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Minimalism, Postminimalism, and the Resurgence of Tonality in Recent American Music

Does musical minimalism any longer exist as a living practice? "No—and good riddance, too," say several composers whose careers, for better or worse, have been associated with it. Steve Reich and Philip Glass, to mention two of them, clearly have been hoping for a permanent moratorium on the word *minimalism* in connection with the music they have been writing for the past twenty-five years or so.[1] While it would seem that during the early 1970s "minimalism" had been accorded a certain grudging acceptance, as time went on most composers found it progressively less satisfactory.[2] Reich, for instance, has asserted that "it becomes more pejorative than descriptive starting about 1973 with my *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ.*"[3] Furthermore, some prominent critics over the past two decades have come to the conclusion that minimalism was finished by the mid-1970s, its original practitioners having gone on to other things.[4]

But this episode in the history of contemporary art-music composition is not really as simply characterized as such denials might suggest. What have Reich, Glass, and others actually repudiated? Is it an aesthetic orientation, or a style, or simply the word used to identify it? It is the word itself which seems to have become the lightning rod

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for composers' annoyance, perhaps as the most blatant and outward symbol of the critical pigeonholing to which they had been subjected. If this is true, however, then they may have objected to it as much out of anxiety over its potentially misleading connotations as on more substantive grounds. Understood in its meaning in the plastic arts, which is after all where the word originated, *minimalism* makes a valid and convincing analogy to an approach to painting and sculpture that emerged in the 1960s.[5] The problem was that most musicians, newspaper journalists, and audiences knew nothing of such art and thus construed the term *minimalism*, when applied to music, in a basically negative way—as if it meant "music with practically no substance" or "music where nothing happens."[6] Or its apparently reductive character and the perception that nothing "new" was happening for long stretches of time led to confusing comparisons with other late twentieth-century music of relatively low event-density, such as the work of Morton Feldman—music whose principles are actually antithetical to those of minimalism.[7]

This failure of understanding, rooted in what seems nothing more than a trivial misinterpretation of terminology, has had two other, more serious consequences. First, it has prevented many observers from recognizing the degree to which the music of certain composers continued to display the impact of their minimalist experience even after the surface features of their respective styles had changed. Second, it has encouraged the idea that minimalism could be acquired, slipped into and out of like some fashionable costume, by simply adopting these same surface features. Both effects are implicated in the individual histories of Reich, Glass, John Adams, and Michael Torke—four composers who have been called, at one time or another, "minimalists" or (especially recently) "postminimalists"—as narrated in the popular press and in the scholarly literature. They are also implicated in critical approaches taken to the work of a number of other, less-prominent American composers, to be discussed later in this essay.

It seems pointless to deny, when all is said and done, that Reich, Glass, Adams, and Torke have been touched indelibly by minimalism. To admit this, however, does not advance very far our understanding of what has happened to minimalism during the last few decades. For it seems equally pointless to deny that *something* has happened to the movement originally known as minimalism, and it is in large part the discrepancy between composers' disparagement of the term and its persistence in the contemporary critical vocabulary that serves as the impetus to probe more deeply. Toward that end, three questions in particular seem worth asking. First, can minimalism still be said to continue in some fashion, even if its principal al-

leged purveyors have kept its original conception only peripherally in operation, or have departed quite markedly from it, or have never done more than dabble in it to begin with? Second, if minimalism has instead turned into something else (or several somethings), does it make sense to speak of a "postminimalism," and if so how would one recognize it? Third, does this metamorphosis, or lack thereof, have anything to do with the larger trends that have emerged in new American concert music in the waning years of the twentieth century and the first few of the twenty-first, particularly toward the music of an ostensibly tonal (and, for the most part, markedly conservative) idiom that has been programmed by orchestras ranging from the Big Five down through the lower echelons?

The possibility that minimalism has somehow fed into a present-day pattern of stylistic retrenchment is all the more poignantly ironic when one considers that minimalism in its early stages, much like the visual art that in large part inspired it and much like other avant-garde movements in the twentieth-century arts, was intended as a clean break from what preceded it in almost every respect. La Monte Young and Terry Riley, as well as Reich, had little use for the increasingly hoary traditions of neoclassicism that still dominated composition as it was taught in the academy in the late 1950s and early 1960s, or for the methodology associated with the then-recent insurgence of serialism. Nor did they see themselves as allied to such contemporaneous avant-garde developments as the aleatory of the New York group clustered about John Cage. Works like Riley's *In C* (1964) and Reich's *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) did suggest very strongly that something brand-new was happening in the world of art music, thanks to a drastic simplification of raw materials and an omnipresent pulse in tandem with insistent repetitions that, usually over long stretches of time, served as the vehicle for steady change.

One way to tell the story of what happened after this initial establishment of minimalism might proceed through four basic stages: (1) Pieces became more complicated, which soon provoked (2) a greater concern with sonority in itself; as a result, (3) pieces began sounding more explicitly "harmonic," that is, chordally oriented, though not, at this point, necessarily *tonal* in any sense. Eventually, however, (4) harmony of an ever more tonal (or neotonal, or quasi-tonal) aspect assumed primary control. As this occurred, the hallmark devices of minimalism—repetition in a buzzing or bustling texture, explicitly projected pulse, the pantonal sonorous profile that was originally the product of a basic indifference to sonority per se—were pushed into the background, where they became stylistic objects.[8]

Stage 1, where things became more complicated, is coextensive with the early history of Steve Reich's compositional practice. In the late

1960s Reich took his earlier, accidental discovery of the compositional possibilities inherent in tape loops going out of phase with one another and adapted it for conventional instruments in live performance. In doing so, he made the process of his pieces both much more clearly audible and, at the same time, more quantifiable for the listener, which in turn seems to have encouraged him to make his basic material more musically intricate than the spoken fragments of his earlier tape pieces. In this sense, works like *Piano Phase* and *Violin Phase* are important preliminary steps away from the absolutist rigor of his earlier vision of musical process. The next stage was Reich's effective abandonment of phasing as the basis of his work—the exclusive basis, that is, which under an absolutist definition comes, of course, to the same thing. Under such a definition, set forth most famously in his 1968 essay, "Music as a Gradual Process," and often fingered as a kind of strict-constructionist sine qua non of minimalism, Reich's *Four Organs* (1970) is not a minimalist work, based as it is not on phasing, but on one many-voiced chord, presented whole to start with and then elongated in various of its components. Although I would say that *Four Organs* is quite firmly minimalist in the aesthetic as well as the stylistic sense, it is important to note that the shift in technique has its significance as well. The contrapuntal approach, previously so clearly limned by phase-shifting, hasn't completely disappeared, but as soon as one or more chords become the basis for structure, counterpoint instantly takes on a secondary role.

Subsequent compositions confirm this new direction in different ways: in *Drumming* (1971), Reich gradually assembles a pattern which then evolves by means of accretion of minute changes, as well as a limited application of phasing; *Music for Eighteen Musicians* of 1976, a watershed work for Reich and quite possibly his masterpiece to date, is based on a series of eleven chords, played through at the beginning and again at the end almost as if it were a progression, in the traditional sense of the word, even though it is really simply a succession and more closely resembles the series of minimalist visual art.[9] Within these two "framing" presentations of the complete series of chords appear twelve sections, each built on a single chord (chord 3 gets two sections). By this point, we have passed through stage 2 and into stage 3.

