

# the conversation

## Steve Reich

# 'Time is not an endless commodity'

Steve Reich's son was trapped near Ground Zero on 9/11. Now the composer has created a piece using the voices of people caught up in the chaos. He wants us to concentrate on the alarming reality still with us. It could happen again, he tells *Tim Teeman*

**T**oday, in Steve Reich's Modernist home in the woods of rural Pound Ridge, upstate New York, the falling and vaporised bodies, storm clouds of dust and terrible sound and fury of September 11, 2001, seem far away. The William Brager-designed house has floor-to-ceiling glass windows and the famed minimalist composer and his wife, Beryl Korot, a video artist, work in separate studios in the sleek property. Hundreds of trees are their looming neighbours.

The direct, dryly witty composer, dressed in unflashy jeans and baseball cap, looks a decade younger than his 74 years. He is happier not having the city "rubbed" in his face, even though its aural onslaught never affected him creatively: he walked the streets of Manhattan wearing earplugs for 30 years. He and Korot have lived here since 2006, although Reich admits that he will be "a New York boy till they put me away" and his latest piece, *WTC 9/11*, marks the most scarring event that the city has endured: the destruction of the World Trade Centre in a terrorist attack almost ten years ago.

The outrage was literally close to home for Reich. Four blocks away from Ground Zero, Reich's son, Ezra, then 23, Ezra's wife, Davies, and their one-year-old daughter, Orah, were trapped in the apartment that Reich had owned since the late 1960s, when the area was teeming with merchants, "like 19th-century Melville's America".

The piece has its UK premiere at the Barbican in a two-day celebration of Reich's work. Its impetus came from David Harrington, the founder of the Kronos Quartet, Reich's longtime collaborators. For more than 40 years Reich has redefined orchestral composition, ingeniously looping and distorting voices alongside music samples. His 1988 piece, *Different Trains*, which wove personal history into a contemplation of the Holocaust, won the Grammy for Best Contemporary Classical Composition. In 2009 Reich won the Pulitzer Prize for Music for *Double Sextet*, which used interlocking pianos and vibraphones.

From 2003 to 2009 he concentrated solely on instrumental and vocal music, before Harrington urged him to return to using prerecorded voices. Reich started to curate the voices of air traffic controllers tracking the planes that hit the twin towers, conversations between switchboard operators and ambulance and fire crew members lost and desperate at the scene, and friends and neighbours caught up in the chaos. "That day Beryl and I were in Vermont," Reich recalls. "Ezra called us. We stayed on the phone with him for six hours." Reich was worried that the 360ft TV mast on the northern tower would topple on to the apartment building, "squashing it like an insect. All our worry about the possibility of them dying was deferred into practical things. We told them to keep the windows shut, to wear face masks. Ezra said the sky went black when the buildings came down, a total eclipse of everything."

Late in the afternoon a friend drove Ezra and his family out of the city to be reunited with Reich and Korot. "When we came back 30 days later, the army and National Guard were patrolling the streets and the air stunk of burnt flesh and burnt wires. Osama bin Laden came from a distinguished family of builders and this was an incredibly well-planned, brilliantly conceived and executed act of war."

For Reich, the challenge — even in this most apparently political work — was primarily technical. "I had the idea to create

**'Bin Laden came from a family of builders... 9/11 was a brilliantly conceived and executed act of war'**

the sound equivalent of a freeze frame at the end of the film, like Truffaut used." He demonstrates elongating the long "o" of "zero", the "sh" of "fish", then doubling the sound by the addition of a violin, viola or cello; in the piece the insistent "a" of "LA" as an air traffic controller's voice charts Flight 11 from Boston to Los Angeles segues to exclamations such as "I'm trapped in the rubble; I can't get out of here".

The second movement, featuring Reich's friends, begins with the voice of his neighbour's daughter saying "I was sitting in class four blocks north of Ground Zero". David Lang, a neighbour who pointed out that "WTC" also stood for "world to come" and J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, talks about ducking with his children as the second aircraft flew into the southern tower. In the final movement, alongside a Jewish cantor intoning the *Wayfarer's Prayer* in Hebrew, Reich alludes to the practice of "shmirah", a Jewish tradition of protecting a body and soul from the time of



death to the burial, which after 9/11 was conducted by volunteers outside the New York City medical examiner's office, as bodies and body parts were bought in.

"I didn't want the piece to end with a dreamy vision of the world to come, I wanted to concentrate on the alarming reality still with us," Reich says, and so the haunting piece is bookended by the jarring beep made by a telephone left off the hook. "The issues of 9/11 were very much on my mind. They should be on other people's because it might happen again," Reich says. The reality preceding it, he says, goes back to the first Battle of Poitiers in 732AD, where the Frankish Christian army stopped the advancing Arab Muslim army. "9/11 was merely the latest instalment, albeit a marquee event, stretching back to that and the Siege of Vienna in 1683. I recently read a quote attributed to an Islamist website [and] addressed to President Sarkozy — it said his wife, Carla Bruni, should wear a burka, and 'remember the Battle of Poitiers, we're coming to get you and this time with an atom bomb.' What does he think about the controversial plan to build a mosque near the World Trade Centre site? 'If I had caused you upset and wanted to express my feelings of solidarity, wouldn't the first natural thing be to say, 'What can I do to make this right?' All I'll say is the imam didn't appear to do that."

