



Texture-Space-Survival

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TEXTURE—SPACE—SURVIVAL

STEVE REICH

I will speak on these topics from a personal viewpoint as I have dealt with them myself.

WHEN I WAS asked to give this talk I was told that the three topics under consideration would be, Texture, Space, and Survival. When I accepted I explained that I would treat these given topics from a personal viewpoint as I have encountered them in my own life and that is what I have done.

TEXTURE

CONTRAPUNTAL /HOMOPHONIC

Under the word “texture” in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* one finds the following: “. . . the texture of a work that is perceived as consisting of the combination of several melodic lines is said to be contrapuntal or polyphonic. A work consisting primarily of a succession of chords sounded as such is said to have a chordal or homophonic texture.” Given this traditional distinction there is no question that by far the greater part of my own music is contrapuntal in texture. The period in Western musical history where I find the most useful information is that from 1200 to 1750—the contrapuntal period. Musics outside the West that I have learned a great deal from are West African and Balinese, both of which are contrapuntal in nature. And yes, their counterpoint was developed quite independently from ours and the myth that counterpoint was invented exclusively by Europeans is just that, a myth.

The technique I first discovered in 1965 while working with tape loops I called ‘phasing.’ It was later, in 1967, applied to live performance. In fact, ‘phasing’ is a process for composing canons at the unison where the subject is short and the rhythmic interval between the subject and its answers is variable.

Canon, as you know, is a technique beginning in the thirteenth century, and instances of it can be found from the Middle Ages to the present. Though the technique is fixed it says nothing about sound. Canons can be found from “Sumer is icumen in,” to the *Musical Offering* to the Bartók

Mikrokosmos and Webern's Symphony Op. 21. While the procedure is basically the same, the sounds are extremely different.

My work is based on canon. I used infinite canon as an example of what I was talking about in my 1968 essay, "Music as a Gradual Process". My first tape pieces back in 1965 and '66, *Its Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, use one tape loop gradually going out of phase with itself in two or more voices. Canons are thus produced with gradually changing rhythmic distances. In the first piece of live music to use this technique, *Piano Phase* in 1967, two pianists begin playing the same short repeating pattern in unison and while one player stays fixed in terms of tempo, the second gradually accelerates until he or she is one sixteenth note ahead. The second player then holds, and then continues to move ahead until they are back in unison with the first player. Thus each 'phase position' is just a short unison canon with a slightly different rhythmic interval. Though I stopped working with the phasing technique in 1971 after *Drumming*, I found other ways to gradually build up canons at the unison between two or more identical repeating patterns. The most productive of these is to gradually substitute notes for rests—sound for silence—until a canon is constructed. People became aware of my canonic structure much later with *Tehillim* because the subjects were longer and more traditionally melodic. Basically I was working as I always had, and what is new in my work in *Tehillim* is its specifically homophonic sections. The same can be said of *The Desert Music*. The homophonic aspects of these pieces result completely from the fact that they each set a text—in *Tehillim* parts of the Psalms in the original Hebrew and in *The Desert Music* parts of poems by the American poet and physician Dr. William Carlos Williams. In works which followed these pieces in 1985 through the present I have returned to basically contrapuntal texture.

Starting in 1982 I began my "Counterpoint" series of pieces with *Vermont Counterpoint* for flute, alto flute, piccolo, and pre-recorded tape or eleven flutes, alto flutes, and piccolos. The piece was written for the flutist Ransom Wilson in response to his original request for a flute concerto—which I was not interested in writing since its conception of soloist with accompaniment was not something I have any attraction for. *Vermont Counterpoint* actually refers back to early works like *Violin Phase* where a violinist plays against pre-recorded tracks of him- or herself. The overall texture is made up entirely of multiples of the same timbre, which texture highlights the overall contrapuntal web with its many resulting patterns which the listener can hear. That is to say that my early works like *Violin Phase* and *Piano Phase* were written for multiples of identical instruments because if, for instance, in *Piano Phase* I play piano and you play harpsichord or synthesizer we will hear the separate timbres moving out of phase without the complete blending between the two to produce a contrapuntal web in the way we would if we use two pianos or two harpsichords or two synthesizers. Thus, multiples of identical instruments

