Sound Expertise – Episode 9

TRANSCRIPT

SPEAKERS
Sumanth Gopinath, Will Robin

Sumanth Gopinath 00:00
What happens over the course of, you know, the mid 60s to early 70s? Why does he stop kind of doing these pieces? Why does he stop doing work that seems to focus on African American voices and material. I mean, there's a period there, right. But as you said, I call them "the race pieces" where he's really kind of doing stuff, specifically like that's really oriented very explicitly around African American music, voices, culture, politics, etc. Even though it's not all coming from him, it's clearly a preoccupation.

00:32
[music]

Will Robin 00:53
Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin, and this is a podcast where I talk to fellow music scholars about their research and why it matters. If you listened to last week's episode, you might be expecting an interview with ethnomusicologist Timothy Taylor about music and capitalism. This is not that, which we bumped to next week. Instead, this is a bonus episode recorded just last Friday, in response to a controversy that erupted in the music world recently around the composer Steve Reich. Reich is one of the most prestigious figures in American music today, a rare living composer who is both regularly studied by scholars and regularly performed by major institutions. Last week, an anecdote from the British photographer Val Wilmer, published in the 2019 anthology _A Hidden Landscape Once a Week_, resurfaced online, which I will read in full. This is Wilmer speaking. "You know, the other day I heard somebody talking about Steve Reich on the radio, and I interviewed him once for _Melody Maker_, and I had just come back from Ghana, and he'd been to Ghana too, the same place as a matter of fact, and heard the same music. I was talking about a person who was playing with him, who happens to be an African-American, who was a friend of mine. I can tell you this now because I feel I must. This was in Michael Nyman's house. And we were talking and I mentioned this man and Reich said, "Oh, yes, well, of course, he's one of the only Blacks you can talk to." So I said, "Oh, really," he said -- this is Reich speaking -- "Blacks are getting ridiculous in the States now." And I thought, this is a man who has just done this piece called drumming, which everybody cites as a great thing. He's gone and ripped off stuff he's heard in Ghana, and he's telling me that Blacks are ridiculous in the States now." So this is clearly a racist comment. And social media erupted with understandable anger about Reich's words. For those familiar with the composer's broader history, the anecdote also resonated with Reich's long and possibly appropriative relationship with both African American and African music as well as his complicated politics, which have drifted rightward since the

1960s. And so as a fan of Reich's music, which I also teach in my classes and which I will admit, I do not necessarily always subject to the full critical scrutiny it deserves, I wanted to talk to someone on the podcast about all of these issues. Sumanth Gopinath is an Associate Professor of Music Theory at the University of Minnesota, and for nearly two decades has been writing on the issue of race and Steve Reich's music, from his 2005 dissertation through several major publications that have really reshaped how we approach this topic. I've been reading Sumanth's work for years and have found it deeply enlightening. I hope that this discussion -- which is our longest episode, by far -- does not by any means excuse Reich's racist comment, but contextualizes it within the composer's broader engagement with Afro-diasporic music and racial politics. I learned a lot from this conversation, and I hope you do as well.

03:58
[music]

Will Robin 04:09
So, scholarship on Steve Reich's music in the last kind of decade or so has really kind of ... I've seen it kind of move from kind of more traditional composer studies, studies of the the composer and their musical works, to a more kind of engagement with some of the political themes in his music, as well as a kind of critique of some of those themes. And your work, which I've been following since grad school, has definitely been at the center of that, since your 2005 dissertation on Reich and race. Can you talk a little bit about how you got to the subject of studying Steve Reich through the prism of race, like what the field was like in terms of minimalism and White studies at that point, and why this kind of intervention was needed?

Sumanth Gopinath 04:50
Yeah, this is a great question. So the way that this started for me, was that in early grad school I had started, as most grad students do in seminars, we're trying to kind of figure out a seminar paper, and also thinking, you know, eventually towards what a dissertation project would look like. And I had been exposed to Steve Reich's music in as an undergrad, and then in a more sustained way in grad school, and so sort of, I think Trevor Baca, who's a composer and musical friend, goes back to my days at UT Austin. He was one person who was into Steve Reich, and I think he showed me "Come Out" when I was like an undergrad. And I don't think it registered with me at the time, but I was also an engineering student and not very politicized in any way. And then when I got to Yale, I encountered the piece again. And at that point, I had started becoming a union organizer. I was, you know, kind of -- coming to be aware of my own racial background as not White, and as an Asian American, South Asian American, thinking about race more seriously, I had encountered Michael Veal, who's ... he was on my dissertation committee and is a huge influence to me -- or on me, and among other things, you know, talking with grad students about, you know, race and union organizing and labor and politics and I was getting into Marxism, all of these things were sort of happening roughly around the same time. And I would say the Reich thing was actually a little sort of on the early end of some of that, and I wrote a seminar paper on Reich and race for a course taught by Robert Morgan. And it basically kind of mapped out, you know, this trajectory that's showing that, you know, Reich's focus on African Americans early on, and then his move to, you know, other issues especially By the early 70s, and it seemed like World Music was kind of this focus. And then, you know, at some point, you know, his

Jewish identity became increasingly important. So I was interested in that, and that's, you know, those are like well known, you know, not secret dimensions of the story even then, but I think no one had, at least in my... what I encountered no one seemed to be very critical or think historically about what that meant. And so, and because of my concerns about race and thinking about its relevance to music, and certainly my own life and politics, and revisiting a piece like "Come Out," or "Different Trains," or "Music for 18 Musicians," these issues started to become much more charged for me and "Come Out," you know, which I'd been thinking about maybe the most, occupied a lot of energy within that sort of study. And so you know, and people who ... I would say in terms of the state of what people thought about it, and we have to remember too, a lot of my interlocutors -- not all of them, but most of them -- were White. And so ... and they were a lot of people who were, you know, White composers, White theorists, you know, people who were interested in American, mostly White experimental music, you know, and so, you know, I would say the Black voices I was encountering were people who were not interested in that, they weren't in that context, you know, I didn't have a lot of connections to the experimental jazz or free music scenes like that, you know, that's developed more recently, you know, like, since I really moved to Minnesota and stuff but... so that was my orbit and so people were, you know, like thought Steve Reich was great, you know, he was a hero to them, right? And I just didn't feel that way because of what ... my these developing concerns around this piece, and about these pieces in general; and you know, when I've revisited "Come Out" at that moment in the late 90s, like, the piece made me mad. And I was trying to kind of work through my feelings around it like... and it was actually over the course of doing that over the course of the dissertation, and then comparing to all the laudatory, you know, articles and writings, like you said, like, there was a lot of stuff that basically was sort of, you know, praiseworthy composer studies...

