An Interview with Russell Hartenberger on the Music of Steve Reich

Dr. Daniel Tones

Steve Reich is one of the most significant living composers of contemporary Western art music. He continues to garner critical recognition, and his works are performed throughout the world with increasing frequency. Reich’s style is distinct, and his compositional voice unique; however, the contributions of his ensemble’s performers have also been critical to his success. At times, their knowledge and expertise have shaped his music.

Russell Hartenberger, a member of the PAS Hall of Fame and Nexus, has played a prominent role in the creation and development of Reich's music. He was the first trained percussionist to join Reich’s ensemble, and has collaborated with the composer for over thirty-five years. He premiered virtually every Reich composition that involves percussion, including “Drumming,” “Clapping Music,” “Music for Pieces of Wood,” “Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ,” “Music for 18 Musicians,” “Tehillim,” “The Desert Music,” “Sextet,” “The Cave,” and “Daniel Variations.” From his long association with the composer, he intimately understands Reich’s use of time, rhythm, process, harmonic structure, and form. Furthermore, his role in the evolution of Reich’s music makes him a living contributor to contemporary performance practice.

This interview may appeal to percussionists who are interested in performing Reich’s compositions, or to those who wish simply to know more about the cultural climate and artistic influences that gave rise to Reich’s music. It presents credible, first-hand testimony from someone involved in the music’s original creation, and makes available to a wider audience details known heretofore by a limited group of participants.

Hartenberger’s insight is especially important because it articulates an insider’s perspective. Whether discussing the degree of non-Western influences in Reich’s music, the role of performers in determining the parameters of certain compositions, and the nature of notation in selected works, his views connect those who appreciate Reich’s music with those who created it.

DT: How did you become involved with Reich’s ensemble?

RH: I was a student at Wesleyan University - a graduate student. I had been studying there for just about a year and was planning on going to Ghana in the summer to hear and to study African music. A friend of mine who was also a graduate student at the time, Richard Teitelbaum, knew that I was interested in going to Africa, and he was also friends with Steve Reich. Richard was a composer. He lived in New York City and knew Steve. He was familiar with the whole underground music scene that was
emerging at the time. He knew that Steve was beginning to write this piece “Drumming” and that Steve had been to Ghana the summer before, in 1970. So he got us together, so that I could talk to Steve about Africa and Steve could talk to me about percussion. So we met, and Steve invited me to rehearsals, and that was the beginning of it.

DT: Were there any other percussionists involved at that time?

RH: No, I was the first real trained percussionist. The people playing at the time were Steve Chambers, who is a pianist, Arthur Murphy, who is a pianist, Jon Gibson who is a reed player, and Steve Reich.

Arthur Murphy had been a classmate of Steve’s at Julliard along with Phil Glass and Peter Schickele. He became known as much as anything for his transcriptions of Bill Evans’ piano solos, but now Arthur’s not in music at all. He became a C.P.A. or something. Steve Chambers is also not really in music. He went to architecture school. But Jon Gibson is interesting because he’s probably the only performer who has played with Steve Reich, Phil Glass, and I think also with LaMonte Young and Terry Riley.

Those people were the first in Steve’s group. I came in as the first percussionist, and at the time he was still working on the bongo section, and was just beginning work on the marimba section of “Drumming”. Shortly after that Steve somehow got in touch with the Manhattan School of Music and was given the name of Jim Preiss, and then Jim was the next percussionist. Jim introduced Steve to several other percussionists – students of his – including Glen Velez and Gary Schall.

DT: To your knowledge, were there any specific qualities in the players for which he was looking? Was he searching for a certain type of player, or for players with a background in a certain kind of music?

RH: I don’t think he knew at the time. I think that a profile emerged as he saw which kind of percussionists were attracted to his music and were able to play it. It was the kind of music, and it still is, that either you get it or you don’t, or you like it or you don’t, and you have a knack for playing it, or you don’t.

I think he finally realized that the kind of players who were drawn to his music were those who also had an interest in World Music. Bob [Becker] was there, and Glen [Velez]. Glen eventually had that interest, but not at the time. When Glen started playing with Steve he was just a typical percussion student working on marimba [laughs]. It was actually through Bob and me that Glen became interested in frame drums. We told him that we were studying with Raghavan at Wesleyan, and Sarda Sahai, and I think he went there to study with Raghavan and discovered the kanjira. So that was his first frame drum - the South Indian tambourine.

