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Steve Reich's *The Desert Music* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival

"For music is changing in character
today as it has always done."

—WCW (SE 57)

On October 25-27, the 1984 Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music presented the American premiere of Steve Reich's *The Desert Music*, a piece for chorus and orchestra setting to music excerpts from three poems by William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," "The Orchestra," and his translation of Theocritus' *Idyl I*. Michael Tilson Thomas conducted the Brooklyn Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra and chorus, and he, the musicians, and the composer received standing ovations after the performances.

Steve Reich is one of this country's most promising young composers. Since 1966, when he founded his own ensemble, Reich has been associated with "minimalist" music, inspired by his studies of Asian and African musical traditions, particularly their use of a polyphonic layering of repetitive, pulsing rhythms. His minimalist works have always had a strong, dancing beat and clear tonal centers, in pointed contrast to the atonal and jagged structures of the academic serialism dominant in the 1960s. With Reich's most recent masterworks, *Music for 18 Musicians*, *Tehillim*, and *The Desert Music*, however, "minimalist" now seems an inaccurate name for his increasingly ravishing mix of rhythms, timbres, tempo changes, and harmonies. With this Brooklyn Academy premiere, Steve Reich moves in one leap from being a leader of the American avant-garde in music to being a leader in American music, period. Unlike almost any other living American composer, he is able to fill a large house with an enthusiastic audience for new classical music. It is especially fitting that the piece that affirms Reich's arrival to the center of American musical life pays tribute to William Carlos Williams, another American artist who entered the American mainstream without compromising his integrity as an avant-garde artist.

Reich says that he has read and loved Williams' work since he was 16. He began *The Desert Music* by selecting favorite texts of Williams' and then letting them inspire appropriate music. The texts chosen are as follows. Part I: "Begin, my friend,/ for you cannot,/ you may be sure,/ take your song,/ which drives all things out of mind,/ with you to the other world" (PB 107). Part II: "Well, shall we/ think or listen? Is there a sound addressed/ not wholly to the ear?/ We half close/ our eyes. We do not/ hear it through our eyes./ It is not/ a flute note either, it is the relation/ of a flute note/ to a drum. I am wide/ awake. The mind/ is listening" (PB 81). Part IIIA: "Say to them:/ 'Man has survived hitherto because he was too ignorant/ to know how to realize his wishes. Now that he can realize/ them, he must either change them or perish'" (PB 82). IIIB: "it is a principle of music/ to repeat the theme. Repeat/ and repeat again,/ as the pace mounts. The/ theme is difficult ./ but no more difficult/ than the facts to be/ resolved" (PB 81). IIIC: repeats IIIA. IV: repeats II. V: "Inseparable from the fire/ its light/ takes precedence over it./ . . . / Who most shall advance the light—/ call it what you may!" (PB 178, 181).

In tune with Williams' concern with nuclear weapons, death, music, and light in these poems, Reich's piece is more chromatic and "darker" in harmony than his earlier work. It also employs fast, medium and slow tempos for the first time, along with an arch-like A-B-C-B-A structure. Mixing major and minor keys, harmonic and chromatic movement, and dirge- and dance-like rhythms, the work is a moving tribute to the rhythms, tensions, and radiance of Williams' late style. *The Desert Music* is scheduled to be recorded for Nonesuch Records sometime in 1985.

Peter Schmidt