

Electronic Music of Steve Reich

There are few music genres that are as uniquely American as the minimalist movement of the 20th Century. This American music genre has gained popularity across the United States and in Europe among classically trained musicians and popular music lovers. Minimalism is a term taken from the Visual Arts and was seen as a major anecdote to the previous new music genre - modernism (Potter, *Minimalism USA*). Minimalism, when used to refer to music, is usually seen with a lowercase 'm' and was defined by La Monte Young (b. 1935) as "that which is created with a minimum of means" (Schwarz, 9). La Monte Young is known as the 'grandfather' of minimalist music. There are four major composers associated with the minimalist movement: Young, Terry Riley (b. 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936), and Philip Glass (b. 1937). These four composers believed that a composer should reject the musical ideas of the previous music movements and emphasize the simplicity of the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic content in order to reduce the historical or expressive narrative (Lagasse). All four rejected the idea of their music being called minimalist because of its negative connotations in its early days¹. Several other names, such as repetitive music, acoustical art, and meditative music, have been suggested as a replacement. Ultimately, minimalism is the best approximation to describe their music (Mertens 11-15). This research will examine the minimalist works of Steve Reich, with emphasis on *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, through the discovery and explorations of phasing in his early avant-garde electronic composition through *Different Trains* (1988).

Born and raised in New York, Reich grew up listening to composers and music that he termed 'middle-class favorites'; music by composers such as Beethoven and Schubert, as well as Broadway shows and popular music (Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists* 154-156). His mother's

¹ The term minimalism had negative connotations because it was new and speaking out against the atonal music and other kinds of music that came before it.

family had a history of music, so he began piano lessons at a young age. Reich quickly lost interest and searched for another instrument to play. The instrument he discovered opened his mind and eyes to a world of infinite musical possibilities (Griffiths). Reich began studying drum set with Roland Kohloff (1935-2006), who introduced him to jazz, bebop, Bach and Stravinsky (Potter 154). This exploration of new music in his teens would have the largest impact on his style as a composer.

After studying with Kohloff, he formed his own jazz ensemble and laid the foundation for an obsession with rhythm and percussion. Reich also studied with Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) and Luciano Berio (1925-2003) while earning his Masters degree from Mills College. The latter is said to have told Reich that “if [he] wanted to write tonal music then write tonal music” (Potter 158). Reich’s music does not use functional tonality, so Berio saw something that others would not see at first glance. Berio saw that it had static harmonies, repetition, as well as other techniques that are utilized in tonal music. Berio and Milhaud were not the composers that had the longest and farthest reaching impact on Reich. He believes that his most important time spent studying with another composer was with Hall Overton (1920-1972). Reich has said that Overton was the kind of teacher who could look at his music and critique it ‘without letting his ego’ get in the way; Overton could look at the music and say ‘this note is wrong, it should be this’ without letting the ideas or bigger picture get in the way of the fine details (Smith 213). Being able to look at compositions on a micro-level inspired a level of clarity that would become characteristic of Reich’s style of music.

Reich also believes that he was influenced more by Stravinsky and Bach than any of the 12 tone or ‘middle-class composers’². Compositional traits from Stravinsky, jazz and Baroque

² Reich classified these composers, among others, as middle-class composers because he believed they were composers that every middle-class citizen recognized (even if a listener could not name the composer or the work by its title).

music can be seen throughout Reich's music. Characteristics shared by those eras, styles, and composers were repetition of melodies and rhythms, cycles, improvisation, and repeated chord progressions. Cycles refers to the return of previously used music to create a continuous recycling of music. Reich is said to have been captivated by the reliance on phrasing, keeping a beat, and maintaining a reserve or discipline while performing (Smith 213). Reaching further back into music history, Reich discovered Medieval music and became interested in the music of Perotin. Reich was drawn by Perotin's strict structures (such as those seen in cantus firmus), canon, and augmentation (Potter 155).

