Less is More, and More is Less, More or Less: The Historical Progression, Aesthetic Characteristics, and Physical Limitations of Minimalism

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Abstract

Since its emergence as an aesthetic category in the mid-twentieth century, minimalism has been contentious amongst scholars of all forms of art. It has been alternately celebrated, questioned, and condemned by not only its critics, but also the artists whose works have been given the historical title “minimalist.” This article explores the emergence of minimalist music, examining its relation to the earlier “avant-garde” works of John Cage and other eclectic influences, such as jazz and Eastern music. In doing so, this article attempts to establish a broad understanding of the elements integral to minimalist music, with a special focus on the composers La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich. The works of Riley and Reich are compared to the works of visual artists Barnett Newman and Sol LeWitt in order to highlight the pivotal elements of the minimalist aesthetic, including repetition, simplicity, and, to borrow Cage’s term, “Unfixity.” This article concludes that the minimalist compositions of the aforementioned composers ultimately demonstrate the integral characteristics of minimalism better than their visual counterparts, due to the temporal nature of music. However, the article seeks to demonstrate the importance of contemplating visual and musical interpretations of minimalism together, as they are complimentary windows into this modern movement.

Keywords

Minimalism, Aesthetic, History, Art, Reich

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While writing for the notable urban New York newspaper *Village Voice*, poet and art critic John Perrault stated: “What is minimal about minimal art is the means, not the ends.”¹ In this concise articulation, Perrault captures not only an important and often misunderstood aspect of minimalism itself, but also the spirit of the minimalist aesthetic: less is more. For painter Barnett Newman, this reductionist philosophy meant, very practically, “art conceived in terms of its absolute essentials”²—what composer La Monte Young described as, “that which is created with a minimum of means.”³ Glass referred to it as “intentionless”; Riley praised it

1. John Perrault, “Minimal Art: Clearing the Air,” *Village Voice*, (January 12, 1967), 11.

2. Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 8.

3. Robert K. Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 9.

as a “mystical experience”; and, surly critics have adorned it with such titles as “going-nowhere” and “wallpaper music.”⁴ Regardless of varied critical opinions, since its emergence in the 1950s and 1960s, minimalism has proved to be one of the most important and innovative movements within twentieth-century classical music. However, this aesthetic was not restricted to music; nearly every art form, from literature to film, had a similar minimalist movement—especially the visual arts. In the mid-twentieth century, certain works of art and music projected similar qualities, themes, and goals, many of which were foundational to the minimalist aesthetic. In the words of H. Wiley Hitchcock, “minimalist music had arisen at about the same time as minimal art, and...was in many ways aesthetically and stylistically similar.”⁵ These artistic mediums often reflected and influenced one another, to their mutual benefit. However, the musical medium ultimately reflected the minimalist aesthetic most extensively and effectively.

The term “minimalism” is often attributed to philosopher and art critic Richard Wollheim, who introduced it in the January 1965 issue of *Arts Magazine*.⁶ Since its first use, this all-encompassing term—referring to a large group of composers and artists—has been contentious and frequently debated. It is important to note that none of the four central

4. Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 135. Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 104. Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 8.

5. H. Wiley Hitchcock, “Minimalism in Art and Music: Origins and Aesthetics,” in *Classic Essays on Twentieth-Century Music: A Continuing Symposium*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz and Joseph Darby (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 309.

6. Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, 18.

minimalist composers (Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass) considered themselves as part of a coherent movement—each thought of himself as an artist external to any musicological label.⁷ An artist’s rejection of the historical grouping into which he is placed is not a new occurrence; many expressionist artists and serial composers alike have denounced the stylistic categories imposed upon them. However, it can be helpful in musicology to label these movements, so as to better understand the common aesthetics between the works of their members and how they relate to other concurrent (and preceding) works of art. Thus, Wollheim’s use of the term “minimal” is both apt and descriptive.

