

Written as a program note for the first performance at New York Town Hall on April 24, 1976.

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.

As to instrumentation, *Music for 18 Musicians* is new in the number and distribution of instruments: violin, cello, two clarinets doubling bass clarinet, four women's voices, four pianos, three marimbas, two xylophones, and metallophone (vibraphone with no motor). All instruments are acoustical. The use of electronics is limited to microphones for the voices and some of the instruments, in order to obtain a balance in the overall sound.

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. Although the movement from chord to chord is often just a revoicing, inversion, or relative minor or major of a previous chord, usually staying within the key signature of three sharps at all times, nevertheless, within these limits, harmonic movement plays a more important role here than in any of my earlier pieces.

Rhythmically, there are two basically different kinds of time occurring simultaneously in *Music for 18 Musicians*. 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 (see ex. 18-1).¹

The structure of *Music for 18 Musicians* is based on a cycle of 11 chords played at the very beginning of the piece and repeated at the end (see ex. 18-2). 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

1. See Reich's comments on Michael Snow in "Excerpts from an interview in Art Forum," #2A, p. 33.

Bsn. Cl. 1
 2 (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) *f*

Xylo. 1 (3-5x)

Xylo. 2 (3-5x) (3-5x) (3-5x)

Mar. 1

Mar. 2

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Pno. 3 Player 1 *8va*

Pno. 3 Player 2

Pno. 4 Player 1 *8va*

Pno. 4 Player 2 (3-5x) (3-5x) (3-5x) (3-5x)

Voice 1 (3-5x) (3-5x) (10-16x) *mp* *p*

Voice 2 (3-5x) (3-5x) *mp* *p*

Voices 3 (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) *f*

Voices 4 (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) (5-10x) *f*

Vln. (7-12x) (7-12x) (7-12x) (7-12x) (7-12x) (7-12x) *f*

Vc. (7-12x) (7-12x) (7-12x) (7-12x) (7-12x) (7-12x) *f*

Example 18-1. *Music for 18 Musicians*, mm. 624–25. COPYRIGHT © BY HENDON MUSIC, INC., A BOOSEY & HAWKES COMPANY. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION.

Example 18-2. *Music for 18 Musicians*, cycle of chords.

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. This first pulsing chord is then maintained by two pianos and two marimbas. While this pulsing chord is held for about five minutes a small piece is constructed on it. When this piece is completed there is a sudden change to the second chord, and a second small piece or section is constructed. This means that each chord that might have taken 15 or 20 seconds to play in the opening section is then stretched out as the basic pulsing harmony for a five-minute piece, very much as a single note in a *cantus firmus* or chant melody of a twelfth-century organum by Perotin might be stretched out for several minutes as the harmonic center for a section of the organum. The opening 11-chord cycle of *Music for 18 Musicians* is a kind of pulsing *cantus* for the entire piece.

On each pulsing chord one or, on the third chord, two small pieces are built. These pieces or sections are basically either in the form of an arch (ABCDCBA), or in the form of a musical process, like that of substituting beats for rests, working itself out from beginning to end. Elements appearing in one section will appear in another but surrounded by different harmony and instrumentation. For instance, the pulse in pianos and marimbas in sections 1 and 2 changes to marimbas and xylophones and two pianos in section 3A, and to xylophones and maracas in sections 6 and 7. The low piano pulsing harmonies of section 3A reappear in section 6 supporting a different melody played by different instruments. The process of building up a canon, or phase relation, between two xylophones and two pianos, which first occurs in section 2, occurs again in section 9, but building up to another overall pattern in a different harmonic context. The relationship between the different sections is thus best understood in terms of resemblances between members of a family. Certain characteristics will be shared, but others will be unique.²

One of the basic means of change or development in many sections of this piece is to be found in the rhythmic relationship of harmony to melody. Specifi-

2. A concept Reich first encountered in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953.

cally, a melodic pattern may be repeated over and over again, but by introducing a two- or four-chord cadence underneath it, first beginning on one beat of the pattern, and then beginning on a different beat, a sense of changing accent in the melody will be heard. This play of changing harmonic rhythm against constant melodic pattern is one of the basic techniques of this piece, and one that I had never used before. Its effect, by change of accent, is to vary that which is in fact unchanging.

Changes from one section to the next, as well as changes within each section, are cued by the metallophone, whose patterns are played once only to call for movements to the next bar—much as in a Balinese Gamelan a drummer will audibly call for changes of pattern, or as the master drummer will call for changes of pattern in West African music. This is in contrast to the visual nods of the head used in earlier pieces of mine to call for changes and in contrast also to the general Western practice of having a nonperforming conductor for large ensembles (fig. 18-1). Audible cues become a part of the music and allow the musicians to keep listening.

PH: How was *Music for 18 Musicians* composed—I think you told me there was a lot of collaboration in putting it together?

SR: It was composed during 1974–75 and at that point there were more regular rehearsals with the ensemble than at any other time. In those days I wasn't commissioned, but there was a clear understanding that there were concerts available. It was first done as a work-in-progress in 1975.

PH: Did the musicians work for free during the rehearsals?

SR: Yes, basically—they were mostly then students—Russ Hartenberger and Bob Becker were studying non-Western music at Wesleyan University [about a two-hour drive north of New York City in Middletown, Connecticut], and I paid the bus fare. I lived across the street from here in a loft and 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 Marc Mellits finally made the score (in conjunction with me) for Boosey & Hawkes.

—From a discussion with the editor.



Figure 18-1. *Music for 18 Musicians* performed by Steve Reich & Musicians at Town Hall, New York City, 1976. Left to right: Nurit Tilles, Shem Guiborry, Elizabeth Arnold, Jay Clayton, Ken Ishii, Larry Karush, Gary Schall, Russell Hartenberger, Glen Velez, Bob Becker, Steve Chambers, David van Tiegham, Pamela Wood, James Preiss, Steve Reich, Richard Cohen, and Leslie Scott. PHOTO BY PAMELA MAGNUS.