

## THE STORY OF THE HUGE FACE OF AN ARRANGEMENT: VARISPEED'S ADAPTATION OF ROBERT ASHLEY'S PERFECT LIVES

Gelsey Bell  
with the members of Varispeed

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**Abstract:** Robert Ashley's opera *Perfect Lives* was conceived for the medium of television and first broadcast (by the UK's Channel 4) in 1984. Partly for this reason, and also for other factors (the apparently necessary involvement of Ashley himself as narrator; the absence of a complete, fully notated score) the work has received very few live performances. In 2011 the New York City-based performance collective Varispeed reconceived the work as a day-long, site-specific event, following Ashley's available notations and recorded performances in broad outline but departing from them in creative ways. In this article Varispeed founding member Gelsey Bell describes the working processes and decision-making that informed the collective's approach to this experimental classic.

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### 'The People In it... or On it'

Robert Ashley's 1983 classic *Perfect Lives* is an opera made for television. When Ashley was beginning the piece in the wake of finishing *Music with Roots in the Aether* (1976), television had not yet become the 'large-scale corporate advertising billboard' it is today and Ashley imagined there would be room for a flourishing of a decidedly American kind of opera that did not merely imitate the traditions of Europe.<sup>1</sup> He decided the best place for American opera would be outside of the restrictive architecture of the opera house and in 'our living rooms'.<sup>2</sup> However, though the opera was aired on and partly funded by Channel 4, in the UK, it has never aired in

<sup>1</sup> See Robert Ashley, *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music* (Cologne: MusikTexte, 2009), 132. And Bianca Michaels, 'Interview with Robert Ashley', *The Opera Quarterly*, 22 (2006), 538: 'There was at that time the idea that there would be a lot of independent television productions – they didn't all have to come out of Hollywood or New York. I thought that it would be possible for American composers to work in their own locations and make pieces that would be distributed through television as opposed to being distributed through scores and realized by different people depending on where the scores landed, as it is the European tradition. So I made a conscious decision for myself that I was going to write opera for television. Also, television is so important in American culture'.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Ashley, *Perfect Lives* (New York: Archer Fields and Burning Books, 1991), 168.

America.<sup>3</sup> Varispeed's adaptation of *Perfect Lives* skips the occluded broadcast mediation and instead goes physically into the living room.

The opera follows the events in a small Midwestern town over the course of a single day, through seven approximately 25-minute episodes. The plot revolves around a perfect (philosophical and artful) crime: to remove all the money from the local bank for one day and then return it and let the 'whole world know that it was missing'.<sup>4</sup> The captain of the high-school football team, 'D' (who works at the bank), and his sister Isolde decide to place the money in the car of Gwyn (a teller at the bank) and Ed, who are driving to Indiana for a day in order to elope. Other characters are introduced over the course of the work, for instance Raoul de Noget, a travelling singer, and his companion Buddy, 'the World's Greatest Piano Player', who is ever-present throughout the original television production in shots of 'Blue' Gene Tyranny's often-bejewelled fingers tickling the ivories. Since the story is 'recounted, not enacted' by a single narrator (with the help of a chorus) rather than a cast of characters in dialogue, the tale unfolds in only an obscured manner, simultaneously obfuscating its narrative significance and whetting the spectators' appetite with questions that take a number of viewings to unravel.<sup>5</sup> Each episode takes place at a particular time of day (every two hours from 11 a. m. to 11 p.m.) and is named for the generic location where it takes place ('The Park', 'The Supermarket', 'The Church', 'The Living Room', etc.). Varispeed's adaptation performs the episodes chronologically (the original skipped around) in site-specific locations that match the episode's title.<sup>6</sup>

Varispeed is a New York City-based performance collective that was formed through the experience of doing this opera.<sup>7</sup> We are Aliza Simons, Dave Ruder, Paul Pinto, Brian McCorkle and me, Gelsey Bell. Doing *Perfect Lives* as a site-specific, all-day event was Ruder's brainchild. In 2008, he was heavily influenced by a series of unauthorised outdoor performances, such as the guerrilla-style dance performances of Abigail Levine and two cover-to-cover readings of Philip K. Dick's *VALIS* organised by Ben Simington. The *VALIS* readings, done overnight on a bridge and in a subway station, suggested that to make a better connection with one's favourite works of art, one should start by sharing them publicly. *Perfect Lives* had the convenient addition of specifying places and times. After Ruder met Aliza Simons in early 2009, at a performance of one of Ashley's operas at LaMama in New York City, he shared his plan for public interpretation, and the two invited a few friends to take part in the reading on a beautiful summer day in Brooklyn. Performers in this early version spoke in free time, rarely sang, and had no accompaniment. With a high point of six participants for 'The Bank' and a low point of one for most of 'The Backyard', Ruder and company made it through the opera with a rush of new understandings of the text, plot,

<sup>3</sup> A live performance version of the piece was also made and toured for many years with the original cast. An example of this is featured in the Peter Greenaway's documentary *Four American Composers: Robert Ashley* (1983).