Will Robin 09:22
Well let's maybe jump to the ... Why did "Come Out" make you mad in the 90s? Like, what? And, you know, what about that piece signals... I think for a certain group of people, it can signal like, this is a important kind of work of electronic music that is influential and like you can unpack all of that, then there's a kind of other set of people who valorize it as some kind of document of civil rights, but then there's the more kind of critical takes. So what what about "Come Out" ... what is ... I mean, maybe tell us from your perspective, like what is "Come Out", what is the piece about, and then like, why did you feel negatively towards it.

Sumanth Gopinath 10:01
Sure, so to to tell the famous story. I mean, we know the history of the Harlem Six case or it's familiar now because more people have written about it. And one of the members of that group of young African American men who were basically like, you know, rounded up for a crime they didn't commit by police due to an earlier event in which they were sort of tagged, a couple of little fruit stand riots in Harlem. And during the sort of upheavals around the so called Harlem riots, uprisings of 1964, this was sort of part of that moment in which cops were sort of looking for... it actually happened a little before if I remember correctly, the dates are fuzzy in my mind now but, but around that time, they found these young men and basically, you know, put them in jail and then you know, started beating them and interrogating them. And it's horrible, right? I mean, it's the kinds of things that cops have done to Black people and Black men in particular for a long time. And so that was the sort of story and context then, as we know, [Daniel] Hamm was interviewed for testimony about what happened to him for a book that

was called _The Torture of Mothers_ written by Truman Nelson, who was a kind of leftist writer, fiction writer, historical fiction writer... anyway, and then as part of that recorded testimony, Hamm was recorded like so many of the other members of the group, and described that what he did in order to basically get out of being beaten -- like cops do they have techniques where they beat you up and can you know, essentially, like really do terrible damage, but it doesn't leave, you know, many sort of visible wounds or signs of what they've done to you. And so he had a bruise. And, you know, he says, I had to like open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them and in doing that, opening up the bruise blood, he showed visible injury and then was able to kind of basically get out of being held, and was transferred to a hospital, I believe. And so this this was a... Reich, when he was talking to Truman Nelson said, You know, I guess they were at some party and Nelson said, you know, I'm looking for someone to make a kind of audio collage of this testimony so that we can, you know, play it at this benefit. And John Pymm, who's done a lot of research on this, actually writes about this collage piece in _Rethinking Reich_, the book I edited that came out last year and he's done a lot of work on the subject too. So he's sort of uncovered a lot more particularly by really digging into the archival stuff at the [Paul] Sacher [Archive]. Anyway, and so this moment, you know, when Reich meets Nelson, Nelson's asked him to do this thing, you know, Reich has just moved to New York. I mean, he had been in the Bay Area for a while, and then he's come back, and -- I think he came back in the fall of '65, and I think he meets Nelson sometime between then and like early '66. And Nelson says.., he says to Nelson, Sure, I'm willing to do it -- and he's gonna do it for free. I mean, you know, there's no money involved. And he says, I'll do it. But you know, my payment -- or what I want in exchange -- is that if I find something in it that I can turn into a piece I want to use it. And Nelson's like -- A piece? You know, of course, like who knows, this is the little world of electroacoustic music. What does that even mean to most people, right? And then he shows him -- I don't know, he must have done it later, but he showed him "It's Gonna Rain," and Nelson loved it, and Reich starts working on the piece. You know, he's listening as his, you know, he's written about much later and more extensively. He's listening to speech for its pitch content and rhythm content, right? Like sort of hearing, like, what are these capacities and he's not necessarily or only paying attention to the words. Of course, they intersect in all these complex ways as word and pitch sound do in song and in other musical contexts. And so excerpted and turned into music, he takes that sentence and then, in the piece, as we all know, then excerpts it again, to just "come out to show them," you know, and then that becomes the unit, which you know, can be transcribed in a variety of ways. I took one approach to it in my dissertation and that essay from _Sound Commitments,_ and then over the course of the piece t transforms, right like so, he uses his famous phasing process, where he takes two copies of the same, you know, musical example, in this case a pre-recorded one, and allows them by, you know, slightly altering the speed of the tape loop of one, he said by putting his thumb on the reel to slow it down, it slightly goes in, you know, out of sync. And as it goes out of sync, you know, all these notes which have a relatively steady rhythm start to line up in different ways. And so it's the lining up, in part, that sort of makes the shift sound, not just like moving from, you know, like steadiness to kind of unsteadiness, but then lining back up into these new patterns. The piece the way it goes, it unfolds is that it then multiplies. So it -- you know, there are a variety of ways that he uses the phasing process. One is that he, you know, let something run its course that it goes ... it's in sync, and then it runs through a bunch of positions until it finally wraps back around, and it's in sync again to the original. Another is to just go to a few steps, right? And so he does that, but this and then at a couple steps out, he then doubles what he has there and then lets the double thing move again and he does it one more time. And so it's the doubling and

the phasing process that changes the sound character of the speech excerpt quite a bit. Because when you start you're hearing, you know, a text speech. It's, of course, reiterated and it's sort of, you know, rhythmically hypnotic, it's, you know, pitched as this C minor, B minor, kind of, you know, sound, it's, you know, you can turn it into something that, you know, is, you know, one conceivably could trance out to -- and it's that multiplication and the change of what happens from the original voice to what ends up with, which is this kind of soup and sonic complex mess that I try to interpret in my own work. I read it and -- there are lots of ways to read it, but you know, people have read it in terms of being -- sounding like you know, various forms of traditional or neo-traditional African musics the "shuh" and I should say to step back, but the, what happens as a result of the multiplication and phase process is that the phonemes and subsonic content of the original excerpt gets divided up. And so different elements start to become separated, different register layers get separated, different phonemes get separated. So it's this whole thing where it's like divides up and complicates in this way that just didn't, it didn't before and one of the things to hear is by then you're hearing this "sh sh sh sh"

Will Robin 17:22
The kind of maraca sound...

