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Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?

Timothy A. Johnson

Minimalism in music has been defined as an aesthetic, a style, and a technique, each of which has been a suitable description of the term at certain points in the development of minimal music.¹ However, two of these definitions of minimalism—*aesthetic* and *style*—no longer accurately represent the music that is often given that label. Furthermore, whereas many of the composers most associated with minimalism, such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich, deplore the label, some younger composers, such as John Adams, embrace it. In this article I describe each of these three definitions of minimalism, citing musical examples pertaining to each definition, and through this exploration of the term I attempt to show that minimalism may be defined most fruitfully as a technique and that the discomfort many composers now feel from being associated with the term may be attributed mainly to its delineation as an aesthetic or a style. A brief survey of the literature shows that little scholarly attention has been paid to the development of minimal music and that authors have taken a variety of approaches to this term.

The literature on minimal music has been sparse, whereas the parallel movement in the plastic arts has been the subject of extensive critical attention.² Wim Mertens's *American Minimal Music*, translated from the original Flemish, remains the only book-length survey of minimal music.³ He surveys the music, and the circumstances surrounding its creation and performance, of the four major minimalist composers—La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. In addition, he sketches the historical development of the basic concepts of minimal music through Schoenberg, Webern, Stockhausen, and Cage and concludes with a rather intricate philosophical discussion of the ideology of minimalism based on the work of the philosophers Adorno, Lyotard, and Deleuze. Mertens's thorough treatment provides a valuable outside perspective (that of a European who is not a minimalist composer) on this largely American development.

Edward Strickland's recent book, *Minimalism: Origins*, provides a thorough and informative discussion of minimalism as an artistic movement, focusing primarily on its early development in painting and in music.⁴ In addition he places minimalism into cultural and historical perspective and describes the broad influence of the phenomenon extending even to television commercials in both sight and sound. The extensive section on minimal music, occupying almost half of the book, examines the earliest works in detail and carefully traces their influences upon later pieces. The breadth (covering any works that Strickland identifies as minimalist, rather than only works labeled as such by the composers) and depth (delineating the circumstances surrounding the composition of each work in addition to analytical aspects of the music) make Strickland's book an indispensable resource.

Many historical surveys of recent music contain sections on minimalism, but these generally treat the subject with few original insights, instead simply listing and briefly describing a few pieces by the main proponents.⁵ On the other hand, Michael Nyman, a British composer who employs minimalist techniques himself, gives a fairly detailed description of a few minimalist pieces; his book represents one of the first attempts to discuss this music in any depth.⁶ John Rockwell deals with the problem of insufficient space in a survey-oriented book by devoting a separate chapter to Philip Glass's music as representative of minimalism, in which Rockwell surveys Glass's pieces, discusses the influence of the Orient, and outlines the relationship of minimal music to the visual arts.⁷ Finally, in a section of a more recent book, Glenn Watkins presents insightful comparisons between minimalism and earlier musical works that share similar surface qualities or rely on limited resources.⁸

Among the other authors who discuss the origins of minimal music are Peter Gena, who traces the role of indeterminacy in minimalist performance, and Kyle Gann, who finds affinities with serialism.⁹ Elaine Broad, reacting strongly to Gann's article, finds a closer relationship between minimalism and experimentalism, especially since they both suspend teleological listening.¹⁰ Perhaps the best recent article dealing with the origins of minimalism is Robert Carl's attempt to define modernism and minimalism, tracing the origins of both in an effort to find common ground between the two musical movements and to more fully understand current compositional paths.¹¹

Two minimalist composers have written books devoted to minimalism, contributing a vital perspective on their own music. Philip

Glass provides an autobiographical account of his development as a composer and describes the circumstances surrounding the composition of his trilogy of operas.¹² Steve Reich offers insightful analytical observations on many of his works, including a detailed explanation of his compositional technique.¹³ Aside from Reich's book, only a few other analyses of minimal music have appeared in the literature, and little else has been written on this important recent compositional trend.¹⁴

Only a few authors have attempted to define minimalism. Among them, Elaine Broad describes minimalism as an *aesthetic* distinguished by "the conception of the *non-narrative work-in-progress*."¹⁵ According to this definition, minimalism represents a new way of listening to music, concentrating on the process itself. The activity of listening to music is downscaled substantially, and very slight changes in rhythm, texture, or harmony become the main events in a piece. Wim Mertens presents a similarly narrow view, setting minimal music in stark contrast to teleological music: "Traditional dialectical music is representational: the musical form relates to an expressive content and is a means of creating a growing tension. . . . But [minimal] music . . . is non-representational and is no longer a medium for the expression of subjective feelings."¹⁶ According to Mertens, the teleological nature of most Western music—in which goals are established, the music progresses toward these goals, and the listener travels on a journey among and between different musical areas—is absent from minimal music. Thus, pieces focusing primarily on the process alone or pieces that lack goals and motion toward those goals best exemplify the delineation of minimalism as an aesthetic.

This notion of minimalism clearly excludes most traditional Western musical works, which do not emphasize processes over other musical elements and which do produce goal-directed motion. Even some of the most process-oriented traditional music, such as the gradually shifting pattern of sixteenth notes in Bach's C Major Prelude from Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, seem to be more concerned with harmony and voice leading than with the process employed. Likewise, the idea of tonal centrality—common to a wide variety of pieces and including Renaissance modality, common-practice tonality, and the nonfunctional centrality of Béla Bartók and others—directly implies the establishment of goals. These pieces establish particular pitch classes as tonal centers, and in many cases the main activity of these pieces involves the drama of motion toward or away from these centers. Modulations provide motion away from the tonal center and set up intermediate goals, secondary tonal centers, that allow goal-directed motion on a smaller scale while retaining the overall tonal center as a final goal, reached conclusively only at the end.

