

Interview mit Steve Reich und Beryl Korot, 12.Dezember 2003

?: Before we started this interview you called loops an “old hat”. Why is that?

Reich: You know that I first became known to the public because of „It’s gonna rain“ in 1965, which was based on tape loops. I was initially interested in loops on tape and phase shifting. Very quickly, after “It’s gonna rain” and “Come out”, I decided that if I could do this technique of changing phase between different loops only with machines, then I didn’t want to do it. I had to be able to do it with other people. But I thought, it is a machine process, you know – windshield on a bus, bells at a railroad crossing and so on. So I finally said: Ok, I’m the second machine, and I made a recording of myself playing a piano pattern, and I made a tape loop out of it. And I put it on a tape recorder, and I sat down at the piano and closed my eyes, and miraculously I could move slowly one-sixteenth note ahead of the tape. So I said: “Well, we do it with two pianos and forget the tape.” Arthur Murphy, a friend of mine, and I got together and – look, Ma, no tape! And that was a very big breakthrough in 1967, which led to “Piano Phase”, “Violin Phase” and eventually to “Drumming”.

?: Why was this looping technique interesting to you?

Reich: Well, there were a lot of reasons. One of the reasons was African Music. Another reason was that I just became aware of tape recorders. When I was a student of Luciano Berio at Mills College, we went to a conference where other composers were, and one of the speakers was the American Gunther Schuller, who was writing a history about early jazz. And he said that he had discovered a book of notations of African music, the first African scores written down correctly. That was “Studies in African Music” by A.M. Jones. I got the book, when I returned to San Francisco, where I lived at that time. And what I saw in this books were repeating patterns, loops if you like, in what we would call 12 / 8. They don’t think of it that way, but that’s how we think about it. That coupled with the knowledge that I was experimenting, as many people were experimenting in the Sixties, with splicing tape together and seeing the effects of that. That made me think: “Oh, that is a cross cultural phenomenon. We are not the only people doing this.” Balinese music also works in repeating cycles, some of them long, some of them very short.

?: Why was the loop exciting to you? How did it make you feel? Did it have a physical effect on you?

Reich: Well, when I made the loop for “It’s gonna rain”, first of all I had this very intense voice. When I recorded Brother Walter, a black street preacher, a pigeon had taken off at the moment, and you hear that in the background: “Kch kch kch kch“. It almost sounds like a drummer: “ch ch ch ch“. And below that you have a “Grrrrm”, which is the traffic, very slowly. When you make a loop of that, you stand up very straight, because it is a very, very powerful sound. A loop is like anything else, you can make a bad one and a good one, you can make a boring one and an exciting one. And that was a very exciting loop. Therefore something, I think, very good came out of it.

?: But it didn’t have a psychedelic effect on you? It didn’t affect you physiologically, because that wasn’t what you were after?

Reich: I am after making music. I’m after making music, that gives me goose-bumps on my spine, and that’s the only criteria. When I close my eyes, it’s black, I don’t see anything. I am not looking for psychedelic experiences, I am looking for intense musical pleasure. And that’s

it. Loops were just one thing, and loops by themselves are nothing. Loops by themselves are a stupid effect, and unfortunately a lot of stupid effects came out of using loops: people getting high on dope, and saying: "Hey man, that's cool". But it's not cool, it's just stupid.

What was interesting was to take loops and put them out of phase with each other. In other words, it is just a very, very mechanical technique. The bottom of all of this is that repetition in music is really a very old topic. It is very obvious in African music, because the patterns are very short, like loops. But you can find repetition in Haydn or in Bach. So the tape loops were a new kind of repetition based on very short patterns. And what became particularly suggestive is that once you applied it to traditional musical instruments, you opened up another whole universe. And also, at that time, not using loops but suggesting that constant of focus was John Coltrane, who I would hear very often, when I was studying with Luciano Berio. I did that during that day, and at night I went and listened to John Coltrane, and he is playing half an hour on ONE CORD, like in "Africa Brass".

