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Steve Reich: Pulse of life

Once the works of Steve Reich made him a pariah in the musical world. Today, he is being feted on his 70th birthday, says Sholto Byrnes

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As soon as I arrive at Steve Reich's house in upstate New York, he demands to know how I'm going to leave. I haven't booked a car, I explain, because I don't know exactly when we're going to finish. "Okay, okay," he says, all snappy talk and little patience, "have you got a number? Here's the phone." I have flown over the Atlantic Ocean, taken two trains from Manhattan, and crossed the Connecticut-New York state boundary twice to get here. But all Steve Reich cares about is being sure he can get rid of me. Later, he apologises; and he does have his reasons. He and his wife, the artist Beryl Korot, have just moved into this angular, airy, modernist house, and things are a little hectic. "Sorry about that brush at the beginning," he says, "I'm just beginning to get my sea legs."

Right now, everyone wants a piece of Reich. The man many consider the father of minimalist music and the

greatest living composer turns 70 in October. He's flattered by all the celebrations, but there's a lot of travelling involved and new commissions to finish. "The maelstrom begins at the end of September," he says, running through an itinerary which includes London, New York, France, Hungary and Portugal. Here, the Barbican is devoting a week to his music, including a dance collaboration with Akram Khan, and performances by groups as diverse as the LSO, the Kronos Quartet, the Britten Sinfonia, Coldcut and DJ Spooky. Reich himself is giving this year's Royal Philharmonic Society Lecture. In New York, the celebrations will last the whole month.

But it wasn't always like this: because Steve Reich may be an acclaimed cultural figure now, but at the beginning he was a revolutionary. And until the revolution he led - working with or influencing others such as Philip Glass, Michael Nyman, John Adams, Brian Eno and The Orb - began to be accepted, he was a musical pariah.

When Reich formed his first ensemble in New York 40 years ago, the classical world was dominated by the followers of Arnold Schoenberg. Atonal serialism, a continuance of the arid, dissonant 12-tone scheme Schoenberg had devised, was the only kind of composition taken seriously by the conservatories. Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio and the serialist-influenced John Cage: these were their gods.

"It was de rigueur to write music like that," recalls Reich, "because if you didn't you were considered a fool. There was just that one way: no pulse, no tapping of the foot, no whistling of the tune, no harmony to grab on to." Anyone using rhythm, harmony or melody - in short, anyone who produced a piece that actually sounded like music - was derided. "They'd snigger behind your back. There was no place for the Stravinsky of The Rite of Spring or the Bartok of the string quartets. Or even John Coltrane."

The compositions of these three still strike most as modern. Not modern enough, however, for the desiccated theorists of serialism. Reich embraced Stravinsky, Bartok and Coltrane, but turned his back on the serialists completely, and placed rhythm at the very heart of his work (which is why, if it has to be categorised, he prefers to call his work "pulse" music).

He happily reclaimed the harmonies that the Western world had found sufficient for centuries; indeed, he looked back further to medieval music, as well as to Hebrew chant, and Balinese and African percussion traditions. He employed, if not fully-fledged 32 bar tunes, at least melodic fragments. He used technology to develop new styles, using tapes of voices or instruments to "phase" in and out with each other; and later used samples of the spoken word as "speech melody" alongside instruments echoing the pitch and phrasing of the human voice. He would take a pattern and make new versions, slightly augmenting them. His ensembles were small, and often percussion driven.

These were developments over time; they didn't all happen at once. But the pulse, harmony and melody were there from the start. And this was so controversial that, during the first 10 years of his ensemble, most of the performances of Reich's music were in art galleries and museums, not concert halls.

In these early years, Reich couldn't make a living from music. So he and Philip Glass started a removal firm together. When not driving their van, the two hung out with artists in lower Manhattan. Their circle included Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Chuck Close, Sol LeWitt and Carl Andre. "They'd say: 'there's a big show at the Whitney, it's something to do with us, why don't you guys come up and give a concert?'" So Reich performed in art spaces in New York, Nova Scotia, Berkeley and London. It was just as well the art circuit welcomed him. At that time, says Reich: "The music world didn't want to have anything to do with me. They thought I was a lunatic".

One occasion when Reich did make it into a classical music venue, at Carnegie Hall in 1973, he almost provoked a riot. Michael Tilson Thomas, then conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, asked Reich to participate in a special series of concerts. Reich agreed to his Four Organs being performed, but with what turned out to be well-advised reluctance. Even he considers the piece to be "the longest V-I cadence in the history of Western music"; in other words, its resolution, which is achieved after very gradual changes to a chord played on "four screaming

rock-and-roll organs", takes a long time to reach. Nearly 16 minutes, in fact.

"A few minutes into the piece a restlessness began to sweep through the crowd," recalls Tilson Thomas. "Rustlings of programmes, overly loud coughs, compulsive seat shifting, mixed with groans and hostile exclamations crescendoing into a true cacophony." An "avalanche of boos" marked the performance's end. Reich was "ashen", says Tilson Thomas. He, on the other hand, was "exhilarated", and compared it to the disturbance at the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913. "Tomorrow," he said to Reich, "everyone will have heard about your work and will be hugely intrigued to hear it for themselves." He concludes: "The scenario did play out much as I thought it would".

