Steve Reich: stories of machines and minimalism

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Steve Reich and Beryl Korot's Documentary Digital Video Opera *Three Tales* deals with the way in which technology has shaped and directed human history in the twentieth century. In each of its three movements, we are offered a snapshot of a key moment that is cited as indicative of the direction of that history. The selection of particular moments is necessarily the personal choice of Reich and Korot since there can be no objective agreement as to the selection of such events. Thus *Three Tales* explores: the crashing of the *Hindenburg* in New Jersey in 1937; the atom bomb tests at Bikini atoll between 1946 and 1952; the cloning of Dolly the sheep in 1997. One year after the completion of *Three Tales*, Dolly sadly passed away on Valentine's Day 2003, aged six. The pursuit of immortality through technological advancement that she represents continues unabated, however. This paper offers some suggestions as to how *Dolly* can help us understand a little more about Steve Reich's compositional output.

In *Dolly*, we are given a particular insight into Reich's views on technology, in a way that acts as something of a commentary on his output as a whole. Reich and Korot have readily acknowledged that their compositional approach in *Dolly* is quite different to that adopted for *Hindenburg* and *Bikini*. Privately, they have described the work as "Two Tales and a Talk". Whilst it is certainly true that talk dominates *Dolly*, the overall effect is more sermon than discourse. The interviewees total nineteen in number, and with the exception of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz and Kismet the robot, are all scientists. Perhaps most significantly, one of the interviewees - Kevin Warwick - is an aspirant cyborg, having had – to date - two cybernetic implants.

This theme of the transformation of man into machine is summed up in *Dolly*. The words of Richard Dawkins 'we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes' are used at three points to reiterate a worldview in which choices must be made about the next steps of technological advancement. In the second of the three uses of this sample, Dawkins' word 'machines' is looped and the video images manipulated, as Dawkins is himself transmogrified into a mechanistic twin clone to match the speech loop.

This extract is from the third section of *Dolly* – Human Body Machine.

Richard Dawkins' words are given considerable prominence in the opening sections of *Dolly* and are central in establishing a view that all creatures are merely machines, without purpose or direction. Reich and Korot use this to raise the question: even if the assumption that human beings are merely machines is true, given they have the capability to create other machines in their image, how should they behave as a result; a question left to the audience to answer. The situation faced by humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century is portrayed as a new Eden, with individuals and societies called upon to make choices as to which of the technological 'trees' must remain forbidden. Dawkins' words are preceded by the robot Kismet, who quotes God's words from the creation account in Genesis: Adam is placed in the Garden of Eden 'to serve it and keep it'. In the new Eden, Kismet has the prescience to see what will happen if humans strive for the technological tree of knowledge. Such prescience from the mouth of Kismet is not lost: later, Bill Joy (Chief Scientist of Sun Microsystems) is sampled saying 'if we gonna create a robot species we oughta take a vote first'.

Between section 4 (Darwin) and section 5 (Robots/Cyborgs/Immortality), there is a short interlude based on the words of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, which divides the technical discussion of DNA and cloning from the vision of what the future might hold. Steinsaltz's words offer a framing narrative for the whole piece: 'every creature has a song – the song of the dogs – and the song of the doves – the song of the fly – the song of the fox – what do they say?' This assertion - that songs are ultimately more significant than systems, melodies more meaningful than machines - is unique among the interviewees in *Dolly*. It is, however, the most telling in appreciating the motivation that produced the work. It is far more than a glimpse into the orthodox Jewish worldview of Reich and Korot. Arguably, it offers a framework for understanding a central feature of Steve Reich's compositional imperative back to the 1960s. This is not simply a religious story of Reich rediscovering his orthodox Jewish faith and reconnecting with his own story of Judaism. It is the story of how so

many of Reich's pieces intend to allow voices to be heard that might otherwise be lost in the crowd.

2

The treatment of Richard Dawkins *et al* in *Dolly* is not essentially different to that applied to human participants in Reich's earlier work. In two of his earliest pieces *Come Out* and *It's Gonna Rain*, a short speech sample is looped and phased against itself and in so doing creates a musical system   Phasing is generally acknowledged as Reich's most significant structural contribution to the emerging forms of Minimalism. Yet on so many occasions, Reich has been at pains at point out that phasing was a serendipitous discovery, chanced upon as he worked with recordings of human speech. What came first was his rationale for using speech as a compositional sound source. This is inextricably bound up with the composer's view of the relationship between speech and personality, and the belief that the natural melodies that emerge through a speech patterns offer a unique insight into the speaker's personality. Reich approvingly cites Janacek's view that speech melodies are indeed a 'window to the soul', the soul from which every creature expresses its song, its personality, its identity.

