

In the 1st Person : July 2004

# NewMusicBox

## The Next Phase:

### Steve Reich talks to Richard Kessler About Redefinition and Renewal

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Vermont

Videotaped and transcribed by [Frank J. Oteri](#) and [Randy Nordschow](#)

In July 1998, before *NewMusicBox* existed, [Richard Kessler](#), then celebrating his first anniversary as executive director of the American Music Center, launched a series of conversations called "In The First Person," by [interviewing Steve Reich](#). Now, in July 2004, as Richard [ends his tenure](#) at the American Music Center, it seemed perfect timing to present a second conversation between Kessler and Reich, this time focusing on Richard's tenure at the American Music Center—how he spearheaded the organization's renewal and refocus and what that means for new American music.

--FJO

## Beginnings

**Steve Reich:** So, how did life in music begin for you?

**Richard Kessler:** I think for the most part it started in junior high when I started singing in the chorus—just a regular junior high school in Rockaway Beach, Queens, with a 350-member chorus. Nobody could read music; it was all by rote. I spent two years in that chorus and it was the most amazing thing—the connection to music, the tradition. We had a traditional "repeater", a piece that every year's chorus would sing—it was "Every Time I Feel the Spirit," a spiritual arranged beautifully by [Gregg Smith](#). At the spring concert every year, chorus alumni would come back and just erupt with screaming after they heard it.

When I went to high school there wasn't much of a chorus. It was a little choir with about 20 people in it. So I decided to learn an instrument. I picked up the trombone in the middle of the 10th grade and one thing led to another. I played in the all-city high school orchestra when I was in the 12th grade and then made my way to Juilliard. That was how music started for me in a serious way.

**Steve Reich:** After Juilliard you became a part of the [Saturday Brass Quintet](#). Can you explain how you got there?

**Richard Kessler:** You know, brass players don't play much in the orchestra.

**Steve Reich:** Some do, some don't. *[laughs]*

**Richard Kessler:** *[laughs]* To begin with, so much of the classical repertoire is missing trombones—and in some of the greatest works with trombones, you don't play for the first three movements! In Brahms's first symphony you do nothing but sit there for three movements and then in the fourth you basically have to come in on a soft, exposed high A that keeps all the principal trombone players sweating. So I just decided to start playing some chamber music. It's a course usually at the conservatory: brass chamber music. I started in my first quintet at Julliard with [Jerry Schwarz](#) coaching us. Most people know him today as a conductor, but back then he was just starting out as a conductor and had been principal trumpet in the [New York Philharmonic](#) and also with the [American Brass Quintet](#).

Outside of school, a few of my friends from different schools got together and we started this group. I was about, I don't know, 18 or 19 years old. We just started playing gigs for fun; we played on the streets. You might remember in the '70s in New York you could play on the streets. We used to play on the corner of 6th Avenue and 4th Street; we used to play on 5th Avenue in the 50s...

**Steve Reich:** Nice locations.

**Richard Kessler:** Great locations. It was an incredible thing because we made money, we learned repertoire—we played all the Bach transcriptions, all the Joplin stuff—and you could play for hours and big crowds would come along. Cute girls would come around and watch us play!

**Steve Reich:** There you go.

**Richard Kessler:** I'd go home with maybe 30 or 40 bucks in my pocket...

**Steve Reich:** ...which in those days was something...

**Richard Kessler:** Yeah, and it was all from just playing music on the streets. They stopped that at one point. Mayor Koch ended it. To this day you really don't see it...

**Steve Reich:** You see stuff in the subways but that's about it.

**Richard Kessler:** And that's [an official MTA program](#), but on the street, forget it, it's long gone and it's a shame really. So we started playing for fun. There were five of us from different schools and we needed a name. We were just joking around and somebody said, "Let's make up a name that has no meaning." Brass players always come up with these names, you know, the Tower Brass, Epic Brass, Monumental Brass, Empire Brass....There's something oddly monolithic about these names. So we decided that we'd have a name that made no sense at all. We were just joking around...the Saturday Brass Quintet. We ended up getting artistic management, ended up getting gigs, started touring nationally. We won the Naumburg Chamber Music Award in 1990, and you know only two brass quintets have ever won that award. We commissioned a lot of people, all sorts of folks, Pauline Oliveros, [Anthony Davis](#), [Elliot Goldenthal](#), [Richard Danielpour](#), [Ned Rorem](#), [Joe Schwantner](#), and many others.

