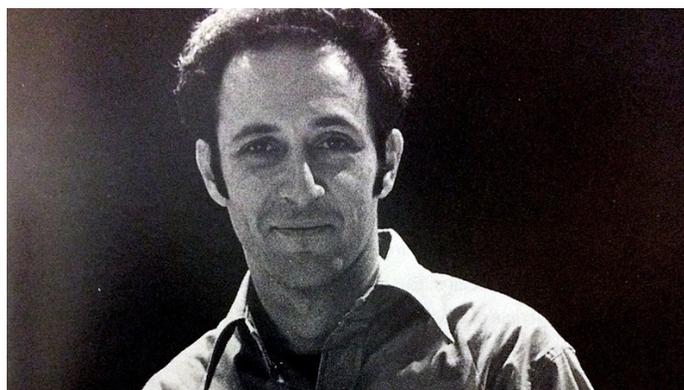


**This interview with
STEVE REICH
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 4, 2018**



Steve Reich

Library of Congress: How were you first approached about having a piece of yours included, alongside works by Pauline Oliveros and Paul Maxfield, on the 1967 album “New Sounds in Electronic Music”?

Steve Reich: I wasn’t. No, I was never approached. I knew nothing about it. I only heard about it via the grapevine. Somebody told me, I don’t remember who, somebody. It was a surprise to me.

LOC: Were you happy to be included?

SR: No, actually, I was not. Of course I know “Come Out” is a very good piece and has survived very well now for over 50 years, but why not choose the recording of it on my “Early Works” CD from Nonesuch which has other pieces of mine as well?

I’m much more known for “Music for 18 Musicians” [1976]. Many critics have said it is one of the most important pieces of the 20th century. When it was released, it sold 100,000 copies. A later recording of it by my ensemble won a Grammy. It has gone on to be recorded five times by other ensembles. It seems like the logical choice.

LOC: An enduring mistake, I suppose.... Still, the piece of yours included, “Come Out,” is quite powerful and distinctive. How did you come up with the idea for it? Did you first formulate it in your head?

SR: I had already begun composing with repeating speech phrases on tape in 1965 with “It’s Gonna Rain” (also on the “Early Works” album). Two tape recorders playing the same repeating phrase slowly go out of phase with each other creating an ever changing series of canons or

rounds. I then developed this way of composing with traditional instruments which resulted in a number of pieces including “Drumming” in 1971 which attracted international attention.

As to “Come Out,” in 1966, I was approached by Civil Rights activist Truman Nelson, who said to me, “I hear you work with tape.”

Well, I said, “I have done work with audio tape but I’m not an engineer...”

He told me he was working with a group called the Harlem Six, a group of six boys who had been arrested for murder around 1964. The kids were getting retried, and they had an attorney and they were staging a benefit to pay for the attorney and could I edit together these tapes for the benefit. And he gave me a whole stack of reel-to-reel tapes of the kids, the cops, their mothers.

I’m not a tape editor, but I could do it, and I told Truman that I would do it gratis, but wanted to take a tape fragment and to use it in a piece. And he asked: “A piece”? I played him “It’s Gonna Rain” and he really loved it, and said, “It’s a deal!”

During the process of doing the edits for the benefit, I heard Daniel Hamm, one of the kids charged, who had been injured by the police, saying about opening up the bruise on his leg—“I had to open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them.”

His speech melody was really a striking C minor: Eb,C,C,D,C. I immediately felt, “That’s it!” So, basically, that’s how it came about.

Back in 1967, it was released around Christmas by Columbia Records along with *28 records of new music!* Can you imagine? Then, out of all those new pieces, it was singled out by “Time” magazine as really new and effective. It put me on the map.

LOC: Was this up to that time your most pointed, political work?

SR: Well, “It’s Gonna Rain” is about the end of the world, the Cuban missile crisis. But, yes, “Come Out” is political and it has survived for 50 years now. It’s historical as part of the Civil Rights movement. Of course, it only matters to the Civil Rights movement because it’s successful musically. If it didn’t work musically, it wouldn’t work for the subject matter.

I think it’s an important piece and, unusually for a tape piece, it still gets played a lot. As a matter of fact, it’s been choreographed by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker as part of her great Fase choreography and has been performed around the world. Some other dance company is using it in Zurich next month.

LOC: Did you ever meet Daniel Hamm?

SR: No, but I was in touch with his mother through their lawyer. I gave her some of the royalties from the recording. I thought that naturally she and Daniel should share in that.

I don't know what happened to him—I heard he later went to and graduated from Columbia. So it sounds like he was doing well.

LOC: Obviously, “Come Out” is a very experimental work as well as a political one, did you get any negative reaction to it?

SR: Are you kidding? Absolutely! I remember when it was first played on WBAI radio, the switchboard got all these calls saying, “Your record's stuck in the groove!”

For that piece, you have to really listen carefully. The rate of change is slow. But many people, once they *listened*, they came around.

LOC: Is “Come Out” a work you are asked about a lot?

SR: Well, Pitchfork, the very prominent music site, did a long piece on it last year on “Come Out's” 50th anniversary and on its relevance to the Civil Rights movement, and it's frequently taught at universities.

But my works “Drumming” [1971] or “Music for 18 Musicians” and some of my more recent pieces are talked about much more.

“Different Trains” [1989], which is certainly one of my best, has “Come Out” as a grandparent. It too uses pre-recorded speech phrases, but this time the speech melody is actually played by members of a string quartet. The original recording by Kronos won a Grammy back in 1989.

You know, I didn't discover speech melody, that dates back at least to the late 19th and early 20th century when Janacek went around Prague writing down what people said and using their speech melodies in his operas. I know Stephen Sondheim has a keen ear for speech melody as well. I believe this has been the case for many composers and folk musicians for centuries. Almost all good new ideas turn out to be old ideas applied in new ways.

LOC: On the “New Sounds” LP, you are on it with two other legendary composers—Pauline Oliveros and Richard Maxfield. Did you ever meet them?

SR: I never met Maxfield; he died before I had the chance. Pauline, I met when I was a grad student but then I lost track of her. And, of course, she's passed away now too.

LOC: Can you tell me about the role that David Behrman, the producer of “Come Out,” played?

SR: Well, he was the one that told Columbia, “We should record this!” Of course, there was no “taping” or “recording” of this work, just a mastering session at Columbia, with the very good engineers that Columbia had. They did a little cleaning up of the voice, but the “grain” of the original is what makes it. David acted more as an A&R man. He brought “Come Out” to Columbia for my first commercial recording, and for that, I'm forever grateful.

