Beryl Korot and Steve Reich

The Cave (1990-93)

conceived and developed by Steve Reich and Beryl Korot
music by Steve Reich • multi channel video and screen design by Beryl Korot

Act1 West Jerusalem/Hebron May/June1989
Act2 East Jerusalem/Hebron June1989 and June1991
Act3 NewYork/Austin April/May1992

by Jonathan Cott

JC How did the idea for The Cave originate?

BK We had a meeting at Ellen's Coffee Shop around the corner, because we'd been talking about collaborating, and we felt we had to be on neutral territory to continue our discussions. Steve came with the story about Abraham as the idol-breaker, the iconoclast. In my reading, I had been struck by the story in the Bible of the three strangers (actually angels) who come to visit Abraham while he recovers from his circumcision, and who foretell the birth of his son Isaac and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (over which he later argues with God). Not knowing who they are, but always showing hospitality towards strangers,we are told he runs to fetch a calf. At this point the text leaves off and the oral tradition kicks in. He chases a calf into a cave and there he sees shadows. He knows intuitively that they are the shadows of Adam and Eve, as he also senses something verdant and lush, and again he intuits: this is the Garden of Eden. At

that moment he knows that this is the place where he and his family will be buried, and he takes the calf and returns to feed his guests.

That story was magical to me because that simple act of fetching a calf to perform an act of hospitality for strangers connects Abraham with the prehistorical mother and father of all humanity. And the cave still exists, though underneath a partly Herodian, Byzantine, and mostly Islamic structure today in Hebron. And that was important, that there was actually a place that existed now that was connected to events which took place so long ago, that I could actually travel to with my camera.

SR Over a year before the meeting, Beryl and I decided to collaborate based on the true underpinnings of the
piece, which had nothing to do with the cave or any particular content. I was coming out of Different Trains and Beryl was coming out of Text and Commentary and Dachau. The true underpinnings were our interest in making a new kind of musical theatre based on videotaped documentary sources. The idea was that you would be able to see and hear people as they spoke on the videotape and simultaneously you would see and hear on-stage musicians doubling them – actually playing their speech melodies as they spoke.

JC And the visual style?

BK There are no precedents in video as there are for a composer. It's basically a new medium with a developing vocabulary. But in the early 70s when I made my first multiple-channel installation, Dachau (1974), I was quite concerned about precedents, and I looked both to the film medium and to the ancient technology of the loom to determine how to work in multiples. And it is the thoughts I had then which I drew on to create my work in The Cave. For one, the work, even though you are viewing multiples, remains fiercely frontal, and is to be read as one. That is my allegiance to film. But to create techniques in this new format to relate a narrative I turned to the ancient programming tool of the loom, and conceived of each channel as representing a thread. I then proceeded to make non-verbal narrative works by carefully timing and juxtaposing inter-related images, and by creating individual rhythms for each channel by alternating image and gray leader pause. Those techniques became the underpinnings for the visualization of Steve's score. He gave me the audio for the talking-heads channel. It was up to me to provide the rest and make it work with the score. I chose five screens because of the variety of possibilities you have for interrelating the different threads, so to speak, and because you can still perceive five as one, thus maintaining a tight visual focus.

JC Why this family? WhyAbraham?

SR Abraham is about as radical and visionary a person as we've ever had. He lived in a world where people saw the forces of nature as the highest value. The sun, the moon, the

stars, trees, various statues – they worshipped these things – Abraham said, 'none of the above'. There is a story in both the Midrash in Judaism and in the Koran in Islam about Abraham breaking the idols in his father's idol factory. He puts his life on the line by doing that and in both traditions is miraculously saved from the fiery furnace that King Nimrod throws him into. Here is a man who has a totally different conceptual take on the true focus for human worship – one that is unified, invisible, and ultimately ethical. And that view ultimately prevails, and we are still living with that view.

JC So the iconoclasm works on several levels: one is the story of Abraham, the idea of completely new belief systems, and another is how you deal with traditionally bel canto opera – iconoclastic in terms of how 'opera' has been practiced.