The earliest minimal pieces (from the late 1950s and early 1960s) best exemplify the idea of minimalism as an aesthetic, as defined by Broad and Mertens. Many of these pieces require the development of new listening strategies in order to fully appreciate them. In various ways these pieces seem to suspend time, gradually revealing a slowly unfolding process or focusing upon a minute musical detail. They move sharply away from the idea of requiring the listener to recognize goals and goal-directed motion and toward the notion of listening from a nonparticipatory viewpoint suspended in time.

For example, in Terry Riley's groundbreaking work *In C* (1964), goals are eliminated by the fragmented nature of the piece as each member of the ensemble moves through the stipulated process at her own pace, guided only by her musical intuition and sense of ensemble. This piece consists of fifty-three musical fragments or modules, some of which have as few as one or two notes, notated on a single page of music (see Ex. 1). Despite the brevity of the score, the piece may last for over an hour (the duration is not specified). Though over the course of the piece a number of tonal centers may be established through sheer repetition, the idea of a tonal center as a goal never materializes. Each melodic figure and most of the combinations of these figures produce diatonic collections, but the fragmented and repetitive nature of their presentation prevents these diatonic collections from being organized into tonalities, despite their familiar orientation. Instead, the process of gradually introducing new melodic figures by each performer in turn takes primary importance in the piece. Finally, the piece well represents Broad's idea of minimalism as a work in progress since the musicians are responsible for many of the decisions usually made by the composer, making every performance substantially different. Though improvisation alone certainly does not preclude goal-directed music—for example, many jazz pieces employ some form of functional tonality—the lack of prescribed coordination among the performers helps deflect any teleological potential in the piece.

La Monte Young is perhaps most representative of minimalism as an aesthetic, though many people (including himself) do not label him a minimalist composer. His *For Brass* (1957) and *Trio for Strings* (1958) employ single tones and simple combinations of tones held for extraordinarily long periods of time. The repetitive element, a feature of most minimal music, including Riley's *In C*, is replaced by a complete lack of rhythmic impetus. In many of Young's pieces, listeners are invited to hear tiny fluctuations in tuning as almost the only musical stimuli. These pieces offer no goal-directed elements, satisfying Mertens's conception of minimalism, as the sound simply exists in

1 2 3 4

5 6 7

8 9

10 11 12 13

14 15 16

17 18 19

20 21 22

23

24 25

26 27

Example 1. Terry Riley, *In C* (modules 1–27). Copyright © 1964 Terry Riley.
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time. Although these pieces do not focus on a perceptible process, their nonteleological approach and substantially scaled-down resources place them in the minimalist aesthetic. Later pieces by Young embody the work-in-progress aspect of the minimalist aesthetic. For example, *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys* (1964–) and *The Well-Tuned Piano* (1964–) are two works that are still in progress and, according

to the composer, always will be; they include long-held tones, repetitive passages, and improvisation. These works also suggest the need for a new listening method focusing on the process and on precise details.

Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966), two tape pieces, each superimpose two or more tape loops of a single source gradually moving out of and eventually back into synchronization with each other. In these pieces the process itself, rather than the eventual outcome of returning to synchronization, receives the primary focus. The changing rhythmic patterns emerging from the slowly shifting process sustain interest in the piece. These works were highly influential on Reich's later instrumental music and on his general development as a minimalist composer. A number of Reich's pieces for instruments attempt imperfect simulations of this tape-loop technique.¹⁷ Reich's *Six Pianos* (1973) may also be considered characteristic of the minimalist aesthetic, though it was composed much later and varies substantially from his earlier pieces and the early works of Riley and Young. Although each of the six independent piano parts is completely written out, the extremely slow process of change in these repetitive parts eliminates any teleological sense in this piece. Listening to the piece requires patience, because time seems suspended, and concentration, because slight changes in rhythmic emphasis or rhythmic figurations reveal new individual patterns and combinations. For example, an even eighth-note texture produced by the ensemble is often subtly altered by the addition of a single accented pitch in only one of the pianos. When this procedure is duplicated by another piano on a different part of the measure, a new rhythmic pattern emerges superimposed over the eighth-note back-drop. Although the piece is through composed rather than improvisational or a work in progress, the nonteleological nature of the piece and the change in listening strategy required to perceive the subtle emergence of new patterns suggest that this piece is also representative of the minimalist aesthetic.

Whereas Broad and Mertens conceive of minimalism as an aesthetic, several other writers define minimalism as a *style*, or school of composition.¹⁸ The consideration of minimalism as a style recognizes the mode of expression common to the music of a number of composers, principally the works of Reich and Glass during the 1970s, that developed from the earlier pioneering works characteristic of the minimalist aesthetic. This view of minimalism embraces more pieces than the idea of a minimalist aesthetic, since the minimalist style includes pieces that do not focus exclusively on the process and pieces that are

representational or teleological in some ways. The definition of minimalism as a style emphasizes the relationships among the various composers of minimal music and attempts to draw minimalist pieces and composers together under one rubric.

In an article on style in music, R. J. Pascall describes the phenomenon of style in terms of its constituent parts—form, texture, harmony, melody, and rhythm.¹⁹ The form of pieces in the minimalist style is primarily continuous, often in the shape of an unbroken stream of rhythmic figuration flowing from the beginning of the piece until it ends. Sometimes these continuous forms grow gradually from sparse rhythmic frameworks or wane after reaching climaxes. However, in any case distinct disjunct sections are generally not characteristic of the minimalist style. The texture of the minimalist style, which follows logically from the form, typically consists of interlocking rhythmic patterns and pulses continuing without interruption. In addition, the minimalist style generally sports bright tone colors and an energetic disposition. The most prominent characteristic of harmony in the minimalist style is its simplicity. Other contemporaneous works often feature complex harmonic sonorities in close proximity and habitually employ all twelve pitch classes in even the shortest passages; the minimalist style contrasts drastically with these by presenting uncomplicated harmonic sonorities (often familiar triads and seventh chords), by limiting harmonic materials principally to diatonic collections, and by presenting these harmonic sonorities in an extremely slow harmonic rhythm. The melodic aspect of the minimalist style is perhaps its most obvious characteristic: extensive melodic lines are entirely absent. Melody is confined to scant patterns, while rhythm, the final aspect of style identified by Pascall, takes center stage. The short, repetitive rhythmic patterns are ubiquitous, and their organization, combination, and individual shapes provide the primary points of interest in the style.

