

Minimalism in Art and Music: Origins and Aesthetics

The esteemed American musicologist **H. Wiley Hitchcock** (born 1923) has made contributions to musicology as a scholar, writer, editor, and educator. His finely crafted writings have shaped scholars' views of the sacred, secular, cultivated, vernacular, and experimental traditions of American music, among other subjects. A professor emeritus at Brooklyn College, where he founded the Institute for Studies in American Music, he has also taught at the University of Michigan and Hunter College, received numerous awards and grants for his scholarly work, and been a prominent member of several learned societies. He edited the Prentice Hall History of Music Series (of which his *Music in the United States* is in its third edition) as well as many other publications and edi-

tions of music, including *Earlier American Music*, *Recent Researches in American Music*, and *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (as co-editor). He has also written books on a wide range of subjects, including Charles Ives, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, and the history of the phonograph. In "Minimalism in Art and Music," a lecture originally given at the College Art Association in the late 1980s, Hitchcock traces the antecedents, contributions, aesthetics, and reception of four major figures of minimalist music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. He traces the development of minimalist music in the United States—including its roots in serial techniques, aleatoric processes, jazz, technological advances, and music of non-Western cultures—and draws striking parallels to minimalist painting and sculpture.

Minimalism in the visual arts was a well-recognized movement by the mid-1960s.¹ Musical minimalism, however, came to public consciousness only in the late 1970s: two landmarks, both dating from 1976, were the opera by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson *Einstein on the Beach*, which had a *succès d'estime*, selling out two performances at the Metropolitan Opera House (specially rented for the occasion), and Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*, the recording of which sold more than 20,000 copies within a year. Only in the 1980s, moreover, did the mass media or the musical establishment pay much attention to musical minimalism, let alone acknowledge it as a force of significance. Even critics and historians were slow to acknowledge its existence.² But in fact minimalist music had arisen at about the same time as minimal art, and the music was in many ways aesthetically and stylistically similar to the art. My aim here is to sketch the rise of minimalist music, then to explore some analogies between it and minimal art.

The musical stage had been set by various vanguard trends in the 1950s, in two major camps.³ One camp was occupied by adherents of the chromatic, twelve-tone (or serial) composition methods of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern; Milton Babbitt was its American company commander. The other camp was occupied by adherents of the random, chance, and aleatory methods of John Cage, especially a group of New York composers including the late Morton Feldman and Earle Brown. Important in the background of minimalist music were

1. Perhaps the first exhibition devoted exclusively to what came to be called minimal art was the one selected and hung in October 1964 by critic Eugene Goossen at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York. (Goossen's catalogue of the exhibition, which was called simply "8 Young Artists," is reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), pp. 165–169.) One of the first essays on minimal art (and apparently the first to use that term) was Barbara Rose's "A B C Art," published in the October–November 1965 issue of *Art in America* (reprinted in *Minimal Art*, pp. 274–297). Daniel Mendelowitz had not mentioned minimalism in the first edition of his *A History of American Art* (1960), but in the second (1970) he included a section titled "Minimal Painting" and also discussed minimal sculpture as such.

2. For example, neither Eric Salzman, in his *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967), nor myself, in *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969), mentioned minimalism in music; in our second editions (both 1974) we did.

3. An especially sympathetic overview is that of John Rockwell in his *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983).

the *reductive* tendencies in the music of some of these composers—for example, the post-Webernites' tendency to isolate single tones and give them a microcosmic identity all their own; or Feldman's continuous, murmuring low-level volume and slow-motion rhythms. Also important was Cage's prefiguration of concept art, in which the *concept* of a work is as significant as the work itself. And Cage wiped the slate absolutely clean with his 4'33" of 1952, the "silent" piece that invited the audience simply to listen—to anything in the environment that caught their attention (as Robert Rauschenberg's contemporaneous white canvases invited attention to any luminous or shadow-created visual echoes from their viewers' environment). Elements of jazz, too, were important, particularly its powerful, insistent pulse and its cyclical variation-like structure. Technology counted for a lot—especially the technology that had reduced much of the world to a nonstop jet flight, and that led to the long-playing disc and magnetic tape as new recording media; these made available an unprecedented range of music, including much non-Western music—Indian, African, Indonesian—that was based on very different principles of structure and continuity from those of the Western tradition. (Tape-recording techniques allowed composers to work directly, in a concrete physical sense, with the materials of composition, and to manipulate, alter, repeat, and adjust them at will.) Also important was a general interest in developing cultures—particularly Asian—and their religions, philosophies, and states of altered consciousness achieved through meditation or drugs.