An interesting piece to that is how difficult it was to convince composers to write for brass. A lot just didn't want to write for brass quintet, something I couldn't understand

then, because you're thinking, "Well, we're a great brass quintet. Why won't they want to write for us?" I understand it now. How many performances will you get? How much will the commission be? We had talked for a long time about approaching you.

**Steve Reich:** I've hardly written for brass.

**Richard Kessler:** We never called you, but we got your name from soprano [Cheryl Bensman](#). One of our trumpet players was good friends with Cheryl.

**Steve Reich:** This must have been back in the early '80s.

**Richard Kessler:** Cheryl said, "You should call him, he's really great." We didn't, but we all loved your music so much! I guess we couldn't get up the nerve. We used to listen to *Music for 18 Musicians* while we traveled around the country touring in a van.

I had your number in my phonebook from about 1984, way before I came to the [AMC](#). When I joined the AMC I discovered that nobody there actually had your home number, but I had had it for years in my filofax! *[laughs]*.

## Changing Direction

**Steve Reich:** I understand that you also ended up teaching at [Manhattan](#). How did that come about and how did you feel about it?

**Richard Kessler:** It was a residency partially funded through [Chamber Music America](#). We taught brass chamber music. We worked with all the different student brass ensembles...we rehearsed with them, we rehearsed for them, and we coached them. I miss it. I really loved it. I loved being around students and it was also a little home base for us. Chamber Music America gave us that opportunity; we had to raise part of the funding, but we got paid. Manhattan School paid us a salary. It was another piece in our career, with the touring, with the recordings, with the residency—it's what makes the life of a chamber musician. I was part of the residency from 1988 to 1993.

**Steve Reich:** Why did you leave the life of a performing musician? I understand you were involved with an organization called [Artsvision](#), but I don't really know what that is...

**Richard Kessler:** The [Saturday Brass](#) hired a consultant to help us with our education programs—[Mitchell Korn](#). We needed to develop our work in education, to expand our skills and help build that part of our career. It's vital to making it as a professional chamber ensemble. So for instance, when we got booked into the [Kennedy Center](#) they would send us for a week into the Fairfax city schools conducting educational residencies...this was in addition to our concert at the Terrace Theater. We wanted to do more of it and make more money—there was actually pretty good money. So we hired this consultant Mitchell Korn who had been very successful as an artist with the old Affiliate Artist Program. Mitchell worked with us on all sorts of things: to think about the

grade level issues; to think about participatory issues; how do you manage a classroom; how do you deal with teachers; how do you make your ideas work in a curricular context. Mitchell worked with us on all this stuff. We hit it off, Mitchell and me, and he started asking me to do work for him, to start writing study guides to help other artists prepare for work for schools. Little by little I did more and more work for him. It became like a pendulum: the quintet on one side; the education work on the other. I started to feel that I was good at the education work. I felt that I had the knack for it. It felt natural to me.

There was a certain point in time when I began to realize that while I may have been a good trombone player, I thought that a lot of players could have taken my place any day of the week. Playing for me was never easy. I didn't have a natural talent and had to work and work and work at it. You see people with natural talent. They don't even practice and they can play beautifully. I had something there inside of me when I worked with kids, families, and teachers. I started to feel that I could do more for the music I loved by working in education than I could as a player.

There was a point in time where actually it all snapped for me, a kind of "a-ha" moment. We, the SBQ, made our Kennedy Center debut at the Terrace Theater and among the pieces we played was the premiere of a new quintet by [Richard Danielpour](#), the second one he had written for us. It was an interesting piece because the slow movement was dedicated to [Stephen Albert](#). Richard was friends with Stephen, who had only recently died in a car accident. We were also playing a piece of [Arvo Pärt's](#), *Pari Intervallo*, an organ piece that Pärt arranged for us. This slow movement became a memorial piece for Stephen Albert that sounded a bit like Pärt's *Pari Intervallo*. Richard is that kind of composer, great ears and with the ability to meld all sorts of styles and ideas into his own voice. I thought that movement was extraordinarily beautiful. Anyway, when we were backstage during intermission, after we had already played Danielpour's "Urban Dances Book Two," the tuba player in the quintet said, basically: "I don't want to play any more contemporary music—it's all sad. I don't want to play any more sad music. People don't want to hear any more sad music, I want to play happy music..." I remember thinking to myself, "This is not something an adult should be doing," meaning that I should find another career. I was about 32 years old and [*laughs*] I realized at that point that I was going to have to leave the quintet, stop playing, and focus on education fulltime.