That is also true for a lot of Rhythm 'n Blues. Junior Walker, "Shotgun", yambadidabamba, yambadidabamba. There is a bass line, that goes through the whole song. There is no B section, it is just one bass line through the whole tune, **and that hadn't been done before**. So even around 1961, 62, 63, 64, you have all this: African music, John Coltrane, Motown, all this stuff coming together in America on the Westcoast, and, you know, (Terry) Riley was obviously listening to it, I was listening to it, later (Philip) Glass gets involved, and so on and so forth. So that was the cultural environment in which it was growing.

?: Do you think that you had to go through technology, through the tape, in order discover this loop technique for your work?

Reich: Well, I did. At that time a lot of musicians were working with tape recorders. Tape recording had a huge effect on music, and I had just gotten my first tape recorder. I had a little, stupid Wollensack mono machine. So that was interesting in and of itself, but what interested me about tape was speech, to be able to use the human voice as a subject for music. I wanted raw speech material, that had a musical content, and workt with it. I studied with Berio, and he had also used speech as opposed to electronically generated sound. I have never been interested in synthesizers, but I love samplers for that very reason.

?: In Europe there was Musique Concrete at this time. Were you in touch with this scene?

Reich: In Europe, obviously it was a totally different thing. I had listened to a lot electronic music and a lot of musique concrete. My heart belonged to the musique concrete people, but what bothered me with (Pierre) Schaeffer and that bunch was that if they were using the sound of a human voice, they had to speed it up or play it backwards or modulate it with a ring modulator. Why not hear that it's a human voice! These sounds that you're using in the original state have some kind of emotional resonance. It's worthwhile maintaining and building upon. My idea was that I always wanted you to hear what the original sounds were. For "It's Gonna Rain" and "Come Out," it was what the people were saying.

?: How do you define a loop? Would you call the repeating patterns in your compositions such as "Drumming" or "Six Pianos" loops? Or does a loop need to consist out of pre-recorded material as in "It's gonna rain"?

Reich: Well, that is just playing with words. Let's put it this way: if you forget the word "loop", and just call it "repeating patterns", it is a repeating pattern on the piano, it is a

repeating pattern in “It’s gonna rain”, it is a repeating pattern of any sound, whether it’s from the non-musical world or the musical world. And in newer piece like “Different trains”, they come together completely.

?: Beryl, you also used repeating loops in your video installations such as “Dachau”...

Korot: Well, they are not exactly loops, that I work with actually. I work with small bits of time, that are repeated in a particular section, but not exactly. So if you see in the “Dachau” piece on Channel one you may see a bicyclists very far off in the distance. The next time it is repeated she is closer to you. It is also a way of creating a work based on rhythmical relationships to move a narrative along. So to me it is related to narrative. And it uses rhythm and interrelationships between channels, based on weaving structures to create a non-verbal narrative. I mean, it is never exactly the same. It is taking an element of the previous loop, and moving it ahead in time, each time it is repeated in relationship to another channel that has almost the same loop, but not exactly, so that you have a live-ness. That came out of early experiments by Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette in a piece called “Wipe-Cycle”, where they had these Live-Time-Delays, that interested me. But I wasn’t interested in an Open-Circuit-Situation, I was interested in it as a compositional technique.

?: It’s interesting that you say that it is about narrative, because one argument about loops is that they are non-narrative, that they are eliminating story, even history in a way.

Reich: Beryl has a particular use of it, that is a combination of contradictory ingredients which is what makes it interesting. “It’s gonna rain” is not narrative. Then again, it is! In the first section – well, you might just get lost in the sound. But “It’s gonna rain” is about something. “It’s gonna rain” is about the end of world. It was done in 1964 and in 1966 was the Cuban missile crisis. Living in San Francisco we felt, that it was possible that we might all go up in radioactive smoke. I mean, the Russian ships were coming, Kennedy said: “You’re not gonna go there”, and they had missiles on board of ships. It was terrifying, a very scary situation. So when everybody who was listening to it in that period of time, the Noah story and the story of Kennedy and Chruschov is one story, really. The second part of “It’s gonna rain”, which is even more frightening, it is about trying to get into the arch and knowing that it was sealed by the hand of god. So it is not a narrative in the sense of Beryl’s piece, where she literally takes you through Dachau, through a series of loops that are not the same. But it is definitely about something. People say the tape pieces are just about pure sound, but that’s not true. It is about taking something that means something, and intensifying it through the repetition and the out-of-phase shifting, and of course you get lost, but the meaning hovers over it like a cloud. I even did not play the second part before an audience for some time, because I did not want to inflict my neuroses on them. I felt very disturbed while I was in San Francisco, and I thought that the piece would show that.