Meanwhile, to backtrack to the late 1960s, Philip Glass had come onto the downtown New York scene. To a limited extent, an increasing complexity (of texture, in his case) is evident, along with an increasingly rigorous application of his "additive" rhythmic processes in the earliest group of works that he acknowledges. Eventually, however, it became clear that for him the real action lay elsewhere. Glass fell in love with chords early on in his musical development, well

before the late 1960s. It would now appear, in retrospect, that his notably conservative training with neoclassical composition teachers at Juilliard, and after that with Nadia Boulanger, essentially reasserted itself after the first "strict" minimalist, essentially monodic works like *Strung Out* (1967) and *Music in Fifths* (1969). Glass himself identifies a little-known work called *Another Look at Harmony* (1975–77), begun a year before *Einstein on the Beach*, as the point in his career at which he recovered his interest in harmony (stage 3), but sonority in a more general sense (stage 2) is already an obvious and important consideration in *Music with Changing Parts* (1970). Tom Johnson, in fact, in an article published in 1981, looked back to that work in particular as the one in which an unmistakably Romantic sensibility on Glass's part emerged—as adumbrated by the variations in timbre, bespeaking a fascination with that dimension of music in itself; the sustained tones threading through the typical busy texture of repeated patterns; and the abrupt sectional shifts that periodically disrupt any sense of continuous change.[10]

Contrary to what Johnson says, though, I don't think that this evidence of a Romantic streak means that Glass had been only nominally a minimalist all along. Furthermore, even if minimalism, stylistically speaking, is no longer much in direct evidence in his work, it continues to have an enormous impact on the kind of music that he writes today: music that could almost be called a caricature of Romanticism. Glass's growing attraction over the last two decades to bombast and the banal effect of big build-ups fairly thoroughly repudiated the minimalist desideratum of very gradual change, or of structures built almost entirely without recourse to the conventional patterns of development, climax, or sense of arrival. But for pieces like any of his big operas, such as *Satyagraha* (1980) or *Akhnaten* (1983), or the more recent symphonies (five and counting) to be comprehended at all, one must disregard the Romantic need for themes that develop, for structures that are generated from within rather than being imposed from without. And this is precisely where problems arise. In any of his recent works—the "Low" Symphony (1992), for instance, or *In the Penal Colony* (2000)—the kind of tonal or quasi-tonal harmonic progressions that Glass began to work with in the mid-1970s have now entirely supplanted the structures based on additive and subtractive rhythmic patterns that made the large works from the early 1970s, *Music with Changing Parts* and the three-hour *Music in Twelve Parts* (1971–74), so compelling. In other words, a kind of hybrid has lately been attempted, combining an extremely simple tonal structure with vestiges of a minimalist structure. To the extent that these later works seem unconvincing—and, essentially, most of what Glass has written since *Einstein* falls into this category—it is because the hybrid is not viable.[11]

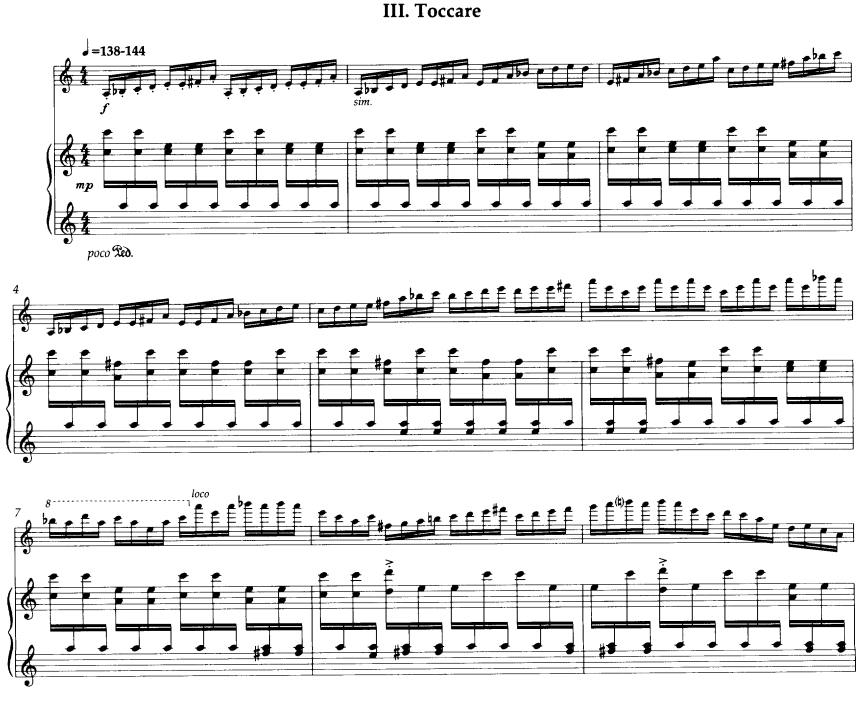
Born ten years later than Glass and Reich, John Adams encountered minimalism principally as a style, having missed the formative years of the aesthetic in downtown New York during the mid- to late 1960s. He was always harmonically oriented, even in the works of the early 1970s that were written in a kind of homage to Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra, an ensemble of decidedly avant-garde proclivities. His work thus is encompassed by stages 3 and 4. Certainly no one could miss the importance of harmony in *Phrygian Gates* (1977), Adams's breakthrough piece, although here the harmonies are built out of modal collections, alternating between the Phrygian and the Lydian in a very readily discernible pattern of pitch levels. In other words, the effect is not particularly tonal in the sense meant in the title of this article—tonal, that is, in a common-practice or quasi-common-practice sense. But that would soon change, as for example in *Grand Pianola Music* (1982), in which one part of the piece was put explicitly on a tonic-dominant footing to get away from the less readily recognizable harmonic moves, tonally speaking (such as root motion by thirds) that Adams saw at work in "typical" minimalist pieces.[12] Also symptomatic of Adams's lack of first-hand exposure to minimal visual art is his treatment of certain aspects of minimalism synthetically—that is, as technique, divorced from any aesthetic basis—a circumstance that later would tend to reduce the minimalist aspect of Adams's music to a kind of shtick, a routine that became semi-parodic. Things had not yet progressed to that point in works like *Phrygian Gates* and *Shaker Loops* (1978), but already here Adams's distance from minimalism as an aesthetic enabled him to turn off the minimalist pulse from time to time, as if in the service of conventional contrast and dramatic effect.[13]

There was a time when Adams was hard to take seriously, because for much of the 1980s he seemed to oscillate unpredictably between the highly sober world of such works as *Harmonielehre* (1983) and *The Wound-Dresser* (1989) and the seeming frivolity of works like *Grand Pianola Music* and *Fearful Symmetries* (1988)—the latter category embodying, as he has said, the character of "the Trickster."[14] And it is here that he attempted to have it both ways: borrowing the rhythmic vigor and repetitive tendencies of minimalism while at the same time poking fun at it, joyriding on "those Great Prairies of non-event," to quote his own characterization of certain minimalist music.[15] This, one might say, was his compositional adolescence; in any case, more recent works such as the *Chamber Symphony* (1992) and the Violin Concerto (1993) are more settled in their style, and to my ear at any rate much more artistically successful—although one cannot help but notice the Trickster peeking out from time to time, as in the "Mad Cow" movement of *Gnarly Buttons* (1996). One notices, too, that the works of the 1990s

represent a coming to terms with minimalism according to a decidedly tonal slant: pulse and repetition have been transmuted, by a kind of reverse-chronological alchemy, into devices familiar from earlier eras, such as *moto perpetuo* and ostinato. The second movement of the *Chamber Symphony*, "Aria with Walking Bass," is one example of this development; another is the third movement, "Toccare," of the Violin Concerto, the opening of which appears as example 1.

