

The New York Times

Music Review

Four Ensembles Unite for a Contemporary Composer's Big Birthday

By Allan Kozinn
May 1, 2011



Steve Reich 75th Birthday Concert So Percussion, above, joined the Kronos Quartet, eighth blackbird and Bang on a Can All-Stars and Friends at Carnegie Hall on Saturday to celebrate a milestone in the composer's life.

[Steve Reich](#) is in the enviable position, for a living composer, of not having to wait for milestone birthday celebrations to hear his music performed. Certain seminal works — “Drumming” (1971), *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976) and “Different Trains” (1988) — are heard at least once a season, and new scores are added immediately to his expansive [Nonesuch discography](#). So when those birthdays do come — like Mr. Reich’s 75th birthday, on Oct. 3 — the stakes are raised: How do you make a concert of a composer’s works seem special when the music is heard all the time?

One way is to assemble a starry roster of new-music ensembles and have them perform music that Mr. Reich has written for them. That was what Carnegie Hall did on Saturday evening, and the results will be hard to top. [So Percussion](#), the [Kronos Quartet](#), the [Bang on a Can All-Stars](#) and [eighth blackbird](#) were on hand, and three of the four works — “2 x 5” (2008), the Mallet Quartet (2009) and “WTC 9/11” (2011) — were given their first New York performances. The rich-hued Double Sextet (2007), for which Mr. Reich won a Pulitzer Prize, filled out the program.

The newest, “WTC 9/11,” a meditation on the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, is a startling departure for Mr. Reich. Though his music has become increasingly chromatic over the years, this piece is unceasingly dissonant (insistent major and minor

seconds sounding through most of it), with jagged, anxious rhythms set against a steadily pulsing backdrop. And where the appeal of much of Mr. Reich's music, including the other works played here, is primarily visceral, "WTC 9/11" extends a growing list of pieces (starting with "Different Trains") that make a pointedly emotional appeal.

Mr. Reich scored it for three string quartets (one live; two recorded, with an option for live performance) and a manipulated speech track that includes Norad air-traffic controllers (who note that the first plane is off course and incommunicado), the recollections of first responders and witnesses, and chanted Hebrew verses ([Psalm 121:8](#) and [Exodus 23:20](#)) of consolation. The speech rhythms, mirrored in the string writing, give the piece its uneasy spikiness. The Kronos Quartet played the music with forcefulness, passion and a suitably harsh timbre.

The rest of the program was more celebratory. So Percussion's energetic account of the Mallet Quartet pointed up one of Mr. Reich's current modes of propulsion: a two-tiered approach in which the rhythmically repetitive backdrop that listeners hear as Minimalist (and as the music's distinctively Reichian signature) is offset by restless, melodically adventurous top lines. There were other contrasts here: the repeating figures, for marimbas, were dark and subdued, with a warm, wooden tone; the themes, played on vibraphones, were cool, bright and lively.

The Double Sextet and "2 x 5," which shared the second half, also use this layered approach, though their palettes and Mr. Reich's thematic imagination give them distinct personalities. The double quintet "2 x 5" — for twin rock bands, each with two guitars, bass, piano and drums — benefited from an irresistibly energetic performance by the Bang on a Can All-Stars and Friends (among them, the guitarist Bryce Dessner and the drummer Glenn Kotche). The Double Sextet, for which the All-Stars and eighth blackbird joined forces, is more conventionally scored. It includes one surprising departure for Mr. Reich: a slow movement in which vibrato-rich string, flute and clarinet lines momentarily evoke late-19th-century Vienna.