

Mardi-Ellen Hill's opera, "Vaugirard," forms a grand trajectory

Palmer Poroner (c)

"So you can talk by telephone to Pittsburgh in 30 seconds? I'll do so instantly -- in my imagination," wrote Henry David Thoreau many years ago. Even today, when telecommunications is making all citizens global, the artist is there already, for inventors and creators world wide have a communality in their imagination. Such is proving to be the case in the international community of artists who collaborate to create the opera Vaugirard.

Artists possess a very few basic ideas, which they call concepts, and they hold on to them for a long time. The "Happenings," an impromptu theatrical form that began in the late fifties, is now superseded in avant garde circles by "Performance Art," also created mainly by visual artists. Witness as well Environmental Art, which has been popular for 50 years and is still considered new.

I mention these few 'new' concepts because they now have relevance to the push to multi media art, which exploded in the late sixties and continues to grow. Some examples are poetry written into paintings, an ongoing occurrence, the ever more popular combining of painting and sculpture, as well as silk screen prints on paintings, very successful in the Pop Art era of the early sixties. The late Jean Tinguely's self destruct kinetic sculpture is another striking example.

Multi media art is already feeling the influence of evolution and is becoming so elaborate as to go beyond two or three media at once and is itself revolving into a new art form. This has become apparent in New York for some years. Since art is global and ideas pop up simultaneously everywhere, the Guggenheim Museum has been able to find a similar effort in Germany and is now exhibiting the work of Rebecca Horne, an artist who has many ingredients of the new and popular in her person and her work, including 'new' media, such as stuffed body sculptures, film, performances, site specific installations, etc.

Opera is the ideal and inevitable art form for combining media, for it is an integrated multi media art form that has withstood the tests of hundreds of years. The abstract nature of music is excellent as a glue to integrate diverse media. Opera combines dancing, music, acting, theatrical decor, at a minimum. Though its contemporaneity is suspect because its form was

defined in an earlier era, opera is a powerful resource, a treasure house of cultural potential.

Any contemporary opera, like the few successes in the recent past, must contain basic new approaches which include radical changes in structure. Such is the case with "Vaugirard," an opera in progress by composer Mardi- Ellen Hill. To call this work an opera or a multi media art form, or even global gives no concept at all of the compass of such a multi layered work. It has been described thus:

'Vaugirard is a meditation on the transparency of time. It takes as its theme la rue de Vaugirard, the longest street in Paris, which is "traveled" by the main character, Odette, as it sinks through historical, musical and mythic events, cutting across the boulevards and byways of history like a time machine.'

La rue de Vaugirard is the field of human experience, placed within a form which is manageable for the human imagination. In fact, its limitation can only be our imagination, for the vision and power of organization of Mardi- Ellen Hill extends as far as anyone would require in this multi-layered work.

In the first instance, she has already invited several collaborators, who are each functioning in his or her specialties. Working now are Walter Bilderbeck, dramaturg, theater lighting designer, Thomas C. Hase, Liza Henderson, Canadian dramaturg, and Canadian painter Daniele Rochon. All of these artists (and more to be added) toil in diverse media, within the concept and design of "Vaugirard," which Mardi-Ellen Hill began writing in French and English in 1986.

Two aspects stand out in this opera. First, the composer of the music also wrote the book and lyrics, and is the creator, the formulator of the concept of the work. It was essential that there be only one creator and writer, for the words and music are inextricably woven. Second, "Vaugirard" is created in a specific structure that includes dance, theater, opera, story, libretti, music.

A single person is writing the set design treatment, the lighting treatment, the choreography, and the architecture of the piece. The metaphorical image of the street is given in many different formats. All its elements are repeated in different configurations and juxtapositions, defining and redefining their interrelationships. A musician could understand what is being done here, for the ideas and music are involuted in the same manner as many themes and variations. This type of theme and variations is written in every format to form a grand trajectory.

Something has already been said about the unique talent of the creator, Mardi-Ellen Hill. She possesses a relentless, even ruthless, power of organization. Such an ability renders her fearless about integrating several media as major features within her grand theme. By employing a large chart, she constructs a century of interacting events and images into her matrix, and she can follow this up in detail like the best novelist. She selects specific eras because each expresses the form she wants to be in. Hill is a born musician who began to compose at a very early age; she writes music as a painter paints, for the inspiration pours forth, with one 'dab' after another. Also, upon listening, one can literally "see" the music, making it excellent for opera.

"A Vaugirard Sampler" was performed at Steinway Hall, New York City, on June 7, 1993, co-hosted and made possible by the French Cultural Services of the French Embassy, The Canadian Consulate General of New York, and the Quebec Government House. Another performance based on "Vaugirard" will be given next year in the Works and Process series of the Guggenheim Museum.

Mardi-Ellen Hill has been the recipient of many prestigious fellowships and awards over the years, including two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.