

Saturday 3 October / 7.30pm

Steve Reich at 90: Music for 18 Musicians

Steve Reich (born 1936)

Music for Pieces of Wood (1973)

Steve Reich's *Clapping Music* (1972) is a 20th century masterpiece – a work of breathtaking rhythmic complexity and fascination that requires for its performance no instruments and not even any trained musicians: just two people clapping. **Music for Pieces of Wood** followed in 1973, and, according to Reich, “grows out of the same roots...a desire to make music with the simplest possible instruments.” The instruments in question were five pairs of claves. Reich explains further:

The claves, or cylindrical pieces of hard wood, used here were selected for their particular pitches (A, B, C-sharp, D-sharp, and D-sharp an octave above), and for their resonant timbre. This piece is one of the loudest I have ever composed, but uses no amplification whatsoever. The rhythmic structure is based entirely on the process of rhythmic “build-ups” or the substitution of beats for rests, and is in three sections of decreasing pattern length: 6/4, 4/4, 3/4.

But Reich's only hinting here at the intricacies, the surprises and the richness of sound that he generates from deceptively simple material. The percussionist Laurent Warnier, perhaps, describes it better: “To understand the piece, imagine listening to a kaleidoscope. A pattern is established, then it shifts as with the click of the kaleidoscope”. That single change of perspective transforms a seemingly rigid rhythmic pattern into something startlingly new and beautiful. Who needs an orchestra?

Quartet (2014)

Reich's lifelong fascination with percussion (he started to play the snare drum at the age of 14) and the musical language that grew out of that fascination has in turn gone on to inspire new generations of performers. As Reich puts it:

*In my case, the quartet that has played a central role in many of my pieces (besides the string quartet) is that of two pianos and two percussion. It appears like that or in expanded form with more pianos or more percussion in The Desert Music, Sextet, Three Movements, The Four Sections, The Cave, Dance Patterns, Three Tales, You Are (Variations), Variations for Vibes, Pianos and Strings, Daniel Variations, Double Sextet, and Radio Rewrite. In **Quartet**, there is just this group alone: two vibes and two pianos.*

The piece is one of the more complex I have composed. It frequently changes key and often breaks off continuity to pause or take up new material. Though the parts are not unduly difficult, it calls for a high level of ensemble virtuosity. The form is one familiar throughout history: fast, slow, fast, played without pause. The slow movement introduces harmonies not usually found in my music. The piece is dedicated to Colin Currie, a percussionist who has broken the mould by maintaining his solo career with orchestras and recitals and also, quite amazingly, by founding the Colin Currie Group which plays whatever ensemble music he believes in. I salute him and hope others will take note.

Music for 18 Musicians (1976)

We go back to 1976, but not to the same world as *Clapping Music* or *Music for Pieces of Wood*. In Steve Reich's own words:

Although its steady pulse and rhythmic energy relate to many of my earlier works, its instrumentation, structure and harmony are new.

As to instrumentation, Music for 18 Musicians is new in the number and distribution of instruments: violin, cello, 2 clarinets doubling bass clarinet, 4 women's voices, 4 pianos, 3 marimbas, 2 xylophones and metallophone (vibraphone with no motor). All instruments are acoustical. The use of electronics is limited to microphones for voices and some of the instruments.

There is more harmonic movement in the first 5 minutes of Music for 18 Musicians than in any other complete work of mine to date. Though the movement from chord to chord is often just a re-voicing, inversion or relative minor or major of a previous chord, usually staying within the key signature of three shapes at all times, nevertheless, within these limits harmonic movement plays a more important role in this piece than in any other I have written.

Rhythmically, there are two basically different kinds of time occurring simultaneously in Music for 18 Musicians. The first is that of a regular rhythmic pulse in the pianos and mallet instruments that continues throughout the piece. The second is the rhythm of the human breath in the voices and wind instruments. The entire opening and closing sections plus part of all sections in between contain pulses by the voice and winds. They take a full breath and sing or play pulses of particular notes for as long as their breath will comfortably sustain them. The breath is the measure of the duration of their pulsing. This combination of one breath after another gradually washing up like waves against the constant rhythm of the pianos and mallet instruments is something I have not heard before and would like to investigate further.

Changes from one section to the next, as well as changes within each section are cued by the metallophone (vibraphone with no motor) whose patterns are played once only to call for movements to the next bar, much as in Balinese Gamelan a drummer will audibly call for changes of pattern in West African Music. This is in contrast to the visual nods of the head used in earlier pieces of mine to call for changes and in contrast also to the general Western practice of having a non-performing conductor for large ensembles. Audible cues become part of the music and allow the musicians to keep listening.

Colin Currie Group

Led by Colin Currie, this hand-picked ensemble was formed in 2006 for a performance of *Drumming* at the BBC Proms to celebrate the 70th birthday of Steve Reich. The Colin Currie Group has since performed *Drumming* and other Reich works around the world, and in recent years has expanded their repertoire to include Mark-Anthony Turnage, Steve Martland, Guillaume Connesson and Iannis Xenakis. They made their concertante debut at the 2019 Edinburgh International Festival performing Sofia Gubaidulina's *Glorious Percussion* with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

In 2014, Colin Currie Group premiered *Quartet* at the Southbank Centre in London, the first in a collection of works written for them by Steve Reich. A major highlight of recent seasons is the critically acclaimed world premiere of Reich *Traveler's Prayer* in 2021, which they toured to The Concertgebouw, Royal Festival Hall, Philharmonie de Paris, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Carnegie Hall, Cal Performances and Tokyo Opera City.

In the 2026/27 season, the Group will celebrate Steve Reich's 90th birthday, giving the world premiere of *In All Your Ways* at the Edinburgh International Festival, written by Reich to mark this anniversary. The work is co-commissioned by NTR Zaterdag Matinee, The Barbican, Philharmonie de Paris and Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, with further performances still to be announced.