Sumanth Gopinath 17:23
The maracas thing, right. So when people like in the 60s, some people read it as maracas, or a shaker ... a kind of African rattle, you know, instruments. I heard it -- that's one definitely way to hear it, one can hear it as breathing of some kind. I also ... a friend of mine who was listening to it with me, a musical collaborator, Emily Lechner, described it as sounding like sawing through metal, or rattling on a chain link fence, I think ... that there was a metallic quality to it, which I think her observations are really astute. And that sort of ... there are all these things that, you know, suggest various things basically, and so -- but in the process of why I was mad. I think I didn't have all these readings yet. I just heard this voice and I heard it go through all these things. And it sounded violent to me. And I felt that -- Wow, he used this voice of an African American speaker. Did he have permission to do this? Did he pay that person? You know, did ... these are the kinds of questions in my mind, and I basically, I didn't have answers to those things. I didn't interview Reich or try to find out, I was scouring interviews that existed to try to get information. And then, you know, kind of through that process, ended up kind of starting to develop a reading that really took years; that reading itself was very influenced by suggestions from Michael Veal. It was ... I talked to people, a lot of people about the piece, I was curious to see what they thought. And so I would kind of play excerpts for them and see what they thought. I spent a lot of time transcribing this, and "It's Gonna Rain," and you know, so there was a kind of whole, I don't know, steeping myself in Reich's work to kind of move from I think this like sort of Initial -- I wouldn't say just upset, but it was that type of discomfort; I was also attracted to and interested in the piece. I mean, I think the piece is powerful. And so it was that mix of feelings, I think that that propelled that energy to then try to better understand it as ... the way I...

Will Robin 19:15
Yeah. I mean the, the kind of, I think, somewhat familiar critique, which is one that is frequently made, and one that I kind of -- when I teach the piece talk a little bit about is that it takes a specific African American voice and kind of abstracts it into noise. So you have something that's very pinpointed, and by the end of it, it becomes this wash of sound. And partly, this piece remembered historically for

documenting some kind of... Reich participating in a political action, some kind of solidarity with the civil rights movement, but at the same time, it's more often documented as like, this is an important piece of electronic music, that represents one of his early phasing experiments, right. So like, do you still feel ... agree with that kind of political critique of this piece, did your kind of years of thinking about it and stewing with it come to another realization?

Sumanth Gopinath 20:10
Yeah, I mean, one of them was I felt like I wanted to deepen the criticism beyond those versions of it. Like Chip Whitesell wrote an essay on the kind of noise version that was, which I think is a part of the story for sure. You know, I think that ... I think what's tough is that, you know, the piece is all of these things, right. I sort of connected to the transformation of text and thinking about, you know, sort of poststructuralist thinking, which is contemporaneous with this moment, in this piece. So Derrida's work ... deconstruction is a way that people familiarly will say, like, Reich deconstructs this voice. And so you know, what does that mean? The fact that it arises at the same time as deconstruction, the way that people are thinking about text and language and meaning are, you know, part of a kind of intellectual moment and philosophical, you know, transformation in that period, which is in part a kind of critique of the media and of the state and of like power and the way that language, you know, sort of shapes and controls things, you know. So there are all sorts of ways into it like that. There are yet other readings too, right? I mean, I think the big thing that I tried really hard to do is to say that as it moves to noise, or noisy stuff, that noise isn't meaningless. I think that's one of the things that I think, is maybe my big intervention in that scholarship. So I really wanted people to try to figure out ways to understand the meaning of the piece, even though it has multiple meanings, because I think that it doesn't have infinite meanings, and it doesn't become just meaningless as it progresses. And that was the sort of really ... I wanted to really, like enrich the hermeneutics of this kind of stuff.

Will Robin 21:54
And so you, I mean, you analyze, you talk about a kind of series of "Race works," I think is the phrase you use, in the 60s, that Reich is creating. Can you talk a little bit about kind of what Reich's political positioning is in this time, especially with regards to "Come Out" but also "Oh Dem Watermelons," which you've written a lot about, which is this very strange bit of marginalia, this music created for an experimental film that was part of a leftist kind of political agitprop blackface minstrelsy show that both critiques blackface minstrelsy, but also plays into the tropes, very problematic today, but you've spent a lot of time thinking about this. So tell us a little bit about "Oh Dem Watermelons" and also Reich's larger kind of political project at the moment, mid 60s, shifting from the Bay Area to New York.

Sumanth Gopinath 22:45
Sure. So in the Bay Area after... you know he had gone to Mills and Oakland and then, you know, graduated and was staying, living there and got connected to the composers in the San Francisco Tate Music Center -- Ramon Sender, Terry Riley, Pauline Oliveros. I mean, there's a whole scene of people, right; and around the same time, and I think maybe through contact in the Tate Music Center -- I actually don't remember -- he meets up with and connects with Ronnie Davis, who's the head of the San Francisco Mime [meem] Troupe. And it's the ... or Mime Troupe, they have called it different ways over the years. And Davis is, I would say, the most political, you know, kind of figure in terms of like really having a kind of, I don't know, a strong and coherent political worldview, that was influencing

Reich. I think, I mean, Reich was someone who was I think, at the time, a sympathetic, you know, White liberal, Jewish-American White liberal, you know, pro civil rights movement, but not really thinking... I don't think ... he's not a ... and still to this day, I don't think he's really a political thinker. I don't think he has like a really rich, complex kind of politics. I think he has a lot of instinctive politics. And you know, he certainly thinks about things I'm sure. And you know, and I've avoided talking to him for these reasons. Because when people have tried to approach him about some of these things, he tends to shut down, or his interactions about them have not been necessarily productive, so ... at least in recent years, so it just seems like it hasn't been worth it to kind of engage him. Maybe that's my mistake. But in any case, so that's my take on him. You have someone who is really trying to, like, make a career for himself and figure out where he was going. He's an intense person. Quick temper, a lot of people talk about at the time, you know, trying to move places. Saul Landau, who was the writer of minstrel show, the piece, the San Francisco Mime Troupe piece. You know, was one of the people who was aware of Reich at the time and also much more politically, you know, kind of very leftist and doing ... eventually, like, made like leftist documentary films, dealing with Cuba and all sorts of stuff. Davis himself was very Marxist. And so they were thinking through a lot of issues, you know, politically very explicitly through the Mime Troupe's work. And so, when Reich encounters the, the stuff they are looking for -- from him -- a kind of Neo Brechtian, you know, sort of theater music in various contexts, and he worked for more than one piece for that. I mean, there are a few different ones that he did stuff for; that music doesn't survive, but it's fascinating, you know, stuff that was like pieces where he was, like, people were playing kazoos, and you know, almost like Neo cabaret kind of stuff. Anyway, so as part of this, the minstrel show was I think the last one he did, and it was the most involved one. And the way that the... yeah, the way as you describe it, the way that the thing works is that there's a film, which is an interlude within the broader performance, and yes, the performance involves blackface that... the performers put blackface on, it's both Black and White performers who are in blackface. It's a confrontational blackface. So, you know, it's ... there are, you know, sort of jokes that come out of historical minstrel show texts, and then it ... there will be like, transformations into kind of like Black Power, proto Black Power at the time, like Black liberation and, you know, other sorts of radicalizing references, and it's all sort of mixed up in this sort of very quick-paced jumble. It's fascinating -- Yeah, today, I mean, you know, people wouldn't do it but... and it seems incredibly offensive. It's not unlike something like _Bamboozled_, you know, that Spike Lee film, which also dealt with you know, blackface and Black caricature in various ways, a lot later and, you know, Black artists at the time were interested in and supportive of this. It's a complicated story. The moral horizon I think is how we think about...

