

Steve Reich's Tehillim: Jewishness and Identity

The late 1970s were a time of profound personal and aesthetic change for Steve Reich. The defining shift was rediscovering his Jewish faith and identity, beginning in 1974, as he sought to “learn more about [his] ethnic and religious background.” He therefore began studying Hebrew and the Torah in 1975, followed by studying chanting in 1976 and 1977, when he also visited Israel, experiencing the practice of Sephardic Jews while he was there.¹ His compositional practice also changed during this period, beginning with *Eight Lines (Octet)* (1979), and then *Tehillim* (1981). Reich has written about the structural influence of Hebrew cantillation on these works, arguing that he was able to develop new melodic strategies through his study, and has suggested that aspects of *Tehillim* were an attempt to bring his newfound Jewish culture and faith into his music.²

This essay explores Reich's treatment of seemingly 'Jewish' content in this work. In particular, it will consider how he appears to present this as Othered material, and will go on to assess his use of it as a projection of his developing cultural and religious identity in the context of Jewishness in the twentieth-century United States. This will be considered in relation to his other uses of content from non-Western Classical sources, particularly in his earlier works. This is perhaps most explicit in his tape pieces, *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966), but it also comes through in *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965) and *Drumming* (1970-1971), and arguably influences many of the key features of his oeuvre. The political ramifications of this discussion have been outlined in particular by Gopinath, Biareishyk, Scherzinger, and Whitesell.³ In these cases, however, the Othered content has typically been racialised as black: either African-American or West-African—as Gopinath puts it, first an 'internal', and then an 'external' Other.⁴ As such, it remains outside of Reich's identity, culturally separate. In *Tehillim*, the situation is somewhat different: rather than employing content from a distinctly different cultural identity, Reich is seeking to use elements of a culture that is simultaneously part of his identity, and yet distinct, particularly from the part of his identity that places him as a composer in the Western Classical tradition.

¹ Steve Reich, *Writings on Music: 1965-2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 105-107.

² Rebecca Y. Kim & Steve Reich, 'From New York to Vermont: Conversation with Steve Reich' (2000), <https://www.steverreich.com>, accessed 3.4.19.

³ Sumanth Gopinath, 'The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich's *Come Out*' in *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (Oxford: OUP, 2009); Sumanth Gopinath, 'Reich in Blackface: *Oh Dem Watermelons* and Radical Minstrelsy in the 1960s', *Journal of the Society for American Music*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2011), 139-193; Siarhei Biareishyk, 'Come Out to Show the Split Subject: Steve Reich, Whiteness, and the Avant-Garde', *Current Musicology*, No. 93 (Spring 2012), 73-93; Martin Scherzinger, 'Curious Intersections, Uncommon Magic: Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain*', *Current Musicology*, Nos. 79 & 80 (2005), 207-244; Lloyd Whitesell, 'White Noise: Race and Erasure in the Cultural Avant-Garde', *American Music*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 168-189.

⁴ Sumanth Gopinath, 'Composer Looks East: Steve Reich and Discourse on Non-Western Music', *Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts* 3, Nos. 3-4 (2004), 141.

Is it all in the title?

Identifying those elements of *Tehillim* that function as 'Jewish' precedes this interpretative discussion, however. The most explicit of these is the Hebrew text. Reich posits that, having decided to introduce his Jewishness into his music, for him "the most obvious way was to set a text in the original Hebrew."⁵ Though, if divorced from an explicitly autobiographical framing, choosing to set a text in Hebrew was not necessarily a statement about Reich's identity, it was certainly a statement about situating this piece as somehow Jewish. Whether this Jewishness is cultural or religious is unclear from the language alone: the distinction between Jewishness as community and/or religion is often indistinct, or, as Bershtel and Graubard put it, "uniquely messy."⁶ Nonetheless, the choice of Hebrew certainly positions the piece as referring at least to the Jewish community. Weingrad goes so far as to argue that "the Hebrew language was the only vehicle for a Jewish national identity that could both draw deeply on the stores of Jewish civilization and religious heritage and provide its creative and vital continuance in a secular age."⁷ Although he is referring to the State of Israel here, the point holds for the larger international Jewish community. Reich's choice of text was a significant statement.

