

'It's not a requiem'

The murder of American journalist (and violinist) Daniel Pearl has inspired composer Steve Reich to write the most political work of his career. He tells John O'Mahony why

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'I hope Danny likes it'... Daniel Pearl (top, photograph: EPA) and Steve Reich (photograph: Martin Godwin)

When Steve Reich first met Judea Pearl, father of Daniel Pearl, there was little to suggest that the encounter would result in one of the composer's most politically resonant works in many years.

At the time, Reich knew nothing more about the Pearl killing than most people: that he had worked for the Wall Street Journal, been abducted by Islamist extremists in 2002 while on assignment in Pakistan, and his brutal murder videotaped. For his part, Judea Pearl had only a fleeting familiarity with Reich's minimalist oeuvre.

But they immediately hit it off. "We talked about what happened," says Judea, "and how I feel about the significance of the tragedy." As well as their common Jewish heritage, Reich also had some small intimation of the suffering that Pearl must have endured throughout his son's captivity. "On 9/11, my wife and I were in Vermont," he recalls, "but my son and grand-daughter were in my apartment in TriBeCa, a few blocks from the towers. We got a call at 8.30am. My son was screaming down the line, 'It's black, its completely black.' When the buildings came down, they were so close it was like an eclipse of the sun. The word 'terror' seems to trip lightly off the tongue but if it really touches you, it has a different meaning."

Towards the end of their conversation, Judea presented the composer with a collection of Daniel's journalism as well as a book he and his wife had edited, entitled *I Am Jewish*. He had set up the meeting with Reich to explore the possibility of marking his son's life and death in music. "I had the impression he was the right composer." For Reich, who had been searching for his next work, a subject had miraculously dropped into his lap. "I said to him, 'I think you are carrying my text.' And of course he was. God sent him to give me my text."

Two years later, *Daniel Variations*, co-commissioned by the Daniel Pearl Foundation and the Barbican, receives its world premiere on October 8, the centrepiece of Reich's 70th-birthday celebrations. According to the composer, it marks another musical departure. "When the piece first begins, you might think: can this really be Steve Reich? It's much darker, not at all what I'm known for," he says.

The composer's early works were examples of pure, unadulterated, avant-garde minimalism: *It's Gonna Rain* in 1965 featured the voice of a Pentecostal preacher played on two permuted tape loops. Later pieces such as *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976) and *Desert Music* (1984) were baroque by comparison, but never abandoned the central Reich tenet: finding curious emotional depths in the contours of a simple repeated phrase.

Daniel Variations' first innovation comes from the fact that Pearl himself was a musician, playing the violin and mandolin: "He read music before he read English," says Judea. "He used the power of music to connect people in dangerous corners of the world." To reflect this, Reich has beefed up the string section of his ensemble. "Since Pearl was a fiddle player, I said let's have a full string quartet. Let's add a second violin and viola, and at that point, when his text comes in, the strings just take off." For the first segment of this text, Reich has taken Pearl's final words, spoken on video just before he was decapitated: "My name is Daniel Pearl. I'm a Jewish American from Encino, California."

As these words loop and coil around Reich's music, he hopes that the focus won't be the horrific circumstances of the statement, but the luminosity of the name. "It is a name that reverberates. In Jewish tradition, names were like indications of characters. And from his photos, he just seemed like this glowing personality." The second piece of Daniel's text was taken from the title of an old record in his collection: I Hope Gabriel Likes My Music, recorded by Stuff Smith & His Onyx Club Boys in 1936. "Of course I am writing about myself, too," says Reich. "Because I'm the one who made the music here."

The element of darkness in the work comes from a different source: "After the meeting with Judea, I went home and read the book of Daniel," says Reich, "It's got all kinds of stuff: violence and cruelty, mercy and compassion. It became clear that I was going to juxtapose these two Daniels."

Reich's choice of biblical text opens: I saw a dream. Images upon my bed & visions in my head frightened me (Daniel 4:2). It's a clear reference, he feels, not only to the fate visited upon Pearl, but also to the waves of terrorism unleashed by 9/11: "When I read that sentence," he says, "not just me but people in Bali, in Afghanistan, in London, in Madrid, in Australia, in Beslan where they held the kids, people in Chechnya, all could have a chill going down their backs. We are living in a time when such horrific dreams are a reality."

Of course, Reich is far from the first modern composer to tackle the monumental questions of the day: Hindemith in Neues vom Tage, a satire of 1920s Weimar life, and Kurt Weill in Die Bürgschaft, both tackled social issues. Before them there were the likes of Mozart, Verdi, Mussorgsky

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"In fact, each of these composers was staking their lives on the biggest issues in the world," says opera producer Peter Sellars. "In Boris Godunov, Mussorgsky is taking on the entire historical destiny of his country. Verdi is questioning the moral basis of the Catholic church in 19th-century Italy. It is so daring."

Sellars has been the driving force behind some of the most fiercely political music of the last 30 years, including *The Death of Klinghoffer*, an operatic interpretation of the murder of a Jewish tourist aboard the hijacked *Achille Lauro*. "Even before I had written a note," says its composer, John Adams, "I was receiving angry letters from both Arabs and Jews who assumed that I would be tilting towards the other side."

Adams waded even deeper into potentially treacherous waters with *On the Transmigration of Souls* in 2002, which dealt directly with the World Trade Centre attacks. "I very much wanted to do this piece," he said. "In fact I needed to do it. [It] allowed me not only to come to grips personally with all that had happened, but also gave me a chance to give something to others."

In the past, Reich has not been shy of approaching sensitive subject matter: *Different Trains* (1988) was a phenomenally evocative work, which placed the sounds and sensations of the four-day train journey he would regularly make between his divorced parents' houses, alongside trips made by Europe's Jews to the gas chambers. But he remains wary of referring to this and others as political works: "I just don't approach it that way. If somebody had come to me and said: 'Hey, Steve, would you like to write a piece about the Holocaust?', I would have said, 'Would you like me to drink the Pacific Ocean first?'"

He's just as stubborn in the case of *Daniel Variations*, which he says shouldn't be viewed as part of any new post-9/11 imperative to deal with wider issues. "I'm doing this piece because it means something to me."

Instead, what Reich and Judea wanted to create was a work that would emphasise the humanity of its subject. "We didn't want it to be a eulogy or a requiem," says Judea. "Danny was an ordinary person, and a damn good reporter. But he became an icon. This will be a tribute to a life that represents our culture. For me, Danny represents the betrayal of western culture, and the determination of western culture to prevail against terrorism."

Ultimately, the most they can hope for is a shimmering piece of music, an enduring work that will adequately reflect its inspiration. Reich says: "Daniel Variations is a homage to someone who stands beautifully and grotesquely at the same time as a symbol of thousands of innocent victims who was murdered, while trying to really give a fair shake to all concerned. In that sense I am very proud of that. So win, lose or draw in terms of the reaction to the piece, I'm glad I did it. And I hope that the family likes it. And I hope Danny likes it. And I sure hope Gabriel likes my music".