea. And so it took me a few years to figure out who I was and what I was going to be doing.

FRANK J. OTERI: So the question that you would have asked yourself then that I'm going to ask you now is do you view yourself as a classical composer. And, if so, what does that mean?

ROBERT ASHLEY: In musicology there is a classical period: Mozart, Beethoven... As you know it starts coming apart when you hit Brahms and Liszt and that kind of stuff. But in America classical music meant anything that lasted more than three minutes and that you went to a concert to hear and that was played by an orchestra or a string quartet or something like that. And everything fell under that, under that title of classical music. I don't think for any of us there was a distinction between Beethoven and Ravel. It was just classical music. That's what classical music was.

FRANK J. OTERI: By the '50s with the advent of long playing records, jazz recordings started lasting longer than three minutes. You weren't limited by the length of a 78-rpm record. So you could have Thelonious Monk or Miles Davis doing something for seven and a half minutes, eight minutes.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah, but seven and a half, eight minutes is not very much compared to a symphony or something like that. It was big for jazz. I mean jazz is a whole different kettle of fish. And, even though I probably learned a lot from thinking that I might be a jazz musician, it finally occurred to me after a couple of years of playing in jazz ensembles that I wasn't very good at it. I couldn't be Bud Powell. I couldn't be Thelonious Monk. And the other part of it was that I wasn't all that interested. So the whole thing sort of like just stopped in the late '50s. I stopped being interested in jazz. There were exceptions. I mean I read reviews, I listened to Miles, and I listened to John Coltrane. But all that stuff I learned while I was in my '20s like Charlie Parker and those guys, I pretty much stopped doing. I didn't want to do it anymore.

FRANK J. OTERI: There's certainly a freedom involved among jazz groups that in the beginning helped to shape your view of how to work with an ensemble.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah, yeah, certainly my idea of an ensemble is deeply related to the jazz idea of an ensemble. But I never thought of myself as writing jazz music. It's more a condition of how you write music in America than it is a matter of influences. In the ensembles I worked with in the 1960s, I was not trying to make a new kind of jazz. It just came out to be eight or ten people because that's all one could afford to do.

FRANK J. OTERI: Was it then a new kind of classical music using the American sense of classical being anything from Beethoven to Ravel as you said?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah, but it's hard in an interview like this to know where to start talking about how that music differs from so-called classical music which in effect meant European music, without starting to get very technical which is so boring. All I can say is that the important thing in the 1950s and 1960s for me and a lot of my colleagues was that there came to be this specific interest in the sound texture... I don't know what Europeans would call this, but there seemed to be an interest in the sound as such. And, so all of those old rules of European music, harmonic architecture and other things that were intrinsic to classical music sort of went out the window. I mean we just abandoned them.

FRANK J. OTERI: A lot of people in the classical music industry say that they can't define classical music, but they know what it sounds like. But if you already know what it's going to sound like, why listen?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Right. I agree with you entirely.

2. America and Popular Culture

FRANK J. OTERI: I would venture to argue that there's something very inherently American about what you do as a composer. I know that you referenced European composers working with sound and texture, but I think that the road you followed would not have been possible for a European composer to do.

ROBERT ASHLEY: I think that's true. I think it's true because I think that a typical European composer in those times, we're talking about ancient history now but, typical European composers would have had all the resources at their command so they could expect to work with an orchestra or they can expect to work with an opera company; whereas, for American composers that was simply out of the question. So what happened was that, for better or worse without assigning any cause to it, there came to be for me, at least, a new kind of music which was focussed on the sound of the instant--without respect to any sort of structural form that you expected to satisfy in the next twenty minutes or the next hour and a half. You didn't expect the chord to change; you expected to continue listening to the sound and the very subtle changes in the sound so that the listeners' interest was more focused on the sound at any instant.

