

6 Work Song

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When I was about seventeen, old enough to drive into Northampton on my own, I had an errand to run on a Saturday morning in the hardware store that used to be on Main Street. (Foster Farrar, it was called; they've moved to King Street since, but they're still in business.) I don't remember the errand now, and possibly I forgot it even then, because as soon as I walked in my attention was overtaken by what was playing on the store radio. It was a piece of music for flute—though I'm sure everything about that description already felt wrong. “For flute,” wrong if only because there were so many of them, eleven I would learn, as much an ecology as an arrangement. “Piece of music,” wrong because, coming in on the middle of it, it seemed as though it had always been playing, and would never come to an end. I found a quiet aisle among the tape measures and I stood still and listened. When it did end—I was taken so by surprise—the familiar voice of WFCR's morning host stepped clear of the labyrinth to say that it was called *Vermont Counterpoint* and that it had been written by a composer named Steve Reich in 1982, three years before. I went down the street to order the record. Possibly I went back to Foster Farrar for the sandpaper, or whatever it was I was supposed to get. Possibly I forgot all about it.

I have been listening to Reich's music ever since, catching up and then following along with a career that has lasted for more than fifty years. I used to have a stack of LPs, then CDs; now I dial it up on Spotify. I have heard *Drumming* (1971) and *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976) and *Different Trains* (1988) and others played in concert. But

mostly, I listen while I work, while I read and write, as I am doing now. No music I know is so good for thinking with, and I've always wondered why—why his music serves so readily as the soundtrack (if “soundtrack” is the word) for the labor (if “labor” is the word) of the mind. Not everyone can listen to music while they work, and some music lovers and musicians find the practice dubious or disrespectful or even heretical. Among those who do it, who need it, I've talked to several over the years who share my dependence on Reich. His music is a kind of work song. Just now I've put him on again to see if I can work out why.

Work song: usually the phrase is used for songs sung to keep spirits up and bodies together in time. Many come from prisoners and slaves, whose work is bondage; songs like the ones Alan Lomax recorded in the 1940s, where the crack of the axe measures out the music and the task together. One of the Black prisoners he talked to at Parchman Farm in Mississippi explains that the work “go so better” when you sing with it, when you “keep [your] mind from being devoted on just one thing.”¹ Writing is solitary, not collective; it is not physically taxing, it won't break you down, and it is almost never done under threat of violence. I risk the analogy only to credit that prisoner's hard-come-by insight about how the axe-falls and the rhythms of breathing at Parchman are brought into the music; the song is at the service of the work, pacing it and keeping it going, but at the same time, the work comes to be at the service of the song. The interdependence of labor and music makes the work go better than it could go alone, even if the work alone is brutal and unfree. That means work song is different from having a transistor radio playing on a construction site, where the music is a diversion but does not organize the activity or transform its meanings. It is that much more different from the soundtrack of retail, the buying-music for the customers that becomes the work-music of the employees, but work-music only by accidental association with their hours on the clock.

Listening now, back in my study, I am at a moment where the alto digs down to execute an intricate figure at the bottom of its register,

1 Alan Lomax, liner notes to *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from Parchman Farm 1947–48*, vol. 1: *Murderous Home*, Rounder B000002UV, CD, 2009.

a figure that seems to store energy, like a flywheel, for an upward leap of a fifth—a big interval in a work so closely knit. Is it work, what I am doing, setting down these words? Work that has anything to do with the body's energy and exhaustion? How is it that the music could help? Someone watching me might be able to gather some sense of the fluctuations of my effort. I am writing longhand, though I'll type this paragraph up soon. There are moments when my brow furrows, my mouth tightens, when I lean forward and put my head in my hands. Thought is brought up short, its momentum breaks against a barrier, or dissipates into an unmarked clearing—some problem I cannot immediately solve, the right word, whatever it is, the next step. If there were a habit that would answer, the work would be easy. Hard is not having the habit, but having to probe, test, try, like a climber groping for the next hold. That's the feeling I have now. Hard for writing is when the pencil teeters between the sharp point and the eraser, or the hovering hand equivocates between the letters and the delete key. I am groping after the right metaphor. Perhaps a skipping record? The lost momentum is expressed in a kind of frustrated repetition.

