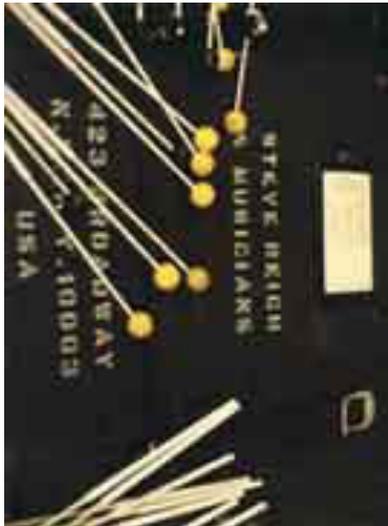


Steve Reich



Way back in 1974/5 when I was working for Polygram Records who then were the distributors for Deutsche Grammophon, I came across a boxed set of records with bright yellow tuned percussion mallets and the word 'Drumming' on the cover, and since I was a budding percussionist and got a substantial discount as an employee, I immediately purchased the set without really knowing who Steve Reich was. Little did I know that this music was to open up and influence my whole musical outlook from then on. Never before had I been so 'drawn in' by a piece of music. Here was a beacon that shone out from the intellectual headiness of the European avant-garde. (Incidentally, this first manifestation of the large Steve Reich and Musicians ensemble on this recording included England's own Cornelius Cardew!). I immediately tried to hunt out more Reich recordings only to find that this set was the only one listed in the British gramophone catalogues so I had to look to the U.S. for further recordings where I obtained the early tape pieces *It's Gonna Rain* coupled with *Violin Phase* and *Come Out* on CBS Masterworks and *Odyssey* respectively.



Steve Reich was born in New York in 1936 and spent much of his early childhood travelling from New York to California, the result of parental separation but an experience that later in life was to manifest in some degree in his composition *Different Trains*. By the age of 14 he was a kit drummer playing and listening to jazz and dance music and earning money to support further musical studies. In 1957 he graduated from Cornell University with honours in Philosophy and from 1958 to 1961 studied composition at the Julliard School of Music and later attended Mills College in California where he 'studied' with Milhaud and Berio. The reason I have exclaimed 'studied' is that Reich himself has said that he underwent more important studies with the likes of Hall Overton, William Austin and Vincent Persichetti and goes on to say that 'some people that are well known may or may not have a gift for teaching'.

At this time , 1961/63 Reich was writing all kinds of serial pieces but the 'writing was on the wall' in terms of the direction his musical path would lead as he never transposed, inverted or reversed the tone row but just repeated it discovering that you could divide up the first notes of the row into four groups of three

or three groups of four, and that kind of thinking paid off rhythmically later on - the idea of twelve as a rhythmic number rather than a pitch number. While beginning to work with tape, Reich ventured briefly into film sound-track composition, by writing the music for *The Plastic Haircut* and *Oh Dem Watermelons*, two films by Robert Nelson. It was also around 1964/5 when other pioneers were using tape to manipulate and totally transform sounds (concrete and electronic) Reich retained the raw vocal recorded material and made identical tape loops and used 2 tape recorders to play them back simultaneously and accidentally discovered that it doesn't matter how accurate two tape machines are, eventually they would go in and out of phase and produce intricate and interesting polyphony. The first piece he produced like this was *It's Gonna Rain* which is the voice of a Pentecostal preacher recorded in Union Square, San Francisco. Incidentally the sound of flapping pigeons in the background is an integral part of the soundscape. This was followed by *Come Out*. The voice this time is that of Danniell Hamm a black 19 year old and one of six youths arrested for murder during the Harlem riots, describing a beating he took in the Harlem 28th precinct New York. Both these pieces could be described as Reich's vocal music at that time whose thinking came out of American speech rhythms as they are found on the streets and also has strong links with the poetry of William Carlos Williams. However, although both these pieces were ground breaking events in tape/electronic music, Reich thought that if this process only applied to tapes then it would be a gimmick and have the life span of a gimmick and the only way to prove that they were not a gimmick was if the process could be performed by live musicians. Initially he thought that this was impossible and that this process is indigenous to tape recorders, but undeterred Reich set about recording a short phrase on piano, made a loop of it and played it back with himself playing live the identical pattern and to his amazement found that with concentrated listening he could very gradually increase the speed of his playing until he was one beat ahead, thus was born *Piano Phase* and the live phasing technique. There followed *Reed Phase* written for saxophonist Jon Gibson and *Violin Phase* which extends the process by using three pre-recorded tape tracks with the live performer playing the fourth and the resulting interlocking patterns created. Later in the 80s Reich returned to the phase shifting technique in *New York Counterpoint* for

clarinets, written for Richard Stoltzman, Vermont Counterpoint for flutes and piccolos written for Ransom Wilson, and Electric Counterpoint for guitars, written for Pat Metheny. All these pieces use multi layered lines (as many as eleven) with the performer playing the "live" solo.