FRANK J. OTERI: I think that one of things that seems to inform the path you took was that you grew up listening to jazz and watching *The Tonight Show*.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well that was only thing I knew.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, but that's so inherently American! The classical tradition, Beethoven, Brahms and all of that is not necessarily what you would have had all around you. What you had around you was popular culture, recordings, television, our popular culture, our commodity culture which if anything is our largest and most visible contribution to the world at large, and I think even now, 50 years later, your music is still engaged in a very interesting dialogue with popular culture. Like *Dust*, which I was so amazed by when I saw it at The Kitchen a couple years ago. There were moments in it that are almost pop songs.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, that's because of the particular subject of that opera. That opera was about people who are on the margins of society. The opera actually moves through different groups of people who are marginalized until finally, when you get to the last four songs, you get to people who are marginalized because they're old. I mean they're old people. So the reason for me making those kind of popular music productions of those words was that in the plot of the opera, this is what the hero of the opera heard on the radio when he was in the hospital. They're not popular music in the strict sense because they're too long to be popular music, they're too narrative to be popular music because the hero of the opera has been thinking about them for a long time so he's made a little drama around each of those songs. If those songs were made today, there would be a statement about the reason why the song is being sung. You know: "I'm in love with you," or "You're not in love with me," or something like that... And then there's a hook and then you return to that. You keep reinforcing that image, that simple, simple image of

the thing. Whereas in *Dust* when we get to the last four songs the hero has been thinking about these energies for a long time so he's made little narratives of these. So it's a little different than popular music.

FRANK J. OTERI: There are definitely popular song hooks even in many of your other operas. I'm thinking about "I Would Do It Again," in the Bank scene of *Perfect Lives*, or "Hold Me Tighter" that little chorus in *Atalanta*...that's very much like a Beach Boys song.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well it's true. In the 1960s I was working in Detroit, and I had good friends who were trying to produce at Motown and one good friend in particular asked me to write him some songs that he could produce. And so it was very natural for me to write those songs because I had been listening to those my whole life. So I simply wrote the songs. And then, when I got to *Perfect Lives*, which had this... How do you say it? It recapitulates a series of moments in my life. I put those sounds in as kind of landmarks or labels for that time. I mean I purposely put the song in because it serves as a kind of label for that particular moment in my life.

FRANK J. OTERI: So were those songs that you had written earlier?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Oh yeah, I wrote all those songs in the 1960s, hoping that they would be produced for Motown, but they never were....

FRANK J. OTERI: Well that's too bad. That would have funded all the operas!

ROBERT ASHLEY: That would have funded everything I ever did.

3. Opera vs. Musical Theatre

FRANK J. OTERI: Although you said that what you do is not classical music, you use words to describe your compositions which clearly place you in that tradition, words like opera, concerto, sonata. You wrote for string quartet... These terms are all very malleable. What does the word opera mean to you?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, opera means that you're telling a story with music. I know that my operas don't sound like Puccini, but the idea is to tell a rather complicated story over an hour and half with a lot of characters where the telling of the story is based on the musical forms to the same degree that it happens in Puccini, but in a different manner. The problem is that you don't have any words. I wish I had a different word so I didn't have to use the word opera because that causes a lot of confusion and it causes people to ask me silly questions. I mean not you, but people ask me silly questions like: "What right do you have to call your work opera?" And I say it's because I don't have another word. There is no other word that everybody understands for the notion of telling a long story based on musical forms.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well what do you think of the term musical theater?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Musical theater is all within Broadway. I mean it meant Broadway in the 1950s and I think it still means Broadway. And that's really nice if you like it, but I don't happen to do it.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you think it's a more specific term than opera?

ROBERT ASHLEY: No, I just think it's a label. It's a label that people put on music in the 1930s and '40s. If you say musical theater to people, they automatically think of Stephen Sondheim or Andrew Lloyd Webber or something like that. You can't say I do musical theater and then put on something like *Dust* because it seems like you made a mistake.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting because a lot of American operas, like the works of Menotti and Beeson or even John Adams, are not really that far away from some of the things that Stephen Sondheim has done, you know like *Sweeney Todd*, or even things that Frank Loesser or even Rodgers and Hammerstein were doing back in the 1950s.

ROBERT ASHLEY: I can't answer the question because I'm not the expert on musical theater. I listened to musical theater until *South Pacific* and then I more or less stopped. I can't say anything about Stephen Sondheim, because I've never seen a Stephen Sondheim production. So I don't know what musical theater is today.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's funny hearing how things that come from such different worlds sometimes connect. I was listening to *eL/Aficionado* the other morning and I heard a section that actually reminded me of Sondheim. And I thought this is amazing because I'm sure that Robert