That charge, that the music sounds like a skipping record, has been brought against Reich more than once, especially his first pieces. (An early audience member is said to have run up to the stage afterwards and cried, "I confess!") *Vermont Counterpoint* falls somewhere in the early middle of his career, seventeen years after his experiments with phased tape loops (*It's Gonna Rain*, 1965) and his subsequent phased compositions for piano (*Piano Phase*, 1967) and violin (*Violin Phase*, 1967). Those earlier works are incremental canons, established by playing a short phrase in two-part unison, then gradually accelerating one of the parts to shift it out of phase with the other, displacing the unison by one note, then two, and so on. Skipping is precisely what these works do not do. Their change is perpetual. The emergent patterns of contrapuntal interference between the two lines define that change, which ends only when the accelerating player brings her part around to perfect unison again. *Vermont Counterpoint* builds on some of the same techniques. It begins with a syncopated seven-note phrase played by a single flute. Other parts enter one by one, doubling and displacing fragments of

that first phrase so that it beats against itself, and gradually substituting notes for rests to create lines of increasing complexity and density.

You could perform the work with eleven players—three alto flutes, three flutes, three piccolos, and two soloists using all three—but it is usually heard live with a single soloist and tape. (Ransom Wilson commissioned it, and plays all eleven in the recording I first encountered.) In the density of the counterpoint, it is not always easy to discern the last part, the part that is listening to all the others. But that is the one that gives fullest articulation to the emerging melodies, melodies that extend the staccato phrases into more expansive, eloquent gestures. None lasts longer than about three measures before repeating and eventually subsiding into the shifting texture of canon around it. Still, each allows the continuous, repetitive process to become for a moment more expressive, and the work as a whole is always shifting its emphasis between engrossing background and the momentary salience of a new figure. Reich's earliest music insisted that the process be transparent throughout: "I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music."² By *Vermont Counterpoint*, the sound of process is strong, but the demand for perfect, real-time intelligibility has been relaxed, and there is space for a melody that sounds, for a moment, as inspired as it does emergent.

Which is not to say that the dominant impression is of Romantic vaunting or sighing. Quite the contrary. Reich has said that the Western music that matters most to him was written between 700 and 1750. For Beethoven and Brahms and Mahler and even Mozart, he has little use. His music advances by the incremental development, the revolution and permutation, of discrete phrases, and the changes are always stepwise. If some steps are larger than others, still their dynamism does not depend on having a large sense of direction, on plotting the musicians' or the listeners' place in a long story. The musicologist Karol Berger writes about how composers before Mozart privilege the structures of figural variation, and how Mozart and his successors value the large-scale development

2 Steve Reich, *Writings on Music 1965–2000*, edited by Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34.

of narrative structure. (*Bach's Cycle*, *Mozart's Arrow* is the name of his book.³) Reich returns to the cycle by way of the phase, and his music, in its canonic *carmen perpetuum*, manages to be both unflaggingly energetic and infinitely patient. Significant cadences and modulations arise through the accumulation of small differences—purposiveness, you might say, without a purpose. Or thinking without a thought—unless the bright threads of melody are the momentarily thoughts, fleeting ideas; if so, they emerge and disappear, the next moment, into the texture of the thinking again.