Next comes the curious case of Michael Torke, who was barely out of his infancy by the time Reich began experimenting with tape loops—a composer, in other words, whose development in no way coincided with that of the original minimalists but who seems to have latched onto the style, and perhaps as well to some of the technical devices superficially construed, as a vehicle to getting somewhere else. In Torke's hands, minimalism appears to have become a kind of sheen or flavor for a musical "product"; Torke himself has likened his method of composition to the process of an assembly line.[16] A few pieces do show a flair for rhythmic invention, such as *Adjustable Wrench* (1987), with its attractively nervous verve. But the conventional ton-

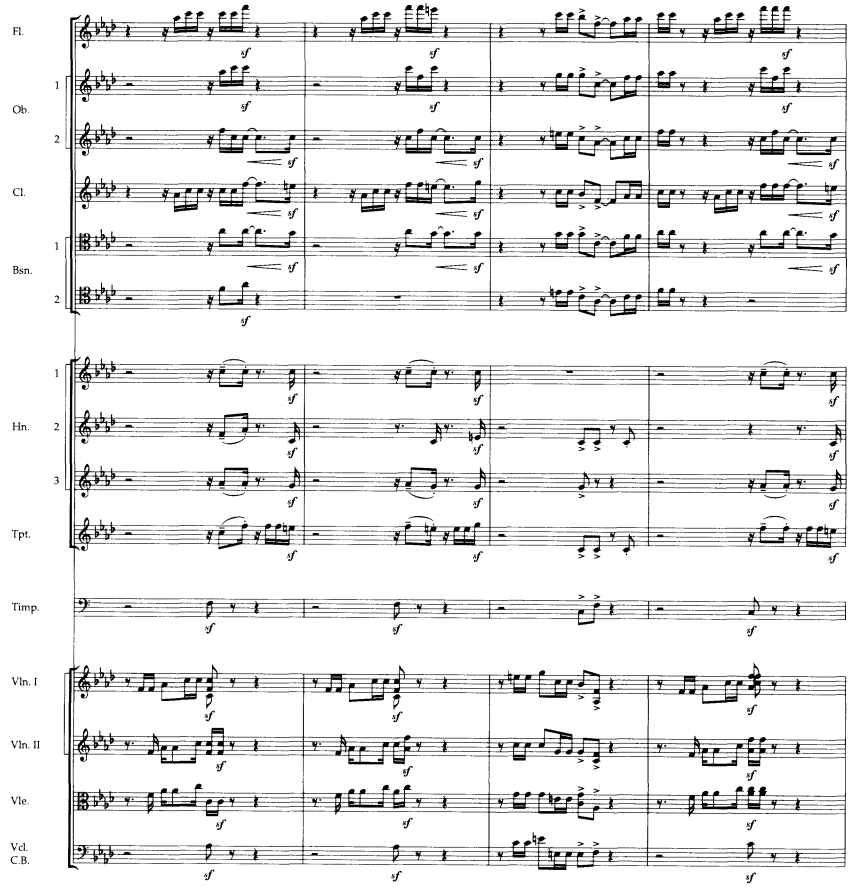
Example 1. John Adams, Violin Concerto, III ("Toccare"), mm. 1–9 (reduction for violin and piano). (© 1994 by Hendon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company. Reprinted by permission.)



al-harmonic aspects of most of his compositions are so blatant that they reduce this (in the end) pseudo-minimalist rhythmic activity to, effectively, a backdrop.

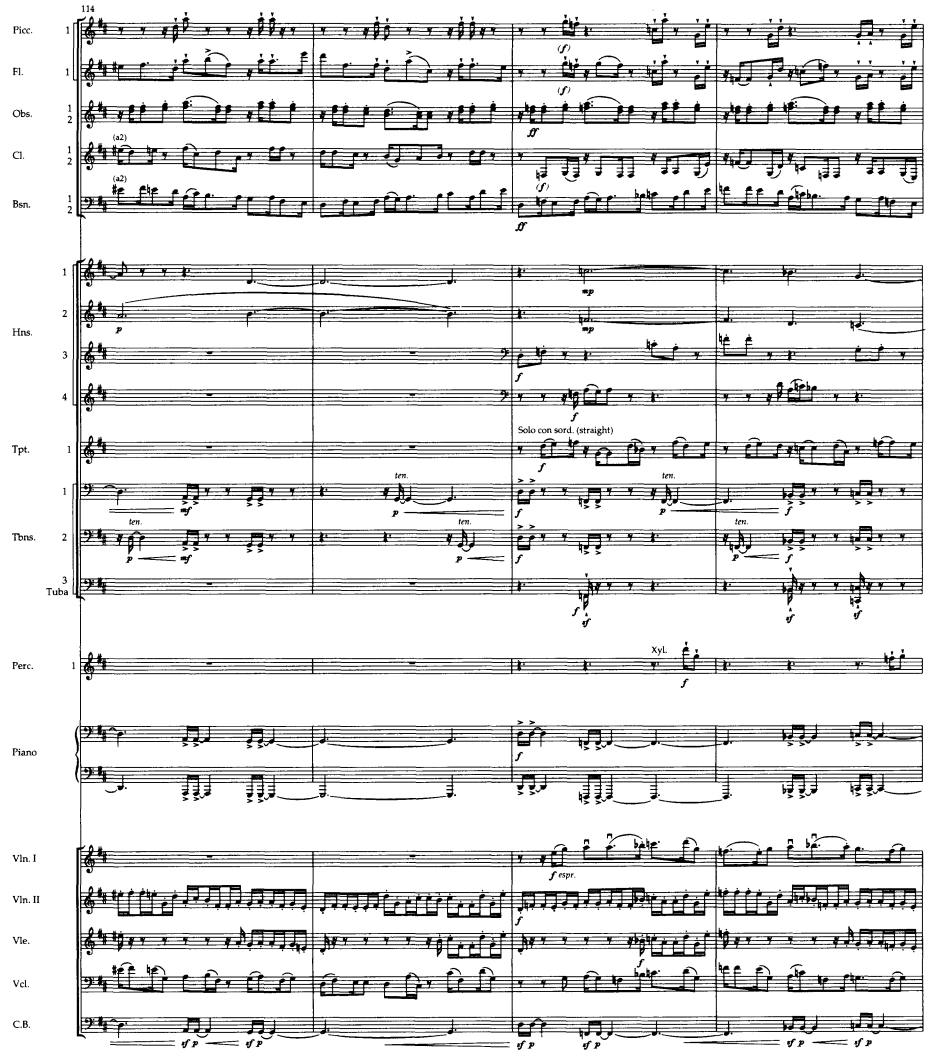
Torke's work therefore belongs solely to stage 4. As far as harmony is concerned, "minimalism" seems to have become equated with making very little go a very long way, as in pieces like *Bright Blue Music* (1985) or *Ash* (1989), which consist of nothing much other than alternation between tonic and dominant chords. Any idea of process, or even of the "seriality" of postphase minimalism, seems to have dropped right out of the picture. In *Ash,* Torke alludes to a kind of generic early nineteenth-century German style (ex. 2). *Bright Blue Music,* by contrast, might be said to evoke the Classical period more strongly. What is copied here, though, is only a kind of immediate

Example 2. Michael Torke, *Ash,* mm. 4–7. (© 1989 by Hendon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company. Reprinted by permission.)

