

A Fresh Look at Reich's "Clapping Music"

BY GLENN KOTCHE

In January 2001 I was asked to join the Chicago-based band Wilco, and immediately began working on the band's fourth record, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, which was released on the Nonesuch/Warner label. Nonesuch has a rich history of diversity, specializing in the music of contemporary classical composers and performers, and is one of the original champions of world music with its Explorer series. As a member of Wilco, I was lucky enough to have access to their vast music catalog. After being exposed and re-introduced to some of the amazing music that Nonesuch has released over the years, a new phase in my drumming and solo explorations began. I'd like to focus on just one of those catalysts, Steve Reich, and in particular one of his early pieces, "Clapping Music" from 1972.

Although I had been exposed to Reich's music while studying under Jim Campbell at the University of Kentucky, I wasn't as familiar with some of his early works. Reich is a New York-based composer who initially gained international acclaim with his taped speech pieces, compositions for his own mixed ensemble, and later for his and Beryl Korot's digital video operas. Reich began exploring the concept of phase shifting with his early tape pieces.

"Clapping Music" is an outgrowth of those works and an attempt to write a piece of music that would require nothing

but the human body—in this case, two performers who hand-clap. Reich states that the piece is "to have one performer remain fixed, repeating the same basic pattern throughout, while the second moves abruptly, after a number of repeats, from unison to one beat ahead, and so on, until he is back in unison with the first performer." (See Example 1.)

The piece is intended for performance in an auditorium where the echoes and reverberations of the clapping create, as Reich states, "a surrounding sensation of a series of variations of two different patterns with their downbeats coinciding."

Reich and Russell Hartenberger, a founding member of Nexus, perform the original recorded version. When I started digging into my Steve Reich box set from Nonesuch, one of the first pieces I heard was "Clapping Music," and I was instantly captivated by what I heard. (An archival video clip from 1974 of Reich and Hartenberger performing the piece is available for viewing at www.steverreich.com.)

As the piece unfolds, the patterns interact to create a garden of rhythms unlike anything I had previously heard. I was blown away that something so conceptually simple could sound so complicated. I transcribed the piece after reading about its compositional process. Seeing the piece notated for two parts made me recall when former teachers would have me learn simple duets as split parts for the right and left hands. I now had a personal challenge to see if I could learn "Clapping Music" as a duet

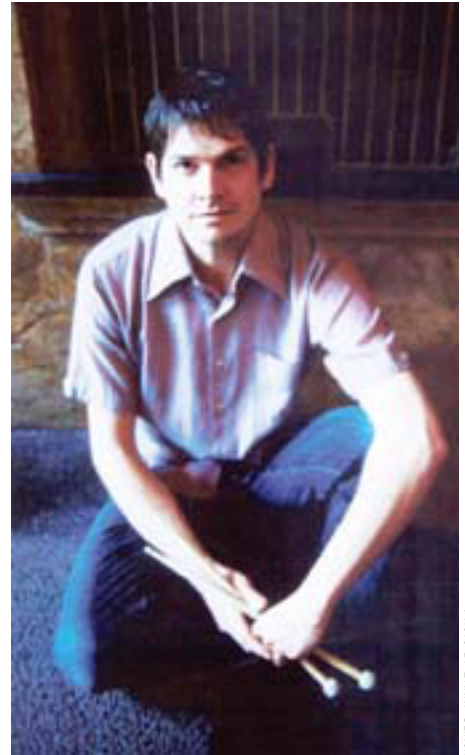
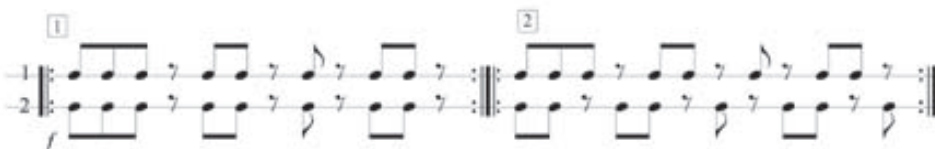


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for myself, playing one part with my right hand and the other part with my left.

When I began to learn the piece I was intrigued by how much some of the hand combinations were reminiscent of the advanced rudiments I was exposed to as a performing member of the Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps (Rosemont, IL), while others were completely fresh and unlike anything I had seen or studied in any method book or rudimental solo. Some examples of the familiar rudiments include Flam Taps, Pataflaflas, consecutive Flams, and Swiss Army Triplets. However, there is one important exception: There isn't supposed to be any "flaming," as all the parts are to be played simultaneously. This fact didn't stop me from relating to some of the rudimental combinations and actually aided me in learning the piece because of my familiarity with these rudiments (Examples 2 and 3).