Ashley doesn't listen to Sondheim and that Sondheim doesn't listen to Robert Ashley. When musics that are seemingly worlds apart somehow meet each other, it really shows that there's a lot of common ground.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, *eL/Aficionado* was written for Tom Buckner who is devoted to jazz. And so I wrote a series of jazz-type chord progressions with the notion that they would be played at any speed. In other words, the chord didn't have to change every four beats. The chord could last three minutes or something like that. But the chord progression was always the same. And I think it's a nice chord progression! I wouldn't be surprised if you heard a coincidence between that and Stephen Sondheim because he must also write chord progressions. There's no way out of that unless you're writing serial music or unless you're working in some other system like such as just intonation like Harry Partch or Terry Riley. Unless you're working in one of those systems, if you're simply writing chord changes in equal temperament, inevitably there's going to be a coincidence between *eL/Aficionado* and Stephen Sondheim depending on how fast that particular section of *eL/Aficionado* is going. In other words if we're playing it so that the chords are changing every four beats it's gonna sound more like Stephen Sondheim than if the chords are changing every thirty seconds.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's true that there are only so many things you can do with 12-tone equal temperament. But I think there's actually a larger convergence here. One of the things that I'm hearing is a sense of setting vernacular American English. Paying attention to the words, which is what I think is lacking in a lot of operatic music that fashions itself after European models. There are lines that sing well in Italian that just don't work in English. I think the Broadway people understand that and have created a vernacular American opera and there certainly are American composers that have created operas that have played into that, but what you've done that I think is extraordinarily, is that your operas are really about language.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, without wanting to insult any of my friends, I've always been unhappy with American English set to a European musical form. Because American English, American English doesn't sing that way. American English has always been most successful as words. It's always been most successful in popular music and it's been that way in probably in musical theater since like George M. Cohan. I just decided that I was going to write operas where we speak English. And therefore, I had to figure out a new way to make English fit with the music. And I'll be the first to admit that I have learned a lot from listening to pop music. I learned more about writing opera from listening to Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys than I did from listening to Puccini or Wagner because in Italian, of course, every word rhymes with every other word and because of the vowels that means that there's this huge tradition of hundreds of years of Italian opera for vowel embellishment that is very beautiful. It just doesn't happen to work in English because we don't have the vowels.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting because with European languages you can have these fluid lines, these melismatic lines with long tone utterances. But English is so clipped. All the words get chopped up. And it demands shorter note values; it demands a clipped style. And it's

not just American English. I think the reason the British didn't produce a world class composer of opera in the 18th and 19th centuries is that English in general doesn't work in this style and that's why, contra-positively, the British are the only ones besides the Americans who seem to have international pop music that's successful. The clipped style of pop doesn't work in Italian...

ROBERT ASHLEY: You're exactly right. You can't set English words to Puccini; you can't set English words to Wagner. You can only set English words to some kind of music that accomodates the words, or else the words lose all their meaning. And the most exciting part is that it keeps changing constantly. It keeps changing constantly in the world of popular music and for me personally it keeps changing, not because I want to imitate popular music, but because the language of the street keeps changing in spite of me or what my intention might be. We're not in a world of Cole Porter or of Yip Harburg anymore. We're now in the world of Snoop Dog and Little Bow-Wow. I mean we're in a new world!

4. Hip-Hop, D.I.Y. and Sound-Mixing

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, let's talk about hip-hop for a second... In rap music, text is supreme; everything is driven by the text: every beat, every sound, there aren't melodic lines in the conventional sense of what a melodic line is. There are contours that are melodic contours, but they're all derived from the text.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, the problem in discussing hip-hop with somebody who doesn't like hip-hop is that they don't hear the melodies. There's no difference in the quality of the melody in any good hip-hop record now. There are so many I can't even name them. But there's no difference in the quality of the melody between that song and something like Billie Holiday for instance. It's just that the world has changed, the street language has changed and now you have to tune our ears to be able to hear that the very best hip-hop singers are singing exactly in tune. It might be going a little too fast; the melody might be going a little too fast for you to perceive it as melody, but there's no doubt that there's melody.

FRANK J. OTERI: What struck me as so exciting about hip-hop in the 1990s was that all of a sudden there was a reintroduction of discernable melody in the old fashioned sense among some rappers, but it was still informed by the inflection of speech patterns. I'm thinking of groups like Arrested Development, P.M. Dawn, or The Fugees where the rapper will suddenly start rapping on a melody which is a clearly discernable tune as opposed to a *sprechstimme* speech-song-type thing, but it's so derived from speech that it flows off the tongue like speech. Which is precisely what the best Italian vocal music does. In that sense, rap is like Puccini because if you speak Italian you'll instantly be able to understand the words from the shape of Puccini's melodies.

