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## STEVE REICH

DAVE SMITH

Saturday 26 September 1981 saw the welcome return of Steve Reich and Musicians to the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Reich's music is by now sufficiently well-known in Britain to have influenced the work of several British composers as well as those working in commercial music. The concert offered a representative sample of his work from the last ten years and consisted of Part 1 of *Drumming* (1971), *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* (1973), *Octet* (1979) and the recently completed *Tehillim* — the last two receiving their first British performances.

*Drumming* is Reich's longest piece to date (1½ hours) and the last one to use the 'phasing' technique which had dominated his work for seven years. At its most basic phasing involves the simultaneous performance of two identical musical 'loops' which move at slightly different speeds. This can throw up engaging and sometimes quite surprising results, but the relative success of each piece depends a good deal on some apparently quite simple decisions such as the instrumentation and the internal melodic and rhythmic character of the loop itself. A high standard of performance is necessary too. Reich has always been well served by the abilities of his performers and this concert was no exception. Part 1 of *Drumming*, in particular, communicates the amazing virtuosity of his leading players, Russ Hartenberger and Bob Becker. They took the piece away at quite a lick, but still seemed untroubled. The sound of the tuned bongos adds extra electricity (marimbas playing the same patterns in Part 2 sound rather soporific in comparison): and it's no accident that Reich's most impressive phase pieces (Part 1 of *Drumming*, and *Piano Phase* (1967)) are those that use instruments with a sharp attack (drums, pianos). Moreover the loop figures of both these pieces contain rhythmic ambiguities that are multiplied in the successive phase relationships.

The music that has appeared since Reich abandoned phasing in 1971 has confirmed the suspicion that Reich is not keen to venture too far outside a well-proven territory; in other

words some pieces (most notably *Music for a Large Ensemble* (1978)) shed little further light on researches made earlier. Three quite audible structural techniques dominate these works: progressive augmentation (*Four Organs* (1970) represents the earliest and purest example); 'rhythmic construction' (a process in which beats are gradually substituted for rests—it was first heard in the impressive opening of *Drumming*); and harmonic progression. Whereas phasing always sounds interesting, the endless repetition of these techniques tends to give a soothing predictability in some works, three of which (*Clapping Music* (1972), *Music for Pieces of Wood* (1973), and *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976)) even use the same rhythmic pattern.

The second work on the programme at the QEH, *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*, combines these techniques and is also Reich's earliest attempt to sustain a single combination of timbres throughout. The result is unsuccessful: one tires quickly of the same formal devices and also of the immediately comfortable, peach-coloured, sugar-coated sound-world, a far cry from the challenging austerity of (again) Part 1 of *Drumming* and *Piano Phase*. *Music for 18 Musicians* gives evidence of a much more considered attitude towards timbre and harmonic progression, with results that still surprise and delight. It remains Reich's most successful piece of the last ten years.

It didn't seem a very good plan to follow *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* with the *Octet*: the pieces are not dissimilar enough. The fast and difficult piano patterns of the *Octet* are agreeably funky and some longer melodic lines of refreshing unpredictability appear on the flute and piccolo at times. But the neutral world of long, directionless, diatonic discords is the same as that of *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* except that here there is a reminiscence of Stravinsky. In the QEH performance the harmonic repetition tended to obscure the melodic development after the first few minutes, and this was probably emphasised by the ill balancing of Reich's usually reliable light amplification.

More interest was directed towards Reich's new piece *Tehillim* (Hebrew for 'praises', 'psalms'), a setting in Hebrew of extracts from four biblical psalms for four female voices and a mixed ensemble, which (in this performance at least) was dominated by tuned tambourines without jingles, clapping, and maracas. The programme note promised 'no fixed meter or metric pattern' and 'no short repeating patterns' as the logical result of setting a text. However, the music was immediately recognisable as Reich's by virtue of the familiar harmonic techniques (grounded here by a suitably resonant double bass) and an incessant, fast pulse which proved to be difficult to sustain on maracas. Early on the canonic vocals were effective, but any sustained instrumental doubling detracted from their effort. Here as well perhaps the amplification caused the changing harmonies to eclipse an expanding melody. The material, while not rhythmically repetitive, is certainly melodically repetitive; and this in conjunction with the generally aggressive, percussive nature of the accompaniment again evokes Stravinsky quite strongly, *Les noces* in particular: apart from anything else, both works contain too much singing.

The beginning of Part 2 (the work is in two parts) really is a step forward, though. It is slow and relaxed, at an altogether different pace from all Reich's previous music, which (with the single exception of *Violin Phase* (1968)) is fast and energetic. This is sparsely textured and tinged with imaginative coloristic resource. It approaches that kind of Romantic harmony that is out of fashion with most of today's 'straight' composers but which is enjoying a boom in commercial music. The vocal lines here seem to owe as much to the Andrews Sisters as to Stravinsky. It is this section of *Tehillim* that represents a path Reich should explore further, since it is apparently devoid of rigid structuralism (for which the time is past) and more open to human flights of imaginative fancy.

By comparison, the last section is bad news, being a 'recapitulation' at the fast tempo. It presents little in the way of new information—the general intention appears to be a gradual build-up and increase in intensity with the usual sudden cut-off at the end. Music like this, in which machine-like precision and hypnotic effect are strong elements (however much Reich emphasises structure), is more likely to cause an audience to respond with unrestrained enthusiasm than with critical distance. The last few minutes of *Tehillim* smack of the shrewd businessman who knows how to milk his audience rather than the capable composer who knows how to finish a piece.