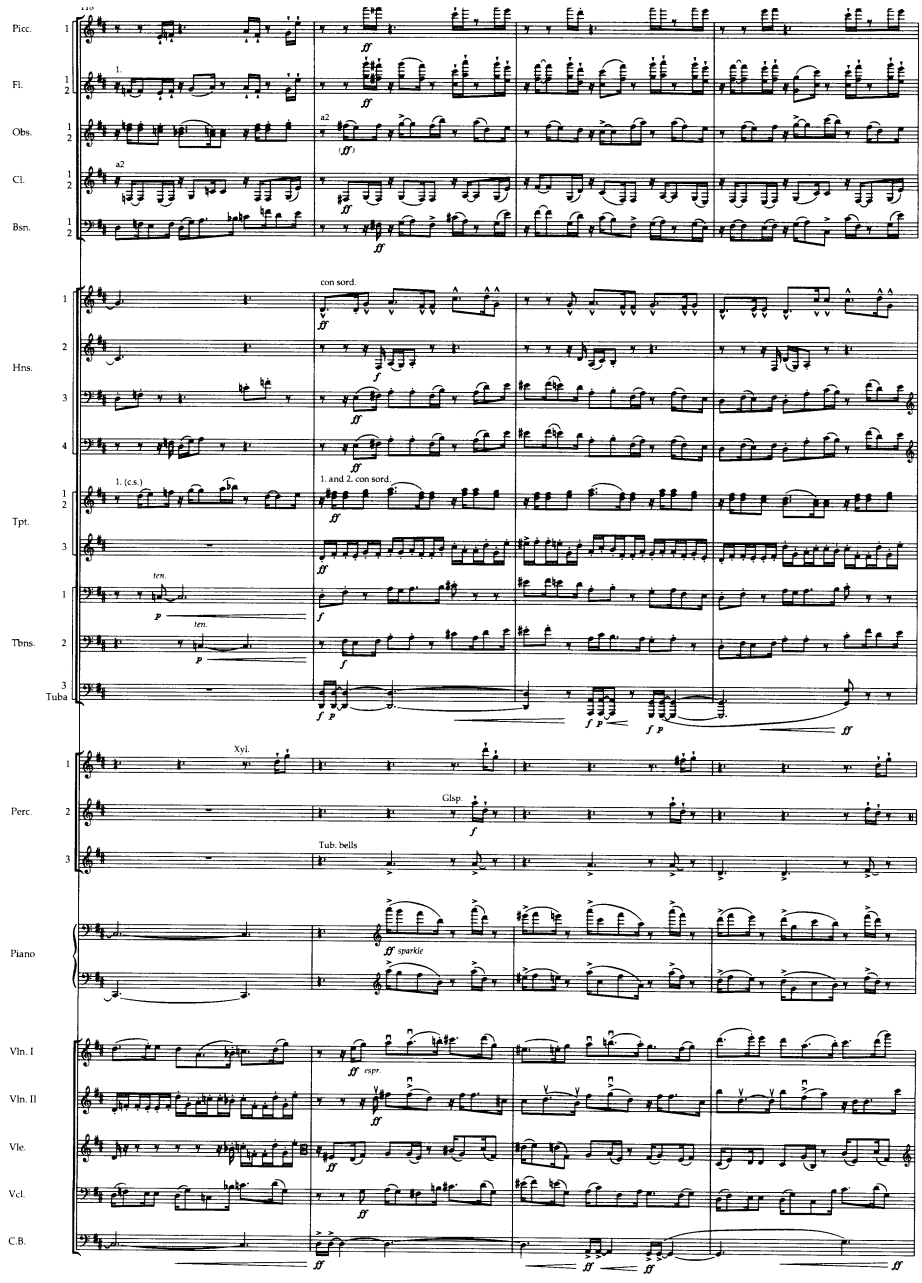


sonorous impression, a fact that becomes glaringly evident when the harmony occasionally departs from I and V. Any such new elements, including the rare occurrence of chromaticism, always turn out to be decorative or incidental, not presaging a modulation or any real development of material in the tonal sense. Instead, we are returned, almost always with no transition whatsoever, to the tonic. In example 3, taken from *Bright Blue Music,* there is a sudden shift from the D major tonic (mm. 114–15) to F major and its dominant (mm. 116–

Example 3. Michael Torke, *Bright Blue Music,* mm. 114–21. (© 1986 by Hendon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company. Reprinted by permission.)



Example 3. Con't.



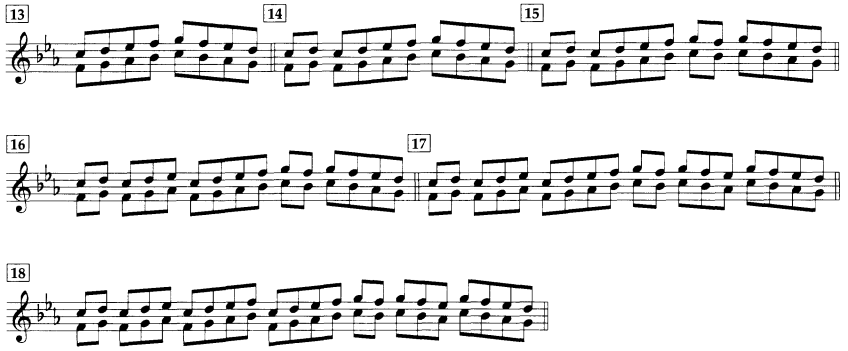
18) and back just as suddenly to D major (m. 119). This type of non-developmental treatment should be very familiar to anyone who has been in a movie theater lately; many contemporary Hollywood film-score composers use similar techniques, endlessly recycling thematic material with little or no change from one appearance to the next.

As harmony has taken center stage—in roles ranging from conventional to rather trivial—musical time, including the rhythmic domain for which it serves as foundation, has reassumed its conventional function as supporting cast. For it is the signature pulse of minimalism, that explicit quantizing of musical time, that in its steadily declining importance shows how far the current practice of composers like Glass, Adams, and Torke has really evolved from a "true" minimalist orientation. Even this is a complicated issue, for pulse, despite its prominence, was never an absolute *requirement* of minimalism; it has never featured much at all in La Monte Young's work, and other composers who have worked from time to time in a minimalist vein, such as Alvin Lucier and Pauline Oliveros, have had little or no use for it.[17] Riley's *In C* was probably the first work to include an explicit pulse, something that was added for the sake of helping to organize the ensemble's semi-improvisational activity.[18] Shortly thereafter, in Reich's tape pieces, a pulse was effectively generated by the practice of phase-shifting, lending it an integral function that was sufficiently powerful to persist for quite some time even after phase-shifting itself had effectively gone by the boards. Eventually, however, it became nothing more than a steady beat—the sort of thing one might find in, say, dance music, in both ballet and popular usages—and it is at this point that one can declare the special meaning of pulse for minimalism to have been effectively absorbed into the larger, developing neotonal practice of the late twentieth century.