This definition of minimalism—as a style—also applies to the pieces discussed above in this article (except for the works by Young) since these early minimal pieces exhibit the characteristic components of the minimalist style. For example, Terry Riley's *In C* presents a continuous form as the piece unfolds one fragment at a time until all players have reached the last fragment. The texture consists primarily of short, repeated rhythmic patterns, while the slowly changing harmony remains rather simple, exploring primarily diatonic collections. No extended melodic lines appear in the piece, and the rhythm generally forms sixteenth notes in repetitive patterns. Similarly, the pieces

by Reich described above share these characteristics; however, the works of Young, which feature long-held tones rather than repetitive rhythms, lack the rhythmic and textural aspects of the minimalist style.

Many of the pieces of Reich, Glass, and others of the 1970s project all of the characteristics of the minimalist style but do not exhibit the qualities of the minimalist aesthetic. In Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976), process continues to play an important role. Repetitive patterns dominate the texture, and slight changes occurring in a prescribed order are readily apparent. However, this piece, like several other of Reich's pieces composed around this time, also employs goal-directed motion, particularly in its harmonic changes and formal scheme, as a prominent feature of the work. According to Reich, "There is more harmonic movement in the first 5 minutes of 'Music for 18 Musicians' than in any other complete work of mine to date."²⁰ Yet the harmonic rhythm is still extremely slow compared to other contemporaneous works. The prominent teleological harmonic activity suggests that despite its reliance on process, this piece lies outside of the minimalist aesthetic. However, the texture formed by the work's rhythmic consistency and bright tone, the simple harmonic palette, the lack of extensive melodies, and the repetitive rhythmic patterns all suggest that this piece is representative of the minimalist style. The formal organization of the piece is primarily continuous, though it does exhibit some sectional aspects. In this work Reich extends his customary rhythmic compositional method—substituting notes for rests, gradually building a complete rhythmic pattern—to the formal structure of the entire work, resulting in a large-scale arch form (ABCDCBA) with interrelated sections. But despite the sectional orientation of this compositional method, the resulting overall shape of the piece is predominantly continuous due to the consistent textural and rhythmic flow. Although this piece is certainly representative of the minimalist style, it departs from the basic tenets of the minimalist aesthetic in its teleological aspects.

In his operas Philip Glass deviates from the minimalist aesthetic of nonrepresentation by employing goal-directed harmonic successions and by merging his minimalist procedures with a libretto. In "Knee Play 1" from *Einstein on the Beach* (1975), Glass adapts his additive procedure, wherein notes are added gradually upon each repetition until an entire pattern is completed, to a chorus counting eventually from one to eight, one or two numbers at a time with generous repetitions.²¹ In this and similar passages throughout the opera, repetitive

formulae of simple triads in a diatonic orientation underlie the stylistic short, repeated rhythmic patterns over an even texture. In these harmonic progressions a local tonic is established as a goal, reached over and over again as the harmonic formula repeats. For example, the underlying harmonic progression of "Knee Play 1" is composed of a succession of three triads: A minor, G major, and C major. This progression establishes the C-major triad as the local tonic by its position (last in the three-chord succession), by the length of its appearance (double that of the other two chords), and by its association with functional tonality (vi–V–I). Despite the genre of this piece and the use of a libretto, extended melodies are absent from this opera. The sung material takes the same shape as the rest of the musical material in the piece, primarily short repetitive fragments. Although the scenes are each independent, creating a sectional shape overall, the continuous nature of each scene produced by the repetitive rhythmic and harmonic structure suggests that the form of the work—like the textural, harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic aspects of the piece—is also representative of the minimalist style.

Although the "classic" minimalist pieces of Riley, Reich, and Glass described above neatly correspond to the definition of a minimalist style, many pieces often labeled minimal do not have all of these characteristics, or they include other musical procedures in addition to some of those found in the style. Furthermore, most of the more recent pieces by Reich and Glass no longer conform to the idea of minimalism as style. These pieces, and the works of a number of other composers active recently, transcend the minimalist style, making use of selected features of the style while discarding others. If minimalism is defined only as an aesthetic, then just a few pieces meet the narrow qualifications of minimal music. Likewise, if minimalism is defined purely as a style, then this style period was remarkably short and has already ended, since few, if any, pieces after the 1970s exhibit all of the characteristics of the style.

Perhaps minimalism may be defined most accurately as a *technique*: a "general reduction of materials and emphasis on repetitive schemes and stasis," as described by Glenn Watkins.²² Thus, the term could be employed on a broader basis to describe certain features that compositions include, even if they incorporate other compositional aspects as well. Robert Carl compares this view of minimalism to the development of monody by the Florentine Camerata.²³ These composers broke ground for Monteverdi and others who used the same techniques as the camerata. However, these later composers transcended monody, combining the style with simple harmonic successions, the

theater, and even the contrapuntal techniques that monody was intended to replace. In a similar way, Riley, Young, Reich, and Glass developed minimalism as an aesthetic and style, and their later works and the works of other composers combined minimalist features with other compositional techniques.

