The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach as a Western Influence on Steve Reich's *Tehillim*

Brandon Hollihan

Abstract

While the majority of musical influences for Steve Reich's compositions come from non-Western cultures, he states consistently, both in interviews and in writing, how the music of Johann Sebastian Bach also serves as an avenue for inspiration. In particular, Bach's Easter cantata *Christ lag in Todesbanden* provides Reich with a portion of the schematic for the creation of his 1981 breakthrough chamber orchestral-vocal composition, *Tehillim*. These include a "stealing" of imitative counterpoint from *Christ lag in Todesbanden*'s second verse, "Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt," as well as the types of wind instruments Bach used to double the voices in a later version of the cantata. Beyond the influences stated by Reich, there are similarities in the vocal employment on the word "Hallelujah" in each work, and a connection in how each composer uses the string section to imitate motion initially found in the voices. This article surveys each work and provides examples of the ways that Reich imitates Bach, both consciously and perhaps coincidentally, and highlights the significance of Reich taking interest in a Western music culture for his own work.

*T*ehillim, the eclectic chamber orchestral-vocal work written by Steve Reich in 1981, represented a shift in compositional style away from the short repeating patterns, for which Reich gained notoriety in such works as *Music for 18 Musicians, Music for a Large Ensemble* and *Eight Lines*, toward longer melodic lines that still maintain high levels of repetition. These pieces also preserved Reich's phasing technique,[1] which is perhaps best associated with his earliest works, including *It's Gonna Rain* and *Piano Phase*. *Tehillim* is also significant because it represents Reich's first text setting and the first occasion his music requires a conductor in performance.

In surveying Reich's compositions up until the beginning of the 1980's, we witness the composer harnessing inspiration from a variety of non-Western musical influences. He has written profusely about his compositional life and chronicled his journeys to Africa to study Ghanaian drumming,[2] Israel for studying Hebrew

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[2] K. Robert Schwarz, "Music as a Gradual Process, Part II," *Perspectives of New Music* 20 No 1/2 (Autumn, 1981–Summer, 1982), 230.

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[1] Phasing technique, as popularized by Reich, Brian Eno, and others, juxtaposes the same pattern in two voices, with one voice moving slightly faster than the other to generate new melodic and rhythmic ideas.

cantillation,[3] and his studies in Balinese gamelan at institutions in Seattle and Berkeley, California.[4] As we observe all three of these influences at work in *Tehillim*, there still remains another source to which Reich directs us. That source is Johann Sebastian Bach, and in particular his Easter cantata, BWV 4 *Christ lag in Todesbanden*. Bach's presence is a striking contrast from the aforementioned non-Western cultures that have an imprint on *Tehillim's* construction, but Reich "never fails to remind us that Bach was a formative influence on his music."[5]

My interest in reviewing the musical influences of *Tehillim* stems from an interview Reich gave to the Miller Theatre at Columbia University.[6] In addition to the online interview, Reich participated in pre-concert discussion about his music, which was followed with a performance by the contemporary music group Ensemble Signal, under the direction of Brad Lubman, pairing *Christ lag in Todesbanden* with *Tehillim*. In the interview, Reich connects *Tehillim* with Bach by saying that *Tehillim*'s form is like that of a cantata: "If you had to say, 'What form does *Tehillim* sort of appear to be in,' given the traditional voices at the time, well it's like a cantata," he says. "It's not a chorus, it's solo voices and it's a small instrumental grouping. Now it's exactly what you find in the Bach."[7] On its own, this quotation might be challenged, because Bach's music could employ more than one voice per vocal part for his cantatas, but the similarities between *Tehillim* and that of a Bach cantata are important, given the use of scripture as a textual source and a division of the text into four distinct movements. This article surveys the structures of both works and demonstrates the ways in which Bach's cantata serves Tehillim as a uniquely Western influence.