Example 1



Because a majority of the rudimental music I had been exposed to was in quarter-note-based time signatures (3/4, 4/4, 2/4), I initially transcribed the piece in 3/4 time. I learned to play the piece from my own transcribed “score” before seeing Reich’s score. When I finally did see his score, the fundamental difference between the two was obvious. Reich’s is notated in 12/8, not 3/4. It’s important to note, however, that no time signature appears on the original score as a gesture to remind the performer to keep the piece void of any metrical accents.

Instead of being discouraged by this, I just decided to learn it as flat as I could, void of accents and obvious inflections that would give away the pulse I was thinking of. Soon, I began to rethink this decision after pondering the two different pulsing possibilities and how they related to the African drumming I was exposed to in college. One of the biggest lessons

from those studies was the cyclical nature of African rhythms and how many of the voices in an African drum ensemble can be felt in four or three. In other words, 12 pulses can be subdivided into either four groups of three pulses or three groups of four pulses.

Reich studied African drumming in Ghana in 1970, so I felt it would be no disrespect to the composer to try “Clapping Music” with the addition of one or both of those metrical accents. Since the hands were to be played flat I needed the inflection of the pulse to come from someplace else. Being a “drumset guy,” I naturally looked to the feet to provide the pulse. Once again, I felt that by adding feet into this composition I would somehow have the composer’s blessing since he also studied jazz drumming, and in particular was a fan of the polyrhythmic style of the late, great, Elvin Jones.

After learning how to play the piece as

Example 2

Example 3

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a duet between the hands—played on two drums with “clapping sticks” that I purchased in Korea—I learned it separately with both a 12/8 and a 3/4 pulse in the feet. It is important to note, though, that Reich has stated if there were to be a new version of “Clapping Music” he would add 3/2 as the meter, since this is the way he thinks of the piece while performing it (Example 4).

Around this time I was also finishing a solo drumset version of another Nonesuch gem, the Explorer Series recording of the Balinese Ketjak or “Monkey Chant.” Bob Hurwitz, the longtime president of Nonesuch, was aware of this and of the fact that I did solo drumset performances and recordings and asked me to play on a program he was putting together for his day as honorary principal at the LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts in New York. I was to play an abbreviated version of the Ketjak preceded by my version of “Clapping Music”—and I was following Steve Reich and Thad Wheeler playing the original version of the same piece! I was a bit worried about offending Reich with what could be interpreted as the hijacking of his work. My fears were calmed when I got the thumbs-up from Reich after performing that day. He was happy that a younger rock drummer would be interested in his earlier work and he enjoyed the addition of the feet! I was shocked to learn that he was unaware of anyone else doing a complete solo version of this well-known, often-performed, 30-year-old piece. I set my sights on recording my version and sharing what I had learned with my students and drummer friends.

After playing the piece so many times, I really noticed my hand control and endurance improving. While playing, it actually relaxed my arms and almost forced me to flow in order to pull it off correctly. I had stumbled upon the best warm-up I had ever known. “Clapping Music” became a staple warm-up before Wilco

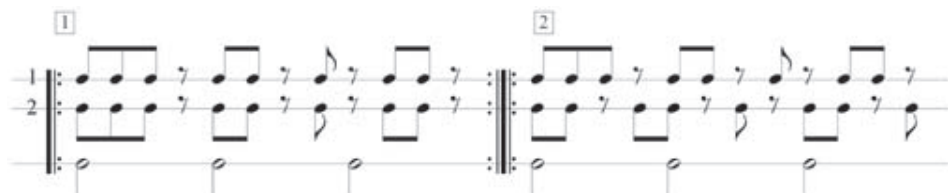
shows, which require a lot of power, endurance, and versatility. I even noticed that some of the parts I was coming up with in the studio for new songs were parts that I wouldn’t have been able to play a year earlier. The “chops” I gained from this piece and my subsequent application of what I learned to drumset opened up new possibilities for me in Wilco and with my solo performances.

Since Reich’s reaction to my version was so positive, I decided to explore the work beyond the solo adaptation of it. One aspect of the original recording I was particularly fond of was the naturally occurring nuances and dynamics of the various patterns and individual clapping “techniques,” which created a sense of melody. That got me thinking about assigning pitches to the notes so the pattern turns into an actual melody. This became one of several variations on the original that I was to record. Some of the other variations deal with rhythmic construction and substitution, unison stand posts, and the concept of what I call negative rhythm. My variations have been recorded and will appear on my upcoming third solo percussion record.

One of my former teachers, while I was an undergrad, was a doctoral candidate, Michael Gould, who went on to become assistant professor of percussion at the University of Michigan. He told our former professor, Jim Campbell, that he was going to perform a new solo version of “Clapping Music.” Jim informed him that I also had a solo version, which I had performed at the Kentucky Day of Percussion the previous year. We both thought it was great that we had coincidentally rediscovered this piece and had been drawn into intriguing possibilities for interpretation that it offered.