It is useful to keep in mind these various strands of American musical culture of the 1950s in order to recognize the common ground among the founding figures of musical minimalism, at the same time as one recognizes their very different personalities. The early leaders were La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass; all were born in the mid-1930s. (I might emphasize that it is these four composers *only*, and chiefly their radical early minimalist works, that I am concerned with here.)⁴

La Monte Young is often claimed to be the earliest minimalist composer.⁵ In the mid-1950s he began to introduce into his post-Webern serial compositions unusually long-held notes and lengthy silences; his *Trio for Strings* of 1958 was even more static: Only four notes are introduced in the first five minutes of this fifty-minute work. By 1960 he had been influenced by Cage and was making such pieces as *Composition 1960 #10*, the score of which consists only of the sentence "Draw a straight line and follow it." Young was also showing interest in music based almost exclusively on long-sustained tones or drones—for example, *Composition 1960 #7*: "♮ to be held for a long time." His focus on drones, and an increasing preoccupation with just intonation and non-tempered tuning systems, were confirmed by lengthy study with Indian master Pandit Pran Nath.

4. Another important early minimalist was Terry Jennings (1940–1981), but he dropped out of sight after the mid-1960s, well before his premature death. See Ben Patterson, "Terry Jennings: Making of a Musician," *The Village Voice* (January 11, 1968), p. 24.

5. See, for example, Robert Palmer, "A Father Figure for the Avant-Garde," *The Atlantic Monthly* 248, no. 5 (May 1981), pp. 48–56.

Terry Riley⁶ was an associate of Young on the West Coast and later in New York; Riley too became a student of Pran Nath. In the early 1960s he supported himself partly as a jazz pianist, and his jazz background fed into one of the seminal early minimalist works, his *In C* of 1964. *In C* is a work for any number of musicians, playing any melodic instruments. Each musician runs through a series of some 50 brief melodic figures—repeating each figure, however, as many times as he wishes before moving on to the next one; the work ends when all the players have completed their run-through of the 50-odd melodic figures. The total length of *In C* and its moment-to-moment details, as well as its instrumentation, are variable and unpredictable—which may suggest a Cage-derived aleatory randomness. But this randomness is offset by the repetitive element—anathema to Cage at the time—and by a strictly controlled rhythm, governed by a steady, continuous pulse (heard nakedly, drummed on the top two Cs of the piano keyboard, to begin the piece); these latter aspects are jazz-related.

Steve Reich⁷ also became interested in music based on the repetition of brief modular patterns (at a time when he, like Riley, was working, along with other innovative composers, at the recently organized San Francisco Tape Music Center). Partly influenced by Riley's work, partly by accident when fooling around with tape recorders and tape-loop maneuvers, Reich developed a type of composition based on "phase-shift" patterns—created when identical, repeated phrases, at first played by two sound-sources together and simultaneously ("in phase"), gradually get "out of sync"—out of phase—as one part ever so slowly moves ahead of the other. Early works by Reich based on this technique were *It's Gonna Rain* (1965), *Come Out* (1966), and *Violin Phase* (1967). Important in these works were not only the new possibilities opened up to composition using magnetic tape but a paradoxical combination of precompositional decision-making on one hand and, on the other, a final musical outcome that was in many details unforeseeable and impersonal.

Philip Glass⁸—after a crucial encounter in Paris with the Indian music of the great sitar player Ravi Shankar—also began building pieces by repetition of melodic cells—varying the repetitions, however, by occasional additions or subtractions of units within them, as in *Strung Out*, for amplified violin (1967), and *Two Pages* (originally titled *Two Pages for Steve Reich*), for two amplified keyboard instruments (1968). The radicalism of these works lay in their rejection of polyphony (in favor of single-line melody—monophony—or two-note parallel-

6. See Joel Rothstein, "Terry Riley," *Down beat* 48, no. 5 (May 1981), pp. 26–28, 63; Joan La Barbara, "Terry Riley: After a Quiet Decade, a New Style Emerges," *Musical America* (March 1986), pp. 12–13; and Edward Strickland, "In C-erra: An Interview with Terry Riley," *Fanfare* 11, no. 4 (March/April 1988), pp. 341–353.

