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When musicians play my work, part of me wants to strangle them

As the minimalist composer Steve Reich approaches 80, he discusses how he changed the face of music — and where he goes from here

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Steve Reich: "I often say what my generation did was not a revolution, it was a restoration"
CHRISTOPHER LANE FOR THE TIMES



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There is a piece by the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt drawn directly on to a wall of Steve Reich's kitchen, in dense tangles of pencil that form a series of vertical bands. "It took him several

make the link with Reich's music and its emphasis on repeating structures and shifting phases to create works of almost unfathomable beauty.

Next month Reich turns 80. There will be more than 400 performances of his work in 20 countries, which he brushes away as merely making "good copy". "I don't know how many are celebratory or just happen to be playing a piece of mine, but, you know, why not?"

Fiercely intelligent, though cheerful and relaxed, and sporting his familiar cap, Reich comes across, in his own words, as a typical "fast-talking, high-metabolism New Yorker". He settles on to a sofa in the wonderfully angular and airy modernist house he lives in with his wife, the pioneering video artist Beryl Korot — they moved upstate a decade ago because he couldn't stand city noise any more.

Despite Reich's downplaying of the hoopla, it will be hard to avoid his music this autumn. The Barbican has scheduled a weekend in his honour, part of a season that also celebrates the other key minimalists: Philip Glass, who turns 80 in January next year, and John Adams, who turns 70 in February. There is the European premiere of Reich's latest work, *Pulse*, and a London Symphony Orchestra performance of *You Are (Variations)*, *Daniel Variations* and *The Desert Music*.

Reich admits to "mixed emotions" when travelling to see performances by people aged "between 25 and 40, playing my music better than I'd ever heard it, including my own ensemble". He smiles. "Part of me wants to embrace them, part of me wants to strangle them."

At the Royal Opera House in London, the Royal Ballet's resident choreographer, Wayne McGregor, has devised a piece set to Reich's new score *Runner*, which Reich says suggested its own title when he realised that its rapid opening meant he would have to pace the piece carefully.

Elsewhere there is a site-specific performance of his classic *Different Trains* at Edge Hill railway station in Liverpool. It's all a long way from when his earliest tape pieces were played on radio, and "the switchboard lit up, people saying, 'Your transmitter's broken, your record's stuck in a groove — fix it!'"

It was mainly visual artists such as LeWitt who "got" Reich's music at first, and most early concerts in New York were held in galleries. "When I was coming up, in the late Sixties, the Boulez-Stockhausen-Cage aesthetic had a stranglehold on the academic world," he explains. "Most composers were teachers; they weren't terribly fond of what I was doing."



The premiere of *Drumming* was at the Museum of Modern Art, he tells me. “Later, we gave concerts at the Guggenheim. The early audience was artists, film-makers, dancers, choreographers and people living downtown.” Mainstream crowds weren’t always as enthusiastic. He recalls one performance in front of “lots of blue-haired ladies” at Carnegie Hall in 1973. “At the end there was this avalanche of ‘Boo!’ and ‘Bravo!’ ” He laughs. “You know, really a riot! And I was white as a sheet because I want people to love what I’m doing.”

Today Reich is generally agreed to be one of the great composers of our time, and it’s no exaggeration to say that masterpieces such as *Music for 18 Musicians* altered the face of music. “I was part of something that really changed an aesthetic,” he says, referring to himself and composers such as Glass, Adams, Terry Riley and other figureheads of what became known as “minimal music”, a term Reich is wary of.

“I often say what my generation did was not a revolution, it was a restoration. Restoration of harmony, restoration of counterpoint, those basic elements of music.” Boulez, Stockhausen and Cage are “very important figures”, he emphasises, “but not many people want to hear it, and that is the bottom line”.

A few years ago Glass and Reich performed together for the first time in many years. Friends and collaborators in their early years, the composers had a falling-out and didn’t speak for decades. “You know, artists are as egotistical and jealous for their own work as any other human being,” Reich says, carefully. “There’s a saying in the Talmud; it says, ‘Two of a trade never agree.’ On the other hand, what are you going to do? If you’re going to take it to your grave, who benefits from that?”

If there's one piece that distills Reich's approach, it might be *Different Trains*, a 1988 work inspired by journeys across America that he took between divorced parents on both coasts. "If anybody had come to me and said, 'Hey, Steve, would you write a piece on the Holocaust?', I'd say, 'Are you crazy? Forget it. Go get some other fool to do that one.'