?: So it is not about emptying the words of their meaning?

Reich: No, it is about cranking it up, making it more intense. I mean it is REALLY about the end of the world, it’s gonna like scare you. I was so scared by the second half of “It’s gonna rain”, that I thought I shouldn’t play it in public for a year.

?: I wonder what the live performances of these tape compositions were like. You already said that you had nothing to do with the counterculture that developed in San Francisco in the 60ies, but I know that there were connections between the SF Tape Music Center, that you were part of, and the hippie scene of San Francisco.

Reich: The Tape Music Center was tied up entirely with the musical aesthetics of John Cage. That was all they were thinking about, and I had nothing to do with that. I never worked at the Tape Music Center. I presented stuff at the Tape Music Center, but I had no sympathy or interest in what they were doing. And history has proved that what they were doing was just a waste of time. Not that John Cage was a waste of time. But all those miniature-John-Cages – we don't even know who they are anymore. Obviously Terry Riley was doing something very, very important. "In C" was a great piece, but the rest of the San Francisco scene were just little John Cages running around.

?: If you read descriptions of Terry Riley early concerts, it almost sounds like today's raves or ambient music concerts. They often lasted all night, there were colour projections, the people were asked to bring their own drinks or even sleeping bags...

Reich: Terry Riley had a completely different attitude, and he still does. He is much more of a hippie. I'm not a hippie and I never was. I didn't like the San Francisco rock scene, and I got out of there as quickly as I could. (lacht)

?: Yet your works have been remixed by some contemporary producers. On "Reich remixed" are tracks by people such as Andrea Parker or DJ Spooky, that are based on your compositions...

Reich: I don't think that DJ Spookie is a hippie, but you should ask him. (lacht) I am delighted about this remix album, and I am really happy that that happened. But when I did those pieces in 1964, most of these people weren't even born. To me it is like this: When I was 14, I discovered Miles Davis and Kenny Parker and Charlie Parker, and I went down to Birdland to hear them as a kid. Then I am playing in London in 1974, and at the end a guy comes up with Lipstick and long hair and says: "Hey, what's up? I'm Brain Eno." And I think: poetic justice, that's the way it should be. Then later, I did an interview with a pop keyboard magazine in London, and they ask me: "What do you think about The Orb?" And I ask: "What is The Orb?" And they give me their record with "Little fluffy cloud", that has "Electric Counterpoint" sampled on it. So then I understood what this DJ thing was, that they don't just like what I am doing, but that they take what I'm doing. But no lawsuit, it was always a friendly relation. When the remix album happened, I had never met these people. I think that if you start out as a kid, and you are interested in jazz and the popular music of the time, then somehow, in the best of all possible worlds, or at least in my world, when you get older, people who are in the same situation the way you were when you were young, they gonna find something interesting in your music, and that's what happened in my case.

?: So have you ever been to a rave or a techno party?

Reich: No, not at all, not interested. I have no interest in that whatsoever.

?: Why not?

Reich: Why? Why am I 5 feet 10? I don't know, I am just the way I am.

?: One thing that is very interesting about Techno is which aspects of minimal music they could use and which they couldn't use. For example, the technique of phasing that you used in "It's gonna rain", was almost never used in contemporary dance music, because it wouldn't work for a dance floor...

