Day of Psalms: Tehillim

PROGRAMME NOTES

Clapping Music (1972)

Starting in 1971 my ensemble began touring Europe. We would carry 2000 pounds of loudspeakers, amplifiers, drums, marimbas, glockenspiels, electric organs, microphones, and so on. In 1972 I composed Clapping Music to create a piece of music that would need no instruments beyond the human body. At first I thought it would be a phase piece, but this proved inappropriate since it introduced a difficulty (phasing) that seemed inconsistent with such a simple way of producing sound. The solution was to have one part remain fixed, repeating the pattern throughout, while the second moves abruptly, after a number of repeats, from unison to one beat ahead, and so on, until it is back in unison with the first. It can thus be difficult to hear that the second performer is in fact always playing the same pattern as the first, though starting in a different place.

— Steve Reich

Pulse (2015)

Pulse, for winds, strings, piano and electric bass, was completed in 2015 and was, in part, a reaction to my Quartet of 2013 in which I changed keys more frequently than in any previous work. In Pulse I felt the need to stay put harmonically and spin out smoother wind and string melodic lines in canon over a constant pulse in the electric bass and or piano. From time to time this constant pulse is accented differently through changing hand alternation patterns on the piano. All in all, a calmer more contemplative piece lasting about 16 minutes.

As is well known, composing is primarily a solitary activity. However, after completing Pulse, I sought out suggestions for improving the piece from Maggie Heskin, my editor at Boosey and Hawkes. She offered several ideas which helped motivate me to find my solution of hand alternation patterns mentioned above. I want to thank Maggie for her thoughtful and generous help.

— Steve Reich – 2015

Tehillim (1981)

Tehillim (pronounced “teh-hill-leem”) is the original Hebrew word for “Psalms”. Literally translated it means “praises”, and it derives from the three letter Hebrew root ‘hey, lamed, lamed’ (hll) which is also the root of halleluyah. Tehillim is a setting of Psalms 19:2-5 (19:1-4 in Christian translations), 34:13-15 (34:12-14 in Christian translations), 18:26-27 (18:25-26 in Christian translations) and 150:4-6.

The chamber version is scored for four women’s voices (one high soprano, two lyric sopranos, and one alto), piccolo, flute, oboe, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, six percussion (playing small tuned tambourines with no jingles, clapping, maracas, marimba, vibraphone and crotales), two electric organs, two violins, viola, cello and bass. The voices, winds and strings are amplified in performance. In orchestral version there are full strings and winds with amplification for the voices only.

The first text begins as a solo with drum and clapping accompaniment only. It is repeated with clarinet doubling the voice and with a second drum and clap in canon with the first. It then appears in two voice canon and at last the strings enter with long held harmonies. At this point all four voices, supported by a single maraca, doubled by two electric organs and harmonised by the strings sing 4 four-part canons on each of the four verses of the first text. When these are competed the solo voice restates the original complete melody with all drums and full string harmonisation. The second text begins immediately after a short drum transition. Here the three verses of text are presented in two or three voice harmony in a homophonic texture. Sometimes the voices are replaced by the cor anglais and clarinet or by the drums and clapping. Soon the melodic lines begin augmenting (or lengthening) and then adding melismas. The effect is of a melodic line growing longer and more ornate. After a pause the third text begins in a slower tempo and with the percussion changed to a marimba and vibraphone. The text is presented as a duet first between two and then all four voices. This third text is not only the first slow movement I have composed since my student days, but also the most chromatic music I have ever composed (with the possible exception of Variations for Winds, Strings and Keyboards of 1979). The fourth and final text resumes the original tempo and key signature and combines techniques used in the preceding three movements. It is, in effect, a recapitulation of the entire piece which then, in a coda based solely on the word “Halleluyah”, extends the music to its largest instrumental forces and its harmonic conclusion. This last movement affirms the key of D major as the basic tonal centre of the work after considerable harmonic ambiguity.

The tambourines without jingles are perhaps similar to the small drum called “tof” in Hebrew in Psalm 150 and several other places in the Biblical text. Hand clapping as well as rattles were also commonly used throughout the Middle East in the Biblical period as were small pitched cymbals. Beyond this there is no musicological content to Tehillim. No Jewish themes were used for any of the melodic materials. One of the reasons I chose to set Psalms as opposed to parts of the Torah or Prophets is that the oral tradition among Jews in the West for singing Psalms has been lost. (It has been maintained by Yemenite Jews.) This meant that I was free to compose the melodies for Tehillim without a living oral tradition to either imitate or ignore.

In contrast to most of my earlier work, Tehillim is not composed of short repeating patterns. Though an entire melody may be repeated either as the subject of a canon or variation this is actually closer to what one finds throughout the history of Western music. While the four-part canons in the first and last movements may well remind some listeners of my early tape pieces It’s Gonna Rain and Come Out, which are composed of short spoken phrases repeated over and over again in close canon, Tehillim will probably strike most listeners as quite different from my earlier works. There is no fixed meter or metric pattern in Tehillim as there is in my earlier music. The rhythm, of the music here comes directly from the rhythm of the Hebrew text and is consequently in flexible changing meters. This is the first time I have set a text to music since my student days and the result is a piece based on melody in the basic sense of that word. The use of extended melodies, imitative counterpoint functional harmony and full orchestration may well suggest renewed interest in Classical or, more accurately, Baroque and earlier Western musical practice. The non-vibrato, non-operatic vocal production will also remind listeners of Western music prior to 1750. However, the overall sound of Tehillim and in particular the intricately interlocking percussion writing which, together with the text, forms the basis of the entire work, marks this music as unique by introducing a basic musical element that one does not find in earlier Western practice including the music of this century. Tehillim may thus be heard as traditional and new at the same time.

— Steve Reich