I resented what the tuba player said, particularly in light of the hard work some of us in the quintet did to convince composers to write for us and to obtain funding. I think that sometimes composers might forget how hard the performers have to work to find the funding for a commission. Add to that the fact that many composers didn't want to write a brass quintet. What we had to do as a brass quintet to convince composers to write for us! They're looking for a string quartet, or an orchestra premiere, or they all want that elusive opera. You know how it is...

**Steve Reich:** Well, I'm different. But I do know how it is! [*laughs*]

**Richard Kessler:** [*laughs*] Well, many are looking for these things; a great deal of the field focuses, sometimes obsesses, about orchestras. Anyway, sometimes it might take a year or more of nudging to get a composer to say yes. We were chasing around [John Harbison](#), [Gunther Schuller](#), many others, [Ligeti](#), [Lutoslawski](#)... Then you have to find the money. How many times do you apply to [Koussevitzky](#) and get turned down? You

apply to another foundation, and get turned down. So you finally scrape the money together and you get a piece that you believe in. Then you get this from the tuba player—I had had enough.

And, in the middle of playing at the Kennedy Center! You know how long that took?

**Steve Reich:** At intermission he said this?

**Richard Kessler:** Yes.

**Steve Reich:** Ouch!

**Richard Kessler:** I just thought, "This is not for adults." So I figured it was about time to take up Mitchell Korn's offer. He owned Artsvision, a consulting company developing programs all over North America—for orchestras, opera companies, theater companies, for foundations, for entire cities; partnerships between an ensemble and a school—all this kind of work in all these places. In October of 1993 I played my last concert with the quintet.

**Steve Reich:** So you can thank that tuba player! *[laughs]*

**Richard Kessler:** Pretty much! *[laughs]* I can thank him for ending up at the American Music Center, which was the most prophetic of it all.

**Steve Reich:** What do you consider to be some of the highlights when you were at Artsvision?

**Richard Kessler:** We did some wonderful things, worked for so many different organizations: The [New York City Board of Education](#), the [Annenberg Foundation](#), the [Cleveland Orchestra](#), the [Milwaukee Symphony](#), [The Acting Company](#), the [Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto](#), in cities all over North America. We developed programs, created curricula, helped teachers to integrate the arts into their daily teaching or helped arts teachers work more closely with classroom teacher. Certainly the creation of the [Center for Arts Education](#) has to rank right at the very top.

**Steve Reich:** You started that at Artsvision?

**Richard Kessler:** Yes. We were hired by the then New York City Board of Education, the [New York City Department of Cultural Affairs](#), with initial funding from the [Aaron Diamond Foundation](#). This was in 1994. Basically, the Annenberg Foundation established a national school reform initiative where it gave a total of \$500 million to independent programs that sought to address specific challenges to public education. In this case it was an arts education initiative. There were 18 of these initiatives that were funded by the Annenberg Foundation and one of them was the Center for Arts Education in New York City (CAE), CAE was created to restore arts education in the New York City schools. Arts education had, for the most part, been removed from the New York City public schools in about 1978. There was a big budget crisis and they simply made the decision that they needed to cut money out of the system and just removed art and music. They simply fired the music and art teachers. All of these incredible programs, like that chorus I was in, disappeared just like that. Gone. For many years a lot of the

cultural organizations worked to keep arts in the schools. But the teachers weren't there, and the programs were decimated.

CAE was created to restore it and that was a tall order—it's something that will take many years of work to help foster that kind of system-wide change. Since 1996, CAE has put almost \$30 million into these innovative arts education partnerships between schools and cultural organizations. The partnerships are about advancing arts learning in the school, in a way that can effect the culture of the school so that arts education will be supported for years to come. In addition to the partnerships, there is also a program where parents learn alongside their children—something that is vital, as parental involvement is the most important factor in a child's education. There is also a wonderful career development program that places high school students as interns throughout the city in arts-related industries. And there is much more, including conferences and publications.

## Redefining the American Music Center

**Richard Kessler:** When I left [Artsvision](#) in 1997, my focus was with the [American Music Center](#), so I really lost track of things having to do with arts education. My focus was on composers and their music.

