

Everyone knows Dennis Cleveland. You know him, in fact, the first time you see him. He stands up there with his dark sunglasses, his cool persona, his imperturbable calm, his infinite sympathy, his all-knowingness. Through his microphone he is connected to the universe itself. His extended arm encompasses all reality. He is the process through which the messiness of three-dimensional life is compressed, flattened, translated into the seamless two-dimensional myth of television. He is the transparent yet impermeable filter through which the guests on his talk show can safely direct their fear and anger at each other without consequences. He is The Great Mediator. He is Buddha. He is the ultimate Snake Oil Salesman. He is nonexistence itself.

Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. That's Mikel Rouse, creator of the first opera in the form of a talk show, just as Dennis Cleveland is the first musical talk show host. Cleveland/Rouse is the composer-host wielding the microphone in front of the giant video screens. The chorus of guests answer from the stage, while the soloists answer from among the audience, and their responses are transported from the real (rather, unreal) world of talk shows:

"That's messed up, man."  
"I know, but she's changed on me!"  
"If you don't love me the way I am then you can go."

The guests tell their interchangeable stories and express their interchangeable emotions in their interchangeable clichés. And Cleveland/Rouse goads them and calms them at once with his interchangeable jibes:

"She feels that you let her down though."  
"Why are you here today? There's gotta be someplace else."

Yet that isn't the whole story. Though Dennis Cleveland may pull the strings, he is equally a result of the process. Paradoxically, while talk show hosts Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey may not possess Dennis's cool objectivity, they are not as exposed, either. The story the guests and audience members tell is Dennis's story, and the "permanent pain" we hear is his as well as theirs: "All of my life I've been loveless /L-O-V-E-L-E-S." Like Emerson's sage, the talk-show host can sing:

They reckon ill who leave me out;  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter and the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

This is the universe. This is life. This is television.

No other composer has so succeeded at drawing an eloquent musical idiom from the popular vernacular as Mikel Rouse. Most composers find television and radio beneath them, unsuitable as objects of artistic interest; Rouse's music is reaching audiences because he disagrees. He watches TV, he observes couples at greasy spoons, and he

makes his art from what he sees and hears. At any given measure his songs seem to fit pop genres, yet their lyrics are embedded within dauntingly complex rhythmic structures. To research Dennis Cleveland, he sat in the live audiences at several New York-taped talk shows: Geraldo Rivera, Ricki Lake, Gordon Elliott. He recorded television talk shows and sampled things people said, looping them and listening hypnotically to capture the exact emotional nuances. And the result is an opera that springs from the very bedrock of American daily life.

No wonder, given Rouse's background. The son of a state trooper, he grew up in the rural Missouri "boot-heel" region near Arkansas. The slick New York sophistication of his music is in dramatic contrast to his upbringing, which was so rural that a favorite pastime was jumping from a horse onto a moving train. (In third grade he permanently changed the spelling, though not the pronunciation, of his name Michael to its present form.) Torn between music and art—he still carries a sketchbook in which he draws introspective caricatures of people at restaurants—he studied both, respectively, at the Conservatory of Music at the University of Missouri and the Kansas City Art Institute, which were across the street from each other. Here he formed a rock band, Tirez Tirez, which was the only local band progressive enough to open for Talking Heads when that group played Kansas City.

In 1979 the band moved to New York. Rouse studied African rhythms in A. M. Jones's Studies in African Music, and also chanced upon one of the few teachers in New York qualified to teach the Schillinger method. Joseph Schillinger (1895-1943) was a Russian-born theorist who believed, and tried voluminously to prove, that all artistic beauty was based on universal mathematical principles; for example, that pleasing rhythms could be generated from formulas like  $a^2 + 2ab + b^2$ . (His best-known disciples were George Gershwin and a whole slew of Tin Pan Alley songwriters.) After his untimely death, his system continued to be taught by his followers. "Schillinger was never a system like twelve-tone music," Rouse notes. "It was a set of vocabularies you could use to help your composition whether you were doing a pop tune or whatever, in any style. I was drawn to it because it was so naturally the way I thought."

Rouse's early magnum opus, the source work for his later rhythmic style, is *Quorum* (1984) for intricately sequenced Linn drum machine, probably the first work to rescue that instrument from its pop context. (The late Ulysses Dove later choreographed *Quorum* for a widely performed ensemble dance.) Although Rouse gave up strict use of the Schillinger method afterward, it is the source of his rhythmic complexity, the phrases that don't end where you expect them to, the different pulses that conflict with each other but somehow work out right in the end.

From *Quorum*, a totally rhythmic exercise, Rouse expanded his language in pieces for the rock quartet he formed in New York, Broken Consort: electric keyboard, bass, drums, and lead guitar or MIDI saxophone. During the late 1980s Rouse's Broken Consort was a staple of the Downtown scene, providing a fusion of rock conventions and classical techniques. Underlying patterns such as 3 against 5 against 8 spread out in hypnotically geometric patterns in Broken Consort pieces such as *Quick Thrust* (1984), a striking

twelve-tone rock piece that doesn't transpose its row and varies it only rhythmically, and the lushly melodic *Leading the Machine* (1990).