Will Robin 27:08
Reich's ... How did Reich view that? Like all of ... how did he kind of take that in? How did he make this kind of phasing thing and what did it involve?

Sumanth Gopinath 27:20
So he, I would say he ... because he was trying to kind of figure out, like a different way for his own work. This group gave him, like, a kind of a different, I don't know, approach to music making that I think, encouraged him to think differently about what he was doing. And the other thing we have to remember is that he ... concurrently with all this, he was doing the sort of tape music experiments, in his own, you know, with his own equipment. He had been very influenced by meeting Terry Riley, and

Terry Riley showed him his tape pieces, and then Reich like picked up on elements of them. This is something that exists in the literature. But people don't adequately appreciate, I think, how much Terry Riley gave to Steve Reich. Reich then picked up the phasing idea in part from what he was hearing and from, you know, studying and reading about African music.

Will Robin 28:14
Yeah, I want to come back to that in more detail.

Sumanth Gopinath 28:16
That's another key element of it…

Will Robin 28:17
Yes, yeah, we're gonna talk about that more.

Sumanth Gopinath 28:19
Okay. And then, as a result of that, as a result of this sort of, like leftist political context, and then the particular project where he was supposed to, he was working with a filmmaker who was going to make a documentary film of a Pentecostal, Black Pentecostal street preacher named brother Walter. He records Walter's voice and then turns it into this phase piece. And initially, as Martin Scherzinger and others have talked about, he tried to kind of create a phasing rhythm and pattern that was where the voices were out of sync, inspired by the things he was reading about in A.M. Jones's book, on Studies in African music, and in doing so, then, as he saw it, like, lining happening, while working with it, he then let it sort of go. And it was starting to slip out of phase. And it was when it was moving out of phase that he realized, Oh, this is a ... this is the thing that's interesting. It's not just ... the patterns are interesting too. But it's like letting them move in and out of sync with one another. And so it was a kind of technologically shaped or motivated discovery. Reich has this famous quote where he talks about like as, as it started to kind of ... when they started in sync, and then they move out of sync, like he felt it like move, you know, down through his body and then like another set? Yeah. So it's a really evocative description. And that sort of moment, I think, is a huge discovery. He's not sure what to do with it. So when he does the music for the Mime Troupe, the film that's an interlude in the show, which deals with ... was made by Robert Nelson, experimental filmmaker and the film basically features members of the troupe kind of doing stuff to watermelons. And the watermelon becomes like symbolic of, you know, essentially it's like a symbol of an African American. And so the violence that they're doing to it which is like sort of this weird jesting violence, it's also like disgusting and grotesque and physical and sexual -- all the stuff that they're doing in that film, which is a weird film. And fascinating, frankly, it connects to, then, what they're doing ... what they were doing with the show more broadly. And then Reich's music was to take a fragment of a minstrel song that he was ... he was using two minstrel songs in the ... as the basis for the music of the film. And the second song which is "Oh dem watermelons" by Luke Schoolcraft. He ends up taking little fragments that -- they sort of create a version or variant of the tune, and at the very end, there's a kind of cadence, and as part of that cadence, it starts being looped over and over again, like it sounds like it's kind of a II-V cadence and your watermelon, watermelon, watermelon, watermelon; and then he builds a canon based on this and it actually ... even though it's marginalia, it's the first thing that really sounds a lot like Steve Reich's instrumental music.

Will Robin 31:18
Yeah, I was listening to it yesterday.

Sumanth Gopinath 31:19
Yeah, it's different. It's rougher it doesn't have the smooth voices because it's sung by members of the troupe, and Reich himself, you know, he's playing the piano, but it's sort of Steve Reich music and you know, about as close as you get until you get to like Piano Phase, and then Violin Phase and you know, the rest of the stuff that we know. And so it's pretty key. So David Chapman has written about the way that improvisations, you know, a version of the watermelon music which they would do these sort of variations that improvisations on a watermelon, variations on a watermelon. There are different versions of it. And he came to understand a certain kind of, you know, suspended dominant sound as a kind of a ... he ... they would joke about in his, you know, his notebooks as calling out the watermelon. So the watermelon became a chord, you know, which is like a jazz chord, jazz-ish, you know, I mean, I don't know, you don't have to hear it that way. But Ian Quinn talked about this in a paper that he gave when he's trying to think through Reich's harmony. So anyway, this... all this stuff ends up kind of brewing together and really playing into, by the time when he gets to New York, and starts to kind of figure out, you know, what he's going to do with instrumental music as he writes about, he didn't want to keep making tape pieces, and it's clear that "Come Out" was a kind of second run of, "It's Gonna Rain," you know, and it came out of this situation, I don't think he would have necessarily done another tape piece like that. But he was struggling, you know, and obviously, I don't know the ins and outs of what he was thinking at that time, and what he was working through. But trying to get back to the “Oh Dem Watermelons” thing. And so anyway, to step back, I would say that the political thinking and context was I think really supplied a lot by Davis, and you know the troupe and the context in which he was working. And as part of that, he became connected to a leftist, you know, largely White, but you know, there were interracial collaborators in the Mime Troupe, White New Left kind of radical Marxist group, and with a lot of artists, you know, like, sort of leftist Marxist arts group. And so that's the politics, like, that, I think, is sort of shaping what he's trying to do. When he leaves that group and moves to New York, I think he, you know, finds new friends and connects with old ones. And, we have to remember that, as I've talked to Russell Hartenberger and others of the period, you know, the period was, in general, very politicized. People were attending a lot of protests very regularly, it was sort of part of the world that they were in. So I would say this is the kind of political world. It's not that Reich has, I think, a specific kind of theory or thinking about politics that's like, you know, what's the right strategy for this or this? You know, does he identify as a Marxist, but he's on the left, right. I would say at that time he's on the left.

