

# 'Downtown' Composers Are Headed 'Uptown' for a Festival

By LINDA SANDERS

If the performing lofts of SoHo and Tribeca seem emptier than usual this January, it may be because so many composers are wintering in the northern latitudes of East 71st Street, at the Marymount Manhattan Theater. As recording artists for the Lovely Music label, they will be participating in a four-week festival called "Lovely Music Live," which opens Jan. 5 with the New York premiere of Robert Ashley's latest opera "Atalanta (Acts of God)."

Lovely Music is the recording wing of Performing Artservices, Inc., a nonprofit artists management specializing in experimental music, dance and theater. The Lovely Music label is relatively new to the music scene, but many of its composers are not. The roster includes such figures as David Tudor, Pauline Oliveros, Alvin Lucier, David Behrman and Roger Reynolds who, like Robert Ashley, have been in the vanguard of American music for over 20 years. The younger generation is represented as well by such composers as Rhy's Chatham, George Lewis, Peter Gordon and Ned Sublette.

The Performing Artservices co-director, Mimi Johnson, founded Lovely Music. An enthusiastic spokesperson for new music who is also married to

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Robert Ashley, Miss Johnson recently discussed the reasons for putting Lovely Music Live in the Marymount Manhattan Theater.

"Basically it's because it's a fully equipped proscenium theater that has the right acoustics — we'll have a fantastic sound system — as well as being the right size," she said. "But another reason is that we want to see what it feels like if you're sitting in a really comfortable seat and there are ushers

and all of that — you know, like going to a little-bitty Lincoln Center. We're trying to do it as well as the Autumn Festival in Paris is always done. These composers have been given this kind of treatment in Europe but hardly ever in the U.S. We're just trying to do a first-rate job in presenting the music with the dignity it deserves."

"Atalanta" is the first in a projected three-opera series that Robert Ashley is designing for television. It was preceded in performance, however, by the second in the series, "Perfect Lives (Private Parts)," a seven-episode work written between 1977 and 1981. A live version of "Perfect Lives," with staging designed to suggest its video conception, has been performed complete in several U.S. and European cities.

Discussing "Atalanta" in his Beach Street loft one recent rainy afternoon, Robert Ashley described the opera's subject as "the character of three men — Max, Willard and Bud. Max is Max Ernst, the Surrealist painter. Willard is my uncle, a famous alcoholic storyteller — I mean, a famous man in my tribe for being a storyteller. Bud is Bud Powell, the legendary jazz piano player."

The way in which these characters are presented was inspired by the mythological figure of Atalanta. She, it will be recalled, was a huntress famous for her speed who demanded that anyone wishing to marry her would have to beat her in a race, adding the condition that the winner would marry her and the losers would die. She was "won" by the suitor who tricked her by dropping three golden apples, which she stopped to re-

trieve. Mr. Ashley was attracted to the questions raised by the myth: "Was she stupid? Or greedy? Or did she love the man because he was a trickster?"

"When I started thinking about Max, Willard and Bud, I was trying to get at the character of the guy who would win her heart. Obviously he's got to be something pretty outrageous

and these guys are pretty outrageous. They're all — well — slightly different from their society. So I figured that would be the character of the guy who'd win her heart. Essentially it's the portrait of the successful suitor."

Like "Perfect Lives," "Atalanta" is a collaborative effort between Robert Ashley and several other Lovely Music composer/performers including Gene Tyranny, Peter Gordon, Jill Kroesen and David Van Tieghem. Working from Mr. Ashley's text and concept, they share the writing and/or performing of the music, as well as the creating of the characters of the opera.

Mr. Ashley has divided the three half-hour episodes of his text into what he calls "anecdotes," 2½-minute segments during which the performers play off of each other as fast as they can (in the spirit of Atalanta's race) until they're abruptly cut off. After a 30-second choral interlude they start over again, and so on.