The Background of BWV 4, Christ Lag in Todesbanden

There is not an exact date for the completion and debut of *Christ lag in Todesbanden*. As quoted in the Norton Critical Score of this work, Alfred Dürr writes that the cantata may have been written in "1708 or a little later [but] before 1714,"[8] due to the lack of an "Italian-born recitative style" or da capo aria forms, which Bach began using in 1714.[9] Robin Leaver goes so far as to suggest that the cantata was first performed on Easter Day in 1706, while Bach was the organist in Arnstadt. He also writes that Bach may have performed the cantata at St. Blasius Church in Mühlhausen while testing the restored organ there.[10] There is a general consensus that BWV 4 was performed in Leipzig on Easter in 1724 or 1725,[11] and that the cantata's "earliest source is a set of Leipzig performing parts, which dates from 1724 and 1725."[12] Dürr's preface to the Bärenreiter score states that "the wind parts for zink[13] and three trombones were not added until 1725."[14]

[3] Steve Reich, "Hebrew Cantillation as an Influence on Composition (1982)," 107.

[4] Michael Tenzer, "That's All It Does: Steve Reich and Balinese Gamelan," in *Rethinking Reich*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 305.

[5] Kheng Keow Koay, "Baroque Minimalism in John Adams's *Violin Concerto,*" *Tempo* 66 No 260 (April 2012), 23.

[6] YouTube video posted by Miller Theatre. "Steve Reich on Tehillim + Bach." Published April 21, 2014. Total duration: 6:11. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=creTXfBzjBg&t=171s.

[7] Miller Theatre interview.

[8] Gerhard Herz, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Cantata No. 4 Christ lag in Todesbanden: An Authoritative Score*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967, 22.

[9] Ibid, 22.

[10] Robin Leaver, *The Routledge Research Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 490.

[11] Ibid, 503, 507.

[12] Alfred Dürr, "Church Cantatas: Advent-Trinity," in *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 264.

[13] "Zink" is German for cornet, which "was mainly used from the end of the 15th century to the end of the 17th, but continued its use, mostly by town musicians, until the late 18th century and occasionally even into the 19th." ("Cornet," Anthon Baines, revised by Bruce Dickey, Grove Music Online, accessed October 2, 2019.)

[14] Dürr, 264.

The text springs directly from Martin Luther's 1524 Easter hymn of the same name, which is based upon the Latin sequence "Victimae paschali laudes" (To the Paschal victim"), and draws inspiration from the hymn "Christ ist erstanden."[15] The cantata consists of eight movements: an opening sinfonia followed by the seven verses of the chorale. Only three of the verses (numbers one, four, and seven) utilize all four SATB voicings, including "Wir essen und leben wohl," set in a closing chorale fashion. Dürr identifies a symmetrical layout of the cantata's verses as follows:[16]

One sees the idea of musical symmetry with regard to the three choral movements, which act as the structural pillars of the cantata. The fourth verse, "Es war ein wunderlicher Krieg" ("It was a strange battle"), serves as a nexus, lacking a partnering. In the Norton score, Gerhard Herz provides a diagram:[17]
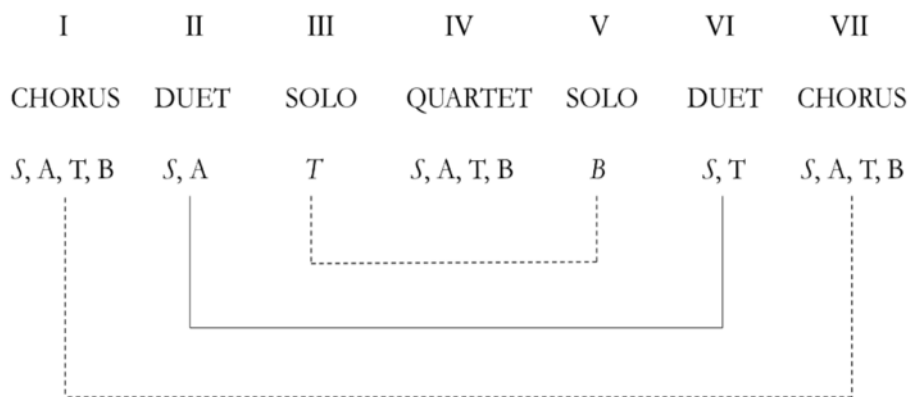
Figure 1

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
chorus	duet	solo	chorus	solo	duet	chorus

Figure 2

Sinfonia

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Versus:	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
	CHORUS	DUET	SOLO	QUARTET	SOLO	DUET	CHORUS
	S, A, T, B	S, A	T	S, A, T, B	B	S, T	S, A, T, B

The *cantus firmus*-carrying voices are indicated by italics.

