



STEVE REICH 2005 medalist in music

2005 MEDAL DAY

ON AUGUST 14TH, Steve Reich took his place among past Medalists, including Robert Frost, I.M. Pei, and Georgia O’Keeffe. Speeches by composer and Colony Fellow **David Lang**, and sculptor Richard Serra follow below. A concert of Mr. Reich’s work was also performed by New York–group So Percussion (pictured on cover); studios of current artists-in-residence were opened to the many guests who attended (pictured above). The Colony would like to thank members of this year’s Medal Selection Committee: composers **Robert Beaser**, David Lang, **Francis Thorne**, and Chen Yi.

remarks by *david* **LANG**

HELLO, I AM DAVID LANG. I want to begin this speech with a little aphorism translated from the Hebrew: “Say little, and do much.” This is from an early book of the Talmud called *Sayings of the Fathers*. I wish I could say that I learned it from my own Hebrew studies, but I can’t. I learned it from Steve Reich. This little phrase — *say little and do much* — is the entire text of the last movement of Steve’s most recent and remarkable piece, *You Are Variations*. Co-commissioned by the Los Angeles

Master Choral, Lincoln Center, and the Ensemble Moderne, *You Are Variations* is a very large piece, 25 minutes for chorus and a generous instrumentation of winds, strings, and percussion. I’ll talk about the music in a bit, but what I want to start with is the text. This large and dramatic and deep piece is made entirely out of four short scraps of text — three from Jewish sources, and one from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. These texts are as follows: *You are where your thoughts are. I place the eternal before me. Explanations come to an end somewhere. Say little and do much.* That’s it. That’s the whole text. It goes without saying that it is a tour de force to make so much music out of so few words, but what does the text really tell us about the composer? The quote from Wittgenstein is the tip-off about whom we are dealing with here. In



The music of Steve Reich is pure ecstasy. During a summer I spent at Tanglewood as a student I think I wore headphones all nine weeks, and coming through the headphones was invariably *Music for 18 Musicians* or *Music for a Large Ensemble*. When I hear these pieces I am transported and electrified. I am dazzled by the counterpoint, the glorious textures miraculously created with nothing more than the acoustic instruments we all know, but I also long for the “turn in the road”, the wonderful moment of harmonic shift that is always perfectly timed and sends chills down your spine. >> I would like to thank Mr. Reich for the generosity of his music, for the pleasure it has given me, and for the great influence it has had on my approach to listening and making music.

—composer and Colony Fellow Kevin Puts

Steve, the composer and the philosopher are one. It is in the philosophy — the intense questioning of fundamental forms of belief — that the music becomes set free.

Steve’s music always begins with an idea. Some of these ideas are narrative, or social, or philosophical, but even the strictly musical pieces begin by asking simple questions about how music can be made. How can a melody be made to slow down? How does a melody sound when it plays at the same time as a version of itself that is going slightly faster? Many of these questions come from his early work — looping bits of recorded tape; experimenting with how sounds can be recorded, and reproduced, and rearranged; and how these mechanical processes can be remade acoustically with live musicians. Some of the questions his music explores now are the logical continuations of the ideas he started with 40 years ago, reimagined and sometimes startlingly recombined.

The new piece, *You Are Variations*, follows up on Steve’s lifetime of exploration. You can hear the long history of each idea as it appears. The slow pulling apart of the vocal lines continues a process explored in the 70s with *Four Organs*, and in his early experiments at stretching musical

material on tape. The counterpoint and overlapping of lines come right out of the close canons of his ecstatic vocal work *Tehillim*, which itself came out of the early phase and counterpoint pieces. The harmony is a much richer, and denser, and more ornate version of the jazz chords he started with in *Music for Mallet Instruments*, and perfected in his breakout masterpiece, *Music for 18 Musicians*. I think for Steve there are abstract musical things he has always wanted to do, and he keeps finding new ways to do them. This intense focus on close and repeated examination of music’s basic materials has had a big effect on the composers who have followed him, and certainly the sound, the concentration, the stripping away of ornament, the monumental dedication of large sections of pieces to the working out of his ideas, have had a big impact on an entire generation of composers.