Will Robin 34:17
At that time, yeah.

Sumanth Gopinath 34:18
At that time. Yeah. You know, and so what's important then, I think, is, and this gets maybe to the question of like, you know, the issues that are coming up now. What happens over the course of, you know, the mid ‘60s to late early ‘70s. Why does he stop kind of doing these pieces? Why does he stop doing work that seems to focus on African-American voices and material? I mean, there's a period

there, right. But as you said, I call them the “race pieces,” where he's really kind of doing stuff, specifically like that's really oriented very explicitly around African-American music, voices, culture, politics, etc. Even though it's not all coming from him, it's clearly a preoccupation. And it's not unique, right? A lot of White Americans, and certainly a lot of Jewish Americans have been very interested in and kind of engaged with African-American musical practices and African-American musical life and culture, and African-American language, you know, more broadly. So, these are things that, you know, you can think of the Tin Pan Alley tradition and the Gershwins for among many others, right. And so, Reich, I think you can, you can sort of see him in that vein. Anyway, all of which is to say that as ... in this later period, this is the period of when the Black liberation movement is gravitating much more directly around ideas of Black power, autonomous organizing, it's the moment when the Black Panther Party forms, you know, Stokeley Carmichael is shouting Black Power, you know, Amiri Baraka, Leroy Jones is getting very politicized and speaking explicitly as part of his Black Arts movement kind of work. So New York is a real center of a lot of this thinking. And really like a kind of reclamation, I would say, of Black work, which, you know, prior to that moment had been seen, as you know, in part, like with Reich, even though I don't know if he would have admitted or talked about it this way, but they were kind of source material for other people, you know. And so this, I would say that, my sense is well before the current sort of scandal is that Reich was very aware of this, and was at some level wary of trying to kind of continue in the vein of just using African American themes as part of his work. What he ends up doing is focusing more squarely on Africa. And there's a documentary TV series on Africa on ABC, I think, and that is a huge influence for him. And it ends up becoming the basis for "Slow Motion Sound," which is, like, I think the last of his race pieces, but it's an important... it was never finished and you know, there's a kind of fragmentary version of it that exists in the Sacher. But um, but the idea of that I think sort of closes the window on his race voice, you know, sort of pieces and moves towards Africa. And it's all within like a span of like, three years. It's a short period. And now as he's doing that, he's also coming up with "Piano Phase," and all this music we can sort of see as kind of bleached out or Whiter, because it's like, sort of the politics seems absent. And so my sense is in that period, and he talks, that series in particular made him also start thinking about, well, what's my background? Like, what do I have claims over and he starts moving, you know, especially in the 70s, towards like, reclaiming his Jewish identity as something he could draw on, that wouldn't be an act of appropriation in the same way. So I think his sensitivity around this stuff even though you know, however he talks about it, and however, you know, he's sort of thinking about these things. I think he's aware that what he's doing isn't quite okay. And that's one of the things that we know Reich is so preoccupied with in his writings, trying to set, sort of demarcate limits as to what isn't acceptable or ethical. It's something that he, you know, that's the point of my _Sound Structures_ essay on "Drumming," the first thing I ever published on Steve Reich. The first thing I ever published, actually. And that idea, what's at stake in it is that, you know, it's okay to engage with structure, but not okay to engage with sound. Because if you imitate the sound of some music, that is to say, take its instruments, its pitch content, its, you know, timbres, you know, that's an appropriation -- he calls it "chinoiserie." But if you take the structure, that which for him was rhythmic structure, it taught you to think in a different way. And the point of my essay was that you can't really separate those things -- that once you put them ... the, you know, the sound and the structure are really intimately tied up. So, so people often sort of think about "Drumming." and I did the same thing, as the piece that really sort of shows this stuff. But of course, it was in the tape pieces, because the tape pieces' argument and idea was oriented around African music, and Martin Scherzinger makes this argument. And then this is... and so it's really a kind of thread that carries

through a lot of his work. And so I would say that idea of kind of demarcating what is and isn't okay, making those ethical boundaries, is part of a larger quandary or maybe a conception to kind of figure out what is and isn't, you know, possible or licit for him to do. And that's motivating, I think, the changes that are taking place. Yeah, in that period. Now, what we didn't know... So now to go to the current situation, when, the quote from Val Wilmer is it?

Will Robin 39:49
Val Wilmer. Right. So Reich, in the early 70s says, is reported to have said, "Blacks are getting ridiculous in the States now." That's the quote.

Sumanth Gopinath 39:59
Right. And so, you know, it's, you know, a racist comment and all that stuff, right. But like, it's, it's also if you just try to kind of understand the context for it, I think, you know, there's a kind of anger and resentment at the fact that, you know, it's harder to talk to, and engage across interracial lines, because part of the larger comment that Wilmer talks about is they were talking about a mutual African American friend, and he says, and he said something like, "he's one of the Blacks you can talk to." And so the, like, part of this story as I was sort of thinking about it, is that there's a kind of, there's a commons of what you know, interpersonal exchange and intercultural exchange when people across different cultural lines and backgrounds communicate and share ideas, and we take for granted in many contexts, that it's okay to share those ideas, and that we learn from each other, and we can, you know, through that exchange, you know, human being do different and new and hopefully better or meaningful... continue to do meaningful things. Of course, at that period, a new awareness of a lot of these issues around asymmetries of those exchanges, the fact that a Black speaker and a White speaker just are, especially then, certainly today, are never quite on the same speaking terms because of the politics of what it means to be White versus what it means to Black the United States. Now, at the time, what it meant for an ambitious, you know, you know, fast talking White composer, to ... and Jewish, and we have to remember that there were increasing conflicts between Jewish Americans and Black Americans in this period. That's part of the story too. There are ... it's not surprising to imagine that there are resentments and awarenesses of these kinds of appropriations that really hadn't existed before or people... I'm guessing that Black speakers were aware of them but just didn't voice those concerns, you know, unwillingness to do so. And so that's the ... I think it's that kind of context in which you have to place those comments.

