


# "Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich," by Russell Hartenberger

Pwyll ap Siôn  
*University of Bangor, Wales*

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**Book Review: Hartenberger, Russell. *Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-1-107-15150-5.**

**Pwyll ap Siôn**

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“Each time I play the first...attack of [Steve Reich’s] *Drumming*, I feel I am beginning a gradual process that will lead me through time toward the essence of rhythm; a journey that leads me beneath the surface of the music to the joy of rhythmic beauty” (239). Thus ends Russell Hartenberger’s fascinating and illuminating account of a journey that attempts to uncover what from a performer’s perspective lies beneath Steve Reich’s music. Described as “America’s greatest living composer” (Kyle Gann) and one of “a handful of...composers who can legitimately claim to have altered the direction of musical history” (Andrew Clements), Reich developed a distinctive and influential musical style during the 1960s and 1970s based on repeating interlocking patterns and slowly-unfolding processes that soon became known as “minimalism.” Rhythm and pulse formed the cornerstone of Reich’s early aesthetic, and musicians enlisted to perform his music were often experienced percussionists. Even early compositions for keyboard, such as *Piano Phase* (1967) and *Phase Patterns* (1970), demanded rhythmic precision rather than pianistic ability, with Reich describing the latter piece as “drumming on...keyboards.”<sup>1</sup>

One of these percussionists was Russell Hartenberger, who joined Reich’s ensemble as a twenty-six-year-old in the spring of 1971, fresh from percussion studies at the Curtis Institute of Music and Wesleyan University. He has remained a key member, forming a working relationship with the composer that has lasted over forty years. Much of what is disclosed here is informed by Hartenberger’s firsthand experiences of rehearsing, performing, and recording Reich’s music.

*Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich* is, however, more than a personal account from an integral member of the composer’s ensemble. Hartenberger’s approach neatly balances biography with pedagogical and interpretative insights gained from years of teaching and coaching percussionists to play Reich’s music. And, in drawing on source materials housed at the Paul Sacher archive in Basel, Switzerland—including the composer’s many sketchbooks—Hartenberger’s account uncovers rich

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Reich, *Writings on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 50.



layers of hermeneutic meaning that come into play when considering the work of this important composer.

To be sure, *Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich* does not encompass Reich's output *in toto*. Hartenberger limits his study to the period starting with the composition of *Drumming* during 1971–72 and ending with *Music for 18 Musicians* in 1976. To many, this particularly fecund period represented the high watermark of Reich's so-called minimalist style, a period when the composer refined and developed several innovative techniques, including phasing, rhythmic construction, and (increasingly, by the time one gets to *Music for 18 Musicians*) textural richness and harmonic color.

Thus, Reich's works from this period appear to resist some of the basic principles that govern one's understanding of Classical and Romantic performance, such as expression, melodic and rhythmic phrasing, rubato, use of dynamics, and so on. Hartenberger implies as much in his preface to the book, where he states that "the kind of virtuosity...required of performers of minimalist music...differs from more traditional performing expertise" (xxii). His account often draws on aspects that distinguish the performance of minimalist music from other styles. Hartenberger's study raises questions such as: how does one articulate perceptual and metrical ambiguity in Reich's music? How does one grasp its "time feel"? Should one approach more traditional elements, such as dynamics, tempo, pacing and phrasing in the same way, or differently? How should we understand concepts such as time, beat, pulse, and feel in Reich's music? What about detailed issues relating to attack placement and hand-patterning? And then, what about more general matters concerning concentration, endurance, stamina, and comfort level?

Before addressing these questions in detail in Chapter 10 ("Performance practice in *Drumming*"), Hartenberger offers an overview of Reich's working methods during the early 1970s by focusing on three areas: the ensemble's rehearsals leading to the first complete performance of *Drumming* in 1971, the first tours of Europe in 1972, and Reich's compositional process as detailed in the sketchbooks that date from this time. *Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich* thus seeks to locate Reich's music through a gradual process of familiarization, internalization, and understanding.

