

Hypermusic: Ascension, Guggenheim Museum, New York

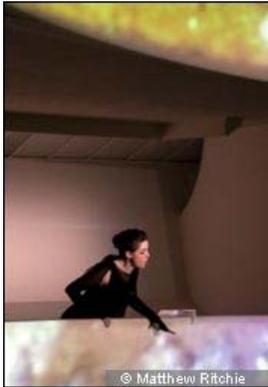
By Martin Bernheimer

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They did not really call it an opera. They settled for "operatic monodrama".

The work in question, *Hypermusic: Ascension*, was presented on Thursday at the splendid Guggenheim Museum. The festivities began with a would-be-informational panel involving the creators. Next came a pause for liquid refreshment (only soda water, thank you, for your stubbornly sober scribe). And this gave way to a multimedia performance in, on and around the fabled rotunda.

The vehicle, a sequel of sorts to an experiment mustered last year at the Pompidou in Paris, fuses an electronic score by the Spanish avant-gardist Hèctor Parra with a libretto by the Harvard physicist Lisa Randall and an installation by the progressive American artist Matthew Ritchie. The subject? Something, it says here, about "the expanding reality of a fifth dimension". The goal? To "alter finite media and explore the unique opportunity of an 'empty' Guggenheim without any artwork on display". At first blush it seemed intriguing.



Exploring an 'empty' Guggenheim

Erudite obfuscation dominated the symposium in the lower concert hall. Randall chatted very rapidly about exploring extra attributes of space and inherent linguistic, aesthetic, technological and scientific implications.

Parra discussed the relationships that exist between musical gesture and computerised application. Ritchie, who was also credited as director, cited the role of the particle in a visual language that echoes abstraction. So far, so opaque.

The rotunda, upstairs, yielded a sprawling conceptual sculpture, with related particle pieces arranged artfully on the floor nearby. The audience was invited to sit on the particles. At show time, dancing-floating blobs were projected in endless combinations and permutations on the walls at one side of the circular gallery, with four of the five rings progressively involved.

Mary-Elizabeth Mackenzie, a brave soprano dressed in ghostly black mufti, emitted amplified wails and drones from positions on various ramps. The vocal mumbo-jumbo, apparently mystical and certainly mystifying, was reinforced by a well-ordered symphony of rumbles, shrieks, whistles, cracks, roars and gurgles.

The final crash elicited instant cheering and stomping. It wasn't exactly clear, however, if the response reflected appreciation or relief. (★★★★☆)

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