

Friday 2 October / 10pm

Steve Reich at 90: Drumming Part I

Steve Reich (born 1936)
Drumming, Part 1 (1970)

Julia Wolfe (born 1958)
Dark Full Ride, for four drum set (2002)

By 1969 the young New York composer Steve Reich found himself in a dead end. Having constructed an electronic "Phase-Shifting Pulse Gate" to perform his *Pulse Music* found himself forced to an unwelcome conclusion: the performance was "stiff and unmusical. I felt very clearly then that I did not wish to have any involvement with electronic music again". So, where now?

One answer was West Africa: Reich travelled to Ghana to study West African drumming, not so much with a view to emulating it as to learning how sophisticated music could be created without the props of modern western culture. "I am often asked what influence my visit to Africa in summer of 1970 had on *Drumming*" says Reich.

The answer is encouragement, confirmation, and learning from another musical culture. It encouraged my natural inclination towards and training in percussion. I started studying snare drum at the age of 14. And, it confirmed my intuition that acoustic instruments could be used to produce music that was genuinely richer in sound than that produced with electronic instruments. [...]

For one year, between the fall of 1970 and the fall of 1971, I worked on what turned out to be the longest piece I have ever composed. Drumming lasts from 55 to 75 minutes (depending on the number of repeats played) and is divided into four parts that are performed without pause. The first part is for four pairs of tuned bongo drums, stand-mounted and played with sticks.

In the context of my own music, Drumming is the final expansion and refinement of the phasing process. Drumming begins with two drummers building up the basic rhythmic pattern of the entire piece from a single drum beat, played in a cycle of 12 beats with rests on all the other beats. Gradually additional drumbeats are substituted for the rests, one at a time, until the pattern is completed. The reduction process is simply the reverse where rests are gradually substituted for the beats, one at a time, until only a single beat remains. The sections are joined together by the new instruments doubling the exact pattern of the instruments already playing.

Reich's deep engagement with percussion was part of a very personal journey of creative self-discovery, but its impact has been profound, liberating new generations of composers to find their own new worlds in the percussion section. Composers like Julia Wolfe - whose love of rock music inspired this dazzling interrogation of the potential of a drum kit. As she explains:

When Talujon Percussion Quartet asked me to write a piece for 4 percussionists I immediately thought of the drums. I am a long time fan of drummers and their ability to play simultaneously with both hands and feet, so I thought why not four of them? When we got to the hi-hat I became mesmerized. It's an amazing instrument – 2 cymbals crashing together by means of a foot pedal and struck from above. It produces an enormous range of shimmering colours. Just opening and closing the cymbals allow for symphonic possibilities.

You can play the cymbals on the edge, play on the bell (top), roll, attack, be delicate, and my favourite – make the hi-hat roar.

The first 7 minutes of the piece are entirely on hi-hats. Then I add in cymbals. That's where the title of the piece comes from – it was printed on the back of one of the ride cymbals. From there the piece spreads out to the drums, eventually leading to a cacophony of conflicting pounding speeds on the whole drum set.

Colin Currie Quartet

The Colin Currie Quartet is a bold and virtuosic percussion quartet, brought together by Colin Currie to perform works by Steve Reich alongside composers such as Julia Wolfe, Kevin Volans and Andy Akiho. They have made a name for their exciting performances of contemporary percussion works and for commissioning new music by the next generation of composers. Notable world premieres performed by the Quartet include works by Anna Meredith, Freya Waley-Cohen, Ben Nobuto, Joe Duddell and Aileen Sweeney.

The Colin Currie Quartet have appeared at festivals and venues including the BBC Proms, Wigmore Hall, Kings Place, Paris Présences Festival, Stoller Hall, Norfolk & Norwich Festival, Dublin Chamber Music Festival, Two Moors Festival, ConcertLab Utrecht, Barber Institute, West Road Cambridge, Concentus Moraviae, NCPA Beijing, and Nagakute Cultural Center.

In the 2026/27 season, the Quartet will give the world premiere of a new work by Robert Honstein at Milton Court London, and also performs across the UK including at The Glasshouse, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and in Manchester.