Yes, it did, eventually. Reich's *Music For 18 Musicians* won him a wider audience in 1976, and in 1982 Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic performed the orchestral version of *Tehillim*, his setting of parts of the Hebrew psalms. By then he had entrees at the leading concert auditoriums of the world, and in 1994 Reich was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Yehudi Menuhin chose one of Reich's works for part of his 80th birthday concert in New York. The Orb sampled his *Electric Counterpoint* on their ambient hit, "Little Fluffy Clouds". He no longer needed to camp out on the floor of Michael Nyman's flat when he stayed in London. No one booed anymore.

But there had been many hard years on the way. What had made the young Reich divert from the path that he could easily have taken? He had the tools and the background to have gone along with the prevailing musical style in the 1960s, having concluded his education at the Juilliard School of Music in New York with an MA at Mills College, California, where he studied under the leading serialist, Luciano Berio. "It was lonely," he admits of his early forays into dissent. "I was almost ashamed to show my compositions to the people in important positions, because they were going to laugh at me. People treated my music as infantile."

He had become convinced that classical music, particularly in America, had taken a disastrous wrong turn in the 20th century. Even though he disagreed with it, he understood why Europe had embraced serialism. "The German romantic tradition was the great tradition in central European music. Schoenberg and Berg had been extending its lessons to their logical conclusions, but the war had stopped that. If you saw that, you would feel it was your duty and your heritage to pick that up and move it on.

"But!" he exclaims. "If you grew up in Kansas City, with 'If you're going to dance with me' on the jukebox, and tail fins and burgers are your reality, and you suddenly say 'Dark angst. It's Vienna in 1916' - then I say you're a liar." Serialism, he claims, had no place in America. "Cut that out. That's not you. Imitating your European betters is a bad old American habit. Charles Ives knew that, and you still haven't figured it out?"

In the past, thinks Reich, classical musicians always stayed in touch with popular or folk music. "Schoenberg and his followers," he has said, "created an artificial wall. In my generation we tore the wall down." The American music that affected Reich the most was jazz. "Until I was 14, the only music I had heard was Beethoven's Fifth, Schubert's Unfinished, the Meistersinger overture; Broadway tunes, Crosby and Sinatra. I had never heard a note of music before 1750, and I'd never heard a note [of classical music] after Wagner. And I'd never heard any real jazz."

Then in a short space of time, a friend played him records of *The Rite of Spring*, Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, and Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Kenny Clarke. "It's like someone said [he puts on a deep voice]: 'You're about to be 14 years old, and there's one room you haven't seen in this house, son.'" He drops the voice. "I walked into that room," he explains, "I closed the door, and that's where I lived the rest of my life. Because those are the musics that made me the composer that I am, and those are the only types of music that I ever listen to. I don't listen to anything between Haydn and Wagner. Not even a little bit." What if it's on the radio? "I can change the station."

The teenage Reich took the train into Manhattan from the suburbs to sit in the kids' section of Birdland, the great

jazz club named after Charlie "Bird" Parker. The drummer Kenny Clarke was a particular favourite. "He had this great sense of time on the ride cymbal," he says, "this buoyant magic, as though he was floating on air and he was keeping you floating with him. I don't think I could have written a note that I've written without the desire to get that buoyancy that Kenny Clarke had." It was the origin of "the pulse". John Coltrane was another major influence. "To hear someone succeed in making half an hour of music while staying in the same key... I realised that you can be harmonically static but make interesting music if you substitute rhythmic and timbral ingenuity."

Though he has never been overtly political, Israel and Judaism have recurred in Reich's work since Tehillim. Reich's new commission for his birthday concert at the Barbican, Daniel Variations, takes its texts from the words of Daniel Pearl, the Jewish American journalist murdered in Pakistan, and the Old Testament Book of Daniel, from which he has chosen the part where Nebuchadnezzar has a terrifying dream. "The images in my head frightened me," says Reich, "because where I lived in New York was just four blocks away from the World Trade Centre." He says it's his darkest work yet.

But he's smiling and good-humoured as I leave, and not, I like to think, just because I'm leaving. Although his early battles are remembered with an acidity time has clearly not yet neutralised, Reich has succeeded in his revolution. The tide has turned against the serialists. He even has a generous word for Pierre Boulez. "I don't know about him as a composer, but he's the greatest living musician," he says. "You want to hear The Rite of Spring, baby, you get Boulez's recording with the Cleveland Orchestra."

That's praise indeed from an energetic nearly-70-year-old who gives a good impression of not suffering fools gladly.

* Phases - The Music of Steve Reich runs at the Barbican, London EC2 (020 7638 8891/ www.barbican.org.uk), from Tuesday to 8 October. For details of other Steve Reich 70th birthday celebrations see www.steverreich.com

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