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As the tenth anniversary of 9/11 passes and our society continues to be marked by these malicious acts of terrorism, Steve Reich has composed one of his greatest works to date. It is a tale of protest, frustration and artistic mastery.

It's 2006. 290 million Americans have access to a broadband connection. Almost five years since 2,752 deaths were reported following attacks on

America, her citizens are still looking for answers. Websites, blogs, forums and comment boards are flooded with theories on what REALLY happened and who perpetrated these horrendous crimes. The Internet is rife with rumour, and with an ongoing war in the Middle East, people wanted answers. They called for their government to offer transparency. Under political pressure, NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defense Command), a Cold War-era military organisation charged with protecting North American airspace, releases thirty hours of recordings taken the morning of 11th September 2001.

Against this backdrop, Steve Reich is at home in Vermont composing. Having just turned seventy he's in the middle of a busy year, working on 'Daniel Variations' - a project in memory of Daniel Pearl, a Wall Street Journal reporter who was kidnapped and murdered whilst investigating al-Qaeda links with Pakistani Intelligence. For the time being, 'Phases: A Nonesuch Retrospective' is released, comprised of classic recordings of Reich's music. Equally there are festivals across the globe celebrating his milestone anniversary, notably at London's Barbican where 'Daniel Variations' is premiered. Further festivities take place in New York, Oslo, Ljubljana, Bratislava, Prague, Paris, Seville, Mexico City and Amsterdam. On 11th October in Tokyo, days after his birthday, Reich is awarded the Praemium Imperiale, one of the most prestigious honours in the arts and music. There is the atmosphere of a harvest festival; that the composer, in the autumn of his career, is reaping what he has sown. Steve, flattered as

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he is, has no time for such frivolities. 'Daniel Variations' had been a hard slog and he wasn't completely sated by his projects. Ideas were flying around, ones he was struggling to realise, painting the picture of an artist tormented by his ambitions.

"One thing I did want to do which popped in my mind was something that had been in the back of my head since 1973 which is...ever been to a movie where it has a freeze frame and everything just stops? What I wanted to do was to make a sync soundtrack of a freeze-frame. You got, 'It came from Bostonnnnnnnnn' and that 'n' would just go on indefinitely then it would be doubled by violin, viola or cello. Then the next speaker would come in and his or her last syllable would be prolonged. That would add to the harmony and then you would add up these chords and connect people harmonically. So that was in my mind but I had no idea who's talking or what they were talking about. This went on for several months. A formal idea clear; a content idea absolutely vacant. To tell you the truth I had no idea what those voices would be."

Speaking on the phone to him I can hear the pace of his ideas rushing out. He speaks directly albeit in a broken style with sentences trailing off, constantly revising himself, his method and his execution - a style which mirrors the way he approaches his work. Often sticking to formats, Reich's career is a series of revisions, reimaginings and extensions. In this instance Reich is stuck, trying to deal with voice recordings and harmonisation. Then, David Harrington, of minimalist ensemble and long-term Reich collaborators The Kronos Quartet, called Steve, inviting him to return to pre-recorded sound. "When David's phone call came in it was an invitation to sort of go back to that way of working and I had had a long time out and I was like, 'This might be interesting'. So months later as I say, when the lightbulb went on I thought, 'My gosh, how can I be so stupid? I've got unfinished business. We've lived for twenty-five years four blocks from Ground Zero. Gee, you know, I never dealt with 9/11. It was a big event in my life and it's definitely not over. This is obviously what I should be doing.' And then I knew that I had to get the documentary sources from the people who were there, who were involved. Like first of all, the traffic controllers who saw the plane going off course, second of all the fire department in New York, the many many people who dealt with the phenomenon on the ground, many of whom didn't survive it."

Today, the NORAD files are freely accessible to the public - a degree of transparency we may not always associate with the United States. The seemingly endless content takes the listener right to the heart of 9/11. The files document the intimate moments of those directly connected to the events. Listening to them myself it is chilling to hear those who retain a reserved professionalism in the voices. While the Air Traffic Controllers can see exactly what's taking place, certain voices maintain an automative control, as moving as they are measured.

The recordings are horrifying to listen to. In many ways it's exceptional that they have been released, inconceivable that anyone would want to relive these moments captured on tape. They are rich with military code rattled off like a typist would tap; automated, almost mechanical. Voices would layer each other as information is fired across with startling intensity, creating delirium from direct speech. Beneath all this is a doomily crackle of radio waves, like the messages are travelling with ghosts. Loaded into the intonation of the voices and the plaintive commentary there are infinite tales hiding behind them. So many in fact that it's not only their quantity that's overwhelming, but their nature.

