

From New York to Vermont: Conversation with Steve Reich

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Taking a break from his latest project, Three Tales, Steve Reich discusses the techniques, influences, and implications of some of his past works, starting with Music for 18 Musicians. The interviews took place at his New York City apartment on October 12, 2000 and by telephone to his Vermont home on October 25, 2000.

Music for 18 Musicians (1974-76)

What kinds of things were you thinking about when composing Music for 18 Musicians?

Well, harmony and orchestration were very high on the list. Rather than starting with a melodic cell, which had been the starting point for *Piano Phase*, *Violin Phase*, *Drumming*, and basically all the pieces preceding *Music for 18* except for *Four Organs*, the way I composed *Music for 18* was by starting with a series of chords. The idea was to extend the middle register, *not* the bass—remember the Debussy flute melody beginning *Afternoon of a Faun* and that same melody repeated with different bass notes. In other words, key signature is structure and bass is color. You're in three sharps which can mean A major, F# minor, B dorian and so on.

Works like *Six Pianos*, *Four Organs*, *Violin Phase*, and *Piano Phase* had been dealing primarily with multiples of instruments of the same timbre, and this was done both as an aesthetic choice *and* an acoustical necessity. It was *necessary* to have instruments of the same timbre playing against one another so that all the sub-patterns would emerge clearly. When you have six pianos, after a while you don't know who's playing what; all you know is that all this is happening, and you begin hearing all kinds of sub-patterns because everything blends together. If you were to play *Piano Phase* on harpsichord and piano, this wouldn't happen. You could do it on two harpsichords and on two synthesizers of the same timbre, but you just have to match them.

With *Music for 18*, I began to think, “Well, there’s an awful lot of music for dissimilar instruments.” Therefore, *Music for 18 Musicians* was, in a sense, a riot of color compared to what came before it. *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ* is the parent and is certainly lurking there in the background; that’s where beautiful sound became a major consideration, as well as mixing timbres, and mixing very long held tones with very short eighth notes started. But, *Music for 18* takes the harmonic aspect of that piece and expands it into completely new territory.

You added more color toward the end of Drumming.

There is a kind of continuity between *Drumming Part IV*, *Music for Mallet Instruments*, and *Music for 18*, but *Music for 18*, as a lot of people have noticed, combines the old and the new. While there is a new intense interest in harmonic variation, changing key, changing mode particularly, and in changing orchestration, there is also the xylophone being built up against the other xylophone and the high pianos are paired with each. Hence, that old pairing is there, and of course it’s still there today, but the idea of pairing instruments against one another to produce canonic sub-patterns is now part of rather than all of the piece; *Nagoya Marimbas* is an exception because it is basically doing an old piece more recently. *Music for 18 Musicians* was a step, if you like, backwards, backwards *into* the Western tradition, *into* harmonic variation, *into* orchestral color, and [*laughing*] in a sense I never stopped moving backwards until *Different Trains* in 1988.

This step “backwards” into Western tradition seems to have been a big step forward for you stylistically.

It essentially was. There are artists in the visual arts who more or less do the same things their whole lives. A certain minimal artist, whom I won’t name, made boxes—steel boxes, blue boxes, wood boxes—and that was his life. Then there are artists like Frank Stella; he made black and white grid paintings, dayglo color grids, then the grids became chicken wire, which got bent out of shape off the wall, and pretty soon he was doing sculptures. Therefore, when someone asks, “What’s the next Frank Stella show going to be?” You answer, “Well, let’s see what he does.”

I turn out to be that kind of artist, because that's who I am. I got bored writing phase pieces. I couldn't write any phase music after 1971. I couldn't write *Music for 18 Musicians* or anything like that now. I just move on to the next thing that seems to need doing.

So, with Music for 18 you moved on from what's been identified as your early "minimalist" style?

Well, yes. There is an interview that was done with Michael Nyman shortly after the piece was completed. In it, he asked whether I was interested in doing minimal music, and I said, "No, I'm not." I'm interested in doing what genuinely interests me and that keep changing. I was recently at Dartmouth as a Montgomery Fellow earlier in the spring, and an undergraduate in one of the classes had apparently just read my 1968 essay, "Music as a Gradual Process." After I played a piece from last year, *Triple Quartet*, the student asked me, "How is that a gradual process?" I said, "It's not. It's not a gradual process."

