12. Reich
New York Counterpoint: Movement II
(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Biography

- Steve Reich was born in 1936.
- He is an American composer who was one of the pioneers of **minimalism**. This type of music, consisting of repetitions of relatively simple musical material, evolved as a reaction to contemporary avant-garde music, particularly that of European serialist composers (e.g., Stockhausen & Boulez) and American experimental composers (e.g., John Cage). Reich himself wrote: "Serialism and Cage gave me something to push against".
- As well as Reich there were other composers adopting a similar minimalist style in New York in the 1960s including Philip Glass and Terry Riley; together they became known as "The New York Hypnotic School".

New York Counterpoint

New York Counterpoint was written in 1985 as part of a series of works where Reich explores "counterpoint"; other works in the series feature flute and electric guitar.

- In each piece one player is responsible for playing all of the contrapuntal strands of the music but pre-records all but one of the lines so that the final performance consists of a backing track plus a live solo line.
- It was commissioned by the Fromm Music Foundation whose founder, Paul Fromm, was a passionate and generous supporter of modern American music.
- The first performance took place at the Avery Fisher Hall in New York in 1986 by the virtuoso American clarinettist, Richard Stoltzmann.

New York Counterpoint is in three movements and our excerpt consists of the second movement. Reich's intention was to capture the throbbing vibrancy of Manhattan.
A performance of the complete work with the inclusion of pictures of New York and other relevant images (N.B., the second movement commences at 5'9") can be found at:-

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poG0537wCfM

Performing forces and their handling

Instrumental forces in this excerpt are not just isolated to one family of instruments but, in fact, to one instrument, the clarinet, albeit utilising two different types, the normal Bb clarinet and the Bass Clarinet. To simplify things further there is only one performer who pre-records ten of the written parts and then performs the final part live along with what has been recorded.

Note that the music sounds a tone lower than notated, although the analytical comments which follow are based on what you see in the score.

There are some points regarding the handling of instruments worthy of note:-

- The ten clarinets mostly function in three distinct groups:-
    - Clarinets 1, 2 & 3 utilise the same melodic material within a range of an octave from C sharp to C sharp.
    - Clarinets 4, 5 & 6 work together in a similar way but in a lower register from A to A.
    - Clarinets 7, 8, 9 and 10 cover a very wide range (parts 9 & 10 being written for Bass Clarinet) and generally play persistent repeated notes.
- The exception to the groupings outlined above is the opening of the movement (Bars 1-12) where the clarinet parts are grouped in pairs.
- Extremes of register are avoided apart from Bass Clarinet part 10 being required to play the lowest available note (E natural) from Bar 33 onwards.
- The Live Clarinet part has the most active and interesting part with a wider range of over two octaves (low A natural to high C sharp).
- Although the timbre is limited solely to clarinet tone there is still some variety present due to the contrasting sound created by each of the clarinets three differing registers, chalumeau, clarino and altissimo. The range of notes which Reich selects for the piece touches upon every one of these timbrally contrasting registers.
- It is also worth noting that, since the whole performance involves only one player using their own instruments, there is going to be complete homogeneity of tone.

Texture

Given the piece's title, it will come as no surprise that texture is a central feature of the movement and that counterpoint plays a key role. The persistent use of staggered repetition of melodic material is at the very heart of the movement's construction. It is important to note that this music is not an example of phasing – phasing is a very specific music technique which consists of two or more musical lines gradually moving in and out of synchronisation with each other (most famously employed by Reich in *It's Gonna Rain,* his elaboration of a recording he made in 1964 of a San Francisco street preacher, Brother Walter, in which two tape recorders, with slightly different speeds, play back the preacher's voice leading to constantly changing aural effects as the two recordings move very gradually out of phase). Reich himself said that the compositional period when he used phasing ended with *Drumming* in 1971, long before the composition of *New York Counterpoint*. The movement gradually grows in instrumental density from two instruments homorhythmically playing at the outset; following this, two part counterpoint begins in Bar 3 with the entry of two further parts. From Bar 9 onwards anything from six to the full 11 parts is playing depending on what textural layers are being employed. All of these instruments play two bar units which repeat constantly in the manner of ostinati. These two bar units repeat in canon and the following details are worthy of note:

- The initial two part counterpoint in Bar 3 consists of imitation at a distance of one quaver.
- In Bar 13, the music divides into three undoubled homorhythmic pairings, and a three part canonic texture with each entry at one quaver distance emerges.
- In Bar 21 Clarinet 3 enters with material identical to the Live Clarinet part.
- When the Live Clarinet begins its solo passagework in Bar 25 Clarinet 3 is left to maintain its individual line within the canonic texture.
- Whilst Live Clarinet and Clarinets 7-10 then add other material, this texture remains unaltered for virtually the whole of the remainder of the movement (the only exception is the final bar).

Noteworthy exceptions to this contrapuntal dominance are:

- The opening bars consist of pairs of clarinets playing in **homorhythm** at an interval of a compound third (or occasionally a fourth) apart.
- The final bar of the movement returns to this homorhythmic texture with Clarinets 1 & 4.