The influence of non-Western music on the establishment of this genre is vital. All four of the central composers were infatuated with styles virtually unknown in the Western world at the time, including the Indian raga, which influenced Young from an early age, and West African Drumming, which is integral to some of Reich’s later compositions.⁸ The influence of these musical cultures, along with American jazz music, contributed to the emergence of the minimalist aesthetic. However, Western classical music also had a significant influence on these composers; another commonality between Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass was their study at various prestigious classical music schools, including the University of California (UCLA) and Julliard. Additionally, it has been argued that minimalism evokes medieval plainchant and organum, which both use “stasis as a

16. 7. James Meyer, “Survey,” in *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000),

8. Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 9.

point of structure.”⁹ This adheres to the intentionally non-dynamic nature of minimalism. Minimalism also incorporates repetition—another device of Western classical music—but re-appropriates it into something overt and immediate.¹⁰ Clearly, an eclectic array of musical ideas influenced the first minimalist composers, making it difficult to describe the movement itself in anything but broad terms.

Minimalism would not have existed without its immediate predecessor, the so-called “avant-garde.” As Barbara Rose wrote in her discourse on minimalist expression, “all [minimalists] are, to a greater or lesser degree, indebted to John Cage.”¹¹ Cage is best known for his composition *4'33"*, which instructs performers not to play their instruments, rather allowing everyday sounds to formulate the aural experience of the piece. With such a penchant for reductionism, Cage composed what could be considered the ultimate minimalist composition.

In his article “The Tower and the Line,” Branden Joseph separates Cage’s unique style into several categories, the majority of which overlap seamlessly with fundamental aspects of minimalism. Joseph first discusses Cage’s insistence on “the production of an aesthetic of immanence.”¹² Cage’s series entitled *Music for Piano*, written in the mid-1950s, represents this use of “immanence,” as its ambiguous score

9. Ibid., 23

10. Ibid., 13

11. Barbara Rose, “A B C Art,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 278.

12. Branden W. Joseph, “The Tower and the Line: Toward a Genealogy of Minimalism,” *Grey Room* 27 (Spring, 2007): 61.

abandons such conventions as rhythm and tempo, fostering unpredictability within each performance. These pieces were later called “aleatoric” due to their use of chance as a compositional device. This idea was implemented in the music of La Monte Young in various pieces, including *The Melodic Version Of The Second Dream Of The High-Tension Line Stepdown Transformer From The Four Dreams Of China*. This work was so improvisational in nature—relying only on the spontaneous recurrence of four distinct tones, played on eight muted trumpets—that Young insisted that each recording include the date and time as part of its title (as if the title were not already long enough!).¹³

Cage also saw his art as “an entertainment in which to celebrate unfixity,” venerating its “a-teleological” nature.¹⁴ In Robert Schwarz’s commentary upon Philip Glass, he describes minimalism’s ability to “replace...goal-oriented directionality with absolute stasis.”¹⁵ This sentiment is reflected in many of Steve Reich’s phase compositions, including *Phase Patterns*, a piece for two organs. In this piece, a single melody is repeated for an arbitrary amount of time. While rhythms and dynamics remain constant, subtle alterations to the melody, such as gradually extending the length of certain notes, provide variation while avoiding narrative structure.¹⁶ Cage was also

13. La Monte Young, *The Melodic Version of the Second Dream of the High-Tension Line Stepdown Transformer*, performed by The Theatre of Eternal Music Brass Ensemble, led by Ben Neill. Gramavision, 8122794672, 1991, compact disc.

14. Joseph, “The Tower and the Line,” 62.

15. Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 9.

16. Steve Reich, *Phase Patterns*, performed by Ensemble Avantgarde. (Wergo, 6630-2, 1999), compact disc.

particular about “the relationship between the listener and the indeterminate musical production,” challenging the traditional barriers between music and listener.¹⁷ In order to imply a level of inclusiveness to the listener, Cage described his work with pastoral imagery, using terms like “field” and “constellation”. These terms would later be incorporated into Young’s musical descriptions, demonstrating another aspect of Cage’s influence.