The principal features of the minimalist technique include the five characteristics of the minimalist style described above: a continuous formal structure, an even rhythmic texture and bright tone, a simple harmonic palette, a lack of extended melodic lines, and repetitive rhythmic patterns.²⁴ Thus, the minimalist technique often produces long, harmonically static passages characterized by consonance and built from repeated patterns and pulses. The appearance of any one of these aspects alone would be insufficient to indicate that the minimalist technique is in use, since many pieces that are obviously not influenced by minimalism contain one of these characteristics in isolation. For example, many of the childhood pieces of Mozart employ a simple harmonic palette, but these pieces certainly do not employ the minimalist technique. However, the appearance of two or more of these features in a piece would suggest that the minimalist technique is a compositional feature of that piece. Another use of the minimalist technique is the adaptation or transformation of some of these minimalist characteristics. This compositional procedure produces pieces with aspects that bear an undeniable resemblance to those of the minimalist style but that significantly depart from its other stylistic ideals. Defining minimalism as a technique rather than an aesthetic or style allow the affinities between related pieces to be recognized. The definition of minimalism as a technique covers all of the pieces described above, including those of Young, which present long, harmonically static passages sustaining consonances in a continuous form but have long-held notes replacing the usual repetitive rhythmic patterns. In addition, a number of other pieces that are not representative of the minimalist aesthetic or style may now be grouped with these earlier minimal pieces by virtue of their common use of the same technique.

Only a few of John Adams's works, notably *Common Tones in Simple Time* (1979–80, rev. 1986) and *Light Over Water* (1983), approach the brand of minimalism represented by the "classic" minimalist works of Reich and Glass from the 1970s and therefore might be grouped under the rubric of minimalist style. Most of Adams's pieces depart substantially from the minimalist style either by altering elements of the style or by including other compositional characteristics. However, Adams recognizes the influence of Reich and Glass on

the developments of his own style: "I've always been very open about acknowledging that, unlike many composers who reach a certain level of notoriety and don't want to admit influence. They want to rewrite history or something. I don't. Certain pieces of Steve's, particularly *Music for 18 [Musicians]* and *Tehillim* and *Music for Mallet Instruments* and *Drumming*, were very critical in helping me develop my own style. . . . I thought that [Glass's *Satyagraha*] worked well because the plain, spare, repetitive musical language which was so *extremely* simple was so appropriate to the theme of passive resistance."²⁵ In most of Adams's works he employs minimalist techniques to explore minimalism's "expressive emotional potential—something the first generation [of minimalists] generally eschewed."²⁶ Whereas Reich and Glass deplore the label of minimalist, Adams now feels he has "internalized" the elements of minimalism and has gone beyond the label:²⁷ "Minimalism really can be a bore—you get those Great Prairies of non-event—but that highly polished, perfectly resonant sound is wonderful."²⁸ By embracing the textural, harmonic, and rhythmic aspects of minimalism, Adams has adopted the minimalist technique, but he has transcended the minimalist aesthetic and style through his expansion of these features and through his frequent use of extended melodic lines.

For example, the first movement of Adams's *Harmonielehre* (1984–85) begins with the repeated chords typical of the minimalist style, but these chords do not recur in any regular rhythmic pattern (see Ex. 2). The repetitive pulses dominate the passage, but they do not follow a strict repetition scheme. Instead, they move closer together in increments, finally resulting in an irregular syncopated pattern. The somewhat unpredictable arrangement of these pulses varies greatly from the continuous, evenly distributed pulses of the minimalist style; yet the fact that only these pulses occur in the rather extended passage betrays the influence of minimalist rhythmic ideas. Furthermore, the simple harmonies (triads and seventh chords) and slow harmonic rhythm further suggest that this passage relies on the minimalist technique. Later in the movement, the second violins present repetitive scalelike figures similar to Glass's additive and subtractive method of gradually building melodic patterns (see Ex. 3). However, instead of regularly adding or subtracting one note at a time until the pattern is complete, as Glass does in his minimalist style, Adams freely adds and subtracts notes in an unpredictable manner. Thus, Adams employs the minimalist technique of repeated short melodic patterns but goes beyond the minimalist style by altering these patterns and varying their repetition scheme.



Example 2. John Adams, *Harmonielehre*, mm. 1–10, orchestral reduction



Example 3. Adams, *Harmonielehre* (mm. 180–84), second violins

A more striking example of Adams's use of the minimalist technique while exceeding the bounds of the minimalist aesthetic and style appears in the middle section of this movement. This broad, expressive passage combines regular melodic and rhythmic patterns using a simple harmonic palette with a long, lyrical melody appearing first in the horn and cello and later taken up by the upper strings (see Ex. 4). This soaring melody pulls the music far away from the minimalist style; the melody is closer to nineteenth-century romanticism than to minimalism. Yet the triplet arpeggios in the second harp along with the interlocking eighth-note arpeggios in the first harp and woodwinds meld this section with the extensive passage of repetitive patterns and pulses that precedes it. Thus although the passage clearly exceeds the minimalist style in its melodic construction, the minimalist technique dominates the accompaniment in rhythm and texture.

Another composer who uses the minimalist technique is Louis Andriessen; however, Andriessen abhors the term minimalism for its restrictive connotation. On the contrary, he describes some of his

[illegible]

Example 4 Adams, *Harmonielehre*, mm. 257–67, transposed score, reduced. Copyright © 1985 Associated Music Publishers, a division of Music Sales Corporation. International copyright secured. All rights reserved. Used by permission

260

Fl. 1

Fl. 2

Fl. 3

Fl. 4

Cl. 1

Cl. 2

Cl. 3

Cl. 4

Hrns. 1 & 2

Hrns. 3 & 4

Tpt. 1, 2, 3

Tbn 1 & 2

Tbn 1 & 2

Harp 1

Harp 2

Celli

Basses

mp

dim. for Horn 2 only

mp

mp

Example 4. continued

This musical score, labeled 'Example 4. continued', is a page from 'The Musical Quarterly' (page 756). It features a multi-staff orchestral arrangement. The staves, from top to bottom, are: Flute 3 (Fl. 3), Flute 4 (Fl. 4), Clarinet 3 (Cl. 3), Clarinet 4 (Cl. 4), Horns 1 & 2 (Hrns. 1 & 2), Harp 1 (Harp 1), Harp 2 (Harp 2), Cello (Celli), and Basses. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The woodwinds (Flutes, Clarinets, and Horns) play a continuous, flowing melody with many eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The Harp 1 and Harp 2 parts play a similar flowing accompaniment, with Harp 2 including triplet markings. The Cello and Basses provide a more sustained, lower-register accompaniment with some melodic movement. The score is divided into three measures by vertical bar lines, with repeat signs at the end of each measure.