The thing that is sometimes overlooked is that Steve’s pieces are all incredibly humane. They are about something important and meaningful. A piece like *Different Trains* — Steve’s landmark work for the Kronos Quartet — that mixes a personal narrative with recordings of Holocaust survivors not only sounds great but it makes human a very emotional experience and an

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On Medal Day, the cameras are trained on the honoree, but what about the public who attends? What do they come for and, even better, what do they come away with? We found the answers to why Medal Day is not just a ceremony but a personal celebration.



“Creativity is something we all have. I spent a career becoming a professor in social work, and I decided in retirement to do what I wanted to do, which is to write. MacDowell stands for that.”

— Carolyn Saari

“Creativity is more than a value; it’s a necessity. We may or may not share values, but I hope we would share an interest in creativity.”

— David Lord



incomprehensibly desperate moment in history. This is the part of Steve the composer that I think about the most. The depth — this intention to take on big issues — is something everyone really needs from art, and almost never gets.

I want to talk about something else, though. I want to talk about my first experience with the music of Steve Reich: how I found it, how I heard it, and how it changed me. One of my high school jobs was as a stock boy in a classical music record store. A perk of this job was that I got great discounts on records, and I would buy anything that caught my attention. One day, around 1973, I noticed a Columbia Records release with a violin and a rainstorm on the cover. It was a recording of two recent pieces by an unknown young composer named Steve Reich — *Violin Phase* and *It's Gonna Rain*. I bought the record; I think it cost me 50 cents. (I actually don't even remember if I paid the 50 cents, but that's another story. It was that kind of record store. And I was that kind of high school student.) *Violin Phase* was immediately very appealing, but the piece that knocked me out was *It's Gonna Rain*.

This piece, as you may know, was made in 1965 by looping tape fragments of a street preacher's testimony about Noah's flood that Steve had heard and recorded in San Francisco's Union Square. *It's Gonna Rain* is one of those pieces that invents its own powerful magic, its own world. It is a piece that asks a lot of questions, presenting an expansive array of paradoxes, not the least of which is how an individual's humanity can become illuminated in confrontation with technology. The piece is full of real contradictions; it is at the same time aggressive and restrained. The means of composition are elegant but the source material is raw. It is dense and complicated, but it is made very simply. The piece employs a repetitive process but somehow moves forward with a continuously

evolving shape. The man's voice is rough and human and down and out, but the music transforms the voice into something intensely spiritual with the promise of eventual redemption. Most important, it is a deeply musical experience made from something that is not supposed to be musical at all — from the spoken word itself. For me, as a young and inexperienced listener, what was most provocative was that this piece was clearly about something new. It wasn't about harmony or melody or orchestration. It wasn't satisfied to be about writing a nice tune or making a pleasant noise. It was a piece that was bursting out of the restrictions of the traditional definitions of music. Knowing that such a thing could even be attempted was a revelation to me, and I never forgot it.

Of course, many of the inventions of *It's Gonna Rain* foreshadow the later developments in Steve's music: the exploration of the relations between individuality and technology; the purity of the materials; the conversion of speech to melody; the search for humanity. I think you can hear that the composer of *It's Gonna Rain* might later seek out the eternal in a cave in Israel, or on a cross-country train ride, or in a geneticist's laboratory. It is a triviality to say that the music in all of his compositions is sublime, but it is important to recognize that the music is always in the service of something larger than itself. These pieces believe that music can serve as an opening to some kind of larger truth about ourselves, how we think, and feel, and live our lives. Knowing that such a thing is possible is still a revelation.