with the same timbre were acoustically necessary in my early pieces to create the overall contrapuntal web and particularly the ambiguity as to where the downbeat is, since two or more equal downbeats are always sounding with the same timbre throughout. Now in the eighties the same principles apply with the addition of more developed melodic patterns and changes of harmony, as in a piece like *New York Counterpoint* for multiple clarinets and bass clarinets, composed for clarinetist Richard Stoltzman. Presently, I am working on *Electric Counterpoint* for multiple electric guitars and electric basses to be played live against tape by the guitarist Pat Metheny. So as you can see my interest in contrapuntal texture and particularly canonic texture is very much alive.

TEXTURE CAN ALSO REFER TO 'HEAVY' OR 'LIGHT' TEXTURES

The Harvard Dictionary of Music (1969 edition) describes Sibelius's symphonies as 'heavy' and Stravinsky's *Histoire* as 'light.' Following this line of thought you might describe John Adams's *Harmonielehre* as 'heavy' and my *Sextet* as 'light.'

This line of thought obviously suggests how different composers deal with the orchestra. First, according to size. As you know most major orchestras employ about eighteen or more first violins. This gargantuan string section may be appropriate for Sibelius, Mahler, and Bruckner but I have found that it is much too overblown for me. By trial and error I have come to the conclusion that when I write for the orchestra I need no more than twelve first violins and an overall string force of about forty-eight players—or about the size of a full classical as opposed to romantic orchestra. In addition I make chamber versions of all my orchestral works for two reasons. One is that these arrangements sound good, and one could argue as to whether they are better than the full orchestral originals. Another is that chamber orchestras, particularly European groups like the Ensemble Intercontemporain in France, the Schönberg Ensemble in Holland, the Group 180 in Budapest, the London Sinfonietta in England, and the Ensemble Modern in Germany are interested in playing my music and need these versions in order to play my orchestral pieces. I believe it is extremely important for a composer to discover the size of his or her own orchestra so that the texture—in this sense of 'heavy' and 'light'—is achieved.

The desire for a transparent texture has also forced me to re-seat members of the orchestra or chamber orchestra in order to achieve it. Specifically I have put the mallet players, with marimbas and vibraphones, who often play continuously in my orchestral pieces, directly in front of the conductor. This is done not merely to enact the 'percussionist's revenge' (though this may be of merit), but because if they are in their customary place, forty

to sixty feet from the conductor, and are playing continuously in a brisk tempo, then, as a result of the acoustical delay in sound travelling, the rest of the orchestra will see one beat from the conductor and hear another from the mallet instruments. By putting them directly in front of the conductor there is one unified tempo seen and heard by all the orchestra. I have also found it necessary in pieces like *The Desert Music* to re-seat the strings if they are playing *divisi* in two or three parts with each part playing repeating patterns in different rhythmic positions. This is because orchestral string players like to follow the leader in front of them, and if he or she is playing in a conflicting rhythm you can count on string confusion. By seating the strings in two or three separate smaller groups—as in the Bartók *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*—each string group can follow its own section leader and contribute its own individual contrapuntal voice. I would encourage all composers to re-think the orchestra with their individual musical needs in mind so as to create their own orchestra in terms of forces and placement to best realize their musical ideas.

SPACE

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

When I was asked to give this talk and was told the three topics under discussion I found that I remembered “texture” and “survival” and could not remember the third. Upon calling back to refresh my memory I was reminded that the other topic was “space.” I looked in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* once again, both in the 1969 and 1986 editions, and found that the word “space” was not to be found in either. I called back again for clarification and was told there were three kinds of musical space under discussion: (1) physical space as found in Gabrieli or Henry Brant, (2) ritual space as pertaining to non-Western music, for example, and (3) electronic space as in moving sound around a hall via multiple speakers.

