

### **Music for 18 Musicians (1974-6) by Steve Reich**

“You want to hear music that moves you, and if you don’t, then you’re not really very curious to find out how it was put together.” *Writings about Music (1974)*

“I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.” *Gradual Process (1968)*

This combination of the spiritual and organic is what I’ve always admired most about Steve Reich’s music. The unapologetic embrace of beauty, combined with a desire to effect a true spiritual experience is what makes his music so compelling, so profound.

Just as Philip Glass announced a new direction in his compositional style with *Square*, so too did Reich reveal a new direction in his ‘minimalism’ in 1976 with *Music for 18 Musicians*, leaving behind the phase music of *Drumming* to embrace a style based on large, gradually evolving gestures, moving at a comprehensible pace that allows the audience to relate to the music simultaneously on a macro and micro level.

The composition of the piece took place over 2 years, involving a steady collaboration with members of Reich’s ensemble. According to Reich, “I rented four spinets for the rehearsals, which took place every two to four weeks. I would write a lot in my notebook in shorthand and then transfer it to individual parts for the musicians, just adding occasional notes in the parts. Then there was a lot of discussion in rehearsal: “No, no, you come in here,” and the musician would just write it on his part. So this oral tradition grew and the notation shrunk; the parts had everything on them that the musicians needed to play the piece, but no bar numbers common to all players. There are 11 sections with Roman numerals that mark off the sections, but once you’re into a section there’s no number to call out. We just continued working that way and the piece was going well, and when the piece was done, that’s what there was. I started to make a score. I got to section 2 and I began realizing I wasn’t even sure how to notate everything, and there were hundreds of pages to go, so I stopped. Basically there were 22 years without a score: between 1976 and 1998, when Mark Mellits finally made the score (in conjunction with me) for Boosey & Hawkes.

The following notes were written by Steve for the premiere of *Music for 18 Musicians*: “*Music for 18 Musicians* is approximately 55 minutes long. The first sketches were made for it in May 1974 and it was completed in March 1976. Although its steady pulse and rhythmic energy relate to many of my earlier works, its instrumentation, harmony, and structure are new.

There is more harmonic movement in the first five minutes of *Music for 18 Musicians* than in any other complete work of mine to this date. ...Rhythmically, there are two basically different kinds of time occurring simultaneously in *MF18*. The first is that of a regular rhythmic pulse in the pianos and mallet instruments that continues throughout the piece. The second is the rhythm of the human breath in the voices and wind instruments. The entire opening and closing sections plus part of all sections in between contain pulses by the voices and winds. They take a full breath and sing or play pulses of particular notes for as long as their breath will comfortably sustain them. The breath is the measure

of the duration of their pulsing. This combination of one breath after another gradually washing up like waves against the constant rhythm of the pianos and mallet instruments is something I have not heard before and would like to investigate further.

The structure of *MF18* is based on a cycle of 11 chords played at the very beginning of the piece and repeated at the end (“Pulses”). All the instruments and voices play or sing pulsing notes within each chord. Instruments like the strings that do not have to breathe nevertheless follow the rise and fall of the breath by following the breath patterns of the bass clarinet. Each chord is held for the duration of two breaths, and the next chord is gradually introduced, and so on, until all 11 are played and the ensemble returns to the first chord. The opening 11-chord cycle of *MF18* is a kind of pulsing cantus for the entire piece. Each of these 11 chords forms the individual sections in the main body of the piece, with changes signaled by the vibraphone player. These audible cues become a part of the music and allow the musicians to keep listening. *MF18* comes to a close with a return to the “Pulses” music, functioning as a coda.”