

Musical symbols of the ephemera – eternal dichotomy in the final movement of *Tehillim* by Steve Reich

Alexandra BELIBOU¹

Abstract: *In my paper I chose to analyse a 20th century work by Steve Reich, a musical setting of psalms in Hebrew language. The dichotomy between the evanescence and the eternal in the last musical part of Tehillim is a hermeneutical aspect that caught my attention because of the artful way in which the composer used augmentation as a symbol of time dilation. Time and rhythm in music are metaphorical images of extra-musical time –the human time in comparison with the divine time. The hermeneutic analysis of the musical texts offers the opportunity to go beyond the harmonic and rhythmic texture, to a spiritual universe whereby the composer argues his choices.*

Keywords: *eternal, ephemera, evanescence, symbol, psalm, augmentation, rhythm*

1. Introduction

As Gabriel Liiceanu - Romanian philosopher - states: “*humans need music because they need the remembrance of paradise, and there is no other way to restore it than through music and love*”. When we try to understand the musical language as a symbolic one, the responsibility of transcending the complex textures of the musical discourse becomes evident, additionally to the urge to perceive the real meanings of sonorous art through hermeneutic methods. The artistic works are echoes of the soul’s tumult of their creator, they are also confession acts, and an undying declaration of love. In any aspect that we exposit before, the important issue is the *why* of artistic expression that carries over the *how* music was built. From this point of view I chose to interpret the musical setting of psalms named *Tehillim* by Steve Reich, a testimony of the composer’s mosaic faith.

¹ PhD Candidate, *Transilvania* University of Braşov, xela_lrig@yahoo.ca

2. Discussion

Known for his experimental music, Reich is the composer of works like: *Piano Phase*, *Come Out*, *It's Gonna Rain*, *Clapping Music*, *Different Trains*, *Music for 18 Musicians*, *Drumming*. The musician under discussion pioneered American minimal music along with Terry Riley and Philip Glass. His preference for repeated rhythmic patterns, and the phasing technique (in which the same phrase is played on two or more musical instruments, in steady but not identical tempo) are specific elements that sign his creation.

Constantin Noica asserts that one of the spiritual diseases of the contemporary being shows itself through man's non-affiliation to a context (Noica 2008, 33). The original artistic act reveals the beauty of the creator's spirit, thus we can say that Steve Reich combated the error under consideration– the non-affiliation to a general– through a musical score called *Tehillim*. The title's translation is *The Book of Psalms* (from Hebrew); this aspect along with the preference for certain psalms texts hint a wish to testify the composer's Jewish ancestry.

David's *Book of Psalms* is one of the poetical books of the Old Testament with great spiritual and artistic value. The human feelings towards God stated in this historic poems show a heterogeneity of subjects that cover many types of prayer. By analyzing the psalms one can discover prayers of faith, prayers of supplication, thanksgiving prayers, worship religious texts, and prayers of imprecation. Considering the facts above, we easily understand why this spiritual poems were inspirational for musicians throughout history. "*The Book of Psalms is a collective vault of knowledge that reveals to one man, depending on his struggle, what he needs*". (Saint Basil the Great 2011, 365)

„*In the Judaic ritual, the psalms were a part of the teffilah prayer, that is, in fact, a series of short blessings pronounced in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening with an instrumental accompaniment or/and vocal one*" (Costea 2006, 20). Steve Reich tells the reasons for his choice of Psalms 19 (2-5), 34 (13-15), 18 (26-27) and 150 (4-6): their importance in the Judaic praise, and the fact that the traditional music of this biblical poems did not survive in time. Composing a musical score starting from an historic text without a living oral musical tradition means not having to "*either imitate or ignore*" (Reich 1984, score introduction) melodies.