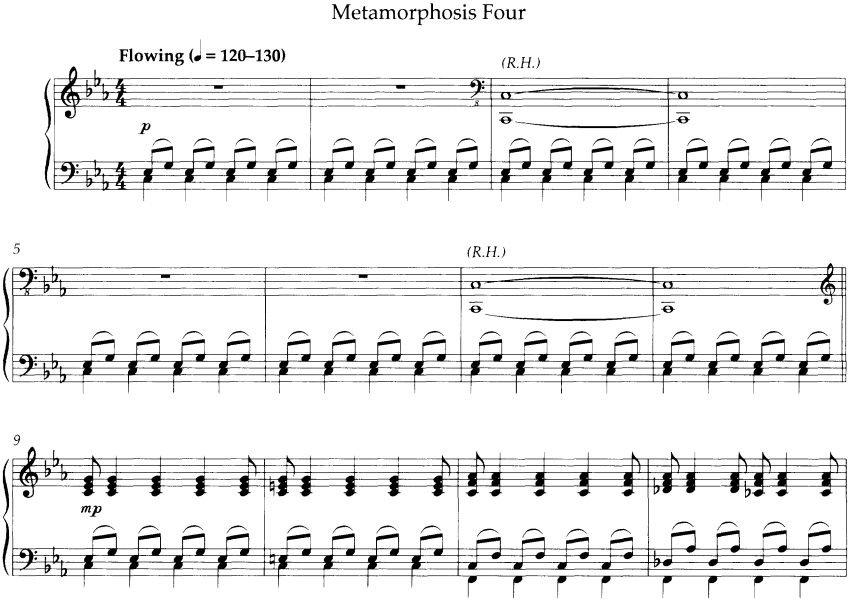
Two "before-and-after" comparisons will serve to illustrate this point. In the first, an excerpt from Glass's *Music in Fifths* (1969) (ex. 4) is paired with one from his *Solo Piano* (1988) (ex. 5). In the earlier piece, it is the additive patterns (and, eventually, subtractive patterns, beyond the extent of ex. 4) that are the real focus, the parallel fifths of the "harmony" merely a kind of medium. By contrast, in the later excerpt the quasi-Alberti bass patterns serve the much more conventional role of projecting a repeating, slightly varying progression of harmonies; by the same token, the syncopated chords in the right hand, for all their rhythmic distinctiveness, draw the ear's attention principally to their harmonic qualities. The second pairing juxtaposes the opening of Adams's *Phrygian Gates* (1977) (ex. 6) with an excerpt from *Fearful Symmetries* (1988) (ex. 7). In the earlier work, the steady pulse comes across, at least initially, as the focus of attention, the gradual accumulation of the complete Lydian collection on E mainly as providing that pulse "something to do" in the realm of pitch

(although later in the work, as mentioned, harmony gains at least equal footing with the pulse); whereas in *Fearful Symmetries* the goofy dance-like rhythms are readily perceived as the vehicle for Adams's distinctive harmonic practice. Torke, finally, had no "before" phase analogous to that of Adams or Glass, but his rhythmic usages are often the flip side of the switchings off of the pulse employed by Adams. An example of Torke switching the pulse on, in *Bright Blue Music*—to create, for a moment, a minimalist-backdrop effect—appears in example 8, starting with the upbeat to the second beat of m. 176.

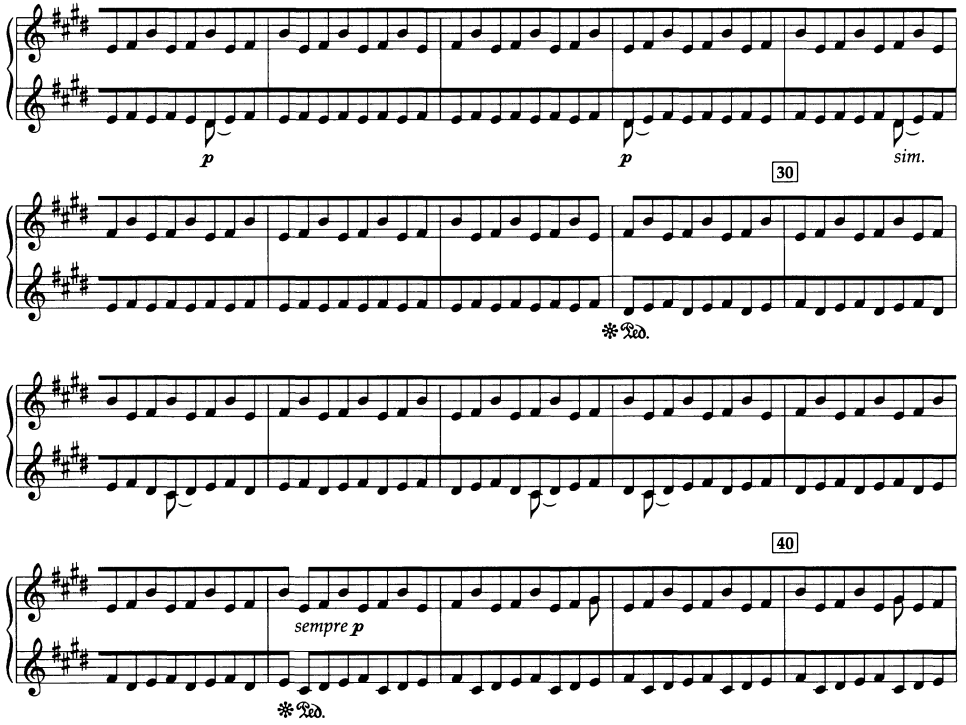
Example 4. Philip Glass, *Music in Fifths,* sections 13–18. (© 1989, 1973 Dunvagen Music Publishers. Used by Permission.)



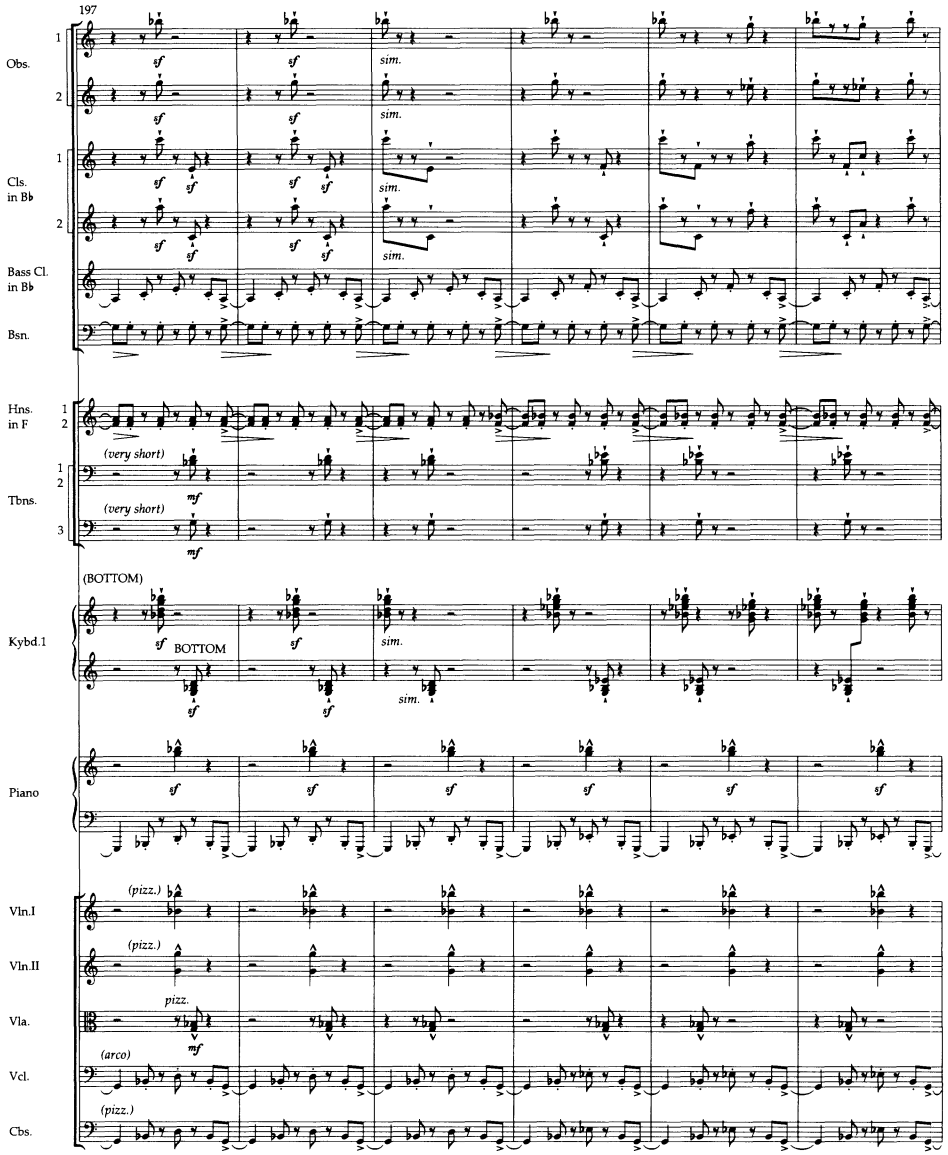
Example 5. Philip Glass, *Solo Piano,* "Metamorphosis Four," mm. 1–12. (© 1989, 1973 Dunvagen Music Publishers. Used by Permission.)



