Proverb (1995)
for voices and ensemble
Music Text
Ludwig Wittgenstein (E)
Scoring
3lyrS.2T 2vib-2kbd (playing 4 five-octave kbd)

Composer's Notes
The idea for Proverb was originally suggested to me by the singer and conductor Paul Hiller who thought of a primarily vocal piece with six voices and two percussion. What resulted was a piece for three sopranos, two tenors, two vibraphones and two electric organs, with a short text from Ludwig Wittgenstein. Since Paul Hiller is well known as a conductor and singer of early music and since I share an interest in this period of Western music, I looked once again at the works of Perotin (Scholl of Notre Dame – 12th century) for guidance and inspiration.

The three sopranos sing the original melody of the text in canons that gradually augment or get longer. The two tenors sing duets in shorter rhythmic values against held tones from the sopranos. The two electric organs double the singers throughout (except at the very beginning when they sing a Capella) and fill in the harmonics. The piece is in constantly changing meter groupings of twos and threes giving a rhythmically free quality to the voices. After about three minutes of voices and organ only, the vibraphones enter enunciating these interlocking shifting groups of two and three beats.

The original theme in the voices is then inverted and moves from B minor to E-flat minor. In this contrasting section the original descending melodic line becomes a rising one. The last part of the piece is one large augmentation canon for the sopranos returning to the original key of B minor with the tenors singing their melismatic duets continuously as the canon slowly unfolds around them. This is concluded by a short coda which ends, as the piece began, with a single soprano.

Though the sopranos sing syllabically with one note for each word, (and every word of the text is monosyllabic) the tenors sing long melismas on a single syllable. Perotin’s influence may be heard most clearly in these tenor duets against soprano, which clearly resemble three part Organum. That same influence plays a more indirect role in the soprano augmentation canons which are suggested by the augmentation of held tenor notes in Perotin’s Organum.

The short text, "How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life!" comes from a collection of Wittgenstein's writing entitled Culture and Value. Much of Wittgenstein's work is ‘proverbial’ in tone and in its brevity. This particular text was written in 1946. In the same paragraph from which it was taken Wittgenstein continues, "If you want to go down deep you do not need to travel far".

Steve Reich

Tehillim (1981)
for voices and ensemble
Music Text
4 Psalms (Hebrew)
Scoring
1.picc.1.corA.2.0-perc(6):maracas/clapping/4tuned tamb without jingles/marimba/vib/crot-2elec.organ-4women’s voices(high sop, 2lyric sop, alto)-string quintet (woodwinds, voices, and
strings amplified)

Composer's Notes

Tehillim (pronounced "the-hill-leem") is the original Hebrew word for "Psalms". Literally translated it means "praises", and it derives from the three letter Hebrew root 'hey, lamed, lamed' (hll) which is also the root of halleluyah. Tehillim is a setting of Psalms 19:2-5 (19:1-4 in Christian translations), 34:13-15 (34:12-14 in Christian translations), 18:26-27 (18:25-26 in Christian translations) and 150:4-6.

The chamber version is scored for four women's voices (one high soprano, two lyric sopranos, and one alto), piccolo, flute, oboe, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, six percussion (playing small tuned tambourines with no jingles, clapping, maracas, marimba, vibraphone and crotales), two electric organs, two violins, viola, cello and bass. The voices, winds and strings are amplified in performance. In orchestral version there are full strings and winds with amplification for the voices only.

The first text begins as a solo with drum and clapping accompaniment only. It is repeated with clarinet doubling the voice and with a second drum and clap in canon with the first. It then appears in two voice canon and at last the strings enter with long held harmonies. At this point all four voices, supported by a single maraca, doubled by two electric organs and harmonised by the strings sing 4 four-part canons on each of the four verses of the first text. When these are competed the solo voice restates the original complete melody with all drums and full string harmonisation. The second text begins immediately after a short drum transition. Here the three verses of text are presented in two or three voice harmony in a homophonic texture. Sometimes the voices are replaced by the cor anglais and clarinet or by the drums and clapping. Soon the melodic lines begin augmenting (or lengthening) and then adding melismas. The effect is of a melodic line growing longer and more ornate. After a pause the third text begins in a slower tempo and with the percussion changed to a marimba and vibraphone. The text is presented as a duet first between two and then all four voices. This third text is not only the first slow movement I have composed since my student days, but also the most chromatic music I have ever composed (with the possible exception of Variations for Winds, Strings and Keyboards of 1979). The fourth and final text resumes the original tempo and key signature and combines techniques used in the preceding three movements. It is, in effect, a recapitulation of the entire piece which then, in a coda based solely on the word "Halleluyah", extends the music to its largest instrumental forces and its harmonic conclusion. This last movement affirms the key of D major as the basic tonal centre of the work after considerable harmonic ambiguity.

The tambourines without jingles are perhaps similar to the small drum called "tof" in Hebrew in Psalm 150 and several other places in the Biblical text. Hand clapping as well as rattles were also commonly used throughout the Middle East in the Biblical period as were small pitched cymbals. Beyond this there is no musicological content to Tehillim. No Jewish themes were used for any of the melodic materials. One of the reasons I chose to set Psalms as opposed to parts of the Torah or Prophets is that the oral tradition among Jews in the West for singing Psalms has been lost. (It has been maintained by Yemenite Jews.) This meant that I was free to compose the melodies for Tehillim without a living oral tradition to either imitate or ignore.

In contrast to most of my earlier work, Tehillim is not composed of short repeating patterns. Though an entire melody may be repeated either as the subject of a canon or variation this is
actually closer to what one finds throughout the history of Western music. While the four-part canons in the first and last movements may well remind some listeners of my early tape pieces *It’s Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, which are composed of short spoken phrases repeated over and over again in close canon, *Tehillim* will probably strike most listeners as quite different from my earlier works. There is no fixed meter or metric pattern in *Tehillim* as there is in my earlier music. The rhythm, of the music here comes directly from the rhythm of the Hebrew text and is consequently in flexible changing meters. This is the first time I have set a text to music since my student days and the result is a piece based on melody in the basic sense of that word. The use of extended melodies, imitative counterpoint functional harmony and full orchestration may well suggest renewed interest in Classical or, more accurately, Baroque and earlier Western musical practice. The non-vibrato, non-operatic vocal production will also remind listeners of Western music prior to 1750. However, the overall sound of *Tehillim* and in particular the intricately interlocking percussion writing which, together with the text, forms the basis of the entire work, marks this music as unique by introducing a basic musical element that one does not find in earlier Western practice including the music of this century. *Tehillim* may thus be heard as traditional and new at the same time.

*Steve Reich*