Whilst the phasing of speech samples appears to denude them of their context and meaning, these are clearly vital considerations in what Reich believes he was doing in composing *Come Out* and *It's Gonna Rain*. He is on record as attributing a socio-political framework for his pieces. Brother Walter's text from the Flood story in Genesis is given an apocalyptic significance through both the manner in which it is preached and its political context in 1960s Cold War America in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Reich goes as far to refer to the piece as a 'setting of a text about the end of the world …. though not a setting in any conventional way' (Duckworth: *Talking About Music*). The composer's reflections on *Come Out* reveal a similar concern with social issues. The work was composed for a benefit concert to raise funds for a retrial of six boys arrested for murder during the 1964 Harlem riots and its performance context was therefore more closely associated with its subject matter than was the case with *It's Gonna Rain*. Reich had a large number of tapes from which to choose and his final choice of extract is taken from Daniel Hamm's

discussion of a police beating he received. In both cases, therefore, it is the song that takes precedence over the system: the proclamation of Brother Walter; the lament of Daniel Hamm, the social context that frames both. It is fundamentally the pre-eminence of the human over the mechanical.

3

By 1970, Steve Reich had abandoned electronics as a means of composition; the technique of phasing, initially inspired by the tape experiments was similarly left behind shortly afterwards. His Phase Shifting Pulse Gate that he had so painstakingly constructed during 1968/9, was left languishing in its fibre-glass case. This was not simply because it was a prototype and therefore unreliable, although it was certainly true that the limitations of 1960s technology outweighed the benefits for Reich; it was also that technology was a potential distraction from human performance. Reich's 'optimistic predictions (1970) about the future of music' consist of five pithy assertions originally intended as a programme note. The first of these is that 'electronic music as such will gradually die and be absorbed into the ongoing music of people singing and playing instruments' (*Writings* 51). The composer commented in 2002 that he seems to have been proven largely correct.

Three Tales, first performed in its entirety that year, makes the most significant use of technology of any of Reich's pieces to date. When questioned by David Allenby as to whether there was any potential contradiction in using sophisticated audio and video technology to question the role of technology, Reich was adamant that it is not technology *per se*, but rather attitudes towards technology that lie at the centre of the work. In particular, it is the notion that technology has become our master rather than our servant; the paradox that whilst we look to it to make us immortal, technology increasingly has the power to destroy us.

4

Given our time constraints, I will make brief reference to other ways in which Reich's use of technology is the means to his allowing human subjects to express their song. It was the development of a new form of technology in the mid-1980s that enabled Reich to begin telling his own story in *Different Trains*. The voices are now

autobiographical: Reich's own story, told through characters from his own childhood, paralleled by the voices of those who survived the horrors of the concentration camp. Reich assumes here the role of narrator and uses the technology of the sampler to have the last word over those revisionists who would deny horrors of technological abuse in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

In the liner notes to the award-wining recording, the composer acknowledges the links between the piece and the phase pieces in the use of the recorded human voice, now recorded on the (relatively advanced) Casio FZ10 sampling keyboard rather than a reel-to-reel tape recorder. In embracing sampling technology, Reich makes it the means by which he creates parallel instrumental lines from the speech samples so that the songs of each of the five characters are expressed through the instrumental lines themselves.

5

The sampling keyboard is also at the heart of the 1995 composition *City Life*, here used to sample both speech and concrete sounds from the cityscape of New York, with the keyboard played live in performance rather than recorded onto tape. Reminiscent of the now discarded *Livlihood*, constructed from voices recorded by Reich in his taxi-driving days, *City Life* is a joyful immersion of the overlapping babble of voices and activities in the pre 9/11 world of Rudolf Juliani's first term as mayor. Yet the piece is prophetic as the very events of 9/11 themselves are prefigured in the story of *City Life*. The speech samples in the fifth movement are taken from the New York Fire department in 1993 at the first bombing of the World Trade Centre. The voices of the third movement are no mere soundscape but are charged with the same political energy as that of brother Walter; the voices of *It's been a honeymoon* originate from a black political rally near City Hall.

6

The personal story for Reich, and also for Beryl Korot re-emerges in the video-opera *The Cave,* as technological advances again allow a story to be told in a new way. The narrative is constructed around the story of the cave where the patriarch Abraham buried his wife Sarah, located in Hebron, now in the West Bank. The work's three

sections each deal with the question as to what meaning the characters in the original story hold for Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims and secular Americans. Each story is told through speech melody reinforced by the images on a matrix of five large video projection screens, technology in 1992 being insufficiently advanced to allow the projection of a single large image as was later possible in *Three Tales.*

The linking of story, song and image allows each of the speakers to identify with the characters in the original narratives, uniting both Jew and Palestinian in the face of the bewilderment of secular Americans. In contrast with John Adams' highly controversial *The Death of Kilinghoffer*, however, Reich does not personify conflicts of the West Bank as being between two groups who are other to himself. Instead, the technology is used to tell the story of people's reactions to the significance of the original players and to allow each soul to have its song.

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A distinctive narrative underpins Reich's approach to technology. From the urban soundscapes of Livelihood and City Life to the open railroad of Different Trains, a story emerges in which repetitive music is used to comment on the repeated impacts of technology, a chronicle that reaches its climax in Three Tales. Ultimately it is a story that is personal rather than mechanistic, one in which technology is engaged primarily as a means of expression, as a means of allowing every creature to sing its song, one in which the experience of industrialised city life helps us understand the relationship between technology and minimalism.