Example 4. continued

265

Fl. 3

Fl. 4

Cl. 1

Cl. 2

Cl. 3

Cl. 4

Hrns. 1 & 2

Harp 1

Harp 2

Celli

Basses

p *mp* *mp*

3 3 3 3

3 3 3 3

Detailed description: This musical score page, labeled 'Example 4. continued', covers measures 265, 266, and 267. The instruments are arranged in a standard orchestral layout. Flutes 3 and 4, Clarinets 1 and 2, and Horns 1 & 2 play a continuous eighth-note pattern. Clarinets 3 and 4 play a similar pattern but are silent in measure 267. Harp 1 and Harp 2 play a descending eighth-note pattern with triplets indicated by '3' and brackets. Cellos and Basses play a slower, sustained line. Dynamics include piano (*p*) and mezzo-piano (*mp*). The key signature has four flats, and the time signature is 4/4.

Example 4. continued

music as “MAXIMAL music—I am a maximalist!”²⁹ Andreissen’s music clearly does not conform to the minimalist aesthetic or style. The complexity of its harmonic materials exceeds the simple harmonic palette that is characteristic of the aesthetic and style. And even when the harmonic palette is limited to a small collection of pitches, these pitches form dissonant sonorities usually not found in the “classic” minimalist pieces. Nevertheless, the minimalist technique of repetitive rhythmic and melodic patterns pervades many of his pieces.

For example, *De Staat* (1976) opens with a rather lengthy passage for woodwind quartet that employs only the diatonic collection of notes corresponding to the “white notes of the piano” and primarily only four of these notes (mm. 1–67). Despite this simple diatonic framework, the strict inversive symmetry between the pairs of voices maintains the initial nontertian chord (F, C, E, B) throughout the opening passage (see Ex. 5). The repetitive rhythmic and melodic patterns in this passage, particularly evident in the canonic section (mm. 28–41; see Ex. 6), display the use of the minimalist technique in this piece. This passage consists entirely of a rhythmically displaced melodic line, creating an “echo” effect that is enhanced by the clever use of diminishing dynamics for each voice in the first statement of the example. These short melodic fragments are built from repetitive rhythmic cells, and each fragment is repeated by each voice in turn. The minimalist rhythmic technique in this piece is even more apparent at the entrance of the four soprano voices, which spin out a long melodic line in unison (mm. 105ff; see Ex. 7). In this passage all of the accompanying instruments present simple eighth-note melodic figures repeated in patterns of varying lengths, creating an even eighth-note texture. For example, the pattern in the guitars repeats every six notes, while the patterns in the harps and pianos repeat every eight beats, or every measure (beginning in the second measure of the example). Even the slowly unfolding melodic line is built from the repetition of a limited collection of notes, the same notes as in the repetitive patterns of the accompaniment. The dissonant, though limited, harmonic sonority produced by the ensemble—D, E, G-sharp, A—gives a fitting Lydian (raised fourth) flavor to the presentation of the text, Plato’s description from *The Republic* of the attributes of the Lydian mode. As indicated by this example, this passage exceeds the delineation of the minimalist style in both its harmonic palette and its use of an extensive melodic line, but the minimalist technique is readily apparent—despite Andreissen’s objections.

As described earlier in this article, most of Steve Reich’s more recent music has departed from the minimalist aesthetic and style, but

Example 5. Louis Andriessen, *De Staat* (mm. 1–4). Copyright © 1976 Donemus, Amsterdam. Copyright assigned to Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. Reprinted by permission of Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.

Example 6. Andriessen, *De Staat* (mm. 28–31)

the use of the minimalist technique continues to pervade his music. Unlike Adams and Andriessen, younger composers whose compositional styles have adopted the minimalist technique in conjunction with their own individual styles, Reich has explored all three interpretations of minimalism in his music—*aesthetic, style, and technique*. Whereas Adams embraces the term and Andriessen abhors it, Reich's discomfort with the term *minimalism* may be attributed to his departure from the kind of minimalism found in his earlier works. However, despite the changes in his music and his aversion to the term *minimalism*, persistent, repetitive pulses continue to dominate large sections of his pieces, and his music continues to exploit simple, often diatonic collections of pitches.

The musical score is a reduced score for Example 7, Andriessen, *De Staat*, measures 105-10. It features the following parts and markings:

- git** (guitar): Two staves, both marked *ff*.
- basgit** (bass guitar): One staff, marked *ff*.
- arp 1** (arpeggiator 1): Two staves, both marked *ff*.
- arp 2** (arpeggiator 2): Two staves, both marked *ff*.
- 4 women** (four women's voices): One staff, marked *a 4 f* and *legatissimo senza vibrato*. The lyrics are "... e - an tis a - po - di -".
- pf1** (piano 1): Two staves, marked *ff* and *m.s.* (mezzo sostenuto). Pedal marking: *Ped. ten.*
- pf2** (piano 2): Two staves, marked *ff*. Pedal marking: *Ped. ten.*
- 4 vle.** (four violas): Four staves, marked *S.V. S.P. mp* and *legatissimo*.

The score is written in 12/8 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked *Andriessen*. The score is a reduced score, as indicated by the text "reduced score" in the caption.

Example 7. Andriessen, *De Staat*, mm. 105-10, reduced score

The musical score is arranged in a vertical stack of systems. The first system contains two guitar staves (labeled 'git' 1 and 2) with eighth-note patterns. The second system contains two arpeggiator staves (labeled 'arp 1' and 'arp 2') with descending eighth-note patterns. The third system features four voices (labeled '4 women') with a single note each, accompanied by the lyrics 'dôj', 'prê', 'pô', and 'san'. The fourth system contains two piano staves (labeled 'pf1' and 'pf2') with eighth-note patterns. The fifth system contains four viola staves (labeled '4 vlc.' 1, 2, 3, and 4) with a single note each. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time.

