

Tehillim Parts I – IV
Steve Reich
Analysis by David Mitchell

Tehillim (Psalms) is the first piece in a series of pieces by Steve Reich that explores his Jewish heritage using of Psalm text from the Hebrew Torah. Besides the Hebrew text, Reich uses a variety of cultural and historical ingredients to create a unique piece that is a suitable setting for the text. These ingredients fit neatly into the categories of rhythm, texture, and timbre. Vertical harmony and traditional-horizontal-chord progressions are not as important in this piece. Reich uses rhythm, texture, and timbre to emphasize the poetic meter and meaning of the Psalm text.

The harmonic meter is very slow, and there are very few dissonant notes in this piece. Chord changes are generally two to three measures apart. All of the notes are primarily from diatonic collections with few notes outside of the collection. For example, the beginning of the piece is in the G Dorian mode and it stays there for a long time before it modulates to E Aeolian mode. With this in mind, there is an interval in Part III with a note that is outside of the diatonic collection. On the Hebrew word for perverse, there is a tritone sonority between notes A and D # in the upper two female voice parts. This is a very effective use of text painting by Steve Reich. This part of the piece really stands out because, up to this point, there have been few if any dissonant sonorities. This is a good example of how a device can be more effective if used sparingly.

There are several ingredients in this piece that can be found in earlier periods of music history. The modal orientation of the melody and harmony is reminiscent of medieval music. There is canonic imitation that is very similar to 15th century Renaissance imitation. There are also homophonic textures in Parts III and IV that recall English homophonic pan consonance in the early Renaissance period. The intervals in these homophonic sections are generally 4^{ths} and 5^{ths}. This is very similar to early medieval-period organum. Additionally, there are other sections that recall episodic Baroque fugal textures.

By far the most important ingredient in this piece is the rhythm. The rhythm makes up for a lack of harmonic interest and it brings out the poetic meter and meaning of the Hebrew words. For example, the poetic meter of the Psalm text is a series of stressed and unstressed syllables that Reich emphasizes with three and two count rhythmic groupings. Three count groups are on stressed syllables while two count groups are on unstressed syllables. Triangles in the score designate a three count group and a line represents a two count group. This makes it very easy for the performers to read because they don't have to look at note values to determine rhythmic groupings.

In Part IV, Reich uses rhythm to take the place of harmonic tension. The modal harmonic structure and lack of dissonance make it difficult to create a sense of increasing dramatic tension. Reich solves this problem by relying on rhythmic tension instead. In Part IV, the last part of the piece gradually accelerates to the end. This creates a growing sense of tension and climax.

The raga-like rhythmic complexity and texture that characterizes Reich's minimalistic style fits the Psalm text in Part I very well. Part I is based on Psalm 19:1-4. Verses 1 and 2 say "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge."¹ The nearly continuous rhythmic active is like the continuous declaration of God's glory in the firmament.

The instrumentation throughout this piece and particularly the fourth movement is based on Psalm 150, similar to the instrumentation of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. Psalms 150:3-5 says "Praise him with the sound of the trumpet; praise him with the psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance; praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals; praise him upon the high sounding cymbals."²

The use of amplification and electric organs is an example of Steve Reich borrowing ingredients from other styles. The electric organs and amplified strings give the piece a rock and roll flavor. The

¹ Psalms 19:1-4 (King James Version).

² Psalms 150:3-5 (King James Version).

bass part sounds like an electric bass guitar in a rock band. The amplification makes the strings sound detached and ethereal. The long sustained chords in the strings sound like power chords on an electric guitar.

In conclusion, this piece is very eclectic. It uses ingredients for a variety of stylistic, historical, and cultural sources. Reich tastefully uses these ingredients to complement the Psalm text. In the end, this piece sounds like world music.