



# Steve Reich: the composer with his finger on the pulse

Reich showed the world the hypnotic pleasures of repetition as his music took in religion, politics and New York city life - and aged 80, he's still moving forward

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**"F**or 30 years I walked around Manhattan with earplugs in my ears." Steve Reich, whose music seems to embody the pulsing energy of the metropolis, doesn't enjoy being there that much. "Whenever I went out I had to kind of gird myself, you know," he says. "I basically don't like New York."

If the city had feelings, it would find that particularly hard to take right now. It is in the midst of feting Reich, who has just turned 80. He's composer in residence at Carnegie Hall, which is throwing a birthday concert for him on 1 November. His work is being performed at the Guggenheim, the Juilliard School and NYU. He's even in the process of moving back to his roots - from the leafy upstate suburb of Pound Ridge, where we meet, to the Lower East Side. "I mean, I owe a great deal to New York," he says, "and all my best friends are there and I am a New Yorker."

But there's a part of me that doesn't like noise, doesn't like a million people, doesn't like concrete."

Fans may have misread *City Life*, a 1995 work that riffs on slamming taxi doors, horns and sirens, then. "That was written in hostility, before we left. It was like, I can't stand these car alarms, so I'm going to put them in the piece and do what I want to with them. I know how to take care of you. I'm just going to devour you in my music and make something that I really want to hear."

In Pound Ridge birdsong is the only noise likely to disturb him. The Frank Lloyd Wright-esque house that Reich shares with his wife, video artist Beryl Korot, sits on a beautiful wooded slope, and warm October sunlight fills the room in which we talk. It might be a wonderful place to compose, but it's too isolated. Snow trapped him here one evening when he was supposed to be at a performance of his work in Manhattan. And Korot's gallery is on the Lower East Side. So, despite his misgivings, he's returning to the city in which he made his name half a century ago.

In 1965 Steve Reich arrived back in New York after a spell at Mills College, California, where he'd been studying composition. He had begun to experiment with tape loops, playing back snippets of human speech at different rates, letting them phase in and out of sync. Syllables sputter and stretch, zooming from one ear to the other, slowly reforming before deforming again. It's *Gonna Rain* samples a Pentecostal preacher in Union Square, San Francisco, declaiming the story of the Flood. *Come Out*, made once he was home again, uses the voice of one of the Harlem Six, black men beaten up by police, explaining how he'd had to split the skin on a bruise and let the blood "come out" in order to prove he'd been injured. Created to raise money to pay for the Six's legal team, the piece was included in a Columbia records compilation of new music a couple of years later. It was singled out in reviews and Reich found himself - and his "phasing" technique - in the spotlight.

Not everyone was happy, though. "Infantile!" Reich shouts, mimicking outrage. "Infantile. A critic used that word."

Why? When Reich was a student, serialism, a genre that deliberately avoided harmony, melody and rhythm, was the only game in town. Luciano Berio, one of his teachers at Mills College, was a leading exponent, but its inventor was the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg. It is difficult, highly intellectual music that makes sense as a stage in the development of the art, but has limited appeal. "There have been periods in music called Mannerist," Reich explains. "So at the end of Renaissance polyphony, it gets so convoluted, it's brilliant ... but it's always going to be off in a corner because it's so recherche and so refined. And this always presages some move towards a drastic simplification, a back to basics. Like: hey let's just have a voice singing! There'll be a story, there'll be people acting it out ... Opera!"

And so it was in the middle of the 20th century. "The skill - particularly with Boulez and Stockhausen - and the innovation is enormously admirable, enormously well done, and has its place in music history, no question about it. But, it attracted a minuscule audience. And if it weren't for the fact that Stockhausen appeared on the cover of *Sgt Pepper*, it would've been ever smaller.

"I felt in my gut: I became a composer because I love Bach, because I love Stravinsky, because I love bebop, because I love John Coltrane. Now, I just can't ... I don't want to spend my life doing this."

Reich did go back to basics - and uproar ensued. A 1973 performance of *Four Organs*, a hypnotically beautiful work in which harmonic chords are played again and again, shifting and overlapping, for 15 minutes, became famous for all the wrong reasons. According to Michael Tilson Thomas, now director of the San Francisco Symphony, “there were at least three attempts to stop the performance by shouting it down. One woman walked down the aisle and repeatedly banged her head on the front of the stage wailing, ‘Stop, stop, I confess.’”