Studying this many composers and compositional styles left Reich feeling lost and confused, but determined to find his own voice. He finally felt as though he had discovered his musical identity when he came across tape pieces - specifically when he composed *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*. Reich perceived tape pieces as **persuasive, real, and solid**; Reich saw this kind of composition as something tangible in the moment and not something he had to envision from the past. He also saw it as a genre that no human could perform on an acoustic instrument (Smith 215). Ironically, this constraint as well as the constraint he felt in setting texts as music, gave him a sense of freedom. Reich's first attempt at setting text to music came when he tried to set Williams Carlos Williams (1883-1963) poems to music.³ This failed, but Reich was inspired by Williams' ideas that artists should go out into the world and record what is around them (Potter 164-170). At the same time he was commissioned by Robert Nelson to write a tape piece to be played with an experimental film. This piece would become *The Plastic Haircut* (1963) (Mertens 58). The *Plastic Haircut* was comprised of collage-like soundtracks from the LP *Great Moments in Sports*.

³ For further, and more specific, reading on how William Carlos Williams poem's influenced Reich refer to <https://poets.org/text/steve-reich-william-carlos-williams-finding-form>. Reich was finally able to set Williams' words to music when he wrote *The Desert Music* (1983).

While attempting to write another collage-piece, Reich accidentally discovered phasing. Phasing is the idea that when a performer or composer sets two identical pieces of music against each other and they naturally separate; the natural push and pull in timing against each other is phasing. Phasing has become the musical characteristic that is synonymous with Reich's name. The phasing that Reich discovered led him to write his landmark of musical minimalism, and first mature composition, *It's Gonna Rain* (1965). *It's Gonna Rain* was premiered in 1965 in San Francisco. This seven minute piece is based on a single melodious three word fragment. Reich, inspired by Williams' ideals, went into the nearby subway station and recorded Brother Walter's, an African American preacher, sermon about God and the ark (Schwarz 61-64).

In *It's Gonna Rain*, Reich takes the melodic profile of Brother Walter's sermon, and the rising major third heard at the beginning of the statement, and creates a loop with it. Choosing to use a major third as the opening melodic interval could have also been influenced by Terry Riley's *In C*, which opens up with a major third⁴; Riley and Reich were in ensembles together and frequently bounced ideas off of one another. Listeners can hear a clear influence from Riley's tape pieces which were being premiered around the same time. Reich argues that the tapes were not his inspiration, but admits to having had a breakthrough while performing *In C*. Reich used two Wollensak tape machines and an Amex to compose *It's Gonna Rain*. These inexpensive machines were set to play back the tapes of Brother Walter's words at the same time and they did not. The slight difference in playback speed caused the two identical tapes to sound slightly apart from one another, creating phasing. This phasing of the two tapes became Part I of *It's Gonna Rain* (Potter 164-170).

The resulting phasing piece is divided into two movements: Part I is the part that is most recognizable and uses the quote 'it's gonna rain'. Part II starts with two voices that slowly phase

⁴ *In C* was premiered at the San Francisco Tape Music Center on November 4, 1964.

(similar to Part I). These two voices are then doubled and the four voices slowly phase. This process is repeated so that there are eight voices phasing with one another (Potter 164-170). Part II is also interesting because Reich uses the longer recording where Walter talks about the ark and God. The idea of the ark and God killing humans was important at the time because Walter was preaching about this in order to talk about the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Three years after the Crisis the threat of nuclear war was just as real as it had been. The sermon and its use in *It's Gonna Rain* makes this piece political. In a later composition, *Four Organs* (1970), Reich drew a spaceship of sorts in the margin of his composition. *Four Organs* was composed in the middle of the Space Race (1955-1975). This imagery, as well as the material that the organists played, show musicologists that Reich was thinking about politics and how his art fit into the political/social climate. Drawings and writings cannot be seen in *It's Gonna Rain* because there is not a physical score. However, the use of Walter's voice shows Reich was thinking about politics even if he didn't talk about them directly (Gopinath).

Reich has stated that “[*It's Gonna Rain*] was the purest process piece that I ever did” (Potter 169). What makes this interesting and unique is that within the tape piece a listener can hear an outside sound mixed into the music. While recording Brother Walter's sermon, a pigeon flapped its wings in the background. Reich was delighted when he discovered this sound in his recording. He believed that the extra-dimension was a significant contribution to the piece - that the repetition of the wings beating added an experimental element to the music (169). This idea of experimentalism and excitement of the unforeseen harkens back to the idea of hearing the process within the music.