However, the use of the terms “field” and “constellation” had radically different connotations for each composer, reflecting a fundamental difference of intention between Cage and Young. Cage essentially wanted to remove what he thought to be a redundant distinction between music and sound; music constantly surrounds us, and is therefore a happening rather than an event. Cage insisted that his music should allow the listeners to feel as though they are where they are meant to be, whereas Young saw his music as another world that the listeners enter. Young’s insistence on the engagement of an audience demonstrates a significant reason for the distinction between minimalism and the “avant-garde.” Minimalism required certain elements of composition, such as repetition, tonality, rhythm and/or melody, in order to maintain its involving effect, overtly seeking the audience’s focus. However, the use of traditional elements of form and style were intentionally sparse. Minimalism is often also seen as a rejection of serialism—the dogmatic, mathematically- strict style of composition based on a twelve-note technique devised by Schoenberg and Webern.¹⁸ Young, often referred to as the

17. Joseph, “The Tower and the Line,” 61.

18. Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 10–11.

grandfather of minimalism, deviated from both the avant-garde and serialist styles. Although these forms influenced him as a composer, his exploration of musical territory outside of these styles allowed him to establish the roots of minimalist music.

Throughout his rural Idaho upbringing, La Monte Young was interested in both the natural and mechanical sounds around him: the whistling of the wind through the cracks between the logs of his family's log cabin; the sounds of owls in the forests nearby; and, even the buzzing of the power lines at the distribution plant where his father worked.¹⁹ During his musical training on the saxophone, this interest in sound never waned, and when he began studying music history and composition at UCLA, this penchant crept into his creative process. While still a student in 1958, Young composed "the virtual fountainhead of American musical minimalism," *Trio for Strings*.²⁰ It was long; it was monotonous; and, it consisted of only three notes. Upon submitting it for his composition class, his professor told him he would not receive a grade for such a work, and advised him to write a piece "that's got lines, that's got climaxes, that's going places."²¹ Virtually every professor and student dismissed the piece. The one exception was a graduate student, fellow composer Terry Riley, who would eventually help to propagate Young's intriguingly novel ideas.

Trio for Strings may be a controversial piece, but its composition is undeniably interesting and innovative. It shares many characteristics with Barnett Newman's painting *Onement*

19. Ibid., 16–17.

20. Ibid., 23.

21. Ibid., 24.

I (1948), which musicologist Edward Strickland believes to be the first piece of visual minimalist art.²² Both works are striking in their reductions: Young's piece in its use of only three tones, and Newman's painting in its focus on two spectrally similar colours, crimson and orange. Both pieces also rely on parallel structure and are evidently concentric. Young's composition deliberately paces the entries and exits of the three tones: a single tone begins; a harmonic second is added; a chord is made (a chromatic second is added above the root); the triad falls back into the second; and finally, the single tone persists until silence takes over. This parallel structure allows the concentric chromatic second to appear exactly halfway through the movement. Newman's painting features a thin, central strip of orange paint, creating concentricism through overt parallelism. However, descriptions of time, which are necessary to musical minimalism, are difficult to apply to stationary visual art. The impact of *Trio for Strings* relies on its length and tempo. As Reich explains, "the process must unfold very systematically and very slowly."²³ The meditative state one must enter in order to listen to such a piece is an important part of aural minimalism, an experiential component that cannot be replicated in its visual counterparts.

Two later works that further reflect the relationship between aural and visual minimalism are Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* and Sol LeWitt's *Wavy Brushstrokes* series. Reich is somewhat exceptional among minimalist composers, because—unlike his peers—he was consistently involved with

22. Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, 9–10

23. Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 11.