<sup>4</sup> Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Ashley, *Outside of Time*, 230.

<sup>6</sup> Video material from *Perfect Lives Manhattan* is available online at <http://vimeo.com/varispeed> (accessed November 21 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The name Varispeed is itself homage to Ashley, who numbers 'the Varispeed' among his four-syllable recurring phrases of involuntary speech. See Ashley, *Outside of Time*, 544. Other Varispeed adaptations have included a site-specific all-night performance of John Cage's *Empty Words* (1974) and an assortment of Arthur Jarvinen's *Adult Party Games from the Leisure Planet*, a collection of conceptual scores from throughout his career.

characters and author. The piece felt accessible as never before, for its sounds, its jokes and its language.

Two years later, Ruder met Brian McCorkle, Paul Pinto and me while performing in *TIME: A Complete Explanation in Three Parts* (2011), a collaboratively written performance work created by Panoply Performance Laboratory (which McCorkle heads with Esther Neff) and thingNY (an experimental music ensemble founded by Pinto of which I am a core member, along with Erin Rogers, Jeff Young and others including Dave Ruder). The five of us decided to do another casual, daylong reading on 7 June 2011. This became what we now refer to as *Perfect Lives Brooklyn*.

In the original, the meat of each episode lies in Ashley's delivery of the text – marked by his unique composition style in which vocalisations ride a line between speech and song – and the virtuosic piano playing of *Tyranny*.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Jill Kroesen and David Van Tieghem form a chorus, though their official roles were as Isolde and her brother 'D'. For *Perfect Lives Brooklyn*, we decided to distribute the narration of the episodes evenly among us, splitting up 'The Living Room' and 'The Bar', with each performer otherwise becoming the lead in one episode. We chose locations within walking distance of one another in North Brooklyn, using my backyard and living room as a nexus. The idea of the performance was a casual reading among friends in order to 'deepen our connection with the piece and spread the gospel of one of the classics'.<sup>9</sup> We used what was available to us in order to perform: primarily the published libretto, enhanced by our knowledge of the audio and video recordings. We all came to the piece with different kinds and degrees of knowledge, on a spectrum from knowing certain episodes inside and out to not being familiar with any of them and using this event as a way simply to get to know the work better.<sup>10</sup> Our accompaniment was makeshift and mobile (mostly just melodicas and a four-octave, battery-powered Casio keyboard), and in our announcements about the event we made it clear that we did not intend to perform any sort of authoritative version of the piece. We rehearsed sections of it privately, deciding that a group rehearsal was unnecessary for such a casual event.

Despite our lack of advertising (we told friends, sent a few emails, made a blog a week and a half before and would tweet through the thingNY twitter), a number of people came out to share the day with us. This is in no small part due to the composer himself. None of us had yet met Ashley, but a close friend knew him and told us to let him know what we were up to (it certainly didn't occur to us to ask permission since the event was so informal). Ruder emailed him the day before the event and within hours the 81-year-old Ashley replied that he'd rented a zip car for the day and would see us there. He and

<sup>8</sup> In a lecture in 2000 Ashley quipped, 'I will continue to make operas that will allow the journalists to say, "That's not singing. That's talking." It will be a well-kept secret. I mean, that it is singing'. Ashley, 'The Future Of Music' ed. Karen Reynolds. <http://www.rogerreynolds.com/futureofmusic/ashley.html> (accessed 5 August 2011), 36. Ashley has also clarified that he distinguishes the piece as song, rather than poetry, in the way *The Iliad* is song (*Perfect Lives*, 168). From my own experience, the categorisation of song lies in the performance approach and listening technique – that is to say, in the mouth and ear of the beholder.

