



Robert Ashley (American Composers)

Kyle Gann

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This book explores the life and works of the pioneering opera composer Robert Ashley, one of the leading American composers of the post-Cage generation. Ashley's innovations began in the 1960s when he, along with Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma, and David Behrman, formed the Sonic Arts Union, a group that turned conceptualism toward electronics. He was also instrumental in the influential ONCE Group, a theatrical ensemble that toured extensively in the 1960s. During his tenure as its director, the ONCE Festival in Ann Arbor presented most of the decade's pioneers of the performing arts. Particularly known for his development of television operas beginning with *Perfect Lives*, Ashley spun a long series of similar text/music works, sometimes termed "performance novels." These massive pieces have been compared with Wagner's Ring Cycle for the vastness of their vision, though the materials are completely different, often incorporating noise backgrounds, vernacular music, and highly structured, even serialized, musical structures. Drawing on extensive research into Ashley's early years in Ann Arbor and interviews with Ashley and his collaborators, Kyle Gann chronicles the life and work of this musical innovator and provides an overview of the avant-garde milieu of the 1960s and 1970s to which he was so central. Gann examines all nine of Ashley's major operas to date in detail, along with many minor works, revealing the fanatical structures that underlie Ashley's music as well as private references hidden in his opera librettos.



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