visual art. While Young and Riley were immersing themselves in the New York City minimalist scene, collaborating and performing with groups such as the “Theatre of Eternal Music,” Steve Reich was more likely to be found among painters and sculptors in such locales as the Park Place Gallery.²⁴ At this venue, Reich premiered many of his early phase-shifting compositions, which implemented tape loops (repeating short snippets of sound) in order to achieve an effect of “radical simplicity.”²⁵ His first phase piece, *It’s Gonna Rain*, mutates a recording of a preacher on a New York street into a repetitive loop. The loop of the audio sample (the preacher’s speech) is doubled, with one of the loops gradually shifting out of rhythm. He later applied this concept to acoustic instruments—*Piano Phase* recreated this effect using two pianos. Both pianos begin by repeating the same simple melodic line in unison, but one piano gradually speeds up until it is a full beat ahead of the other piano. This accelerating movement continues, although the actual number of repetitions; speed of the transitions; and, length of the piece are left open to the performers.²⁶ In these works, Steve Reich was implementing a form of repetition hitherto unimaginable in the compositional community.

Repetition and modularism (in the sense of a repeated structural idea) are omnipresent in both Reich’s and LeWitt’s works. In Reich’s *Piano Phase*, a simple, short melody repeats

24. Ross Cole, ““Sound Effects (O.K., Music)’: Steve Reich and the Visual Arts in New York City, 1966–1968,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 11, no. 2 (2014): 217.

25. *Ibid.*, 223.

26. *Ibid.*, 228.

throughout, unchanging in its melodic nature. In LeWitt's paintings, he presents identically shaped curves repeated across the canvases, though each one begins at a slightly different point. Therefore, in *Piano Phase*, the hypnotic effect is created through the slight variations in rhythm, whereas in the latter, the effect is created through slight variations in positioning. This "use of cell-like motifs as a basis for the entire work" creates a contemplative consistency in both works.²⁷ Reich writes, "One's listening mind can shift back and forth within the musical fabric, because the fabric encourages that."²⁸ Both the "phasing" of the painting and the composition challenge human focus; these pieces are constantly creating the illusion of movement. However, the musical representation of this is more effective in its use of aural gradation—again, taking advantage of the temporal element in music. The piano melodies are able to phase very gradually, allowing the listener to experience the relationship between the parallel melodies at every stage of their rhythmic discord. As Bennett explains, "our ears psycho-acoustically fixate upon various transitory patterns which arise out of the phasing process."²⁹ This means that the listener will hear new patterns constantly arising out of a piece's structural framework. LeWitt's *Wavy Brushstrokes* are all immediately present; though the eye can wander between the individual curves and note their relationships,

27. Mark Stephen Bennett, *A Brief History of Minimalism* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 19.

28. Steve Reich, "Steve Reich in Conversation with Jonathan Cott," in *Writings on Music*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 130.

29. Bennett, *A Brief History of Minimalism*, 22.

there is no gradual, hypnotic process to heighten the power of minimalist expression.

Regardless, LeWitt and Reich have similar compositional methodologies. Sol LeWitt declares, “the artist’s will is secondary to the process he initiates” and once begun, the process “should run its course.”³⁰ Similarly, in his essay “Music as a Gradual Process,” Reich states, “once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself... What I’m interested in is a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same.”³¹ Though Reich was reluctant to allow critical parallels between his work and LeWitt’s, he conceded that the “tone and purpose” of their respective works was similar.³²

This similarity speaks to the greater purpose of minimalism, which is beyond any discussion of individual creative forms. When Steve Reich’s music was performed in small art galleries around New York, long before its acceptance into concert halls, an interesting phenomenon started to take place in the audience’s listening experience. The spectators “received and judged against the background of other works of art as well as against the background of the everyday experience of life.”³³ The auditory experience was enhanced because of the visual element. Ultimately, the minimalist

30. Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Alberro and Stimson, 106–7.

31. Steve Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” 56–7.

32. Cole, ““Sound Effects (O.K., Music),”” 238.

33. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 41.

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movement includes both music and visual art—as well as dance, drama, film, literature, and many other artistic forms—not only because they represent similar themes and aesthetics, but also because they participate in an active dialogue. When combined, the purpose of minimalism is more powerful. The minimalist aesthetic of “less is more” is integral to individual compositions, but the more compositions we examine, explore, and create, the clearer the purpose and effect of minimalism will be.

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