

Tragedy, Triumph and Hope

May 11, 2008

STEVE REICH:

‘Daniel Variations,’ Variations for Vibes, Pianos and Strings

Los Angeles Master Chorale, conducted by Grant Gershon; London Sinfonietta, conducted by Alan Pierson. Nonesuch 406780-2; CD.

IT is tempting to think of Steve Reich’s creative output in two major chunks: the works that came before “Different Trains,” his monumental 1988 string quartet based in part on recorded narratives from Jews who survived World War II, and those that followed that watershed. Most of his early music was concerned with processes and techniques that rendered a cool, impersonal serenity. After “Different Trains” Mr. Reich grappled with charged issues of identity, spirituality and cultural politics in pieces like “The Cave” and “Three Tales.”

He continues to work in both modes, a point made by a new Nonesuch CD that includes pieces first heard in New York during the celebration of Mr. Reich’s 70th birthday in 2006. “Daniel Variations,” for small chorus, clarinets, string quartet, pianos and percussion, was composed that year in memory of [Daniel Pearl](#), the Wall Street Journal correspondent killed by Islamic extremists in Pakistan in 2002.

The piece avoids both sentimentality and vituperation. In two of its four movements Mr. Reich sets brief passages from the Book of Daniel to wiry, discordant patterns. In the other two, in which he uses Mr.

Pearl's own words, the harmonies brighten and timbres soften. What results is a work of contemplative commemoration, which merits and rewards repeated explorations.

Variations for Vibes, Pianos and Strings, from 2005, bears its attractions closer to the surface. Jointly commissioned by the London Sinfonietta and the Akram Khan dance company, the piece seems ideally suited to choreography. In two outer sections, bumptious accents on the piano jut through shimmering, rippling rhythmic patterns; between them is a slow movement of mesmerizing stillness.

STEVE SMITH