7. See K. Robert Schwarz, "Steve Reich: Music as a Gradual Process," *Perspectives of New Music* 19, no. 1–2 (Fall–Winter 1980), pp. 374–392; 20, no. 1–2 (Fall–Winter 1981/Spring–Summer 1982), pp. 226–286.

8. See the autobiographical chapter "Apprenticeship of Sorts" in Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, ed. Robert T. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 3–56; see also Rockwell, *All American Music*, chap. 9 ("The Orient, the Visual Arts & the Evolution of Minimalism: Philip Glass").

Baker makes the point that viewing these works "demands time, and [they] must be perceived gradually"; they are works of utter repetitive regularity—"no mystery in their construction" but of such complexity of details that they have "an almost atmospheric quality," and one in which "the artist could not have foreseen the shower of detail that his procedures produce." This is a perfect description of many minimalist music compositions of the 1960s.

The minimalist composers liked the impersonality, the "anti-expression," and the lack of storytelling of their repetitive process music. Reich wrote, with evident satisfaction, that "once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself," and said that he found

performing and listening to gradual musical processes . . . a liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outwards toward *it*.²⁷

Glass has referred to his early work as "intentionless music," music that does not set out to make "a calculated effect. It does not paint a picture."²⁸ For him, "what sets the music apart is the fact that it's non-narrative"²⁹; elsewhere, he elaborated on this idea:

You can see what I have in mind . . . in the [historical] development of the violin concerto. There, the solo instrument becomes more and more the alter ego of the composer. And the listener identifies with it, too, as the instrument experiences happy moments and sad moments until there is a triumphal end. . . . All that narrative structure . . . is gone from my music.³⁰

And Glass emphasizes that in his music there is a "focus on structure rather than on theme."³¹ This makes one think of Donald Judd's critique of the sculpture of Mark Di Suvero:

[He] uses beams as if they were brushstrokes, imitating movement, as Franz Kline did. The material never has its own movement. A beam thrusts; a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image.³²

Stella, too, rejected the programmatic approach in his art:

People who want to retain the old values in painting . . . always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. [But] my painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object.³³

Minimalist music is similarly self-referential. This is most obviously true of the drone pieces of La Monte Young: His aim, in fact, is to have us, as he puts it, "get inside the sound . . . [concentrate] so heavily upon a given sound—[give oneself] over to it to such a degree—that what's happening is the sound . . . all [one is] is an element of the sound."³⁴

Minimalist music is also nonrelational, like minimal art. Stella contrasted American minimal art with European geometric painting, saying:

The basis of their whole idea is balance. You do something in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner . . . but we use symmetry in a different way. It's nonrelational.³⁵

Glass said analogously of his music that it invited a new mode of listening—"one in which neither memory nor anticipation . . . have a place in sustaining the . . . reality of the musical experience."³⁶ Reich spoke of a kind of concentrated listening "where one hears the details of the sound moving out away from intentions, occurring for their own acoustic reasons."³⁷

The art critic Rosalind Krauss has pointed to the *grid* as a figure especially useful to minimal artists in their pursuit of a nonnarrative, nonrelational, nonautobiographical, and nonstorytelling art. She cites the grid's "absolute stasis . . . its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection . . . its anti-referential character, [and] its hostility to narrative."³⁸ The grid in painting—or the three-dimensional equivalent in sculpture, the repetitive cubic or other polyhedral module—functions, of course, to divide space into evenly repeated segments. The musical equivalent to space is time, and the musical minimalists' equivalent of the grid is the repeated musical module, whether of rhythm alone or of pitch combined with rhythm to form a melodic or a harmonic pattern. The minimalists' module has

33. Interview with Judd and Stella conducted by Bruce Glaser, broadcast on WBAI-FM, New York, February 1964, under the title "New Nihilism or New Art?"; published as "Questions to Stella and Judd," ed. Lucy R. Lippard, *Art News* (September 1966), pp. 55–61; reprinted in *Minimal Art*, pp. 148–164. References herein are to the last-named version.

34. Quoted in Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, p. 197.

35. "Questions to Stella and Judd."

36. Quoted in Gagne and Caras, *Soundpieces*, p. 215.

37. *Writings About Music*, p. 11.

38. "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," *October* 18 (Fall 1981), reprinted in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 151–172.

27. *Writings About Music*, pp. 9, 11.

28. Quoted in Kostelanetz, "Two Tonal Composers," *Breaking the Sound Barrier*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981), pp. 284–299.