**Steve Reich:** What year did you come to the AMC and when you got there what did you find?

**Richard Kessler:** My first day was July 8, 1997.

**Steve Reich:** What time? *[laughs]*

**Richard Kessler:** It was probably 9:35 *[laughs]*, but of course the joke was—and the younger staff at the AMC probably never got this—they would say, "When did you start?" I would say "July 8, 1997, and that was my [December 7th](#)." They would say, "What do you mean by December 7th?" *[laughs]*

I found it was an organization with a great history and heritage, but as happens to many organizations, it lost its focus for one reason or another and began to really struggle a bit. It was at that point a 59-year-old organization.

**Steve Reich:** Did Copland start it?

**Richard Kessler:** [Copland](#), [Hanson](#), [Luening](#), [Marion Bauer](#), [Harrison Kerr](#), and [Quincy Porter](#).

**Steve Reich:** It always occurs to me—I'm on the board of [Meet The Composer](#) and this was once discussed—music organizations come up out of a certain need, at a certain time and because of certain people. And, as those people leave, it slowly either metamorphosizes or dies.

**Richard Kessler:** I think that's right. I also think that organizations need to refresh themselves. They need to regularly ask: "What is the need *today*? How is the need *changing*? How is our response to that need changing or going to change?" And it is easier than one might imagine to proceed for too long a stretch without asking those questions and to hold on to things of the past. The AMC was wrestling with its [Collection of Scores and Recordings](#). Now, the Collection might have made incredible sense in 1939 when it was created—it was one of the two major programs at the Center in 1939. The other was as an information clearing house, providing information on composers and their work in an age when it was very difficult to obtain such information. This, by the way, was the core concept for the [Music Information Center](#). There are almost 50 of them in different countries around the world. In the early days, the Collection was perfect because conductors would come by the AMC when they were in New York to learn about new works. It was very difficult back then for performers to access this information—there were few publishers and the publishers didn't have the means to update people regularly about new works, so a central information source was vital.

Fast forward a few decades when there are more and more publishers, and they're sending out bulletins, announcements to performers—information technology was making it possible for performers to quickly learn about new works. The field was growing and the prime rationale for the Collection as a promotional vehicle didn't completely work anymore, but the Collection still defined the organization. In addition, the Collection grew in ways the founders many never have anticipated—in 1962 there were 8,000 scores; in 2001 there were over 40,000 scores and 20,000 recordings, including many materials that needed restoration and great care. The Collection had sort of morphed from being a promotional vehicle into something archival, which only made things more complicated for the AMC. They felt a responsibility to these composers and to the heritage of the founders who created this collection. So what do you do? The AMC struggled with this change for quite a time. It was Talmudic to the Nth degree. What are we going to do with this Collection? There were the ones on the board who said: "We've got to get rid of this thing. It's choking us to death. It's an albatross." And then the others said: "This Collection is the most important thing in the world to the self-published composer. You've got to figure that without that collection, where are you going to find their music?" This debate was mirrored in the field.

**Steve Reich:** Right.

**Richard Kessler:** All this time, the AMC circulated copies of the scores. So if someone from Australia called and said, "I want to see that score"—and we still do this to this day, even with the Collection at the New York Public Library—we make a copy of that score and we mail it out free of charge to anyone who asks, provided that those rights have been secured through a Deed of Gift. But the AMC had been struggling with this Collection as a core program, and when you're struggling with that, you might not be able to see what else is going on in the field. Now, I took that job because I knew that there was incredible need and I knew there was an incredible opportunity to serve the field of new music. I loved new music from my days with the quintet. I knew the AMC. I'd used even used the collection!

**Steve Reich:** Without your tuba player [laughs]...

**Richard Kessler:** [laughs] And we also had gotten a grant from one of the two [Copland Fund](#) programs that the AMC administers: we got a grant from the [Performing Ensembles Program](#). It was for general operating and we could use it however we wanted, so we put it into a commission for [Aaron Kernis](#). So I knew some of the grant programs, and I knew the Collection, and some of the people: Eero Richmond, [Wes York](#), and [Fran Richard](#) who was on the board... I knew there were a lot of things in the field that composers needed that were not being addressed by any other organization. I felt that there were these giant openings that made sense for the AMC, for its mission, and that's why I took the job.

**Steve Reich:** Let's jump to now that you're leaving. What do you see as the major achievements that solved a lot of these problems?

