Steve Reich: master of minimalism

In the mid-1960s, budding composer Steve Reich began monkeying with tape loops and pre-recorded voices. In an attempt to create new sonorities, he explored techniques with identical looped material, but learned that a number of factors prevent complex recombination of these pieces, leading to a realization of the potential of minimalism.

The culmination of his phasing process, which he learned from his work in radio jingles, was the six-year composition Upon, a rhythmic tape piece that consisted of a phase piece for two persons in which music is of a sort. The initial recordings, which Reich had made himself, were eventually released on a vinyl record. This disc represents a return to the sort of music Mitchell abandoned after Haydn's L'Orfeo.

Drumming, performed by Steve Reich and Musicians.

Drumming is the first Reich piece to incorporate tuned percussion instruments (a practice he has maintained to the present). He next turned his attention to rephrasing and reinterpreting Reich's composing.

Music for 18 Musicians is based on the superposition of two tremolo rhythms. Reich's use of human voice to determine phrase length—a phrase would be as long as a period—was comfortingly juxtaposed with the combination of all new techniques (phased percussion, rhythmic patterns, and human voices) laid the groundwork for the second piece of Reich's composing. Reich explained: "It was making music with words... Essentially you cannot believe that these sounds are being made by words. The voice is extremely colocated, since it is a rhythmic tape piece, as with tape, I felt like a mad scientist. I started to transfer this process to composed music with traditional instruments."

Reich's fascination with phase shifts began to draw him to the almost entirely new world of phasing. At the time he was six years following his initial discovery, Reich was working on a new kind of African drumming, produced a sound of new form which neither evaded traditional configurations. He stripped music down to the bare bones, concentrating solely on the shape of rhythms for Clapping Music (scored for two persons clapping and shaking a rattle). This disc represents a return to the sort of music, Mitchell abandoned after Haydn's L'Orfeo. It is his first true vocal work, with a text taken from the Psalms. It is also a major compositional break in that it is a vocal work with a traditional four-movement structure; it does not utilize repetition, relying instead on close four-part canon writing and most startling of all, it is very melodic. Reich continued to explore, adding vocal and string instruments to his tonal palette. The Catherine Wheel is full of Reichian percussion sounds, and it also marks the return of James Taylor on back-up vocals. Fans of cryptic lyrics should persevere — remember, at one time they endured — remember, at one time they suffered long nights of endless repetition of the ideas contained in the first two pieces. "You Dream Flat Times" contains the following gem: "Why do you dream flat times? When you dream fast trees?"

What are Wild Things for? (continued)

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