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ROBERT ASHLEY

eL / Aficionado

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eL/Aficionado

Music and Libretto by Robert Ashley

The Agent
Interrogator No. 1
Interrogator No. 2
Interrogator No. 3

Kayleigh Butcher
Brian McCorkle
Bonnie Lander
Paul Pinto

Orchestration by Robert Ashley and Tom Hamilton

Recorded and Mixed by Tom Hamilton

Produced by Tom Hamilton and Mimi Johnson

eL/Aficionado is a group of scenes from the life of an “agent.” The scenes are a kind of “debriefing” to a jury of Interrogators, in which the Interrogators (chorus) challenge the Agent (soloist) in various forms of musical dialogue. The mood of the opera owes much to our fascination with espionage and with the character of those people who lead double lives.

Personal

A simple description, in code.

My Brother Called

The Agent has been instructed to go to a cafe overlooking the entrance to a building where “the department” maintains a safe house, or meeting place. He receives a telephone call in the cafe. He is instructed to watch the building and to describe in code every person that enters. The code takes the form of newspaper “personals” (repeated throughout by the Interrogators, from the record.) As part of his statement the agent describes the mysterious apartment. *My Brother Called*, told in the present about an incident in the immediate past, is interrupted successively by two other scenes, each enacted further in the past, and finally by a scene of direct confrontation between the Agent and his Interrogators.

A Simple Border Crossing

The Agent is challenged to reconstruct the events of his first assignment. In this assignment (apparently as a test of his training, the facts of which he recounts) he is instructed to go to a building unknown to him and there to cope with a “surprise,” which is described as a test of “the business of staying alive.” Even as he watches for “the surprise” he must memorize (in code, to be repeated as part of his assignment) every room he passes through in this “labyrinth.” The scene is an antiphonal presentation of the narrative in two moods: the seriousness and naivety of the Agent, against the subtle sarcasm of the Interrogators, who apparently know the story from the inside.

An Answer Is Expected

The Agent recounts the climax of a bizarre assignment to interrogate a child (“find out something about him”), who is being held in a remote safe house by a mysterious couple with a dog. The child has the resources of an occult power. He eludes the Agent’s approaches and invokes the occult power to end the examination. The Interrogators swear the Agent to a lifetime of secrecy about this assignment. (“If we may be somewhat dramatic, you should take it to your grave.”) The scene is a continuous duet between the Agent and the chorus of Interrogators.

Viva’s Boy

The story told in *My Brother Called* is interrupted, finally, by a direct questioning of the Agent’s language and skills. We learn something about the codes and about the Agent’s understanding of his job, but nothing is resolved.

— Robert Ashley, August 1994

We include below Robert Ashley’s note regarding performers’ contributions to the original production and recording of eL/Aficionado that featured Thomas Buckner, Sam Ashley and Jacqueline Humbert. The note still applies, and we are grateful to the new cast, Kayleigh Butcher, Bonnie Lander, Brian McCorkle and Paul Pinto, for their contributions to the opera, and to Tom Hamilton for his idea to cast a mezzo-soprano as the Agent.

The matter of giving credit to individuals for particular contributions to the creation of *eL/Aficionado* is unusually difficult for me, both because of the way I compose music of this sort (opera) and because of the sheer bulk of such contributions over the six-year history of the work.

Most important to explain is the technique of the vocal characterization. In every solo or ensemble part, the singer is given a “character-defining” pitch (that is, a pitch somewhere in the singer’s range that, understandably, forces a certain “character” to emerge.) Around this pitch the singer is asked to invent vocal inflections (pitch changes, vocal techniques, etc.) that express the intent or meaning of the text. The singer is always guided in the vocal inflections by a harmony, explicit in the orchestration, and in some cases by a specific set of alternate pitches. Apart from these technical limitations and apart from the trial-and-error process of what is agreed on as proper or correct, the singer is entirely free to invent the vocal character. So, the written melodies (which I think are obvious to the listener) are only a part of the vocal characterization. Equally important are the decisions made by the singer in practice and in rehearsal and in the spontaneous inventions unique to this recording.

— Robert Ashley, August 1994

eL/Aficionado was commissioned by Mutable Music Productions for Thomas Buckner. It was performed multiple times from 1987 to 1993 as *My Brother Called* or *eL/Aficionado*. In 1993 the opera was incorporated into Robert Ashley’s monumental opera tetralogy, *Now Eleanor’s Idea*, which also includes *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*, *Foreign Experiences* and the stand alone opera, *Now Eleanor’s Idea*. The tetralogy was premiered in July 1994 at the Festival d’Avignon and was performed in November of 1994 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s “Next Wave” Festival.

eL/Aficionado was recorded for Lovely Music in 1994 with the original cast: Thomas Buckner as The Agent and Robert Ashley, Sam Ashley and Jacqueline Humbert as his Interrogators. That recording (LCD 1004) has been continuously available since then.

This current recording was made in July 2021 at Robert Ashley’s studio.

More information on *eL/Aficionado*, including the full libretto, can be found at www.robertashley.org.

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