- At Bar 27 Clarinets 7-10 enter with repetitive semiquavers creating a feeling of pulsating chordal homophony as a contrast to the counterpoint in the other parts.
- The Live Clarinet plays a more intricate, soloistic melodic line which does give it some feeling of textural independence from the other parts.
- Dynamics play a vital role in this chordal homophony. The four lower parts fade in and fade out of the overall texture with very carefully gradated crescendos and diminuendos.
- Closer inspection of the overall dynamic structure reveals the composer's clear intentions. Clarinet parts 1-6 never rise above mp and mf throughout the movement. Interestingly both the Live Clarinet and Clarinets 7-10 are instructed to reach f at the peak of their "fade in" / "fade out" patterns. Therefore they are given brief textural prominence before sinking into the background again.

Structure

There is not a definite structural label which can be given to this movement. It evolves principally as a product of the textural and melodic elements described elsewhere. One can, however, isolate specific sections and events within the movement as shown in the table below:

Bar Nos.	Description
1-12	Introduction of melodic/canonic material as the number of instruments playing increases.
13-71	Unchanging three part canon using the two bar ostinato patterns.
25-66	Live Clarinet fades in and out with a solo line
27-65	Parts 7-10 fade in and out with four-part chords in semiquavers

Melody

- The music is diatonic throughout.
- A six note scale is the basis of all of the melodic material in the piece.
- This is known as a hexatonic scale.

- The scale used here is E-F#-G#-A#-B-C#
- The use of A# is noteworthy. Without it the pattern could have been described as a hexachord (matching the first six notes of any major scale) but with it the scale becomes Lydian in character (the Lydian Mode having, as a principal defining feature, a raised fourth degree).
- The melodic pattern consists mainly of leaps but there is some stepwise movement.
- The leaps are usually outlining broken chord or arpeggio patterns.
- Each of the recorded clarinet part melodies stays within the limited range of an octave.
- An exception is the Live Clarinet which, in its solo section (Bars 25-66) extends its range to over two octaves (to be precise, from low A to C# above the stave).
- The Live Clarinet is also much more extreme in its disjunct melodic shape at times. (Bar 35 is a good example as two ascending minor 6th leaps are followed by a minor 7th descent, after which the line continues to head lower when an ascent might have seemed the more natural direction.)

Harmony

"You can stay put harmonically and make a music which is interesting" (Reich)

Many new influences reached America in the 1960s. Some of the most important influences on Reich's harmonic style came from Indian and Balinese music as well as contemporary jazz, especially John Coltrane. All of these influences were similar in that they had a very limited, sometimes static, harmonic structure. Coltrane and his Quartet would famously remain fixed on individuals chords for a long time while band members would take turns in developing complex solos above.

A further influence on Reich was his close contemporary, Terry Riley. Riley's piece In C, is, as the title suggests, anchored in C major harmony throughout. Reich played at the first performance of the piece and this was another factor which caused Reich to be fascinated with the possibilities of creating an effective composition whilst restricting the harmonic interest available.

New York Counterpoint is a good example of Reich's harmonic approach to composition in the following ways:-

- The harmony is essentially diatonic**.**

- An alternation of chords IV (E major) and V (F# Major) forms the main harmonic movement of the piece.
- This alternation is not totally straightforward. Because of the staggered nature of entries there is an inevitable harmonic blurring where one chord merges with the next before becoming totally independent, rather like an artwork where the colours have smudged!
- The overlap of chords results in brief but audible dissonance each time.
- The entry of parts 7-10 on their chordal semiquavers introduces a non-functional element to the harmony of the piece.
- There are three different chords utilised in this textural layer.
- Firstly, beginning in Bar 27 there is a B major Chord over a C# in the Bass (this could also be interpreted as a C# Bass note with chord extensions of a 7^{th}, 9^{th} and 11^{th} above).
- In Bar 33 the chord consists of E-G#-D#-A#, (with the three upper parts a fifth apart). The alternative chord extension analysis would result in an E major harmony with 7^{th} and 11^{th} above.
- Finally, in Bar 39 there is F # Major Chord over a G# in the Bass. The chord extensions here are identical to Bar 27, just over a different Bass note.

Tonality

- Unsurprisingly, given both the harmonic stasis and the avoidance of D#s in most of the passagework, Tonality is never clearly established.
- The Key Signature suggests B Major.
- The lack of any key-defining cadence is inevitable given the reliance on purely chords IV and V.

Rhythm and metre

- The metre is simple triple throughout.
- Whilst the time signature clearly states this, the listener would find any metre hard to discern, particularly at the start.
- The piece is mainly built on short rhythmic units featuring grouped semiquavers interspersed with longer notes and separated by rests.

- After the homorhythmic start, the counterpoint gradually builds the rhythmic complexity and when Clarinets 7-10 enter there is a perpetual semiquaver impetus. What begins as a rather fragmented rhythmic feel gradually evolves into a complex tapestry of rhythms which evoke the buzz of the city.
- Looking at the score one can see what should be syncopation (e.g., the entry in Bar 3), but syncopation can only be effective when working against an audibly defined metre and this doesn't really happen in this movement.

Reading List

'Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians'; entries on Coltrane, Reich, and Riley.

Potter, Keith, *Four Musical Minimalists*, CUP, 2000