Recently, I discovered a way to sum up Steve's work, Steve's thoughts, and maybe even Steve's life, in four simple statements: You are where your thoughts are. I place the eternal before me. Explanations come to an end somewhere. Say little and do much.

Thank you.



"I think Peterborough has a pretty thriving arts community for a town of 5,000 — you don't find that a lot, and it's because of places like MacDowell."

— Jane Eklund

"I've been coming to Medal Day for 15 years. The Colony is so unique. It's a sanctuary. Artists can think about what they're doing here and why. I wish there were more places like it in the world."

— Penelope English





remarks by
richard
SERRA

THERE EMERGE, at various times and places, manifestations of art which transform the realm of possibilities. New York in the late 60s was such a place. To invent — to originate something new — was the pressing need of the moment. The group of young artists that would bring about the change came from different practices. They were musicians, dancers, sculptors, painters, filmmakers. I'll mention a few amongst others who were insistent on bringing about such a rupture, such a break: Michael Snow, La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Yvonne Rainer and the Grand Union, Trisha Brown, Bruce Nauman, Robert Smithson, Bob Ryman, and I have to include Steve and myself on the list.

We were each other's audience and critics. The interchange of ideas nourished new approaches to materials,

to time, to context, to process. We were all involved in process. Trisha did her *Accumulations* piece; Bruce fell in and out of the corner; I wrote *Verb List* and splashed molten lead against the wall; Steve wrote his *Pendulum Music* for microphones, amplifiers, speakers, and performers. I was one of the performers when *Pendulum Music* was played at the Whitney in 1969 as part of the *Anti-Illusion* show. That show summed up the activities of the moment and confirmed this group as a movement. One could call *Pendulum Music* a paradigm for process art. Let me read a paragraph of Steve's notations:

"The performance begins with performers taking each mic, pulling it back like a swing, and then in unison releasing them all together. Performers then carefully turn up each amplifier just to the point where feedback occurs when a mic swings directly over or next to its speaker. Thus a series of feedback pulses are heard, which will either be all in unison or not, depending on the gradual changing phase relations of the different mic pendulums. Performers then sit down and watch and listen to the process along with the audience."

Steve's early work has had a lasting effect on me. *Come Out, It's Gonna Rain, Clapping, Drumming, Piano Phase* refuse to be eradicated from my mind, although I have no precise recollection of how the pieces develop. Listening to Steve's music is being in complicity with his process. Comprehension is a matter of complicity. My experience lags behind my anticipation, which has to do in part with the speed of sound. It keeps me alert, sometimes annoyingly so. Even after having heard Steve's pieces many times I can never predict with any assurance how the pieces are going to develop as I am listening. The density and saturation of sound — the specific gravity — prevents recollection.

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"As a creative artist, it's a complete inspiration for me to come to Medal Day. I feel impressed by the excitement of people who really care about creativity, who see it as a value in the world. Creativity is not just important to every life. It is life. It's about being alive."

— Anita Francis

"Being a foreigner [Haiti], I don't know most of the culture of this country, but I'm glad to be a part of it here."

— Philippe Salnave



Sometimes, as the music evolves, patterns change so swiftly that their logic evades me. I am unaware of its consistency, particularly in the later work, where I only experience an emotional effect, and I completely give myself over to the rush of sound. Yet I am aware that there is an exact weight to the lightness of the sound. Although there are varying durations, the power of Steve's music has a lot to do with its speed. I find my ear and mind being flooded with ideas and emotions, which follow in quick succession. Tempo counts. Tempo — timing — may be a value in and of itself, and it's of particular importance to me whether the pace is quick or slow, contracted or extended. It's the same subjective time that conveys meaning to perception as you walk through an installation I recently completed in Bilbao titled *The Matter of Time*. It is based on the idea of multiplicity or layered temporalities. Duration — not clock time, not literal time — is the main organizing principle that drives the work. The time of the experience can be fast or slow, which depends entirely on bodily movement. The listening to Steve's music is subjective time, psychological time, durational time, and comparable to the viewing time in my work.