After the premiere of *It's Gonna Rain*, Reich was excited about tape pieces and their possibilities. He took the techniques used in *It's Gonna Rain* and further developed them in his

next piece, *Come Out* (1966). Reich took five words ('come out to show them') from Daniel Hamm and created a 13 minute tape piece. Hamm was recorded in an interview with the Harlem Six - a group of African Americans who had been accused of murdering a White shop owner. In the interview Hamm says that the only way he was allowed to be taken to the hospital, to be treated for his beating by the police, was to cut open his bruises and let them bleed out (Potter 176-179). All six men accused of killing the shop owner pled guilty and were sentenced to death during their trial. The media and artists of New York were enraged at the unjust treatment of the young men (Tani).

Reich was provided over 10 hours of recordings and interviews from the Harlem Six in 1964 by Truman Nelson (1911-1987). Nelson, a civil-rights activist and author, had gathered the interviews while doing research for a book that he was working on. The program that Reich's piece was to be premiered on consisted of compositions by various composers about the Harlem Six and in protest of their treatment by police. The piece was initially ignored, but when it was released later on a cd its importance was realized⁵. The piece opens up with an interval of a minor third, which could be seen as an homage to *In C* and *It's Gonna Rain*, that suggests the key of C minor and allows a clarity in the vowel sounds. The five words used in *Come Out*, similar to the words in *It's Gonna Rain*, are stated unaltered at the beginning of the piece. The 'co-ma' sounds create the melody while the 'sh' sounds create a percussive, maraca sound in the background, when the piece phases. This is described by Reich as resulting patterns (Potter 177). Resulting patterns are the naturally occurring patterns that a composer comes across from the material they are working with.

⁵ The release of *It's Gonna Rain* onto cd happened on Nov. 10th, 1996. It was released on Reich's Early Works album produced in 1986-87.

The resulting tape piece has been described as “more technically refined and emotionally more grim than its apocalyptic predecessor,” *It’s Gonna Rain* (Schwarz). *Come Out* emphasizes the phonic, or sound, of the words through a systematic rigor and intuitive control that sets it apart from Reich’s other pieces. The initial clarity of the text highlights the emotion behind the words and their cultural significance. The social protest of the words and their context is heightened through sheer repetition. Slowly Reich moves from text to textural and away from a purity of sound. The complexity of the sounds as listeners move through the piece can be interpreted as being charged with frustration at the danger of pent-up repression (Potter 176-179). Keith Potter, the author of *Four Musical Minimalists*, states that “[the statements on repression are] enhanced by the grim transmutation of a human outcry against injustice into the relentless machinations of a force beyond human control” (Potter 178). In other words, this ‘outcry against’ the injustice that African Americans, such as Hamm, face can become an important statement for change when they are incorporated into music and allowed to be out of ‘human control’.

Reich himself believes that a composer should stay out of social and political affairs, but despite this, his minimalist compositions reflect political ideas. Frances Colpitt, an art historian, believes that minimalist art cannot have any “form of comment, representation, or reference” because it is abstract (Potter 9). Sumanth Gopinath, the associate professor of music theory at the University of Minnesota whose doctoral thesis was on race and its relationship with Reich, believes that Reich was someone who thought about politics but is not a political thinker. He believes that Reich doesn’t have a ‘rich complex’ system of politics, but has instinctual political beliefs. He states that Reich tends to ‘shut down’ or avoid political conversations in interviews (Robin). Reich himself has stated that art is “a reflection of political concerns”; Reich believes

that he may not state his political beliefs but they are reflected and presented in his works (Schwarz 104). Political ideas in his compositions can be seen in his collage work *Oh Dem Watermelons!*, a short film that uses blackface to make statements on racism in the 60s, *It's Gonna Rain*, its use of a African American preacher talking about the Cold War, and *Come Out*, its use of racism and the police. Some musicologists and historians have presented the idea that Reich found solidarity in the words of African Americans, and thus used them often, because of his Jewish heritage. Many of these historians believe that there is a 'special understanding' between African Americans and those of Jewish heritage because of their long-running persecution (Tani).

Inspired by the success of *Come Out*, Reich delved further into the idea of using phasing and electronics. His next composition was *Melodica*, which was composed a month after *Come Out*. *Melodica* was written over the course of one day and is based off of a dream that Reich had. In the dream he heard 4 pitches on an instrument that resembled the sound of a melodica. This piece was not popular because it phased and duplicated itself one time and then became a canon (Potter 179). Due to its lack of success Reich quickly moved on to write two other tape pieces that premiered in 1967: *Buy Art, Buy Art* and *My Name Is* (and its variation *My Name Is: Ensemble Portrait*).

