

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

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.

17 minutes

Steve Reich

10 minutes

b. 1936

Music for Pieces of Wood

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

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

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

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.



CONCERT PROGRAMS

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Version 3, 30 September 2026