ROBERT ASHLEY: I'm not a hip-hop producer so I don't know what drives those things, but I listen to hip-hop all the time. I've noticed that there are a lot of references now to black music in the 1960s, there are a lot of references to Motown, there are a lot of references I mean if you just turn on the top 10 hip-hop videos tonight at 6 o'clock on the Black Entertainment Network, you'll hear at least one that'll remind you of the Supremes or something like that.

FRANK J. OTERI: They're sampling earlier music.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah, but they're also singing in that style. So, the changes in popular music are... I don't know what you'd call it... they're design changes for consumer purposes, but I think that for composers, clearly, the most powerful force is to make the words rhythmic in the way you imagine that rhythm could express the words. I mean you distort the street rhythms in order to make them more beautiful or whatever. But at the same time you keep the street rhythms and you do that irrespective of whether you're making a reference to Marvin Gaye or whether you're trying to go way out there you know.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, one of the interesting things about hip-hoppers sampling earlier music how it fits into the whole do-it-yourself aesthetic; it was born from limited resources. The first

rappers didn't have access to guitars or keyboards or anything like that so they rapped on top of earlier records. In a way, that situation is not very different from your own in the 1950s when you decided to work with electronics because you didn't have access to an orchestra or an opera company. Of course, 50 years ago it was a lot different, but now people are creating MIDI symphonies. And so a piece of yours like *Superior Seven* is an "orchestral" piece, but there's no orchestra.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, it's an orchestra piece but it's only rarely been played because it's not conducted and it's not structured in the orchestral tradition. In *Superior Seven*, which is the so-called flute concerto, the conductor has nothing to do with the beat, the ongoing time of the orchestra. The conductor functions entirely as a person balancing the different elements of the orchestra in the same way that you would do at a mixing keyboard. And so the music, the music, the rhythm, the mood and the feeling of the thing operate independently of the conductor. I mean it would not be as good sounding if there was not a conductor to bring the violins down and to bring the woodwinds up and these kinds of things. But the music could go on without a conductor at all. The music is entirely independent of the conductor. The conductor functions simply as a person who is at a mixing console.

FRANK J. OTERI: So has it been done with live orchestra in performance?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah. We, we had a very good performance in Marseilles. It started with the usual problem of resources. It was commissioned by Barbara Held. We started with two pianos and I got the idea of layering the orchestra parts in the same way one would layer parts in an electronic orchestra. And we kept adding parts. And then Barbara moved to Spain... We had a beautiful performance a couple years ago in Marseilles with a wonderful American flutist named Lisa Hansen. And then I had another performance a year or so ago in Los Angeles which was conducted by David Rosenboom which used members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and faculty members from CalArts and that kind of thing. And when a conductor understands that...how should I say this... when the conductor's of our time and he understands that he's not conducting the orchestra, he's balancing the different parts, you can get beautiful changes of character and changes of mood with the orchestra. I should say in that piece, there's also the possibility that the orchestra could just stop and there are dozens of places within that so called concerto where the flutist, in collaboration with the person doing the electronic processing can insert a so-called cadenza into the middle of the piece which has nothing to do with the time of the piece. In other words, the orchestra could stop playing and the flute player goes on someplace else. And then when the flute player finishes the cadenza, they resume their activities for the rest of the piece.

5. "Performance Oriented" Music

FRANK J. OTERI: I've actually never heard your music done by another group. Everything I've heard has been something that you've been intimately connected with.

ROBERT ASHLEY: That's almost always the case.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting to hear what happens when you take yourself out of the mix.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, it's not as interesting. I mean, the only reason I became a musician as opposed to a banker or a civil servant is because I wanted to perform music. I can't live without performing music, so it's always interesting to me in those rare cases where somebody performs my music and I'm not in it. But it's not very interesting. It's most interesting to me when I'm with the ensemble and we're making music together. That's what I call living.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, that's another sort of generation shift. It's not about writing notes on paper and then getting someone else to do it. It is "performance-oriented music." This phrase sounds weird because how could you have music that isn't performance oriented? But I think there's something about your music from the very beginning that really is keyed into the notion that you're a performer and that you have experiences as a performer. It's like Galileo coming along and dropping heavy and light objects off the Tower of Pisa to prove they'd land at the same time. Before people believed the heavier object would land first because no one ever tried it. And I'm thinking that your music is so much what it is because you've actually tried things yourself as a performer. There's always a kind of "what if" quality to your music. Even back in a piece like *The Wolfman*... What happens if you play around with feedback? That's something you couldn't conceptualize on paper without physically having done it first.