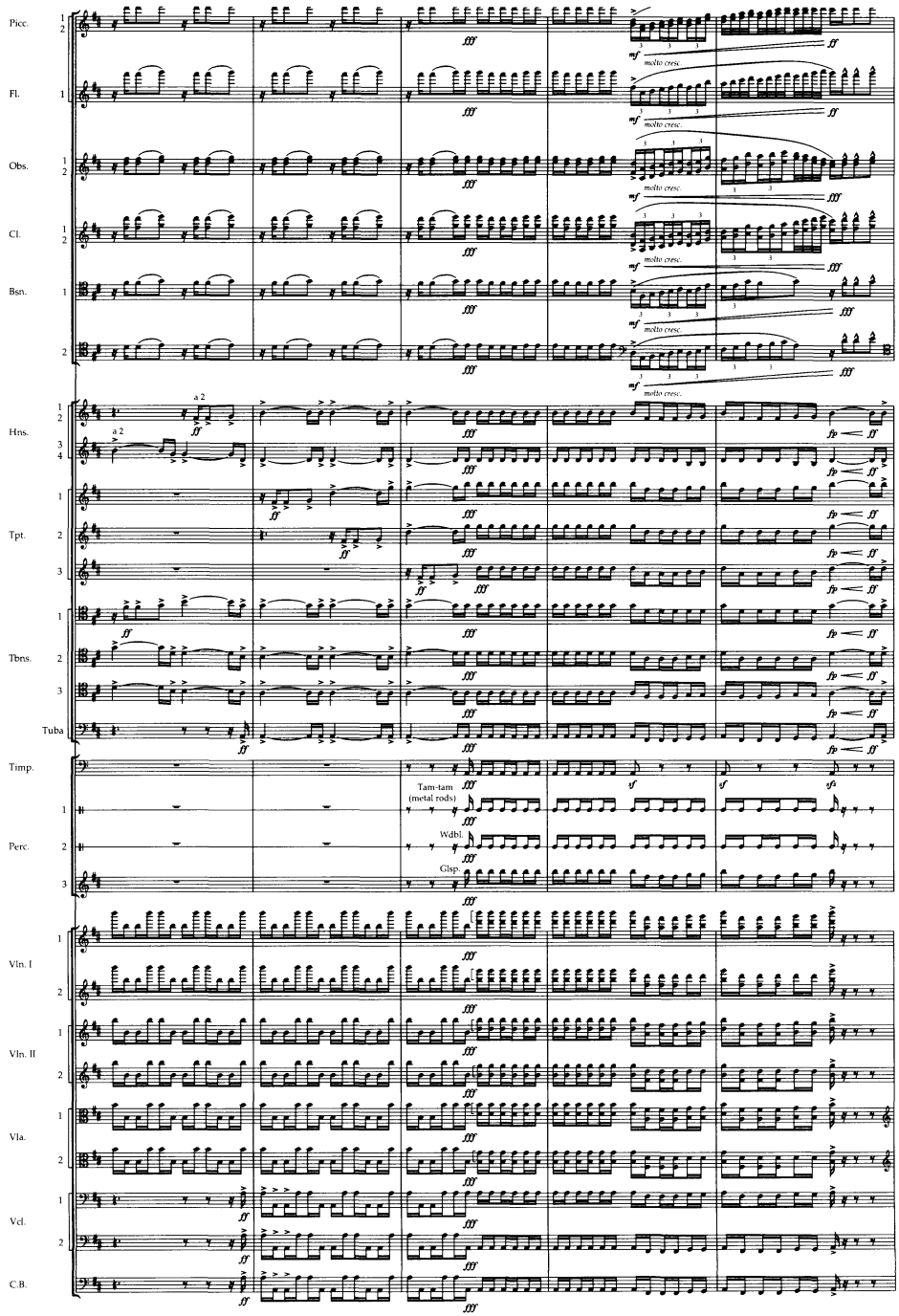
Example 6. John Adams, *Phrygian Gates*, mm. 21–40. (Copyright © 1983 by Associated Music Publishers, Inc. (BMI). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.)



Example 7. John Adams, *Fearful Symmetries,* mm. 197–202. (© 1989 by Hendon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company. Reprinted by permission.)



Example 8. Michael Torke, *Bright Blue Music*, mm. 174–78. (© 1986 by Hendon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company. Reprinted by permission.)



As I said, that's one possible story. It does not, the reader will have noticed, invoke postminimalism per se, preferring to trace a line of development through which minimalism gradually turns into a kind of "new tonality" that, although clearly retaining some features (however vestigial) of minimalism, ultimately has very little to do with minimalism in its original form and is therefore independent of and indifferent to it. Of course, there is another story, widely disseminated, in which minimalism is cast as the deliverer of American music from the pharaoh of Academic Serialism, leading young composers out of the desert of atonality with the reassurance that it's okay to write consonances again. In the Promised Land of the new tonality, everyone is a postminimalist almost by definition, or so it would seem.

However, to affix this label to such a vast range of composers, along with the works they have produced, is at least a little misleading.[19] Granted, most of those so classified have also been active in downtown New York or on the West Coast, the two original hotbeds of minimalism. But I would propose more restrictive criteria by which a composer could qualify as a postminimalist, assuming for the moment that the term refers to something real: specifically, that he or she either (1) began as a minimalist and is now writing music that, however different from those beginnings, can be plausibly traced back to them; or (2) developed after minimalism's most abundant flowering, but principally in response (even if partly in opposition) to it. If this seems to set the bar too high, it would be well to consider that at any lower level one either courts the fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc* or mistakes the appropriation of characteristics superficially reminiscent of minimalism for evidence of common ground or continuity.

Both Reich and Glass, then, could be considered postminimalists by the first of these two criteria, Adams and Torke by the second. But the first criterion would also eliminate Ingram Marshall and Daniel Lentz from consideration; both appear to have developed along lines predating minimalism and completely independent from it. By the same token, John Luther Adams is not only not the same composer as the John Adams six years his senior but of a completely different aesthetic and stylistic stamp, given to writing long, meditative pieces whose slow pacing emanates in great part from a contemplation of the rhythms and cycles of the natural world. (Adams himself cites such nonminimalists as Robert Ashley, Morton Feldman, and James Tenney as major influences.) By the second criterion, Peter Garland is no postminimalist either; one hears tinges of minimalistic repetition in his work but also a great deal else, such as debts to Copland and Debussy as well as a kind of modal folkishness, all of which appear to loom larger in his musical consciousness than anything specifically minimalist.[20]

The history of eclecticism and experimentation in twentieth-century American art music has meant that any recent American composer with a sense of adventure is fairly bombarded with potential influences, any or all of which might find their mark. Thus the gamelan scales and motoric rhythms in the music of Seattle-based Janice Giteck might seem minimalist (or postminimalist) at first, but repeated hearings reveal this resemblance to be superficial. Giteck's heritage is more convincingly traced to other, older West Coast composers such as Lou Harrison and Harry Partch—and perhaps directly as well to the non-Western sources themselves. In general, ostinato or drone elements alone are skimpy evidence of a connection to minimalism; those encountered in the work of Mary Jane Leach, for example, or that of Beth Anderson could as readily flow from an attraction to any of the many other available musical models that make use of such elements. In Leach's case, these seem to be relatively remote (non-Western and/or ancient musics); in Anderson's, relatively proximate (Henry Cowell's hymn-and-fuguing pieces, perhaps, or other folk-tinged American neoclassical repertoire).