PHYSICAL SPACE

I remember enjoying Gabrieli performed in St. Mark’s Cathedral in Venice in 1957 as the opening of a concert there of the premiere of Stravinsky’s *Canticum Sacrum*. The antiphonal brass choirs were something the composer obviously had in mind for that particular church. But is Gabrieli a flop in mono recordings? I think not. As for Henry Brant, I cannot say, as I

don't know any of his music. Certainly one could say that my talk about orchestral seating is, if you like, 'about space.' It certainly is important in my music that musicians sit close together so they can hear each other well. Just the opposite from say, John Cage, where spatial separation is often desired and rhythmic coordination is not. In this sense "space" is a practical factor in performance, but it seems peripheral to composition.

RITUAL SPACE

Ritual space calls to mind my trip to Ghana in 1970. While there I studied with members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. What was the nature of this ensemble? It was made up of musicians from at least five different tribes who originally lived far away from the capital city Accra, where the Ghana Dance Ensemble was located. Prior to 1967 these musicians had lived in their own villages and had been employed as musicians by the local chief. In 1967 Nkruma came to power and established a government in Accra for the entire country; a modern state was born. But with this modern Western-style statehood the local village tribal chiefs remained only as figureheads. They had no money or power. This meant that local musicians could remain musicians but not professional ones. Instead of being employed by the chief they had to find a 'day job' in the chocolate factories or elsewhere to support themselves and their families. For those fortunate to be outstanding players and, yes, to have the right political connections in Accra, they could become professionals once again—but this time in an ensemble that toured Europe and the Orient with versions of music and dance where the duration of a piece might be condensed from three days to twenty minutes, and the musical space changed from a village to a proscenium stage. So, can one conclude that changing the space changed the music? No, one is dealing with a complete shift in social organization and economics as the real cause here. *That* caused the shift to the stage, which in turn brought about shortened versions of pieces. Space here seems incidental to more profound cultural changes.

ELECTRONIC SPACE

The third sense of "space," electronic space, is one we are all familiar with, at least if you are old enough to have experienced the shift from mono to stereo. Since we do have two ears and have the G—d-given ability to locate sounds with them, using two loudspeakers instead of one made electronic musical reproduction closer to our normal everyday acoustical hearing. Then, in electronic music in the fifties with Varèse and on through

the sixties to the present, the movement of sound around a hall via multiple loudspeakers has become a possibility for composers. It is a possibility I have not pursued because for me the main questions in composition are rhythm, pitch, and timbre in that order. My use of electronics has been primarily amplification to create balances that would not be possible without amplification. Thus a woman's voice without vibrato and with a great deal of rhythmic clarity and detail can be heard over an ensemble as large as an orchestra with the help of amplification. The placement of loudspeakers is indeed crucial for the audience to hear well, but for me that placement is only an expedient to realize a composition, it is not a compositional material or technique.

SUMMING UP

Physical space, while undoubtedly enhancing or detracting from a performance because of acoustics, seems peripheral to musical composition. A piece of music limited to a particular space is just that, limited. It would seem more worthwhile to try and write pieces that will work well in almost any space.

Ritual space seems to be the result of religious, social, and economic organization. Change the religion, social organization, or the economics, and the ritual space will change with it along with many other things. It is incidental to these basic forms of life.

Electronic space created by multiple loudspeakers or associated equipment is an important acoustical fact about performance with electronics, but it does not seem to me to be a worthwhile technique or material to compose music with.

SURVIVAL

MY OWN CASE HISTORY

As a child I took piano lessons. At the age of fourteen I heard for the first time the *Brandenburg Concertos*, *The Rite of Spring*, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Kenny Clarke and I decided to study snare drum and drum set with Roland Kohloff. At Cornell University from 1953 to 1957 I primarily studied the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and also studied music with Professor William Austin. After graduating from Cornell University in 1957 I returned to New York City and began studying composition privately with Hall Overton, a composer and jazz musician. In 1958 I entered

the Juilliard School as a composition student. While there I studied with William Bergsma and Vincent Persichetti. In 1961 I went to the San Francisco Bay area and began studying at Mills College with Darius Milhaud and Luciano Berio. In 1963 I received my M.A. from Mills and ended my formal Western education. At precisely this point the question arose as to how to survive.