ROBERT ASHLEY: You can write the instructions on paper, but unless the person who's reading those instructions has some experience with feedback in different situations, it might as well be written in some other language. Taking *The Wolfman* as an example, in most performances including my own, because we were doing it in a relatively small space, in order to get the level of feedback with movements of your voice, contrary to what you've read in the paper, the actual vocalization of the *The Wolfman* is probably the softest, vocal piece every written. But those soft changes in your voice, by modulating the feedback as it were, make the music. Just a couple of years ago, Mimi Johnson and I were in Barcelona and we went to one of the enormous cathedrals in Barcelona and we got there just as the mass was supposed to begin and the sound engineer for that cathedral made the level of the sound wrong so as soon as the priest walked up to the microphone and as soon as he closed the microphone with his voice, there started to be feedback, but because of the huge space of the cathedral, the resonant feedback of the thing was actually in the voice range. So he was doing *The Wolfman* without knowing it. And, and I said, it sounded like Gregorian chant, because all of the feedback was actually in the pitched range of his voice, and I whispered to Mimi like that this is the way *The Wolfman* would

sound if I did it in this cathedral. You know, it wouldn't sound deafening or anything like that. It would sound like somebody was singing along with him.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow!

ROBERT ASHLEY: Oh yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: So then the trick is imparting these ideas to other people. Certainly, in working with Tom Buckner and Joan LaBarbara and Jacqueline Humbert and your son Sam, your core ensemble, you can do things that you probably couldn't do if you said, "OK, take five people and do a performance of *Your Money My Life Goodbye*. Other people probably wouldn't get it if you'd never worked with them.

ROBERT ASHLEY: My ensemble is a dream come true. I've said as a joke to Tom Hamilton that I never write anything that I can't do myself, but of course I can't sound like Joan LaBarbara, I can't sound like Tom Buckner, and I can't sound like Jackie Humbert. But it's all very practical in the sense that I actually perform music before I send it to them. If I could tell you a little anecdote... We started doing a concert... We had just done the first performance in Cologne. I started doing a concert of two of the longer sections of *Atalanta* with just Jacqueline Humbert and me and Tom Hamilton producing the sound. In the case of one of those things, it's called "Empire," I had made the rehearsal track for Jacqueline and myself in 5 beats per measure. And when she came and we started rehearsing, it was clear that five beats per measure was not enough. I mean even though I had been sort of conceptually rehearsing it in five beats per measure, I never actually had the time or had taken the trouble to try to do the whole thing myself in five beats per measure. And when we did it a couple of times, we realized that five beats per measure was just wrong. And so Tom Hamilton added one beat per measure for each, for the whole song. So, in a sense, we recomposed a very important part of that song, of that aria or whatever you want to call it right here in the studio as a result of performance. I mean as a result of working with it and seeing that we didn't have enough room because it was crowding the English.

6. The Compositional Process

FRANK J. OTERI: The whole notion of compositional control in some ways is really absent from your work. Getting back this notion of musical theater and jazz, I think your music grows out of a result of collaboration and from not necessarily having a fixed form. It's very much an open structure and you work with the performers and in some ways you allow the performers to create a lot of the content, what the listener is hearing, whether it's the melodic line or the rhythm or even in some instances, the harmonic progressions, I'm thinking back to *Perfect Lives* where all the harmonic progressions were provided by "Blue" Gene Tyranny.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: And in some of the orchestrations where the MIDI orchestration is done with Tom Hamilton. You share that part of the process with other people, which is very unusual for a composer to do.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, it's very important to me, because I never wanted to be a solo musician. I enjoy more than anything in life making music with people. So that when I come to a situation where I write the piece, where what I've composed needs some sort of deep collaboration, it's very easy for me to just give that idea over to somebody else so that it refreshes the piece. I mean it's a better idea than my idea. You know. In other words, when we started working on *Perfect Lives*, I said to Blue Gene, you know I can write the chord changes, but then you have to spend a year learning the chord changes, and then you have to improvise on my chord changes, which might not be so interesting to you. So why don't you write the chords because that's what you're gonna improvise on. I mean it doesn't have anything to do with the template of what pitch the singer is singing on or where the chorus comes in or anything like that. It's totally based on the idea of making it possible for Blue Gene to be as fluent as he can be. And that's actually a great pleasure. I mean, it's more interesting for me than for me to write the chords and for him to struggle with those chords.