"I began thinking, 'What years did I take those train trips?' 37, 38, 39 . . . Oh, I know what's going on. Hitler's getting any Jewish kid, taking them to the south of Munich, then eventually off to Poland, and up the chimney. And if I had been born in Dusseldorf, Brussels or Paris, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

The groundbreaking work is structured around recordings of Holocaust survivors sourced from an archive at Yale University, "probably done on funky 1970s Radio Shack-type cassette recorders", which Reich spent days listening to for phrases he could incorporate — the first use of digital sampling in a classical context. "There were computers, I could have changed the pitch, but I decided no. As they speak, so I write. I am the faithful scribe."

“

David Bowie and I had a sort of distant but mutual respect

Reich was brought up a Reform Jew. "I knew nothing, I walked away from it," he says. "Then, like many people during the Sixties, I got involved in yoga, breathing exercises, transcendental meditation . . . I went through all that."

daughter, this living tradition. When I got home the question on my mind was, ‘That’s a beautiful thing — don’t I have anything like that?’ I thought, ‘Wait a minute, I’m a member of one of the oldest surviving groups on the planet. And I don’t know anything about it.’ ”

He studied with rabbis and became intensely interested in the 3,000-year musical and oral traditions of the Jewish people, as manifested in *Tehillim* (1981) — “a very pivotal piece, where I first said, ‘Hey, I want to bring this into my music’ ”. Meanwhile, faith became more central to his life. “As I got older, it grew in intensity. It’s about building it into your life. What you believe, you believe, but what matters is what you do, and that will change you, whoever you are.”

As much as Reich’s music has been informed by his personal journey, it has also responded to real-world events, such as the haunting *WTC 9/11*, made ten years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. One of the composer’s earliest recorded pieces, *Come Out*, made 50 years ago, is constructed from a looped tape recording of a young black man describing his savage beating by police. To listen today, amid continued reports of police brutality and Black Lives Matter protests, it sounds shockingly contemporary. “I’m glad *Come Out* is still relevant, but I think that’s rooted in whatever musical quality it may have,” he says. “If the music isn’t any good, then whatever the ideas, they’re just going to fall by the wayside.”

He doubts that artists can have any effect on world events. “*Guernica* by Picasso is one of the great artistic triumphs of the 20th century, but as a political gesture it’s a complete failure. We’re living in an era where people cut the throat of a priest, knock down buildings with 3,000 people in.”



Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, a Belgian choreographer, performs Reich's Violin Phase, tracing images in sand with her feet, in New York in 2001

TODD HEISLER/NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX/EYEVINE

Isis, Trump, the refugee crisis . . . there's no shortage of material to take inspiration from, should he choose. "Look, I'm a human being, I'm aware of all of those things," says Reich. "But right now I'm having a horrible time trying to write a short piano piece! I'm a lousy pianist. Nevertheless, I want to get that done, because I want to go on to the next one, which is, I think, finally my solution to deal with the orchestra."

After that, the German painter Gerhard Richter ("He's even older than me") has asked him to write something in response to his latest project. "In any event, that's what's on my mind, but it's a difficult time . . . Rough seas, for sure. I hope the boat doesn't capsize. I think I'm optimistic. As long as we keep our eyes open, I think we'll get through it."

Reich remains technologically plugged in, chatting about the disadvantages of digital streaming for today's musicians. "Though I'm guilty as charged. I have Spotify on my Mac." He talks about the inevitable need to relinquish control over his music at some point. "Michael Tilson Thomas was doing some piece, leant over and asked some question, and I said, 'Pretend

As well as the classical world, several generations of avant-garde rock musicians and pioneering electronic producers have been influenced by Reich. He describes meeting Brian Eno after a concert in London in 1974. “A guy comes up, long hair, lipstick . . . I think, ‘Poetic justice — I’m the kid sitting on the bar stool listening to Miles Davis, now Brian Eno’s listening to me.’ ” And in Berlin in 1976 he met David Bowie. “Later, in print, he listed his desert island albums, and *Music for 18 Musicians* is there. He and I had a sort of distant but mutual respect,” says Reich.

He embraces it all — classical audiences, rock gods, rave pioneers. After all, he was once a 14-year-old kid at Birdland, having his mind blown by the jazz greats. What goes around, comes around. “John Coltrane? Now, that was a real composition lesson,” he says. “I don’t think we would have had ‘minimal music’ without his contribution.

“Music has to exert a magnetic attraction on the listener, or it fails,” he concludes. “I think for those who want to go further, great, but if music doesn’t have that attraction, then nothing’s ever going to happen. How do I judge that? Well, if I love it, I hope you will too.”

***Different Trains* presented by Metal Liverpool is at Edge Hill station, Liverpool, on September 29. Steve Reich weekend is at the Barbican, London EC2, on November 5 and 6. Wayne McGregor’s ballet, set to *Runner*, is part of a mixed bill at the Royal Opera House, London WC2, with performances from November 10-19**



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