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Relationship and Community in the Creative Process:
The Steve Reich and Musicians Ensemble

In 1974, Steve Reich outlined the early history of his ensemble of musicians in an article included in his *Writings On Music*. The ensemble was initially a trio formed between 1965-66 when Reich moved to New York from San Francisco and started working with pianist Arthur Murphy and woodwind player Jon Gibson. In 1971, however, the ensemble underwent its first major expansion to twelve players who were all involved in Reich's process of composing, teaching, and rehearsing *Drumming*. At this time, it became known as the Steve Reich and Musicians ensemble. Following the premiere of *Drumming*, this ensemble was the primary outlet for his compositions for several decades and, although there was fluctuation in the membership of the group, the ensemble remained committed to the performance and dissemination of Reich's music. This paper explores the ways in which this ensemble was formed throughout the process of composing and rehearsing *Drumming* and how the group's musical and interpersonal cohesion was sustained. Reich and his musicians actively cultivated close relationships and a sense of community within the ensemble. Not only did this create, in Reich's view, an "ensemble solidity that makes playing together a joy," (Reich, 1974: 81) but it also allowed these performers to have a significant degree of influence on the creation of Reich's music across several decades.

Close working relationships between composers and particular ensembles have not been uncommon in the history of chamber music, especially in the twentieth century. Even composers forming their own ensembles as an outlet for their own music was not without precedent in the 1960s. John Cage and Lou Harrison had each formed their own ensembles on the west coast of

the United States, which performed their percussion music, as well as that of other American composers, throughout the 1930s and '40s. However, when both Cage and Harrison moved away from the west coast in the early 1940s, their ensembles disbanded. In the 1960s, Vinko Globokar co-founded with Carlos Alsina the quartet, New Phonic Art. While the group was originally intended to be an outlet for Globokar and Alsina to have their compositions performed, the group developed into a free improvisation ensemble. Frank Zappa, in 1965, took over as lead guitarist of the band Soul Giants, which he renamed the Mothers and convinced them to begin exclusively rehearsing and performing his own music. The Mothers (also known as the Mothers of Invention) recorded eleven studio albums of Zappa's music in less than a decade. Still, they disbanded and reformed with different players twice, once in 1969 and once in 1971, and Zappa moved on to other projects after recording the final two albums with the band in 1975. What separates Reich's ensemble, and that of his contemporary Philip Glass, from these and other composer-led ensembles, is their longevity. Both ensembles provided their founders with a means for working out their compositional ideas and performing, recording, and disseminating their compositions for decades. While there has been turnover in the membership of Reich's ensemble, and undoubtedly the group has faced issues and conflicts throughout its history, their long history invites the question of how they were able to build and sustain a successful organization while so many other composer-led chamber ensembles did not.

The relevance of personal connections and friendship in creative collaboration between composers and performers has been found to be quite significant. Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor, in their co-authored study on collaborative composition, pointed to "close personal relationships and a shared aesthetic mission" as two important criteria in a successful composer/performer collaborative relationship. (Hayden and Windsor, 2007) Similarly, in his PhD

dissertation on the phenomenology of collaboration, Paul Roe states that “collaborating effectively takes personal courage and trust where often the destination is unclear. Naturally starting from a point of friendship is a good beginning.” (Roe, 2007) Furthermore, composer Elliot Gyger has suggested that a deeply collaborative relationship between a composer and an ensemble of performers “requires considerable accumulated trust” (as does a close friendship). (Gyger, 2014) These statements are further supported by the results of this author’s recent study into long-term composer-performer collaboration, which found that one of the key factors in maintaining collaboration across multiple projects and many years is “the active cultivation of a close personal relationship between collaborators.” (Smith, 2020) The extent to which Reich’s ensemble can be considered collaborative will be discussed later in this article, but first it is necessary to examine how personal connections and the intentional cultivation of relationships and trust were significant in the formation of the group.

Reich began his ensemble with a small number of close friends he knew in New York. Arthur Murphy was a colleague of his in graduate school at Juilliard; Jon Gibson he knew from San Francisco in the early 1960s; Steve Chambers he met through the contemporary art and music scene in New York City. It is natural that Reich would choose to work with those with whom he had already developed friendships. However, when Reich started to compose *Drumming* and the ensemble needed to expand beyond his immediate circle of friends, he relied on personal connections and recommendations to find new performers. Saul Goodman, timpanist for the New York Philharmonic, referred Reich to Paul Price, who taught percussion at the Manhattan School of Music. Price recommended to Reich one of his students, James Preiss. Around the same time, Reich was also introduced to percussionist Russell Hartenberger by a mutual friend, Richard Teitelbaum. Over time, these two percussionists, previously unknown to

Reich, became quite close with Reich and helped him by recruiting other percussionists for the ensemble.