If the choice of Hebrew places *Tehillim* in the context of the Jewish cultural community, the decision to use texts from the Psalms would appear to demarcate this as specifically religious. Sarna argues that, "The Jewish Holy Scriptures have long served as a defining symbol of American Jewish communal life and culture."⁸ This is unsurprising, and yet meaningful: in the context of a concert work like *Tehillim*, Reich's choice of a religious text positions the work as engaging with faith as much as community (given this setting, it is reasonable to assume that listeners will typically be provided with the source of the text, if not a full translation). This comment requires some qualification, however: Reich has stated that he sought a "text that I could say to anyone, Jew or non-Jew. [...] a very universal text."⁹ Whilst the text includes references to God, it is largely uncontroversial in its theological content, and so although it stakes out a religious position, it avoids offending secular audiences.

There was another reason that Reich chose a Psalm text, however. As he outlines in his descriptions of the piece, in the Ashkenazi tradition, of which he is a member, there is no tradition of chanting the Psalms, unlike for other books of the Bible. As such, he felt "free to compose a setting for them without

⁵ Kim & Reich, 'From New York to Vermont'.

⁶ Sara Bershtel & Allen Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 99.

⁷ Michael Weingrad, 'Hebrew in America', in *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), 281.

⁸ Jonathan Sarna, 'The Bible and Judaism in America', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, ed. Paul C. Gutjahr (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 1.

⁹ Kim & Reich, 'From New York to Vermont'.

the constrictions of a living oral tradition [...] to either imitate or ignore".¹⁰ As is typical for Reich, he has developed something approaching a 'creation myth' surrounding the genesis of this work: his comments closely follow the same narrative, often repeating phrases verbatim, in a variety of different contexts.¹¹ There is a discrepancy in the sources, however. A 1982 entry in his *Writings* outlines his initial attempts at using a text from the Prophet Jonah, before shifting to the Psalms; by 2000, however, he described the choice of the Psalms as "the most obvious text to set".¹² This is notable because he explains abandoning Jonah as due to the traditions of cantillation: he felt that he need only "transcribe Jonah exactly as it is chanted".¹³ As expressed earlier in the same article, in Reich's view it was inappropriate to imitate the sound of Hebrew cantillation, as this would merely result in a "Jewish sounding piece", a form of appropriation.¹⁴ For Reich, music that evoked cantillation therefore 'sounded Jewish' in a way that a piece merely using a Hebrew text did not. This disparity is further illuminated by Reich's setting of the Hebrew text, particularly in relation to rhythm and form. According to his narrative, "[t]he rhythm of the music here comes directly from the rhythm of the Hebrew text",¹⁵ and the form of the piece clearly follows the text, both on a movement-to-movement level, and internally, with clear caesuras and other textural devices demarcating smaller structural units. He was clearly keen to present the text according to its spoken usage in the Jewish community, and yet argues that this does not produce a 'Jewish sound'.

Reich's explanation for this draws on his much-cited distinction between 'sonic', and 'structural' influence, which he tends to deploy whenever discussing non-Western-Classical influences.¹⁶ For him, the sound of cantillation would be inappropriate, whilst the rhythms and form of the text is structural, and thus unproblematic. Though he avoid precisely defining the difference between sound and structure, from comparing his comments it appears that sonic elements concern pitch and timbre, whilst structural elements rhythm and form. Leaving aside the reality to which these elements can be subdivided, and the Euro-centric analytical approach that justifies this subdivision, Reich's claim that *Tehillim* avoids any Jewish-sounding influence is contradicted by his own writing, in which he describes the tambourines without jingles as "perhaps similar to the small drum called *tof* in [...] the biblical text.

¹⁰ Reich, *Writings*, 118.

