

# Steve Reich, Busy as Ever, Enters His Late Period

At 86, this eminent composer takes a surprising but still searching direction in his music, while recent projects look back on six decades of work.

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This year, Steve Reich has released two important albums and a conversations book. And his music has taken a turn with “Traveler’s Prayer,” which had its premiere at Carnegie on Tuesday. Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

Steve Reich — one of our greatest living composers, with a recognizably pulsing sound and a place in the pantheon of Minimalist pioneers — recently turned 86. It’s not the clean kind of age, usually in multiples of five, that you often see observed with a concert like Carnegie Hall’s celebration in his name on Tuesday night. But that’s the pandemic-disjointed world we live in.

Delays aside, though, this has been a particularly eventful year for Reich, who long ago moved from the proverbial downtown scene to the classical music establishment; from performing his works while scraping together money for his \$65 rent to having the ears of audiences worldwide. Yet he never abandoned the searching, experimental nature of his practice, especially in [“Traveler’s Prayer,”](#) which had its American premiere at the Carnegie concert.

“I’ve been saying,” Reich joked in an interview, “I’m 85 years old; what have *you* done this year?”

To start, there have been two major album releases: [premiere recordings](#) of “Runner” (2016) and its grander sequel [“Music for Ensemble and Orchestra”](#) (2018), pieces in [arch form](#) that play with varying note durations in a consistent tempo, both executed with verve by the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Susanna Mälkki; and [another](#), “Reich/Richter” (2019), which in this reading by Ensemble Intercontemporain is revealed to be an intricate, spellbinding score that thrives outside its original context as a companion to a video work by Gerhard Richter.

There has also been [“Conversations,”](#) a book of mostly pandemic-era interviews with friends and colleagues — Richard Serra, Stephen Sondheim, Julia Wolfe and more — covering the breadth of Reich’s six-decade career, in which each work seems to lead into the next, but with material from the past kept close by to repurpose from time to time. A chatty, warmhearted collection, the book is also littered with casual epiphanies, as when Brian Eno paraphrases the cybernetician Warren Sturgis McCulloch, saying:

If you stare at something for a very long time and don't move your eyes, you'll find you cease to be able to see it. The reason the frog stares fixedly at the landscape for a very long time is because everything that isn't moving becomes invisible — and anything that moves becomes intensely visible — and if something moves the frog eats it. The frog uses the fact of habituation to distinguish the parts of the environment that are live, that are moving.

I can't think of a better metaphor for Minimalism and Reich's early music.

The book has the feeling of a capstone, of a reunion episode for a long-running series whose cast members have come and gone throughout the years. Paired with "Traveler's Prayer," it even suggests that this composer has entered his late period.

"Traveler's Prayer" may take listeners accustomed to Reich's pulses by surprise. Onstage are vibraphones and a piano, but they do nothing to propel the music rhythmically; instead, the melodic line floats freely above suspended strings and rumbles from the deep end of the keyboard. Elemental and atmospheric, it is a work of remarkable economy and restraint that excerpts Genesis, Exodus and Psalms yet abstracts their text in canonic clouds — a 15-minute container for metaphysical thought.

Its sound world — particularly its treatment of voices as layered, vibrato-free vessels reminiscent of medieval and Renaissance music like that of Reich's hero [Pérotin](#) — recalls the opening of "[Proverb](#)," a strange yet underrated Reich work from 1996. Even that piece, though, gives way to a percussive pulse. But here, Reich said, there's "no tapping of the foot allowed."

"That was a surprise for me, too," he continued. "It's like, 'Hey Mom, what happened to the rhythm section?'"

Every new work, Reich said, is full of questions. The answers may repeat over time in the form of style, but "Traveler's Prayer" was a turning point, one that "completely broke my compositional habits and made me rethink what I had to do to succeed. When people ask what the form is, I just say, 'A.' It's like a hovercraft — very much an eyes closed, contemplative piece."

Reich likes to say that his musical inspirations are basically anything before 1750 and after Debussy, in the 20th century. In between are the Classical and Romantic periods; “Traveler’s Prayer,” however inadvertently, flirts with that territory in its treatment of the strings, as wisely beautiful and spare as anything in Beethoven’s late quartets.

