

Minimalism

(excerpts from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimalist_music)

Minimalist music is an originally American genre of experimental or Downtown music named in the 1960s based mostly in consonant harmony, steady pulse (if not immobile drones), stasis and slow transformation, and often reiteration of musical phrases or smaller units such as figures, motifs, and cells. Starting in the early 1960s as a scruffy underground scene in San Francisco alternative spaces and New York lofts, minimalism spread to become the most popular experimental music style of the late 20th century. The movement originally involved dozens of composers, although only four—Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and, less visibly if more seminally, La Monte Young—emerged to become publicly associated with it in America. In Europe, its chief exponents were Louis Andriessen, Karel Goeyvaerts, Michael Nyman, Gavin Bryars, Steve Martland, Henryk Górecki, Arvo Pärt, and John Tavener. The term "minimalist music" was derived around 1970 by Michael Nyman from the concept of minimalism, which was earlier applied to the visual arts.[1] For some of the music, especially that which transforms itself according to strict rules, the term "process music" has also been used.

The word "minimalism" was first used in relation to music in 1968 by Michael Nyman ... Tom Johnson, one of the few composers to self-identify as minimalist, also claims to have been first to use the word as new music critic for *The Village Voice*. He describes "minimalism":

The idea of minimalism is much larger than most people realize. It includes, by definition, any music that works with limited or minimal materials: pieces that use only a few notes, pieces that use only a few words of text, or pieces written for very limited instruments, such as antique cymbals, bicycle wheels, or whiskey glasses. It includes pieces that sustain one basic electronic rumble for a long time. It includes pieces made exclusively from recordings of rivers and streams. It includes pieces that move in endless circles. It includes pieces that set up an unmoving wall of saxophone sound. It includes pieces that take a very long time to move gradually from one kind of music to another kind. It includes pieces that permit all possible pitches, as long as they fall between C and D. It includes pieces that slow the tempo down to two or three notes per minute.

The early compositions of (Philip) Glass and (Steve) Reich tended to be very austere, with little embellishment on the principal theme, and written for small instrumental ensembles (of which the composers were members...

The music of Reich and Glass drew early sponsorship from art galleries and museums...

Consonant harmony is a much noted feature: it means the use of intervals which in a tonal context would be considered to be "stable", that is the form to which other chords are resolved by voice leading. In minimalism this function of stability is ignored.[citation needed]

Another trait of the minimalist movement established at an early point in time is the use of phase in consonant context to provide variety.[citation needed] A famous example is Terry Riley's *In C* which gives musicians fragments of music which they are to play at their own pace until they stop. The resulting texture varies with the different choices that performers make...

The development of minimalist music proceeds as a movement which was consciously aware of its being a post-serialist movement in music...

These traits were also the feature of composers who rejected 20th-century chromatic harmony for other reasons, often liturgical or religious. These composers often went back to Medieval and early Renaissance harmony and practice more deliberately, producing works which had more formally worked-out canonic imitation in a modal rather than tonal context...

Minimalism is sometimes associated with an ideology that justifies the moving away from the greater complexity of modernism by arguing from the point of view of postmodernism. Specifically, postmodernism states that progress in music is illusory, and therefore there is no need to have ever more advanced and complex systems of composing, that the purpose of minimalist music is repose, rather than "western" style development, and that minimalism embodies more "eastern" values of meditation, trance and concentration. Philip Glass specifically argues that there has been a disintegration of the concept of "high" and "low" music, and that music of this movement is important because it allows incorporation of, and dialog with, popular styles in a way that previous music did not...

Minimalist music is frequently used in movie scores and other media to provide a backdrop or mood for a particular scene or opening, or as an episode in a score...

Critical reception of minimalism

Ian MacDonald sums up a common, classical-music traditionalist view that minimalism is the passionless, sexless and emotionally blank soundtrack of the Machine Age, its utopian selfishness no more than an expression of human passivity in the face of mass-production and The Bomb... A pulse-rhythm is an artificial substitute for the energy of conviction and its 'effects' due not to any effort from artist or audience, but to a negative process of deliberate self-denial. As a music without focus or hierarchy, it is also without goal or struggle, as inert as the pre-planned corporate lifestyle for which it is the perfect accompaniment.

On the other hand, Kyle Gann, himself a minimalist composer, has argued that minimalism represented a predictable return to simplicity after the development of an earlier style had run its course to an extreme and unsurpassable complexity...Parallels include the advent of the simple Baroque continuo style following elaborate Renaissance polyphony and the simple early classical symphony following Bach's monumental advances in Baroque counterpoint. In addition, critics have often overstated the simplicity of even early minimalism...

Gann has further argued that the development of music represented by serialism was a one-sided development that focused on analytical elements and structural innovations often easier to identify in the score than to hear...