Reich also sought female vocalists for the second section of *Drumming*. Once again, he relied on personal recommendations through fellow composer Michael Sahl, who connected him with Joan La Barbara and Judy Sherman. The third vocalist involved was jazz singer Jay Clayton, who lived in another loft apartment very close to Reich's. Clayton had given lessons to La Barbara in jazz singing, and La Barbara thought (correctly) that the quality of Clayton's voice would be well-suited to Reich's music. With so many new performers attending rehearsals of *Drumming*, Reich made a concerted effort to make them feel welcome. He would provide tea and snacks for the musicians upon their arrival at his loft apartment on Broadway in SoHo on Tuesday nights. He would make time for breaks when the players needed them. Hartenberger even spent the night at Reich's apartment so that he would not have to make the late-night drive back to Middletown, Connecticut. They would get dinner after rehearsal, and in the morning, they would do yoga together. Hartenberger feels that it was the time that he and Reich spent together beyond the rehearsals that forged their close friendship.

By fostering relationships with these performers, Reich developed a degree of trust between them that enabled them to have a meaningful influence on his music. The three original singers, together with Reich, created the resultant patterns that now appear in the score in the marimba section of *Drumming*. La Barbara has described how the different musical backgrounds and sensibilities of each singer were reflected in the resultant patterns that they heard and sang and she characterized the experience as "a cooperative effort." (La Barbara, 2020) Hartenberger has also written that Reich "would often call members of the ensemble during the week and ask how we thought a certain section was working, and he would make changes at the next rehearsal

if he thought they were warranted.”¹ (Hartenberger, 2016: 15) Reich’s willingness to involve these musicians in his creative process demonstrates the level of respect and trust that he had for them. However, Reich was always the arbiter of all compositional decisions. He is credited as the sole composer of his music and (to the best knowledge of this author) that has never been questioned by his ensemble members.

Reich’s interactions with the members of his ensemble throughout the process of composing *Drumming* can be broadly thought of as collaborative. However, scholarship on the subject of shared creativity has demonstrated that there are varying degrees of collaboration. In “‘Collaboration’ in Contemporary Music,” Alan Taylor provides a useful method of categorization based on a division of the compositional process into two fundamental activities: “the imagination of ideas” and “the decision-making or editing of them.” (Taylor, 2016: 568) Taylor illustrates four categories of creative working relationships based on whether or not there is a sharing in imaginative tasks and/or decision-making (see Table 1). Reich’s working

Hierarchy in decision-making			
		Yes	No
Division of labour (separation of tasks) in imaginative input.	Yes	<i>Hierarchical working</i> Tasks are divided between the participants. One or more participants decide on the contributions made.	<i>Co-operative working</i> Tasks are divided between the participants, but decisions-making is shared.
	No	<i>Consultative working</i> The participants contribute to the same task or tasks. One or more people decide on the contributions.	<i>Collaborative working</i> The participants share both the tasks themselves and the decisions on the contributions.

Table 1 (Taylor, 2016: 570)

¹ Hartenberger has recently clarified that the two members of the ensemble that he knows Reich contacted between rehearsals were himself and James Preiss.

relationship with the core members of his ensemble throughout the composition of *Drumming* fits into the “Consultative working” category. The musicians who created resultant patterns or who were asked for critical feedback on the piece during the compositional process had imaginative input, while the decision-making regarding that input was Reich’s alone.

Yet, the word “consultative” does not seem to fully encapsulate the relationship that Reich had with his ensemble members. Many of the early members of the Steve Reich and Musicians ensemble, and those who came later, have discussed the camaraderie and friendship that they experienced within the group. After the premiere of *Drumming* in New York City, the ensemble toured the piece in Europe. Reich had limited funds to finance the tour, so he relied on the willingness of the ensemble members to help out with the logistics of the tour. They would all set up and tear down before and after each performance, loading and unloading the truck, and take turns driving. Sherman recalls having to use her expertise with the inner-workings of electronics and soldering to repair some of their equipment before concerts. The success of the tour depended on more than just the musicians’ ability to play the music. Their willingness to work together doing difficult, non-musical tasks was equally important to the early advancement of Reich’s music, as was their ability to hear resultant patterns or to phase successfully. Clayton remembers that “later on [we had] the best hotels and everything, but we were roughing it with him. I don’t even know what we got paid, but we were happy to be on the road. It’s because of the personalities; these people were great people. Even if it was tough, we were having fun.” (Clayton, 2020) Reich’s early ensemble was more than just a group of people with whom he consulted on his music; they were a devoted group of collaborators bonded together by mutual respect and friendship.

