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### Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung

Published: 01/05/2024

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*

Ap Sion, P. (2024). Musical Wellsprings in a Parched Landscape: Harmonic Sources in Steve Reich's 'The Desert Music' (1984). *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, (37), 39-45.

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## Musical Wellsprings in a Parched Landscape

### Harmonic Sources in Steve Reich's *The Desert Music* (1984)

by Pwyll ap Sion

Premiered in Cologne on 17 March 1984, *The Desert Music* is regarded by many as one of Steve Reich's most important compositions. K. Robert Schwarz praised the work for its "coloristic variety, harmonic and melodic range, and emotional impact," while conductor Michael Tilson Thomas drew attention to its "very powerful, spiritual message."<sup>1</sup> One of *The Desert Music*'s most striking elements, at least to those familiar with Reich's previous oeuvre, is its exploration of a new harmonic sound world. Partly inspired by William Carlos Williams's poetry, the ominous, unsettling chords heard at the beginning of the large-scale work for chorus and orchestra has been described by the composer as "more chromatic and 'darker' in harmony" than in any of his previous works.<sup>2</sup> According to Richard Taruskin, by "[broadening] his harmonic palette into intense chromatic terrain," *The Desert Music* equipped the composer "to deal with sober, even sombre matters."<sup>3</sup> Its impact can be heard in several subsequent works, which explore harmony in similar ways, including *Sextet* (1985), *Three Movements* (1986), and *City Life* (1995).

The introduction to *The Desert Music* sets the tone with a series of five-chords that cycle four times during its opening three minutes. These are labelled I–V in [Example 1](#). The voicings of each chord as they appear in the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts have also been retained. These chords have been described by Reich as "altered dominant" harmonies.<sup>4</sup> The second chord can be described as an E-flat dominant ninth over a C root, the third chord an E-flat dominant ninth with a flat fifth, and the fourth an F dominant seventh with a flat thirteenth. The first and last chords do not appear to be constructed on dominant harmonies

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<sup>1</sup> K. Robert Schwarz, "Process vs. Intuition in the Recent Works of Steve Reich and John Adams," *American Music* 8, no. 3 (1990), pp. 245–73, esp. p. 246. Michael Tilson Thomas in Steve Reich, *Conversations* (Toronto: Hanover Square Press, 2022), pp. 73–101, esp. p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Reich, "The Desert Music (1984)," *Writings on Music 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 120–26, esp. p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Taruskin, "A Sturdy Musical Bridge to the 21st Century," *The New York Times*, 24 August 1997, pp. 29–30, esp. p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Reich, "The Desert Music" (see note [2](#)), p. 121.

but are based instead on minor configurations: the first a G minor eleventh chord with a flat fifth over an A root, while the last is a relatively “straightforward” D minor eleventh.

**Example 1:** The first five chords in Steve Reich’s *The Desert Music*.

All five chords thus comprise extended harmonies based on ninths, elevenths, and thirteenth, with flattened alterations: the kinds of harmonies familiar to the world of jazz. As if to strengthen this connection, Reich has observed that Williams’s texts took him back to the harmonies he explored during lessons with composer Hall Overton prior to (and during) his studies at the Juilliard School of Music, between 1959–61. Reich stated that the “milieu around Overton was very lively. Thelonious Monk was there,” and according to the composer, his early *Music for Two or More Pianos* (1964), “mingled [the influences of] Morton Feldman [...] with those of jazz pianist Bill Evans.”<sup>5</sup>

While jazz remained an important influence, Reich’s sketches for *The Desert Music* reveal that the composer was casting his harmonic net much wider. In addition to chords copied from Bela Bartók and Igor Stravinsky, Reich’s sketchbooks include reharmonisations of the opening melody from Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (see **Plate 1**), the opening chords from Maurice Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloé*, a short passage from Charles Ives’s *Three Places in New England*, and even Richard Wagner’s well-known *Tristan* chord (**Example 2**).<sup>6</sup>

**Plate 1:** Steve Reich, Sketchbook 24 (August 1981 – June 1982), p. [37] (Steve Reich Collection, PSS).

**Example 2:** Chords in Reich’s sketchbooks taken from Debussy, *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (2a), Ravel, *Daphnis et Chloé* (2b), Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* (2c), and Ives, *Three Places in New England* (2d).