DT: At the time when Reich was working on “Drumming,” he began to depart from the approaches he embraced in some of his earlier compositions in a number of ways – from increasing the size of the required instrumental ensemble to decreasing his reliance
on electronic resources. In his earlier pieces, for example, he had written for tape loops and had composed for the Phase Shifting Pulse Gate.

RH: Yes, that [the Phase Shifting Pulse Gate] was kind of a contraption he made. But he had written “Violin Phase”, which was violin phasing against a tape. Then the first phase piece that was “mano a mano” was “Piano Phase.”

DT: So with “Drumming”, this was the first work that employed percussionists. Other than the maraca part in “Four Organs,” this was a change from what he had been doing before.

RH: Yes, in the sense that he actually needed real percussionists.

DT: What about Reich’s music may have challenged you personally as a performer? Compositional procedures employed in “Drumming,” such as phasing and resultant patterns, were relatively new, and definitely were not present in the works of other Western composers. Did you find those things difficult at all?

RH: I think phasing was different, but I don’t know if it was really difficult. It took some practice to be able to do it really well. I don’t exactly remember it being difficult. It just was a new thing. But I was being introduced to so many new things at the time, with non-Western music. It was another new thing. So it wasn’t like, “this is the most difficult thing that I have ever done”. In fact, it was just another challenge, but an interesting one.

DT: Did you feel technically challenged at all? From your experience with Western classical music, did you encounter anything that you physically couldn’t do?

RH: No, not really. I think the things that were kind of challenging, or engrossing, were concentration – figuring things out - and endurance. But they both were kind of wrapped up in the study of non-Western music which presented the same kinds of situations.

DT: In your own teaching you stress both focus and concentration. Did this approach arise through your involvement with Reich’s music, or had you already been thinking about them from your studies in non-Western music?

RH: All of this evolved at the same time. When I started playing with Reich it was probably early 1971 – February or March or something – and I had just started Wesleyan in September before that. So I had only been playing non-Western music for a few months. So it all kind of grew up together. In a way, Reich’s music was another non-Western music, or partial Western music. It was part of the same package.

DT: There have been some heated discussions concerning how much Reich’s music borrows from non-Western traditions, or whether his compositional style developed
spontaneously. From reading some interviews with the composer he stated that his compositional style didn’t have much to do with his trip to Ghana.

From your own involvement with West African drumming or Indonesian Gamelan, could you comment on any similarities or parallels between them?

RH: Steve always says his trip to Ghana was kind of a confirmation of ideas that he already had. I think that’s the term he uses. In “Drumming” the only thing that you could say that was a direct influence might be the choice of a rhythmic pattern that was in six or twelve. I think he discovered, in African music, the ambiguity that happens when you use twelve. So, I think that was the only real thing, because phasing obviously isn’t African and resultant patterns aren’t, although short rhythmic fragments, I guess, could be considered African. Although, that had been established by Terry Riley in “In C” as a structural framework of the piece, and that aspect became very important in early in Minimalism with Terry Riley, Steve Reich and to a certain extent Phil Glass.

The fact that he uses drums... Steve said that the reason he chose bongos was because when he was a student at Julliard he heard a lunch-time concert by a bongo player who was using sticks on bongos and he really thought that that sound was dramatic. He didn’t think about it much more until he started writing this piece for bongos, and he related it to that experience a little bit.

I think some of his other pieces have a little bit more direct influence. A good example is “Music for 18 musicians” which has vibraphone cues that would be similar to either master drum cues [in some styles of West African music] or drumming cues in Gamelan that signal the whole mood to make a change. I think that’s probably the structural idea the he got from those kinds of music.

It’s interesting that in “Music for 18” there’s this alternating beat that’s very much like Amadinda music, which Steve wasn’t really familiar with at all. So Steve came up with that idea independently of that African tradition.

I think some of the interlocking patterns that he became involved with, not only in “Music for 18,” but in his counterpoint pieces, are similar in a sense to kotekan. But they’re also a result of his interest in canons. So I think there’s more of a general influence. I think that the fact that his pieces have a pulse, and quite often an instrument that keeps a pulse is somewhat influenced by that. I guess the “Clapping Music” pattern again is another example of a rhythmic pattern based on twelve that’s even more similar to the Agbekor bell pattern. I think he consciously wanted to come up with a pattern that was similar to that, but not that.