Mike’s version is completely different from mine. His initial inspiration was to have a compact piece that required little equipment for his frequent solo recitals. His dealt with the two parts not as a duet

Example 4



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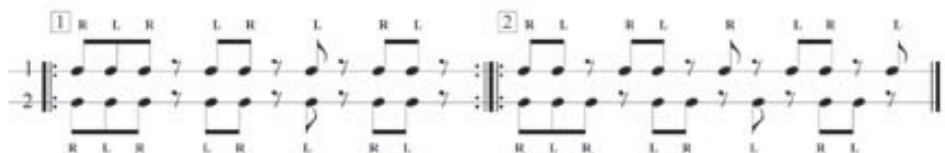
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between the hands with feet accompaniment, but as a duet between hands (part 1) and feet (part 2). He uses LP Jam Blocks in place of clapping and uses sticking variations to help create the melodic aspect to which I referred earlier (see Example 5). This is fitting, since Reich, while studying with Roland Kohloff in the 1950s, was particularly fond of working in the "drumming bible" of sticking patterns, George Lawrence Stone's *Stick Control* book.

I took it upon myself to share "Clapping Music" with my students and drummer friends. One student in particular saw a whole new way to look at the piece. Jesse Nolan decided to make a large multi-setup arrangement of it, which he would perform on his senior recital at Indiana University. Jesse came up with many voicing and melodic possibilities as well as expanding upon the changing pulse idea. In his version he plays the original parts in every possible limb combination at some point during the 12-minute performance. While I concentrated on the conceptual possibilities and Gould on the physical possibilities, Jesse made his version into a solo "tour de force," even incorporating the use of a

Example 5

Top line: hands
Bottom line: feet



sampler at some points to play the static part.

I couldn't be happier that this work is getting a fresh look by a new generation who are inspired by it, both musically and compositionally. It also speaks well of the timelessness of Reich's music. Besides stumbling upon new concepts of how I view rhythm, finding a great warm-up, gaining chops, and a staple for my live shows and clinics, one of the most important lessons I learned from this investigation was to look for inspiration of how to expand our instrument outside the canon of music that typically incorporates drumset. This is one point I try to drive home to students. Whether it be world music, contemporary composition, electronic music, or whatever, there is a

world of music outside of what we might think pertains to us as drumset players that can help us to grow as drummers and musicians as it expands the possibilities of our chosen instrument.

"Clapping Music" by Steve Reich
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Glenn Kotche is the drummer/percussionist in the Grammy-winning band Wilco. He holds a BM in percussion performance from the University of Kentucky. In early 2006, Kotche's third solo percussion record, *Mobile*, is scheduled for release on Nonesuch Records.

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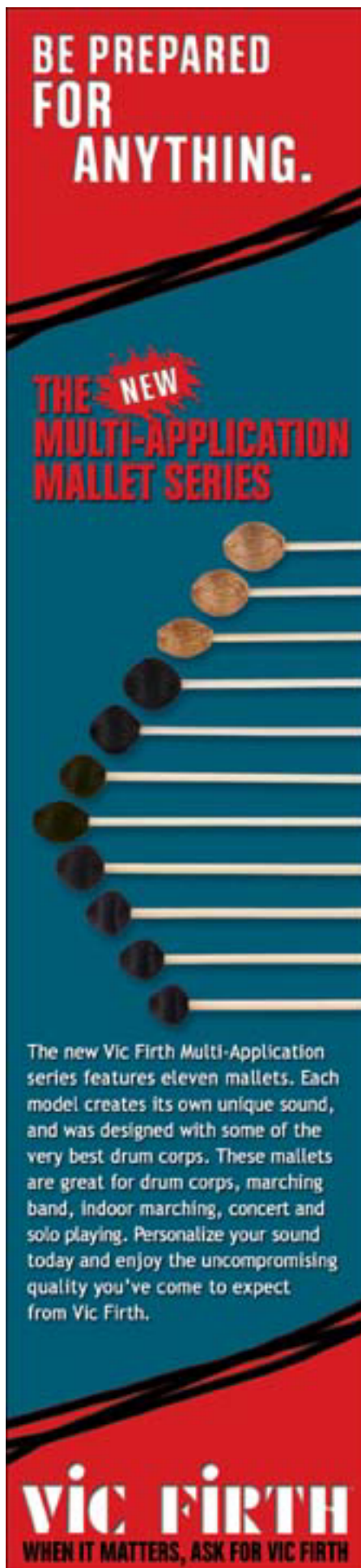
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