This still leaves quite a bit of American music that could, in my (admittedly subjective) view, legitimately be called postminimalist, some examples of which I will cite here. The bowed-piano pieces of Stephen Scott, which synthesize elements from Reich and Glass (differently from the way Adams has done it), fall into this category. So does Elliott Sharp's work with the Soldier String Quartet, which exhibits a complete disdain for "attractive" sonorities but is constructed according to rather austerely evolving rhythmic patterns.[21] The noteworthy *Time Curve Preludes* (1979) of William Duckworth are filled with allusions to the solo piano literature of past eras, but they come across principally as a meditation upon minimalism. Lois V. Vierk's *Red Shift* (1989) and *Manhattan Cascade* (1986)—the latter a piece for four accordions that sounds as though it could have been intended as a response of sorts to Reich's *Four Organs*—are striking postminimalist works. Another good candidate for the postminimalist designation, at least some of the time, is Paul Dresher, in such works as the rather Reichian *Channels Passing* (1981–82) and *Double Ikat* (1988–90), the latter bearing some signs of the "synthetic" minimalism of Adams.

However, this assessment of Vierk and Dresher must be accompanied by a caveat: to the extent that their work is inflected by rock, it departs from the minimalist orbit. It is true that rock and minimalism have always seemed to have some things in common: most obviously a steady and prominent pulse and a fascination with chords, the latter connection becoming potentially stronger as minimalist music became more tonal. Yet the original impetus for minimalism, despite the apparent resemblance to rock embodied in Glass's ensem-

bles of electric organs and amplified soprano saxes, had little if anything to do with rock's dependence on the establishment of grooves that remain unchanged, at least for the relatively short duration of a song. The rise of progressive rock in the 1970s, with its longer and more intricately "composed" tracks, and the emergence of artists like Brian Eno, who has always displayed a keen interest in new music of all kinds, blurred this distinction somewhat but left it, I think, essentially intact. Thus when Dresher makes an album like *Opposites Attract* (1991; with Ned Rothenberg), very much in the esoteric vein of late 1980s/early 1990s prog rock, the effect is decidedly less minimalist than it is in some of his other work.

The same can be said for the music of Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe, cofounders of the downtown New York festival Bang on a Can. From the beginning (1987), BoaC has featured performing ensembles that mix "conventional" and rock instrumentation—and with each new CD release, in fact, it seems to become more rock-oriented; the recent *Lost Objects* (2000), jointly composed by Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe, combines an all-rock BoaC instrumental group with the voices and instruments of the Concerto Köln and the RIAS Kammerchor. For these three downtown New Yorkers in particular, rock bands are as likely to be significant influences as are art-music composers. Wolfe professes a love for Led Zeppelin, and her *Belief,* on another recent BoaC CD, *Renegade Heaven* (2000), certainly evinces it; the crunchier passages of Lang's *Cheating, Lying, Stealing* (1995) bring rock to mind without needing the explicit instrumentation of rock to prompt this reaction; on the same CD with the Wolfe work is Gordon's *I Buried Paul,* which develops its material, in a distinctly rifflike way, out of the coda to the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever" (1967).[22] Certainly, though, Lang's *Slow Movement* (1993), an unbroken stretch of nearly twenty-four minutes of shimmering music that edges up, then down in pitch, and ever closer to consonance, at an absolutely uniform, low dynamic level throughout, and Gordon's ambitious *Four Kings Fight Five* (1988) would qualify as postminimalist by the second of my criteria.

No one from this second group of composers has come quite as close to mimicry of harmonic functionality as have Glass, Adams, and Torke. If one wanted to integrate the story of the former with that of the latter, most of them could be located at various points ranging from somewhere in the vicinity of stage 3 to fairly far along the way to stage 4—with the exception, perhaps, of Sharp, who does not appear to have become involved with sonority per se to any great extent, let alone chords. It must be pointed out, though, that while all of this music is in some way worthwhile and interesting—not least for its very diversity—most of it, viewed from the mainstream of art

music in the United States these days, is either obscure or too new for anyone to be able to predict how it will be received in the long run. Thus, while it could be rightly said to deserve more attention than it has been getting (the efforts of critics like Kyle Gann notwithstanding), still one must conclude that at present it is having very little impact on the larger musical culture.

We are now in a position to answer two of the three key questions posed earlier in this essay. First, minimalism strictly construed—whether as an aesthetic orientation or as a closely related group of styles—has vanished, yet its effects on present-day music are widespread and undeniable. In an attempt to resolve this paradox, critics began to refer to postminimalism, the subject of the second question. It would appear that postminimalism can only signify matters of technique, effectively as vestiges of minimalism, since the composers in question are so diverse in aesthetic and stylistic orientation; all have seized upon elements of minimalism but have gone in very different directions with them.[23] Thus while postminimalism does mean *something*, in the end it can serve only as a placemarker for more precise terms, the coining of which probably awaits greater historical perspective on this period.

This brings us to the third question: Why tonality, and do minimalism and its eclipse have anything to do with it? It shouldn't come as any great surprise that composers have stopped being minimalist, or never started in the first place. In fact, musical minimalism may have been destined for even greater transience than is usual for any musical movement that comes into vogue, owing to its heavy dependence on a form of visual art that was in itself short-lived, and owing also to its rather narrow character. What *is* worth remarking upon is that most of the composers discussed here—minimalist or postminimalist—have become, by one definition or another, tonal composers. Among the four identified in this essay as of primary interest, the presence of tonality is registered in ways that range from generally "harmonic" but not common-practice (Reich), to an approach that alludes to common-practice tonality but often subverts it (Adams), to explicit common-practice emulation (Glass, Torke). Was this inevitable? At first glance, one might think not—surely minimalism's highly original aspects could have evolved in other ways—and yet, perhaps it was the radical *simplicity* of the original minimalist vision, coupled with the inability of American compositional practice ever completely to throw off the institutional influence of tonality, that determined minimalism's ultimate path. That is: there was an indifference to tonality among the early minimalists, but there was also a tendency to avoid harsh dissonance. This resulted in a gravitation to consonant harmonies, or har-

monies that mixed consonances and mild dissonances, which in turn may have suggested a more definite harmonic basis for structure. The next step, which perhaps could only have been taken in the American climate, was really a step backward: to tonal-sounding chords that mimic functionality without even coming close to matching the complexity of its operations in common-practice music.