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[15] Ibid, 264.

[16] Herz, 135.

[17] Ibid, 85. This is a graphic reproduction of Herz's diagram found in the Norton score.

Herz's distinction of the fourth movement being sung by a quartet might connect with Joshua Rifkin's argument of what truly constitutes a "chorus" for Bach's music, as he writes that "before 1750 in particular, musicians regularly used the word 'chorus' to describe a group of solo singers."[18] This argument also connects with Reich's observation from the Miller Theatre interview of this cantata consisting of not a true chorus but instead solo voices. Of course, a possible counterargument is Herz's identification of choral movements to open and close the cantata—namely the singing of the choral hymn's final verse in the seventh movement.

The Background of Tehillim

Tehillim was commissioned jointly by the South German Radio, Stuttgart (SDR), the West German Radio, Cologne (WDR), and the Rothko Chapel of Houston, Texas, with further support by Betty Freeman, the Rockefeller Foundation, and The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.[19] The South German Radio Orchestra, conducted by Peter Eötvös, premiered *Tehillim*'s first two movements in Stuttgart in 1981, and the world premiere of the finished work was given at the West German Radio in Cologne by Steve Reich and Musicians (sometimes credited as the Steve Reich Ensemble), conducted by George Manahan.[20] The orchestral version premiered with the New York Philharmonic in 1982 and was conducted by Zubin Mehta.[21]

Reich's cantata consists of four separate movements, labeled Parts I, II, III, and IV in the score, with a typical performance time lasting a little over half an hour. A breakthrough in the trajectory of Reich's compositional style, *Tehillim* is the first work in which "voices previously approached as instrumental parts, are given texts and treated as true vocal soloists."[22] The Hebrew Psalms serve as the text source, with each of the four movements utilizing two or three verses. Reich is keen to contrast the emotional affect in each movement. For example, Part I quotes Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of G-d, the sky tells of His handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, night to night reveals knowledge."[23] Many composers have set this text to music—including, most famously, Johann Sebastian Bach, Franz Joseph Haydn and Heinrich Schütz—and Reich uses it to create a driving and energetic pulse from the beginning of the work. In contrast, Part III is a setting of Psalm 16: "With the merciful You are merciful, with the upright You are upright."[24] The text is painted in a more introspective light, with imitative counterpoint and intervallic discourse.

In addition to the four solo voices, the ensemble consists of strings,[25] two clarinets, oboe, English horn,[26] six percussionists, flute, piccolo, and two electronic organs or digital synthesizers. In Reich's earlier compositions, such as *Drumming* or *Music for 18 Musicians*, a conductor is not necessary as the players rely on musical cues for transitions. Reich details this performance aspect found in Music for 18 Musicians: "Changes from one section to the next, as well as changes within each section, are cued by the metallophone, whose patterns are played once only to call for

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[18] Joshua Rifkin, "Bach's Chorus: A Preliminary Report," *The Musical Times* 123 No. 1677 (November 1982): 747.

[19] Steve Reich, "Tehillim (1981)," in *Writings on Music 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hiller (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 104.

[20] Ibid, 104.

[21] Steve Reich, *Tehillim*, (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1981), foreword.

[22] Alan Pierson, "Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich" (DMA diss., Eastman School of Music, 2006), 9.

[23] Reich, score foreword.

[24] Ibid.

[25] The number of string players depends on whether one performs the ensemble or orchestral version of the work. The ensemble version calls for one or two players per part (with the exception of only one double bass), whereas the orchestral setting has a 6-6-4-4-1 arrangement. Reich prefers the ensemble version and encourages using two players per part for first and second violins, violas and cellos, as it provides "some heft to the strings while keeping them completely agile." (Email to the author, July 9, 2019.)

[26] The score also lists an optional part for bassoon.

movements to the next bar—much as in a Balinese Gamelan a drummer will audibly call for changes of pattern, or as the master drummer will call for changes of pattern in West African music."[27]

The need for a conductor for *Tehillim*, however, arose as the result of mixed and asymmetrical meters. The eighth-note serves as the main subdivision,

while the time signature frequently shifts from 4/8, 5/8, 6/8 and other meters (Figure 3).

