

TIME

MUSIC

Words Sliced and Diced

By MICHAEL WALSH
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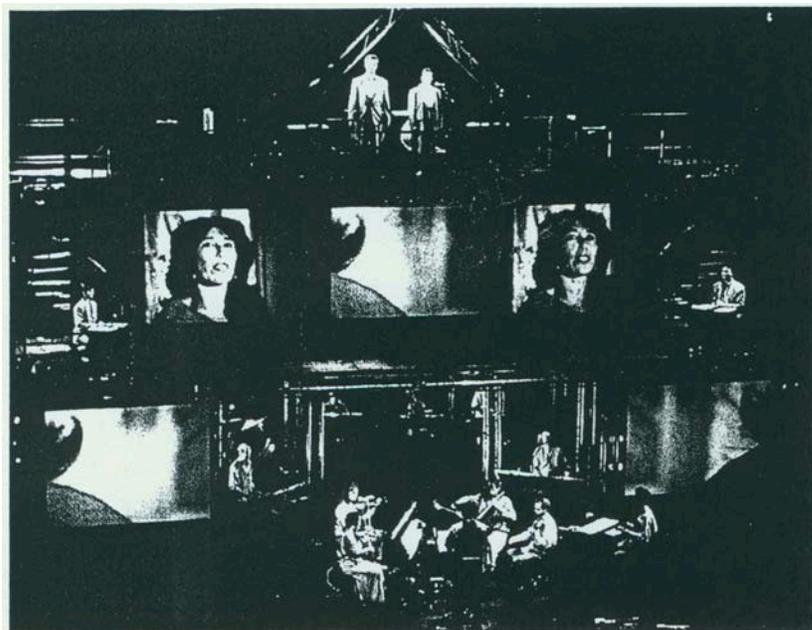
Work: *The Cave*

Creators: Steve Reich, Beryl Korot

Where: Vienna Festival

The Bottom Line: A composer and video artist provide a glimpse of what opera might be like in the 21st century.

On one level, the entire Arab Israeli struggle can be seen as a biblical family tragedy: Abraham's rejection of his concubine Hagar and his first-born son Ishmael in favor of his lawful wife Sarah and their son Isaac. Muslims regard Ishmael (Ismail) as the father of the Arab peoples, while Jews honor Isaac as their progenitor. And both sides claim Abraham (Ibrahim) as their common ancestor.



AN UNCONVENTIONAL OPERA: *The Cave*, premiered at the Vienna Festival, offers a glimpse of what opera might be like in the next century

Hardly a conventional subject for an opera, but then Steve Reich's new music-theater piece, *The Cave*, which premiered last week at the Vienna Festival, is hardly a conventional opera. Based on videotaped interviews with Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem, and with Americans in New York City and Austin, Texas, it is a three-act, multimedia, audiovisual collaboration between the pioneering minimalist composer and his wife, the video artist Beryl Korot. By turns fascinating and frustrating, *The Cave*, which will have other performances this year in Berlin, Amsterdam, London, Brooklyn, Paris and Brussels, stands on its own as a breakthrough piece for Reich and a tantalizing glimpse of what opera might be like in the 21st century.

Reich has long heard music in the inflections of the human voice; indeed, his earliest works, such as the tape-looped *Come Out* (1967), were constructed entirely of speech fragments. *The Cave* -- the title refers to the cave of Machpelah where Abraham and his family are supposedly buried -- is *Come Out* come out. Projected on five huge video screens, the interviews -- all in answer to the question, *Who is Abraham?* -- are treated both as the opera's text and as its musical raw material, from which Reich draws every element of his score.

Thus, when a Jewish interviewee named Ephraim Isaac says, "Abraham, for me, is my ancestor -- my very own personal ancestor," his words are shredded, sliced, diced, pureed by a live vocal

quartet and set to the implied, inherent music of his speech rhythms and intonation, accompanied by a small instrumental ensemble. In works such as the 1912 *Pierrot lunaire*, Arnold Schoenberg invented the device of *sprechstimme*, or speech-song; in *The Cave* Reich has perfected the principle and built an entire work upon it.

Whether what amounts to a one-trick pony, musically speaking, can sustain a nearly three-hour opera, however, is another matter, and it is here that Korot's visual contribution is critical. What gives *The Cave* its real dramatic power is the raw material of Jewish, Arab and American perspectives on one of history's Ur-tragedies.

For Korot is in love with faces, and she gives each one a chance to shine. The dark, committed faces of Jerusalem -- so alike and yet so dissimilar, and each so convinced of its beliefs -- stand in stark contrast to the sunny, open, uncomplicated American visages of the third act. An American, the sculptor Richard Serra, says blithely, "Abraham Lincoln High School, 'High on the hilltop midst sand and sea' -- that's about as far as I trace Abraham." Coming as it does after two acts of religious zealotry, the comment expresses a contemporary, secular kind of cultural truth -- Who cares who Abraham was? In the end that point of view may be just as valid as the Middle Eastern ones, and a lot more peaceful.