**Richard Kessler:** Well, I'm not sure how much has been solved, regarding deep seated issues in the field. If there's one thing I can say about my time at the AMC, it was about retooling the organization—preparing it to become the kind of organization that has the capacity to do really profound things. And I think it's getting there. I'll give you some examples. There were three fulltime people when I started working there; now there are fourteen. The budget was a little under a million. It's been as high as five million when we administered 9/11 grants for the [Mellon Foundation](#) and the Department of Cultural Affairs. We've created all kinds of things like *NewMusicBox*. We've created an online library—[NewMusicJukebox](#)—that when it reaches its full fruition, when this thing is really operational, when it has all the publishers catalogs, when it has a tremendous amount of the self-published composers' works, when you're able to buy scores and parts for sale or rental directly from that site, when you can search the AMC collection, when it has 24-hour, 7-day a week web radio that combines commercially-recorded music with non-commercially recorded music...

**Steve Reich:** You've got a lot of rights clearances to worry about here...

**Richard Kessler:** [Jim Kendrick](#), our attorney, has helped us out with this considerably. We've put a lot of work into the clearing of rights and creating licenses for *NewMusicJukebox*. In addition to *Jukebox*, there are all kinds of grant programs that the AMC has launched in the past seven years, perhaps the most profound is which was the \$3 million to artists and organizations that suffered losses as a result of the events of 9/11. These are all partnerships that we've been involved with, including a wide range of organizations throughout the world. We've endowed the [CAP program](#) and expanded it to include things like support for composers to obtain rights to literary works. We rescued the Live Music for Dance Program when the Cary Trust decided it would no longer be the sole funder of the program. I'll give you an example of a new program we're just preparing to launch. People laugh when I tell them about this program, but there's something to it. We're creating a very small pilot program to commission "music on hold."

**Steve Reich:** Music on hold?

**Richard Kessler:** You know, when you call up a company...

**Steve Reich:** Yeah, right...

**Richard Kessler:** Original music on hold.

**Steve Reich:** *[laughs]*

**Richard Kessler:** *[laughs]* I told you people laugh...

**Steve Reich:** Let me mention my friend, [Jon Appleton](#), who is in charge of the electronic music graduate program at Dartmouth and a lot of his students go on to successful careers writing music for Gameboy and Nintendo. I've heard there's more money to be made in writing for a videogame than in making a rock record...

**Richard Kessler:** I don't know if you knew the composer - [Eric Siday](#)...Remember the Maxwell House theme, dadadada da da... dadada da-da...?

**Steve Reich:** Oh yeah...I remember that. He did okay!

**Richard Kessler:** Well, we are in discussions with Eric's estate and anticipate their support for this project—we're going to commission four works, four short works presumably, for music on hold. What will happen is we're going to rewire the AMC music on hold system so that if you want to listen to the music instead of talking to someone you can actually press an extension. If you want to find out about the music on hold, you could go to a website that would tell you about the composer and play the complete piece. It's also a bit of a mathematical puzzle because music on hold is not finite; it's not regular. If you're actually put on hold, it's for an indeterminate length. If I say, "Steve, hold on for a second," and I hit the hold button, you listen to a piece...

**Steve Reich:** Part of a piece...

**Richard Kessler:** Part of a piece... These are all big questions. What do you do? How, as a composer, do you approach this puzzle? Is it a loop? Some people think, well, this will be for electronic composers but that's not necessarily true, not exclusively so either. What we're going to do is work this out and we hope to get some press. We're going to market this idea first to contemporary art museums.

**Steve Reich:** That's great. Call me up *[laughs]*.

**Richard Kessler:** *[laughs]*. You see what the issue is, the opportunity? They're supporting contemporary artists. They should be commissioning composers and this is a perfect opening for greater commissioning activity.

**Steve Reich:** The [Whitney](#) should have music on hold.

**Richard Kessler:** That's right! Take it a step further. It can also be music in the elevator. It's been done for the [Biennial](#), but not regularly. And take it another step further: Could we, through the press and through marketing it of this, get corporations in on this?

**Steve Reich:** Right. You bought a [Frank Stella](#) for the office and you've got Steve Reich playing in the elevator! *[laughs]*

**Richard Kessler:** Or your own music on hold. We at the AMC are always putting music on hold. We've had plenty of Steve Reich playing! [James Tenney](#) has actually been our number one composer for music on hold. He has a piece...