DT: And that rhythmic pattern, in particular, seems to be utilized in a lot of his compositions. “Sextet” comes to mind.

RH: Yes, and in “Music for 18” a lot. That’s kind of his signature rhythmic pattern. That, and the Agbekor bell pattern which he still uses a lot.
DT: In terms of musical considerations, were there any problems you encountered in ensemble performance, rehearsing, or learning to play as a unit when you first played his music?

RH: I don’t remember that so much in “Drumming”. Although in “Drumming” everything is amplified so you’re hearing stuff through speakers that are behind you. You hear a mix. I guess the only problems in “Drumming” are spatial, especially in the last section if you’re playing marimba. But you learn little techniques, visual techniques—different things to keep together. There’s a bit of a problem in “Six Pianos” just because of the size of the pianos, especially when it’s done on grands. But those are all acoustical problems, rather than problems having to do with his music.

By the time his pieces got up and going there were so many good percussionists. It was an All-Star cast. Everybody was conscious of the situation and could make adjustments.

DT: How about the interaction between the composer and the members of the ensemble? Was there an open dialogue between the two parties? When music was presented were you encouraged to give input, and did a piece eventually evolve out of a collective agreement?

RH: In the early days, for example with “Drumming”, we had rehearsals once a week. Every week we’d come in and there would be new material that he’d written during the week, and he would teach us mostly by rote. He would show you your pattern, and where it came in, what was going on against it, and you would just memorize that and do it. Occasionally somebody would make a suggestion about something, and he would take it into consideration and often adapt it and put it into his piece. They wouldn’t be major suggestions like “change this whole section,” or “cut this out.” They tended to be more simple kinds of suggestions, but he was always open to that.

In “Six Pianos” very much, there was a lot of feedback. “Six Pianos” started as a phase piece, and through various feedback from members of the group, he realized that it wasn’t working. It made him rethink the whole idea of continuing with phasing. Also in “Six Pianos” the register is kind of middle-range. We were playing and I made a comment, I remember, and some other people commented on the fact that we weren’t using the whole piano. We were only using a couple of octaves in the middle, and I think then he realized he needed to expand his vision—his orchestration vision—a little bit more. So he learned through those kinds of things. I think orchestration might have been something that he wasn’t as comfortable with or as familiar with, than some of the other compositional ideas.

I know that he knew something about percussion, because he was a percussionist. But when he was writing violin parts or wind parts he would often invite those players to his loft and go over the part and ask questions about what he was writing. So he kind of learned on the job about other instruments that he wasn’t as familiar with.
Of course writing for percussion, especially in “Drumming” everything is left-handed because he’s left-handed.

DT: You mentioned learning by rote. Did that become a common practice for learning in the ensemble? Were some things notated, or was it a mix of the two?

RH: “Drumming” I learned entirely by rote. In fact it confuses me still to look at the score. “Music for 18” was kind of a combination. There were little pieces of manuscript paper with a pattern written down on it at first, and then he eventually kind of taped them all together in a page, or couple of pages. You had kind of crib notes, like some people use in Gamelan I guess, to play the piece. Still today we just have a couple of sheets of manuscript paper that I throw on the marimba to remind me what to play in that piece. So that was kind of a combination.

I think one of the areas where the performers had a lot of input was in resultant patterns. The bongo section, and also especially with the singing section of “Drumming”, the singers would sit there with Steve and listen to the composite patterns and come up with ideas. Eventually they chose a sequence of patterns to use in performance. But he would always be open to those ideas. Of course now in “Drumming” we play different patterns all the time. Particularly with those resultant patterns, there’s a lot that he readily accepts from the players.

DT: Does each member approach those types of things differently? Are there certain styles that have emerged from the players in terms of what types of resultant patterns they like to play?

RH: Yeah, it’s interesting to see what different people come up with. I know Dave van Tiegham used to play bongos in the very end section of “Drumming,” and he would start accenting single notes, and that became kind of his thing to do, and other people would pick up on that and would do it from time to time. Jim Preiss had some beautiful resultant patterns – really complex ones – that he kind of evolved at the beginning of “Drumming.”