Scored for four women's voices (one high soprano, two lyric sopranos and one alto), piccolo, flute, oboe, English horn, two clarinets, six percussion (playing small tuned tambourines without jingles, clapping, maracas, marimba, vibraphone and crotales), two electric organs, two violins, viola, cello and bass, *Tehillim* is a musical piece that strikes as different from Reich's earlier works. The melodic material serves text's accents and represents an exception in the composer's minimal

technique. Reich's earlier pieces are based on a steady pulse and minimal to no melodic and harmonic development. The musical setting of psalms implies an extended melodic composition, the rhythm presented by the percussion instruments reminds us of the prayer atmosphere in the Old Testament, the result is a musical score in which we witness a fusion of new and traditional. *"In contrast to most of my earlier work, Tehillim is not composed of short repeating patterns. Though an entire melody may be repeated either as the subject of a canon or variation, this is actually closer to what one finds throughout the history of Western music. (...)The rhythm of the music comes from the rhythm of the Hebrew text. This is the first time I have set a text to music since my student days and the result is a piece based on melody in the basic sense of that word."* (Reich 1984)

Score in C

TEHILLIM

Part I

Steve Reich (1981)

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 144$ [A] 1

Oboes 1, 2

English Horn
Bassoon

Clarinets 1, 2

Clapping $\frac{1}{2}$
 $\frac{2}{4}$
mf

Maracas

4 tuned
Tambourines
without jingles
mf

Organ 1

Organ 2

Female Voice $\frac{1}{4}$
 $\frac{2}{4}$
non vibrato sempre
Ha - sha - my-im meh-sa-peh - reem Ka - vohd Kail u - ma-sh - say ya-dive mah -

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello &
Contrabass

Fig. 1. *Tehillim – fragment*

Structured in four sections, *Tehillim* starts with a musical representation of Psalm 19 (2-5). The first part of the score is written in a predominant vocal manner, the voice line that initiates a sonorous universe alludes to Judaic music, suggestively accompanied by claps and tambourines without jingles. The first singular voice will be gradually followed by other three solo voices and instruments of the orchestral ensemble. After the first musical section that reveals a thankful song of praise about God's creation, the second part of *Tehillim* uses the text of Psalm 34 (13-15). This psalm deals with man as central part of creation, and his steps to salvation. The last two contrastable sections outline a meditative environment attached to God's mercy followed by a bursting song of glory (in Part IV of *Tehillim*).

The dichotomy between the evanescence and the eternal in the last musical part of *Tehillim* has a technical background related to the imitation composition technique that assures the conspicuousness of certain melodic fragments. In the section under discussion, Psalm 150 (4-6) is set to music - *Praise Him with drum and dance, praise Him with the strings and pipe. Praise Him with the clash of cymbals, praise Him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Eternal. Hallelujah.* The musical representations of this psalm throughout history are oft and divers, because the text invites to many ways to praise the Lord.

By analyzing the musical pages of Part IV from Reich's psaltic work, we notice a two voice ample start with a sustained harmonic accompaniment of the orchestral ensemble. The percussion instruments maintain their rhythmic part that alludes to the Old Testament prayers accompanied by claps and tambourine. I underline the importance of a melodic theme that occurs along the musical development with rhythm augmentation as main composition technique, and I lay emphasis on the time and rhythm in music that are metaphorical images of extramusical time.

If the initiating vocal theme – which utilizes the melodic material from the first parts theme – appears to begin with a sinuous melodic profile and constant interval jumps, exposed in two unison voices – at an interval of fourth, fifth and sixths – the thematical development occurs in isarithm through the appeal of the canon in stretto. Upon a two-voice imitation, the composer appeals to the accumulation of expressive tension through a canon in four voices, once again in stretto. For a well done metric juxtaposition within alternating measures, Reich modifies the rhythm of the imitated vocals in certain responses. I also mention the interval component of the generating theme to observe its rhythmic augmentation throughout the musical score without interval changes.

Original
Canon
Melody

3m 5p 2M 3m 5p 3M 2M 4p

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof u - ma - chol,

Fig. 2. Initiating vocal theme – part IV Tehillim

1
2
3
4

Voices

mf

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof u - ma - chol, Ha - le -

mf

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof u - ma -

mf

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof

mf

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof

Fig. 3. Initiating vocal theme – canon

The second melodic theme, which is to be treated isarithm, is an augmentation of the above mentioned. We can also observe a conservation of the melodic intervals. The development through counter-point is missing within this theme, the atmosphere thus being gradually shifted and the musical rhythm appears to be expanded.

3m 5p 2M 3m 5p 3M 2M 4p

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof u - ma - chol,

Fig. 4. Augmented theme (first appearance) – part IV Tehillim

Voices 2 (Lyric S.)