Hartenberger starts off by relating his experiences of being taught West African drumming by Abraham Adzenyah at Wesleyan University. Adzenyah provoked several questions from the young percussionist, such as "What makes a rhythm interesting?" "What makes music rhythmically engaging to listen to and perform?" "How does one improve one's performance of rhythms?" "Indeed, what goes on in the performer's mind during performance?" Visiting Ghana after his studies with Adzenyah, Hartenberger was struck by the way in which the landscape and natural environment resonated with a pulsing soundscape of croaking frogs, chirping crickets, and polyrhythmic birdsong calls. As with Reich's own trip to Ghana a year or so previously, Hartenberger's visit confirmed his thoughts that he should "forego a career as an orchestral percussionist and broaden my study of percussion to include non-Western music" (7).

Upon returning home, Hartenberger enlisted with Reich's ensemble to try out sections of the composer's new work-in-progress, *Drumming*. In contrast to classical performance, "everything was taught by rote and none of the percussion players saw any notation" (11), resulting in a more "abstract" and "visceral" understanding of the short repeating patterns and rhythms that comprised Reich's music. This oral approach to learning served as a kind of musical embedding for Hartenberger and the other players. The music became part of each performer's "muscle memory" (11), giving each one "a heightened awareness of the process of the piece" (12).

Hartenberger's account emphasizes the "feeling of participation" and "sense of ownership" (15) amongst the players of the ensemble during this time, allied with the fact that—as *Drumming* gradually evolved into a large-scale work of impressive proportions—"We all felt we were a part of a historical musical event, and the fact that this was all happening 'under the radar' of the uptown New York City music world made it even more exciting" (17). The work's subsequent reception in Europe provoked "impassioned reactions" (22), with audiences "always attentive and enthusiastic in their response to the music" (23).

Of course, Reich's music did not exist in a vacuum, and Hartenberger rightly points out early on that it provided "a bridge between Western and non-Western rhythmic performance" (xxii). To draw connections between these two worlds, there follows a section on the influence of classical performance practice on members of the Reich ensemble who were taught by maestros of orchestral percussion playing, including William Street, Cloyd Duff, and, Reich's teacher, Roland Kohloff.

Chapter 3 turns to the compositional process behind *Drumming*. Here, Hartenberger traces the evolution of the rhythmic idea that forms the basis of the work by consulting Reich's sketchbooks, concluding that the pattern was "the result of a moment of realization combined with an extensive period of jotting down rhythmic patterns and analyzing them" (35). Each part became associated with a specific performer in the ensemble and composed with that person in mind.

Chapters 4–7 consider each one of *Drumming*'s four parts in some detail, including how to interpret and execute rhythms and how best to play pattern constructions and deconstructions in various sections. Helpful advice is provided to those intending to perform the work. A little later there follows some detailed information on instrument specifications, too, in relation to the overall timbral makeup of *Drumming* and how the articulation of rhythmic patterns and overall expression of the work are informed by the size and shape of instruments (bongos, glockenspiels) and materials (stick types). The importance of eye contact and communication on stage are also emphasized, including each performer's positioning. Indeed, a strong ritualistic element informs *Drumming*, as anyone who has attended a live performance would have surely witnessed.

Performance practice is understood here by Hartenberger to mean, “how to interpret the music correctly” and “how to play it right.” He states that: “After a performance of *Drumming*...I feel like my body has spent a great deal of energy...and I feel alert [but at] the end of *Music for 18 Musicians* I have a sense of euphoria” (89).

Chapter 8 provides some thoughts on acoustics and the homogeneity that using multiples of the same instruments brings to Reich’s sound. This homogeneity also aids the production of “difference tones” or “acoustical by-products”—harmonics and resonances that appear to “shimmer” above the contrapuntal surface of the music. Hartenberger correctly points out that these difference tones appear because of an “abundance of consonant intervals” (91). In Chapter 9 (“Anatomy of a phase”), Hartenberger discusses one of Reich’s most unique innovations, namely “phasing,” where two identical parts gradually move apart from one another through the very slight acceleration of one part against the other. As Hartenberger notes, this technique makes the experience of playing Reich’s music very different from other performance practices: “When I first began phasing in *Drumming*, I felt like I was entering a space-time continuum and was losing all sense of contact with the other players, the music, time, and my hands” (94). The chapter concludes by summarizing the results of an interesting case study conducted at McMaster University in which computer data was processed empirically through video observation of Hartenberger and, Reich stablemate, Bob Becker performing phasing shifts. The tests showed that in practice, the actual realization of phasing deviated from one’s theoretical conception of how it might occur. On the contrary, the process was informed by intuition and interplay between the two performers rather than any mechanical motion from one metrical position to the next. The human element therefore remains central to one’s understanding of performance practice in Reich’s music.