SR I'm not saying other composers shouldn't write bel canto operas, but I've pursued something that interests me now, here in America in the 1990s, which naturally doesn't sound like something from 18th- or 19th-century Italy or Germany. We are living with musical realities that didn't exist during Mozart's or Wagner's time. The bel canto voice had to be loud enough to be heard over Mozart's orchestra, and later, when Wagner much enlarged the brass section of his orchestra, the Wagnerian voice had to be still louder in order to be heard – even a particular hall was built to facilitate this. But today – actually for many years now – microphones easily allow a singer with a pure non-vibrato voice to be heard over an ensemble even with much percussion in it. It seems to me that anyone writing for music theatre today should at least try to decide for themselves: a. What is my orchestra? – and where is it placed in the theatre? – and b. What is my vocal style? All the instruments playing in

The Cave [see page 23] are amplified except the bass drums and claves. The vocal style for the interview sections of the piece is speech with the inherent speech melody doubled and harmonized by the instruments. Then there are four singers – two lyric sopranos, a tenor, and a baritone – who sing in a natural non-vibrato voice that you would find in my earlier pieces and in earlier eras, Medieval and Renaissance.

JC Something combines the music and the visuals so that when you see it and hear it, it's like one thing.

BK In visual terms, it's this commitment to the documentary material we gathered in the interviews. All the visual material had to come from the frame of the interviewee's image. Thanks to some pretty sophisticated computer graphics programs made for the home computer, I was able to grab the interviewees' images from the video into the computer, select details from these, rearrange them, and transfer them back to the video to become the setting for each of the talking heads. I then timed these stills to the music and to the talking heads so that the person speaking became embedded in a musical and visual

portrait of him or herself.

SR The speech melody of each person really is, as Beryl says, a kind of musical portrait of that person. It's their melody and I begin by writing it down as dictation. I have to find out the exact notes, rhythm, and tempo of what they say. Then there is the orchestration; it's one thing to double a speech melody with clarinet and quite another to punctuate it with bass drums. The Cave really comes out of the documentary footage. Whenever there was a musical or visual question about the piece, the solution was to be found by a still more careful examination of the source material itself. To give an example, Acts 1 and 2 end in A minor because I found that inside the cave, or rather the mosque that sits on top of the cave, the acoustical resonance of the space with several prayers being said simultaneously, was a drone in A minor. This was what I recorded there. Then I began looking for significant phrases that were said by the interviewees that were also in A minor so that both acts would cadence there.

JC To what extent does MTV affect your kind of work now?

BK Our independent interests preceded MTV,but it definitely reflects on that phenomenon. And it makes our work more relevant because it relates to that type of folk art, though in a very different way. In the early years of video, late 60s, early 70s, we talked about the fact that video was then a one-way communication from the networks to the home, but with the advent of portable equipment, and the proliferation of video equipment in general, people could begin to write in the medium, as well as read it. The possibilities for visual literacy increased, but this whole area of creating with such tools and developing new forms for presenting visual information is still so new. And the idea of creating something that was both rich in information and formally adventurous is a challenge the medium seems to offer, and yet is not often explored.

SR We're living in a culture where music videos are a kind of urban folk art. People make them not only in professional studios but on home desktop computers. You can get a good hit on what folk music is today by simply looking in the window of any music store. What do you see? Samplers, amplifiers, electric guitars, and keyboards–all kinds of electronics.These are street instruments. That's what kids use to play rock.

Historically composers have always been interested in folk music and the popular music of their day as well. You have dance forms used in Bach's suites, before him you have popular tunes like L'Homme armé being used as the basis for large mass settings in the Renaissance, and more recently you have Bartók using Hungarian folk tunes in many of his compositions and Kurt Weill actually writing popular tunes and modeling much of his music theatre on the cabaret style of the Weimar Republic. It seems to me when composers look down on all the popular music around them they are generally suffering from some sort of emotional disorder. Personally, for me, it would have been unthinkable

to compose any of the music I have if I hadn't heard jazz when I was growing up. Much later, in 1988, in order to compose Different Trains, I became involved with the sampling keyboard, which is an essential piece of technology in The Cave.

JC I gather you didn't use a libretto.