Some of the music places me in a constant state of unease with its continuous, relentless, insistent modulations. It forces me to follow its trajectories. It gains its power through the building of similarities, connecting them one after the other so that the process of adding produces a kind of layered rhythm: forward, forward, backward, forward. As the pieces develop, the sound includes and connects all that you've previously heard in its elastic stretch. It is as if the sound begins to roll forward, pitch backward, and then forward again, shift and repeat. I understand that the form is a round, but it's not what I hear. This is not the *Alouette* I learned as a child.

When I recall *Come Out* or *It's Gonna Rain*, I don't recall the structure or concise logic of the pieces. What I retain is a feeling of alienation and discomfort. It might seem strange but the discomfort arises from a rethinking of form. That is what I cherish in art, whether it's Schoenberg, Feldman, Nauman, or Pollock.

Let me try to explain what I mean by a rethinking of form in relation to Steve's early pieces, where he uses prerecorded language. He starts out with a seemingly simple premise: a found voice, a sentence uttered. But as he subjugates this found language to his structure of overlays, as it is repeated again and again, the detail of the detail begins to resonate. I find that I am drawn into the infinitesimal, the infinitely subtle moving variations. It's then I realize I am lost in the infinite vastness of the whole. As the voices spin out they become something other than language. The words are transformed by rhythm into emotion. Words sing as sounds, and as they reach the end of the path they trace through their phased diversions and combinations, the result is music, not language. Language is being pushed to the breaking point, where the meaning of the word has been obliterated so as to allow its potential for music to emerge. It's as if the original word or phrase has been stretched along an abstract, infinitely variable line dissolving its original meaning in a process, which allows for a new meaning to emerge. Smithson, who was a friend of mine, loved Steve's work. I can hear him say, "Oh yeah, I get it. The disintegration of language into the vortex of entropy."

It takes effort to sustain listening to Steve's music. That's its virtue. You might say great composers need great listeners. Steve was never tempted by commissions for operas or symphonies. He says, at the end of his interview with Jonathan Cott, that life is too short



"This is the first Medal Day I was at where I was old enough to know what was going on. It wasn't like it was sad, but I felt like I wanted to cry. Because of how moving and important these people are and how they spoke so earnestly. It really got me. To keep bringing new things into the world, that's so important to the soul. And that's what this place is for."

—Windsor Johnson

"I love creativity and I'm sometimes sad I didn't develop mine, but I'm happy to know I can be surrounded by it."

—Christine Bulgarides





I distinctly remember my first exposure to *Come Out*. I must've been about 19, and I was an undergrad. We listened to a recording of the work in class, and it was in this class that I was really getting my first experiences with music of the 20th century. I was reeling with all this “new” music and even had a mixed reaction to *Come Out* — it was a little bit like driving past a car accident. I was drawn to it and horrified at the same time. >> As far as Reich's continued influence on me (and I think on many composers of my generation), I would like to mention two divides that his music bridges. First there's Reich's use of technology. From those

early tape pieces, to the more recent video operas which fuse multiple streams of video activity with live performance and electronically manipulated sounds, the striking thing about Reich's use of technology is there's nothing blatant or obtrusive about it. *It's Gonna Rain* and *Piano Phase* are clearly products of the same musical mind. *Music for 18 Musicians* and *Three Tales* “make sense” side-by-side. I think it's telling that I've never heard anyone refer to Reich as an “acoustic composer” or an “electronic composer”. He's always simply called a composer. >> The second split is between “popular” and “art” music. I think we are fortunate in America today to have a very plastic definition of what makes popular music and what makes art music. I myself am not interested in these labels, and I can't say that I've heard Reich himself express an interest in categorizing music in this way. But I also cannot think of another living (“art music”) composer who has inspired DJ Spooky, Sonic Youth, and The Orb to rework or cover his/her music. Reich has. And for me, *Four Organs* is pure rock — happily, just the sort of piece to cause a riot!