Since other composers were using similar rhythmic complexities, Rouse soon found himself at the center of a new musical movement that came to be called "totalism." Totalism carries connotations of having your cake and eating it too: that is, attracting rock audiences with its highly physical drum beat, while also engaging more sophisticated listeners through a background of great melodic and formal intricacy. Totalism is the most characteristic phenomenon among young composers in the 1990s, a result of having grown up on rock music and having been trained in the complexities of serialism and Asian and African music. While other composers (notably Ben Neill, John Luther Adams, David First, Michael Gordon) explored the noisier and more improvisatory aspects of totalism, no one else integrated its pop elements and numerical patterns into such a suavely blended idiom as Rouse did.

Then, in the early nineties, Rouse discovered a new wrinkle: the patterns he was creating with rhythms could be made with words as well. Rouse had always written the lyrics for his songs with Tirez Tirez, and he has a gift for using pop culture clichés to poke fun at American society. He experimented with speaking his texts in rhythm and overdubbing his own voice, so that the same text would be heard in slightly different versions at once, words echoing each other in intricate patterns. He called the technique "counterpoetry," on an analogy with a counterpoint of melodies.

Counterpoetry found an outlet in *Failing Kansas*, an "opera"—as long as one doesn't confuse the Downtown Manhattan meaning of that word with the nineteenth-century European sense. Lacking institutional support for most of their careers, Downtown composers write works that they can perform alone, and opera is no exception. Robert Ashley—the greatest of Downtown opera composers, to whom Dennis Cleveland is dedicated—sometimes performs his opera librettos as solo readings, sometimes accompanied by tape and pianist "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and more often lately with an ensemble of hand-picked singers and virtuosos. Likewise, Rouse performs *Failing Kansas* by himself, speaking his rhythmic counterpoetry over a tape. *Failing Kansas* is an operatic adaptation of Truman Capote's electric novel *In Cold Blood*, the true story of two released convicts who murder a family and are slowly tracked down. Since the story happened in Kansas, Rouse felt a kinship with the landscape and several of the characters involved.

Dennis Cleveland is an expansion of the genre of *Failing Kansas*, now with other speakers besides Rouse posing as guests and audience members. Where the earlier opera's text came from court documents and reported interviews, Dennis Cleveland's libretto is in Rouse's own words, threaded through with cryptic allusions to stories, some taken from his own life. Although Dennis Cleveland holds a mirror to American society more explicitly than *Failing Kansas* did, it is in many ways a more subtle and introspective work. The rhythmic intricacies take place within an overriding exploration of the feel of rock's 4/4 meter, with the many conflicting metric patterns in the background. For instance, in "Apparent Money," the repetition of "Money, Money, Mon-

ey, Money” every ten beats shift phases against “And leave off the last S for savings” every nine beats. Such cross-rhythms often pass by blended idiom as Rouse did.

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One impulse behind Dennis Cleveland was a book that has had a tremendous underground impact throughout Europe and North America: *Voltaire’s Bastards* by the Canadian polymath novelist, historian, and essayist John Ralston Saul. Voltaire’s *Bastards* takes as its sweeping premise that the West is declining through an over-reliance on reason and method to the exclusion of feeling, intuition, creativity, and even common sense. Rouse took some key phrases from the book: the initial words “Age of reason,” for example, and “altered bodies,” “beautiful murders,” “apparent money.” Even

more, he took from it reinforcement of his idea of talk-show host as priest. For, according to Saul,

The most accurate context in which to place television programming is that of general religious ritual... Like television, [religious rituals] eschew surprise, particularly creative surprise. Instead they flourish on the repetition of known formulas. People are drawn to television as they are to religions by the knowledge that they will find there what they already know... After watching the first minute of any television drama, most viewers could lay out the scenario that will follow, including the conclusion. Given the first line of banter in most scenes, a regular viewer could probably rhyme off the next three or four lines... There is more flexibility in a Catholic mass or in classic Chinese opera.<sup>1</sup>

It is this conception of television that Dennis Cleveland both subverts and alludes to pervasively. Dennis's critique of American life echoes Saul's: "The conformity that passes for individualism." "The idea of self-help books as literature." Both creator and victim of the television image, Dennis sees through the medium in which he exists:

The bombardment from TV is endless.  
I can bear it with suitable ire.  
The unwinding of constant remembrance  
brings to mind an unspeakable choir.

And so through the triologue of chorus, audience members, and talk-show host, we hear a counterpoint of Dennis Cleveland's lament for American life and his dawning epiphany, surrounded by the inarticulate locutions of American life. Complex but foot-tappable, visionary but down-to-earth, Dennis Cleveland is the most ambitious work yet by the composer who has most delicately straddled the tenuous line between pop conventions and classical structures.—Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann is a composer, music critic for *The Village Voice*, and author of *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge University Press).