

## Steve Reich



Steve Reich Photo: Alice Arnold/Nonesuch

### An introduction to Reich's music by K. Robert Schwarz

When Steve Reich was a conservatory student in the late 1950s and early 1960s, young composers had no choice but to conform to the prevailing serial doctrine. Inaudible mathematical permutation, atonality, and arrhythmic pointillism were the academic norm. Audiences were alienated by music that seemed to value structure more than sound, leaving composers increasingly isolated from their listening public. Steve Reich, devoted to the tonality and pulse of jazz and early Stravinsky, found himself estranged from the new-music establishment.

Today, almost thirty years later, this gloomy situation has changed radically, in no small part because of Reich himself. Without pandering to mass taste, Reich has brought the composer out of isolation and allowed him to regain a meaningful place in society. His large audience is not only a personal vindication, but serves as encouragement to a whole generation of younger composers. For Reich's music has created options that did not exist three decades ago. Rather than dogmatically applying a single technique, composers may now follow Reich's more eclectic path, one that has embraced not only aspects of the rationalism of serialism, but the structures, harmonies, and rhythms of non-Western and American vernacular music, especially jazz.

Reich's own musical development has exhibited a constant enlargement of vocabulary, yet he has never compromised his aesthetic beliefs. Although steady pulse, tonal center, structural clarity, repetition, and a fascination with canons have always characterized his work, he has retained a youthful eagerness to broaden both means and scope. The once impersonal process of phasing gave way, under the influence of African and Balinese music, to a counterpoint of polyrhythms; while a study of Hebrew scriptural cantillation led to an expansion of the melodic profile.

In fact, Reich's works reveal a continuing incorporation of new elements into his existing language – from the harmonic cycle and kaleidoscopic colors of *Music for Eighteen Musicians* to the heightened emotional response evoked by the texts of *Tehillim* and *The Desert Music*.

Prediction is always risky, but it would seem certain that Reich will continue to make from his resources of Western Classical music, non-Western culture, and

the American vernacular a rich and surprising synthesis. In whatever guise the synthesis appears, from the eminently portable, jazz-inflected 'Counterpoint' series to the refined scoring for large orchestra of *The Desert Music* and *The Four Sections*, it remains immediately recognizable as the reflection of a man who continues to delight his public without ever denying his roots.

K. Robert Schwarz

(Author of *The Minimalists* [1996, Phaidon Press])