These chords appear alongside several pages of original harmonic progressions described by the composer in his sketchbooks as “harmonic structure – overall and sectional,” “a series of shorter cycles,” “pulsed chords,” and “pulses for [William Carlos Williams] piece.” These harmonic ideas eventually culminate in a sketch dated 28 October 1982, alongside the words “final chords” (see **Plate 2**). These chords closely resemble the opening five harmonies in *The Desert Music*, as shown in *Example 1*. For example, the bass line follows the same progression in both, raising by two minor thirds from A to C and **E<sub>b</sub>**,

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Paul Hillier, “Introduction,” Reich, *Writings on Music* (see note **2**), p. 8 and p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> The chords in **Example 2** have been presented in a manner that tries to capture the way they appear in Reich’s sketchbooks. The Debussy, Ravel and Wagner examples can all be found in Walter Piston’s treatise on *Harmony* (see pp. 518, 494, and 421 respectively in the **1978 revised edition**). This suggests that Reich may have sourced these chords directly from Piston’s textbook rather than from the scores themselves. See Walter Piston, *Harmony* (London: Gollancz, 1978). **PSS LS 8 PIST 102 = 1966**

before falling by a third from F to D. The harmonies themselves show only slight deviations from the final set of chords (see the comparison in [Example 3](#)).<sup>7</sup>

[Example 3](#): Reich's harmonic sketch 28 October 1982 (3a), compared with the final set of opening chords for *The Desert Music* (3b).

[Plate 2](#): Steve Reich, Sketchbook 26 (July 1982 – February 1983), p. [28] (Steve Reich Collection, PSS).

While it is not uncommon to see music from other sources copied out by Reich, the presence of several harmonic passages belonging to different composers is unusual and their inclusion surprising. Other than Wagner's *Tristan* chord, all the other sources belong to late nineteenth and early twentieth century orchestral repertoire (including the Bartók and Stravinsky chords not discussed here). This suggests that, in addition to jazz, Reich was keen to position his new work in relation to a Western orchestral and symphonic tradition that spanned late Romanticism (Wagner), early impressionism (Debussy and Ravel), and early European and American modernism (Bartók, Stravinsky, and Ives). Perhaps Reich's desire was to synthesize both traditions in this work. The kinds of extended chords found in these examples – augmented and chromatic colorations, dominant substitutions, major and minor sevenths, ninths, and elevenths – appear to have laid the harmonic foundations for *The Desert Music*, to the point of even providing the composer with ideas about the verticalization and spatialization of his chords.

Looking closer, further connections exist between the opening harmonies of *The Desert Music* and Reich's sketched chords. For example, when Wagner's *Tristan* chord is transposed up a tone, yielding (from bottom to top) G, [D \$\flat\$](#) , F, and [B \$\flat\$](#) , all four pitches are contained in Reich's opening six-note chord ([Example 4](#)). (The common pitches to both chords appear as stemless black notes.) As noted by Mark DeVoto and others, when transposed and reordered, the opening harmony from Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* comprises the same pitches as the *Tristan* chord.<sup>8</sup> Described in various ways as a half-diminished seventh, a French sixth, or set 4-27A [0,2,5,8] in pitch-class analysis, Debussy's chord is therefore also contained in Reich's first chord when transposed down a minor third

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<sup>7</sup> The final version of the opening chord replaces an [E \$\flat\$](#)  with an F while the second chord in the sketch is missing an [E \$\flat\$](#) . Assuming the bracketed accidentals in the final chord in [Example 3a](#) have been accidentally left out by Reich in his sketch (the low 'D' natural in the bass strongly implies this), the final chord therefore only lacks a 'G'.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark DeVoto, "Memory and Tonality in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*," *Cahiers Debussy*, 37–38 (2014), pp. 5–21, esp. pp. 6–8. [PSS Z 289](#)

([Example 5](#)). Reich's fifth chord possesses the same pitches as the D minor eleventh in the chord copied by the composer from Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* ([Example 6](#)).

[Example 4](#): Wagner's *Tristan* chord (4a) in Reich's *The Desert Music*, Chord I (4b).