**Steve Reich:** ...*For Ann (Rising)*...

**Richard Kessler:** Yes!

**Steve Reich:** I used to call it "Busy Day at JFK" [*laughs*]

**Richard Kessler:** [*laughs*] Someone who should have known better once called me up and said, "There's something wrong with your phone system."

**Steve Reich:** I've heard that one...

**Richard Kessler:** I said to him, "Hey, that's a piece by James Tenney." But seriously, this is about opening up markets and this is about opportunity and we're trying to do that. We created workshops all across the country for composers to learn how to self-publish, how to market, how to promote, how to negotiate contracts. You know the nature of the business for composers now. It's fairly rare that you ever see a young American composer taken on by one of the major publishing houses. Composers will continue to be publishing their own works more than ever before, creating their own recordings, producing their own concerts, forming their own ensembles...

**Steve Reich:** This is becoming true all over the music world, even the pop side...

**Richard Kessler:** But these skills aren't developed when you go to Juilliard, or Peabody, or NEC. We've been running programs like this [at the AMC] and creating publications. But basically, my greatest pride about the AMC over the last seven years is I think there's a tremendous amount of energy. When I first got here I looked around at the field and I used to make the joke that if two composers got together, the next thing that would happen is a new organization would be created. [*laughs*]

**Steve Reich:** [*laughs*]

**Richard Kessler:** In 1997, I wondered why composers weren't coming to us for help or asking us to partner with them. We're here and we want to help them. Why don't they approach us, why aren't they thinking: "Maybe I should talk to Richard; maybe I should talk to someone on the board; maybe I could join the organization?" And, I would say at this point now seven years into it, people are coming, calling us for help, calling us for advice, calling us for all kinds of things: Can they use the conference room for a meeting? Can we help them think through funding? Can we help them think through structure? Can we be a conduit for them? Composers and performers too, are coming to us, seeing us as a place that cares and wants to help. If you look at the list of organizations that we've partnered with, whether it's the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#), [Music At The Anthology](#), the [Minnesota Orchestra](#), or any number of organizations—we've partnered with dozens—this is about trying to create a more fluid world that better appreciates and better understands the living artist. In part we're trying to make inroads with some of the monolithic organizations—particularly the traditional classical organizations that have trouble understanding living composers.

**Steve Reich:** Are you talking about orchestras? Are you talking about publishers? Or are you talking about the whole lot?

**Richard Kessler:** I think it would be fair to say that the vast majority of composers are disappointed with the orchestras, more than the opera companies perhaps, certainly more than the chamber ensembles and presenting organizations. I think it's certainly better than in Copland's day when he wrote *Copland On Music*. He actually gives figures on how much orchestras performed music by American composers—this was the rationale for the *Copland-Sessions Concerts*.

**Steve Reich:** They wanted to get concerts of their music, so they arranged them themselves.

**Richard Kessler:** That's exactly right. And you look at the numbers—and there were fewer orchestras back then. It's a lot better than it was then, but still I think the issues of living composers: understanding them, appreciating them, working with them... I think the issue of composers not being able to get tapes from orchestras and opera companies—a third of the orchestras, roughly speaking, *won't even give a composer a tape*, not even to study, of their own performance. They can't even hear that tape, a tape of their own work. And add to that that these orchestras use those tapes anyway they want without asking the composer—to support grant applications, whatever they please.

**Steve Reich:** That's no good!

**Richard Kessler:** So, I think there's an energy at the AMC, among the board and the staff and in the membership, that it's a community at this point.

## Returning to Arts Education

**Steve Reich:** Well, why are you leaving?

**Richard Kessler:** I'm leaving because another organization has called that is very important to me, and that's the *Center for Arts Education*...

**Steve Reich:** Where you were involved before...

**Richard Kessler:** Which we were hired to create. There were three of us: Rob Horowitz, *Mitchell Korn*, and I created this organization. We wrote the plan and we launched it. Now they've asked me to come and join them and I think a couple of things. I think that it's good to have this kind of change. When I think of going to the Center for Arts Education, I sometimes think that I'm going to be able to do things that my predecessor *Hollis Headrick* [who is now at Carnegie Hall running the *Weill Music Institute*] couldn't do simply because after you're there for a while, there are some things that become like concrete around you. This will be the case with me, someone will come in and see what I couldn't see, move things along in ways that I couldn't any longer. There are systems. You can become institutionalized, even as an executive director, and there are things that you can't see after awhile. And sometimes you can see them, but habits and

patterns and systems emerge around you and you can't change them. And I think its great for the AMC to have someone now come in at a place where it's ready to move to the next level; it's ready to move to a place that will truly fulfill Copland and Hanson and Luening's dream of an activist organization that's really out there fighting and really making a difference in deeply profound ways.