Will Robin 42:09
So, yeah, so like Reich is... most likely someone is calling out Reich. And like, we don't know that. But like, he's probably getting kind of inundated with the kinds of critiques that are now being voiced, I guess on Twitter, right. And he's shutting down. I mean, he's certainly moving in a political direction, starting to drift rightward. So -- and that's not to excuse any of this, right. Let's talk a little bit about Africa and this kind of question of cultural appropriation. So, you know, Reich, the two kind of, I guess, main kind of Black musical influences on Reich in the 60s are -- he talks a lot about john Coltrane and modal jazz, and he talks a lot about reading A. M. Jones's -- who is this missionary musicologist writing on SubSaharan West African music. So what did Reich kind of take from -- I don't know if we want to use the word take, if we want to use the word appropriate, be influenced by -- I'm curious to see how you'll approach this -- from African music that informed those phasing experiments, that informed kind

of like, really the nitty gritty, the like, the meat of his musical language from the time he becomes who he is.

Sumanth Gopinath 43:19
Yeah, I mean, I have my own take on it, but I'm no expert on African music. So, you know, I can give you what I think I know. But um, I think it is worth talking to Africanists who have a better sense of it. But my sense is that Reich took a certain kind of reading of African music from Jones, from ... he was reading going through Schiller's like _Early Jazz_ and trying to kind of figure out, you know, the sort of roots of African-American music in part by exploring this. And I would say there are a variety of things. One is, you know, sort of repeated group patterns. Which, of course, he isn't just taking from African music. He's also interested in from, you know, jazz, as you said, He's influenced by Coltrane, you know, obviously, like jazz features repeated group patterns, not exclusively, but that's, you know, one element of the swing and sort of, you know, rhythmic patterns and soul jazz and other sorts of -- the various versions of sort of lineages of jazz that emerge in that period are certainly engaging to various degrees with grooves. And then of course, the rock/pop, you know, lineage. I mean, he was listening to Bob Dylan, was listening to Junior Walker's "Shotgun," which is, you know, among other pieces, like, you know, things that he cites that are influencing him. So he's, he's listening to a bunch of different repetitive groove-based musics. And then he encounters Terry Riley. And, you know, here's what Riley is doing with repetitive grooves and units. And that's a huge influence, even though he doesn't tend to kind of talk a lot about the tape pieces that I think played a huge role. If you listen to "She moves she," which is one of Riley's pieces for... the music from "The Gift," a play that he did music for. It's, you know, moments sound a lot, like "Come Out" and "It's Gonna Rain." But he does acknowledge more the importance of "In C". And so the influence of "In C" which he was involved in the premiere performance of, he says it needs a beat and so the C's were born of probably some piece of Reich's own suggestions, Jean Brechen [???], who was Reich's girlfriend at the time, plays the high C's. And as part of that sort of process, you know, he's electrified by this piece. I mean, it's a really important piece and you know, sort of White experimental American music, right? And so it ends up being this one of a variety of influences that are encouraging to make groove based music, right, which is not typical in experimental music at the time. I mean, it's ... and so as we know this and then sort of facing this, I would say that's one thing he gets from African music. Another thing he gets from African music is the non coincidental, you know, organizing of, you know, sort of different layers. And this is something that really, he sort of sees, by the way that Jones himself does transcriptions of African music. This is something that not all scholars of African music agree on. And in fact, most of them, or at least many of them, do hear a kind of consistent meter and pattern that's shaped by the dancing as much as by, you know, the -- what is actually sort of performed on the drumming and musical instruments and singing. And this is something that Kofi Agawu has emphasized a lot. David Locke talks about this too. And so there are scholars who really kind of emphasize the way in which, you know, Reich's music -- or not Reich's music, but you know, there are certain versions of an idea of African music that exists in scholarship that maybe aren't super accurate, but I think those versions of it encourage Reich to think about phasing, to at least hear things and think about music in and out of phase. There are other things too, that Reich was influenced by, that sort of relationship between like, musical sound and language, or like instruments becoming imitated by voices. I mean, you know, they're ... those sorts of like sonic practices and, and Scherzinger talks about some of those things too. And in fact, has a really great and like really rich and lengthy study of Reich's sort of thinking about African music in _Rethinking Reich_

rice and so ... which I think follows up on the earlier essay on "It's Gonna Rain," and stuff that people maybe know better, but um...

Will Robin 47:46
There's a phrase that Reich uses which I'm surprised actually hasn't kind of cropped up on social media, which is, I guess a joke, but he says in an interview he describes phasing as -- this is a quote -- "Little mechanized Africans." And like that seems to gesture towards, I mean, I don't know, like, what do you make of that, that seems to me to point towards something in the "Come Out" thing too, of, like, the interest in this music abstracted from the humans who create it, or like the kind of dehumanizing aspect that I think fuels a lot of, you know, historically White interest in non-Western music, like, take the music without the people being attached to it.

Sumanth Gopinath 48:29
Right. I mean, and, you know, it's him kind of making a joke, combining the very fact of, like, the mechanization of tape loops and repetition, with the fact that the musical patterns are African, right. I mean, but ... So, I mean, you've sort of laid it all out, I think, in terms of how one can think about it. You know, again, like these are sort of like, you know, jokes in these moments that seems symptomatic of, you know, broader kinds of thinking. But it's um, yeah, Scherzinger himself, I think in the earlier essay, like, talks about the little mechanized Africans, as do I think in my dissertation or somewhere, but... yeah, it's an ... it's indicative, I would say; I'm you know, it, there are lots of ways to think about it too, in terms of the ways in which, you know, repetitive patterns in Black, Afro-diasporic, you know, sort of musical traditions were then read by modernists in terms of mechanization and machines and modernity. And so the kind of Afro-modernity ideal is ... has a lineage too, you know, and so I would say that there's ... he's, again, picking up on something that isn't... doesn't start with him.