Example 7. continued

For example, *The Desert Music* (1984) begins with an extensive passage of repetitive eighth notes in a diatonic orientation (mm. 1–91). But in contrast with the typically unchanging nature of his works from the 1960s and 1970s, the pitch collections shift much

more rapidly (usually every four or five measures), and the harmonic content often includes as many as six of the seven available diatonic notes, expanding the simpler harmonic palette of his earlier pieces. Furthermore, other sections of the piece combine repetitive rhythmic and melodic patterns with expansive melodies, extraordinary in scope compared with Reich's minimalist-style pieces. For example, in the second movement the basses present a triadic melody that extends beyond the scope of the minimalist style over constant pulses in the mallet percussion, typical of the style (mm. 61ff; see Ex. 8). Such combinations of extended melodic lines with repetitive pulses occur throughout this piece; these combinations and the harmonic structure of the piece show that Reich exploits the minimalist technique, not the minimalist style or aesthetic, in this piece.

A similar coupling of the minimalist technique with an extended melody occurs throughout much of Reich's *Tehillim* (1981). For example, near the beginning of part two, Reich presents a two-voice melody in parallel sixths accompanied by dronelike tones in the strings, reminiscent of Young's long-held tones, and repetitive rhythmic patterns in the percussion, deriving from Reich's earlier pieces in the minimalist style (mm. 21ff; see Ex. 9). Furthermore, the harmonic sonority presented by the strings—a diatonic cluster consisting of the notes A-flat, B-flat, C, D-flat, and E-flat—far exceeds the simple harmonic palette particular to the minimalist style, though the diatonic parallel sixths in the melody are much more in keeping with the style. In this work, as in *The Desert Music*, described above, Reich's compositional style has changed considerably from his pieces of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet minimalism as a technique continues to occupy a prominent place in Reich's music, while other compositional techniques, including more complex harmonies and more extensive melodies, complement these minimalist features.

Michael Torke, a rising young composer of largely chamber and orchestral music and now opera, has combined elements of the minimalist technique with elements of jazz and popular music to create his own unique style. Torke came of age as a composer after the flowering of the minimalist style and thus was able to take the idea of minimalism as a technique in stride: "Torke represents a generation of young American composers who take Minimalism for granted and who came of age in an environment where the distinctions between pop and so-called serious musics did not have to be observed rigidly. It is a generation for whom the tonality and atonality wars had already been fought, a generation as unselfconsciously at ease with the metric complexities of Stravinsky as with the repeated formulae and radiant

61 Δ |

Timp. 1 Δ |

Timp. 2 Δ |

Piano 1 Δ |

Piano 2 Δ |

Mar. 1 *sub f* *sub. meno* |

Mar. 2 *sub f* *sub. meno* |

Vibes 1 *sub f* *sub. meno* |

Vibes 2 *sub f* *sub. meno* |

Maracas |

Sticks |

S. 1 Δ |

S. 2 Δ |

A. 1 Δ |

A. 2 Δ |

T. 1 *(mf)* |

T. 2 *(mf)* |

B. 1 *poco più f* |

B. 2 *poco più f* |

I(s) |

Is there a sound ad -

Example 8. Steve Reich, *The Desert Music* (mm. 61–67). Copyright © 1985 Hendon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company. Reprinted by permission

Example 8. continued

The musical score is written for a large ensemble. The instruments and voices are listed on the left: Timp. 1, Timp. 2, Piano 1, Piano 2, Mar. 1, Mar. 2, Vibes 1, Vibes 2, Maracas, Sticks, S. (Soprano), A. (Alto), T. (Tenor), and B. (Bass). The music is in 2/4 time. The vocal parts (S., A., T., B.) have lyrics written below them: "dressed not wholly to the ear". The score includes various musical notations such as rests, notes, and dynamic markings.

Example 8. continued

Ob.

E. H.

Clap. 1

Clap. 2

Tamb. 1

Tamb. 2

Voice 2

Alto

div. non vibrato sempre

Vln. I

f

non vibrato sempre

Vln. II

f

non vibrato sempre

Vla.

f

non vibrato sempre

Vc.

f

non vibrato sempre

Cb.

f

non vibrato sempre

Mi - ha - eesh hey-chah - faytz chah - yeem oh -

Mi - ha - eesh hey-chah - faytz chah - yeem oh -

Example 9. Steve Reich, *Tehillim* (mm. 21–24). Copyright © 1981 Hendon Music, Inc. a Boosey & Hawkes company. Reprinted by permission

harmonies of Philip Glass or with the brazen energy of Madonna.”³⁰ Torke’s music, perhaps more than any of the other composers discussed in this article, assimilates the minimalist technique into his music in a seamless fashion.

In *The Yellow Pages* (1985) Torke combines syncopated rhythms and more complex jazz-influenced harmonic sonorities with a continuous form, a bright texture comprising interlocking rhythmic patterns, and a repetitive rhythmic scheme. An ostinato bass (a syncopated jazzy line derived from a Chaka Khan song) undergirds almost the entire score (see Ex. 10, cello).³¹ Over this foundation Torke builds short repeated patterns with varying repetition schemes typical of minimalism in their cell-like structure and repetitive nature but conflicting with the meter established by the ostinato bass, a procedure more reminiscent of Stravinsky than Glass. In Example 10, the upper voices repeat their fragmented melodic patterns every two measures and interlock with the cello and piano, which repeat every measure. Furthermore, these interlocking voices obscure the meter of the passage to some extent. While the cello and piano clearly establish the downbeat of the meter, the violin stresses the second half of the beat, and the winds reinforce this upbeat emphasis two beats later. The aggregate rhythmic pattern produced by the ensemble creates an almost constant sixteenth-note texture, a characteristic of the minimalist technique. Even in the slower lyrical sections, the energetic, syncopated, staccato rhythms continue to prevail, reflecting the formal and textural characteristics of the minimalist technique (see Ex. 11). Often the lyrical lines are also based on repetition, as seen in Example 11, where all the voices participate in various repetition schemes. For example, the flute and the violin share the same contour pattern with different rhythms and pitches, and both voices not only repeat *pitches* between adjacent melodic cells but present exact repeats (both pitch and rhythm) of every pair of cells (every two measures).

