

CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS

Steve Reich

In the first of a new series, James McCarthy explores what makes the minimalist's music unique

What do you make of the following statement? 'Brahms is a great composer – his invertible counterpoint at the 12th is, like, really fantastic – but I don't want to hear a note of it, not now, not later, not ever. Same thing for Mahler, Wagner, Sibelius. If it all disappeared tomorrow, I wouldn't even know.' That was Steve Reich in an interview in *Gramophone* in March 2011 and it almost goes without saying that it put a few noses out of joint. But whether you agree with Reich or not (and you certainly don't have to agree in order to enjoy his music), it is a good starting point for understanding Reich's uncommon musical perspective.

It is rewarding to try to anatomise why one of the most influential composers of our time – a man who has created some of the most rapturous music of the past century – finds such a large proportion of what we term 'classical music' repellent. It's all to do with music and emotion. What Reich is opposed to is the idea that music should actively cajole the emotional responses of the listener. Which isn't to say that he doesn't want his audiences to be moved by his music, quite the reverse, but instead that he wants listeners to decide for themselves how they feel about his music and not how he – by composerly sleight of hand – should seek to prod and poke them into feeling.

Reich was born in New York in 1936 and studied philosophy at Cornell University. He later studied composition with Berio. One of his earliest works, *It's Gonna Rain* (1965), set in motion the train of thought that would carry all of his music up to the present. The idea was a simple one and was conceived by chance. While listening back

'The music's pulsations have a way of animating your limbs in ways that you can't quite account for'

to a recording he had made of a charismatic street preacher in San Francisco he noticed that one tape deck played the recording back slightly faster than another. And that if he started the two identical recorded loops simultaneously they would gradually move out of sync (creating an ever-shifting cacophony of sound) and then resynchronise again several minutes later. The breakthrough for Reich was realising that this wasn't a mere mechanical irritation but a 'musical' process.

Extending the concept of identical sounds moving in and out of sync with each other, or 'phasing', as Reich called it, to real flesh-and-blood musicians marked Reich's ultimate breakthrough as a composer. Works such as *Piano Phase* and *Violin Phase* (both 1967) were the first to ask a musician to speed up and slow down very gradually against another player who maintains a fixed pulse. It is an extraordinarily difficult technical skill, requiring huge levels of concentration and control on the part of both players, but the effect is mesmerising and unlike any other music anyone had heard up to that time.

From these bare-boned early works, Reich has gradually broadened his musical canvas to incorporate works for full symphony orchestra (*The Four Sections*, 1987), large chorus and ensemble (*The Desert Music*, 1984), wind ensemble (*Music for a Large Ensemble*, 1978), string quartet (*Different Trains*, 1988) and even rock band (*2x5*, 2008). His music has spawned countless imitators but he is always pushing forwards musically



Unphased: Steve Reich's music has developed from his early tape experiments

(he left 'phasing' behind decades ago) and this separates him artistically from many of his contemporaries and disciples.

Reich has been well served in the studio, notably by Nonesuch and Deutsche Grammophon (who released his earliest recordings). His music has been championed by the Kronos Quartet, Bang on a Can and the London Sinfonietta, but many of the finest recordings have been made by his own ensemble, Steve Reich and Musicians. One piece that crystallises the essence of what makes Reich such a unique voice is the relatively early *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ* (1973). It is a work built of layers of fascinating, kaleidoscopic rhythms all adding up to an ecstatic continuum of golden harmony. This music is more closely related in musical intent and effect to Renaissance polyphony than to any other music written in the 20th century and yet it has trappings of non-Western rhythmic interplay, most obviously from gamelan but also from West African drumming (Reich studied African drumming in Ghana). Over the 17-minute span you find that your focus of attention constantly shifts from detail to detail within the continuum. One other thing you may observe as you listen that isn't often talked about with Reich's music is that you may find it impossible to keep still: the music's pulsations have a way of animating your limbs in ways that you can't quite account for. And, like most of Reich's output, it all ends as suddenly as it began.

At their best, Reich's compositions have a hypnotic power, a compulsive propulsion that can overwhelm the senses and, yes, the emotions. So we're back to that thorny relationship between music and emotion, then. Perhaps Reich's not so very far from Brahms after all. **G**

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