DT: One of the things that I recall from performing that piece is that there always seemed to be a dialogue developing. I would hear a resultant pattern that another player would create – one that I really liked - and I would try to mimic that, or else find something different in the base pattern. “Drumming” often feels very organic in how it develops.

RH: Bob and I used to work patterns out, although we never really talked about it, but we would work out resultant patterns while we were doing the steady parts in “Drumming”. We would just emphasize certain notes to create a resultant pattern. Sometimes we would react to patterns that the other guys were playing - do a call and response kind of thing, or an exchange. We don’t do that so much any more, but we used to do that a lot.
DT: One of the things that you mentioned in the past is that the duration of the entire performance of “Drumming” has shrunk considerably over the years.

RH: Yes, it started as an hour and twenty minutes, and now it’s down to about 55.

DT: Could you comment as to why that happens now?

RH: I think all the transitions, for one thing, are not quite as drawn out as they were. I think back in the sixties and early seventies the order of the day was to be kind of spaced out, kind of really slowly changing things. I don’t want to use the word “psychedelic,” but more of a mind-bending, hallucinatory style of playing. Things were much more drawn out. Fade-ins and fade-outs would take a really long time. Build-ups would last really, really long. But it felt right to do that. Now it feels like, it’s almost like people know that more. They know what it is, so we don’t need to dwell on it.

Steve used to go to Europe with a core of players from North America, and he’d pick up other players there to fill out some of the bigger pieces. Michael Nyman was one of those guys, and Cornelius Cardew was also one. Cornelius was a great musician who died way too young. He made a great comment once about “Drumming.” Bob and I were stretching out every phase as long as we possibly could. We were going through that phase of phasing where we were working on making it all as long as possible. And he said why don’t we make the first one really long to show people that’s what we can do, and then just kind of get on with it.

DT: From hearing recordings of you and Bob doing that, there seems to be an element of control in how you two phase. Phasing is something with which a lot of students have difficulty - really getting into the zone and finding that space.

RH: Well there’s a whole technique to it. Actually I’m writing an essay on phasing right now. I’ll send it to you. It talks about that and all the various degrees of phasing, and what’s hard and what’s isn’t, where the guideposts are, and the things that you can latch onto - what it feels like starting a phase and ending a phase. If you want to you can make it very systematic. You can go from point to point within the phase. Then one of the keys, of course, is knowing what the next interlocking pattern sounds like, so that you know if you’ve gone too far, or you know when you’re about to get there.

DT: In considering various approaches to notation and learning styles, did people within Reich’s ensemble seem to learn better in certain ways?

RH: Steve would always determine that. He was always the boss. The core group of people always picked up things quickly, no matter how it was presented. Other people that came into the group, or tried to come into the group, would be subjected to Steve’s version of an audition which would be him showing them a pattern and if they didn’t pick it up instantly he would start yelling at them so they would not only have to learn this pattern, but to endure him yelling at them while they were trying to learn it. If they could
survive that, and pick it up, then they could play. If they couldn’t they were unceremoniously tossed out of the room.

So you had to be a pretty confident player to be able handle that. I think the style of learning a piece changed as the pieces themselves changed. As the pieces became more complex, starting probably with “Tehillim,” which was completely different, there was a big change in the style of writing. We had to read measure-by-measure in strange time signatures like 13/8, 7/8, 15/8. You just had to read the piece, and you had your head buried in the music. That was a completely different thing. You couldn’t just learn a pattern and play it mechanically and listen to what was going on. With pieces like “Sextet” and “Desert Music,” that was more like just learning the piece. The style of learning changed from the early days.

DT: “Sextet” was a piece that was originally written for Nexus, is that correct?

RH: Yes, it was commissioned by Nexus, and we played it, but of course it ended up being for four percussion and two pianos, and there were five people in Nexus by that time. So four of us did it with two piano players. Paris was the first performance, and we never really played it as Nexus again, because we couldn’t. But that’s the way Steve has always composed. He’s composed what he wanted to. And no matter what the commission was, it kind of came out like it came out. I guess all of his solo pieces are really solo with tape, like the counterpoint pieces. So he would write what he wanted, more or less, and you either accepted it, or you didn’t - which I admire, for being able to stick to that. I think a lot of composers confine themselves too much by the restrictions of the commission. And it comes out not necessarily being a pure piece, in a certain sense. It’s a compromised piece according to the commission.