29. Quoted in Gagne and Caras, *Soundpieces*, p. 214.

30. Quoted in Joseph Roddy, "Listening to Glass," *R[ockefeller] F[oundation] Illustrated* 5, no. 2 (May 1981), pp. 12–13.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Judd, "Specific Objects," quoted in Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 254.

nothing to do with more traditional kinds of musical divisions of time—beats, measures, the division of measures into “strongly” and “weakly” accented portions, the build-up of measures into phrases or phrases into periods, and the like. These are *background*—or backbone—for other material that is conceived—and perceived—as *foreground* (usually melody). But the minimalist module itself, like the grid, is foreground—surface and subject alike (though it can sometimes be both foreground and background).

A related analogy is the *flatness* of much minimal painting—its denial of depth, of picture planes, of perspective—and the lack of depth, of foreground-versus-background, in much minimalist music of the 1960s and '70s. Even when there is a considerable density of texture, as in Riley's *A Rainbow in Curved Air* (1969), or as builds up in most of Reich's works, especially such a large-ensemble piece as *Music for 18 Musicians* (1974–1976), the richness of detail seems all on the surface, like that of a complexly patterned rug; or foreground seems to trade places continuously with background, in an aural equivalent of op art. And one might argue that the lack of one-point perspective in minimal paintings and their lack of illusory picture planes—or the lack of hierarchy in the cubic modular constructions of Sol LeWitt, the floor sculpture of Carl Andre or Richard Serra, and the multiple tetrahedrons of Robert Morris—find musical equivalents in the lack of traditional tonality and of functional (hierarchical) harmony, and of so-called “accompaniment” in most minimal music.

Let me suggest a final analogy between minimal art and minimalist music: *accessibility*. Accessibility was a conscious goal of some minimalists. Stella said: “All I want anyone to get out of my painting . . . is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion. . . . What you see is what you see.”³⁹ Reich wrote similarly: “I am interested in perceptible processes. . . . I want [you] to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.”⁴⁰

Such artists' aiming for accessibility was in conscious reaction against what they considered a self-defeating complexity in modern art and music. Some critics have viewed this reaction, however, in a broader context as a kind of escapism: American-art historian Daniel Mendelowitz has claimed that “in much minimal art, one feels a weariness of man's spirit, a desire to escape into an enfolding quietude from the pressure of a frenetic, discordant world”;⁴¹ and, for music critic and historian Eric Salzman, “clearly, [musical] minimalism is a reaction to twentieth-century information overload, to the buzzing, blooming confusion.”⁴² Whether escapist or not, however, minimalism proved to be enormously fructifying in music as in art—*pace* the naysayers among the musical establishment, both composers and critics. In the 1970s a large number of composers,

39. “Questions to Stella and Judd.”

40. *Writings About Music*, p. 9. He contrasted his ideally audible processes with processes as used by other composers: “John Cage has used processes . . . but the processes he used were compositional ones that could not be heard when the piece was performed. . . . Similarly in serial music, the series itself is seldom audible” (*Ibid.*, p. 10).

41. *A History of American Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 456.

42. *Twentieth-Century Music*, 2nd ed. (1970), p. 456.

performers, performance artists, dancers, and pop and rock musicians were drawn to it—not to mention a huge new audience, large enough to sell out Carnegie Hall and other such venues for entire one-man shows of minimalist music. True, in the later 1970s, and especially in the 1980s, musical minimalism tended to be abandoned by its major originators in favor of an expansive post-minimalism (dubbed maximalism by critic John Rockwell)—rather like the development of some minimal artists such as Frank Stella. On the other hand, some younger composers have driven minimalism to a logical conclusion by reducing the sound of their music to a near-zero level, as in Tom Johnson's *Four-Note Opera* of 1972 (which employs only four pitches), or in fact zero level, as in his *Symmetries* (1981), a collection of images, based entirely on music symbols, whose constructive premise is symmetry and whose presentation is, as he says in prefatory comments, “in purely visual form—their purest form, [which] leaves you to imagine aural parallels for yourself.”⁴³

Published by permission of the author. Copyright © 1996 by H. Wiley Hitchcock.

43. See also William Hellermann's *To the Last Drop* (1974), depicting cascades of melodic lines, precisely and conventionally notated on staves, gushing torrentially from the mouth of an open, tilted bottle, reproduced in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1986), s.v. “Notation.” With such pieces as these we arrive perhaps at the end of the road in another sense, too: minimalist music *become* minimalist art, just as with certain “sound sculptures”—by, for example, Harry Bertoia or Bill Fontana—we cross the border between art and music.