The result is a mood befitting the world in which the piece premiered. Begun before the pandemic and finished during it, “Traveler’s Prayer” is, for now, inevitably heard in the shadow of crisis. “The virus shifted the gravity of the whole thing,” Reich said. “I was 84 when I started it, but now people who are 24 are even thinking this way,” confronting mortality in life and art.

Where in the past Reich has rendered politics and trauma in his signature voice — the looping of [“Come Out”](#) (1966) or the musical transcriptions of documentary material in [“Different Trains”](#) (1988) and [“WTC 9/11”](#) (2011) — here he has conjured a meditative space less specific and aestheticized, and more fundamentally, powerfully spiritual.

At the very least, “Traveler’s Prayer” contrasted sharply with the other two works on Tuesday’s program, which opened with [“Tehillim”](#) (1981): celebratory music for a celebratory occasion.

The first music of Reich’s to reflect his Jewishness, which has been a preoccupation of his career since then, “Tehillim” received an exuberant reading at Carnegie by the Colin Currie Group, with Currie at the podium, and Synergy Vocals, led by Micaela Haslam. (Both Currie and Haslam appear in “Conversations,” discussing this piece and others with passionate fervor.)

“Tehillim” and “Traveler’s Prayer” contrasted how Reich has approached sacred text over the past four decades. Both live or die on precision, not only of instrumental rhythm and articulation, but also of the purity of sound among the vocalists. But “Tehillim” is also more strictly constructed, more about style than the text itself.

Which is not a bad thing. “Tehillim” is nevertheless intensely moving over its 30 minutes, building from excitement to euphoria with essentially the same material over time, transformed through canons, unexpected harmonic turns and other

Baroque techniques that arrive at a radiant finale in D major — a reminder of how aware of tradition Reich has always been while forging a fresh sound.

And rarely was his inventiveness fresher than in [“Music for 18 Musicians”](#) (1976), which came after intermission on Tuesday, an always welcome revival of what may be Reich’s chief masterpiece among triumphs like “Different Trains,” [“Drumming”](#) (1971) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning [“Double Sextet”](#) (2008).

A total opposite of “Traveler’s Prayer,” “Music for 18” is nothing *but* pulse, heroically exact and sustained over its hourlong running time. Here, Currie joined his ensemble, setting the work’s rhythmic foundation with his mallets, which in both sound and appearance could lull an attentive audience member into the state of Eno’s staring frog. As layers of sound and texture are added in counterpoint, the piece, when played with the commitment and focus of Tuesday’s performance, ascends to the transportingly mystical.

At Carnegie, it was also a heartening glimpse of Reich’s legacy. At the time of the work’s premiere, Reich and his own ensemble were more or less the only artists able to perform his pieces. [“The Desert Music,”](#) from 1984, was a foray into orchestral writing that was so disastrous, he didn’t return to the genre until “Music for Ensemble and Orchestra.” Now, though, his style is widely playable — and played.

The first time Reich saw his music taken up by Currie and his group, he had two thoughts, he said: “This guy’s fantastic, and I want to kill this guy. He’s just totally outmoded my ensemble. That’s very gratifying, to live long enough for that handover.”

That’s what Reich wants. His favorite direction to the conductor Michael Tilson Thomas has always been “Pretend I’m dead”; and he’s delighted that what seemed exotic in his style even 20 years ago is now met with comments like, “Is that all?”

I don’t see that changing any time soon. Reich’s sound is by now central to the history of American classical music — and modern art more generally. Some works may go in and out of fashion. (Pity “WTC 9/11.”) But others are entrenched in the repertoire or are ripe for revisiting, like “Proverb” and the stage works, particularly [“The Cave”](#) (1993).

Once a darling of gallery performance, Reich is now firmly a fixture in concert halls. In the interview, he said that the New York Philharmonic was looking to premiere his next work, "Jacob's Ladder," in fall 2023. Still, Reich, who has published little about his music over the years but who in conversation betrays a close reading of reviews and public reception, is cautious about the future.

"So far so good," he said. "If musicians want to do it, it will get done. If they don't — well, it will take an awful lot. I joke that I've got a new business on the side. I make flags. They're white flags, they have black writing, and they say, 'I don't know.'"