<sup>9</sup> Ruder in Varispeed, 'What Is This All About?' *You Coo Coo You Coo Coo Too* (30 May 2011). <http://perfectivesbrooklyn2011.wordpress.com/page/3/> (accessed 26 October 2013).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, see Simons in Varispeed, 'This is the Celebration of the Changing of the Light'. *You Coo Coo You Coo Coo Too* (5 June 2011) <http://perfectivesbrooklyn2011.wordpress.com/2011/06/05/this-is-the-celebration-of-the-changing-of-the-light/> (accessed 26 October 2013).

Mimi Johnson spent most of the day with us.<sup>11</sup> To augment our own friends, strangers showed up after seeing an announcement Ashley had posted on his website, and a representative from Performa (the performance biennial that had commissioned a production of Ashley's *That Morning Thing* for the fall) joined the fray and took a few pictures. It was through the support of Ashley and Johnson that Performa asked us to perform the piece in Manhattan that November. That performance became *Perfect Lives Manhattan*. In addition, we performed *Perfect Lives Catskills* in the summer of 2013, produced by Mount Tremper Arts in the Catskills area of New York State, and are now preparing for *Perfect Lives Pittsburgh*, hosted by Alia Musica, which will take place in May 2014.

Our performances since *Perfect Lives Brooklyn* have taken on a different quality – a great deal of thought has been put into the arrangements musically, visually and conceptually. They have entailed months of rehearsals and discussions and therefore have taken on different rhythms of revelation. However, we have tried always to remember the lightness of our first performance and not lose the spirit of discovery, celebration and playfulness that guided it.

Ashley has never worked with us on the piece, but we have taken many social opportunities to ask him questions. He has been nothing but generous with his time and his ideas.<sup>12</sup> In addition, we all ended up performing in the new version of *That Morning Thing* and will soon be working with him on his latest opera, *Crash*, to be premiered at the Whitney Museum in April 2014. These interactions have taught us a great deal about Ashley's methods and aesthetics, but have never tempted us to attempt authentic re-performances of his work. Our arrangements of *Perfect Lives* are our own, and none of us, Ashley included, would want it any other way.

With the possible exception of Ruder, I don't think any of the members of Varispeed realised how in-line our natural methods of working were with Ashley's ideas when we started working on *Perfect Lives*. In his book *Outside of Time*, Ashley declares: 'Anybody who wanted to produce one of the operas could work from the compact disc, which represents the way the opera is to be performed and how it is supposed to sound. Except for the rhythmic treatment of the words, which remains a notated constant, there is no score from which to make the orchestra'.<sup>13</sup> Ashley encourages learning the music by listening rather than sight-reading, and we have found our relationship to the material is richer because of this focus on listening and reliance on embodied memory. After listening to the available recorded versions of the piece, we grab harmonic movements, bass lines, melodies and timbres, and use what we like. We are unabashed about putting our own musical ideas into the arrangement and making the piece our own. The only thing we hold sacred is the text itself. We even take or leave the beat structures set up for vocals in the original, depending on the particular episode. Since we are all composers and songwriters in our own right, there is no drought of ideas. However, it is important to note that we all love the original and

<sup>11</sup> Johnson is Ashley's wife in addition to being well known as the founder of Lovely Music and Performing Artservices. She is also a performer in some of Ashley's works, for instance as the female voice in *Automatic Writing*.

<sup>12</sup> We have also been blessed by Mimi Johnson's generosity, sometimes in the name of Lovely Music, as well as by that of Melody Sumner Carnahan and Michael Sumner who, on behalf of Burning Books, sent us free copies of the libretto as well as a host of other printed goodies, like Ashley's first novel *Quicksand* (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Ashley, *Outside of Time*, 190.



Figure 1:

*Perfect Lives Manhattan*. Gelsey Bell narrates 'The Park'. Behind her (left to right): Brian McCorkle on casio keyboard, Dave Ruder on electric guitar, Paul Pinto on drums, and Aliza Simons on euphonium. 6 November 2011. Washington Square Park, New York, NY (Photo by Jeffrey Young)

our arrangements come from a place of respect and of wanting to dwell in our favourite parts. In fact, our relationship to the piece holds a strange balance between Antonin Artaud's 'No More Masterpieces' and a kind of respectful awe only afforded to tomes like the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

We have kept all of the original keys, mostly because there has been no reason to change them. Each time we've performed the piece we have kept some arrangements intact and drastically changed others, simply to try out something new. It is not so different from Ashley's initial idea that the opera for television would never be finished, leaving the editing decisions to the television producer who decided to air the project, and making the final product have 'the form of a first decision'.<sup>15</sup> Aside from a few cases, we have not involved notated music in the process of arranging the piece, using lead sheets, timbre choices and moods to put in place a structure to guide us in performance, and leaving room for improvisation and a need for constant active listening.