DT: And yet, perhaps because of that, his music continues to endure. It’s still performed all the time.

RH: Yeah, more and more by other people. For a long time nobody played it, but his group. He had kind of a tight control over it. He was very wary of anybody else playing his music. But he’s loosened that up a lot, and now his group doesn’t actually play all that much. There are many groups in Europe that play it a lot.

DT: Bob Becker mentioned something that relates to that [in a previous interview]. He said that in his travels abroad - trips to Europe on which you had accompanied him – he was asked to teach some of Reich’s music to other people as well. He said that he found some things difficult to teach. He knew all the music intimately, but without having learned from the notation he found it difficult trying to explain it to other people. What are your thoughts about that?

RH: Well, I’ve taught it in different ways. With Kroumata, rather than sending them the score, I sent them a them a blow-by-blow description of what happens. I assigned parts and then said “Leif does this, and then waits for Anders.” I’ve just told them each what to do all the way through the piece. I’ve found it problematic with any group that
has tried to learn a piece from the notation. I’ve kind of had to tell them to disregard what they think the notation says, and do it this way.

Some of the time Steve’s group doesn’t do it the way the piece looks like when it’s eventually published. A lot of times Steve would always give the important parts to Bob and me. We would reconfigure the choreography of the piece so that Bob and I could play certain parts. When it was actually published it worked out that that wasn’t the most streamlined way to divide up the parts. So it would be a bit different from that. That’s not so much the case with “Drumming,” or maybe a little bit. People learn it by the published score and then have us come in, and we might be telling them a little bit differently than they actually did it in the score. But the early score of “Drumming” was really difficult to learn the piece from.

DT: Bob mentioned that there’s someone else that has been renotating Steve Reich’s music?

RH: That’s Mark Mellits. He’s redone “Music for 18.” There was never a score for “Music for 18 Musicians.” Steve wrote it week by week, and would sketch out a section and then write parts. From the performers’ input, or from ideas that worked or didn’t work at a rehearsal, he would change things. So it became a string of events that everybody had in their part and it always would be like: “play this pattern until you get a nod from Les, and then cue Steve, and wait for Jay to sing that pattern, then do this.” Very personalized. In fact, all the parts are really personalized. Still I can only think of “Drumming” as Jim’s part, Bob’s part, Steve’s part, and my part. I don’t think of it as Percussion One, Two, Three, Four, or whatever.

So Mark Mellits did “Music for 18,” and he just finished doing “Drumming,” which is another part that would help. The notation that Steve had was accurate, but there were a few mistakes. Mark’s would be much more readable. He has figured out a good way to notate the stuff.

DT: It’s funny that you mentioned that you conceived of the piece as being assigned to certain people. Because of that, how much to you think personality has affected the way these pieces have evolved, even just in “Drumming,” for example?

RH: I think it has affected it quite a bit. I think the personalities of Bob, and Jim, and me in particular, have kind of built the piece. It’s also a very North American style of playing. Europeans, until recently, haven’t really gotten it. Now there are some really great performances of Steve’s music in Europe. There’s a certain lift to the time that North Americans have - either through hearing and growing up with Jazz and Rock ‘n Roll and popular music. I think Europeans, especially European percussionists, tend to be more classically trained or geared towards orchestras and not so much other styles. When they do New Music it’s more Stockhausen and Xenakis–type music. So there isn’t this sense of swing that North Americans tend to just feel naturally.
So that’s part of it. And the other part of it is the way that Steve would always demonstrate patterns. First of all he’s not a great player. He’ll acknowledge that before anybody. He was never a great percussionist, but he did have a certain feel. First of all he’s left-handed. He’s a very strong, left-hand dominant player. When he played patterns they were always unbalanced, and they would always have kind of a swing - partially because he felt it that way, and partially because he couldn’t do it another way. Some of the time we would try to imitate his style of playing, or maybe take that as a starting point and then develop our own style based on his style. But it all goes back to this sense of time and swing that North Americans innately seem to have and Europeans didn’t have for a while.