FRANK J. OTERI: So then if someone else were to perform the work other than Blue Gene it would be a completely different piece on some levels.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah, we could take the template, we could take the basic template of the piece and we could make it into anything. It could be a different chorus. In fact, it could be a totally different size.

FRANK J. OTERI: So what is fixed? If you heard a performance let's say of *Superior Seven* or *Improvement: Don Leaves Linda*, could you ever wind up thinking "Wait a second, this is not my music." Where is the line?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Uh, well in the case of *Superior Seven* all the notes are written, it's just a question of whether the people can actually play the notes and whether they follow the

instructions, but when we get into the operas... I don't know how to answer your question without saying in the most practical sense, when I finally finish matching the words to the tempo, the chord changes and that kind of thing, I make a rehearsal tape for all the singers and I send the rehearsal tape to the singers and then we get together. I take any idea that anybody's got, unless it's wrong, I take any idea that anybody's got because it adds something to the piece that I had not thought about. The only way you get the character of the opera out of any one of the singers is by letting them take over that notion of character.

FRANK J. OTERI: Have the operas ever been done with different singers than the original singers of each production? And what have been the changes?

ROBERT ASHLEY: No. *Perfect Lives* had a certain ensemble, and then when we started doing *Atalanta*, that ensemble wasn't working so certain people dropped out and new people came in. So there was a certain ensemble for *Atalanta*. And then when we started doing the group of four operas: *Improvement*, *eL/Aficionado*, *Foreign Experiences*, and *Now Eleanor's Idea*, I needed other kinds of voices because of the nature of the text. So I just started picking people that I knew or thought could do it. And even that changed. We started with one group of people and by the time we got to the end of it, two or three people had dropped out and two or three people had come in. But the basic ensemble I'm working with now is the happiest situation of my life, working with Sam and Jackie and Joan and Tom Buckner and Tom Hamilton doing the processing. It's sort of a dream come true. And I don't expect it to change, unless, unless one of them gets tired of me and wants to go someplace else.

FRANK J. OTERI: But what if you envision a work involving more characters?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Then I'll just have to find some more people. [laughter] That's another problem...

FRANK J. OTERI: *Atalanta* has more roles.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah when we went from *Atalanta* to the quartet, I had to have new voices because there were new characters. Possibly in the next opera. I'm working on one now called *Celestial Excursions* and I must admit, I don't know how many voices are involved. I know that I'm going to use the four voices that I've been working with for the last ten years, but I might add another two or three voices. I don't know yet.

FRANK J. OTERI: What starts first, the music or the text?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Oooh, that's the hardest question that has ever been asked by anybody. The simple answer is that when you're a songwriter, the music and the words come at the same time. But they don't come exactly the same, I mean sometimes you have an idea for a sort of harmonic mood or a rhythmic thing or sometimes you have some words that don't exactly fit with that so you adapt the words to that plan. I mean in other words you might, to take an

example from *Now Eleanor's Idea*, after having worked with the harmonies and the words and the rhythms and everything else for a year or something like that, I finally discovered that one of the operas had to have 15 syllables per line, but I already had the text and I had the music, but the text wasn't in 15 syllables per line. So I had to edit the text, trying to make the text have 15 syllables per line. Sometimes you start with just a phrase, maybe just two lines and those two lines may not even make it into the final version, but those two lines in the rhythm and the way they're said and the way they sound, those two lines start making the music happen in your imagination. So sometimes the words come first, sometimes the music comes first, but they never come independently, I mean for me.

FRANK J. OTERI: Why did those lines have to have 15 syllables?

ROBERT ASHLEY: I don't know. I've forgotten now what the reason was...

FRANK J. OTERI: So words and melodies come together... I'm a little confused. I always got the sense that the melody sort of evolved in the process of working with the singers, that the singers actually shaped the melodies.