Reich says that he didn't intend to make a political statement in the 9/11 piece, that he was focused on writing "a successful piece of music. Look at Wagner. He wrote about Nordic mythology, and at the time audiences would have gone to listen to him for that reason. Now they go because they like the music. Pieces change their purpose over time." Reich becomes emotional about what he writes. "It's why I throw away such a lot and why it takes so long to write a piece. I find it challenging to surround the melody with proper harmony, and preceding long tones, which musically match the voice and its emotional quality." But doesn't he get emotional working with such charged material? "No, I'm not upset about that person stuck in the rubble. I don't know whether he lived or died. It can't affect me."

People often ask him, he says, whether he intended *The Cave*, his 1993 opera exploring the roots of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to change the Middle East situation. "I tell them, 'Forget it. That's absurd.' Look at Picasso's *Guernica*, a masterpiece about war. Did it change history? No. If anyone had come to me in 1987 and said, 'Steve, would you like to write a piece about the Holocaust?' I would have said 'Forget it, do you want me to drink the Atlantic Ocean first?'"

"*Different Trains* happened because I got interested in the latest sampling technology and I'd heard Béla Bartók talking about his wartime experience on radio and connected that with my childhood experiences of being on trains, going between my parents' homes in New York and LA, the sounds of *Soul Train*, *Night Train*, the thought had I been born in Germany or Eastern Europe I may not be alive today but killed in a concentration camp. But writing any piece, it's never my intention to elicit emotion. That would be a disaster."

It wasn't clear to Reich that he would pur-

**'My son said the sky went black when the buildings came down, a total eclipse of everything'**

sue a career in music until he was 14. Until then he had played simplified versions of the classics on the piano, "nothing before 1750 and nothing after 1900". His parents divorced when he was 1 "and should never have gotten married"; his mother, June, was a Broadway lyricist "who was basically absent". He lived with his father, whose "powers of analysis and clarity were impressive". Reich dislocated his shoulder in a game of football at 14, and for the next 26 years "woke up in screaming agony" when it popped out while he was sleeping. He had it corrected through surgery when he turned 40. At Cornell University, where he studied philosophy, Reich was introduced by his mentor, William Austin, to Gregorian chant, Bach, Ravel, Debussy, Satie and Stravinsky. "Then we'd jump to Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington. I loved it."

Reich's inspirational melting pot also included Bartók, Miles Davis, Kenny Clarke, John Coltrane, Bob Dylan's *Maggie's Farm* and African drumming — music "which all shrank the harmonic palate in a dramatic way". Junior Walker's 1964 Motown hit, *Shotgun*, fascinated him "because it had no B-section, no release". Reich released his first piece, *It's Gonna Rain*, in 1965 and remembers when he released his second, *Coming Out*, in 1966, featuring the voice of a black man who had been beaten up and falsely accused of crimes by the police, the repetition in the track led people to call up the radio stations it was played on "to say that the record was stuck in a groove".

In 1973, when he played his piece *Four Organs* (1970) at Carnegie Hall, "the audience reacted as if red-hot needles had been placed under their fingernails. I turned white as a sheet but [the conductor, pianist



and composer] Michael Tilson Thomas told me, 'This is history.'" In 1976 Reich produced his seminal work, *Music For 18 Musicians*, his first for a large ensemble, and explored his Jewish heritage in *Tehillim* (1981). While he feels in his health he is "very fortunate in whatever mismatched genes I got from my parents", Reich notes that "as soon as you realise you're closer to your death than birth, it reminds you time is not an endless commodity".

This has made him work harder and focus in later years on his family. He and Korot can talk about anything: "She is one of the few people I will show a work in progress to, and she to me, too, although

she tells me to get lost if I'm annoying her." Next he is working on a piece for the London Sinfonietta, "a giant counterpoint in which two orchestras play against one another, 12 instruments on one side, the same 12 on the other; either both orchestras on stage, or — depending on resources — one on tape and one live".

Reich gets most fulfilment from mastering technological innovation: the latest recording gizmos. He still writes music on paper, but prefers composing on a computer "because you can save everything, it forms a complete record". He has never been depressed, but after *Music for 18 Musicians* became such a success in 1977, and after 18

months of touring, he returned home and "turning on the faucet, nothing came out. For nearly seven months I couldn't write anything. When I did finally, it was *Music for a Large Ensemble*, one of my worst pieces." He laughs. "I learnt sometimes I had to say no to performing so I could write, and with varying degrees of success I have walked that tightrope." Or, put another way: **Reverberations: The Influence of Steve Reich is at the Barbican on May 7 and 8 (barbican.org.uk 020-7638 8891)**

**The Kronos Quartet tours venues in Glasgow, May 13-15, and Norwich, May 17; kronosquartet.org/concerts**

### Biography

#### Beginnings

Born October 3, 1936, in New York. Reich began to study music in 1950 at the age of 14. He graduated with a BA in philosophy from Cornell University in 1957. Reich's thesis was about Ludwig Wittgenstein. During the summer of 1970 he studied drumming at the University of Ghana in Accra.

#### Works

Reich's innovations make use of tape loops to create phasing patterns and repetitive processes such as clapping and drumming. His works are heralded as pioneering Minimalism. A lauded work, *Different Trains* (1988), compares childhood memories of his train journeys between New York and California in 1939-1941 with trains used by the Nazis to transport European children during the same era.

#### Recognition

In 2006 performers around the world marked Reich's 70th birthday with festivals and concerts. He was awarded the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Music for *Double Sextet*. **Olivia Sudjic**

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Daily Telegraph

★★★★★ BBC Music Magazine

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