So is this what writing is like? Or what writing should be like? Or at least, some protection for that fragile activity, some charm against what threatens it? Languor, to be sure, is a threat to the writer, and the unflagging pulse of Reich's counterpoint is an antidote—it has the drive of its regularity, and the fibrillating surprises of its syncope. Distraction is another threat, the attention spinning off to pursue an unaccomplished errand or a curious bird. Reich's music is concentrated and self-continuous and insists that everything follow. Then there is the threat of too much focus, and again the music helps, for *Vermont Counterpoint* has a restless, lateral curiosity, a kind of concentration-as-distraction or distraction-as-concentration, always asking *what can be done with this? and with this? and what do we have now? and where might it go next?* It is music that keeps moving, as writing has to do, from note to note as from word to word. (The typically succinct notes, sharp attack, short decay, even on the flute, are almost spelled into phrases with white space between.) At the same time, its dynamism has a paradoxical power of reflection, of unhurried curiosity.

Which is to say that it is a mimesis of writing, or writing-thinking, a musical picture of it. What about doing the two together, listening and writing, as I am doing now? Thinking—now I'm really trying to think about it again, to feel it—somehow seems to happen in the front of my head, up above my eyes, and yet my whole body is caught up. In its pulse the music is autonomic, and it galvanizes the vagrant rhythms of breath and heartbeat into a kind of collaboration. I feel alert, how I imagine I would feel playing this music, entranced but

3 Karol Berger, *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow: An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

not lulled, the intricate rhythm keeping the thinking moving and changing. The energy is immanent and it does not flag and does not, somehow, use me up or wear me out. Back at the beginning of his career, Reich wrote that “the pleasure I get from playing is not the pleasure of expressing myself, but of subjugating myself to the music and experiencing the ecstasy that comes from being a part of it.”⁴ Perhaps that is the feeling—of being part of one’s own thinking, party to it, in some kind of immanent ecstasy; not dictated to, but borne along by the process of thought itself, in an even-tempered dialectic of continuity and surprise.

One might worry that such a music is the music of productivity, that what it is good for is keeping knowledge-workers working. And it is true that it is not passionate music, exactly, not the way, say, Mahler is—not music that imposes its emotional extremities on the listener, that aspires to disable us with vicarious grief or longing or exalt us with transports of pride and triumph. It is not music for writing love letters or eulogies. Its characteristic affect is the acute pleasure of experiencing your own sharpened faculties, almost as though the music were playing you, and so much more expertly than the jerky world does. Reich’s work has never become the soundtrack for anyone’s anesthetic capitalism; never so far as I know has it been used in an advertisement or as Muzak (*pace* the good NPR-listening carpenters of western Massachusetts). If he speaks of the pleasure of subjugation, it is just as much the pleasure of freedom—for again, though his music models thinking, it does not tell you what to think or where to go, doesn’t steer your feelings through some story of its own, across the grain of your thought. If you have a plot to make, or an argument, what it affords you is a grid of attention across which the mind can move freely, in any direction, and yet still always forward.

Vermont Counterpoint has four sections; at the end of each, the counterpoint gradually falls away, and a residual melody is left to sound alone for a couple of bars before it begins to generate new canons. The third is slower than the others, but the level of detail is equally engrossing. I am there now. It is, again, not passionate mu-

4 Reich, *Writings*, 81–82.

sic. Nor is it music that defines the collectivity of its listeners by our common suffering. The work it is good for—the work it imagines, or incarnates—is not fallen work, not hard labor let alone slave labor. Still, I have cried listening to it, in concert, reliably, and now and again when a line ambushes me, even when I am writing. Not with a shudder of loss, as might pass through me in a late Beethoven quartet. The feeling is instead utopian—might our world be like this one, after all? The possibility arises of a ramifying, fractal, infinitely generous attention, at all scales at once, and a feeling—for this music is always for an ensemble, sharing rhythm as an intuition—that we are all in it together. Writing is a solitary business and it can stale. To wind it together with Reich's counterpoints is to remember the sheer beauty of the world, and to hold beauty, as Stendhal puts it, as a promise of happiness. A work song for good work freely undertaken, carried along and carried through. It is good luck to be able to do it. My period, as it happens, falls not on the last note, but somewhere in the middle.