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GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE IN NEW RECORDING OF STEVE REICH'S MUSIC FOR 18 MUSICIANS ON INNOVA

"A gorgeous and stunningly accurate CD of *Music for 18 Musicians*, from the heartland to the heart. Take a listen." – Steve Reich

On Tuesday, October 16, Innova Recordings will issue a new multichannel hybrid SACD recording of Steve Reich's Minimalist masterwork *Music for 18 Musicians* (innova 678). The intricate, hourlong piece is performed by the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble, based in Allendale, Michigan. The ensemble gained widespread notice for its early-morning performance of *Music for 18 Musicians* at Bang on a Can's 20th-anniversary Marathon concert in May.

Steve Reich turned 70 on October 3, 2006, a milestone celebrated by performing organizations worldwide. As the anniversary approached, Bill Ryan, director of the GVSU New Music Ensemble, considered ways to mark the occasion. While aware of the work's difficulty, he decided to set his sights on performing *Music for 18 Musicians*, the Everest of Reich's oeuvre.

Leaving aside its unusual length (60 – 75 minutes) and instrumentation (four pianos plus winds, percussion, voices, and strings), this piece makes uncommon demands of its players. It is performed without a conductor; instead, cued by key members of the ensemble, the group as a whole decides how many times to repeat material within each of the work's eleven sections, all the while maintaining tight rhythmic coordination. As a result, while the work's overall character remains the same, no two performances are ever identical. Even for professional musicians, *Music for 18 Musicians* requires exceptional alertness, concentration and endurance. Learning to play it is a discipline in itself.

GVSU's main campus is situated in the farmlands of western Michigan. Unlike many of its counterparts in the Midwest, the school does not have a powerhouse conservatory. Most of its music majors aspire to become teachers rather than concert artists. In order to perform *Music for 18 Musicians*, Ryan had to supplement his usual pool of talent. To that end, he enlisted a few faculty colleagues, members of the community, and for one of the marimba parts, a drum-corps member who had never played the instrument. Most of his players were born nearly a decade after the work's debut in 1976. Yet after a few rehearsals, Ryan realized that a successful performance was within reach.

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In search of practical advice and further inspiration, Ryan arranged a field trip for five of his students to hear Steve Reich and Musicians perform *Music for 18 Musicians* at Carnegie Hall. Some had never left Michigan, and one had never been on an airplane before. They were enthralled by the performance and excited to meet the composer himself. Reported Ryan in an article for *NewMusicBox*, "Of course we heard the music, but we also experienced the music – the swirling overtones, the energy from the audience, the choreography of the ensemble."

During that weekend, Marc Mellits, who transcribed *Music for 18* for publication, and Todd Reynolds, a longtime violinist with Reich's ensemble, met with Ryan and his group and offered crucial insights. Reynolds became an influential supporter, and was instrumental in persuading Bang on a Can to bring the ensemble to New York City to perform on its 26-hour Marathon concert in May 2007. Bang on a Can came up with the idea of programming *Music for 18 Musicians* in the hour just before dawn, so the rising sun would be visible through the windows of the World Financial Center's Winter Garden atrium as the piece drew to a close. Listeners reported an unforgettable experience. "For listeners present from the evening's onset, that performance took on unanticipated dimensions: higher cognitive functions ceded to powerful impressions of physicality and emotion," wrote Steve Smith in *The New York Times*. "The entry of the maracas in Section VI felt epic." In his blog *The Rest is Noise*, Alex Ross observed that the ensemble succeeded in "holding 400 people transfixed at 4 am."

Now, the ensemble's rendition of *Music for 18 Musicians* has been captured on a hybrid stereo/multichannel, 5.1 surround Super Audio Compact Disc (SACD), which can be played on any standard CD player. It was recorded by noted engineer Silas Brown at Royce Auditorium in St. Cecilia's Music Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Of the five recordings now available, this one may best convey the enveloping soundworld of *Music for 18 Musicians* as it is heard in live performance.

Says Steve Reich, "Who would have thought? From a Midwestern school in Michigan, Grand Valley State University, here comes a really first class New Music Ensemble. They spent a good long time rehearsing and then came to New York City and blew away a full house at the Winter Garden with their performance of *Music for 18 Musicians* – at dawn – during the Bang on a Can Marathon. They then went on to make a really moving recording of the piece. A gorgeous and stunningly accurate CD of *Music for 18 Musicians*, from the heartland to the heart. Take a listen."