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MUSIC REVIEW

# Shining light on terror of darkness

Steve Reich's 'Daniel Variations' pays moving tribute to the journalist who died a violent death at the hands of extremists.

By Mark Swed, Times Staff Writer

A tsunami of celebrations in New York and London greeted Steve Reich's 70th birthday in October. Through it all, Los Angeles laid back. But Sunday night the Reich express finally blew into the Walt Disney Concert Hall. The Los Angeles Master Chorale, which commissioned Reich's wondrous "You Are (Variations)" in celebration of the opening of Disney, gave the West Coast premiere of his latest choral piece.

"Daniel Variations" treads dangerous ground. It is a tribute to Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal reporter beheaded by terrorists in Pakistan in 2002. The commission came from an international consortium of musical organizations and the Daniel Pearl Foundation. Political controversy and sentimentality surround the shocking murder, with allegations of coverups in Pakistan and maybe elsewhere.

**ADVERTISEMENT** But Reich — whose string quartet, "Different Trains," is great Holocaust art — has done it again. He has climbed up to the highest musical ground and surveyed the situation.

"Daniel Variations" is compelling, lofty, universal and very powerful.

Ironically for a composer who speaks in an engaging rapid fire (pre-concert talks with him should not be missed), Reich is thrifty with texts. He is drawn to aphorisms, to the single-sentence philosophy of Wittgenstein and the economical verse of William Carlos Williams and the Psalms. Four movements and thousands of notes stretched over 30 minutes need only 40 words.

The first and third movements reveal images of terror from the Book of Daniel, the second and fourth are specific to Daniel Pearl. The implications are profound. Daniel of the Bible interpreted the apocalyptic dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, the despot king of Babylon (today's Iraq). The name Daniel comes from this exiled Jew.

Visions of disaster are our normal nightmares manifested by modern terrorism. We are, Reich reminds us, enacting rituals of death and destruction thousands of years old.

"Daniel Variations" uses the resources Reich loves. Twelve singers (no altos or basses) are part of the glittery texture, which includes two clarinets, four pianos, four vibraphones and string quartet. Bass drum and tam-tam summon the musical oracle. The composer sits at the soundboard dosing everyone in the glamour of amplification.

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Reich at 70 has a mastery of his sonic materials that rivals the masters of old. The sound is his — sparkling, exotic recognizable in an instant. There is always a pulse, always a groove as framework.

Above that Reich builds cathedrals of reverberation the way Renaissance composers did. Harmonies move in large blocks, while small rhythmic and melodic figures crawl all over them.

True to his Minimalist roots, Reich is always shifting the ground under the listener, and chords in the first and third movements collide into crushing dissonances to reveal those terrible visions.

The second movement is remarkable. "My name is Daniel Pearl" is the text. These are the reporter's last words, but they also take us back to the biblical Daniel. Here Reich creates the chilling sense of ritual by repeating the words over and over in long tones, hesitating each time after "Daniel."

The string quartet (Pearl was a violinist) plays short figures that leap up and turn around and fall back down. They overlap and become lusciously lyrical. Reich has written gorgeous, overwhelming music before, but in this he outdoes himself.

The end is upbeat, and much has been made of the piece going from darkness to light. In fact, it does something much more meaningful than that. It confronts darkness with light and light with darkness.

Reich doesn't have answers and he doesn't even really have questions. That's the thinking that gets us into trouble. He observes. He writes great music and lets it speak for itself.

Grant Gershon conducted a terrific performance, one that took in the big picture but also delighted in rhythmically difficult details. Little surprise that these are the forces that will record the work for Nonesuch next month.

In the first half of Sunday's concert, Gershon reprised "You Are (Variations)," with its larger choral forces and mystical Jewish texts setting the scene. And he introduced both Reich scores with short ancient choral pieces by Josquin de Prez and William Byrd.

They were insightfully chosen and well sung but didn't make much effect with the chamber singers arranged in a circle, as if singing to each other, not the audience.

I wouldn't normally recommend it, but Josquin and Byrd might have benefited from Reich's heavy hand on the amplifiers. Sometimes you've just gotta shout it out.

\*

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