¹¹ See for example 'Steve Reich on Tehillim + Bach' (2014), <https://youtu.be/creTXfBzjBg>, accessed 3.4.19; 'Steve Reich Reflects on His Most Significant Works', *q Magazine* (2016), <https://youtu.be/yg7kKJsFpvc>, accessed 3.4.19; 'Steve Reich and Colin Currie - Tehillim' (2017), <https://youtu.be/iqRBGGIzuaM>, accessed 3.4.19; Reich, *Writings*; Kim & Reich, 'From New York to Vermont'. Reich's careful curation of the narratives surrounding his career is remarkable, exemplified by his donating his archive to the Paul Sacher Stiftung over a decade ago.

¹² Reich, *Writings*, 114; Kim & Reich, 'From New York to Vermont'.

¹³ Reich, *Writings*, 118.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

Hand clapping as well as rattles were also commonly used throughout the Middle East in the biblical period, as were small pitched cymbals.”¹⁷ The instrumentation of *Tehillim* thus appears to be a transplant of a Middle Eastern biblical-period ensemble, much as Gopinath has identified the *Drumming* ensemble as “a Western transplant of the Ewe ensemble”.¹⁸ Reich’s choice of ensemble, much like his choice of text, thus clearly proclaims Jewishness, even if by Western tropes of Middle Eastern music, exemplified at the opening with the sparse texture of clapping, tambourine, and single voice (not to mention the Phrygian implications of the melodies). The point of raising this is hardly to lambast Reich for this apparent appropriation—rather it is to demonstrate that the neat dichotomy he establishes to legitimate his borrowings and influences does not stand up to close inspection, which is particularly notable given the moral weight he places the division.

So what?

There are therefore two principal elements in *Tehillim* that overtly and intentionally situate it as Jewish: the text, and the instrumentation. The remainder of this essay will discuss Reich’s treatment of the text, particularly in comparison with *It’s Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, and the implications it may have for reading this work as a projection of his developing Jewish identity.

The principal observation to make is Reich’s consistent focus on textual clarity. The text-setting is typically syllabic and clear throughout. Melismas are rare, and when they do occur (e.g. Fig. 1) they do not distort the text. Likewise, long extensions of syllables tend to be the final syllable in a given word, thus clearly maintaining the meaning as audible for the listener. Instrumental doublings of the voices, always serve to support and colour the voices (a technique he derived from BWV 4), and there are no extended purely instrumental sections in the work.¹⁹ The opening of each movement exposes that movement’s full text clearly and without textual counterpoint, ensuring maximal audibility, whilst the tempi are fast enough that full words are easily comprehended. He has discussed various intentional examples of conventional word-painting,²⁰ and indeed posits that “based on my musical intuition, *the text demanded this kind of setting*”.²¹ Some of this appears similar to the tape pieces, which both begin with a clear, comprehensible exposition of the full text, before focussing on a particular fragment. Likewise, despite the prevalence of processes in these, much of the structure is dictated by Reich’s intuition.

A comparison of his textual treatment between *Tehillim* and the tape pieces is valuable here, particularly as much of the literature, though dealing with the tape pieces, raises points pertinent to

¹⁷ Ibid., 101.

¹⁸ Gopinath, ‘Steve Reich and Discourse on Non-Western Music’, 137.

¹⁹ ‘Steve Reich on Tehillim + Bach’.

²⁰ Reich, *Writings*, 104; ‘Steve Reich on Tehillim + Bach’.

²¹ Reich, *Writings*, 104.

Ex. I: Movt. 4, Figure R

This musical score is for a section titled "Ex. I: Movt. 4, Figure R". It is written for a large ensemble and includes the following parts:

- Clarinet 1**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures.
- Oboe 1, 2**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures.
- English Horn, Bassoon**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures.
- Maracas**: Percussion part with a 12/8 time signature, marked with a sharp sign (#) and a slur over the first four measures.
- Tambourine 1**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Tambourine 2**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Voice 4**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, singing the lyrics "Ha - - - - le - lu - - hu ba -".
- Voice 2**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, singing the lyrics "Ha - - - - le - lu - - hu ba -".
- Voice 3**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, singing the lyrics "Ha - - - - le - lu - - hu ba -".
- Violin I**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a sustained chord with a slur.
- Violin II**: Treble clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a sustained chord with a slur.
- Viola**: Alto clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a sustained chord with a slur.
- Violoncello**: Bass clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a sustained chord with a slur.
- Contrabass**: Bass clef, 12/8 time signature, playing a sustained chord with a slur.