Will Robin 49:45
Let's talk a little bit about "Drumming". You know, this is the moment in which Reich's interest in African music is mediated through his study of someone else's study, and then he goes to Ghana and studies with a master drummer and learns Ewe music. Why does he do that? What is the interest? What does he come out of that experience learning? And how does that shape the creation of, like, one of these pieces that is talked about as being this kind of fusion of African and European music, whether or not you kind of buy that?

Sumanth Gopinath 50:16
Yeah. I mean, that was something that I was trying to kind of think through in my own piece on "Drumming." And I ... it's an important story, because I think it's clear that as Reich is working with these phase pieces, and he's been reading about African music, he doesn't really know it very well. He's sort of got certain structural ideas that he's pulled out of the Jones and of other things he's reading, Scherzinger emphasizes that he starts getting in touch with the Tracey's and you know, is, is paying attention to archives and like so he's pulling, you know, in the mid to late 70s, he's really starting to try to educate himself more about this music because it's clear that this music is something that's It's generative for him to engage with. And so ... and/or appropriate, whatever you want to say, right? I mean, the US-American experimental tradition is full of people who are appropriating non-Western music. So I mean, you know, there's the sort of Cage and Colin McPhee and the sort of Balinese music

lineage right. There are, you know, the sort of, you know, broader histories of Japanese, Chinese, and Indonesian musics that float into the kind of exoticist tradition of Western art music that you find in Debussy, Ravel, you know, Britten, etc, right? Poulenc -- I mean, there, it's all over the place. But traditional African musics were not as focused on by White experimental composers and so Reich -- I think Reich felt like he had found something that others had not really connected with, and of course it connected to something, you know, jazz and Black music that he was already interested in and influenced by -- he'd been listening to that music At least to jazz since he was a teenager, you know, as he famously says, it changes his life when he hears, you know, like Charlie Parker, Kenny Clark and all these people, right? And so this kind of moment, I think is he's sort of found something that he thinks is going to be ... is particularly meaningful to him and that he can really sort of propel and shape his work as he goes forward. And so as he's... as part of that, I think he takes ... decides to take drumming lessons with someone in New York. That's ... is it Alfred Letschepko [???], I think so. Anyway, and as part of that, he then decides he applies for a grant and got the grant went to, went to Ghana, to Accra, and started working with I believe, Gideon Alorworye, yeah. And so, and other people worked with him too. I mean, you know, it's a university sort of setting. I mean, there's all sorts of contexts for pedagogy and training and as part of this he's struggling with how to understand the music, right? And he's doing a lot of transcription. I mean, there's a piece of Reich that is very much bound up with transcribing and, and you know, he's sort of like influenced by ethnomusicology at the time. And so -- that, I would say, is him kind of trying to struggle and figure out what he's going to do. And I would say in terms of what influences, you know, the music in "Drumming" as opposed to earlier pieces, there are a few things. One is the idea really to focus on drums, which he had not done to that point. He says that it comes from hearing a performer in Juilliard, who played sticks on bongos. And so this was the thing he remembered, and he thought that that was really powerful. And so he wanted to use it. As part of his sort of debates with himself about what is and isn't okay to do. He felt like he had to really -- he was demarcating practices where he could find stuff in his own life. You know, he could go to the drum stores and buy things as opposed to having to import specific, you know, instruments that would be difficult to find. And so he was very much not interested in that kind of like, Partchean tradition of like, specialized instruments, you know, things that would be like sort of basically obscure to kind of work with, I think he wanted to work with things that were relatively accessible in terms of like, findable for Western, you know, musicians, and so ... So the sound of the drums is that, there is a... I mean, the African rhythmic stuff, I think, is a continuation of stuff he'd been doing. So, in that way, it sounds the most like when he says it was a confirmation, you know, things he'd wanted to do. Yeah, it's a confirmation because he had already been influenced by African music. And then when he went to study it, he was just learning more about African music. And at least some of the aspects weren't that different. And then I think the most -- to me, the most important thing, and people have talked about this, certainly before I did, but I sort of drew a certain amount of attention to it, is just the heterogeneous sound ideal, which I think comes out of other pieces too. I mean, you hear it in, "in C," for example. But the way that the ensemble sort of comes together and that, you know, there's this transition, like a timbral transition from, you know, from the bongos, to the marimbas, to the glockenspiels, to the whole, and of course, all the voices and singing and whistling and all that that's going along with the flutes, piccolos, etc, like, you get this kind of heterogeneous ensemble at the end. And that is sort of Reich starting to, as he says, trying to think about, like his own orchestra or something. But it also is a ... it's a heterogeneous sound ideal that doesn't sound like you know, Reich, sort of working with this consistent timbral profile in order to get these psychoacoustic differences. What you know, I remember having a

conversation with Greg Tate where he described Reich's music as -- Africa as a science project. You know, and which I thought was pretty apt. And I think in a weird way, the science project is much more with the phasing stuff. You've got the similar timbre thing and you're, you know, in doing the phasing and the shifts, and you get these aural illusions and image, you know, things that you think you're hearing you're not hearing and Scherzinger emphasizes that that is something that's very much a part of African music too. And so, so that's where I think, you know, he's sort of going and "Drumming" starts with that right because you've got the uniform instrumental sounds for the first three movements, but it's when they get combined that I think, a very different kind of thing happens and it kicks off I think something different for him, but I think that's something that I think he picked up on -- not only kind of a confirmation, but maybe a new attention to it, when he went to Ghana and listened to ensembles.

Will Robin 56:53
So, I mean, at the kind of meta level, in terms of also what folks I've seen people talking about on Twitter and Facebook recently. Do you see "Drumming" as an act of cultural appropriation, is... are these later works steeped in some of these African musical patterns, like "Music for 18 Musicians," forms of cultural appropriation? Is that a framework that you think is productive to criticize or understand these works through?

