

## MUSIC

# Steve Reich at 80: Still Plugged In, Still Plugging Away

By KERRY O'BRIEN    SEPT. 30, 2016

Caught between Netflix binges and digital detoxes, Americans can't decide whether they love or hate technology. Despite being a pioneer of electronic music, the composer Steve Reich has maintained a similar ambivalence throughout his long career. Decades before the Grammy- and Pulitzer-winning heyday that has made him one of this country's most renowned artists, Mr. Reich struggled with the very technology that first brought him fame.

On Monday, Oct. 3, he turns 80, a milestone that has been celebrated in the music world all year. Then, on Nov. 1 at Carnegie Hall, comes the premiere of his new work, "Pulse." For fans of Minimalism, the style Mr. Reich pioneered, the word "pulse" summons his most recognizable quality: From the pulsing of tape loops to the pulsing of voices, the hallmark of his style has always been a relentless rhythmic beat. But the idea of a pulse also figures large in his complicated relationship with technology.

Mr. Reich made his name in mid-1960s San Francisco. Experimenting with tape loops, he discovered what he subsequently dubbed "phasing" when he accidentally let two identical tape fragments gradually drift out of sync. In "It's Gonna Rain"

(1965) and “Come Out” (1966), Mr. Reich played recorded voices against themselves: As they “phased,” the voices began to reverberate, then echo and eventually blur into chaos.

But after working exclusively with tape when he returned to New York, his hometown, he reached a crossroads with technology and later described 1966 as “a very depressing year” in which he “began to feel like a mad scientist trapped in a lab.” He decided to add live performers to the mix in a style then called live/electric music.

One live/electric experiment was “Piano Phase” (1967), in which Mr. Reich recorded himself playing a 12-note pattern on piano and set it to loop. He then tried to play mechanically against his recording — as if he himself were a second tape — and “phased” with the looped piano by playing slightly faster. Once this idea had been successful, he performed the process completely live with the pianist Arthur Murphy.

“The phase pieces for instruments turn machine fantasies into human events,” Mr. Reich wrote in his sketchbook.

While “Piano Phase” brought Mr. Reich out of his mad scientist impasse, he soon discovered new fantasies. In March 1967, he expanded “Piano Phase” into “Four Pianos,” in which four performers played electric pianos while listening to a “guide” player over headphones. For technical assistance, Mr. Reich consulted engineers from Experiments in Art and Technology, a nonprofit group capitalizing on Cold War funding for technological research and the countercultural yen for zany investigations.

They paired artists with engineers interested in collaboration. Through such work, the organization was involved in the development of a great deal of American experimental music, from the amplified brainwaves of John Cage’s “Variations VII” (1966) to the electronic mantras of Pauline Oliveros’s “Pep-Psi” (1970).

In early 1968, Mr. Reich envisioned a phasing machine, so the group paired him with the engineer Larry Owens to create the Phase Shifting Pulse Gate. That device was designed to phase 12 separate oscillator pulses, creating gradually shifting

melodic patterns. Mr. Reich spent over 15 months working on the contraption and wrote two new works for it, one called “Pulse Music.” But after two performances, the machine had a glitch, causing the oscillator pulses to hiccup or shudder randomly.

Mr. Reich stashed his Pulse Gate in a closet, abandoned “Pulse Music” and disavowed electronic music. (Today, the machine sits dormant in the Reich archive at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Switzerland, alongside the collections of other 20th-century musical legends like Stravinsky and Bartok.)

In 1970, following the Pulse Gate fiasco, Mr. Reich wrote a short manifesto, “Some Optimistic Predictions (1970) About the Future of Music.” Among his prophecies were that “electronic music as such will gradually die and be absorbed into the ongoing music of people singing and playing instruments.” At least in his own work, this held true: Outside of amplification and the occasional electric organ, Mr. Reich’s music of the 1970s was resolutely tech-free.

But while Mr. Reich had renounced machines, critics still noticed something “machine-like” about his pulse-based music. The critic Louis Snyder, for instance, described the maraca players in “Four Organs” (1970) as “relegated to the status of automatons.”

When he was asked in a 1970 interview about this apparently mechanical aspect of his music, Mr. Reich responded with an unexpected analogy. “I think there’s a human activity which might be called ‘imitating machines,’” he said, “but which is simply controlling your mind and body very carefully as in yoga breathing exercises, or in playing my phase pieces.”

His yoga practice was, in part, a sign of the times: His fellow Minimalist innovator Philip Glass found a yoga teacher by looking under “Y” in the phone book. For Mr. Reich, yoga practice was interconnected with performance practice, and he reflected this in unpublished essays like “Personal Observations Towards a Yoga of Performing Music.”

With these analogies to yoga, the notion of “pulse music” acquired new meaning, as Mr. Reich’s music of the ’70s began to evoke and incorporate the

pulsing of bodies rather than those of machines. By 1971, his yoga practice had spurred a new pulse-based composition: “While doing yoga this morning,” he wrote in his sketchbook, “I thought of a piece where a huge drum would pulse at about the same rate as heart beat — 60-72 and low wind or brass instruments would play long slow tones for a full breath so that the analogy of breathing + heartbeat would be clear.”

While that work never materialized, Mr. Reich’s landmark “Drumming” (1971) began with four men drumming and singing. “There happens to be a great difference in the way human beings respond to a synthesizer and the way they respond to drums,” Mr. Reich told *The New York Times* in 1971, adding that a musician “using his arms or his breath” can involve listeners “on a deeper level than if he is sitting back twisting dials on a machine.”

His body-generated works continued. “Pulse Music,” the name of that old abandoned Pulse Gate experiment, was, in fact, the provisional title for his next piece. But after many reworkings, Mr. Reich decided to call it “Clapping Music.” His most low-tech composition, it required nothing more than two sets of clapping hands to perform.

“I wanted to get all the way back to people,” Mr. Reich told an interviewer in 1973.

But his prolonged sabbatical from technology would not last. Mr. Reich used an Apple computer and sampling software in the 1980s. “I’m not a Luddite,” he said in a recent interview. “But I understand the Luddites.”

Many of his later works make extensive use of electronics, most notably “Three Tales” (2002), a video opera created in collaboration with the video artist Beryl Korot. As Mr. Reich and Ms. Korot once described it, the work is meant to reflect a debate about “the physical, ethical and religious nature of the expanding technological environment.” To be included in the Nov. 1 birthday concert at Carnegie, it includes accounts of the Hindenburg explosion, the nuclear bomb testing on Bikini Atoll and the cloning of the sheep Dolly in the 1990s.

“There’s no free lunch,” he said, musing on the trade-offs we make with technology. “Whatever you gain, you have to realize that it’s at some cost. And if you’re not aware of that, then you are, in a sense, living in what we used to call a fool’s paradise.”

Asked about ubiquity of technology today — a time when some even pay good money for someone to take their iPhones away — Mr. Reich responded, “Well, that’s the beauty of the Sabbath.” As an observant Jew, he unplugs every seventh day to take a break himself.

In 2016, when countless secular Americans are finding a need for “unplugged retreats,” Mr. Reich still seems to have his finger on the pulse of the times.

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