In 1966 Reich decided he would be a performer of his own music and set about forming a group of musicians to realise this. The original three members were Steve Reich, Art Murphy and Jon Gibson. Later in 1971 the ensemble expanded to 12 musicians and singers and became known as Steve Reich and Musicians and continues to this day as a flexible ensemble ranging from 2 to 18 or more players. Amazingly, Russ Hartenberger and Bob Becker both joined the ensemble in 1971 and are still performing as key members now as well as working in the Canadian percussion group Nexus. This idea of composer -performer existed in the three other so called minimalist composers of the time: Philip Glass had his own ensemble ; Terry Riley performed most of his own work and, perhaps the father of them all, La Monte Young performed his own work with his wife Marian Zarzeela. It is perhaps interesting to note that on the recording of Four Organs that I have Steve Reich and Philip Glass make up 50% of the ensemble. Four Organs was written in 1970 and instead of using phase shifting techniques it focuses on rhythmic augmentation where a single chord is gradually 'stretched' from sounding very short to very long. It was also in 1970 when Reich journeyed to Ghana to study African drumming with the Ewe tribe and on his return to the U.S. composed Drumming from the autumn of 70 to the autumn of 71. Reich is keen to point out that the purpose of his visit to Africa and subsequent writing of Drumming was not to replicate African drumming but that it confirmed to him that acoustic (and in particular percussion) instruments can be richer and more complex than electronic instruments and percussion can be the dominant voice in complex classical music and that that music can swing.

Drumming is in four sections beginning with part 1 for 8 tuned bongo drums, part 2 for 3 marimbas and female voices, part 3 for glockenspiels, whistling and piccolo and part 4 all the instruments combined, all sections run without a break from one to another using pitch relationships i.e. the marimba section finishes and fades out in the high register of the instrument and the glockenspiel section begins by fading in on the low register of the instrument. Drumming is not only a key work in 20th century

music, but in Reich's output as this was to be the last work to use the phase shifting technique.

From here on Reich used augmentation, diminution and sudden as opposed to gradual phase changes in works like Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ, Clapping Music (born out of the desire to perform a piece needing only the human body to be present) Six Planos and Music for Pieces of Wood. All these pieces explore the repeated phrase or pattern played out of phase by different players thus producing the rhythmic ambiguity of 'where the one is' and changes the perception of what is not actually changing. It is this aspect which has characterised this music throughout.

From 1973, Reich concentrated on writing for larger ensembles. These included Music for a Large Ensemble (funnily enough!), Variations for Wind, Strings and Keyboards and perhaps most importantly of all Music for 18 Musicians. This piece was a major turning point as it had many more harmonic and melodic changes that happened much quicker than in his previous music and included strings, voices and wind instruments as well as the usual mallet percussion and pianos.

The late 70s and early 80s saw an even greater pull away from the repeated patterns and slowly changing harmonies to more energetic and elaborate melodic writing in pieces like Tehillim and The Desert Music where text now plays an integral role. In particular, The Desert Music is Reich's first large scale orchestral and choral work needing around 100 players to realise the full orchestral version (there is a scaled down chamber version which includes a smaller chorus and keyboards). Different Trains written in 1988 for string quartet and sampled speech recordings is another key work as it looks backwards by using speech (as in Its Gonna Rain) to generate musical material as well as looking forward by using digital samples of speech.

This idea is carried many steps forward in The Cave (1993) where Reich collaborated with his wife Beryl Karot the video artist. Again, musical material is developed from spoken words of interviews recorded by Reich of Israeli, Palestinian and American commentaries relating to the history of the Cave at Hebron and explores the Biblical stories of Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac. The piece delivers great emotional and indeed political impact using computer generated video images on 5 huge screens with musicians and singers on different levels on the stage.



Steve Reich in London

1994/95 saw Reich again looking back in two different ways. In *Proverb* he looks right back to Mediaeval music (Perotin etc) where canonic melodies augment in constantly changing meters and *Nagoya Marimbas* looks back to his own music of the 60s and 70s with the two marimbas playing one or two beats out of phase, creating a series of two part unison canons. In *City Life* (1995) Reich uses samplers live on stage as an instrument to produce real street sounds of New York (car horns, street vendors, pile drivers and protests from a political rally which reminds one of *It's Gonna Rain and Come Out*). Because musicians play these samples live within the ensemble it allows, as Reich says, 'the usual small flexibility of tempo that is the hallmark of live performance'.