The Northeast Air Defense Sector, or NEADS, where NORAD is stationed and the tapes recorded, is a hollowed place, as the military depart for more 'advanced' housing, leaving the desolate rooms filled with Cold War

cobwebs and echoes. A place as modern as it is dystopian. The eeriness of the place only fuelled the conspiracy theorists when the DAT Audio Files were subpoenaed by The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (or 9/11 Commission). What the commission found was that there was evidence on the tapes which contradicted evidence previously provided by several military figures. It is impossible to imagine a set of recordings more charged than these and more terrifying. The unforced release of the recordings not only acts as an exhaustive example of how important these documents are to America, but how important they are to the global community. By now, Reich not only had his 'content idea', but the content to boot.

'WTC 9/11' is a staggering work for many reasons. Following on from the masterly practices he has spent fifty years exploring, Reich has taken on an aposite challenge. He has adopted everything he learnt from 'Different Trains', 'Come Out', and 'It's Gonna Rain' to the more detailed 'City Life', 'Three Tales' and 'The Cave'. From investing so much practice into the handling of issue at the centre of society, Reich is an authority at communicating himself and the ideas of others. But despite this sagely position, Reich does not see his art as social commentary.

"That's not me, I'm not a social commentator. I'm just writing about things that mean something to me PERSONALLY. You can make of them what you make of them but I'm trying to present them as authoritatively, in the sense that the people you hear really were involved, or really know what they are talking about. The people you hear in 'Three Tales' are people like Mr. Watson who helped discover DNA, so we don't get the opinion of somebody on the street, that's irrelevant garbage. You really want to go to the source to the people who know what they're talking about, who made the situation happen. Or in the case of 'WTC 9/11', the people who were there! On the scene. And who really came bear witness. So that's essential if you want to have something that's emotionally valid because you want to have speakers who have a right to speak."

"I choose events that mean something to me, otherwise how's it going to mean anything to you? Then I find people who are emotionally charged because of what happened to them. I think the reaction to 'WTC 9/11' is that it's one of the most emotional pieces of mine that people have heard and I think that's pretty accurate. It's not an intellectual exercise."

In 'WTC 9/11' we see this humanitarian approach from the first to the last note. Following on from the NORAD tapes the piece develops, primarily in the recordings themselves. The second movement, '2010', is Reich asking friends and neighbours where they were and what was happening. It's about people who were there thinking back on what happened to them. The last movement encroaches on the spiritual. In Judaism a body, from the time of death to that of burial, cannot be left alone. The bodies, or parts of, which were found but unidentified, were kept company by a group of women from Stern College near the medical examiners office on the East Side of Manhattan. "I actually read about this in the New York Times and I was quite struck by this as a humane thing to do, so I located a couple of these women and their voices appear in the third movement along with a cellist who sang songs when her mother died who has a very nice voice and a Cantor who does that kind of thing regularly. He sings a part of what's called the 'Wayfarer's Prayer'. I prepared the thing in English; it is, "Behold I sent an angel before you to guard you on the way and to lead you to the place that I have prepared." That's a very beautiful line. And it's something you're supposed to say before you go on a journey, particularly an aeroplane. Along with some other lines. It's something you could say over a body whose soul is about to embark on a voyage we don't know where."

“But the ending of the piece is David saying, “and there’s the world right here”, and the telephone beep comes back on. And it’s a really, you know, you’re right back at the beginning. That’s how the piece ends. It doesn’t end with a lovely trip to the world to come, which of course all of us will experience at one time or other no matter what. It ends with the world right here. The world right here is still the world with emergency clangers going off as we speak.”

There are few musicians who are willing to speak to their audience on such an intuitive level. Throughout his career Reich has found success by not only achieving this, but reinventing the wheel in the process. Listening to him speak in an animated and accelerated fashion, he is worlds away from the soft-cotton-wearing fatherly figure sporting his signature weathered baseball cap. As he reaches his seventy-fifth birthday this month, Reich paints a commanding profile. An artist transfixed by the present.

Unlike previous celebrations of his age, this year heavily features new and recent works. “There’s been a lot of focus on what I have done right now,” he stresses, “and that’s the way I’d like to keep it.”

Words by Samuel Breen

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