In the Fall of 1972, after the group had returned from Europe and Reich had begun work on a new piece, *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*, there was significant turnover within the ensemble. Some members moved on from the group—most notably Murphy and Gibson, who had been with Reich the longest—and Reich decided that he wanted to recruit more trained percussionists to play in *Drumming* and his new piece. Bringing in new personnel who had not shared in the experiences of learning, premiering, and touring *Drumming* had the potential to alter the sense of camaraderie that the group had developed. Reich, however, relied on the same method to recruit new players that he always had: personal recommendations from people with whom he had a close relationship. He asked Hartenberger and Preiss to suggest percussionists who they thought would be suitable for the group. Hartenberger and Preiss recommended Bob Becker, Glen Velez, Richard Schwartz, David Van Tieghem, Tim Ferchen, Gary Schall, and Thad Wheeler, many of whom stayed with the ensemble for decades.² Becker remembers having an informal audition during a rehearsal at Reich’s apartment in which he would repeat patterns that Reich played on the bongos and marimba: “I think Reich appreciated that I could pick up patterns quickly and that I had good facility with sticks and mallets. Evidently those things and Russ’s recommendation were enough.” (Becker, 2020) Becker soon became one of the core members of the ensemble, taking on important parts in *Drumming* and all of Reich’s newer pieces. However, it was the trust that Reich had in the judgement of Hartenberger and Preiss that afforded Becker and most of the other new percussionists the opportunity to first encounter Reich’s music.

² One other significant member to join the group around this time was Garry Kvistad. He was not a recommendation of either Hartenberger’s or Preiss’s. Rather, Reich knew Garry’s brother, Rick, from playing in a Gamelan ensemble together in San Francisco—another personal connection.

The role of interpersonal relationships in the formation of Reich’s ensemble was accompanied by a greater sense of community felt by the musicians. Three significant factors contributed to this sense of community. First, there was the local community of artists in New York City living in the area now known as SoHo—the area south of W. Houston Street, north of Canal Street, and between W. Broadway and Lafayette Street. Stephen Petrus’s article, “From Gritty to Chic,” provides a detailed description of this neighborhood’s transformation from a dingy factory district to a major center for artistic activity. In the wake of the deindustrialization of New York City in the 1960s, artists moved into the large, recently-vacated buildings and paid relatively little in rent.³ However, coalitions of artists had to band together to fight for their legal right to live there, which was not officially granted by the city until 1971. A few years later, in 1975, the process of gentrification had begun, and artists were displaced by the city converting these lofts in SoHo into higher-priced residential units. During this brief period between deindustrialization and gentrification in SoHo—when artists from all different disciplines could live, work, and collaborate in their own community—Reich’s ensemble was formed. The interconnectivity of the artistic community in SoHo, referenced both by Hartenberger and Clayton, influenced the cooperative mindset of the ensemble members.

Another factor that contributed significantly to the sense of community among the early members of Reich’s ensemble was the socio-political climate in the United States during the 1960s and ‘70s. Becker and Hartenberger have each discussed the impact of Vietnam War protests, Civil Rights marches, and the growing distrust of government and other forms of authority. Hartenberger characterized the feeling among musicians and artists his age at that time as “us against the world.” (Hartenberger, 2020). This feeling of unity against the perceived

³ Clayton remembers paying eighty dollars per month for her loft apartment in SoHo. (Clayton, 2020)

problems in their country and in the world galvanized artists and musicians to work together in the pursuit of new pathways forward, both sociologically and artistically. Becker has summed up how this attitude affected his own career trajectory and the development of Reich's ensemble:

Ensembles like Reich's ... began and evolved without reliance on regular salaries for the members and without any clear expectation of success in the public marketplace. ... All of us made a commitment, whether consciously or intuitively, to be part of a group that supported a significant new kind of music that, at first, enjoyed limited popularity. ... The lack of financial reward was accepted or ignored in favor of working together to explore something truly unique. (Becker, 2020)

Becker also pointed out that once Reich's music began to receive popular acclaim, he was able to pay his musicians more money. In order to reach that point, however, Reich needed an ensemble to help him develop and disseminate his music. Maintaining an ensemble of so many players rehearsing regularly for little or no pay was dependent on the sense of collectivism and joint purpose among the members of Reich's ensemble.⁴

