STEVE REICH'S STYLE AND COMPONISTIC CONCEPTS REFLECTED IN TEHILLIM SCORE

ALEXANDRA BELIBOU[1]

SUMMARY. The present article traces the way compositional conceptions and writing style are highlighted in the creation of Tehillim belonging to one of the most prolific contemporary composers – Steve Reich. The research starts from the composer's ideas about what the compositional journey means, continues with a musical analysis that emphasizes the ways of development of the musical data, and ends with the observation of how the principles of composing are objectified in realities and musical choices. I chose this score because it differs from the previous ones with original elements, with musical parameters that Reich did not use in his career, so it is very interesting to find the composer's specific compositional archetypes in this specific work.

Keywords: componistic concepts, style, Steve Reich, vocal music, 21st century music, Tehillim.

Steve Reich's Style and Compositional Concepts

Composer Steve Reich (1936-), called *"the America's greatest living composer"* by the American cultural newspaper The Village Voice*,* stood out as a musical innovator during the 60s, through his compositional technique called phasing. This procedure involves the superimposition of two identical musical/rhythmic materials, which go out of sync - due to tempo differences - at

---

[1] *Lect. PhD, Transilvania University of Brașov, Faculty of Music, xela_lrig@yahoo.ca, alexandra_belibou@unitbv.ro*

a certain moment and cause a rhythmic canon. Based on this type of writing, Reich made himself known through works such as: It's Gonna Rain (1965), Come Out (1966), Piano Phase (1967), Clapping Music (1972)[2].

Phasing implies a tendency to economy of rhythmic-musical material, so Steve Reich is appreciated as one of the pioneers of the minimalist genre in music, along with Philip Glass, La Monte Young and Terry Riley[3].

Steve Reich's work is divided into two distinct stylistic stages, as the composer himself claims. If until the end of the 70s, his music did not deviate from the previously mentioned original technique, after 1979 Reich recommends the ripening of his minimalist language. This maturation/ripening implies the recovery of timbral values - by expanding his scores in terms of the ensemble involved (if in the case of scores from the 60s we are talking about the overlapping of identical discourses on a single musical instrument, after the 80s we observe various vocal-instrumental ensembles), enhancing the melodic-harmonic possibilities – through compositions in which the melody and harmony are extended, without excluding the basic principle – the repetition of cells and motifs, and also their dephasing.

In 1968, Steve Reich codified his compositional aesthetic in the most important essay he wrote in his career – Music as a Gradual Process. The composer clarifies all the trends that have developed in his music since 1965, also setting a direction for the future. We note that there are four primary ideas by which the creator guided his compositional career:

- First, Reich is concerned with clarity of structure, which leads to the need to make compositions in which structure (or process) and musical content are identical. This approach ensures the lack of obscurity in musical expression[4].
- Secondly, the musical processes set in motion take on a life of their own; their impersonal and objective progress is not dependent on the intervention of the creator.
- Thirdly, improvisation does not have to be involved in a musical process; on the contrary, the composer submits his own desires to the inexorable force of the processing.

---

[2] Russell Hartenberger, *Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. xxvi.

[3] Keith Potter, *Four musical minimalists*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. xiii.

[4] Steve Reich, *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 34.

- Finally, Reich admits that no matter how objective the process is, unpredictable events are not excluded; these are embodied by the resulting textural patterns[5].

Beginning with the work Drumming (1970), continuing with Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ (1973) and Music for 18 Musicians (1974), a great deal of non-Western influences can be noted in Reich's music, with exotic elements being incorporated into an original use of traditional musical materials, and the personal style of the composer showing a process of growing up. From a rhythmic point of view, one can mention the use of a constant, unchanging impulse throughout a work, as in the case of the previous compositions. The new idea in the scores after 1970 is the preference for polyrhythmic structures, made up of several patterns, resulting from variation. From a harmonic perspective, the non-modulating chord constructions, imposed by the involvement of heterogeneous groups of musicians, stand out[6].