3 (Alto)

mf

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof u - ma - chol, ___

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof u - ma - chol, ___

Fig. 5. *Augmented theme - isarithm*

The final appearance of the theme temporarily sustains the dilation idea through rhythmic augmentation in comparison to the initial theme. Once again, we observe a respect for the musical interval within the melodic profile with minimum additions.

3m 5p 2M 3m 5p 3m 2m

Ha - le - lu - hu ba - tof u - ma - chol, ___

Fig. 5. *Augmented theme (second appearance) – part IV Tehillim*

The final theme, that leads towards the musical conclusion of the work *Tehillim*, is developed isarithm, through the vocal unison of the 3rd and 4th voices. This characteristic underlines the desire for musical atmospheric contrast of the composer.

3. Conclusions

Commencing from the above-mentioned statements, I derive that there are two layouts based upon the musical rhythm, which lead me to think about the extended musical beat, and its ephemeral and eternity to be precise. If at the first encounter of the theme it is treated as a stretto imitation, the second time around, when the expanded theme occurs, there is a renunciation of the imitative writing in favor of a harmonized development in two voices. This matter then leads to a third approach of the theme, once again with an expanded time. The finale of *Tehillim* presents an amplitude of chords, both vocally and instrumental. The atmosphere is thus shifted from one theme to another, the rhythmic expansion serving as a way of expanding time. From a hermeneutic standpoint, the temporary expansion leads to an elevation of earthly time, with its fast and tumultuous passing, to a godly eternal. To sustain

the aforementioned changes, we notice the orchestra writing which modifies its rhythmic-harmonic stance at each new thematic exposure. Thus, on the initial appearance of the theme the musical composition appears to be focused on development, the harmonies being modified and morphed. At its second appearance, the theme can be discussed from a ritualistic and repetitive rhythm, without any development and with an accompaniment that is harmonically ostinato. These characteristics gradually lead to the disappearance of a so called *future* – through the lapse of development – from the extra-musical time. Thus, in the final thematic augmentation the above mentioned are highly emphasized. The repeated rhythm contours a static yet grandiose atmosphere, a symbol of eternity. This aspect is also resonant of the Old Testament dance, which is juxtaposed upon successive chords (ostinato), with an augmentation of the themes rhythm, and isarithm at the 3rd and 4th voice.

The hermeneutic analysis of the musical writing offers the opportunity to go beyond the rhythmic-harmonic thread, towards a spiritual and philosophical universe in which the composer may argue his choices. As Constantin Noica used to say, the culture sustained by a philosophical conscience has the virtue to elevate matters to their rightful state. The choice of psalter writing in a musical composition of the 20th century, that belongs to a composer with minimalistic technique, draws attention towards the spiritual realm. The dichotomy of human – divine time is an aspect which binds itself to idealism, to allow the comparison of ephemera and eternity to be natural for someone who is concerned with their mosaic cult identity. The musical time and rhythm are treated as symbols for the extended musical beat. Rhythmic augmentation has the role of highlighting the temporal expansion (time dilation). Upholding this procedure of melodic theme development is made through the accompaniment of the instrumental ensemble, which gradually loses in harmonic progress in favor of ostinato script. The ephemera – eternal dichotomy is a hermeneutic aspect which is evidenced through the analysis of the score from the final movement of *Tehillim* by Steve Reich.

4. References

- Costea, Marcel Octav. 2006. *Sacerdotes, Schola et Christifideles*. București: Editura Muzicală.
- Noica, Constantin. 2008. *Șase maladii ale spiritului contemporan* [Six diseases of contemporary spirit]. București: Humanitas.
- Reich, Steve. 1984. *Note by the composer* in Steve Reich – *Tehillim*, CD. Hendon Music, Boosey & Hawkes.

- Gomboș, Stelian. 2011. "References about the Book of Psalms in orthodox faith." *Confluente Literare*, March 25, București. Available at: http://confluente.org/Cateva_referinte_despre_cartea_psalmlor_in_spiritualitatea_ortodoxa.html
- Reich, Steve. 1984. *Tehillim*. CD. Hendon Music, Boosey & Hawkes.