The third way in which members of Reich's ensemble (specifically the percussionists) felt a sense of community was through a shared musical background. In "Timpani traditions and beyond" from the *Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, Hartenberger discusses the three main schools of percussion playing and teaching that influenced North American percussionists in the twentieth century: the Leipzig school, the Dresden school, and the school of self-taught timpanist William G. Street. Street played in the Rochester Philharmonic and taught at the Eastman School of Music between 1927-1967. His teaching focused on quality of sound produced through the upstroke technique—the intentional lifting of the stick or mallet after making contact with the drum. Two of Street's most influential students were timpanist Fred D. Hinger (Philadelphia

⁴ This statement is not meant as an endorsement of musicians or other artists being under-paid but rather an observation about the remarkable dedication of Reich's ensemble members.

Orchestra 1951-1967, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra 1967-1983) and John H. Beck, who succeeded him at Eastman. Before Preiss's involvement in Reich's ensemble, he had studied percussion at Eastman with Street. After moving to New York, Preiss also took lessons from Hinger. Hartenberger had also studied with Hinger at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Because most of the other percussionists in Reich's ensemble were connected to either Preiss or Hartenberger through teacher-student relationships, they were all from this lineage of percussion training that originated with Street. Their common pedagogical backgrounds caused these percussionists to think similarly about sound production—always striving for a full, centered sound—and facilitated their ability as an ensemble to play with a consistent and unified sound.⁵ Their concept of sound was also, evidently, preferable to Reich as he continued to use percussion as the foundational instrument grouping of his music for years afterward.⁶

Reich consciously built the core of his ensemble through personal connections and intentionally fostered close relationships with those early members. His investment of time and energy into teaching his music to these individuals was reciprocated through their genuine enthusiasm and commitment to the development and performance of his music. This collaborative relationship was reinforced by a wider and multifaceted sense of community felt by these musicians. While the sense of community among the ensemble was profound, there was

⁵ Another factor that bonded together these percussionists was that many of them, including Reich, had interests in studying and playing non-Western forms of music: Hartenberger and Becker had both studied African drumming and Indonesian gamelan; Becker also took Indian tabla lessons, as did Tim Ferchen; Velez studied kanjira and became a world-renown frame drum performer. Experience in learning non-Western music, particularly forms that are not traditionally notated, certainly would have helped these musicians with *Drumming* as they all learned the music by rote and without the aid of notation.

⁶ Hartenberger believes that the way he and the other percussionists played reinforced the way that Reich wanted his music to sound. During an early rehearsal of *Music for 18 Musicians*, he recalls Reich asking the other musicians to copy the sound that the percussionists were producing.

also an awareness of hierarchy. Reich was the undisputed leader of the group who made all compositional decisions. During the restructuring of the ensemble in 1972, Preiss and Hartenberger were the two that Reich relied on to recruit new percussionists. Following this, the two of them, along with Becker, came to be the musicians that Reich relied on the most: “Steve grew to trust especially the three of us the most because he knew we were devoted to the music in a certain way and he could trust us with parts. ... When he was assigning parts, he would give what he considered to be the most important parts to Bob, Jim, and me.” (Hartenberger, 2020) Moreover, Preiss and Hartenberger took on other leadership roles within the ensemble. Becker remembers that Reich occasionally, instead of assigning the percussion parts himself, would give them to Hartenberger to distribute. Hartenberger also remembers that newer members of the ensemble would approach Preiss and him with questions for Reich, and the two of them acted as intermediaries. Thus, hierarchy and community coexisted within Reich’s ensemble, and both aspects were important to the way that the group functioned.

Ultimately, Reich’s ensemble serves as a unique example of how interpersonal relationships and community bonds can deepen the creative exchange between musicians and composers. While Reich’s compositions are fully his own, aspects of his creative process certainly were collaborative. Reich’s musicians affected his music simply through their presence while he was developing it.

During early rehearsals when a first version of a new piece is being tried out, the reactions of the players will often tell me whether the new piece really works, or not. Not only direct verbal comments during or after a rehearsal but also an appreciative laugh or an embarrassed averted glance may be enough to let me know when I am on the right or wrong track. (Reich, 1974: 81)

Without mutual trust and respect, Reich would not have allowed his creative process to be so strongly influenced by others. This trust and respect were not lightly bestowed but rather were built throughout the course of many long rehearsals and performances, exhausting tours, and post-concert celebrations. Centered on the development of *Drumming*, the experiences shared by the members of the Steve Reich and Musicians ensemble in the early 1970s set the tone for the group, both musically and relationally, for the decades of music-making that followed.

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