

# Double Acts

Inside views on relationships in the string world

The US composer and the Kronos Quartet violinist discuss collaborating on Reich's works, including his new string quartet, inspired by the World Trade Center attacks

## STEVE REICH

**I FIRST GOT TO KNOW DAVID** when Betty Freeman, the great patroness of contemporary music, asked me to write a piece for the Kronos Quartet. At first I had no idea what this piece would be, but then I began thinking about the train trips I took as a kid between my divorced parents and of Hitler taking little Jewish boys like me off to concentration camps. When I finished the first movement of *Different Trains*, I sent David the score and a midi mock-up. The seriousness of his engagement was thrilling. I just felt, wow, this guy is deep into this stuff.

**WHEN WE STARTED TO WORK TOGETHER**, it was like a flower opening up. The rest of the quartet are amazing musicians, but David is the first violinist in every sense. The intensity of his commitment to music and to pushing technical and emotional ideas is very important. David just gets it. He's like the engine that drives the machine.

**MY WIFE AND I** were in Vermont when 9/11 happened. We got a call at 8.30am from my son, who was living with his wife and my granddaughter in our place in New York. From our back window you couldn't quite see it – it's only four blocks away – but you could hear it and feel it. Eight years later I got an email from David saying, 'Hey, we'd love another piece, and we'd like something with pre-recorded voices.' I had no idea what that subject matter would be. Then it struck me: I've got unfinished business. I have to deal with this.

**DAVID STARTS MY NEW PIECE** *WTC 9/11* by imitating a telephone beep. In the US, if you don't hang up your phone properly, you get an incredibly loud beep. I thought, that's what I need to start the piece. 9/11 is like an alarm, a wake-up call. So, David's the alarm. And who could be more alarming than David?

**IF I HAD TO DESCRIBE DAVID**, the word intensity is inescapable. I originally notated that opening telephone pulse with a staccato dot, but I was worried that it might be too short. Sure enough David had a thought about what exactly the stroke should be. We came up with something together – a dash and a dot, on the string. This is typical David – making a seemingly cold and uninteresting technical decision that is actually an intense and sensitive reading of what is needed to make the music come alive.

## DAVID HARRINGTON

**I FIRST MET STEVE** in the early 1980s. He was doing a concert in San Francisco, and I arranged to have coffee with him. At the time he hadn't written any string quartet music, and he made it pretty clear that he wasn't interested in the form. But he gave me a score of *Vermont Counterpoint*, his piece for eleven flutes, and said, 'If you want to turn it into a quartet, be my guest.' Anybody that knows me knows that I have not been a great fan of the Western orchestral flute, so let's just say it didn't work out.

**RECEIVING THE MUSIC** at the point that it's being written and hearing its development is a very special part of my relationship with Steve. But also, once we get into the studio together we can

actually experiment with the different ways it can sound. At that point Steve is still composing, and I love being there at that moment when some of the details are still being decided.

**STEVE LATER WROTE** *Triple Quartet* for the Kronos, and then at a certain point it seemed to me that I should call him and see about the idea of creating a bookend to *Different Trains*. When I started hearing about *WTC 9/11*, I thought, 'he's really going for it'. I was afraid to go into the studio to record it:

I thought that hearing some of the sounds and voices from 9/11 over and over would be a terrifying and awful experience. But actually it was therapeutic.

**WHEN I SEE STEVE** and his wife Beryl in New York, we talk about all sorts of things. You hear all kinds of stories over the years, and they're amazing people. Steve is a granddad now, and it's wonderful to hear about his family.

**I REALLY ENJOY WORKING WITH STEVE.** I think in years past he was probably more worried about whether his music was going to work or not than he is now. I'm very proud that he trusts the Kronos with his pieces, to be there working with him on these issues. What I'm seeing is this creative force that's just blossoming – it's thrilling to see it. He was even talking about another piece!

INTERVIEWS BY DAVID KETTLE

*The Kronos Quartet gives the European premiere of WTC 9/11 on 7 May at London's Barbican Hall, followed by performances in Essen, Glasgow and at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival on 17 May*



'When we started to work together, it was like a flower opening up' STEVE REICH