

Steve Reich: Early tape pieces



Interview by Jason Gross
retrieved in June 2004 from

<http://www.furious.com/perfect/ohm/reich2.html>

JG: Where there any earlier tape pieces you heard that influenced your own early works with tapes?

SR: Basically, "*It's Gonna Rain*" was done in '65. At that point, I already studied with (Luciano) Berio. I had listened to a lot electronic music and a lot of *musique concrete*. I felt that my heart belonged to the *musique concrete* people. Even with Stockhausen, I was interested in "Gesung der Jungling" because of the boy's voice.

The bone I had to pick with (Pierre) Schaeffer and that bunch was that if they were using the sound of a car crash, they had to lower it by an octave or speed it up by an octave, run it through a ring modulator or play it backwards. Why not hear that it's a car crash! These sounds that you're using in the original state have some kind of emotional resonance. We relate to them in various ways. If you bring them into the music, that brings in an emotional, theatrical meaning which is useful. It's worthwhile maintaining and building upon.

JG: So how did your early tape pieces actually come about?

SR: My idea was that I always wanted you to hear what the original sounds were. For "*It's Gonna Rain*" and "*Come Out*," that meant what the people were saying. Because the piece ("Rain") was vocal music. It was setting what they were saying in a way that was appropriate to the subject matter. "*It's Gonna Rain*" is about the end of the world. In those days, the voice was recorded in '64,

you had the Cuban Missile Crisis and so it was very much a part of many people's thinking at that time. We were at the point where we could all turn into so much radioactive ash at any given time. So while this guy is preaching about Noah, it's not something abstract that has nothing to do with what's going on in your life.

It was also a time that was fairly difficult for me personally. So *"It's Gonna Rain,"* especially the second half of it, is very bleak. You're literally hearing the world come apart. Technically, it's been said many times, the discovery of the phasing process was within that piece. It happened with those two little Wollensack tape recorders I had (also used on *"Phase Piece"*). I made identical loops and I thought I would line them up in a particular relationship. Mainly with "it's gonna fall" on top of "rain" with the two channel result being "it's gonna... it's gonna... rain... rain..." with 180 degrees separation. I put on headphones (which were stereo with each ear with a separate plug going into the two machines). By chance, two machines were lined up in unison. So what I heard was this unison sound sort of swimming in my head, spatially moving back and forth. It finally moved over to the left, which meant that the machine on the left was slightly faster passing in speed than the machine on the right. So the apparent phenomenon in your head is the sound moving to the left, moves down your left shoulder and then across the floor! (laughs) Then after a while, it comes into an imitation and then finally after four or five minutes, you hear "it's gonna... it's gonna... rain... rain..."

By the time it got that far, I thought to myself "this is unbelievable." Instead of a particular relationship, here is a whole way of making music, going from unison through all these contrapuntal relationships, all the way back to unison. All the possible relationships, rational and irrational, are there. So I immediately decided to experiment with just how fast that process should happen. Then in the second half of the piece, it got much more complicated, going from two then to four then to eight voices and never coming back together again, which is more in keeping with the text.

JG: Did you also have the idea that you wanted to explore the semantics of what was being said?

SR: In those days, I was very interested in American poetry. My interest in William Carlos Williams which surfaced in *"Desert Music"* was something that goes back to when I was 16. Reading Williams led to reading a lot of younger American poets like Robert Creeley and Charles Olson who were very influenced by Williams. Williams himself was influenced by American speech rhythms. The difficulty that I had as a student setting Williams was that I felt that I had set him like you would set an insect in amber. You'd set it alright but he's dead as a doornail. After I discovered all the constantly changing meters in *"Tehillim"* I thought *'hey, here's a way of dealing with the flexible rhythms in Williams' poetry in "The Desert Music."*

But the tape pieces, it seemed to me, were a way of taking Dr. Williams' advice. Here's American speech rhythm, particularly in the case of the black Pentacostal preacher and later in the black kid who was arrested for murder, then presenting it just as it is and letting the actual rhythm and cadence of the voice form the music.

JG: So you were also studying the musical tone of their speech?

SR: Yes, absolutely. If you listen to a black preacher, sometimes it's hard to say whether they're singing or speaking. They're exactly in the cusp between speech and song. It's a very mannered kind of speaking. It's almost chanting. So it was perfect for this kind of tape manipulation. Later, when I did "*Come Out*," to get that one little phrase 'come to out to show them,' I went through ten hours of tapes- boys, police, mothers, everyone you could imagine. This one phrase seemed emblematic. The speech-melody is everything. It then generates all kinds of variations upon itself melodically and on the meaning of the words.

JG: I was going to ask why you had given up on tape music but something occurred to me.

SR: But I haven't!

JG: That's right. When I think of your latter pieces, there is a thread there of using recorded speech.

SR: Speech recordings and their melodies are the basis of "*Different Trains*." In 1988, that was done consciously to get back in touch with these early tape pieces but instead of saying 'this speech is just as if it is music,' now I'm saying 'this is a part of a musical ensemble.' The Kronos Quartet took its cues from the speech melody. Every time a woman speaks, she is doubled by the viola and every time a man speaks, he's doubled by the cello. With '*City Life*,' I was saying that it doesn't just have to be voices. It can be all kinds of sounds.