SR Instead of writing a libretto or having one written, we started out with a story from two holy texts; the Bible and the Koran and some of their associated literature. Then we began asking 'Who for you is Abraham?', 'Who for you is Sarah?'. 'Hagar? Ishmael? and Isaac?', to Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans. From their answers we edited out the rest of our libretto. I don't really feel comfortable with the idea of singers acting Biblical roles. We really have no idea how these 4000-year-old characters looked, and it's always awkward when someone portrays them. The reality is that Abraham and the others only live in the words and thoughts of the living. In our piece, The Cave, they live in the words of the people we interviewed. I remember trying to explain this back in 1989 to an opera set designer we thought might work on the piece, and he just couldn't get it. He kept insisting that he couldn't begin his work until he had a finished libretto. That was how he worked, click click, and no other way. Of course a few weeks later our set designer, John Arnon, got the idea immediately, as did Richard Nelson, our lighting director, and Carey Perloff, our stage director. Anyway, the fact is that the libretto was finished in January 1993 when the piece was completed.

BK As it turned out, the work's a narrative told three times from the points of view of three different cultures. We had a general outline as we began, then a general working procedure, and the libretto evolved as the music and video evolved.

JC What are the politics of this work?

BK In framing the questions in terms of the Biblical characters of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, we attempted to steer away from the politics of the Middle East and the Arab/Israeli conflict. We feel that the underpinnings to that conflict relate beyond politics to the culture and religion of these peoples, so that is the focus of our work. However, insofar as the main actors of this work are the interviewees speaking today, politics inevitably seeps in around the edges. An Israeli settler answers the question of 'Who, for you, is Ishmael?' by saying, 'You can see him in the street', whilst a Palestinian woman answers a question about Hagar by saying 'She was a refugee, I think'. What to us was most revealing, however, was how familiar all those we interviewed, Israeli and Arab, were with these ancient Biblical and Koranic figures. When the chief curator of the Shrine of the Dead Sea Scrolls said of Abraham, 'a legendary figure, we know nothing about Abraham', it was not with academic indifference. The 'cave' for people living in this part of the world has significance and physical reality. Whether from a secular or religious or historical perspective, they knew who these

characters were. However, in America the story is different. We are much further away from the cave here, many people never hearing of it, even among the religious. Abraham to some is Abraham Lincoln. Ishmael is the lonesome cowboy riding off into the sunset, the archetype of the individual going it alone. To a black woman living in Texas: 'When I think of Hagar, as a black female, I really think of myself'. In Act 3 the 'cave' comes home, and the audience, mostly Western, is asked to reflect on itself.

SR Abraham and the others aren't here anymore. As I said, they only live in the minds of the living. For some, particularly in the Middle East, they're very much alive, and for others, particularly in America, they become forgotten or turned to other purposes. When I asked the sculptor, Richard Serra, he said, 'Abraham Lincoln High School, high on the hilltop midst sand and sea – that's about as far's I trace Abram'. When I got to Ishmael he said, 'Call me Ishmael – Moby Dick'. Mary MacArthur says, 'The man we all identify with'. 'He's the James Dean of the Old Testament', says Ann Druyan.

JC You're both Jewish with roots in this country. Did you learn anything new or gain a different perspective on the Muslim tradition concerning Abraham?

SR Yes, absolutely. It was a chance to meet Arabs and talk with them about something we both shared and respected. So it was a very positive experience there, and also here in America where we got advice from Dr. Assad Busool of the American Islamic College in Chicago, Dr. Mahmoud Ayoub of the Temple University Department of Religion, and from Imam Talal Eid, the religious leader of the Islamic Center of New England in Boston. It was a pleasure to meet and work with them, as it was to work with Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Efrat outside Jerusalem, and Rabbis Ephraim Buchwald and Hershel Cohen of Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York, who advised us about Jewish law

and tradition. In a more peaceful world we would have interviewed not only Palestinians but also Egyptians, Syrians, Iraqis, Jordanians, and so on, because they all view themselves as children of Abraham and Ishmael.

JC What about the American response?

BK In the first two acts the people that we interviewed felt very connected to that story and to the cave. They were living with the cave. In the third act most of the interviewees had never heard of the cave. There really is no cave in America – there is no umbilical cord, the connections are very thin.

JC Do you find that sad?

BK There's a kind of sadness, but sometimes the answers were so fresh and alive and contemporary and questioning. Perhaps we're very long on commentary here and shorter on text. At the end of the third act, the borders to the stills become more and more

dominant until the slow final downward pans of the visual are all borders, or one could say, all commentary.

