16 Steve Reich

Steve Reich (b. 1934) was a pioneer in the minimalist movement, which began in the 1960s. Minimalism marked a departure not only from the extremes of integral serialism and indeterminacy, but also from the sort of compositional complexities associated with composers such as Iannis Xenakis; and it proved to be greatly influential on subsequent musical developments. In the first of these two articles, which were written in 1968 and 1973, Reich advocates a process-oriented music that proceeds, like serial music, more or less automatically once it is set in motion while limiting itself to processes that transform the materials (in Reich's case, relatively simple diatonic patterns) in easily perceptible ways. The second essay reveals Reich's discomfort with contemporary musical specialization. Reflecting upon his dual status as composer and performer, he discusses the relationship of his work to the small ensemble for which it was then written and in which he himself performed, and to his fellow musicians, who played such a vital role in shaping that music.

FROM *Writings about Music*

MUSIC AS A GRADUAL PROCESS (1968)

I do not mean the process of composition, but rather pieces of music that are, literally, processes.

The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the over all form simultaneously. (Think of a round or infinite canon.)

I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.

To facilitate closely detailed listening a musical process should happen extremely gradually.

Performing and listening to a gradual musical process resembles:

pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it gradually come to rest;

turning over an hour glass and watching the sand slowly run through to the bottom;

placing your feet in the sand by the ocean's edge and watching, feeling, and listening to the waves gradually bury them.

TEXT: *Writings about Music* (New York: New York University Press, 1974), pp. 9–11, 45–48.

Though I may have the pleasure of discovering musical processes and composing the musical material to run through them, once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself.

Material may suggest what sort of process it should be run through (content suggests form), and processes may suggest what sort of material should be run through them (form suggests content). If the shoe fits, wear it.

As to whether a musical process is realized through live human performance or through some electro-mechanical means is not finally the main issue. One of the most beautiful concerts I ever heard consisted of four composers playing their tapes in a dark hall. (A tape is interesting when it's an interesting tape.)

It is quite natural to think about musical processes if one is frequently working with electro-mechanical sound equipment. All music turns out to be ethnic music.

Musical processes can give one a direct contact with the impersonal and also a kind of complete control, and one doesn't always think of the impersonal and complete control as going together. By "a kind" of complete control I mean that by running this material through this process I completely control all that results, but also that I accept all that results without changes.

John Cage has used processes and has certainly accepted their results, but the processes he used were compositional ones that could not be heard when the piece was performed. The process of using the *I Ching* or imperfections in a sheet of paper to determine musical parameters can't be heard when listening to music composed that way. The compositional processes and the sounding music have no audible connection. Similarly in serial music, the series itself is seldom audible. (This is a basic difference between serial (basically European) music and serial (basically American) art, where the perceived series is usually the focal point of the work.)

What I'm interested in is a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing.

James Tenney said in conversation, "then the composer isn't privy to anything." I don't know any secrets of structure that you can't hear. We all listen to the process together since it's quite audible, and one of the reasons it's quite audible is, because it's happening extremely gradually.

The use of hidden structural devices in music never appealed to me. Even when all the cards are on the table and everyone hears what is gradually happening in a musical process, there are still enough mysteries to satisfy all. These mysteries are the impersonal, unintended, psycho-acoustic by-products of the intended process. These might include sub-melodies heard within repeated melodic patterns, stereophonic effects due to listener location, slight irregularities in performance, harmonics, difference tones, etc.

Listening to an extremely gradual musical process opens my ears to *it*, but *it* always extends farther than I can hear, and that makes it interesting to listen to that musical process again. That area of every gradual (completely controlled)

musical process, where one hears the details of the sound moving out away from intentions, occuring for their own acoustic reasons, is *it*.

I begin to perceive these minute details when I can sustain close attention and a gradual process invites my sustained attention. By "gradual" I mean extremely gradual; a process happening so slowly and gradually that listening to it resembles watching a minute hand on a watch—you can perceive it moving after you stay with it a little while.

Several currently popular modal musics like Indian classical and drug oriented rock and roll may make us aware of minute sound details because in being modal (constant key center, hypnotically droning and repetitious) they naturally focus on these details rather than on key modulation, counterpoint and other peculiarly Western devices. Nevertheless, these modal musics remain more or less strict frameworks for improvisation. They are not processes.

The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note details and the over all form simultaneously. One can't improvise in a musical process—the concepts are mutually exclusive.

While performing and listening to gradual musical processes one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outwards towards *it*.

NOTES ON THE ENSEMBLE (1973)

Since late in 1966 I have been rehearsing and performing my music with my own ensemble.

In 1963 I first decided that despite my limitations as a performer I had to play in all my compositions. It seemed clear that a healthy musical situation would only result when the functions of composer and performer were united.

In San Francisco in 1963 I formed my first ensemble which was devoted to free, and sometimes controlled, improvisation. This quintet met at least once a week for about six months, but because we were improvising on nothing but spur of the moment reactions I felt there was not any musical growth except when I brought in what I called *Pitch Charts,* which gave all players the same notes to play at the same time, but with free rhythm. Even with these charts the musical growth was much too limited, and the group was disbanded.