In our own way, we try to stay true to Ashley's proclamation that *Perfect Lives* is 'a masterpiece of collaboration'.<sup>16</sup> There are endless discussions about all aspects of the performance. Together we choose who will act as the narrator of each episode and then, for the most part, the member who is narrating is in charge of arranging the episode. Since, like any ensemble, we have a tendency to disagree from time to time, this dividing of power helps us work together without diminishing the rigour of any individual's idea.

<sup>14</sup> 'Masterpieces of the past are good for the past: they are not good for us. We have the right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a way that belongs to us, a way that is immediate and direct, corresponding to present modes of feeling, and understandable to everyone'. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 74.

<sup>15</sup> Ashley, *Outside of Time*, 236.

<sup>16</sup> Ashley, *Outside of Time*, 250.



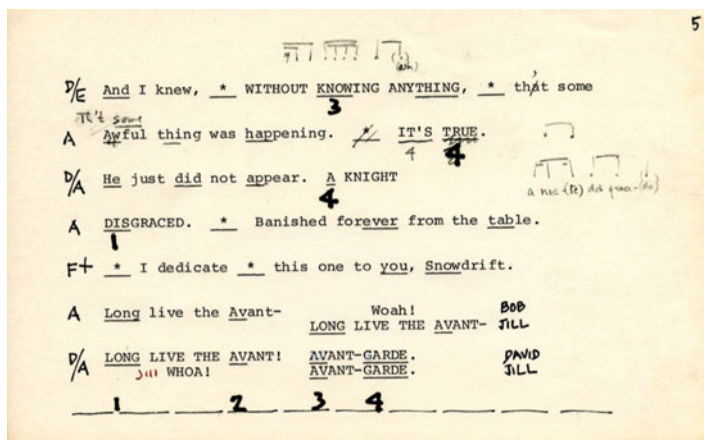


Figure 2:

A note card from 'The Church' episode of *Perfect Lives* from Robert Ashley's private score. Individual beats indicated by underlining, harmonic structure on the left margin, and chorus sections in all caps (Courtesy of Robert Ashley)

## Music

In the original, Ashley used a template for every aspect of the opera to follow and work within. One characteristic of the template was a beat structure for the vocals and accompaniment. Each episode was structured on a tempo of 72 beats per minute and given a certain beat pattern or metre (for instance 13, or 8 + 5, beats in 'The Park', 4 beats in 'The Church', alternating between 3 and 4 beats in 'The Bar', etc.). We treat the beat and the text as the structure of the piece, while all other musical elements can be swapped or thrown out. While we follow the beat structure of the text as laid out in the libretto in certain sections, our arrangements make use of various approaches to vocal delivery. Much more of our performance is in free time than is true of the original. The published libretto reflects Ashley's beat structures to the extent that it follows the same line breaks, but it does not indicate where the stress of individual beats lie as it does in most of his personal score, of which we were sent scans prior to *Perfect Lives Manhattan*. In most cases, the original metres were kept in the accompaniment while the articulation of the voice in that metre changed. One instance where we did not completely follow the original metre was in Simons's arrangement of 'The Backyard', which drew more from the original *Private Parts* audio recording, released in 1977 as a proto-version of *Perfect Lives*, than the eventual *Perfect Lives* video. Rather than alternating between structures of 5 beats and 6 beats, we held a steady 6-beat pattern in the tabla during the entire episode.

There are four ways in which the voice interacted with the beat:

1. We totally ignored Ashley's suggestion of tempo or metre. This was the case for most of *Perfect Lives Brooklyn*. It's also the case for my arrangement of 'The Park' or for the free-rhythm sections of Pinto's 'The Supermarket'.
2. We followed Ashley's line breaks, dividing a set amount of text per bar. This happened fairly often, for instance in parts of both Ruder and Simons's arrangements of 'The Church', Ruder's arrangement of 'The Park' and Simons's arrangement of 'The Backyard'. Pinto also did this for most of 'The Supermarket', with an occasional 'double time', fitting two lines into a single 5-beat bar.
3. We performed lines with exact beat placement. This happened most often with any song material that had specific melodies:



Fig. 3 - Colour online, B/W in print

Figure 3:

*Perfect Lives Catskills*. Brian McCorkle narrates 'The Bank' in Phoenecia, NY. Behind him (left to right): Gelsey Bell on casio keyboard, Paul Pinto on drums, Dave Ruder on guitar, and Aliza Simons on euphonium. 17 August 2013 (Photo by Mathew Pokoik)

the chorus in 'The Supermarket' or the song on the radio in 'The Bank'. This was also the case for the chorus of counting in 'The Backyard' and certain portions of 'The Bar' ('Chew Crash Blink' as well as the counting). Sometimes this was taken from Ashley's own notation, transcribed from recordings or composed anew by one of us.