ROBERT ASHLEY: That's true. That's exactly true.

FRANK J. OTERI: You don't present singers with staff-notated melodies, you present them with tapes of you singing your vision of what those melody are?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah. I send them a demo tape, a demo tape of me singing the song and then a few weeks later or a few months later they come here and they have their own idea about that song. Obviously it can go from being extremely crude, as in the first four songs of *Dust*. I mean I can't be Jackie Humbert or Joan LaBarbara, I just sing those songs the way I sing, but in the last four songs, those actually have a melody because they're supposed to be memories of pop songs. Joan LaBarbara has to adapt the melody to what she can do with her voice and Jackie and Tom and Sam have to adapt those melodies to what they can do with their voices. But it's actually not any different from me deciding to cover a Chuck Berry song or a rap song. I mean, I couldn't possibly make it sound like the original, what is that, karaoke or something like that, I couldn't do that so it would, in other works I would take the material of the original song and I would make it into my own version.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well the last two *Dust* songs--"It's Easy" and "The Angel of Loneliness"--have great melodies. They have great hooks...

ROBERT ASHLEY: Thank you.

FRANK J. OTERI: So they were your melodies?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, but for instance in the melody I wrote for "It's Easy," the first note was too high for what was comfortable for Joan. So she had to adapt how she got to that first note from rehearsing in the studio and it wasn't until she had done it for I don't know, 15 or 20 times that finally that adaptation of how to get to that first note, which I had made a mistake on because I thought that was an easy note for her. It turned out to be a hard note for her. It wasn't until she had done it 15 or 20 times that she came up with a way of getting to that first note that sounds like it's right. You know. But you would never know that.

FRANK J. OTERI: So what happens when you're doing a work like *Balseros* for the Florida Grand Opera? How did you work with those singers? It's clearly not the intimate relationship that you get to have with your ensemble. What happens?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, I must say that *Balseros* was not a very happy experience for me. I'm telling tales out of school... When I was commissioned to do the piece, I was told by the Florida Grand Opera that their singers would not be available except in the chorus parts. And so I started writing music for the four, well I said you can't have an opera with any less, I've gotta hire the soloists. And they said OK, go ahead and hire 'em. So I hired my ensemble and I wrote the melodies for my ensemble and made the orchestra work with my ensemble. And then, not long before the musical deadline, I was told that in fact the Florida Grand Opera singers had to have some solos so I spent a couple of months, talk about technicalities, making 18th century sort of canons for the Florida Grand Opera singers to sing the same melodies twice as fast. In other words, Jackie would have a song that lasted four minutes, two minutes of that would be given over to one of the Florida Grand Opera singers who was singing almost exactly the same melody she was singing, but twice as fast and at a different interval, so it was in harmony with her. And the other two minutes of that solo would be given over to a male and female pair of Spanish speaking persons. So they were speaking; they were acting. So *Balseros* started out as an opera for my ensemble with the orchestra on tape which would accommodate a couple of Cuban type drummers and would accommodate a couple of people speaking in Cuban-Spanish explaining what was going on. And then at the last minute, the last two or three months, I had a different assignment and so I had to think of some way to put the Florida Grand Opera singers in as soloists. And the only way I could figure out how to do it was as I said this canon-type of thing.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you didn't really have any opportunity to work with them?

ROBERT ASHLEY: No.

FRANK J. OTERI: So they were never able to feel an ownership for the roles...

ROBERT ASHLEY: No, I just wrote the notes, I just wrote the notes and they learned the notes as best they could.

FRANK J. OTERI: I was listening recently to *Automatic Writing*, which is probably the most personal piece you've ever written. And it's something I can't imagine anyone else ever being able to do.