Although the harmony in Torke's music is more complex than that of the minimalist style, Torke mainly relies on diatonic collections and often establishes a tonal center. For example, the opening ostinato strongly projects G as a tonal center through its reiteration, its position on the strong beat of each measure, and the stereotypical bass pattern (4–5–1) at the end of each repetition of the ostinato (see Ex. 10 again). Meanwhile, the other voices explore the diatonic collection associated with G major (all white notes except F-sharp, used instead of F). Thus, despite the complex weaving of melodic patterns and the resulting nontriadic harmonic sonorities, the piece presents a relatively simple harmonic palette, in comparison with many other, more chromatic works of this time.

Torke sometimes adopts a compositional procedure directly from the music of the minimalist style but alters the procedure to meet his own compositional needs. For example, in one section of *The Yellow Pages* he employs Reich's favorite technique of substituting rests for

The image displays two systems of a musical score for measures 8, 9, and 10. The instruments are Flute (Piccolo), Clarinet, Violin, Cello, and Piano. The Flute and Clarinet parts are written in treble clef, while the Violin, Cello, and Piano parts are in bass clef. The Flute and Clarinet parts feature short, rhythmic bursts of notes. The Violin and Cello parts have longer, more melodic lines. The Piano part provides a continuous, smooth line in the bass. The score is written in a minimalist style, with a focus on texture and rhythm.

*In the score, the clarinet part is notated at actual sounding pitch.

Example 10. Michael Torke, *The Yellow Pages* (mm. 8–10). Copyright © 1985 Hendon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company. Reprinted by permission

notes in the upper voices of the score but keeps the texture full by providing the complete line in the piano (see Ex. 12). This compositional scheme produces a playful interchange of short outbursts from each instrument over a smooth line in the piano, a procedure reminiscent of the compositional procedures of the minimalist style. Later in

95

Flute (Piccolo) *mp*

Clarinet *mp*

Violin *mp*

Cello *mp*

Piano *mp* *sim.*

Example 11. Torke, *The Yellow Pages*, mm. 95–98

the same passage the piano line gradually disappears until only the outbursts remain, unexpectedly forming their own new syncopated rhythmic pattern (see Ex. 13).

Despite these affinities between Torke's music and that of the minimalist style, the rather rapid shifts between harmonic areas in his music and its constantly evolving texture shows that his music does not conform to all of the stylistic characteristics. Furthermore, Torke's use of the minimalist technique blends so smoothly into his compositional style that its influence is often almost imperceptible. As seen in *The Yellow Pages*, Torke blends repetitive rhythmic patterns and a bright, even texture with a bass line drawn from popular music and jazz. He employs extended melodic lines, but he builds them from shorter repetitive lines and supports these melodies with an even, active texture. He uses simple diatonic collections and borrows elements of functional harmony, but he melds the resulting harmonic simplicity with more complex, nontertian sonorities. Finally, when he directly adopts a minimalist compositional procedure, he transforms the procedure to produce entirely unexpected results. To Torke, minimalism is simply one of any number of compositional techniques available for his exploitation, and his use of the technique does not lock him into either the aesthetic or the style.

In summary, identifying minimalism as a technique, rather than an aesthetic or style, reveals its continuing influence on composers

40

Flute (Piccolo)

Clarinet

Violin

Cello

Piano

Example 12. Torke, *The Yellow Pages*, mm. 40–42

46

Flute (Piccolo)

Clarinet

Violin

Cello

Piano

Flute

mp

Example 13. Torke, *The Yellow Pages*, mm. 46–48

and their works. Although Reich, Glass, and many other composers justifiably object to the association of their more recent work with the minimalist aesthetic or style, the abundance of minimalist techniques in their works cannot be ignored. Thus, pieces featuring two or more minimalist features—continuous form, texture consisting of interlocking rhythmic patterns and pulses, simple (often diatonic) harmonic materials, slow harmonic rhythm, a lack of extended melody, and repetitive rhythmic patterns—may be identified as minimalist in terms of technique.

Considering minimalism as an aesthetic or style may be useful and appropriate for historical references to the development of minimalism. These terms accurately reflect the essential aspects of groups of pieces that share numerous affinities, as described earlier in this article. But defining minimalism primarily as a technique clarifies the term and more accurately reflects the continuing influence of minimalism on recent composers and their works. Thus, labeling a musical work minimalist simply identifies one of the compositional techniques used in the piece. Likewise, labeling a composer minimalist only reflects the composer's predilection for using the technique. From this viewpoint the term may be seen as much less limiting than it would as an aesthetic or style, and composers and listeners may begin to appreciate minimalism more fully.

Steve Reich and Glen Watkins have identified earlier pieces in the history of music that exhibit similar features to those of minimalism, including the continuous form and even texture of the constant sixteenth notes of Bach's C-major Prelude, the simple harmonic materials and extremely slow harmonic rhythm of the extended E-flat-major triad in the Prelude to Wagner's *Das Rheingold*,³² and rather extensive texturally, harmonically, and rhythmically static sections in the music of Varèse (*Intégrales*), Stravinsky (*Les Noces*, *Symphony of Psalms*, *Symphony in C*, *Requiem Canticles*), Messiaen (*Quartet for the End of Time*, last movement), and others.³³ A number of pieces may be added to this list of works containing repetitive elements or simple harmonic materials, extending at least as far back as Perotin. However, though the minimalist technique may be traced back to these earlier works, the term probably should be reserved for pieces composed after the full development of the minimalist aesthetic in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although the ideas of extended repetition and simplified harmonic materials have been explored in music at various points over the last several centuries, the development of minimalism, first as an aesthetic, then as a style, has singled out the technique and shaped it into a recognizable entity. Thus, minimalism

was not fully recognized as a compositional tool until composers like Riley and Young began searching for a new aesthetic, Reich and Glass continued in the same style, and a host of composers discovered a technique.