4. We strictly followed the beat of 72 beats per minute but ignored the designated metre. For instance, in 'The Bank' episode, any section that did not include the song on the radio was felt as a steady 1, rather than a bar of 9.

Ashley has not been consistent among his own performances in how his vocal precision interacts with the beat. For instance, if you compare the *Private Parts* recording, the video recording and the Greenaway documentation for 'The Park', each differs from any of the others, and none of them conform to what is notated in his personal score. These inconsistencies make us feel more comfortable to explore many variations.

There are other ways we have used the recorded performances besides the matter of how they relate to the beat. For instance, for the vocal part of 'The Bank', McCorkle notated where Ashley made audible breaths and used that as a guide in his delivery. There are also certain vocal quirks that we have retained that feel as essential to the piece as the text itself; for example, Ashley's neighing inflection when vocalising 'Whoa Lucille' in 'The Church' or Kroesen's nasal choral voice in 'The Bank', particularly for the much-repeated line, 'Mostly she helps people count their money. She likes it'.

In addition, it cannot be overstated how equally indebted we are to Tyranny's piano playing and the compositional choices he made musically. There are a great many instances when we are drawing from his work on the recordings. For instance, in Ruder's

arrangements of 'The Living Room' the original piano parts were transcribed and expanded for strings, flute and electric organ. In *Perfect Lives Manhattan*, McCorkle used Kyle Gann's transcription of Tyranny's playing in the original to close out 'The Backyard', while I transcribed the piano solo from the recording and condensed it to make the accordion part for the end of my arrangement.<sup>17</sup> Not only the harmonic movement but also the kind of phrasing and feel informed McCorkle's piano playing for Ruder's arrangement of 'The Park' and Simons's arrangement of 'The Church'. Other licks and chord progressions were deemed essential or beneficial, and were deployed throughout, such as the piano riffs at the end of 'The Bar'.

In terms of instrumentation, the original scoring for piano, synthesizers and electric percussion supporting three voices has been expanded into larger formations. Just as our vocal interpretations don't seek simply to recreate Ashley's original intoning, it would be in vain to try to recreate the equally virtuosic playing of Tyranny. We take advantage not only of the many instruments the five of us are most comfortable playing, but also of working with guest performers. As we tour the piece, working with local musicians is a way we enjoy of engaging with the musical community on a more extensive basis. For instance, for *Perfect Lives Catskills* we worked with a diverse assortment of musicians from 16-year old high-school student and cellist Asa Spurlock, to saxophonist Bill Ylitalo, whom we first came across in his work as the plumber for Mount Tremper Arts, to Ray Spiegel, a world-renowned tabla player. For the forthcoming *Perfect Lives Pittsburgh*, we will be working with Alia Musica, a collective of composers and performers, to mould our arrangements for the instruments they play. Having a free-flowing instrumentation – at least for particular episodes – allows us the freedom to engage more people in the performance of the piece and keep our arrangements vital to each community. In fact, for the last episode, 'The Bar', of *Perfect Lives Manhattan*, we made a lead sheet that we handed out to friends who came with instruments.

Being a group of five has allowed us to expand the number of vocal styles contained within the piece. The style of vocal delivery becomes an issue of timbre with equal weight and variety as instrumental accompaniment. McCorkle's performance of 'The Bank' and Ruder or Simons's performance of 'The Church' are examples in which the narrator is heard using a great many styles within a single episode. This is in many ways connected to their tempo and the way the performers decide to interact with the beat and metre, but is also affected by the subject matter – from bombastic to contemplative. Each of us has our own vocal quirks. Not only do we have different regional accents, covering Northern California, Michigan, Western Pennsylvania and New York City, but we have our own habits of inflection and intonation that are accentuated by the attention to musicality that our natural speaking voices are given in this piece.

