

Susanna Mälkki: Steve Reich at 90

Thursday, November 12, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Susanna Mälkki, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	REICH b. 1936 <i>Music for a Large Ensemble</i>	17'
2	REICH b. 1936 <i>Music for Pieces of Wood</i>	10'
3	REICH b. 1936 <i>Variations for Winds, Strings and Keyboards</i>	21'
4	REICH b. 1936 <i>Three Movements</i>	15'
5	REICH b. 1936 <i>Music for Ensemble and Orchestra</i>	20'
TOTAL MUSIC		83'

Steve Reich

b. 1936

Music for a Large Ensemble

THE COMPOSER

Steve Reich (born 1936 in New York) is one of the most influential composers of our time: a founding father of musical minimalism whose work has reshaped not only concert music but also rock and electronic music. In the 1960s he pioneered the technique of ‘phasing’, in which identical repeating patterns gradually slip out of sync to generate shimmering, evolving textures (heard first in tape pieces like *It’s Gonna Rain* and then in live works like *Piano Phase* and *Drumming*). From these austere process pieces he developed an ever-richer language, culminating in landmark scores such as *Music for 18 Musicians*, *Different Trains* (for string quartet and tape) and the Pulitzer-winning *Double Sextet*. His music is built on steady pulse, repeating cells, interlocking rhythms and the slow, hypnotic transformation of material: joyous, propulsive and instantly recognisable. This concert marks his 90th birthday with five works spanning more than four decades.

17 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Music for a Large Ensemble (1978) grew out of two earlier pieces, Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ and Reich's masterpiece Music for 18 Musicians, and expands their sound-world for bigger forces: strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion and two wordless female voices. Commissioned by the Holland Festival, it belongs to the period when Reich was moving from the stripped-back process pieces of the 1960s toward a warmer, fuller, more sensuous minimalism, and it glories in the new colours a larger group made possible, especially the bright brass chords that ride above the pulsing texture.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the steady, unbroken pulse that underpins everything, and for the interlocking patterns in the pianos and mallet instruments that create Reich's characteristic shimmering web of sound. Above this, listen for the long-held wind and brass chords and the wordless voices, which trace slow melodic arcs. Reich was experimenting here with the human breath as a measure of musical time: the trumpet chords are written to take one comfortable breath to play. The effect is bright, buoyant and hypnotic, a steady stream of pulsing energy out of which melodies and harmonies seem to rise and dissolve.

Steve Reich

10 minutes

b. 1936

Music for Pieces of Wood

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Music for Pieces of Wood (1973) is minimalism at its purest and most elemental: a piece scored for nothing but five pairs of tuned claves, small hardwood sticks struck together. A sequel to his Clapping Music of the year before, it strips Reich's art down to its bones (rhythm, pulse and the gradual unfolding of pattern), with no harmony or melody to speak of, only the dry, bright clack of wood on wood at five different pitches. It is performed here by players drawn from the orchestra.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is a study in pure rhythm, so listen to how it is built. The highest-pitched player keeps a steady, metronomic pulse from beginning to end; the others enter one by one in canon, each adding a repeating rhythmic pattern until the texture is dense. Listen for the interlocking, syncopated patterns that emerge as the parts combine, and for the sudden 'gear-changes' your ear hears as the music seems to shift between different metres. It is the same psychoacoustic magic as Reich's phase pieces, achieved with the simplest possible means: rhythmically intricate, physically exciting, and over before you know it.

Steve Reich

21 minutes

b. 1936

Variations for Winds, Strings and Keyboards

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Variations for Winds, Strings and Keyboards (1979) was Reich's first work for orchestra, commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony and premiered in 1980. It leaves out percussion and adds pianos and

electric organs to the winds, brass and strings. Writing for a traditional orchestral body was a significant step for a composer who had built his career with his own hand-picked ensemble, and the piece translates his pulsing, interlocking style into the warmer, more sustained sound of massed strings and winds. Despite its title it is less a set of discrete variations than a continuous, flowing process: a chaconne-like cycle of harmonies that moves through several keys before coming home.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for how Reich adapts his minimalist language to the orchestra: the steady pulse and repeating patterns are still there, but now clothed in the rich, blended sonority of strings and winds rather than mallets and pianos alone. The music unfolds in long, slowly shifting harmonic waves. Listen for the way chords gradually change underneath the rippling surface, for the raspy buzz of the electric organs binding the sound together, and for the broad, almost romantic warmth of the strings. It is among the most lush of Reich's works, a bridge between his ensemble pieces and his later orchestral writing.

Steve Reich

15 minutes

b. 1936

Three Movements

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Three Movements is one of Reich's most direct and exhilarating orchestral works, written in the years after *The Desert Music* (1984), when his style had absorbed a new harmonic richness and rhythmic drive. As the plain title suggests, it is cast in three movements, giving

it an almost Classical sense of shape, but filled with Reich's unmistakable pulsing energy. The LSO likens its gradually shifting harmonies to changing light as clouds move slowly across the sky.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the clear three-part structure: two propulsive, driving fast movements framing a slower central one. In the outer movements, listen for the relentless rhythmic momentum, the interlocking patterns hammered out across the orchestra, and the bright, percussive use of pianos and mallets within the orchestral texture. The central slow movement offers contrast: broader, more sustained, harmonically richer. Throughout, notice the steady pulse that never stops driving the music forward. This is Reich at his most muscular and orchestrally brilliant, minimalism with the power of a full symphony orchestra behind it.

Steve Reich

20 minutes

b. 1936

Music for Ensemble and Orchestra

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Music for Ensemble and Orchestra (2018) was Reich's first orchestral work in more than thirty years, and it makes a fitting climax to a birthday celebration. Reich calls it an extension of the Baroque concerto grosso, where more than one soloist is set against the full orchestra. Here the 'soloists' are twenty regular members of the orchestra itself (the first-desk strings and winds, plus two pianos and two vibraphones), who weave their interlocking patterns against the larger

body. The Los Angeles Philharmonic gave the premiere in November 2018 under tonight's conductor, Susanna Mälkki, and she also conducted its first recording.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the interplay between the small group of soloists and the full orchestra: patterns passed back and forth, the soloists' rapid interlocking figures set against sustained orchestral harmonies. The work is in five connected movements, with a clever twist. In Reich's words, "the tempo never changes, only the note value of the constant pulse in the pianos": sixteenths, then eighths, then quarters, then back again. So the music seems to slow down and speed up while the underlying beat stays the same. Listen for that arch of gathering and releasing momentum, and for the bright, joyous, propulsive energy that has made Reich, at 90, one of the most beloved composers alive.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Writings on Music, 1965-2000**

Steve Reich, Oxford University Press 2004

Reich's own essays and interviews, from *Music as a Gradual Process* onwards, with his notes on several of the works in this birthday programme.

ACCESSIBLE **Minimalists**

K. Robert Schwarz, Phaidon 1996

An illustrated introduction to minimalism and its main composers, with Reich at the centre.

DEEPER **Four Musical Minimalists**

Keith Potter, Cambridge University Press 2002

A detailed study of Young, Riley, Reich and Glass, tracing how Reich's style developed from the phase pieces onwards.

SOURCES

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10. The Desert Music, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Desert_Music
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16. Four Musical Minimalists, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521015011>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/Iso-2026-11-12-malkki>

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