

Music for Ensemble and Orchestra

Steve Reich

Concert music reached an impasse in the 1950s and '60s, when tonality was on the outs and much of the mainstream adhered to some form of serialism, a cerebral manipulation of tones to create an abstracted, mathematical balance. In the late '60s, a new way of making and hearing music burst onto the scene, a style that was dubbed minimalism (a term most early minimalists would grow to hate as they evolved in their own directions). Minimalist music was reduced to the bare essentials, typically involving pulsating rhythmic or melodic repetitions that transformed over an extended time frame through incremental changes in sounds or patterns; or, alternatively, individual sounds might be sustained far longer than the ear was accustomed to. The effect could be at once static and energized. Whether audiences liked minimalism or not, at least they did not find it bewildering. It was sharply refreshing to the ear, as cleansing to the sonic psyche as a spoonful of citrus sorbet between dishes of mind-boggling complexity.

Steve Reich was a pioneer minimalist. He received a firm musical training at Cornell, The Juilliard School (where he worked with William Bergsma and Vincent Persichetti), and at Mills College in California (as a pupil of Luciano Berio). He was a trained percussionist, and it seemed natural that his early works should emphasize minute gradations of rhythmic dissonance, which he achieved particularly by having identical musical lines move gradually in and out of phase, or by having one musician maintain a steady tempo while another shifted suddenly off the beat, as in his 1972 evergreen *Clapping Music*. This was a relatively easy technique to achieve in electronic music, but Reich set himself the goal of employing it in the context of live, acoustic music-making. He

led this exploration with a dedicated ensemble, Steve Reich and Musicians, and by the 1970s the composer and his group were achieving widespread acclaim for their explorations of rhythm using percussion or melody instruments, sometimes in combination with electronic possibilities.

Reich has traveled far since those early days. During the 1980s, his work often drew inspiration from traditional Jewish music and struck a political stance *vis-à-vis* environmental pollution, AIDS, or warfare. In the 1990s he became immersed in intermedia work, usually created in tandem with the videographer Beryl Korot, to whom he has been married since 1976. By the turn of the new century he had refocused on composing instrumental concert works, which were often performed by Steve Reich and Musicians, until that ensemble disbanded in 2006. Other ensembles and musical organizations quickly filled the gap. The ensemble Eighth Blackbird, for example,

In Short

Born: October 3, 1936, in New York City

Resides: in Pound Ridge, New York

Work composed: 2018, co-commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, London Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and the Baltic Sea Philharmonic

World premiere: November 1, 2018, at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Susanna Mälkki, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which mark the New York Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 20 minutes

commissioned and premiered his 2007 *Double Sextet*, a work that earned Reich the Pulitzer Prize for Music. He was by then being recognized as a senior statesman of music, and major awards followed fast, including Japan's Praemium Imperiale in 2006, Sweden's Polar Music Prize in 2007, the Gold Medal in Music of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012, and the Leone d'Oro for Lifetime Achievement in Music from the Venice Biennale in 2014.

Reich ceased writing orchestral works following *The Desert Music* (1983), *Three Movements* (1985–86), and *The Four Sections* (1987), not to pick it up again until 2018, with the work played here. Reich explained:

At the premiere in Cologne [of *The Desert Music*] it was clear the ... players and singers were completely out of touch with my idiom and were unable to play it well at all. Shortly afterwards Michael Tilson Thomas

conducted the Brooklyn Philharmonic with several members of my ensemble in principal positions. There was an enormous amount of rehearsal time and the result was excellent Nevertheless, the general orchestral outlook for my music was not encouraging, so, at that time, I decided "no more." Now it's over 30 years later and the situation is very different: a lot of the orchestral musicians know my style, particularly the percussionists, and there is a new generation of younger conductors that are well aware of my music and very skilled at performing it.

Instrumentation: a featured ensemble consisting of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two vibraphones, two digital keyboards, four violins, two violas, two cellos, bass, and electric bass, plus an orchestra of four trumpets and string section comprising first and second violins, violas, and cellos.

In the Composer's Words



With Music for Ensemble and Orchestra I looked at the orchestral stage and saw that an ensemble very similar to what I usually write for was already sitting there in two horseshoes, with the front strings and the principal woodwinds. These players, together with two pianos and two vibes became my ensemble. For the orchestra I added four trumpets and a string section. The ensemble certainly contains a great deal of melodic interlocking while the orchestral strings have a simpler more harmonically supportive role. The trumpets are often melodic without complex interlocking.

Bach's Fifth *Brandenburg* Concerto is one of my all-time favorite pieces of music. I love the signature opening broken D-major chord played in double sixteenths, the canonic writing between the flute and principal violin and the way motivic fragments are thrown back and forth — these features are alluded to in some of the details of Music for Ensemble and Orchestra. However, I don't follow the integrated exchange of material between *concertino* and *ripieno* groups like Bach does. My orchestra mainly provides harmonic support for what the ensemble is doing, so their functions are distinct.

The shape of the piece is formed into five movements determined by the speed of the pulse in the pianos. The tempo is fixed but the speed varies from movement to movement via different note values: 16ths, eighths, quarters, eighths, and 16ths. A five-movement arch form is rhythmically delineated. The harmonic ground plan in each movement moves from one key to another that are generally a minor third apart: A-C-E-flat-F-sharp-A.

— Steve Reich