Buy Art, Buy Art and *My Name Is* are different from Reich's previous tape pieces in that they adapt to the audience of the piece. *Buy Art, Buy Art* was a recording of the artists that were presenting their art in an Exhibit presented by Audrey Sable in Philadelphia. The artists recorded themselves saying 'buy art' or something similar and Reich replicated the sayings onto three cartridges. These three cartridges were set to play back at the same time and phasing was created between the differing speeds. The cassette machines that played the recordings back were wildly

out of sync and the result was an uncontrolled phasing process. Reich abandoned this piece but took the concept into *My Name Is*. In *My Name Is* audience members are asked to say 'my name is _' into a microphone. The recordings are then spliced into loops, duplicated, and then played back against one another until they phase. The difficulty of this piece was the quick turnaround, so Reich did a variation so that he could use the ensemble members and have more time to compose (Potter 173-174).

By the late 1960s tape pieces began to lose their appeal and Reich began experimenting with phasing and new technology. The first step that he took away from tape involved taking a tape that he had previously recorded and slowing it down. Reich's goal in slowing down the recordings was to get the tape as slow as he could before the pitches lowered. He realized that technology was not as developed as he would need to achieve something interesting so he abandoned *Slow Motion Sound*. Knowing that there was a way to use technology in an interesting way in music, Reich stepped away from phasing to create *Pendulum Music* (1968). *Pendulum Music* was created as a literal realization of his metaphor about process music; the realization of "once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself" (Potter 89). In *Pendulum Music* four microphones are set to swing above four speakers. Performers take hold of the mics and pull them back, release, then step back to watch them swing over the speakers. Every time the mic comes into line with the speakers, feedback can be heard, and the piece is complete when the feedback becomes a continuous drone (175). Critics and audiences hated the simplicity of this piece, so Reich moved back to phasing with *The Phase Shifting Pulse Gate* (1969). This new technology was meant to accompany live performance and stimulate the phasing process. After using this in a couple of performances Reich realized this made the music feel robotic and stiff, so he moved on to composing music for living musicians (Schwarz, 68).

Almost 20 years later, Reich returned to the ideas of his earlier compositions in *Different Trains* (1988). Reich himself describes this piece as the piece that ‘drew the line in the sand’ between what he was doing before and what he does now. He states that *Different Trains* goes ‘forwards and backwards’; it helps combine the techniques of the past with the future. He references back to the past by taking documentaries and interviews (tapes), but what propels this piece into the future is that the spoken material determined what the string quartet would play (Smith 220-221). Finally satisfied with the technology available, and having worked with live performers more often, Reich began using a sampling keyboard to integrate recorded speech with the quartet.

Another characteristic of *Different Trains* that relates to the early works of Reich is the social and political aspects of this composition. Reich spent years traveling from New York to California, between his parents, by train with his nanny. He traveled on these trains during World War II. While thinking about this time Reich realized that if he had been across the sea he would’ve been in a different kind of train- a cattle car headed to a concentration camp. Having recently rediscovered his Jewish heritage, Reich was moved to write something to honor what could’ve been. The first movement of the piece is titled ‘America - Before the War’ and is filled with train whistles from US and European locomotives layered with the clattering of train tracks. This movement conveys the innocence, expansiveness, and romance of trains in American folklore. The second movement is ‘Europe - During the War’. This movement is characterized by an unrelenting pulse, sirens, the sounds/recallings of Nazi cattle cars. The movement ends when it comes to a climax and a shockingly simple chord fades. The last movement is ‘After the War’ where Reich tries to show how the world attempted to recapture its innocence. Ultimately, the world finds their innocence tarnished by the tragedies of war (Schwarz, 94-97).

Rejecting the ideas of modernism and forging his own path through phasing and repetition, Steve Reich is known for his abandonment of traditional ideas of harmony and melody in favor of repetition of phrases that develop gradually over time (Reich, Steve). Not only did he abandon the musical ideas of the past but he also surrounded himself with other artists who rejected the political and social ideas of the past; this influence can be seen in his early compositions. Many of his award winning and well-known works are not political, but his early compositions are. All of his tape pieces from the 60s to the late 80s use some sort of political material presented in a way so as not to influence listeners thoughts, but to make a listener think.

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