

Inside-Out Opera

By Kyle Gann

The Cave

Nobody tell Brooklyn Academy, but Steve Reich, Pauline Oliveros, and Philip Glass were the Wave Before Last, so how can they be the Next Wave now? Not to say I'm unenthusiastic about this season's lineup—especially Oliveros, who's never been given her due—only that truth in advertising would entail changing the series's name. Reich and Glass, who spun out the '80s in their respective ruts, have both made impressive comebacks. Glass's was *The Voyage*. Reich's, less polished but more strikingly original, came October 13–16 in the form of a video-music collaboration with his wife Beryl Korot. Synchronistically timed to hail prospective peace in the Middle East, their theater work *The Cave* pinpointed in an imagistic, nonconfrontational, and healing manner what Jews and Arabs have in common: their ancestor Abraham and the cave in Hebron where he's buried.

Wisely scorning romantic-opera conventions, *The Cave* is an anti-opera, written inside out. Rather than set the words to music, Reich set music to the words. As snippets of video interviews with Arabs, Jews, and Americans flashed across the screens, Reich's ensemble of strings, mallet percussion, reeds, keyboards, and singers (conducted via clicktrack by Paul Hillier) picked up their speech melodies, harmonized them, and

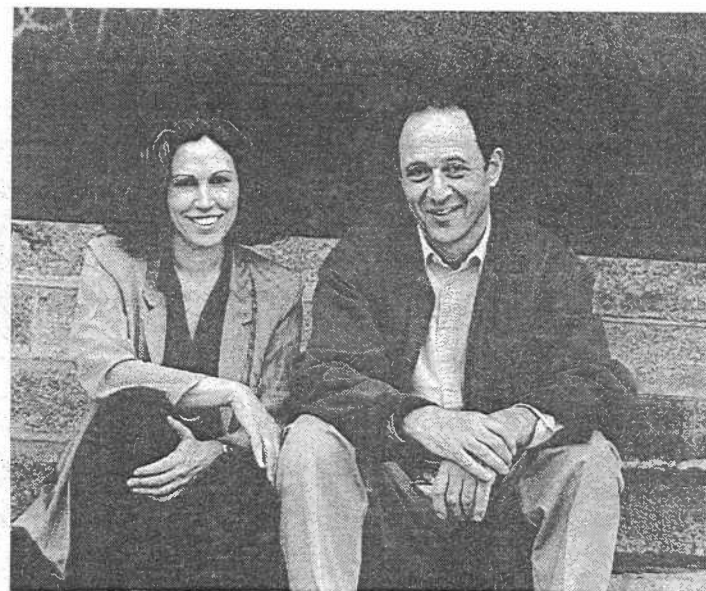
riffed off of them, as though the interviewees were speaking through a living effects box with digital delay. Other composers (Nic Collins, Paul Lansky) have drawn music from speech electronically, but no one else has done it with live instrumentalists to this ornate extent, a process Reich began in *Different Trains*. Rarely has music so succeeded in effacing itself for the projection of speech. (Come to think of it, that was precisely the goal of opera's Florentine inventors. Count Bardi would have found *The Cave* closer than *La Bohème* to the resurrected spirit of Greek drama.)

Equally antioperatically, continuity was provided not by the music, which shunned musical-formal devices, but by the recurrence of video images. Whether a recording of the piece would make any sense, I can't imagine. Korot's name belongs first, for *The Cave* was a repetitively structuralist video documentary/poem with music elaborately stitched into every possible fissure. Structure, so simple that you almost overlooked it in the surface ornamentation, came from the video formulas: in acts 1 and 2 a full phrase was built up additively. Too many avant-garde pieces omit expected landmarks and leave you in the wild, but what *The Cave* subtracted, it more than compensated for with the recurrence and warmth of the interviews.

The analogy to an illuminated manuscript with illustrations and

commentary is unmistakable, especially with such manuscripts periodically appearing among the video images. Devoid of recapitulation or (until act 3) even contrast, the music was a strung-out single line, rooted in shifting drones, a ritual chant heterophonically diffracted into tense chords and interspersed with madrigalistic marginalia. And the only thing in the videos *not* set to music was the sung Hebrew and Arabic cantillation; a nice irony, like Marcel Marceau having the only spoken word in Mel Brooks's *Silent Movie*.

A Southern goy might be forgiven for not catching all the piece's cultural resonances, but their treatment was about 55 billion times more thought-provoking than the Jew-Arab conflict of John Adams's *The Prosaic Obliteration of Klinghoffer*. The video characters spoke in personal terms about what Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac were like. (A Jewish friend tells me he grew up among just such family discussions. Meanwhile, we Baptists were speculating that the Rapture and Armageddon would occur, according to Revelation, in 1993.) Footage of Hebron tied together past with present, myth with political reality. For all its serious intent, *The Cave* was laced with humor. Ishmael was "the James Dean of the Old Testament." Act 3 took off on word associations, linking Abraham with Lincoln. A student tells us, "I have no idea who Abraham was." Only later do



Korot and Reich: setting music to words

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we learn the kid's a Hopi Indian; why should he know?

It's intriguing how closely Reich has returned to the concerns of his early music, transcending them at the same time. Absent was any reference to the flabby repetition devices of his '80s orchestral works. *The Cave's* opening, words tapped out on amplified computer keyboards, sounded like *Clapping Music*. The mercurial speech metrics come from his close study of word-rhythm in *Tehillim*. The extraction of melody from speech, obviously, has its roots in *Come Out* and *It's Gonna Rain*, but there's a big difference. Those early tape-loop pieces drew close attention to speech inflection, magnifying a surprising microworld. *The Cave* does the opposite: the music homogenizes the speech, suggesting that our vocal inflections all fall pretty much within the diatonic scale and 6/8 meter.

The music couldn't acknowledge the speakers' microtonal slides and arrhythmic stutters, and the discrepancies became more obvious for being glossed over.

Equally bothersome were the surtitles, which we tolerate from necessity in Italian opera and vocal disasters like *Klinghoffer*, but which could have been nicely avoided here. Korot's use of the written word as image was highly effective, Reich's text setting was the most naturalistic since Virgil Thomson, but the singers should have enunciated clearly enough that we didn't need to read. Because of such minor discomforts and Reich's parasitism of his early work, I responded through much of act 1 with bemused skepticism. By act 3, however, the resonance of the images, the confident directness of the technique, and the audacious originality of the project had me thoroughly seduced. ■

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