A further significance in being a collective with a wide breadth of musical experiences and influences lies in our ability to manifest as numerous different types of musical groups. Our arrangements have taken advantage – sonically, visually and in manner of vocal presentation – of a broad range of musical genres. In *Perfect Lives Brooklyn*, we

<sup>17</sup> Kyle Gann, 'Transcription from 'The Backyard' in *Perfect Lives*'. <http://kylegann.com/Backyard-transcription.html> (accessed 26 October 2013).



had the relatively static effect of a few street musicians backing up a lone reader. With our more sophisticated arrangements since then, we have played with the genres of boogie-woogie, punk, classical chamber music, new age, lounge, indie pop and experimental.

After learning so much by vocalising the text out loud in *Perfect Lives Brooklyn*, I wanted to make sure audience members had a chance to experience a similar kind of embodied learning. So, playing off of the already engrained rituals of church-going, we added an audience hymnal to 'The Church' in subsequent performances. Halfway through the episode, there is an approximately five-minute section when the audience joins together as the chorus in a rapid call-and-response with the narrator. The text of this section revolves around social arrangements (the episode recounts a marriage ceremony, after all) and linguistic sonic arrangement. This section is populated with lines such as

*Sound is the only thing we can arrange. So, the rule  
Don't Talk To Yourself has many meanings.*<sup>18</sup>

and

*Language has sense built in. It's easy to  
Make sense. To make no sense is possible  
But hard. Language does not have truth built in.*<sup>19</sup>

Conflating the musicality of talking with social relationships in a weaving of voices between audience and narrator garners a type of embodied understanding in the sheer activity of mouths. These passages didn't really make sense to me until I said them out loud with others.

### Landscape

Because the piece is performed chronologically in a single day (with each episode being performed at the time of day in which it takes place in the narrative), the event ties itself quite literally to the rhythms of the earth's rotation and the audience's biorhythms. The exactness of time and place for an opera that is recounting a story, rather than illustrating it (with perhaps the exception of the dialogue in 'The Living Room', depending on how it is arranged), provides a literalness or, as Ashley puts it, 'makes it into a narrative piece'.<sup>20</sup> For instance, 'The Bank' takes place at 1 p.m., about the time someone would stop by a bank, and 'The Backyard' takes place at 7 p.m., about the time the sun would be setting in the summer, making the lines in the episode that describe different stages of the sunset, from 'gloaming' to 'nautical twilight' to 'clair de lune', even more powerful. The energy in 'The Bar', which takes place at 11 p.m., is all the more carousing for taking place after a long day of performance. One's circadian rhythms throughout the day are mirrored in the music, and the drama of the opera feeds off the changing of the light.

In addition, each place elicits particular kinds of social behaviour and ways of engaging with music. We took into account the different ways people *expect* to engage with music in these different places. For instance, one holds one's body more modestly and speaks in hushed

<sup>18</sup> Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, 118–19. Italics indicate text for the chorus while the Narrator's text is in roman.

<sup>19</sup> Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, 121.

<sup>20</sup> Ashley in Corinne Ramey, 'Modern Opera, Heading for the Hills'. *Wall Street Journal* (12 August 2013), A22.



Fig. 4 - Colour online, B/W in print

Figure 4:

*Perfect Lives Brooklyn*. A small crowd sits on the street for 'The Church'. Dave Ruder as the Narrator, Paul Pinto, Gelsey Bell, and Aliza Simons as the chorus, Brian McCorkle on casio keyboard. Robert Ashley leans on a conveniently placed car. 7 June 2011. Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Transfiguration, Brooklyn, NY (Photo by Mimi Johnson)

tones at a church, whereas one may shout and dance at a bar. We also kept in mind who might happen upon the performance and what their expectations would be. 'The Supermarket' or 'The Park' are always great examples of the different ways people engage with unexpected musical performance. In a park it's not that strange, whereas in a supermarket it is almost shocking.

In Simons's arrangement of 'The Backyard', we handed out small hand-held, wind-up radios to the audience to transmit the soft lilt of the choruses with a radiophonic intimacy. The radios opened up a space of memory and hinted at both Isolde's inner voice counting, as well as a kind of ghosting of the characters that coexisted with her in the backyard during a picnic. The same kind of broadening of considerations for our arrangement influenced the idea to have dancing in 'The Bar'. The chorus performers (Simons, Ruder and me for *Perfect Lives Manhattan* and Simons and me for *Perfect Lives Catskills*) functioned as back-up dancers, encouraging the audience to dance with us, particularly as the episode – and the whole long day – came to a close.