I think people suffer from a misconception, not only about me, but about music theory and its relation to music practice. Whatever music theory you encounter, certainly including the rules of four-part harmony, was written *after* a style had been worked out by ear, and by a good musical ear. Of course its good for a student to learn the rules of four-part harmony, but with the understanding that they're just student exercises and that parallel fifths may be perfect in another context. All music theory refers to something that has already happened, but if it is taken as a prescription, or worse as a manifesto, heaven help you. It's interesting that the music we treasure most of Schoenberg preceded the 12 tone theory. It's no accident that Op. 11, and "Farben" of the Five Orchestral Pieces Op. 16 (my favorite piece) or *Pierrot Lunaire*, and other earlier works all keep getting played. They're "difficult" and they're dark, but they're more successful, I believe, than those pieces that came later with the adoption of the 12 tone system.

Yet, you are constantly asked to explain minimalism because it's legitimately part of your early style, and others have since assumed this style.

The point is, if you went to Paris and dug up Debussy and said, "Excusez-moi

Monsieur...are you an impressionist? ”, he'd probably say “Merde!” and go back to sleep. That is a legitimate concern of musicologists, music historians, and journalists, and it's a convenient way of referring to me, Riley, Glass, La Monte Young, maybe even John Adams, and now Arvo Pärt, Giya Kancheli, and Louis Andriessen; it's become the dominant style. But, anybody who's interested in French Impressionism is interested in how different Debussy and Ravel and Satie are - and ditto for what's called minimalism. So it's hard to get excited about that kind of thing. Basically, those kind of words are taken from painting and sculpture, and applied to musicians who composed at the same period as that painting and sculpture was made. There is some validity to the description; certainly if you listen to *Piano Phase* or *Violin Phase* and you look at Sol LeWitt, you're going to note some similarities. That just means people who are alive at a certain period of time and have their antennas up and functioning are going to get similar input messages and they're going to react to that those messages. Beyond that, it's all individual, and that's what's interesting.

There is a wonderful visual side to Music for 18, in the way one performer takes over an instrument from another performer. Is that an important aspect of performing Music for 18?

Well, a lot of that is just keeping the key players in the ensemble doing what it is they do best. The title says it's music for eighteen musicians, and we [Steve Reich and Musicians] play it with eighteen, but no other ensemble plays it this way. Eighteen is the minimum number of musicians with which you can do the piece. We are a traveling ensemble, which means that one extra person is one more air fare, hotel room and so on. When the Ensemble Modern does it, I think they do it with twenty-one. When we do it, I play marimba in three sections, and piano in the others. Jim Preiss, who plays the vibraphone and does all the cueing, also comes over and plays piano, and Jay Clayton, who sings, plays my piano part when I'm playing marimba. Other ensembles wouldn't bother with that. You can use up to twenty-two people, and the number of musicians will vary from ensemble to ensemble. When you see us doing it, we're just the original instruments. [laughs]

There's no conductor, and that was a pivotal decision. The models I had in mind were West African drumming and Balinese gamelan. The conductorial responsibilities for eighteen people playing together and making changes together

devolves onto members of the ensemble. Primarily the vibraphone and first bass clarinet. Basically, what you have is chamber music where everybody has to listen to each other, be aware of each other, because there's a lot of audible internal cueing, most obviously by the vibraphone and the bass clarinet. This creates an atmosphere where you have to be in touch with each other or you can't play the piece. There is also a kind of communal aspect to that, which musicians genuinely enjoy.

My ensemble has been together for a long time. We know each other well and that just comes out when you see us perform. I think that reality is communicated perhaps best in *Music for 18 Musicians*. People in the ensemble have to feel at ease with each other in order to keep on playing together for 10, 20 or 30 years. There is a kind of shared attitude in terms of what it's all about when we're playing; we don't talk about it - its just there.