I felt very clearly that I did not want to continue in an academic environment. In my few teaching experiences as a graduate assistant at Mills and as a theory and composition teacher at a community music school in San Francisco I found that the very energy I needed as a composer was being expended on my students instead. I felt that to be a good teacher one had to expend that energy, that there was only so much of it, and that for me I simply could not teach and still give the necessary energy to my own composition. It also seemed clear to me that teaching was a talent quite different from composing and that my best teachers, Hall Overton and Vincent Persichetti, were not necessarily the best composers. What I learned from more outstanding composers like Berio, for example, was not about who I was as a composer but about who he was. At the time that was of interest, but it is not, I believe, what is basic for good musical education. What is basic is a teacher who can give you the musical information you need given your own particular situation at a given time. This kind of teacher in a sense disappears into various alter egos of the various students he or she teaches. This kind of teacher may be a great teacher just because he or she lacks the single-minded focus on a particular way of writing music a stronger composer may have. In any event, I felt I could not pursue an academic career.

What then? I took a job with the Yellow Cab company in San Francisco in 1963. I found that this kind of job left my mind completely free to concentrate on composition and actually paid more money than a college instructor in theory and composition would make. While in San Francisco I composed at home and presented my music, including a tape piece composed of fragments recorded in the taxi I drove, at both the San Francisco Tape Music Center and the San Francisco Mime Troupe Theater. My job as a cab driver ended late in 1964 and I moved to the U.S. Post Office which proved to be somewhat less interesting though about the same in terms of income and certainly did not interfere with my composing. In 1965 I left the Bay Area and returned to New York City.

In 1966 in New York I began rehearsing my musical ideas with two friends, Art Murphy, a composer and pianist from Juilliard, and Jon Gibson, a woodwind player from San Francisco who had come to New York as well. At the time I did not envision that this would eventually lead to a performing ensemble which would make it possible for me to survive by performing my own music. In 1966 I simply had musical ideas which I wanted to try and these were my friends who were interested in what I was working on. While in New York in the mid-sixties I once again took a series of menial

jobs. In 1967 my ensemble grew to include the composer, pianist, and conductor James Tenney, and he along with Murphy, Gibson, and myself presented my first major concerts in New York at the Park Place Gallery in March of 1967. The gallery showed the works of artists like Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson, and Robert Morris. That is, it showed what was to be called Minimal Art. While few well-known composers attended these concerts, many painters and sculptors like Robert Rauschenberg, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson, and Richard Serra did, and the success of these concerts led to invitations to perform my music with my own ensemble, which had grown to include pianist Steve Chambers and composer/keyboard player Phil Glass, at the Whitney Museum in 1969, and the Guggenheim Museum in 1970.

From 1970 to 1971 I worked on what was to be the longest piece I had ever composed. It was also the piece where I came to terms with my own background as a drummer. It was also the piece where my ensemble grew from five or six musicians to twelve and introduced percussionists Russ Hartenberger, Bob Becker, and James Preiss into my ensemble where they still perform. In December of 1971 the world premiere of *Drumming* was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. At about this same time I also had begun writing letters to European concert sponsors in England, Germany, and France and in 1971 we made our first European tour. That same year, with help from Jean Rigg, the administrator of the Cunningham Dance Foundation, the Reich Music Foundation was incorporated so that we could receive funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts to pay for travel and rehearsal fees for musicians in the ensemble. Finally in 1972, somewhat to my surprise, I found that at the age of thirty-six I was finally able to make a living as a composer who performed his music with his own ensemble.

Now, in 1987, what could a young composer about to finish his or her own schooling get from this personal history that might be of use? I'm not sure. The 1960s were perhaps more idealistic and also perhaps more foolish and unrealistic. Students in the 1980s are often extremely concerned with how they will survive economically starting from the time they leave school. This cannot be dismissed as a foolish concern. I would, however, venture a few thoughts I hope are of some practical use:

1. If you're not wholly committed to your own compositions, you will undoubtedly find that performers and audiences aren't either.
2. If you feel that teaching will eat up valuable time and energy that would be better spent composing, you might just be right.
3. If you're young and unknown and you want to get your compositions performed the way you know they should be performed, perhaps you should perform them yourself with your friends. One good

performance leads to another and gradually people get to hear what you really have in mind.

Thank you very much.