This account omits many nuances, but in its general outline it seems accurate enough. Certainly not all the returns are in yet on postminimalism, although the results so far are decidedly mixed. Reich continues to write music that has a good deal of rhythmic interest, some of which, at least, stems from his more explicitly minimalist period; one can note the debt, in recent works such as *Different Trains* (1988), *The Cave* (1993), and *City Life* (1995), to the repetitive looping of "found-object" vocal snippets of his early tape pieces, while also admiring the remarkable new uses to which he has put this idea. Adams, for his part, has developed a harmonic language of some considerable originality and intricacy.[24] But these two highly accomplished composers, in their almost old-fashioned present-day respectability, represent a retreat that is in some ways disappointing, suggesting as it does that minimalism and its offshoots have failed after all to live up to their initial promise radically to reinvent American art music. And, unfortunately, the recent work of Glass and Torke tells another and sadder story altogether, in which simple (sometimes extremely simple) harmonic patterns repeat over and over without anything like the rigorous rhythmic structures of minimalism to motivate them: a true triumph of manner over substance.

The history of minimalism, in all its brevity, can be seen as a case study in the evolution of musical practice at the close of one century and the beginning of another. This is true, at least, in the United States, although it may be a harbinger of what will happen eventually in other Western countries as well. And anyone already inclined to take a pessimistic view of the situation would see, in what minimalism has largely led to—the loss of its impulse in simplistic pseudo-tonality on the one hand, a confusing range of rather cultishly received repertoires on the other—some markedly discouraging evidence against the resilience of our art-music traditions, against their capacity for perpetuation through self-renewal.

NOTES

1. Glass has been vehement: "I think the word ['minimal'] should be stamped out!" (Tim Page, "Dialogue with Philip Glass and Steve Reich" [1980], in *Writings on Glass*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 46–50). Reich has adopted a more hands-off attitude: asked how he would define minimalism, he

responded, "I don't. I steer away from that whole thing. Minimalism is not a word that I made up.... I understand the reason for having it, but I don't get involved" (interview, ca. mid-1980s, in William Duckworth, *Talking Music* [New York: Schirmer Books, 1995], 293).

2. In an interview conducted in 1972, Reich spoke of the similarity between the *processes* of his music and those of work by sculptor Richard Serra and filmmaker Michael Snow, and acknowledged, "There is some relationship between my music and any Minimal art" (Emily Wasserman, "An Interview with Composer Steve Reich," *Artforum* 10, no. 9 [1972]: 44–48). Reich was less receptive four years later to proposals from interviewer Michael Nyman that Reich's work and his statements about it have a strong relationship to the work and statements of artist Sol LeWitt; see Nyman, "Steve Reich: Interview," *Studio International* 192, no. 984 (1976): 300–307. Glass has written, "All of my works which predate 1976 fall within the highly reductive style known as minimalism," although he subsequently notes that such categories can be misleading. See Glass, liner notes for recording of *Music in Twelve Parts*, Virgin Records 91311–2 (3 CDs), 1988; originally released on LP, 1980.

3. Reich, interviewed in Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 293.

4. See, for instance, K. Robert Schwarz, "Process vs. Intuition in the Recent Works of Steve Reich and John Adams," *American Music* 8 (1990): 245–73; Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996); Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 241; Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16.

5. For a review of the evidence attesting to this connection, see Jonathan W. Bernard, "The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 86–132; Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, particularly chapters B through I (17–115); H. Wiley Hitchcock, "Minimalism in Art and Music: Origins and Aesthetics," in *Classic Essays on Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz and Joseph Darby (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 308–19.

6. Ironically, this misconstrual accurately recapitulated the early reception of the term in the visual arts; as was the case with many other "isms" of the twentieth century, the first critic to use it evidently uttered it in contempt. See also the critics' brickbats quoted in Hitchcock, "Minimalism in Art and Music," 312 and n. 10.

7. Concerning the differences between Feldman's aesthetic and that of minimalism, see Bernard, "Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts," 91 and nn. 6, 51; Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, 123. On Feldman's concept of time, in particular his "passive" treatment of it (which contrasts markedly with the minimalist desire to control its flow quite strictly), see Bernard, "Feldman's Painters," in *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts*, ed. Steven Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 173–215.

8. Some aspects of this development are surveyed in Bernard, "Tonal Traditions in Art Music since 1960," in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 535–66. See, in particular, the section entitled "Minimalism Goes Tonal," 555–59.

9. An analysis of this eleven-chord "frame" is presented in Bernard, "Theory, Analysis, and the 'Problem' of Minimal Music," in *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz since 1945: Essays and Analytical Studies*, ed. Elizabeth West Marvin and Richard Hermann (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1995), 259–84.

10. Tom Johnson, "Maximalism on the Beach: Philip Glass," *The Village Voice*, February 25–March 3, 1981; reprinted in *Writings on Glass*, ed. Kostelanetz, 57–59.

11. This failed hybridization was exactly what Peter Schickele used as the fulcrum of his satire, "Einstein on the Fritz," in which P.D.Q. Bach is revealed in his heretofore-undiscovered mode as a minimalist. "Einstein on the Fritz" is included in the P.D.Q. Bach album *1712 Overture and Other Musical Assaults*, Telarc 80210 (CD), 1989.

12. John Adams, liner notes for recording of *Grand Pianola Music,* Elektra/Nonesuch 79219–2 (CD), 1994.

13. Ironically, it is this distance that seems to enable Adams to accept the label "minimalist" for his music as well as that of others, although this acceptance comes with a rather vague notion of what minimalism means in the visual arts. See "John Adams: Conversation with Jonathan Sheffer," in *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque,* ed. Claudia Swan (New York: Eos Music, 1997), 76–82.

14. John Adams, quoted in liner notes for recording of *Fearful Symmetries* and *The Wound-Dresser,* Elektra/Nonesuch 79218–2 (CD), 1989.

15. Adams, 1984 interview; quoted in Brent Heisinger, "Minimalism in the 1980s," *American Music* 7 (1989): 430–47.

16. Michael Torke, in conversation with Michelle Ryang, in liner notes for the recording *Javelin: The Music of Michael Torke,* Argo 452–101–2 (CD), 1996.

17. On Lucier's *I am sitting in a room,* see Bernard, "Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts," 101; Bernard, "Theory, Analysis, and the 'Problem' of Minimal Music," 267–69; Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins,* 281. On Oliveros, see Bernard, "Minimalist Aesthetic," 106 (specifically with reference to Oliveros's *Horse Sings from Cloud*); Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins,* 251–52.

18. Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists,* 111.

19. Kyle Gann, in particular, has been quite liberal in his application of the term *postminimalist.* See Gann, "New Tonality II—Postminimalism," in *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 325–51; Gann, "New Currents Coalesce: Since the Mid-1980s," in H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction,* 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000), 363–94.

20. Gann actually classifies John Luther Adams and Garland not as postminimalists, but as "totalists"—a useful term in some ways, since still-active composers obviously represent very recent history; but in other ways not so helpful, since it seems to imply that a culmination, perhaps even an end, of history has been reached in the music so characterized. See Gann, "Totalism and the 1990s," in *American Music in the Twentieth Century,* 352–86.

21. See, for instance, Sharp's *Hammer, Anvil, Stirrup,* SST Records 232 (CD), 1989.

22. This is the passage where John Lennon was misheard by some fans to proclaim, "I buried Paul," sparking the strangely persistent "Paul [McCartney] is dead" cult.

23. This assessment of postminimalism provides a more complete answer to Timothy Johnson's question, as posed in the title of his article, "Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?" *The Musical Quarterly* 78 (1994): 742–73. Johnson himself regards minimalism principally as a matter of technique; by contrast, I would say that minimalism is fundamentally an aesthetic (and only incidentally a matter of style) while it is really postminimalism that conveniently labels a whole host of styles and techniques.

24. For a thorough investigation of Adams's harmonic usages up to about 1985, see Timothy Johnson, "Harmonic Vocabulary in the Music of John Adams: A Hierarchical Approach," *Journal of Music Theory* 37 (1993): 117–56.