

Expressive Arts Gcse - Critical Analysis
Unit 2- People and Places
'Different Trains' by Steve Reich

In this Analysis I am going to be looking at 'Different trains' by Steve Reich. I will be trying to understand the reason why he created this interesting piece of music and his influences. Furthermore I am going to talk about how groundbreaking this piece is and its significance.

Steve Reich was the creator of the piece, he has had a very successful career and has created other *spectacular pieces such as 'It's gonna rain' (1965), 'come out' (1995) and many more.* He was born in New York during 1936. He learnt about drumming at the age of 14 with New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Then he took a philosophy degree at Cornell in 1953. He carried on with further education at places like Mills Collage, where he developed an interest for African and Balinese Music. In 1966 he began performing with his own band, mostly contained percussion. Then he began to work on larger orchestral and choral forces this is when he wrote Different trains, 1988.

The song won a Grammy in 1989 for best contemporary Classical composition. It was originally written for Kronos quartet string group, this contained 2 violins, 1 viola and a cello. It was founded by violinist David Harrington during 1973. After 1978, They have mainly worked from San Francisco. They specialize in new types of music and they have an extremely long history of commissioning new works. Over 600 works have been created for the Kronos Quartet. They have worked with many minimalist composers including Arvo Pärt, Henryk Górecki, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Roberto Carnevale, Terry Riley and Kevin Volans.

Steve's older pieces of work often involved him using tapes, looped and played back whereas Different Trains was more of a research experiment. Using recorded speech as lyrics and to create rhythms and tempo. He was also inspired to create this unique styled music by Scott Johnston's 'John somebody' in 1978 an early attempt to record a voice and interrupt into a piece of music.

It was called Different Trains because the composition was made in remembrance of the Holocaust, especially the trips the victims made to the camps. Furthermore it was about his life as a young child travelling from one parent to another. It was a newspaper of it time, everyone could access it whenever they wished!

The song was written in 1988. Steve had to write it then because it the survivors would have already been in there seventies. There were very old and their bodies were starting to wear out, as you get older you start to forget things. He wanted to use real people from the event. He interviewed many people that linked with the event, so he could get a non biased account of what happened these included railway workers, victims ect. The interviews lasted for hours; he couldn't let the song be that long. So he use key phrases that some up their story.

The piece was published by Hendon Music/ Boosey & Hawkes. The premier took place at Queen Elizabeth Hall on November 2 1988. Steve decided that he wanted it to be played by the Kronos Quartet. It was commissioned, which means 'to order to be made'; by Betty Freeman for the Kronos Quartet. Betty Freeman is an American philanthropist and photographer. A philanthropist is someone who donates their time, money, or reputation to charitable causes.

She is best known as an heavy supporter in the art world. She is one of the most major American sponsor of modern classical music of the following half of the 20th century. Since 1961 to 2003, she had made 432 grants and commissions to 81 composers, frequently primitive parts of their careers. She has assisted composers such as Lou Harrison, John Cage, La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Adams, Pierre Boulez, Harrison Birtwistle, Virgil Thomson, Helmut Lachenmann, and Kaija Saariaho. Steve Reich decided to dedicate Variations for Winds, Strings, and Keyboards (1979) and Vermont Counterpoint (1982) to her.

At this time, the technique was fairly unused this was because the technology was just starting to evolve. This is why on all the versions of the song its not great quality.

Different Trains had a strong structure it was spilt into 3 piece movements. It included;

1. America before the war
2. Europe during the war
3. After the war.

He wanted to write it for everyone as a memory of what really happened in the Holocaust, a newspaper of its time. He shows this by using different voices, of people involved such as survivors, and key phrases which come up the Journey and emotions they felt.

One of the movements was created to help him memorise his childhood stories. When he was one year old, his parents separated. His mother moved to Los Angeles and his father stayed in New York. He spent a lot of his youth travelling between their houses in a friendly and hostile environment. Steve was lucky because he was an American Jew, many boys the same as him living in Europe would have had a very different journey. This was the happier of the journeys because he was looking forward to seeing his mum or dad. He travelled back and forth with his Governess, Virginia who was a second mother to him and he used her voice to quote the phrases during the Song. These are a few of the phrases he used;

- From Chicago to New York
- One of the fastest trains
- The crack train from New York
- From New York to Los Angeles'

This mean a lot more to him, than they do to us. This part of the song especially was an audio album of his life. No matter how much he forgets when he older; He can just listen to

this song and it will remind him. They individually show different aspects; for example I got told the line 'The crack train from New York' crack is slang for the best. So by using this, you can tell he meant he travelled on the best train, with his governess, maybe first class. However when I researched this there was no information on it. When I went through hundreds of websites and the official meaning of Crack Train in the 1980's was a train that ran from New York Central Railroad and went all over America, it was very fast and hardly ever stopped. He was very lucky, because if he lived a few thousands miles away it would be a very different story, this song shows the comparison between the two train journeys going on at the same train.