Chapter 10 (“Performance Practice in *Drumming*”) forms the cornerstone of Hartenberger’s study. Here he divides performance practice into several elements, including dynamics, tempo, pacing, attack placement, duration, hand-patterning, phrasing, concentration, endurance, time-feel, and comfort level. This allows him to emphasize connections with chamber music (“pacing”), the Japanese concept of *ma* (“attack placement”), developing and maintaining “time flow” (133–34), the need to be at once engaged and disengaged (“concentration”), aspects of *cool* in West-African and Afro-American cultures (135), shifting tension control (“endurance”), and the “magical sense of time” associated with the kind of time-feel heard in the drumming of jazz drummers such as Kenny Clarke (138). Hartenberger argues that the concept of “expressive timing” is also “fundamental” to performing Reich’s minimalist works (141) and relates this to his experiences of playing North Indian music.

In between the extensive exegesis on *Drumming* and detailed consideration of *Music for 18 Musicians*, Hartenberger dedicates a chapter each to *Clapping Music*, *Music for Pieces of Wood*, *Six Pianos*, and *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*. While his respective discussions of these works are not as detailed as those for *Drumming*

and *Music for 18 Musicians*, Hartenberger's observations continue to illuminate the subject area, including the important point that Reich's decision to forego phasing for rhythmic construction after *Drumming*, "stemmed from a very practical, musical consideration...[it] simply did not work very well musically in these latest compositions" (158). The background to the formation of *Six Pianos*—the first Reich composition in 4/4 time—also indicates that the composer had an even larger ensemble of pianos in mind for the work before finally settling on six.

Those already familiar with Reich's music may well be tempted to jump to the last work discussed in Hartenberger's study, *Music for 18 Musicians*—a transformative experience for many listeners and a landmark work in the history of twentieth century music. The gradual evolution of *Music for 18 Musicians* becomes clear in Hartenberger's narrative account, from early rehearsals, performances, and recordings to more recent accounts of the work (189–90). As with *Drumming*, Reich composed *Music for 18 Musicians* empirically and incrementally, gradually adding new sections through trial and error, but this time by combining notation with learning by rote.

Hartenberger draws on several reflections collected through interviews, email correspondence, and conversations with performers, suggesting that the work's success was partly the result of camaraderie developed between members of the ensemble. He emphasizes that "issues of energy, endurance and concentration affect all performers of Reich's music, not just [the] percussionists" (200) and looks at the physical and mental challenges involved in performing the work for singers, pianists, and string and woodwind players, in addition to percussionists.

Central to any successful performance of *Music for 18 Musicians* is an intuitive grasp and understanding of the space *between* the notes and rhythms. Breathing is also crucial in the way in which it "underlies the rhythmic situation of the piece and is a determining factor in the pacing of the work by the performers, especially in the opening and the closing pulsing sections" (220); but Hartenberger concludes that the most important component in the work is its "emotional reaction" (233), quoting violinist Audrey Wright: "the work [reminds] us that all experiences are truly cyclical rather than finite" (233).

All of which leads the reader full-circle to Hartenberger's comments at the end of the book about "rhythmic beauty." To many, the beauty of *Music for 18 Musicians* lies in its seductive sound world as much as in its pulsing rhythmic vitality. Clearly both aspects work in tandem. If there is a slight gap in Hartenberger's account, then it lies in its comparative neglect of the harmonic element. To be fair, harmony in *Music for 18 Musicians* has received plenty of attention, not least by Reich himself when discussing the work, and in later studies by Potter and Fink.<sup>2</sup> After all, rhythm and pulse provide the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Reich's 1976 interview with Michael Nyman in Pwyll ap Siôn (ed.), *Michael Nyman: Collected Writings* (London: Routledge, 2016), 326–333 (especially 329); Keith Potter, *Four*

cornerstone of performance practice in Reich's music. Hartenberger's study gets inside its rhythmic essence, and, in combining in-depth knowledge and understanding of Reich's music through years of working and performing with the composer with sketch study and analysis, Hartenberger has produced the most important account of Reich's work since the composer's own *Writings on Music* in 2002.<sup>3</sup>

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*Musical Minimalists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 231–247 (especially 233–36); and Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (California: California University Press: 2005), 50–55.

<sup>3</sup> Reich, *Writings*.