

**Steve Reich's**  
**The Desert Music**  
An Analysis of Text

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In *The Desert Music*, Steve Reich sets excerpts of poetry by William Carlos Williams. *The Desert Music* is a modern day cantata, which explores the limited perception of man to his world. The work, completed in December of 1983 and premiered in March of 1984, is a prime example of a composer writing a piece to the absolute rhythm of Williams' poetry. In this paper I will explore the settings of these texts in detail, as well as look at the formal structure of the work as a whole.

The texts used by Reich in *The Desert Music* come from several different poems by William Carlos Williams; *Theocritus: Idyl I*, *The Orchestra*, and *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower* (See Appendix). The title of the work comes from a collection of Williams' poems, *The Desert Music*. Williams' poetry implies what Ezra Pound called "absolute rhythm." Absolute rhythm offers the composer a way of communicating poetic meaning without resorting to excessive imitation. Excessive imitation is an admission by the composer that his music is secondary to the poem. R. Murray Schafer clarifies Pound's definition as "a rhythm which was part of the poetic idea itself, not a discipline over which the poem was strung." (Coroniti, p.36) Absolute rhythm is the driving force behind the text. The text then becomes the driving force of the music. This is not just a

poem set to music. The text is used to empower the composer's imagination: the fusion of text and music is heard as a new predominantly musical work. (Coroniti, p38)

Reich uses literal repetition only insofar as it realizes the absolute rhythm of Williams' verse. The first set of text is repeated because of the first word used: Begin (see ex. 1). That the text takes a full minute before it moves on to the next part of the line is just a signifier of how important it is to begin. Once the text begins, the music moves to the absolute rhythm of Williams' poem. Of course, the startling change of key at the end of this line propels the listener to another musical world.

The canon, which begins at rehearsal 160, is another good example of literal repetition subject to the absolute rhythm of the poem (see ex. 2). Reich most likely became fixated on this text not because it is remarkably similar to what Reich does in music, but because of its reference to repetition. The canon removes the meaning from the text and focuses upon the sonic quality of the sound. This is an old technique to Reich dating back to his tape piece *Come Out*. Coroniti expressed plainly as:

“It is the masterful use of this musical form that goes beyond literal imitation, i.e., we listen less to the meaning of the words and become fascinated by the musical form. Reich gets to the heart of what Williams refers to as a principle of music; rather than create a music that simply imitates Williams' reference to music, the signifier, Reich creates what Williams is referring to, the principle of music itself, the signified.” (p.40)

The vocalise sections of the piece are Reich's wordless response to the text “well, shall we/think or listen?” in the second and fourth movements. This wordless pulsation is just that, a pulsation. They serve to set up the drive of the piece as another layer in the chord progressions. These progressions present the harmonic cycles of each movement as a pulsing chorale. The constant movement between what words mean and how they

sound is primary focus of *The Desert Music*.

In the second and fourth movements, which share the same text and tempo marking, the text addresses the sonic qualities of the music. By this time, the listener is not hearing just the music or just the words, but is hearing the relationship developing between these two sources. The final line of text directly addresses this relationship: “The mind is listening.” (see ex. 3) These are appropriate words for anyone listening to Reich’s music. One cannot focus on only one aspect of the work; the listener should absorb all of the music.

The final aspect of the text setting that needs addressing is the viola siren at rehearsal 228 (see ex. 4). The inspiration is from a fire siren that Reich heard in Vermont while composing the slow movement. The connection to the text is in the third movement: “Say to them: Man has survived hitherto because he was too ignorant to know how to realize his wishes. Now that he can realize them, he must either change them or perish.”(Reich, preface) Williams lived in the era after the dropping of atomic bombs in Japan and was acutely aware of the limited perception of man. The siren in the violas is a wordless commentary upon that limited perception.

There are five movements in *The Desert Music* and they form a large arch, A-B-C-B-A. The first and fifth movements are fast and use the same harmonic progression. The second and fourth movements share identical text and have a moderate tempo marking. They also share a harmonic progression, which is different from the first and fifth. The third movement has the slowest tempo marking and forms an arch within itself, d-e-d. The d sections are marked “slow” while the e section has the same tempo

marking as the second and fourth movements. The harmonic progression of the third movement is independent of all the other movements. The five movements are played attacca and the piece is approximately 48 minutes in duration.

In John Coroniti's article Scoring the "absolute rhythm" of William Carlos Williams: Steve Reich's *The Desert Music* the position is taken in support of Reich's setting of the text. Much time and detail is spent on comparing the literary interpretations of the poems versus the musical settings. Coroniti firmly believes that Reich found a balance between the two interpretations. He also demonstrates that Reich set the absolute rhythm of the poems without sacrificing his own musical vision.

In Fabian Lovisa's book *Minimal-Music: Entwicklung, Komponisten, Werke* the history of "minimalism" is explored quite thoroughly. In the case of Steve Reich, Lovisa spends a lot of time on the influence that hearing jazz had on Reich when he was younger. He also compares Reich's writing to that of "neo-minimalists" like Gavin Bryars, Karel Goeyvaerts, and Arvo Pärt. Lovisa talks about the influence that Reich has had and continues to have on this second generation of composers. Lovisa also talks about how minimalism has been received throughout the world.

The first piece of minimalist music that I can remember hearing was *Reich's Music For Eighteen Musicians*. I had no idea that music could sound like that and still keep my attention for over an hour. After hearing that piece, I made a concerted effort to hear all of his music. I first heard *The Desert Music* at the age of 18 and I have been hooked ever since. Now that I have studied the text and its setting, I have a newfound

appreciation for the piece. I now understand what Williams was saying in his poetry better and I understand the setting of the text and its relationship to the music. This is one of my all time favorite pieces of music.

## APPENDIX

Text of *The Desert Music*

I.       “Begin, my friend  
              for you cannot,  
                      you may be sure,  
take your song,  
              which drives all things out of mind,  
                      with you to the other world.”

from: *Theocritus: Idyl I*

II.

“Well, shall we

think or listen? Is there a sound addressed  
not wholly to the ear?

We half close

our eyes. We do not  
hear it through our eyes.

It is not

a flute note either, it is the relation  
of a flute note

to a drum. I am wide

awake. The mind  
is listening.”

from: *The Orchestra*

“Say to them:

Man has survived hitherto because he was too ignorant to know how to realize his wishes. Now that he can realize them, he must either change them or perish."

from: *The Orchestra*

IIIB. “It is a principle of music

to repeat the theme. Repeat

and repeat again,

as the pace mounts. The

theme is difficult

but no more difficult

than the facts to be

resolved.”

from: *The Orchestra*

IIIC. “Say to them:

Man has survived hitherto because he was too ignorant to know how to realize his wishes. Now that he can realize them, he must either change them or perish.”

from: *The Orchestra*



IV.                               “Well, shall we  
think or listen? Is there a sound addressed  
                                  not wholly to the ear?  
                                  We half close  
our eyes. We do not  
                                  hear it through our eyes.  
                                  It is not  
a flute note either, it is the relation  
                                  of a flute note  
                                  to a drum. I am wide  
awake. The mind  
                                  is listening.”

from: *The Orchestra*

V.       “Inseparable from the fire  
                                  its light  
                                  takes precedence over it.  
Who most shall advance the light-  
                                  Call it what you may!”

from: *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower*

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