

Minimalism

Defining Minimalism

- * “Less is more” - Mies van der Rohe
- * “Less in art is not less.
More in art is not more.
Too little in art is not too little.
Too much in art is too much.” - Ad Reinhardt
- * “Minimalism... That which is made with a minimum of means” - La Monte Young

Jonathan Bernard's 3 distinguishing strategies of the Minimalist style in art and music

- * 1. The minimization of chance or accident
- * 2. An Emphasis upon the surface of the work
- * 3. A concentration upon the whole rather than the parts
- * This categorisation clearly rules out a composer such as Morton Feldman as a Minimalist. His work whilst appearing to be minimalist in nature relies on closer inspection on a high level of unpredictability and eventfulness. What is minimal in Minimalism is not merely the number of notes but their relationship.

John Adams' 3 criteria for what constitutes a minimalist piece

- * 1. regular, articulated pulse
- * 2. the use of tonal harmony with slow harmonic rhythm
- * 3. the building of large structures through repetition of small cells.
- * This definition ties together Riley's *In C*, Glass's *Music in Fifths* and *Einstein on the Beach*, and Reich's *Drumming*, *Music for 18 Musicians* and *Piano Phase*.
- * What it specifically leaves out (apart from the early Reich tape pieces) is the sine-tone installations of La Monte Young, and the related drone music of the Theater of Eternal Music, which contain neither regular pulse nor repetitive pitch cells. Young's *Composition 1960 No. 7*, which consists of the pitches B and F-sharp and the notation "to be held for a long time," must be regarded as a seminal work, perhaps the seminal work, of minimalism. Adams definition also leaves out the drone music of Phil Niblock and the slow, ambling chord progressions of Harold Budd which are also categorisable within the minimalist framework.

Techniques and traits of minimalism

* 1. Static harmony

- * Starting with Young's Composition 1960 No. 7, the minimalist tendency to stay on one chord, or to move back and forth among a small repertoire of chords, has marked most minimalist music, including Reich's Piano Phase, Drumming, and Octet.

* 2. Repetition

- * This is perhaps the most stereotypical aspect of minimalist music, the tendency that audiences superficially associate with its stuck-in-the-groove quality. It first appears in Terry Riley's tape pieces from 1963: Mescaline Mix and The Gift. Many minimalist works do not use repetition, however: Young's completely static sine-tone installations (except in the most microscopic acoustic sense) and Phill Niblock's drone works.

* 3. Additive process

- * Minimalist works tended to start with a basic repeated pattern and add on in one of two ways. Either the pattern would be lengthened by adding additional notes or measures or phrases in usually a 1, 1+2, 1+2+3, 1+2+3+4 kind of way (Reich's Four Organs, Glasses Music in Fifths), or else by slowing down existing patterns (Music for Mallet Instruments, Voice, and Organ); or else a certain recurring duration would begin with silence and add notes with each recurrence (Drumming). Because of additive process and other types of linear process detailed below, minimalist music was often called "Process Music" - a perfectly viable term and an interesting subject in its own right, but not a term that can be considered exactly coextensive with minimalism.

- * 4. Phase-shifting

- * This technique, of two identical phrases played at the same time but at slightly different tempos so as to go out of phase with each other, was most characteristic of Reich's works of the 1960s and early 1970s: Piano Phase, Come Out, It's Gonna Rain, and Drumming. This technique had antecedents in Henry Cowell's New Musical Resources and Conlon Nancarrow's tempo explorations.

- * 5. Permutational process

- * Composers who wanted slightly less obvious melodic progressions, like Jon Gibson in his Melody IV (1975) and Call (1978), and Tom Johnson in his Nine Bells, would sometimes turn to systematic permutations of pitches.

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- * 6. Steady beat

- * Certainly many of the most famous minimalist pieces relied on a motoric 8th-note beat, although there were also several composers like Young and Niblock interested in drones with no beat at all. Perhaps "steady-beat-minimalism" is a criterion that could divide the minimalist repertoire into two mutually exclusive bodies of music, pulse-based music versus drone-based music.

- * 7. Static instrumentation

- * The early minimalist ensembles, starting with In C and the Theater of Eternal Music and continuing through the Reich and Glass ensembles, were all founded on a concept of everyone playing all the time; the minimalist concept of instrumentation is based on the idea of music being a ritual in which everyone participates equally, not on the classical European paradigm of the painter's palette in which each instrument adds its dash of color where needed.

* 8. Linear transformation

- * This is a generalization of processes such as additive structure above. Many of the minimalists have cultivated a fascination with linear motion from one musical state to another, such as Niblock's slow mutations from maximum in-tuneness to maximum dissonance or vice versa, or James Tenney's motion from tonality to atonality in his Chromatic Canon, and the linear acceleration of his Spectral Canon for Conlon Nancarrow (1974).