The time signatures displayed in Figure 3 are representative of *Tehillim*'s overall metric complexity. In Parts II and IV, the melodic lines for the singers become more complex and drawn out, resulting in such meters as 12/18 or 17/18[28] (Figure 4).

Figure 3

Figure 4

[27] Steve Reich, "Music for 18 Musicians (1976)," in *Writings on Music 1965-2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 87.

[28] As will be discussed in greater detail, the wind instruments also double the voices; in this example, the first clarinet, oboe and English horn double voice 4 (high soprano), voice 2 (lyric soprano) and voice 3 (alto).

The eighth note provides a consistent pulse in these compound meters, and Reich helpfully divides the measures into smaller groupings so that the conductor does not need to employ unwieldly patterns. In an email response to the question of conducting, Reich wrote that his ensemble did not use a conductor until *Tehillim* because "the constantly changing meters [of *Tehillim*] demanded we have a conductor."[29]

Hebrew cantillation had an important impact on *Tehillim*'s melodic patterns. Reich traveled to Israel in 1977 in an effort to rediscover his Jewish faith.[30] His studies included an examination of the *ta'amim*, which are accents in Hebrew that have three primary functions: showing the accented syllable in the text, serving as punctuation markings for the texts, and serving as the musical notation for the chanting of the Hebrew biblical text.[31]

Reich did not base the phrases of *Tehillim* on pre-existing melodies, but instead freely composed the lines in his own style. He cites the theological scholar William Wickes' notion that "a musical value of the accents for the three Poetical Books (Job, Proverbs, and Psalms), is altogether lost."[32] Therefore, Reich "decided to choose Psalm texts that attracted [him] and then feel [sic] free to *compose* a setting for them without the constrictions of a living oral tradition over 2,000 years old to either imitate or ignore."[33] Finally, he also connects his study of cantillation with the gamelan gambang (a wooden xylophone-like instrument) as the two driving forces behind the composition of significantly longer melodic patterns.

The Influence of Christ Lag in Todesbanden *Upon* Tehillim

Reich has explained how *Christ lag in Todesbanden* partners so effectively with *Tehillim*, relating the fact that Bach not only doubles the voices as a form of support, but that the types of doublings are just as important. He notes that Part I of *Tehillim* always doubles the singers' voices with first and second clarinets, but the beginning of Part II involves voices being doubled with oboe and English horn. Reich also states the importance of timbre in an interview with the Miller Theatre: "Nobody's come on stage but obviously we've got different singers; we don't have different singers, we have different doublings."[34]

As an example, Reich cites the types of instruments Bach uses to double voices in *Christ lag in Todesbanden*—in this case, the zink and trombones. Reich noted the "certain quality" a Baroque trumpet had upon doubling a voice:

> That led to my considering that in the first part of *Tehillim* it would be a clarinet double, and then the second section it would immediately switch to…the oboe and English horn doubling the voices, which changes the character of the voice, even though it's the same singers."[35]

In a separate interview, Reich calls this method of changing doubling instruments a "steal" from Bach, creating what his producer dubs a "voicestrument" effect that comes across as "another kind of singing" for the listener.[36]

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[29] Steve Reich, email to the author, July 8, 2019.

[30] Steve Reich, "Hebrew Cantillation as an Influence on Composition (1982)," 107.

[31] Ibid, 108.

[32] Ibid, 118.

[33] Ibid, 118.

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[34] Miller Theatre interview.

[35] Bruce Duffie, "Composer Steve Reich: Two Conversations with Bruce Duffie," accessed January 4, 2020, http://www.bruceduffie.com/reich.html.

[36] Rebecca Kim, "From New York to Vermont: Conversation with Steve Reich," *Current Musicology* 67/68 (Fall 1999), 351.

We also observe another method of doubling voices in *Christ lag in Todesbanden*'s opening verse. The cantata's original instrumentation at its debut in Mühlhausen was two violins, two violas, and continuo. The strings provide the doublings in lieu of brass instruments. Figure 5 displays the first viola doubling the alto line, the second viola doubling the tenor line, and the continuo doubling the bass line in the first verse.

In the original setting of the cantata, only the soprano voice lacks a doubling. However, they sing the melody of the Lutheran hymn, functioning as the *cantus firmus*, while the lower three voices function in a more contrapuntal fashion.