By the time we got to “Tehillim,” pretty much you would just walk in and there would be a piece. He would send you the music and it would be composed. But in “Drumming,” “Six Pianos,” “Music for Mallet Instruments,” “Music for 18”, “Clapping Music,” and “Music for Pieces of Wood” – in all those pieces the performers had a fair amount of input. “Clapping Music” started out as a phase piece. Steve and I stood in his loft and tried to play it as a phase piece, and it didn’t seem to work. All that time he was trying to look for the next step. I think “Drumming” was the high point, but it was hard to know what to do about phasing.

DT: That becomes an interesting composition becomes it seems to encapsulate so many of the things that he was writing until that point – and so many of the things for which his style is known. So it’s an important work in that respect.

RH: Yes it is, and I think that the next high point is “Music for 18 Musicians,” which broadened his orchestrational palette, brought in a lot of other instruments, combined short rhythmic figures with long breath-length phrases, and created a whole new structural element. Chords got into a little bit of harmonic change, almost functional harmony, and then after that another substantial change would be the next period.

DT: One of the things that I like about a lot of his music is its organic nature. The number of repeats isn’t necessarily specified. From what I recall personally of “Drumming,” although it’s not scripted this way, there seems to be someone who is leading what’s going on. It never happens the same way twice. It’s always changing from ensemble to ensemble - between different groups of players. His music seems to be different from other streams of contemporary music which are very scripted in how they unfold.

RH: Yes, it’s interesting because, over the years, I’ve heard a lot of comments about Steve Reich’s music - that it’s almost fascist in the way it’s controlled so much by the composer. I find it just the opposite. I find much more freedom in that music than almost any other music that I play. The performers have a huge say in determining almost everything – the length of anything that happens, the dynamics, phrasing. Any piece that can vary from an hour and twenty minutes to fifty-five minutes, totally at the whim of the performers, that’s a huge discrepancy in the time.
DT: And there’s room for improvisation within that framework.

RH: Yes there is. It’s kind of a controlled improvisation, but there is.

DT: One last thing. Do you see Reich’s music surviving, and continuing to grow in popularity in years to come?

RH: I do. I know a lot of people still don’t like it. I think he’s written some really true masterpieces, and I think they will, for sure.

Discography

A list of recordings on which Hartenberger appears is found below. Compositions appear in chronological order, and the date for each work is taken from Steve Reich’s official website <www.stevereich.com>.

Drumming (1971)
   Nonesuch 79170
   Deutsche Grammophon DG 474 323-2 (re-release)
   Deutsche Grammophon DG 427 428-2 (reissue)

Clapping Music (1972)
   Nonesuch 79169

Music for Pieces of Wood (1973)
   Orange Mountain Music 0018

Six Pianos (1973)
   Deutsche Grammophon DG 427 428-2 (reissue)

Music for Mallets, Voices, and Organ (1973)
   Nonesuch 79220
   Deutsche Grammophon DG 427 428-2 (reissue)

Music for 18 Musicians (1974-76)
   ECM New Series 78118-21129 (original recording reissued)
   Nonesuch 79448 (re-release)

Music for a Large Ensemble (1978)
   ECM New Series 78118-21168
Tehillim (1981)
    ECM New Series 21215

The Desert Music (1984)
    Nonesuch 79101

Sextet (1984)
    Nonesuch 79138

Six Marimbas (1986)
    Nonesuch 79138

The Four Sections (1987)
    Nonesuch 79220

The Cave (1990-93)
    Nonesuch 79327

City Life (1995)
    Nonesuch 79430

Proverb (1995)
    Nonesuch 79430

Three Tales (2002)
    Nonesuch 79662

About the author

Daniel Tones is an award-winning percussionist and scholar who devotes a great deal of his time to encouraging musical development in aspiring artists. He holds a doctorate in performance and ethnomusicology from the University of British Columbia, and has studied with some of Canada’s most well respected percussionists. He has appeared at music festivals on three continents, and has been broadcast nationally on radio and television.

Daniel has studied frame drumming, West African drumming and dance, Balinese gamelan, and Cuban percussion with several master musicians. Equally at home in the field of Western music, he has performed with the Toronto, Vancouver, and Victoria symphonies, the CBC Vancouver Radio Orchestra, and the Vancouver Opera Orchestra. He also appears regularly as a chamber musician with Vancouver New Music, The Turning Point Ensemble, and the Fringe Group.