* 9. Metamusic

- * For awhile in the '70s it seemed that Steve Reich's chief preoccupation was the unintended acoustic details that arose (or were perceived) as a side effect of strictly carried-out processes. These included soft melodies created by the overtones of played notes, which Reich referred to as "metamusic," and even reinforced with notated instrumental melodies in such works as his Octet. One could say that the overtone phenomena buzzing above the slowly glissandoing drones of Phill Niblock's music, and even the changing overtone patterns heard as you walk through a La Monte Young sine-tone installation, constitute metamusic as well.

* 10. Pure tuning

- * It's noteworthy that minimalism started, in the musics of Young, Tony Conrad, and the Theater of Eternal Music, as a slowed-down exploration of pure frequency ratios, resonant intervals outside the 12-pitch piano scale; Phill Niblock's music and much of Terry Riley's continue this feature as well. One could make an argument that the true minimalist music, hardcore minimalism, is in pure tunings. But since Glass and Reich have always been happy with the equal-tempered scale, this would be a hard sell.

* 11. Influence of non-Western cultures

- * This is far from a universal component of minimalism, nor a necessary one, but composers who started on the minimalist path had no European precedent to look to for examples of repetition or harmonic stasis, and typically turned eastward. It is significant that Young, Riley, and Glass were inspired by Indian classical music, and that Reich studied African drumming. And minimalism led directly to a much greater absorption of non-Western aesthetics and techniques by younger composers of the next generation. In a way, minimalism created a bridge over which American composers could rejoin the rest of the non-European world.

* In Minimalism, the listener is invited, not to follow a complex musical "argument", but to concentrate upon a slowly changing sound and focus with microscopic awareness on different aspects of it. For such listeners such intense concentration has produced psychological states comparable to drug-induced euphoria or meditative trance. Le Monte Young and Phil Niblock are probably the only composers for whom such effects are of primary importance. Significantly, their music is entirely devoid of rhythmic pulse, consisting mostly of combinations of drones. Steve Reich, by contrast, has explored the different ways in which a rhythmic figure can move out of phase with itself whilst Philip Glass has used rhythmic figures which increase or decrease in length as the piece progresses. Common to all three is the fact that their music avoids any sense of climax, development or directionality. Their pieces are either cyclical in form or static. Systems composers appear to have worked largely outside the mainstreams of both European and American music, drawing inspiration instead from various ethnic musical forms. Non-Western musical forms (as Young has observed) involve stasis in contrast to climax or directionality. Examples of such influence include:

- * Ghanian and Balinese - Reich
- Japanese Gagaku - Young
- Indian - Glass

* Western music has also contributed to the development of Minimalism. Young has cited the "unchanging chord" in Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra. Other such influences include Webern's technique of repeating the same pitches in different octave placements. Giuliamme Machaut and plainchant. In addition to Philip Glass's studies Ravi Shankar, he also studied with Nadia Boulanger and acknowledges the influences of J.S. Bach.

Works

- * Steve Reich - Drumming (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doJk4yPwJDk>)
- * La Monte Young - Composition 1960 #7 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdWKIVnrFfA>)
- * La Monte Young - The Second Dream of the High-Tension Line Stepdown Transformer (full title: "The Tortoise Recalling the Drone of the Holy Numbers as they were Revealed in the Dreams of the Whirlwind and the Obsidian Gong, Illuminated by the Sawmill, the Green Sawtooth Ocelot and the High-Tension Line Stepdown Transformer")
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfZzz58VUaw>
- * Terry Riley - In C (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6gbgeKTv6M>)
- * Phill Niblock - Early Winter (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ix-ZYT4if8>)
- * Alvin Lucier - I am sitting in a room (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAxHlLK3Oyk>)
- * Phillip Glass - Einstein on the Beach (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIDuZq7RVAM>)

Influences

- * Brian Eno - Music for Airports (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8IG9W8pEno>)
- * Tangerine Dream - Love on a Real Train (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjPGmSqadxM>)
- * Donna Summers & Giorgio Moroder - I Feel Love (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2q2bis6eLE>)
- * Aphex Twin - Selected Ambient Works (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xw5AiRVqfqk>)
- * Boards of Canada - Everything you do is a Balloon (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQEmaj9C6ko>)
- * Autechre - Dropp (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWGUnrIiOoI>)
- * Robert Hood - Dancer (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IiXKuPsfzt8>)
- * El-B - Express (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQG3lQvY82w>)