1. Tehillim (1981)

Written for four female voices (high soprano, 2 lyric sopranos and alto), woodwinds, percussion, two electric organs and string ensemble, Tehillim (1981) on psalm texts stands out because of the rare melodic writing used by the composer. The score differs from the others by the melodic conception put at the service of the word and by the chosen religious subject. The title, which translates as the Book of Psalms in Hebrew, along with the preference for certain biblical psalms, demonstrates a desire to testify to the composer's belonging to Jewish traditions. *"In contrast to most previous compositions, Tehillim is not composed of short, repeated cells. Even if a melodic structure is repeated as the subject of a canon, or in a variational manner, the creative technique is close to what we encounter in the history of universal music."* [7]

For the first time in Reich's career, he chose to compose music subject to text, in the traditional sense, as opposed to previous speech-based pieces, in which certain verbal phrases were transformed into processed material.

---

[5] Steve Reich, op. cit, p. 37.
[6] Robert Schwarz, *Steve Reich: Music as a Gradual Process.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 235.
[7] Steve Reich, *Tehillim score,* Boosey & Hawkes, 1984, introduction.

It is not only the melodic parameter that makes Tehillim different from the rest of Steve Reich's repertoire, but also the harmonic writing presents a vast expansion, although Tehillim was originally conceived as a melodic work with a harmonic skeleton. The entire harmonic texture is based on a repetitive chord cycle - of a modal nature, in which the vertical structures are varied mainly by permutations of the constituent elements.

The alternative metric in Tehillim signals a new compositional approach, as the composer stood out as a faithful conservative of the unit meter, based on equal pulsations. Metro-rhythmic writing can be reduced to patterns formed by binary and ternary groupings, the result being a heterogeneous one, all of this because of the authority of Hebrew declamations and the accents in speech. Contrast is another element of novelty to Reich's repertoire, which stands out in the timbral choices, and the tempo is also manipulated with the sense of contrast.

1.1. First part

Structured in four sections, the work Tehillim begins with a musical representation of Psalm 19. The first part is written in a predominantly vocal manner, the vocal line that starts the score is an allusion to Jewish music, accompanied by clapping and tambourine. The first solo voice will gradually be followed by three other voices and solo instruments of the orchestral ensemble.

We note that the first part of the Tehillim is based exclusively on the canon technique, a fact that ensures compliance with the old compositional principles, to remove any tendency of obscurity for the listener.

The vocal monody is initially accompanied by a rhythmic oration, provided by clapping and tambourine. The vocal line is syllabic and based on equal note values, by augmenting which the stressed syllables in speech are suggested. The sinuous melodic profile is based on a great intervallic flexibility. As the composer says, the tambourine without bells refers to the top instrument, which appears in records in the Old Testament, and the hand claps have the same purpose to suggest a rhythmic atmosphere like that of biblical times[8].

What we notice after the first vocal solo exposition is the open inner cadence, introduced by sub-tone - cell that provides an impression of incompleteness. We also note the rich use of perfect fifth and fourth intervals in the melodic design, resulting in an exposition with a sinuous profile based on repeated interval cells.

---

[8] Ibidem.

E.g. 1

Debut vocal line

After the vocal solo exposition, the composer proposes resuming the writing, with the addition of the clarinet in melodic dubbing over the vocal monody. Also rhythmically, Reich includes a canon for two rows of claps and tambourines (isorhythm for claps 1 and tambourine 1, claps 2 and tambourine 2). A two-voice unison canon follows, with the addition of a second clarinet to double the imitation's answering melody. After all, four verses have been recited in the canon, the imitation for two voices resumes, this time with the involvement of stringed instruments, which have the role of punctuating vertical structures, providing a harmonic accentuation. According to the composer, the instrumental coloratura creates a varied setting, which gives the repeated melody new perspectives.

The score develops with a canon for four voices, on the same subject, with instrumental dubbing inserted by the two electric organs. For a developed rhythmic tableau, the composer includes the maracas instrument, which not only has an aesthetic function, but precisely supports the rhythmic approach. After five integral repetitions of the canon for four voices, over which the stringed instruments declare their harmonic cycle with permutations of chord elements, the harmonic ambiguity gives the vocal

melody new coloristic appearances. The end of the sonorous vortex of the canon for four voices brings a reduced texture, reminiscent of the first pages of the work, with rhythmically-harmonically accompanied monody. We also observe a new type of vocal processing, with a homophonic exposure to two voices, the second voice providing a melody in parallel to the first, at intervals of thirds and sixths.

E.g. 2

Variant of canon for four voices, with alteration of thematic start

Thus, we conclude that the first part can be seen as a symmetrical structure, progressing through timbral additions and with repetition being the only means of development, so that in the end it returns to the initial simplicity.