ROBERT ASHLEY: [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: It's so personal. You're dealing with a very sensitive topic. To the best of my knowledge, it's the only piece of music ever written about Tourettes Syndrome. It really fleshes out what that means and what it means as music.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Yeah, well, I was coming from California to New York to see Mimi and I got so interested in the people on the street. They're gone now because Giuliani put 'em all in prison, but there were these strange people who were talking to themselves, and I got so interested in what appeared to be some connection between music and what they were doing that I tried to learn how to do that. It was practically impossible. And I did dozens of performances where I used different sorts of shields to keep me from being effected by self-consciousness on stage. And then finally the record that you're referring to, as it says in the liner notes, was simply the last stage of having worked on the piece for two or three years, maybe more. I set up the studio at Mills so that I could go in there and I didn't have to change my mood. All I had to do was push one button. I just had to push the on button and everything started working. I was living by myself then and I got myself into the mood of that involuntary speech. And when it finally took, I walked from where I was living to the studio, which was about a quarter of a mile at like 8 o'clock at night and I just pushed the on button and it actually worked. I mean I actually got something that was totally beyond my control. But then the layering of the piece started and the next thing I wanted was to put some synthesizer music in it so I asked Paul DeMarinis to design some sort of a triggering to give me something from the synthesizer that would accompany the talking and then we had another occasion to do it in Paris and I asked Mimi to read the French translations of these sort of meaningless things without her listening to the tape at all. I would just cue her when to say the French phrase. And so I had three characters and then I finally realized that there was a fourth character needed and it took me another few months to find that fourth character on that kind of organ sound that goes all through it. Then I knew the piece was finished. Then I knew the piece...because I had enough screens between me and the audience so that I was not embarrassed to put it out on a record.

7. Television

FRANK J. OTERI: You're very lucky in that a lot of your works have been documented on recordings and that's the way they'll be perceived of by people, but then again it's also a double edged sword in that since these works often have a visual component or have a multi-media component of some sort, experiencing them on a CD player or on a turntable is not necessarily getting a sense of what the work really is. So, ideally, how should someone come to your music? Should it be through live performance, through video recording, through audio recording, what is the best medium?

ROBERT ASHLEY: Well, I've dreamed for the last twenty-five years of making opera for television. I made this piece twenty five years ago called *Music with Roots in the Aether*, which I thought was very successful and it's been shown 50 or 60 times for thousands of people and it's been shown on local cable stations. It's never made it to the networks. And then because of that I got the connection to do *Perfect Lives* from The Kitchen. We were able to do *Perfect Lives* as an opera for television. And then with the director Lawrence Brickman, I made a kind of demonstration tape of the kind of techniques that we would use for *Atalanta* to try to get some television producer interested. But essentially, I couldn't get through. And then the quartet of operas are all exactly formatted for television. And, I don't know, they may happen. Every once in awhile, someone says they want to do one of the operas for television. And we work on it and nothing comes together. So I don't know, I don't have any feelings about it really. I mean, when I make a CD of one of the pieces I want it to sound as much like a CD as possible. When we do a performance we change everything around so it looks as much like a performance as I can make it look like a performance. But if we ever had a chance to do one of the operas for television, it would be yet another version of the same thing.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, is T.V. the ideal audience?

ROBERT ASHLEY: T.V. for me would be the ideal audience. I've thought that for 25 years. T.V. with really high quality sound would be the ideal audience for my music because of the intimacy of T.V. and because on television you can go I don't know how many times faster than you can go on stage. On stage, if you want to move the chorus, go off stage, go onstage, you have to write three or four minutes of music just to get the chorus from off stage to on stage. In T.V. you don't have to do that, it can happen in a 30th of a second, so the whole idea of where you are, who you are and what you're singing about, happens very much faster and I'm interested in that speed. I love the idea of that speed as part of our culture.

FRANK J. OTERI: In the early days of television, they coined the term "soap opera" for continuous serialized daytime dramas. It's funny because I was thinking when I saw the videotapes of *Perfect Lives*, which is in seven separate serialized episodes, that you've created something of a "soap opera" opera.

ROBERT ASHLEY: It is...

FRANK J. OTERI: But it's not just the structure of it, the characters and the plot are also like something out of daytime T.V. Even the title *Perfect Lives* sounds sort of like *Days of Our Lives*.

ROBERT ASHLEY: It's a soap opera. There's no doubt about it. (laughs)

FRANK J. OTERI: It's wonderful. Now, if only we could get people watching *Perfect Lives* instead of *Days of Our Lives*!

ROBERT ASHLEY: I don't mind what else they watch. I just want them to watch *Perfect Lives*! Everything is O.K. except there isn't enough music on television. The people who run television have not realized yet that audiences can be really interested in music if you treat it with the same attention to detail that you treat professional football or professional baseball or something special, like British accents doing Masterpiece Theatre. I'm doing a pitch now... Opera for television has an enormous potential, but nobody in television has woken up to that idea yet.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, hopefully the television people will visit the Web and read this and hear your music and do it!