With the exception of a few European composers still, as Reich puts it, working “in the graveyard”, serialism has now mostly disappeared. “I think we won hands down,” he says, referring to the generation of musicians who broke away with him: Terry Riley, Arvo Pärt, Philip Glass. But it is a “restoration” not a revolution. “Swallow it: restoration. Of what? Harmony, rhythm and melody.”

It’s because of this that the pop, EDM and contemporary classical worlds are as close as they now are, he argues. “More and more of the young highly skilled conservatory graduates like to hang out with DJs”. He mentions Nico Muhly and the National’s Bryce Dessner, two of the composers who will feature in his *Three Generations* programme at Carnegie Hall in April 2017.

Reich’s son, Ezra, is also a pop aficionado, and has helped him appreciate artists like Prince and Giorgio Moroder. At the time, he says: “I didn’t pay any attention to Donna Summer or any of that, I knew disco existed but I didn’t listen to it at all.” He laughs and says that his favourite Summer track wasn’t “the famous one” (*I Feel Love*). It was - and here he bursts into song - “She works hard for her money ... ba da da da da da DA! ... I really liked that a lot.”

*Pulse*, which will be performed for the first time at the Carnegie Hall concert (its European premiere is at the Barbican in London on 5 November) was partly inspired Daft Punk’s collaboration with Moroder. Anchoring the winds, strings and piano is an electric guitar, which pumps out a repetitive bassline in homage to the 70s synth genius.

Also on the bill at both concerts are his collaborations with Korot, *Three Tales*. These video pieces, with accompanying scores by Reich, were designed to mark the turn of the millennium. They dramatise symbolic moments in the history of the 20th century: the explosion of the Hindenburg, the detonation of the hydrogen bomb at Bikini atoll and the cloning of Dolly the Sheep. As such - and like *Come Out* - they’re rare examples of political engagement by Reich.

“I am not an activist, never have been,” he explains, playing down the resonance between *Come Out* and the Black Lives Matter movement. “I mean I have beliefs and if offered the opportunity, I will help out.” But, he says “in the long run, subject matter doesn’t mean crap. Let me give you an example. One of the greatest artists of the last millennium is Pablo Picasso. And one of Picasso’s greatest masterpieces is *Guernica* ... It’s extremely topical, it’s extremely passionate, it’s extremely political. As a work of art, it’s a towering masterpiece. As an effective political tool, it’s an absolute waste of time. Pablo, get out of here, you’re an idiot.”

His point is that, after *Guernica*, bombing civilians became more common, not less. “So people ask me, should composers write political music? I say there’s one obligation composers have. And that is to write the very best music they possibly can.” If politics helps musicians get fired up to make good work then it’s done its job, he reckons.

Religion too. Reich rediscovered Judaism in his 30s - the baseball cap he’s never seen without is actually his version of a yarmulke - and it has inspired some of his best-known works, including

Tehillim and the Daniel Variations. On the wall behind him is a bookshelf stacked with weighty Jewish tomes. “They’re basically all centred around Torah,” he explains, “the first five books of Moses in the Christian Bible and in the Hebrew scriptures as well. They’re read every year in a cycle. You start at the beginning of Genesis, and we’re now approaching the end of that cycle as we speak.

“There’s a very famous commentary in the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which we are presently in - it’s called Teshuvah, by Maimonides. Teshuvah means returning, returning in a very broad sense of the word, returning to who you are, to who you really are.”

Some of Reich’s contemporaries, including Glass, Riley and La Monte Young, were directly inspired by Buddhism, with its own narratives of rebirth. Is Jewish spirituality the key to his instrumental pieces, as abstract as they sometimes seem? There is, after all, repetition, cycling, returning, on every page. “The answer to your question is: who knows. God knows, I don’t. I wouldn’t say, ‘Oh no, what are you talking about?’ You’re talking about something real.

“The cyclical is only interesting when it’s not a cycle but when it’s a spiral,” he continues. “If it goes around and around in a circle, you’re really a rat in a trap, and just playing a loop is a bore. But if you return ... above that point, or in a different position, you have returned as a different person, you have returned as a different composer, and you have returned to a different musical accomplishment.

“I think it was Charles Olson, a poet you may have heard of, who said: ‘People don’t change. They only stand more revealed.’” And that seems about right for this reluctant New Yorker, finally making his way home again.

Topics

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