The melodic exposition underlying the construction of the first part has a strong modal character, but this also includes a freedom of theoretical interpretation, a deliberate ambiguity. Thus, the composer gives the instrumental chord cycle the role of fixing certain parameters, the melodic-vocal modal ambivalence proving auspicious in this sense (we can interpret the monody as being written in a Dorian mode on G, or a Phrygian one on la, or their plagal variants – Hypodorian on D, Hypophrygian on Mi)[9].

---

[9] Payman Akhlaghi, *A Brief Discussion of Steve Reich's Tehillim*, Los Angeles: University of California, 2012, p.14.

E.g. 3

Cyclic chord entities in stringed instruments

1.2. Second Part

Part II of Tehillim, performed without a break after the first part, presents a balanced variational writing. According to the indications noted by the composer in the score, a symmetrical architecture subject to the variational principle is deduced, the initial theme being worked through all the possible ways of restructuring. Steve Reich notes the following structure cues:

Sections indicating variation (noted in capital letters) and sub-sections delimited by psalm verses (noted in Roman numerals)

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
AI, II, III	BI, II, III, IIIa	CI, II, III, IIIa	DI, II, III, IIIa	EI, II, III, IIIa	FI, II, III, IIIa	GI, II, III, IIIa	HI, II, III, IIIa

Section A proposes a writing reminiscent of the first part, the initial exposition that will constitute the material for the variation being a vocal duet, in parallel sixths, with instrumental dubbing of oboe and English horn, on an isorhythmic support provided by clapping and tambourine. We observe sinuous melodic profile, large intervallic jumps, syllabic conduct, speech accents imposing uneven rhythmicity, alternative metric, and heterogeneous composite metric.

Section B establishes the variational procedure by adding the harmonic accompaniment by the stringed instruments, plus another rhythmic line located in the canon with respect to the first, for hand claps and tambourine 2. The composer appeals, again, to the cycle of vertical entities – chords. Each chord occurrence is, again, accented and sustained in a harmonic pedal throughout a grouping of verses.

Segment C consists of an instrumental discourse, with the wind instruments performing in unison the melody of the second voice in the initial exposition, over the rhythmic-harmonic accompaniment we discussed in section B.

Starting with segment D, the composer proposes other types of variational processing of the initial material, manners that include rhythmic distortion. The two vocal lines sing the original melody in rhythmic augmentation, with the dubbing of the wind instruments, alongside the rhythmic canon and the four chord pedals. We see that the steps of variational progression are natural, and the minimalist compositional approach includes a symmetry worth mentioning.

The vocal singing is interrupted by a new instrumental interlude, marked F, but this time, the segment we are discussing is exclusively rhythmic chord. There are no leading melodic lines, but the square structure (FI, II, III, IIIa) is deduced from the harmonic changes. Rhythmically, in addition to the canon provided by the two rows of claps and two tambourines, the rhythmic figuration of the maracas instrument is included. Over this type of writing, the composer superimposes, in the E section, the initial vocal duet, with the dubbing of wind instruments, in a melismatic variation. If until now we have witnessed the exclusively syllabic attitude, through which Reich protected the understanding of the text, this time we observe an ample melismatic development for two voices, following the initial melodic outline.

The last variational proposal, presented in section H, in the form of four melodic phrases, involves the same sound material as in the case of the previous segment, with the layering of an upper vocal melodic line, at the interval of a perfect fifth, with a clarinet overdub.

We conclude that during the second part of the Tehillim composition, Steve Reich used the variational technique in various aspects: in the form of timbral additions to the initial exposure, by timbral substitution (in the case of instrumental interludes), by omitting leading melodies, by dilating the initial sound space (through the method of rhythmic augmentation and that of replacing the syllabic speech with a melismatic one). We observe, from the examples inserted below, how the vocal duet is subject to variation:

E.g. 4

Initial duet, AI section

E.g. 5

Rhythmic augmentation, DI section
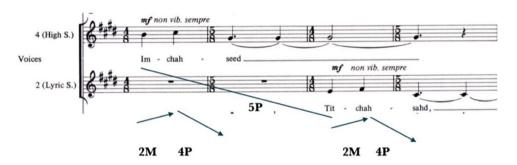
E.g. 6