In the fall of 1965 I returned to New York, and by late in 1966 I had formed a group of three musicians; pianist Art Murphy, woodwind player Jon Gibson, and myself playing piano. This ensemble was able to perform *Piano Phase* for two pianos; *Improvisations on a Watermelon* for two pianos (later discarded); *Reed Phase* for soprano saxophone and tape (later discarded), and several tape pieces. This trio remained intact with occasional additions, notably that of com-

poser/pianist James Tenney in 1967 to play a four piano version of *Piano Phase* and other pieces, until 1970 when the composition of *Phase Patterns* for four electric organs, and *Four Organs* for four electric organs and maracas created the need for a quintet adding pianist Steve Chambers and occasionally, composer/performer Phil Glass. In 1971, with the composition of *Drumming*, the ensemble underwent a significant expansion to twelve musicians and singers. At this time I sought out and found a number of fine percussionists, the most outstanding of whom, Russ Hartenberger and James Preiss, continue to play in the present ensemble. Also, and for the first time, I had to find singers who had the sense of time, intonation, and timbre necessary to blend in with the sound of the marimbas in *Drumming*. Joan LaBarbara and Jay Clayton proved to be perfectly suited to this new vocal style. It was in 1971 that the name of the ensemble, *Steve Reich and Musicians*, was first adopted.

I have thus become a composer with a repertory ensemble. Each new composition is added to the repertoire and our concerts present a selection of new and/or older works.

The question often arises as to what contribution the performers make to the music. The answer is that they select the resulting patterns in all compositions that have resulting patterns, and that certain details of the music are worked out by members of the ensemble during rehearsals. Resulting patterns are melodic patterns that result from the combination of two or more identical instruments playing the same repeating melodic pattern one or more beats out of phase with each other. During the selection of resulting patterns to be sung in the second section of *Drumming*, Joan LaBarbara, Jay Clayton, Judy Sherman and I all contributed various patterns we heard resulting from the combination of the three marimbas. These patterns were selected, and an order for singing them worked out, with the help of tape loops of the various marimba combinations played over and over again at my studio during rehearsals held throughout the summer of 1971. Similarly, in the resulting patterns for *Six Pianos*, Steve Chambers, James Preiss and I worked out the resulting patterns and the order in which to play them during rehearsals at the Baldwin Piano store during the fall and winter of 1972–73.

During the summer of 1973 in Seattle I worked with different singers in the marimba section of *Drumming* who heard and sang very different resulting patterns from the singers in New York. When I returned to New York I showed the new resulting patterns to Jay Clayton and Joan LaBarbara who decided to incorporate some of these patterns into their own version. The details of the music changed when the performers changed.

Selecting resulting patterns is not improvising; it is actually filling in the details of the composition itself. It offers the performer the opportunity to listen to minute details and to sing or play the ones he or she finds most musical.

There's a certain idea that's been in the air, particularly since the 1960's, and

it's been used by choreographers as well as composers and I think it is an extremely misleading idea. It is that the only pleasure a performer (be it musician or dancer) could get was to improvise, or in some way be free to express his or her momentary state of mind. If anybody gave them a fixed musical score or specific instructions to work with this was equated with political control and it meant the performer was going to be unhappy about it. John Cage has said that a composer is somebody who tells other people what to do, and that it is not a good social situation to do that. But if you know and work with musicians you will see that what gives them joy is playing music they love, or at least find musically interesting, and whether that music is improvised or completely worked out is really not the main issue. The main issue is what's happening *musically;* is this beautiful, is this sending chills up and down my spine, or isn't it?

The musicians play in this ensemble, usually for periods of three to five years or more, because, presumably, they like playing the music, or at least because they find it of some musical interest. They do not make all their income from playing in this ensemble. Some are Doctoral candidates in the study of African, Indonesian and Indian music, some teach percussion, and all perform professionally in a variety of musical ensembles including orchestras, chamber groups, Medieval music ensembles, South Indian, African and Indonesian classical ensembles, free improvisation and jazz groups. It is precisely the sort of musician who starts with a strong Western classical background and then later gravitates towards these other types of music that I find ideally suited for this ensemble.

The presence of musicians who play certain instruments or sing encourages me to write more music for those instruments or voices. The percussionists and singers I began working with in *Drumming* encouraged me to write more percussion and vocal music. *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ* is one of the results. Since the keyboard music I write involves up and down movements of the hands exclusively, instead of conventional keyboard technique, percussionists are better suited to play pieces like *Six Pianos* than most pianists are. Most of the musicians in my ensemble are therefore percussionists who double on the keyboard.

These musicians are also my first and most important critics. During early rehearsals when a first version of a new piece is being tried out, the reactions of the players will often tell me whether the new composition really works, or not. Not only direct verbal comments during or after rehearsal, but an appreciative laugh or an embarrassed averted glance may be enough to let me know I am on the right or wrong track. This was particularly the case in the early fall of 1972 when the reactions of James Preiss, Russell Hartenberger and Steve Chambers were enough to make me throw away several attempts at multiple piano pieces that preceded the finished version of *Six Pianos.*

There is also the question of frequency of rehearsals. Most new pieces of

about 20 minutes in length will be rehearsed once or twice a week for two or three months. *Drumming*, which lasts about an hour and twenty minutes took almost a year of weekly rehearsals. This amount of rehearsing allows for many small compositional changes while the work is in progress and at the same time builds a kind of ensemble solidity that makes playing together a joy.