**Steve Reich:** So maybe they'll be looking for someone very young...

**Richard Kessler:** Well, possibly [laughs]. I don't know. I think they're going to be looking for someone with a lot of energy, one way or the other. My mother's taken... [laughs] She's 84 and has lots of energy, but she's taken by my stepdad.

**Steve Reich:** [laughs] I guess what I meant was somebody who was very much tuned into new music at this particular time. The musical world has changed drastically in my lifetime. The role of record companies has either drastically changed or disappeared. You know, the [Philadelphia Orchestra](#) is selling its own CDs. Then, on the other hand, there's the net. The ground is shifting under our feet as we speak. It would seem the AMC needs someone who is keenly sensitive to these incredible changes—and opportunities.

**Richard Kessler:** I think you're right. The AMC is ready to embrace the change on substantial levels, change to the field and change within the organization. There's lots of discussion about the divide or barrier between or the outdated definitions of musical genres. Categories are blurring, you know, there are so many more sub-categories than ever before. There's crossover in all sorts of ways. I think the sense for a long time was that the AMC was quintessentially about the traditional concert composer, to a much lesser degree about electronic composers, and even less about the improvised composer. I think at this point in time what you're looking at is that the AMC is willing to take a look at creating ways to join all these composers, whether they're improvisers or electronic composers or traditional composers, and try to capitalize on the blending genres. Can we in fact be supporting a wide range of composers, well beyond the traditional definition of concert composer?

**Steve Reich:** Why doesn't the AMC open up a kind of online music store that sells all these self-produced or small label CDs floating around? An on-line store where you knew you could find anything new, where you could see covers, hear samples...

**Richard Kessler:** I think [Jukebox](#) without question will be that, both for scores and recordings and if there is no recording, the score will play a built-in midi version if it's in [Sibelius](#) or [Finale](#), although sometimes the sound of it isn't so great, you're laughing at that...

**Steve Reich:** No, I'm not laughing at all. It depends on the quality of your samples.

**Richard Kessler:** But again, if that composer could get the rights to upload that sound file, it could eventually be not only a place where the score and parts could be directly for sale, but the recordings would be as well. I think that Jukebox will encompass all those things and more. I think when Jukebox hits critical mass it's going to take the AMC and push it in the most remarkable way.

**Steve Reich:** That's great. I look forward to it. Meanwhile, when do you actually leave and go to the Center for Arts Education?

**Richard Kessler:** July 16th is my last day at the AMC. I should have made it July 8th [which is the day I started]. And then on August 16th I'll start at the Center for Arts Education.

**Steve Reich:** When you go there, it's not a cold turkey situation for you—you know these people, you've been involved with this organization before—what are the things you really want to set your sights on first?

**Richard Kessler:** The organization is going to undertake a strategic planning process. The Center for Arts Education is now about seven and a half years old and in that period of time the New York City public schools have changed in the most dramatic ways. When we at Artsvision were doing the plan for the Center for Arts Education, you have to understand that it was a huge undertaking. We had a staff of something like six or seven people. They were going out to schools all across the city. They were studying the schools. They were running focus groups. They were researching every cultural organization that works with schools. We met with funders. We met with principals. We went to the Board of Education. We studied the school system.

The school system in the '70s was broken up into 32 different community school districts for a number of reasons. Now, no one ever said to us back in 1995 when we were working on this plan that maybe one day they'll recentralize. No one ever believed that would be possible, but Mayor Bloomberg has made that possible, and it's recentralized.

So, the school system has changed in profound ways in those seven and a half years. What that means is that the landscape is different for the Center for Arts Education, so it has to refocus. We talked about the AMC losing focus and how organizations can lose focus. Well, the time now is for the Center for Arts Education to refocus and to rethink. Again, just as I thought that for the AMC in 1997 there were lots of opportunities, lots of need, I think there are unique opportunities for the Center for Arts Education. It's unlike any other arts and education organization in New York and perhaps in the nation. It's an incredible opportunity. It's about imagination and creativity for children and families. I would hope that more kids could be turned on to [Steve Reich](#). *[laughs]*

**Steve Reich:** *[laughs]* Glad to hear it.

## What It's All About

**Richard Kessler:** I want to turn the tables on you for a second.

**Steve Reich:** Now, wait a minute, I'm not leaving anywhere. *[laughs]* I've got work to do here!

**Richard Kessler:** One of the reasons we thought this interview would be interesting was because before *NewMusicBox* was formally created, I did five interviews that were called "In The First Person" and you were [the first one](#), the very first.