Melismatic writing, section GI

1.3. Third Part

The third part of Tehillim, built based on the variational principle, is constituted as a slow movement, in which the text of psalm 18 is faithfully outlined by the proposed melodic lines. This predominantly lyrical section offers a pause from the fast pace and animated feeling of the previous parts.
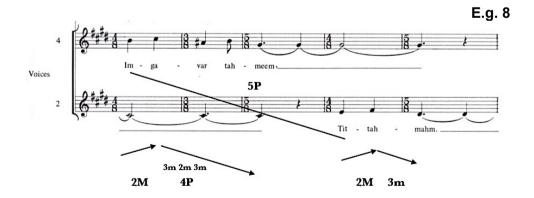
The tempo slows down and the orchestration changes by replacing the previous percussion instruments with vibraphone and marimba for an impressive atmosphere.

The third part opens in Dorian mode on the sound of C #, but there is an addition of the G chromaticism in the main vocal line; the instruments repeat the basic sound of the mode - C # and its perfect fifth - G # in their rhythmic structure. The melodic subject arranged in a duet, which will constitute the material for the variational processing, has a structure of four phrases, built on a motif of three sounds (which has flexibility depending on the number of syllables – the wording being syllabic).
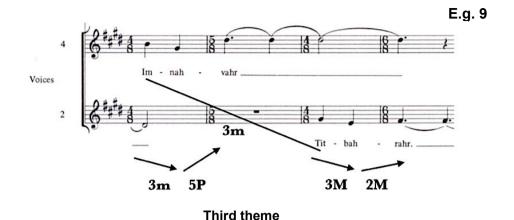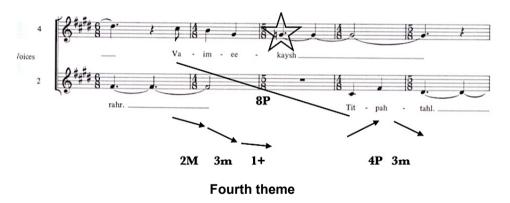
E.g. 7

First theme

E.g. 8

Second theme – as derived from the first one

E.g. 9

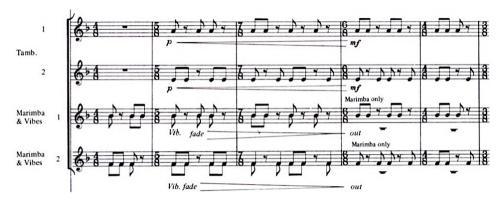**Third theme**

E.g. 10

Fourth theme

The musical examples inserted above, with the interval indications, argue the opinion that the entire melodic journey is derived from a motif of three sounds, in which the gradual line and the leap coexist. Each new phrase proposes this melodic motif in a different way, either with interval substitutions, or with the lower voice responding at a different interval than the original one.

There is a permanent sense of weaving the vocal-instrumental fabric, an idea reminiscent of the second part of the work, but this time the methods used in the variation are worthy of a slow movement; we do not observe dynamism, as in the previous section, but fullness of sound over wide spaces. Expanding the principle of dialogue on several levels gives a sense of temporal dilation, unlike the original subject of the variation, which included imitation at the level of a vocal duet.

The third part is linked to movement number four, through a technique also found in Drumming, a work signed by Steve Reich. It is about timbral modulation, which aims, in the present case, to remove the percussion instruments with a defined tone, from the rhythmic discourse, and replace them with the tambourines. The short instrumental link allows the participation of stringed instruments in addition to percussion[10].

E.g. 11

Timbral modulation of percussion instruments as a transition link to Part IV
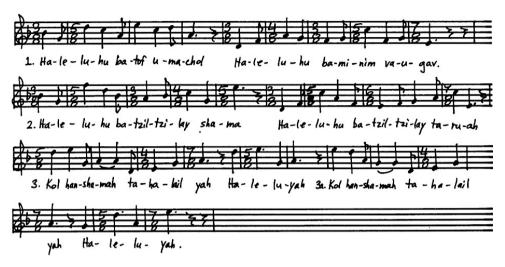
1.4. Fourth Part

The last part of Tehillim combines the construction techniques of the previous segments, canon, and variation; we also note a takeover of melodic materials, the reappearance of the chord cycle, in addition to the resumption of distinct textural types found in the previous pages. So, this movement is intended as a broad recapitulation, with a return to the original tempo, the original modal sound system (flexible to interpretations) and the processing of the early melodic material.