The Second movement was not as happy as the first; it conveyed the horror of the Holocaust throughout Europe. It was played in E minor a common key for sad emotional meaningful songs, like the saints of coming. In stead of using more cheerful noises such as the Train whistles, they used Sirens, which are scary and create a frightening atmosphere. This noise makes you think of danger and fear, which is exactly what the Holocaust was. The words come a lot quicker and the tempo is slower. The instruments are played more confidently and violently. This creates a more up tense atmosphere to the audience. The second movement is a lot more action packed and louder, more violent he creates these feelings by using different rhythms, tempos, volume and dynamics. Here are some examples of the lyrics from movement 2, they are form a holocaust survivor

- On my Birthday
- Germans walked in
- She said quick go
- Into those cattle wagons
- 4 days and nights
- They shaved us
- They tattooed a number in our arm
- Flames going up into the sky

At the beginning of this year we learnt about the holocaust in Religious education and the awful things the victims went through. These phrases are key and some up what happened in and on the way and in the concentration camps. For examples, on the way to the concentration camps they were forced into cattle wagons, they squeezed ridiculous amounts of people in and forced them to live in inhumane conditions, they have one bucket to pee in and one to drink for the hundreds of people in this cart. It was hot, sweaty, smelly and dark. There was no room to lie and they were forced to live like that for 4 days and 4 nights. Steve was clever the way he chose key phrases, because it covered everything in a brief way. Some lines have a powerful word order, it really makes you think what they must be going through. Especially as he repeats it, it really gets it into your head and you really think about what was happening.

When I researched I found that part 3 was about the reconciliation was meant to be achieved, this was when the survivors where allowed to go try and get back to normal. The quotes are from 3 holocaust survivors Paul, Rachel and Rachella. Statements such as 'The war is over' and 'are you sure?' Steve used those lines to convey the uncertainties

that they faced. After all these years was it really over?? The New York Times congratulated it as 'astonishing originality' and that's how it then won its Grammy in 1989.

The instruments are very cleverly used; the cello is a slow driving regular beat. He used the violin to change the speed of the journeys, and also you can imagine them as the train. They make the noises, and the instruments make you imagine the engine, the muffle noise, sort of like a humming. This makes you want to carry on listening because you feel like its taking you on your own journey somewhere and you want to know what going to happen next. Part way through, he play the instruments at a higher pitch, it's a change from the low dreary regular notes before. They were played so much; they stopped sounding individual and more like a train. Whereas you could hear the comparison before because it was higher.

In my head I could imagine the train coming out of the dark tunnel and into light green sunny fields. The violin or viola played the same as the phrases, with the notation. For example 'From Chicago to New York' as the notes where played it made you sing it in your head. The line repeated so many times and then the viola played it at the same time and you could still hear the low humming noise played by the cello; they all worked as a team. Even when the lyrics weren't playing sometimes the viola would play that tune, and you could hear the words in your head. On the second phrase; 'one of the fastest trains' they play it together then goes out of time. The viola starts playing it part way, and then restarts. Eventually they get back in time to end, this is another reason it's a minimalist piece of music. It end with a train whistle, which sounds like the one they play when the trains stops, it warns you the journey is over, this shows that the song was finished to.

The song is significant for its time because it uses samples, no song at that present time had been created as well this way. He repeats the lines over and over again, simply by pressing a button. This was a high technology for its time, not many people had been daring enough to do that. Whereas today there are many songs which use that technique such SOS by Rihanna or pussycat dolls. This technique was great because he repeated the noise and it created a rhythm and tempo as it was developed. You could slow down the song or change the pitch ect.

He combined the taped speech, with string instruments. He very clever in his decisions, he chose samples that were clearly pitched and then put them into musical notation. Then he made the strings imitate what the voice melodies where saying. The speech samples and well as other noises such as the trains were moved onto a tape and then sampling keyboards and a computer. In the song, 3 quartets where added into the tape, and then the final live performance the there was one more quartet was added for maximum affect; It must have sounded sensational!! He wrote the lyrics first and then the music, so it could play on the rhythm and make them work together without realising it to create a outstanding piece of music. This meant that the relationship between the voices and instruments was very strong, and they complimented each other.

This song was a starting point for Steve, he then went on to create further projects such as The cave (1993) and City Life (1995). Steve created these works by copying his speech recordings into a digital sampling keyboard (a Casio FZ-1).

This piece was a piece of Minimalist because it is composed using short themes, which are regularly replayed such as the train whistle or voices. He used a minimal amount of pitches; instead they just used the same clap, microphone or line of lyrics to create the song.

Overall this song is groundbreaking for several reasons because it was a record of what happened. We can hear real survivors voice and phrases which act as lyrics to convey what happened. These words and rhythms of the songs put together a story in your head. Secondly it sent music into a new digital age and thirdly it was a successful example and was the start of greater songs to come. He showed people what could be achieved, encouraged them to try out with this technique. He set all musical people into a new age, digital music. The idea of splitting the song into 3 different motifs worked really well because it enabled the audience to realise, the 3 motifs meanings were very different and it defined a line between the sections. In section 1, its a lot smoother and nicer noises such as the train whistle, whereas section 2 is more rough and uses more horrific terror, sirens create a dangerous atmosphere. It makes you think there's something wrong and then the lyric phrases convey this further. He wanted to show his true compassion and notification of his train journeys and how living in a different place, even if you're the same race, colour or religion can make such a huge impact on your life.