



A guide to Steve Reich's music

Without Steve Reich's rhythms, pulses and phasing, contemporary culture would be a much poorer place



'He has given the contemporary musical world a licence to groove' ... Steve Reich. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

It's rare that one says this about a contemporary composer, but it's become too easy to take [Steve Reich](#) for granted. Of course, that's a sign of just how influential his music has been, the way it has drawn on everything from African drumming to concept art, and how it has influenced generations of pop, jazz and classical musicians over the last half-century. In fact, if you were to subtract Steve Reich from the total sum of today's musical culture, I think you'd notice more of a difference than if you took away any other single figure.

Even if you think you don't know Reich's music directly, you will almost certainly be familiar with what it does, thanks to the way his music and his example have been refracted by other composers in other fields. Here's a whistlestop tour: in the 1960s, with Terry Riley and Philip Glass, Reich gave pulse back to experimental music (listen to [Clapping Music](#) for the Reichian pulse at its purest), he discovered tape-based techniques of looping and phasing using recordings of fragments of speech (try [Come Out](#) and [It's Gonna Rain](#)), and then molecules of musical material ([Piano Phase](#), [Violin Phase](#), or the Fluxus-ish Pendulum Music). And phasing itself? Imagine you have a pattern that consists of 12 quavers. If you keep playing the original but the player next to you starts the same sequence, but beginning one quaver later, you start to phase the rhythm against itself, and you can move through the whole pattern, quaver by quaver, creating a huge diversity of rhythmic possibility from a single cell. In theory it might sound simple, but in practice it's pretty mind-bending, especially

in Reich's [Piano Phase](#), where the second player must gradually make the minuscule rhythmic shift from one semiquaver to the next, before locking into the next note in the pattern.

Later, Reich found a way of using tonal and modal chords but unmooring them from any conventional harmonic function (in [Six Pianos](#) and the final part of [Drumming](#)). By the mid-70s, he was ready to integrate everything he had discovered to encompass genuine harmonic direction and expressive potential. He went on to write pieces that have dealt with the Holocaust, Middle Eastern history and politics, and contemporary conflict ([Different Trains](#), [The Cave](#), [Daniel Variations](#)).

In order to best understand what Reich is up to, however, I want to focus on one piece. It is the work that, for me, sums up not only what he had written before but contains the seeds of the music he would write afterwards: I give you [Music for 18 Musicians](#), first heard in 1976.

You perceive the significance and the novelty of the piece in terms of Reich's music right at the start of [Music for 18 Musicians](#) – in the opening Pulse section, with which the piece also ends. It's a sequence of 11 chords that the whole ensemble breathes through (literally, since what determines how long each individual chord is held is the length of time the the bass clarinet player can sustain the repetitions of the bass note). What's novel about that? Well, where previous pieces had focused on a single harmonic idea (*Four Organs*, for example, is a hallucinogenically hypnotic extension of one chord) or rhythmic pattern (the whole of *Drumming*, which can last up to an hour and a half, is based on just one bar-long idea), there is more harmonic motion and difference in the opening of *Music for 18 Musicians* than in all of what he'd written up to this point. There's also a greater variety of instrumental timbre; again, pieces such as *Six Pianos* or *Violin Phase* do what they say on the tin, using ensembles of acoustic or recorded versions of a single instrumental colour. But the 18 Musicians who play their Music are percussionists, string players, clarinetists, singers and pianists, creating an ever-changing, kaleidoscopic soundworld.

But it's how Reich uses all of that colour and possibility over the hour of the whole work that makes the piece so magnetic. You hear the classic Reich technique of gradually building up a rhythm by adding notes in successive repetitions, and one of the 12 sections even uses the music of *Violin Phase* in a new context. Reich says the sections of *Music for 18 Musicians* are based on the cycle of chords we hear at the start, so that the whole work creates a sequence of short pieces that's like a harmonic expansion and explosion of that cyclic pattern. Yet the experience of the piece is much richer than that suggests. *Music for 18 Musicians* creates a labyrinthine experience for the listener. You're locked into the mesmerising way in which one pattern morphs into another, addicted to the groove and pulse of the music at the smallest scale of what's happening from one note to the next.

At the same time, the music describes a bigger journey, as melodies and patterns recur over the scale of the whole piece. Reich builds up waves of density and complexity that crest at different points (listen out for Section V and Section IX especially), creating an experiential arc that does much more than repeat a sequence of chords and rhythms. I find *Music for 18 Musicians* a compelling and even moving piece, but given that it eschews, like all of Reich's music, any hint of obvious sentimentality, that expressive power comes from the notes themselves, from the warp and weft of pattern, melody and pulse.

Reich expanded the range of *18 Musicians* even further in *Different Trains*, for string quartet and sampled voices, and the music-theatre and installation pieces he has made with his wife, Beryl

Korot, such as *The Cave* and [Three Tales](#); there's even a multimedia micro-Gesamtkunstwerk called [City Life](#). For me, though, it's when Reich focuses on the minutiae of musical material rather than its political or cultural message that his work is at its most powerful. That's an alchemy he manages in [Proverb](#), his setting and meditation on Wittgenstein's aphorism "How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life", or in the impassioned austerity of his [Daniel Variations](#), a piece based on the words of American journalist Daniel Pearl, who was beheaded in Pakistan 2002.

Reich's influence is bigger than any single piece. He has given the contemporary musical world a licence to groove, he created a model of a self-sustaining ensemble, [Steve Reich and Musicians](#), to play, record and remain a living laboratory for his music, and he has inspired musicians from Michael Gordon to Nico Muhly, from Björk to DJ Spooky. And that means that we all live in a Reichian musical world.