In an email response to questions about Bach's influence, Reich confirmed that the second verse of *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, "Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt" ("No man could conquer death"), provided him with a compositional foundation for Part III:

In Versus 2, the duet between the soprano and alto on the phrase 'Den Tod'—'Den Tod'…is a 'call and response' found in other cantatas. This one particularly appealed to me and inspired the 3rd movement of *Tehillim*, a call and response between soprano 4 and clarinet and soprano 2 with oboe, on the text: [Imchahsíd, tichahsáhd], etc.[37]

Reich's use of "call and response" is peculiar in that he applies it to different forms of imitation that are more precisely identified in Western music theory, such as antiphonal exchanges, and even free imitation or strict canons. Reich's labeling of Bach's compositional tool as "call and response" can be better understood as imitative counterpoint as Bach employs the technique.

In "Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt," Bach centers the soprano and alto solo voices around an interval of a third (Figure 6), in the imitative manner that influenced Reich.

Figure 5

[37] Steve Reich, email to the author, July 8, 2019.

Figure 6

While the Lutheran melody remains with the soprano voice (Figure 7), combining the vocal lines reveals the complete melodic phrase.

Bach creates an appealing sonority in this phrase by maintaining an interval of a minor third between the voices, shown in the fourth and fifth measures in Figure 7. This is achieved through a series of suspensions in the alto voice, with a repeated "ti" to "do" motion in the closing three measures of this example. In *Tehillim*, Reich employs a similar intervallic discourse, at the distance of a perfect fifth, between voices 4 and 2 at the beginning of Part III:

Figures 7 and 8

In this opening sequence, voice 4's opening interval of an ascending major second is followed by a descending perfect fourth (B-natural to C-sharp to G-sharp). Voice 2 responds in the third measure with its own major second followed by perfect fourth motion (E-natural to F-sharp to C-sharp). Reich imitates Bach's "Den Tod" opening motive by utilizing a similar intervallic movement between each voice in their opening measures. As shown in Figure 9 with voices combined, this perfect fourth motion ceases in the fifth measure. Still, the texture remains imitative and the tessituras of each voice are similar to those in Bach's setting.

Text Painting

Text painting is another predominantly Western technique that Reich utilizes in *Tehillim*, which we clearly experience with his setting of "Imchasid tichahsáhd" ("With the merciful You are merciful") at the beginning of Part III. The final portion of this text, "Vaimeekáysh, titpahtál" ("And with the perverse You are subtle"), concludes with voice 4 and the first clarinet sustaining a G-natural (a diminished fifth above a pulsating C- sharp played by the marimba). This interval places emphasis on the Hebrew word meaning "perverse."

Figure 9

Figure 10

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Musicologist K. Robert Schwarz, who wrote extensively on several minimalist composers including Reich, Terry Riley, Philip Glass and La Monte Young, describes this moment as a "lovely touch of tone painting," which "results in both a tritone with the C sharp of the marimba/vibraphone 1, and a dissonance with the G sharp of marimba/vibraphone 2."[38] Another example of text painting is seen in Part IV, where Reich adds, for the first and only time, piccolo, flute, and crotales to the instrumental ensemble, reflective of the text: "Hallelúhu baminim vaugáv…Hallelúhu batziltzláy taruáh." ("Praise Him with strings and winds…Praise Him with clanging cymbals"). These examples demonstrate Reich's broadening inclusion of Western musical text painting, adding to the non-Western musical techniques on which he based most of his previous compositions.

At one point in the Miller Theatre interview, Reich says, "When you steal, you steal from the best," while holding up the Norton critical score of *Christ lag in Todesbanden*. While he speaks to the influence of Bach's imitative counterpoint, similar imitation is found in the string writing. The first movement of *Christ lag in Todesbanden* is a Sinfonia with no voices. The strings function in a manner identical to the soprano and alto soloists in "Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt" (Figure 11).

In measures 3 and 4, the first violin reiterates the B-natural to A-sharp intervallic movement that begins the Lutheran hymn, and which is related to the soprano soloist's "Den Tod" motive in the second verse. The rest of the strings respond to the first violin in the same way the alto soloist responds to the soprano, although the pitch movement is not identical. Reich's string writing provides a similar imitation of the voices in Part III (Figure 12).

Figure 11

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[38] Schwarz, "Music as a Gradual Process, Part II," 273.

