

## Hearing Disorientation in Steve Reich's *Drumming* (1971)

by Kerry O'Brien

In the summer of 1970, Steve Reich traveled to Accra, Ghana to study Ewe drumming, and when he returned to New York, he composed *Drumming* (1971). Regarding the influence of this experience, the composer stated in an interview:

African music really had no *influence* on me. African music had an enormous confirmation. It was a big pat on the back. In other words, before I went to Africa I did "Come Out," "It's Gonna Rain," and the live pieces imitating the tape technique: "Piano Phase," "Violin Phase," and "Reed Phase," which was rejected later. And all of that was in place – if you look at "Piano Phase" it's in twelve. "Violin Phase" is in twelve, and this was all done by instinct.<sup>1</sup>

Martin Scherzinger has challenged this oft-repeated confirmation narrative – "a period of early invention followed later by confirmation in Ghana" – noting that Reich had been interested in African music since the 1950s and had been studying A. M. Jones's *Studies in African Music* since 1962. In his 1959 text, Jones identified patterns with non-coinciding downbeats as a trans-continental characteristic of African music, and Scherzinger sees evidence of this stylistic influence as early as Reich's *It's Gonna Rain* (1965).<sup>2</sup> Reich's trip to Ghana, then, served as the culmination of nearly a decade of interest in African drumming rather than a serendipitous confirmation.

Beyond what he learned from Jones's book, Reich's experience in Ghana may have been more influential for the composer, as Sumanth Gopinath has argued. Pointing to the opening of *Drumming*, Gopinath notes that the process of note-by-note rhythmic construction "is very similar to the kind of analytic process Reich went through while transcribing Ewe music." Gopinath interprets the opening rhythmic construction as a "transcription

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- 1 Daniel Mark Tones, "Elements of Ewe Music in the Music of Steve Reich" (DMA diss., University of British Columbia, 2007), pp. 121–22; emphasis in original. See also Steve Reich, *Writings about Music* (Halifax, Canada: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and New York: New York University Press, 1974), pp. 73–74.
  - 2 Martin Scherzinger, "Curious Intersections, Uncommon Magic: Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain*," *Current Musicology*, 78–79 (2005), pp. 207–44, esp. pp. 228–36. For an overview of Reich's Ghana trip, see Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 204–06.

moment," which reflects the composer's mastery of Ewe drumming patterns through transcription and Reich's compositional mastery through pattern manipulation.<sup>3</sup>

Reich's transcription drafts, now held at the Paul Sacher Foundation, suggest that the composer's transcription experience was not masterful, but rather initially disorienting for the composer. It should be remembered that with few exceptions Reich's experience with Ghanaian drumming prior to 1970 was mainly theoretical, gained by studying books and transcriptions.<sup>4</sup> But theoretical knowledge is not primary knowledge, and the disorienting effect that opens *Drumming* is similar to one Reich experienced firsthand during his studies in Ghana.

For their first lesson together in Accra, master drummer Gideon Alorworye taught Reich a social dance called *agbadza*. As Reich described their process:

The teacher would play a pattern, give me the drum, I would try, no, no good, back, do it again, okay, now you've got it, and I would record these lessons. I remember I recorded on a Tandberg portable – it had three speeds. I would record at 7 1/2 and I would come back to my room and play it back at 1 7/8 and with that going I transcribed the music.<sup>5</sup>

Reich explained that by comparing each pattern in the ensemble to a repeating 12/8 bell pattern, he could accurately align each transcribed rhythm within the entire scored ensemble. Reich's preserved recordings from Ghana demonstrate this process, although the bell is not always present; sometimes Gideon plays patterns in isolation, and other times one hears a full ensemble playing all at once.<sup>6</sup>

Reich's notes from his lesson with Gideon transmit his first transcription of *agbadza* (Plate 1). When initially transcribing the Sogo (master drum), Reich mistakenly transcribed the pattern as beginning on the notated upbeat of a 3/2 pattern. He then corrected himself, transcribing the Sogo beginning immediately on the notated downbeat.<sup>7</sup>

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3 Sumanth Gopinath, "A Composer Looks East: Steve Reich and Discourse on Non-Western Music," *Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts*, 3 (2004), nos. 3–4, pp. 134–45, esp. pp. 138–41.

4 "My readings in Dr. Jones' book in 1963 first awoke my interest in African music, and that interest grew through listening to recordings, corresponding with Dr. Jones, and finally having two brief lessons with Alfred Ladzepko, another Ewe master drummer in New York who was working with Nicholas England at Columbia University." Reich, "Gahu: A Dance of the Ewe Tribe in Ghana," *Writings about Music* (see note 1), pp. 29–37, esp. p. 30.

5 Interview with Ev Grimes, transcript, Oral History of American Music, Yale University (December 15–16, 1987), 186-c, p. 37.

6 Steve Reich, CD 111, Track 1; Steve Reich Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung (hereafter PSS).

7 Terms such as "upbeat" and "downbeat" are problematic in discussing African rhythm. My interest here, though, is not a Ghanaian conception of rhythm but Steve Reich's approach to transcription, which was rooted in a Western classical tradition.

6/23/70 GHANA  
AG-BADZA

main beats of Kidi always begin on 2nd beat of bell pattern i.e. the third eighth of the 12/8 pattern

#1

#2

Plate 1: Steve Reich, Sketchbook [3] (14 Feb 1970 – 29 Apr 1971), entry 6/23/70, p. [10] (Steve Reich Collection).