**Steve Reich:** I remember.

**Richard Kessler:** At the end of the interview, I remember we were sitting in your apartment in Manhattan and it started to get very dark. We were there for a couple of hours and the sun was going down. It was really great, and I said to you at one point how beautiful your music was. I think what I said to you basically is that very often people, especially when they write about it, analyze the structure and complexity of it.

**Steve Reich:** It depends on who they are...

**Richard Kessler:** That always seemed to be more likely the case, rather than just saying how beautiful it is. And what I wanted to do was just take a second—you're not going to find a bigger fan of Steve Reich's music than me and I don't know how often you get to hear someone say thank you because of how much time I spend in my life listening to your music and how much joy it has brought my life...

**Steve Reich:** That's great...

**Richard Kessler:** I'll give you an example. I saw you at the concert—when [Keersmaecker](#) did *Drumming*.

**Steve Reich:** Yeah, right.

**Richard Kessler:** We were at *Drumming* and that was a perfect example. It was not just the visual, the dance, but the music itself actually makes my body feel good. It brings a physical pleasure. And I remember also when I heard *Tehillim*, I heard it a few times, the first time with [Robert Spano](#). He was lost for a second. I remember he was flipping the score.

**Steve Reich:** The repeats of the canons are really scary. If you don't have a tape marker on the right page, you're dead!

**Richard Kessler:** I heard it with [David Robertson](#) recently.

**Steve Reich:** He's great too...

**Richard Kessler:** But when I heard it with [Alan Pierson](#) at [Miller](#), and that was another one where I was sitting there and I didn't want the music to stop. It just actually washed over my body. I remember when I was with the Quintet. Terry Szor, one of the trumpeters—he plays in Broadway shows and all sorts of things, great guy—he turned me on to Steve Reich. He said, "You gotta listen to *Music for 18 Musicians*." And I was a trombone player. We were playing [Victor Ewald](#), [Malcolm Arnold](#), nothing wrong with Malcolm Arnold but I hadn't heard anything like this. I just didn't know. And he said to me, "This music changed my life." And how many times have I heard people say that to me about *Music for 18*? [David Lang](#), has said it, any number of people have said this.

And so I wanted to take a moment here and say how much I love your music and how much joy it's brought into my life.

**Steve Reich:** That's what it's all about. J.S. Bach said it's "Das Affect." And that's the whole story. No one gives you an S for structure. If it doesn't really get to people then why bother... The reason I write is because it gets to me. If I don't love to listen to the mp3 midi mock up while I'm climbing stairs for exercise then I've failed. *[laughs]*

**Richard Kessler:** Well, you've succeeded in remarkable ways. The time that [my wife] Debbie and I spend listening... I've given CDs of it to so many folks. There are so many people, especially in the orchestra business, that I've talked to about *Tehillim*. One of the things that's wrong with the orchestra business is the fact that there could be a piece like *Tehillim* out there which isn't being played a lot by orchestras.

**Steve Reich:** Well, there's one I'm working on it right now which is called *You Are (Variations)*. It is a kind of relation of *Tehillim*, maybe it's better. I'm writing it for strings, probably 3-3-3-3-1, but I think it could be done slightly larger. It would be a relatively easy crossover from ensemble to orchestra. Of course, once you've got to hire singers, nothing's easy.

**Richard Kessler:** When will it be premiered?

**Steve Reich:** It will be premiered out in [Disney Hall](#) with the [L.A. Master Chorale and Ensemble](#) conducted by [Grant Gershon](#) on October 24 of this year and then it goes to Frankfurt and London in January of next year with the [Ensemble Modern](#) conducted by [Stefan Asbury](#). It will come to New York in October 2006 when, G-d willing, I'll be 70.

**Richard Kessler:** Big celebration I understand.

**Steve Reich:** There's a lot of stuff being planned including that piece plus two other new ones which I haven't even begun, all to be premiered, along with a lot of older pieces. First at [Carnegie](#), [Lincoln Center](#), and [BAM](#), then all over Europe—I better get busy.