Figure 12

In this particular passage (Figure 12), the singers and winds sustain a C-sharp minor sonority with a sustained D-sharp. The strings move independently of each other, starting with the viola and cello and then progressing to contrabass and eventually first violin, imitating the counterpoint of the singers shown in figures 8 and 9.

There may be yet another point of inspiration for Reich in Christ lag in Todesbanden: Bach's employment of "Hallelujah" at the close of each verse. With the exception of the final verse chorale, the word treatment is contrapuntal, imitative, or melismatic, depending on the number of voices involved.

The opening titular verse of *Christ lag in Todesbanden* concludes with an *alla breve* treatment on the word "Hallelujah," in which the instruments provide doubling support for the chorus.

Figure 13

The sopranos are now doubled by the first and second violins. The first and second violas continue doubling the altos and tenors respectively, and the continuo buttresses the basses. The highly imitative setting on the word "Hallelujah," combined with an accelerated tempo, increases the overall energy and excitement of the movement.

By comparison, Reich's psalm choice for Part IV of *Tehillim*—"Hallelúhu batóf umachól" ("Praise Him with drums and dance")—is also a fervent statement of praise. In the B section of this final movement, Reich phases the voices via the "Hallelúhu batóf umachol" text, doubled by the electronic organs (Figure 14).

It is difficult to avoid the similarities in how Bach and Reich set "Hallelujah" and "Hallelúhu," given the doubling support and imitative, polyphonic texture in each work. Reich distinguishes himself from Bach by relying on phasing instead of imitative counterpoint, yet the outcome from using phasing is comparable with Bach's setting in the creation of a polyphonic vocal atmosphere.

Tehillim's conclusion is set on the word "Haleluyáh" as opposed to "Hallelúhu," and is treated as a coda to Part IV. Reich acknowledged his interest in setting this word to music:

> There's a coda on 'Hallelujah,' which is the text that's been set more than any

Figure 14

other in the history of Western music. It's deliriously overjoyed and it refers to 'tóf u-ma-chól,' drums and winds, which is precisely what I was using in the piece. It was too good to miss.[39]

Unlike "Hallelúhu," which Reich has earlier set in both homophonic and canonical styles, the closing "Haleluyáh" utilizes a more homophonic texture (Figure 15).

In Figure 15, the percussionists continue a phasing sequence, emphasizing the eighth note pulse. This emphasizes the continuous, non-rubato nature of the music, and also acts as a metronome for other musical forces. It is also interesting to observe that while Reich's writing is largely homophonic, he returns to his "call and response" idea from Part III, as voices 2 and 3 appear to respond to the initial statement of voices 4 and 1.

While the music of J.S. Bach influenced *Tehillim*'s compositional structure, it must be remembered

that the majority of the work derives from non-Western influences. Ghanaian drumming techniques create a perpetual state of flow. The melodies spring from the composer's studies of gamelan and Hebrew cantillation, although Reich acknowledged that the melodies can be viewed from a Western perspective as well, in spite of his well-known aversion to melody:

> When I was first working on it my wife [video artist Beryl Korot] said to me, 'You're actually singing! You're singing melodies!' It was the first time I wrote melodies in that sense…*Tehillim* is melody in a *recognizable* way in Western traditional terms, and that was the break.[40]

The connection to Western music is most clear in Part III's dialogue between the voices on "Imchasid tichahsáhd." This movement not only uses the framework of imitative counterpoint provided by Bach in "Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt," but exhibits further Western influences in the use of text painting. Earlier Reich works, such as *Music*

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[39] Kim, 351.

[40] Kim, 353.

Figure 15

for 18 Musicians and *Drumming*, include singers, but only use neutral syllables concurrent with the short repetitions of other instruments in the ensemble. These repeated fragments are melodic, but *Tehillim*'s text requires longer melodic lines to carry an entire thought. Reich then either repeats, phases, or elongates these melodies, imprinting the music with his trademark of minimalist compositional techniques.

Tehillim is a landmark contemporary work that continues to influence subsequent minimalist and post-minimalist composers. It remains a fresh and exciting venture in the realm of vocal and instrumental music and, much like the music of Bach, provides substantial challenges for its performers, and unique interpretations of Biblical passages that never fail to find an audience.

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