Sumanth Gopinath 57:21
Sure. I mean, I think they are. But I guess my feeling is that cultural appropriation is really extensive and widespread. And so I think if you start to kind of, and certainly the mode of art music, I think is one which, in the zeal for individuals demonstrating creativity and originality, and this is sort of, you know, in part I kind of White, I think, practice, I think you'll find this everywhere in the tradition, you know, and so I guess I don't see Reich as special in this way. I think he's part of just a larger history that I think experimental music has to think about -- what does it mean to do this? I think, you know, scholars have tried to figure out ways that traditional musics can be somehow, you know, protected by copyright, or that there are resources that go to musicians who are working with those materials. I think those sorts of things are really important and productive, like to find out, you know, individuals benefiting economically building careers, no matter how much they did, and felt that they did struggle in order to build those careers. I mean, you know, Reich, though he comes from an economically wealthy family, like many people at that time, struggled economically, right. I mean, that's part of the sort of history and mythos of that music in that world. And so I think a lot of these artists feel like they did this themselves, right, like they built up their thing. And so to then say, it's an act of appropriation feels unfair. But, um, but it's, I think it's both of those things, right. I mean, it's ... and so... I guess what, I just ... my main concern is I just want the conversation to have complexity and richness. I personally get really uncomfortable with the, sort of, the mode and discourse of canceling; and I know that these things are oversimplified, and you know, the right loves using "cancel culture" as a kind of boogeyman. And I think that's it's also really important to resist that and be aware of that. But you know, people on the left talk about "cancel" too, like, and think of it and it's a mode of power, and it's a mode of changing discourse and changing society. And it's, you know, I'm not saying people shouldn't do it, I'm pro boycotts in all sorts of contexts. I mean ... so it's more that trying to kind of think through these issues in a complex and rich way, which I will say some people say that the very complexity of doing so actually encourages inaction, or encourages people not to do anything. And so that's something to think about, but I guess ... You know, in the end, you know, human beings who are flawed, who are White males, who are in

subject positions of power and what have you, relative power in a world, in worlds that have in the grand scheme of things not that much power, are... yeah, I don't know, I guess I'm sympathetic to, in a way that tries to see the nuances of their, where they're located socially. You know, I will say this too -- and this is something that some people may feel is unfair, but I have felt that a lot of White individuals have wanted to really, like, come to me to validate what it means to engage with these issues, because I'm not White, and I and I just feel like I'm myself so compromised in these things. I'm, yes, I'm not White. And yes, you know, I look like -- you know, the way I look with my big beard and my hair, and I've been called out as a terrorist and like all these rights, I mean that ... but 9/11 was, like absurd for me, right but... but, on the other hand, I come from a, you know, not economically wealthy but like an intellectually rich, privileged, South Asian Hindu Brahmin background. You know, my family is like, you know, intellectually and, you know, politically connected, not politically but somewhat politically. And you know, so ... what, you know, it means something when you come to the United States as an immigrant and you know, you're sort of semi shorn from those things. But I don't know, I guess I just want people to think through their own privilege a little more, and to be humble about it. I mean, and then use that humility to have a certain amount of charity towards people. Which isn't to say, you know, like, should Reich be lionized in the way that he is? I mean, I've been kind of undergoing in various ways, attempt to kind of ask people to think more critically about his music. Right. I mean, and the conservative drift story is one that's disturbing to me. It's a part of a story that I ... absolutely needs to be talked about. What I'd rather have is that... I'd rather have it that he be open to having honest conversations about it. That's what I'd really like, what I'd really like... and you know, I haven't been in a position to do it. I've felt fearful about it, haven't wanted to engage with him in that way. But if Reich is a political conservative and has these beliefs, I think they should be aired, I think he should talk explicitly about them. It doesn't mean that people ... people may be mad, they may dislike him, it may lead to him, you know, having fewer performances, and that's probably why he hasn't done it in the same measure. I don't know. I'm guessing, you know, he's a person who's lived a long life, and you know, he's not -- he's a smart man. I'm sure he has, even though I don't think of him as a political thinker in that way. But that said, I'm sure he has lots of things to say, I'm sure his ... there are nuanced elements, and it would be just better to have it out in the public and have people talk about it. And then I think, correspondingly for people to decide, you know, okay, you may have these views or beliefs. Is the music meaningful to me despite all of that? Steve Reich is not a monster, you know, I don't think. He's no Wagner, and people continue to like play Richard Wagner's music because they find something meaningful in it. Including when Daniel Barenboim brought it to Israel, I mean, right? I mean, so a person's music can be better than them, you know, a person's cultural offering can move beyond the control that they, the creator thinks that they might have of it. And I think that's important to embrace too. So, my plea is for, like, greater honesty, charity, and understanding. But then I mean, which sounds totally like naive sounding right in certain ways, but, as ... but that is like in the mix along with the critical impulse and the anger and the frustration that people feel, which are right. I mean, I never want to take away from that, you know, as I said, like, you know, George Floyd was murdered by police, you know, a couple miles from my house. You know, Minneapolis is, like, transformed in a, you know, profound way. And, you know, and I've, you know, in my modest ways, I mean, not really major ways, but I'm part of it, you know, I'm part of that history and believe that policing needs to radically change, that it's, you know, killing people, and especially killing Black people and indigenous people, like, in ways that are just deeply wrong and bound up with, you know, how property relations work in the United States. And so, you know, so to, to get people ... I don't want to deflate people's anger or feelings. Like I mean, anger

has motivated my own work, right. But I just -- I want a nuance and a richness around it. And then through that we can, I don't know, try to figure out what's meaningful in terms of going forward. And if that means a few less Steve Reich performances or commissions. I mean, he's got enough money at this point, I'm sure. But I also think, you know, he's writing some good music these days. I think the Reich / Richter thing is like, a real comeback for him. In my opinion, I was excited by the way that that sounded, was surprised by it. And I want everyone to who's making creative music to make music and to do their thing. And, you know, we'll kind of sort it all out later. That's probably the music scholar in me, right? I mean...

Will Robin 1:05:21
Yeah. Well, thank you so much. This is a really enlightening and productive conversation, and I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

Sumanth Gopinath 1:05:28
Of course, thanks so much for having me.

1:05:30
[music]

Will Robin 1:05:37
I am deeply grateful to Sumanth Gopinath for that rich and provocative discussion. As always, you can visit soundexpertise.org for show notes that include links to Sumanth's writings on Reich. I am extraordinarily thankful to our producer D. Edward Davis, for putting this episode together on a very tight timeline. That awesome theme music you hear is his, and you can check out more of his work over on Soundcloud at warm silence. I'm on Twitter @seatedovation if you have any questions or thoughts about the show, and if you're new to Sound Expertise, I encourage you to check out our previous episodes. And speaking of Twitter, I do have one big ask for this week. If you like our show, please post about us on social media. We would love your support on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, MySpace, Friendster, livejournal, and Zynga -- especially Zynga -- to help boost our audience. Thank you and see you next week for an interview with Timothy Taylor, on capitalism and the value of music.

1:06:39
[music]