SR There were several Americans who were very conversant with the Bible. But mostly what we found were people who could barely remember Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac – they gave us either cultural or personal psychological responses to these characters. The young Hopi Indian we interviewed said he had no idea who Abraham was. Later on he said, 'When I was growing up, my father never stressed the Indian either. They say you can always go back to the Hopi rez. No matter what'. That's his cave. For many Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, there's a sense of living with the cave – a defined, accepted spiritual universe. They aren't looking for something; they have something. They know where they're from, and they're happy still being there and living that. Whereas for the Western Odyssean person, it's the searching that counts. In the American section of our piece you can see some people shedding the spiritual concern: 'Drop it, forget it, it's irrelevant'.

JC Let me turn the tables on you both. Who are Abraham and Sarah to you?

SR Abraham, for me, was one of the most radical thinkers that ever lived. He had a basically new and different spiritual insight that challenged all the accepted views of his day: The complete absorption in, the worship of, any thing or any one including yourself, is putting blinders on the mind and heart – very risky saying that to Nimrod. He put his life on the line.

BK Sarah left Ur too,and traditionally she is viewed as a partner on a new path. Some feminists have suggested that she was a priestess from a matrilineal culture that existed in ancient Iraq and she is trying to assert her dominance in a growing patriarchy. She makes the decision to have her line become the new nation which leads eventually to Moses and David and, in the Christian tradition, to Jesus Christ. Alice Shalvi,the Israeli feminist whom we interviewed, suggested that it was because of the nature of Isaac's personality that she chose him and not Ishmael to receive the inheritance. He is very different from the heroes of other myths or traditions. He is neither hunter nor warrior, but a herdsman and meditator in the fields. But still, the tension and strife in the story is traced to her (though Abraham is not at his best here either insofar as he lets Hagar and Ishmael leave with no provisions except water). Unlike Sarah, however, Abraham comes down to us as the man who offers hospitality to strangers, and as a true universalist.

JC And Hagar?

BK She was an Egyptian princess in the court of Pharaoh, and supposedly she left with Abraham and Sarah voluntarily. Remember, the Bible is very laconic and many years pass when we hear of no dissension between these two women. Surrogate mothering, as

we know today, is a very complicated role to play. She was placed in a difficult situation, and then banished into the wilderness. In the Islamic tradition she goes to Mecca, but remember too that, in the Bible, she is also highly esteemed. After all, she is the first woman whom God speaks to. So what appears to be a simple story of banishment is not simple at all. Her son Ishmael is destined to become father of a great nation. It is just not the nation the Bible focuses on. The story of a particular people, the Jewish people, coexists within its own sacred text with the information that family members go off in other directions and become important figures in other traditions.

JC So, the seed for peace is already in the book of Genesis itself, isn't it?

SR Yes, Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury Abraham. The traditional Jewish view is that Ishmael's and Isaac's presence at their father's burial was a sign of their reconciliation. And if they could do it, perhaps it suggests Arabs and Israelis can, too. But it requires real generosity of spirit and a genuine willingness to accept difference. As the Israeli biblical scholar, Uri Simone, in our piece, says of Ishmael: 'He's our relative – he's different'.

JC The story of Abraham has alot to do with the themes of separation and repair.

BK In our interview with Uri Simone, he talks about how Abraham's life is characterized by constant separations, first from his home, his land, his culture, then from Ishmael, and potentially, in the non-sacrifice of Isaac, from him, too.

SR He has to give up Ishmael, whom he dearly loves, and then he has to be ready to give up Isaac, too. In the story when Hagar is cast out she finds herself and Ishmael at the well of Be'er lehai Roi. Much later when Isaac is about to meet his future wife Rebecca,he's meditating in the field by Be'er lehai Roi. What is he meditating about? Some in Jewish tradition say he's thinking about his half-brother Ishmael whom he misses. Ishmael is on his mind.

JC What should be on our minds as we experience The Cave?

SR Well, on one hand, that perhaps this is your story. Maybe you've dismissed it, or ignored it for a long time. But you're free to return to it. You came from here. Do you wish to keep your distance or do you want to reacquaint yourself?

On the other hand, just in terms of the music, you may find the many speech melodies an unusual musical guide to personality. As Janácek said, '... Speech melodies are windows into people's souls ... For dramatic music they are of great importance'. Important because it's impossible to separate the music from the person speaking.