

Their Voices Heard

A Collaboration with Quince Ensemble

Steve Reich ~ *Tehillim*

Tehillim (pronounced “teh-hill-leem”) is the original Hebrew word for “Psalms” and this piece is a setting of Psalms 19:2-5 (19:1-4 in Christian translations), 34:13-15 (34:12-14), 18:26-27 (18:25-26) and 150:4-6. This is the first of Reich’s works to reflect his Jewish heritage, yet no Jewish themes were used for any of his melodic materials. Reich explains: “One of the reasons I chose to set Psalms as opposed to parts of the Torah or Prophets is that the oral tradition among Jews in the West for singing Psalms has been lost. (It has been maintained by Yemenite Jews.) This meant that I was free to compose the melodies for *Tehillim* without a living oral tradition to either imitate or ignore.” The tambourines without jingles are perhaps similar to the small drum called “tof” in Hebrew in Psalm 150 and several other places in the text. And hand clapping as well as rattles were also commonly used throughout the Middle East in the Biblical period as were small pitched cymbals. But otherwise, there is no musicological content to the piece.

The composer notes that *Tehillim* will probably strike most listeners as quite different from his earlier works since there is no fixed meter or metric pattern.... “The rhythm of the music here comes directly from the rhythm of the Hebrew text and is consequently in flexible changing meters. 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. The use of extended melodies, imitative counterpoint, functional harmony, and full orchestration may well suggest renewed interest in Classical or, more accurately, Baroque and earlier Western musical practice. The non-vibrato, non-operatic vocal production will also remind listeners of Western music prior to 1750. However, the overall sound of *Tehillim* and in particular the intricately interlocking percussion writing which, together with the text, forms the basis of the entire work ...is not found in earlier Western practice, including the music of this century. *Tehillim* may thus be heard as traditional and new at the same time.”

The first and longest movement is based on canons, while the second, performed without pause, utilizes a theme and variations structure. The third movement, the only slow movement, features call-and-response and is quite chromatic. It continues without pause into the finale, which recapitulates in turn the structures of the first three movements, closing the piece with exultation and hallelujahs.

Reich was born in New York and raised there and in California. He graduated from Cornell (philosophy), studied composition at Juilliard with Vincent Persichetti and William Bergsma, and earned his master’s degree in music from Mills College, working with Luciano Berio and Darius Milhaud. He has also studied Balinese gamelan, African drumming, and traditional forms of chanting the Hebrew scriptures. Cordancia celebrates his 90th birthday with this performance of *Tehillim*.

Courtney Bryan, *Requiem*

Courtney Bryan, a native of New Orleans, is “a pianist and composer of panoramic interests” (New York Times). She is a Steinway Artist and 2023 MacArthur Fellow, currently serves as composer-in-residence with the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, and is Professor of Music - Black American Music at Tulane University (Newcomb College). Her academic degrees are from Oberlin College (BM), Rutgers University (MM), and Columbia University (DMA). Bryan has composed for diverse ensembles of instruments and voices, from small chamber groups to full orchestra, and in various genres, including jazz and other types of experimental music, as well as traditional gospel, spirituals, and hymns. She focuses on bridging the sacred and secular, exploring human emotions through sound, confronting the challenge of notating the feeling of improvisation.

Composed in 2019 for the Quince ensemble and commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, *Requiem* combines a small New Orleans-inspired band of instruments with the four voices of Quince in a reverent multicultural requiem. It is inspired by death rituals of various cultures including the Anglican Church Order for the Burial of the Dead, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Neoshamanist dying rituals including the “Great Death Spiral,” and New Orleans jazz funeral celebrations of life.

Four of the five sections have English text from the Bible, and Greek and Latin from the tradition Catholic mass.

I. “All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.” – Ecclesiastes 3:20 (NIV)

II. “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” – 1 Corinthians 15: 51-52 (NRSV)

III. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....” – Psalm 23 (NRSV)

“Pie Jesu Domine, dona eis requiem. Dona eis requiem sempiternam.” “Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison.”

IV. (no text)

V. “See, the home of God is among mortals. [God] will dwell with them; they will be [God’s] peoples, and God will be with them; [God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” – Revelation 21: 3-4 (NRSV altered)