Notes

1. Wim Mertens and Daniel Warburton each discuss the suitability of the term "minimalism" and several alternatives, including "process music," "repetitive music," "acoustical art," "trance music," "meditative music," and "structuralist music." Both somewhat reluctantly adopt the term minimalism in the absence of any suitable alternative, though Mertens exhibits a fondness for "repetitive music." Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, trans J. Hautekiet, with a preface by Michael Nyman (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983; New York: Alexander Broude, 1983), 11–16; Daniel Warburton, "Aspects of Organization in the 'Sextet' of Steve Reich," (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1987), 1–4.
2. Jonathan Bernard, "The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 31 (1992–93): 86–132.
3. Mertens. For a review of the English edition see Max Paddison, *Tempo* 148 (March 1984): 49–50.
4. Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993).
5. For example, see Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music: The Avant Garde since 1945* (New York: George Braziller, 1981), 176–81; Reginald Smith Brindle, *The New Music: The Avant-garde since 1945*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 193–96; and H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 268–70.
6. Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (New York: Schirmer, 1974), 119–35.
7. John Rockwell, *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 109–22.
8. Glenn Watkins, *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer, 1988; London: Collier Macmillan, 1988), 572–80.
9. Peter Gena, "Freedom in Experimental Music: The New York Revolution," *Tri-Quarterly* 52 (1981): 236–38; Kyle Gann, "Let X = X: Minimalism vs. Serialism," *Village Voice*, 24 Feb. 1987, 76.
10. Elaine Broad, "A New X? An Examination of the Aesthetic Foundations of Early Minimalism," *Music Research Forum* 5 (1990): 51–62.
11. Robert Carl, "The Politics of Definition in New Music," *College Music Symposium* 29 (1989): 101–14.
12. Philip Glass, *Opera on the Beach*, ed. and with supplementary material by Robert T. Jones (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).

13. Steve Reich, *Writings About Music* (New York: New York University Press, 1974).
14. Wesley York discusses additive and subtractive processes (Glass's favorite technique of gradually building or dismantling long lines by adding or subtracting one note at a time from a repeating figure), the repetition scheme, and form in Glass's *Two Pages* ("Form and Process in *Two Pages* of Philip Glass," *Sonus* 1, no. 2 [spring 1982]: 28–50). K. Robert Schwarz attempts to survey Reich's stylistic traits through an examination of many of his works and a discussion of his life and achievements ("Steve Reich: Music as a Gradual Process," *Perspectives of New Music* 19 [1980–81]: 373–92; 20 [1981–82]: 225–86). Richard Cohn develops a valuable formal theory and analytical methodology for describing rhythmic patterns in Reich's process-oriented works ("Transpositional Combination of Beat-Class Sets in Steve Reich's Phase-Shifting Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 30 [1992]: 146–77). Kyle Gann describes the unique tuning system, harmonic areas, and formal plan of La Monte Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano* ("La Monte Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano*," *Perspectives of New Music* 31 [1993]: 134–62). Some of my own work deals with aspects of harmony in John Adams's music ("Harmony in the Music of John Adams: A Hierarchical Approach," *Journal of Music Theory* 37 [1993]: 117–56, and "Typical Chord Successions in the Music of John Adams," under consideration for publication).
15. Broad, 51–52; italics Broad's.
16. Mertens, 88.
17. For example, Reich's *Piano Phase* (1967) and *Violin Phase* (1967) both present repetitive patterns that gradually move into and out of phase with each other. In these pieces the phase-shifting process is not constant, as is possible with electronic machines; rather, the shifting occurs gradually, in increments, between separate melodic cells.
18. For example, see Strickland, 4; Allan Kozin, liner notes for *John Adams: Grand Pianola Music*; *Steve Reich: Eight Lines*, Solisti New York, Ransom Wilson, conductor (EMI Angel DS-37345); and Rockwell, *All American Music*, 116.
19. Stanley Sadie, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), s.v. "Style," by R. J. Pascall.
20. Steve Reich, liner notes for *Steve Reich: Music for 18 Musicians* (ECM New Series ECM 1129).
21. This opening of the opera seems to be representative of Einstein's obsession with numbers but may also refer to Einstein's own playing in a string quartet, in which, he maintained, he had problems because he could not count! (I am indebted to Edwin Weaver, professor of chemistry at Mount Holyoke College, for this remark.)
22. Watkins, 572.
23. Carl, 112.
24. Though the lack of an extended melodic line is listed as one of the principal features of the minimalist technique, extended melodic lines play a prominent role in many pieces using the technique, as will be seen later in this article, since not all of the characteristics are necessarily present in the minimalist technique. Such melodic

lines are often the principal distinguishing factor between the identification of the minimalist style and the minimalist technique.

25. John Adams, "From *Nixon in China* to Walt Whitman: An Interview with John Adams" interview by Edward Strickland, *Fanfare*, Jan–Feb. 1990, 46.
26. K. Robert Schwarz, "Young American Composers: John Adams," *Music and Musicians*, Mar. 1985, 10.
27. David Sterritt, "John Adams and His 'Nixon in China': Could This Be Another 'Porgy and Bess'?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 Oct. 1987, 21–22.
28. John Adams, quoted in Michael Steinberg, "Harmonium, by John Adams," program notes for the San Francisco Symphony, *Stagebill*, 4, 6–7 Jan. 1984, 20B.
29. Louis Andriessen, quoted in Dan Warburton, "A Working Terminology for Minimal Music," *Intégral* 2 (1988), n. 4.
30. Mark Swed, liner notes for Michael Torke: *The Yellow Pages, Rust, Vanada, Slate, Adjustable Wrench* (Argo 430 209–2), 4.
31. Swed, 5.
32. Steve Reich, "Steve Reich in Conversation with Jonathan Cott," liner notes for *Steve Reich: The Desert Music* (Nonesuch 79101–2).
33. Watkins, 576–77.