Reich: Actually the phasing happened by accident. When I first started to work on “It’s gonna rain”, I had two tape recorders, and my idea was to line up “It’s gonna” on top of “rain”, so you would hear: “It’s gonna, It’s gonna, rain, rain...” And by chance, they were together, in unison. So when I had the head phones on, what I heard was this unison sound sort of swimming in my head, spatially moving back and forth. I heard the sound move over the left and down my leg and across the floor, and it begins to beat. I am just listening to this, and finally it gets to “It’s gonna, rain, rain, rain”. I am saying to myself: “Wait a minute, this *process* of moving there gradually is much more interesting than any one particular relationship.” I had found 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. That technique gave birth to the whole idea of phasing, which – by the way – *ends* with “Drumming”. After 1971 I never used it again.

?: How do you relate your work to the European Serial Music from the first part of the 20. Century I read a comment of yours in an interview, that there are also musical rows in serial music, but that you cannot discover them by listening to it, because the rules after which they have been set up are not transparent enough. In Minimal Music it is different, the rules are immediately clear...

Reich: Bear in mind, that we are talking about my music up to “Music for 18 musicians”, maybe before. We are talking as if it were 1975, and it is now 2002. But in these days, what I was saying was, that in serial music maybe some people can hear the row, but most listeners have no idea what is going on. And I had no idea what was going on, and I didn’t care. I simply didn’t want to hear it. I became a composer, because I love Stravinsky, and I love Bach, and I love Jazz. Those are the three kinds of music, the music that woke me up. In what you call Minimal Music and what I call my own music, or in the music of Riley and Glass and all these other people, *in those early day*, not now, but in those early days, you could hear exactly what was going on. You could hear: “These two pianos are playing the same pattern, oh, and then there is one of them getting slightly ahead of the other, and that is causing this incredible effect that happens.” So, that is a radical difference. In other words the mystery is not that I hide what I am doing, the mystery is the result. It is all very clear, what is happening, but I still can’t follow it.

?: The idea of the book I want to write is that loops have become very important in contemporary culture. I think of music such as yours, but also in Hip Hop, House, Techno, as well as screen savers, computer programs, video loops etc. Do you see any connection between these phenomenon?

Reich: Something starts out in our culture with a couple of artists. They have an insight, which is very personal. It is like when you throw a pebble in the water, and when the waves go out, they get weaker. I think in the Sixties, there was Andy Warhol who used a lot of repetition in his paintings as well as in his films. There was myself, Riley, Glass etcetera. Now it has become a cultural mannerism. In computer technique, loops are necessary because loops are part of programming, as I understand it. But apart from that: you know, Pop Art becomes wall paper, real wall paper, but originally it was fantastic. And after some time, something else takes its place, because culture is changing and it becomes a mark of a certain period.

I think what you are writing about is a significant phenomenon, I think you are onto something, and I think it is something that we started in the 1960ies and has now become very prevalent in our culture, and it always will be. But repetition is a part of life. When your heart stops beating, you're dead. Repeating patterns find their way in music all around the world, independent of the western world. Repeating patterns find their way in the visual arts independent of the western world. I think it might have had a fashionable peak in the western world between 1965 and maybe a little bit more from now. But it is a part of life, and that part will always continue.

Korot: I never really thought about this. As I said, I was never interested in loops per se, as total repetition, as the same thing over and over again. So for me it came out of an interest in patterns and the development of patterns. I even notated "Dachau" as pattern, I actually had it down to the seconds, so that you could see this blackness with little holes in it. I created these kinds of patterns, but they were always irregular and somehow linear, because there was always meaning connected to it outside of itself. For me it was a very important technique to create a non-verbal narrative structure, based on an ancient technology, and the relationship between the ancient and the modern. But I don't pay so much attention to works based on loops. Maybe in programming, if I understood it better, I'd be interested.

Reich: I just wanted to second one thing she just said: when I discovered the loops, it was like... when you want to make a cake, and you find the flour. The flour is great, but you won't eat the flour by itself, you want to make a cake out of it. So loops by themselves are of no interest what so ever, I agree with Beryl. It is what you do with them. Just to have something going over and over again – you're crazy, you're stoned out of your mind. If you want to do that, fine. But it is not art, it is not even interesting. It's really stupid. But it is a powerful ingredient, and you can make fantastic works with it. And it has been done already.