Sites can also take on political or social resonance that adds a layer or even prism through which to hear Ashley's text. For instance, *Perfect Lives Manhattan* took place during Occupy Wall Street's encampment at Zuccotti Park, in the financial district. We had discussed doing 'The Bank' episode at Zuccotti Park, but eventually decided against it because of our need for amplification (and the complicated politics between the Occupy movement and the city) and the desire to be within walking distance of the Performa headquarters, around which the other episodes were located. However, with that in mind we chose to perform the episode in front of a Citibank, near Washington Square Park (Fig. 5), that had received a lot of



Figure 5:

*Perfect Lives Manhattan*. 'The Bank' outside Citibank near Washington Square Park in New York, NY. Left to right: Gelsey Bell (sitting) on casio keyboard, Dave Ruder on guitar, Aliza Simons on euphonium, Paul Pinto on drums, and Brian McCorkle (sitting) as Narrator. 6 November 2011 (photo by Jeffrey Young)

press a few weeks earlier for locking patrons in the bank during an Occupy protest that was mishandled by the police.<sup>21</sup> Our hope was that the generic idea of the small-town bank would resonate with the politics surrounding big-name banks in the city, and this Citibank in particular.

Just as we used specific sonic ideas from the original, we have also retained some staging ideas and recreated particular televisual images. For instance, in 'The Supermarket', Ruder and I act as the old couple described in the text while singing the chorus parts, looking at products on the supermarket shelves in the spirit of Kroesen and Van Tieghem in the original video, reading labels with confused looks. We have also allowed influence to flow in the other direction; rather than bringing our ideas to the space, we have allowed the arrangement to be made in conversation with how the space is already set up. For instance, in my arrangement of 'The Backyard' for *Perfect Lives Catskills*, most of the musicians and audience inhabited the Mount Tremper Arts vegetable garden, which is surrounded by grass on all sides. I choreographed Simons to play accordion while walking in a circle around the garden bed at very specific times in the text and eventually to walk down towards the white farmhouse a little down the hill at the end of the episode. Text, staging and musical arrangement were married as best fits the natural setting.

Simons has often remarked how illuminating it was for her to perform as the narrator in 'The Backyard' and inhabit the description of 'a

<sup>21</sup> For more information see Ben Popken, 'Protesters Arrested at Citibank for Making a Scene, Closing their Accounts', *Consumerist* (18 October 2011). <http://consumerist.com/2011/10/18/protesters-arrested-at-citibank-for-making-a-scene-closing-their-accounts/> (accessed 26 October 2013).





Figure 6:

*Perfect Lives Brooklyn*. Aliza Simons narrates 'The Backyard', with Woody Leslie on tabla to her left, Paul Pinto on percussion and Brian McCorkle on melodica behind her, and Gelsey Bell on casio keyboard to her right. 7 June 2011. Gelsey Bell's backyard in Brooklyn, NY (Photo by Mimi Johnson)

woman nearing 30 and not yet spoken for', gaining a certain degree of feminist power over the arrangement of the female character.<sup>22</sup> I used this kind of gender consideration for my arrangement of 'The Backyard', placing Pinto, Ruder and McCorkle clumped together as the 'three men [who] have loved her', with Simons as the circling Isolde.<sup>23</sup> For 'The Living Room' in *Perfect Lives Manhattan*, we worked with two guest vocalists, Mendi and Keith Obadike (who we'd met at *Perfect Lives Brooklyn*), flipping the traditional gender roles with Mendi singing the Sheriff's dialogue and Keith singing his wife Ida's dialogue. In a similar fashion, we discovered that 'The Park' episode is more successfully narrated by a man, since the many masturbation jokes seemed to land better that way, than they did when I read it – not that a woman couldn't successfully get those jokes across, but it would require a certain kind of hamming up that doesn't actually serve the episode.

Since *Perfect Lives Brooklyn* took place in my home and neighbourhood and *Perfect Lives Manhattan* took place in the area of Manhattan where Simons grew up, both of us have had particularly unique experiences of mapping the *Perfect Lives* mythology onto our own lived experience. After *Perfect Lives Brooklyn* I found myself endowed with a new sense of belonging to the places we had inhabited – not just my backyard and living room, but my local supermarket and bar as well – as if they contained irreducible energetic traces of the event. Since Ruder grew up in Pittsburgh and Pinto went there for college, we imagine they may have similar experiences in the forthcoming May 2014 performance.