—Alan Shockley, composer and Colony Fellow

to just write the next orchestral commission. “Best to do what you have been assigned to do. I have been given my assignment, just as everyone has his or her assignment.” I don't think I am wrong when I assume that Steve looks to his assignment as given by a higher power. Whether we believe in assignments — whether we are secular or religious — does not matter. In Steve's case his beliefs translate into conviction. It's the conviction that makes the work compelling.

Having taken this tack I want to compare two major composers of the second half of the 20th century in terms of their philosophical underpinnings. Steve Reich's belief of having been given an assignment to fulfill differs radically from Cage, who said: “I have nothing to say but I'm saying it.” I always thought Cage's statement was somewhat disingenuous in that he used an attitude of indifference and a denial of meaning to bolster his musical theory based on chance. The ability to believe



“When I was a child, my mother played the piano and she had many pieces by Edward MacDowell. Now I play the piano and have those pieces and to think this place was started by him and his wife, and it's become so successful — it's very satisfying to me.”

—Judith Collier

“One of the nice things about Medal Day is that it's an affirmation that you're not wasting your time in art. That art is important, that art matters. Creativity is a specific value and a worthwhile value and it should be highly valued — over a lot of other things we value as a society.”

—George Sanderson



and to confess to a belief is a quality. Art, music, and poetry would not exist without belief systems. Belief systems are not synonymous with ideologies. I do not mean to suggest that art ought to communicate a specific ideology. Art is purposefully useless. It must refuse to serve. However, nonservice does not negate the ability or necessity for an artist to have a belief. It may be a mere belief in self, or a longing for belief. It may be a belief in making a contribution. Assumptions, speculations, all kinds of superstitions qualify as belief systems. I simply don't believe that art can come out of an attitude of indifference. That's where I take issue with Cage. We all have fantasies, we all imagine, we all project. Making art is an act of faith, a manifestation of hope.

I've always felt that Steve had an ethical grounding, which in his early work translated into social and political philosophy and responsibility, whereas in the later work the emphasis is on the historical and the spiritual. Steve didn't choose the words for *It's Gonna Rain* or *Come Out* by chance. *Come Out* was a political choice of content, echoing the concerns of the civil rights movement. I never got over the desperation of a young black man who was wrongfully arrested for murder and, having been beaten in a Harlem police precinct, squeezed his bruised leg until blood came out so he would be taken out of his cell to be cleaned up. I came upon his cry for the first time when Steve played the tape loop for me in his studio. Conceptually, I begin with process, form, and structure. Here, I found myself listening to a work where the form was content-driven, where the account of the boy — "I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the blood come out to show them" — was turned into the sound of sheer anxiety. It floored me. *Come Out* violated any notion of music that I held.

It was with these early works that Steve became the key figure of my generation and for the generations that followed.



remarks by

steve
REICH

THANK YOU. What I'm cruising for here is the brevity award, so rest easy. It's truly an honor to be honored by those you respect and admire. The MacDowell Colony is devoted to making it possible for artists to get their work done. I'm proud to be acknowledged by such an organization. To receive this medal — given in the past to **Aaron Copland**, Willem de Kooning, and Jasper Johns, among so many other great artists — is indeed an honor. To be honored by old friends — like sculptor Richard Serra, composer David Lang, and the wonderful performance group So Percussion — is particularly satisfying. To all of you, I can only say once again, thank you very much.



"Every year Robin MacNeil says something that leaves a lump in my throat. Because he's always acknowledging how hard it is to make art and how hard it is to fit it in your real life and real job, and it's just nice that someone says that out loud."

— Ann Sanderson

"The idea of America is about freedom of expression. I think The MacDowell Colony shows and exhibits that freedom of expression. This is one place to see what's happening in the art world, internationally and in America."

— Gavin Sturges



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