With a homophonic debut in duet, reminiscent of both the beginning of the first part and the opening of the second, the last movement takes up the melodic approach of the first section, reconstructing it.

We note that each verse of this part may be considered a freely varied exposition of the corresponding verse of the first part. Even the cycle of chords in the concluding part is based on the chord progression of the first part, the vertical entities being a version of the original harmonic sequences.

---

[10] Robert Schwarz, op. cit, p. 275.

E.g. 12

Voice line in the beginning of Part IV

With few exceptions, we observe the preservation of the melodic outline, the preponderance of the sounds re, mi, sol, la, the alternative metric that aims to respect the accents in speech, the uneven rhythm that highlights the accented syllables and the common scope of the two melodic subjects, which become material to be processed for parts I and IV.

A sense of time dilation is provided by glimpses of the original music from Part IV, in a sound fragment treated in homophonic vocal duet, over an airy instrumental accompaniment, with melodic dubbing of voices on woodwinds and writing rhythmic, progressively introduced into the musical texture, with maracas and tambourines. The composer again resorts to the process of rhythmic augmentation as a means of variation, preserving the melodic outline and intervallic composition of the initial vocal lines.

Tehillim concludes with an ample Coda, signaled by an unprecedented timbral expansion and melodic-harmonic treatment, in repetition, of the word Halleluyah. Flute, chromatic cymbals, and vibraphone are introduced in the collective score of the closing of the last part, in addition to all the instruments used in the pages discussed above. Structurally, the Coda demonstrates variation techniques used throughout the work. The generative vocal motif - Halleluyah, initially played in pairs of voices, soon expands through the process of rhythmic augmentation, to later expand even more, through a melismatic

approach. The instrumental techniques used in the previous parts of the Tehillim composition are brought together in the Coda.

Towards the end, the voices leave their responsorial speech, in favor of a homophonic writing in three and four voices. There is a final explosion – provided by the dense vocal texture, the overdubbing of the wind instruments, the percussive rhythmic motifs, the harmonic cycle of the strings, the penetrating sound of the chromatic cymbals.

We observe how the Halleluyah motif metamorphoses, during the Coda segment:

E.g. 13

**Processing by melismatic approach in the exposition
of the Halleluyah motif in the Coda segment**

E.g. 14

The last appearance of the Hallelujah motif in the Coda segment

Conclusions

I noticed, during the musical analysis undertaken, that Steve Reich's minimalist language used in the Tehillim score is based on canon and variation procedures, a fact that ensures a structural unity of the composition, as well as an economy of sound material. The imitation in the canon and the varied repetition of the melodic subjects give the psalm pages a naturalness, which the creator explains by the idea that *"there was no rigid system, there was no theory"*[11] that dictated the notes on the staff, but the text is the one that generated the musical data.

---

[11] Ivan Moody, *Contemporary Music and Religion,* Harwood Academic, 1995, p. 68.

We can claim that the structure of Tehillim is a clear and orderly one, where the sound content is molded on the structural clarity. Thus, one of the principles by which Reich guides his compositional work is respected and reflected. We also observe how the proposed musical processes (set in motion by variation and canon) gain life and meanings effortlessly, by their simple becoming natural - so that the composer's conceptions are faithfully reproduced in this score.

The composer cautions that his musical pages should not be considered narrative, *"although he reluctantly accepts the story-telling potential of their subject matter"* [12].Thus, although the composition process was an objective one, the subjectivity attached to the spiritual text can cause unplanned effects, as expected by the composer.

REFERENCES

Akhlaghi, Payman. *A Brief Discussion of Steve Reich's Tehillim*, Los Angeles: University of California, 2012.
Hartenberger, Russell. *Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
Moody, Ivan. *Contemporary Music and Religion,* Harwood Academic, 1995.
Potter, Keith. *Four musical minimalists*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Pymm, John. *Narrative Trails in the Speech-Based Music of Steve Reich*, Southampton: University of Southampton, 2013.
Reich, Steve. *Tehillim score,* Boosey & Hawkes, 1984.
Reich, Steve. *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
Schwarz, Robert. *Steve Reich: Music as a Gradual Process.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

---

[12] John Pymm, *Narrative Trails in the Speech-Based Music of Steve Reich*, Southampton: University of Southampton, 2013, p. 15.