It is difficult to know exactly what caused this error, but those who have studied Ghanaian drumming can testify to a common disorienting experience: with multiple parts playing on non-coinciding downbeats, one's ear can easily latch onto the "wrong" downbeat. Perhaps a clue in Reich's disorientation is his corrective note to himself: "Main beats of Kidi always begin on 2<sup>nd</sup> beat of bell pattern i.e. the third eighth of the 12/8 pattern."

**AGBADZA** Ewe Tribe—Ghana

Example 1: Agbadza transcription in Steve Reich, "Gahu: A Dance of the Ewe Tribe in Ghana" (July 1971), *Source Magazine*, 10 (Fall 1972), p. 39.

This corrected alignment is represented in Reich's published version (*Example 1*).

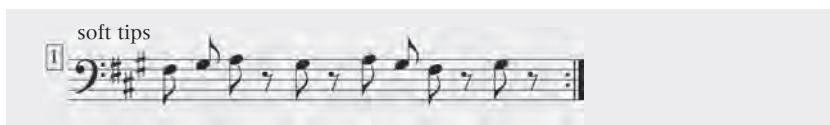
If Reich had initially been hearing the Sogo part in relation to the Kidi part, it is easy to see how the Sogo could have been heard as the "upbeat" to the Kidi. But, as Reich's corrected transcription shows (*Example 1*), the Kidi and the Sogo do not share a downbeat. The upbeat of the Kidi is the downbeat for the Sogo. Even played back at 1 7/8 speed, this is a disorienting realization. Reich's own music had featured non-coinciding downbeats for years, and indeed he performed these works himself, but this was not Reich's own music. He was not seeing non-coinciding downbeats written on a page; he was hearing them for himself in Ghana. And upon first hearing, he confused the downbeat and transcribed that disorientation into his sketchbook.

This moment of transcription and disorientation would soon find an echo in *Drumming*, which Reich began writing in the fall of 1970. At its first in-progress performance at Colorado College in January 1971, *Drumming* began with a fully constructed pattern, featuring a repeated pattern in an ambiguous 12/8 meter (see *Example 2*).

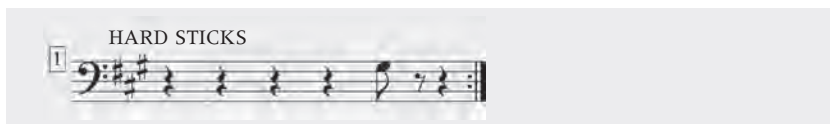
As described in Reich's program notes for *Drumming*,

At the beginning a pattern is played by the two drummers and gradually one note after the other is omitted and replaced by a rest. Soon the original pattern is reduced to only one pulse with rests at which point new notes are gradually introduced in place of the rests and a new pattern is reconstructed of the same length, but of slightly different rhythm and pitches.<sup>8</sup>

8 "The Colorado College presents An Evening of Music by Richard Smith and Steve Reich," January 30, 1971; program, Steve Reich Collection, PSS.



Example 2: Steve Reich, Sketchbook [3] (14 Feb 1970 – 29 Apr 1971), entry 2/6/71, p. [60] (Steve Reich Collection).



Example 3: Steve Reich, Sketchbook [3] (14 Feb 1970 – 29 Apr 1971), entry 2/12/71, p. [62] (Steve Reich Collection).

This opening rhythmic reduction, performed at Colorado College, was eventually crossed out. When performed again in March 1971, *Drumming* commenced with a rhythmic construction, beginning with a single repeated stroke on beat 3 (in 3/2), and then building up to the fully constructed pattern (see *Example 3*).<sup>9</sup>

If audience members were asked to transcribe this revised single-note opening of *Drumming*, they would likely make a mistake similar to Reich's own transcription error in Ghana. They would almost certainly hear the first stroke as the downbeat and would transcribe their disorientation. Although Reich had deployed ambiguous meters and non-coinciding downbeats in prior compositions, only with *Drumming* did he intentionally begin his composition in the middle of things, all but guaranteeing this disorienting effect for listeners from the start.<sup>10</sup>

During Reich's *agbadza* lesson in June 1970, Gideon explained that each rhythmic pattern had a corresponding linguistic phrase in Ewe. In their lesson, Reich transliterated the *agbadza* bell pattern's phrase as "*Do mayi makpo tefe mava.*" Gideon translated this as "Let me go and witness this myself and return," a fitting rationale for Reich's own visit that summer. While Reich had certainly learned a great deal about African drumming before his trip, the experience of disorientation evidenced on that sketchbook page documents one salient lesson that Reich learned firsthand in Ghana that summer of 1970. And this disorientation effect resounds anew at the start of every performance of *Drumming*.

9 As performed at London's ICA Nash House on March 7, 1971, *Drumming* began with a single stroke. For a recording of this London concert, see the digitized audio, PSS (SR-CD 44, track 2). Although the pitch content would change, this opening rhythmic construction opens the published version of *Drumming*.

10 Listeners will likely shift their perception of the downbeat as the opening pattern of *Drumming* is constructed. For an example of this shifting perceived downbeat, see Gopinath, "A Composer Looks East" (see note 3), p. 139.