The score is divided into two systems, with a measure rest of 10 measures between the systems. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

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tof u - ma - chol,

tof u - ma - chol,

tof u - ma - chol,

Tehillim. The major difference is his treatment of the texts after their initial exposition. In the case of the tape pieces, the fragments of text are subjected to rigorous phasing, with multiple layers superimposed. The close proximity of repetitions produces an extremely dense texture which, despite the appearance of a consistent pulse, always retains rhythmic instability due to the blurring produced by the phasing. Various authors have proffered different interpretations of the semantic result of this. For Scherzinger, the intensely close and repetitive layering of *It's Gonna Rain* produces an effect in which the "text has been effaced, or even replaced by texture."²² He distinguishes Reich's repetition from the rhetorical technique of emphatic repetition, instead suggesting that the words are reduced to their sonic basis, stripped of semantic content. This view is shared by Biareishyk in reference to *Come Out*, arguing that Reich transforms the vocality of the words into "utter noise".²³ These authors suggest that Reich achieves this both by obscuring the aural identity of the words through the dense texture, and encouraging the listener to hear the sounds as semantically meaningless, via the persistent repetition.

Scherzinger further interrogates *It's Gonna Rain*, suggesting that despite the initial neutralisation of the text, the extraneous sonic phenomena produced by phasing create an animalistic aesthetic, contextualised by contemporary tropes of blackness: "black America is thus cast as primal man".²⁴ As such, Reich's initial elevation of the black voice is replaced by a silencing and deflating of it. Gopinath identifies similar tropes in *Come Out*, suggesting that the dense frenzy of repetition speaks to contemporary social paranoia amongst both black and white Americans, motivated in different ways by the riots that inspired this piece.²⁵ In the tape pieces the semantic content of the text is thus rendered aurally incomprehensible through the dense texture, even if augmented by resulting sounds.

In *Tehillim*, this is never the case. Though the canonic construction is similar (Reich views phasing as simply a type of canon²⁶), there is a radical aesthetic difference: in *Tehillim* the text always remains audible. This is due simply to the proximity of parts. Whilst the tape pieces produce instability and obscure the words, in *Tehillim* even the densest textures maintain the same quaver pulse, often explicit in the percussion, and there is always enough separation between voices that the words are audible. Returning to *Come Out*, Gopinath has suggested that the density of the textures "do violence" to Hamm's voice.²⁷ Whilst querying the possibility of literal violence in this manner is beyond the scope of this

²² Scherzinger, 'Curious Intersections, Uncommon Magic', 216.

²³ Biareishyk, 'Come Out to Show the Split Subject', 88.

²⁴ Scherzinger, 'Curious Intersections, Uncommon Magic', 216-218.

²⁵ Gopinath, 'The Problem of the Political', 137-138.

²⁶ Steve Reich, 'Thoughts on percussion and rhythm' in *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, ed. Russell Hartenberger (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), 177.

²⁷ Gopinath, 'The Problem of the Political', 135.

essay, the basic point is clear on listening: the dense, clustered texture sounds violent and aggressive, Hamm's voice is being erased—the same claim cannot be said of *Tehillim*.

This technique of erasure is crucial for comprehending Reich's identity projection in *Tehillim*. Whitesell has explored erasure in the tape pieces, arguing that using a racialised Other allows white culture to achieve self-definition, by distinguishing itself from this Other: "the relational scenario foregrounds the Other as a fascinating difference or a problem to be solved while leaving the racial character of the Self unvoiced and submerged."²⁸ In Reich's tape pieces, the gradual erasure of the Other (the voices initially audibly racialised as black) slowly reveals the true 'subject' (the (white) composer). This sort of erasure puts the white composer and white culture in a "powerful conceptual position",²⁹ articulating whiteness as "the background, the norm, the blank field against which figures of contrast can be played out."³⁰ Whitesell argues that this is a classic example of exnomination, the process by which white culture maintains its normalising position through the avoidance of itself being named and identified, resulting in equating 'white' with 'universal'.

