

Steve Reich



Photo credit: Jeffrey Herman

An introduction to the works of Steve Reich

Those who first encounter the music of Steve Reich through his early *It's Gonna Rain* (1965), *Piano Phase* (1967) or *Drumming* (1970-71) will probably connect this vividly contrapuntal music, incessantly relocating simple patterns before our ears and brains, with the term minimalism. It's not an unreasonable link to make. Yet "minimalism" scarcely does justice to this composer's output of the last three decades and more.

Like his individual compositions themselves, Reich's musical language in fact evolves constantly. A new idea is mined for its potential, and might seem to allow listeners to predict where its creator would be headed next. But then, suddenly, another fresh idea, or even a return to a neglected old one, changes your listening perspective, even when patterns and regular pulse are audibly retained. Reich's compositions challenge how you listen. They even challenge you how to think.

Such evolution began as early as 1967, when Reich concluded that the technique of phasing a short pattern against itself in slowly unraveling counterpoint was more interestingly elaborated with live instruments than in the medium of tape that had brought such phasing into being. Evolution can be traced with remarkable consistency through Reich's output from then onwards: in the increasing harmonic sophistication and textural allure of *Music for Eighteen Musicians* (1974-6); in the conspicuous melodic impulse of the piece now called *Eight Lines* (originally *Octet*), of 1979; in the return to text setting - whether in Hebrew, as in *Tehillim* (1980-81), or English, as in *The Desert Music* (1982-4).

Reich's music has never stopped growing since that time, either. The seminal *Different Trains* (1988) tracks back to some of the techniques of those early speech-based tapes to achieve the seismic shift forward in the composer's development that leads to the music-theatre works, *The Cave* (1989-93) and *Three Tales* (1996-2002), both done in collaboration with video artist Beryl Korot. All three compositions feature the sampling of both speech and other sounds in a live instrumental - and in the latter two cases also theatrical - context, in which "found" speech melodies and rhythms are embedded in harmonic structures of increasing sophistication. In addition, these works dig deep for urgent new meanings via contemplations of, respectively, the Holocaust, the 20th century's Abrahamic inheritance, and the significance of modern technologies.

So does *Daniel Variations* (2006), which sets words by and relating to the American reporter Daniel Pearl, kidnapped and murdered in Pakistan in 2002. Its tolling metallophones and four pianos take their departure point from yet further harmonic and timbral advances charted by Reich in the 21st century and raise

them to new heights of lyrical intensity and rich darkness.

Double Sextet (2007), meanwhile, develops fresh perspectives to Reich's familiar interlocking patterns with pairs of identical instruments. And *2x5* (2009) sees him returning again to his early output as the inspiration behind his first piece for an entirely rock instrumentation.

Reich's output of the last three decades has found an increasingly welcome place in the Western classical concert hall, confirmed by the award of the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2009. The ambient DJ crowd, from Brian Eno onwards, has embraced, in particular, the early, hard-edged scores, not least for their radical take on the experience of time. Yet one important message of Reich's entire output as a composer is that such cultural boundaries, where they still exist today, are there to be crossed.

Keith Potter, 2009