The impulse to bring opera onto the television screen seems to me like a desire to bring storytelling and music into the everyday lives of people: to marry stories with a sense of place to actual places. Ashley's operas are not of exoticism and spectacle, but reflectivity and introspection. They are not meant to be elitist (despite what some may think of the avant-garde), but familiar and inviting. The desire for

<sup>22</sup> Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, xvii.

<sup>23</sup> Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, 140.



Fig. 7 - Colour online. B/W in print

Figure 7:

*Perfect Lives Catskills*. Paul Pinto narrates 'The Supermarket' with a parade of musicians and audience members behind him. Dave Ruder and Gelsey Bell look at food products as the chorus of oldsters. 17 August 2013. Boiceville IGA, Boiceville, NY (Photo by Mathew Pokoik)

*Perfect Lives* to be collaborative and slightly unfinished is an aspiration to guide unknown others into the fold of creating the work. It begs not to be read about, but to be read – out loud, in the street with a group of friends. It begs to be devoured as a party. *Varispeed* will continue to do the piece for a long time because we find it endlessly giving and supportive of our infinitely changing ideas. The same could be true of yours.

### Scene Order with Musical Structures

#### *Original*<sup>24</sup>

1. The Park, 11AM: 13 beats (8 + 5); D major
2. The Supermarket, 3PM: 5 beats; F minor
3. The Bank, 1PM: 9 beats (5 + 4 or 4 + 5); A-flat major
4. The Bar, 11PM: 7 beats (4 + 3 or 3 + 4); D minor
5. The Living Room, 9PM: 4 beats divided into triplets; A-flat major
6. The Church, 5PM: 4 beats; A major
7. The Backyard, 7PM: 5 beats or 6 beats in alternating sections; G major

#### *Varispeed's Arrangement*

1. The Park, 11AM: 13 beats (8 + 5); D major
2. The Bank, 1PM: alternating sections of 1 beat and 9 beats; A-flat major
3. The Supermarket, 3PM: alternating sections of 5 beats and free rhythm; F minor
4. The Church, 5PM: alternating sections of 1 beat and 4 beats; A major

<sup>24</sup> For more on Ashley's ideas about this structuring of *Perfect Lives* see Ashley, *Outside of Time*, pp. 250–74.



5. The Backyard, 7<sup>PM</sup>: 6 beats; G major
6. The Living Room, 9<sup>PM</sup>: 12/8 metre with quavers as 144 beats per bar; A flat major
7. The Bar, 11<sup>PM</sup>: 7 beats (4 + 3); D minor

### **An Example of Instrumentation**

*Perfect Lives Manhattan*, November 6, 2011

1. The Park: Narrator (Gelsey Bell), synth (Brian McCorkle), guitar (Dave Ruder), drums (Paul Pinto), euphonium (Aliza Simons), chorus (all but Gelsey).
2. The Bank: Narrator (Brian McCorkle), synth (Gelsey Bell), guitar (Dave Ruder), drums (Paul Pinto), euphonium (Aliza Simons), chorus (all but Brian).
3. The Supermarket: Narrator (Paul Pinto), synth (Brian McCorkle), melodica (Aliza Simons), chorus (Dave Ruder and Gelsey Bell), *with* snare drum (Dave Grollman), violin (Jeffrey Young), melodica and saxophone (Erin Rogers).
4. The Church: Narrator (Dave Ruder), melodica (Gelsey Bell), euphonium (Aliza Simons), guitar (Brian McCorkle), piano (Paul Pinto), *with* saxophone (Erin Rogers), violin (Jeffrey Young), chorus (all but Dave Ruder)
5. The Backyard: Narrator (Aliza Simons), synth (Gelsey Bell), piano (Brian McCorkle), chorus (Dave Ruder, Paul Pinto, Gelsey Bell), *with* tabla (Woody Leslie), clarinets (Lea Bertucci and Matt Frey).
6. The Living Room: Narrators (Aliza Simons, *with* Mendi and Keith Obadike), organ keyboard (Brian McCorkle), chorus (Dave Ruder, Gelsey Bell, Paul Pinto), *with* violins (Jeffrey Young and Tom Swafford), flute (Ellen O'Meara).
7. The Bar: Narrators (Brian McCorkle and Paul Pinto), drums (Brian McCorkle and Paul Pinto), chorus (Aliza Simons, Dave Ruder, Gelsey Bell), *with* piano keyboard (Dave Malloy), accordion (Rick Burkhardt), violin (Jeffrey Young).