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Steve Reich's *Double Sextet* wins 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Music

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Steve Reich's *Double Sextet*, commissioned by Grammy-winning new music ensemble eighth blackbird, wins 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Music

Steve Reich's *Double Sextet* – commissioned by eighth blackbird and given its first performances by the group last season – has won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Music. The prize is awarded for a distinguished musical composition, written by an American and first performed or recorded in the U.S. over the previous year, and this is the second time an eighth blackbird commission has been nominated (Stephen Hartke's *Meanwhile* received a nod last year). Scored for two identical sextets each comprising flute, clarinet, violin, cello, vibraphone, and piano, *Double Sextet* can either be played by six musicians against a recording of themselves, or by an ensemble of twelve. For both the world premiere, on March 26, 2008 at the University of Richmond, Virginia, and the New York premiere, at Carnegie's Zankel Hall on April 17, 2008, eighth blackbird performed simultaneously live and pre-recorded; a few months later, the Grammy-winning group collaborated with six students from the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble to perform the work completely live at New York's downtown new music venue The Kitchen.

"I'm very glad that this particular piece got [the award], because I do think it's one of the better pieces I've done in the past few years," Steve Reich says of *Double Sextet*, which, by juxtaposing live and taped musicians, recalls several of his compositions in the "Counterpoint" series, as well as his ensemble pieces *Different Trains* and *Triple Quartet*. The composer explains:

"It's the idea of writing basically unison canons – the same timbre playing against itself, so that when they intertwine, you don't hear the individual voice; you hear the composite. Now, if you have several composites going on at the same time, you really get to an interesting situation, and that's what's going on in *Double Sextet*."

During both this season and last, eighth blackbird – "a hugely talented and endlessly inventive sextet," as per the *Chicago Sun-Times* – toured the work across the U.S. and England as part of a program entitled "The Only Moving Thing". Matt Albert, violin and viola player of the ensemble, explains that *Double Sextet* is "music we get a real charge out of. With Reich, you have an artist who creates beauty with patterns, repetition, and minimalism." Tim Munro, the group's flutist, says: "The piece is a skillful, imaginative and engaging distillation of Reich's work over the past 40 years, featuring funky riffs, soulful lyricism, and playful banter. The adrenaline rush we get performing this piece is

very intense, and it leaves us wired for the whole night. It's certainly as close as I'll ever get to being a rock star." He adds, "We're not surprised by the award, given the overwhelmingly positive reception with which the piece has been received around the world." One such enthusiastic response came from *Los Angeles Times* music critic Mark Swed, who reviewed eighth blackbird's performance of *Double Sextet* at the Orange County Performing Arts Center; describing the piece as a "kind of explosion of fractured rhythms that never ceases to amaze the ear," he pronounced the concert "a really good, rocking, rollicking performance."

This summer, eighth blackbird will serve as music director of the Ojai Music Festival. It joins a list of music directors that includes Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, Pierre Boulez, Lukas Foss, John Adams, and Oliver Knussen, and is only the second ensemble to hold this position. One of the highlights of this summer's festival will be eighth blackbird's performing the eagerly-awaited world premiere of Steven Mackey's *Slide*, with Rinde Eckert as narrator/singer. This work, "a labor of love for eighth blackbird", is the centerpiece of Ojai 2009.

Double Sextet was commissioned by eighth blackbird through the support of the Carnegie Hall Corporation, the Abe Fortas Memorial Fund of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Liverpool Culture Company – European Capital of Culture 2008, the Modlin Center for the Arts at the University of Richmond, Orange County Performing Arts Center, and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music – Music 08 Festival.

www.eighthblackbird.com

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