Returning to *Tehillim*, this erasure is actively avoided: Reich always seeks to preserve textual clarity. In doing so he maintains its Hebrew, and thus Jewish identity, rather than assimilating these elements into the seemingly universal white American context of the work. Indeed, it is worth noting that even for listeners who do not understand Hebrew—likely much of its audience, including this author—the Hebrew identity of the text remains clear: individual syllables remain recognisable. This is Reich's clearest assertion of himself as Jewish: the Jewish elements are afforded a respect never given to the black elements discussed above. Rather than introducing the Jewish elements as a clear Other and then erasing this aspect of their identity to assert his dominance, he instead keeps them in tension, seeking an aesthetic of fusion. As a result, *Tehillim* functions as a quasi-autobiography, projecting Reich's assertion of his identity as both a white American Classical composer, and a member of the Jewish community. Drawing on Lacan, Biareishyk has suggested that Reich's treatment of the black voice in *Come Out* is an attempt to "transgress the space of his community" by redefining noise as music, and thus assert his identity as a radical composer. This is produced by a split in his subjectivity in which he both seeks to be identified as an avant-garde composer by the community to which he belongs, and yet, in order to achieve this, he must abandon this very community: he must both belong and not-belong.³¹ In the case of *Tehillim*, Reich appears more to be asserting his belonging to multiple communities.

²⁸ Whitesell, 'White Noise', 176.

²⁹ Ibid., 177.

³⁰ Ibid., 176.

³¹ Biareishyk, 'Come Out to Show the Split Subject', 82.

Are we decolonising?

In a final act of self-reflexivity, I wish to ask to what extent this essay is an act of 'decolonising'. Drawing on Bhabra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu, we can understand decolonising as “a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study; it re-situates these phenomena as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view. [...] it purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis.”³² As they suggest, it can refer to a wide variety of actions, though Gopal effectively summarises these as: a. foregrounding works that have typically been neglected from the canon due to imperial legacies or b. considering canonical works in the light of postcolonial ideas.³³ As an essay about a musical work, codified in a score, written by a straight, white (albeit Jewish) man, this clearly fails on the first count, but I hope scores better on the second. Indeed, this seems vital to me: it remains too common for writing about 'non-Western' aspects of music to ignore any political contextualisation.³⁴ Gopinath describes *Come Out* as a “a site of interpretive struggle”³⁵; this is the case for any music, but particularly that in which power asymmetries are so strong. Reich shows an awareness of this with his, albeit clumsy, dichotomy between sound and structure, and though I suspect it was more of a post-hoc justification than a pre-conceived approach, it belies a discomfort with the ease of Western appropriation. As early as 1977 Foucault argued that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations.”³⁶ The knowledge of content as non-Western relies on these very power relations. It is irresponsible just to identify aesthetic features—we *must* expose the power dynamics inherent in them.

³² Gurminder K. Bhabra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancioğlu, 'Introduction: Decolonising the University?' in ed. Bhabra et al., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto, 2018), 2.

³³ Priyamvada Gopal, 'Yes, we must decolonise: our teaching has to go beyond elite white men', *The Guardian*, 27.10.2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/27/decolonise-elite-white-men-decolonising-cambridge-university-english-curriculum-literature>.

³⁴ For just a few examples in the Reich literature, see Antonella Puca, 'Steve Reich and Hebrew Cantillation', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Winter, 1997), 537-555; Jamie Marie Thierman, *The Integration of African Musical Elements into Western Classical Music* (PhD Diss, UCLA, 2015); Sean Atkinson, 'Canons, Augmentations, and Their Meaning in Two Works by Steve Reich', *Music Theory Online*, Volume 17, No. 1 (April 2011).

³⁵ Gopinath, 'The Problem of the Political', 123.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, trans. Alan Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 27.

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