Why anecdotes? "We're trying to be funny — well, not funny, but it's supposed to have the feeling of a comic opera," he said. "The whole idea of these quick decisions that don't have long consequences is involved in trying to make comic timing. The form is so precise — it's like a joke. I noticed in Paris [where the opera had its premiere at the Autumn Festival last month] that the audience would laugh and it made me so happy. They would actually laugh and I never felt the music was compromised for one minute."

Performances of "Atalanta" will

take up the first week of the festival, followed by three weeks of concerts by other Lovely Music composers. All in all, the works of 20 different composers will be represented. Some are Artservices clients, others aren't; many have recorded for other record labels. Mimi Johnson explained why and how Lovely Music evolved:

"In 1971 and '72, Jane Yockel and I founded Artservices and in 1977 decided that it would be interesting to get involved with producing records. I knew the records would sell — that wasn't the issue. The issue was whether it was better for the composer to be part of a company, rather than each making his or her own record and forming his own little company."

From an initial release of six disks in 1977-78, Lovely Music now lists a total of 22 in its catalogue with another four in production. These are handled by some 50 distributors across the U.S. and in Europe with sales averaging between 500 and 1,000 per year, depending on the record.

Among the first records released five years ago, Miss Johnson said, "three have sold about 5,000. The interesting thing is that it doesn't seem to slow down at all. The records keep going out, some faster than others. Frankly, there's a direct correlation between the

record sales and the number of concerts people are doing."

In many instances, Artservices and Lovely Music reinforce each other. Artservices management seeks out the concert engagements and tours that increase record sales, and Lovely Music provides the recording exposure that increases the possibilities for concerts.

Yet selling the avant-garde is no easy task, even with all of the bases covered. One problem is consumer identification. Because their music is so often performed in lofts, many Lovely Music composers have been classified as part of a "downtown" group that is closely associated with minimalism. But Miss Johnson feels that this is misleading: "I don't think we can categorize Lovely Music that way, it's so varied," she said. "I think you could class almost none of the composers as minimalists."

If these composers don't share a stylistic approach, what, if anything, do they have in common?

A fundamental connection, she pointed out, is that they do not typically write for traditional orchestral instruments and ensembles; nor do they often deal in published music. Frequently the composers themselves are the principal interpreters of their own works, performing on

The festival will open with Robert Ashley's 'Atalanta.'

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From l to r: "Blue" Gene Tyranny, John Driscoll, Robert Ashley, Nicolas Collins, Paul DeMarinis, Lawrence Brickman, Alvin Lucier, Richard Teitelbaum, Ron Kuivila, Rhys Chatham and David Van Tieghem. Below: Ned Sublette. Photo: Paula Court

instruments that are in many cases electronic. (Electronics will play a part in virtually every "Lovely Music Live" concert, ranging from the computer technology and individually modified systems of such composers as Joel Chadabe, Richard Teitelbaum, Nicholas Collins, Ron Kuivila and Paul De Marinis, to the use of simple amplification by some others.)

Another characteristic common to some of the composers is their use of a popular musical vernacular, which means crossing boundaries that classical, jazz and rock audiences alike may still regard as inalienable. In short, the composers of Lovely Music do serious work, but in forms that do not often fit easily within the esthetic or practical realms of the classical music world.

While some observers have been led to conclude that "classical music" and "art music" may no longer be considered interchangeable terms, the practical obstacles that inhibit the placement of this music into the traditional network of chamber, orchestra and opera organizations has led Artservices to develop alternative performance outlets for its composers, such as "Lovely Music Live." With the help of such funding sources as the Inter-Arts program of the National Endowment for the Arts, Artservices is able to encourage projects that might never have left the drawing board.

According to Mr. Ashley, his opera "Atalanta" is one of them.

"You can't produce a big piece, you can't produce opera, without a back-up organization," he said. "In the past, one of the problems for the composer was that the audience could never quite understand your intentions because there was no way for you to express them properly. In the U. S., there was no organization, and doing it by yourself meant having to chance the scale of everything, totally distorting the scale of your intentions. You can't overstate the effect of Artservices. You can't have music without people helping you." ■