[Example 5](#): Debussy's first chord in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (5a) in Reich's *The Desert Music*, Chord I (5b).

[Example 6](#): Ravel's chord from *Daphnis et Chloé* (6a) in Reich's *The Desert Music*, Chord V (6b).

Nevertheless, the most revealing associations between *The Desert Music*'s opening chords can be found in Reich's sketch of a short passage from the first movement of Ives's *Three Places in New England* (see [Plate 3](#)). Subtitled "The 'St. Gaudens' in Boston Common," Reich's sketch (dated 5 October 1982) draws on harmonies heard close to the beginning of Ives's movement, containing the first chord of measure 7 alongside the second and third chords of measure 8 (see the boxed chords in [Example 7](#)).

[Plate 3](#): Steve Reich, Sketchbook 26 (July 1982 – February 1983), p. [22] (Steve Reich Collection, PSS).

[Example 7](#): Charles Ives, *Three Places in New England* (1929, rev. 1933–35) (Bryn Mawr, PA: Mercury, 1935), mm. 6–8. **[string section only? PSS 60 Ives 2 / 2bis / perhaps delete this one?]**

[Example 8](#): Two chords from Ives's *Three Places in New England*, first movement (m. 8) compared with Reich's second and third chords from *The Desert Music*.

8a: Ives, m. 8, first chord

8b: Reich, chord II

8c: Ives, m. 8, second chord

8d: Reich, chord III

As seen in [Example 8](#), Ives's second chord closely resembles Reich's second chord – the only difference between the two is that Reich omits the 'A' pitch in Ives's chord – while Ives's third chord, transposed up a minor third, generates all the notes in Reich's third chord. Again, they only differ from each other through Reich's omission of the D natural found in Ives's chord.

What are we to make of these connections, then? Perhaps it is easy to overemphasize the harmonic associations between the opening harmonies in *The Desert Music* and Reich's sketches of chords by other composers. The fact that they were written down by Reich does not automatically mean that he planned on using them. However, it is equally unlikely that one would have drawn such close comparison between Reich and, say, Ives, were it not for the presence of these chords in his sketchbooks.

In fact, looking beyond Reich's "Ives" sketch, further parallels appear between "The 'St. Gaudens' in Boston Common" and *The Desert Music*. Although atonal (or perhaps more

accurately, polytonal) in style, due to Ives's deliberate 'smudging' of the nineteenth-century American vernacular songs quoted throughout the movement, "St. Gaudens" is also characterized by the persistent repetition of a minor third A-C figure. Heard mainly in cellos and pizzicato double basses, this figure is stated seven times in the opening eight measures; it returns between mm. 16–18 and mm. 21–22, makes a brief appearance towards the climax of the movement in measure 59 and then at mm. 63–65, before occurring seven times during the movement's last eight measures. It's the most obvious musical motif in "The 'St. Gaudens' in Boston Common." These pitches – A and C – also provide the root harmonies for the first two chords heard in Reich's *The Desert Music*.

Consciously or not, other Ives harmonies seem to have found their way into Reich's work as well. A bitonal chord heard in measure 39 of Ives's movement, which juxtaposes a D dominant ninth with a D diminished chord, also has its equivalent in Reich's fourth chord, while the harmony heard at the climax of Ives's movement, in measure 63, also forms the basis for Reich's first chord. Although these harmonies do not appear in Reich's sketchbooks, it seems plausible that the composer was familiar with "The 'St. Gaudens' in Boston Common" beyond the three chords that *are* there.

Reich's sketchbooks can thus be seen to function as a kind of mental "rehearsal space," where the composer tested out ideas before deciding on whether to accept or reject them. While Reich may well have settled on the opening chords in *The Desert Music* without the aid of those famous European and American composers who preceded him – Debussy, Ravel, Ives, et al. – it seems clear that their chords helped shape Reich's harmonic outlook in this work, whether directly or not. And the idea that Wagner's *Tristan* chord (and Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi*) somehow found their way into the very first sounds we hear in Reich's *The Desert Music* provides a tantalizing glimpse into the kind of complex creative process that eventually results in a new and original work of art.