Currently, Steve Reich and Beryl Karot are at work on their next collaboration *Three Tales* which deals with three key subjects which have had or could have extreme consequences on life in the 20th and 21st centuries. Act 1. *Hindenburg* looks at both the ill fated zeppelin crash in 1937 as well as the German hero of WW1 and last president of the Weimar Republic who was ill advised to make Hitler chancellor in 1933. *Hindenburg* was performed as work in progress on 23 June at Bonn, Germany and should be performed complete in the U.S. sometime in 1998. The second Act or 'tale' *Bikini* comments on the atomic test sight Bikini atoll in 1946 and the H-bomb test in the Solomon islands. *Bikini* may also include footage about the bathing suit named for the famous explosion. Finally Act 3, *Dolly*, of course, will examine "the technology of the 21st century" - Biotechnology and genetic engineering - through interviews with

scientists, historians and theologians.

Three Tales uses sampling technology that allows durations of spoken words to be augmented without changing the pitch. Reich's established musical imagination coupled with Karot's exciting and creative video artistry must indeed be producing opera for the 21st century. The entire cycle will run for approximately 2 hours and is scheduled to premiere in 2001. Hindenburg as work in progress will premiere at the Barbican Centre on 19th October. Perhaps equally important in this concert is a performance of Music for 18 Musicians which hasn't been heard live in this country for almost 2 decades. Proverb completes this all Reich programme.

Its interesting how people's music tastes change or indeed develop, I can remember going to a few concerts of so called minimalist music in the early 70s where you could choose exactly where to sit as it was so poorly attended. Indeed, Philip Glass said that his early concert audience consisted of about 6 people, two of whom were his mother and father! Now all these composers sell out all the major concert venues in the world. Having played a good deal of Reich's music and listened to much more, I have to say that this music required a huge amount of mental concentration as we were playing in a way that we had never played or trained for before, but the one thing that grabs you is a great sense of joy and exhilaration as this music pulls you along. All the influences are there, Bartok, African drumming, Bach, Gamelan, Hebrew cantillation and jazz all fly about within the music.

Steve Reich will be 61 in October this year and Nonesuch records have just released a 10 CD boxed set of many key works including new recordings of Music for 18 Musicians and Four Organs.

Lastly perhaps we should spare a thought for dear old Fritz Speigl the music critic who said that his first encounter of Steve Reich's music was on Radio 3 which he began to listen to, then suddenly remembered that his lawn mower needed repairing, so he went out, stripped the mower down repaired and tested it, came back to the radio and as he said, 'the same thing was still going on and he missed nothing'. Oh dear Fritz, perhaps you should stick to lawn mower repairs!!?

This article first appeared in AVANT magazine Issue 3.

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List of works.

[The Plastic Haircut \(1964\)](#)

[Oh Dem Watermelons \(1964\)](#)

[It's Gonna Rain \(1965\)](#)

[Come Out \(1966\)](#)

[Melodica \(1966\)](#)

[My Name Is \(1967\)](#)

[Piano Phase \(1967\)](#)

[Violin Phase \(1967\)](#)

[Reed Phase \(1967\)](#)

[Phase Patterns \(1970\)](#)

[Four Organs \(1970\)](#)

[Pulse Music \(1969\)](#)

[Four Log Drums \(1969\)](#)

[Pendulem Music \(1968\)](#)

[Drumming \(1970/71\)](#)

[Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ \(1973\)](#)

[Clapping Music \(1972\)](#)

Six Pianos / Marimbas (1973)
Music for Pieces of Wood (1973)
Music for 18 Musicians (1974/76)
Music for a Large Ensemble (1979)
Octet (Eight Lines) (1979)
Variations for Winds, Strings and Keyboards (1980)
Tehillim (1981)
Vermont Counterpoint (1982)
The Desert Music (1982/3)
New York Counterpoint (1985)
Sextet (1985)
Three Movements (1986)
Electric Counterpoint (1987)
The Four Sections (1987)
Different Trains (1988)
The Cave (1993)
Duet (1993)
Nagoya Marimbas (1994)
Nagoya Guitars (transcription made by David Tietlbaum)
Proverb (1995)
City Life (1995)
Three Tales (Hindenburg - Bikini - Dolly)
Duet
Triple Quartet
Dance Patterns