

A toast to the sound of Reich

CLASSICAL

Music on Main
At Heritage Hall
In Vancouver on Tuesday

REVIEWED BY ELISSA POOLE

The celebrated American composer Steve Reich, one of the few composers in the classical world with near rock-star status, had his 70th birthday on Tuesday. Reich will be feted throughout the year, with the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center all hosting concerts in his hometown New York, a retrospective at the Barbican in London, performances in numerous major international cities and a five-disc compilation from Nonesuch Records.

Here in Vancouver, a snappy new series called Music on Main timed its first concert to coincide with the date of Reich's birth and turned its opening night into a four-part miniseries of his music. Programming included the early and seminal tape-loop piece *Come Out* (1966) and other phase pieces of the 1960s and early 1970s such as *Piano Phase* (performed by Vern Griffiths and Lauri Lister on marimbas) and *Drumming* (Part I only, for four bongo players); the North Ameri-

can premiere of the octet version of *Cello Counterpoint*; a performance by the Waterloo, Ont.-based Penderecki String Quartet of *Different Trains*; and, late in the evening, some Reich-inspired jazz.

For many of us of a certain age, Reich's music was as much a part of our youth as the Rolling Stones or Bob Dylan. We learned how to listen in a particular way through those phase pieces, and even hearing so many of them back to back on Tuesday didn't quite take away their capacity to fascinate, mesmerize. That goes double for *Come Out*, a stunning metaphor for dehumanization that pulls a phrase of spoken text looped on one channel (a description by a young black man of being beaten by police during the Harlem riots of 1964) progressively out of phase with a duplicate loop on a second channel, until what was once speech morphs into a machine-like noise.

Reich took up that thread again with *Different Trains* in 1988, using speech fragments to generate musical motives and juxtaposing his own childhood memories — of being shuttled regularly by train across the United States from one divorced parent to the other — with those of three contemporaries, Holocaust survivors with dramatically different memories of train trips. Constructed like a series of linked box cars, each differentiated by its

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own texture, motive and tempo, the whole suggests a momentum that belies the composer's capacity for choice. It is one of Reich's most powerful works, one that invests minimalism's defining, cool detachment with the emotional charge of personal and political statement.

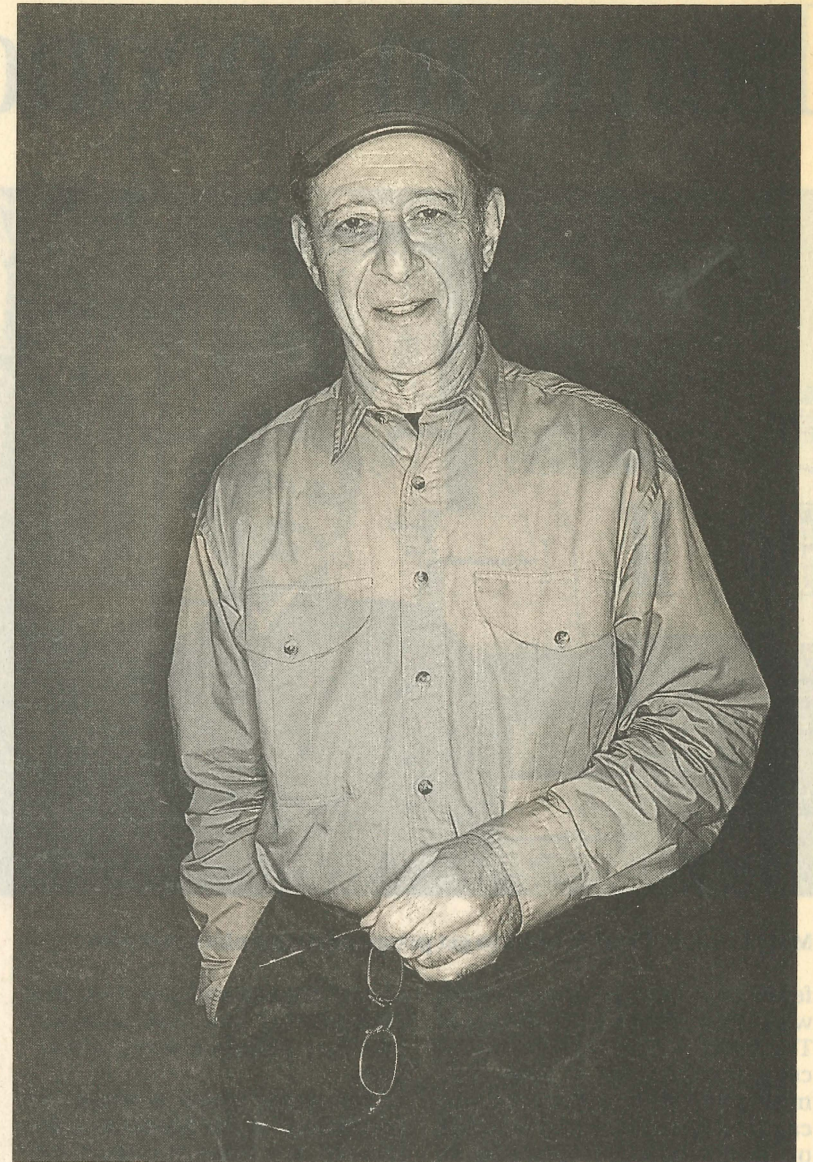
Critical to any performance of *Different Trains* — which superimposes a live quartet performance over a recording of sampled sirens and train whistles, spoken text and four additional string-quartet tracks — is the sound system. It was a shame that the Penderecki Quar-

ter was so dominant in the mix on Tuesday, for the words were almost impossible to understand. With no printed text provided, those unfamiliar with the piece could easily have found themselves grooving to the music (perish the thought) as if it were one of Reich's more abstract compositions.

The weakest piece was *Cello Counterpoint*, one of a series of works (*Electric Counterpoint* for guitarist Pat Metheny is perhaps the best known) that explore the perceptual surprises that arise from placing multiple layers of the same instrumental timbre in counterpoint. Performed live, these pieces are acutely sensitive to intonation and Tuesday's version with eight local Vancouver cellists suffered from a lack of precision; more significantly, its placement after *Different Trains* gave *Cello Counterpoint* the appearance of a piece without a *raison d'être*.

Music on Main's formula of 20 minutes at the bar for every 40 minutes of music left a smaller, albeit more lubricated audience for the last set. But if the Coat Cooke Trio's improvisations were only obliquely Reichian, Kenton Loewen's volatile, hyper-delicate, timbrally ingenious drumming was all it needed to be, an apposite and high-wire send-off for a promising new series.

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FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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