Pillars (for David Moodey)

Robert Ashley

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Well, I guess this is sort of an imaginary piece, I don't know. Probably as things get more sophisticated, technically, probably somebody will be able to do it in the future, but I don't think it could be done. It certainly couldn't be done now without spending an awful lot of money. But I've been working with a wonderful lighting designer, named David Moodey. And I imagined a piece that was especially with him in mind.

I guess I should start by just describing the physical situation. I imagine a rather large gallery, flat floor, with maybe a hundred or two hundred very comfortable chairs, with an extraordinary lighting capability. The whole gallery ceiling would be a grid that would hold lights, and I imagine it would take David a couple of weeks to design the piece. What it would basically look like is that in front of the audience there would be two pillars, like Roman pillars, like pillars from antiquity, maybe a foot in diameter, I'm not sure — let's say each pillar is a foot in diameter and maybe ten feet tall but without any lintels, so it would just be the two pillars in front of the audience.

And basically the piece consists in the lighting designer, let's say it's David Moodey, having sort of ten or twelve light plots that bring the two pillars — oh, I should say the two pillars are about, I don't know, ten feet apart — having a light plot that brings those pillars into three dimensions, so no matter where you're sitting in the audience you become fascinated by the physical reality of the pillars. So the idea of the piece, the effect of the piece, would be for the lighting designer to change, to switch among those ten or twelve light plots, so that the audience was more and more drawn into the physical nature of the pillars.

Then, over the course of the piece, which might take forty-five minutes to an hour — I wanted it to take a long time. The lighting director, who is calling the plays (cues) to a technician at the lighting board, at a certain point in the piece — let's say he went through the whole repertory of the ten or twelve light designs — then he could go

through them in a sort of playful, random order. I think that his instruction to the person running the board should be amplified into the space so that the audience is completely aware of what he's doing. What he's doing, basically, is going from light plot #12 to light plot #2, and light plot #2 to light plot #8, you know, in that random order. And every time he goes to a different light plot, he pulls down the intensity of the lights so that the lighting of the pillars continues to, what would you say, continues to reinforce the physicality of the pillars, but as the piece gets from, say, a third of the duration to the end, and this would have to be determined by playing it many times. As the description, as the piece goes from the beginning to the end, and as he pulls down the intensity of each light plot. Of course this would have to be designed in advance, I mean I don't think you could necessarily devise a dozen light plots that were usable in this fashion, it would involve a lot of preparation, probably like many, many, many hours of preparation and thought, by a good lighting engineer like David Moodey. And then it would involve many hours of playing with that instrument.

So that he would reduce the amount of light directed to the pillars ever so gradually until he got to a point where there was virtually no light at all. So that the audience would see those pillars in their imagination in what would eventually be complete darkness. I mean I think you would have to plan the gallery so that there was no incidental light at all. And what you would be aiming for would be a situation toward the end of the piece where the light plots or the light programs would be on the edge of there not being any light at all. And then he would still be talking, he would say things like OK, let's choose #8 and the #8 light plot would come on and then he would say to the engineer let's bring that light plot down—I don't know how lighting guys talk to each other—but let's bring that down by a couple of degrees and then let the audience look at that for a few minutes. And he'd say OK, let's go now to #3. At this point #3 might be brighter than #8 so he would say OK, let's bring down #3 to a certain point. And then he would go, say, to #12 and again, #12 would probably be much brighter than #3. The whole thing wouldn't be bright, but it would have more intensity than #3, and so he would gradually reduce all of those light plans until the point where changing from one to another would result in changing one kind of darkness to another kind of darkness.

The last few minutes of the piece—we would have to play with this until it worked—the last few minutes of the piece would be changing light plans that were essentially without any light. So you'd say, "OK we'll go to #2 and there wouldn't be any light in #2, and you'd stay there for a few minutes and you'd say "OK, well let's go to #8," and the people in the audience would remember by this time, probably, or maybe, I hope, would remember what #8 looked like. And so he would be directing imaginary light changes in almost total darkness so that in the last few minutes there wouldn't actually be any light in the room except maybe occasionally unless you went occasionally to plan #1 and there was still some light in plan #1 he could bring that down, in other words he's bringing down each of those light plans to total darkness. So that in the last few minutes of the piece he's changing light plans that only exist in the memory of the audience, and the audience is actually

remembering the physicality of the two columns. In other words when you get to a certain point in the piece, they can't see the two columns any more because everything is in black, but their imagination of the two columns according to the dozen or so different light plans causes them to see something that they actually can't see. So you've gone, over the course of the piece, you've gone from something that was perfectly lit in ten or twelve different ways to something that is totally dark in ten or twelve different ways, but the audience is still seeing the pillars.

In other words the audience has—yeah, they've absorbed the varying degrees of physicality of the two pillars so that when the lighting designer is calling changes in the light plot, those changes only exist in the imagination of the audience. Does that make any sense to you? So in other words you've gone from total light to total darkness, but the pillars are still there and fully appreciated in a sensual way by the audience, because of their involvement in the light plots. So finally, when the piece is over, the room is totally dark, totally dark, but the audience can still see the pillars. Does that make sense? OK, I think we did it.

ROBERT ASHLEY was one of the most influential and innovative figures in American contemporary music. He pioneered opera-for-television with his 1980 *Perfect Lives*. Prior to that, he organized the ONCE Festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan and then later the ONCE Group, a music-theatre ensemble. His last work, *Crash*, was completed a few months before its premiere at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Ashley died March 3, while the work was in rehearsal. During his long and distinguished career, Ashley composed many musical works that include *Now Eleanor's Idea*, *Dust*, *Celestial Excursions*, *Concrete*, *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, and *Balseros*. They have toured worldwide. He provided music for the dance companies of Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, and Douglas Dunn. Ashley was a recipient of the John Cage Award for Music from the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts. His recorded music is available from Lovely Music, Nonesuch/Elektra, New World Records, Koch International, and Unsounds, among others. His writings appear in *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music*.