Minimalism

Donald Judd
Stacks (1970)

Barnett Newman
Voice of Fire (1967)

Sol LeWitt *Four-Sided Pyramid* (1997)

Minimalism (in music)

Music in which the rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, or instrumental vocabulary is intentionally limited; often refers to music which is concerned with making audible a process of repetition or gradual change

I do not mean the process of composition, but rather pieces of music that are, literally, processes. . . . I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music. . . . Performing and listening to a gradual music process resembles: pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it gradually come to rest . . . Turning over an hourglass and watching the sand slowly run through to the bottom . . . Placing your fee by the ocean's edge and watching, feeling and listening to the waves gradually burying them.

Steve Reich

- Early 1960s California: LaMonte Young and Terry Riley
- Influenced by non-Western music
  - Time felt in cycles, not a divisions of temporal units
- Interest in overlapping ostinati (often of different lengths) [Isorhythmic]

Terry Riley (b. 1935)

In C (1964)

For any ensemble; score gives 53 melodic "units" which the performers repeat as many times as they want before moving on to the next one. Performance is accompanied by highest C on piano played in constant eighth-notes (as a rhythmic ostinato)

Steve Reich (b. 1936)

Early works interested in ostinati and "phasing" or "phase shifting"
- Two identical parts slowing move out of "sync" with one another to create canonic polyphony
- Initially used 2 tape loops:
- *Come Out* (1965)
- *It's Gonna Rain* (1965)

- 1970 Studied drumming in Ghana (West Africa)
- Increasingly interested in live performance of phase shifting:
  - *Drumming* (1970–71)
  - *Clapping Music* (1971)
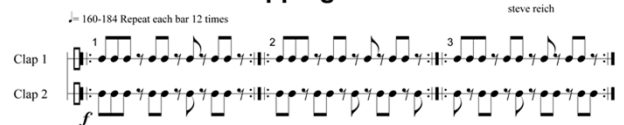
- Discovered that overlapping and "out of sync" rhythms would produce "resultant melodies"
  - one or more instrument shares an attack to create the effect of a downbeat or accent
  - or the ear follows the succession of higher pitches as a kind of melody
  - Like *hocket*—melody created by simultaneous performance of 2 or more interlocking parts

More recent works not "strict" about phasing, but explores effects of multiple rhythmic patterns, canons etc.

Tehillim (1981)

Philip Glass (b. 1937)

Rhythmic processes tends to be "additive" (as opposed to "shifting")
- Melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic units are slowly lengthened or shortened by adding or taking away one note/chord

Interested in harmonic juxtapositions

Philip Glass: Works

- Extends minimalist technique to very large-scale works:
  - Operas: _Einstein on the Beach_, _Satyagraha_, _Akhmaten_
  - Films: _The Hours_, _Kundun_ + new soundtracks for old silent films

The Next Generation

"Post" Minimalism in the 1980s and 90s

In general:
- Term "minimalism" no longer strictly applicable (most prefer _not_ to use it)
- Composers absorb minimalist principles into works with other compositional processes
- Generally marked by a return to tonality combined with some limitations:
  - Limited pitch material
  - Limited rhythmic interest
  - Limited harmonic movement . . .

Minimalism after the 1970s is best understood as an inspiration or background rather than a movement in which younger composers consciously take part.

Think of it as a tendency (minimal_ist_), rather than a movement (minimal_ism_)

Sir John Tavener (1944–2013)

- Radical avant-garde scene of 1960s
- Converted to Russian Orthodoxy 1977

Advocated:
- "destroying" the concert hall
- "Metaphysical" music—music that communicates with the soul

- 1980s-90s musical style:
  - Religious or sacred poetry/themes
  - Very simple melodies, often inspired by Orthodox chant
  - Straightforward harmonization
  - Uses Medieval and Church modes—absorbs them to use as his own (never borrows)
  - Drone normally present: represents eternity that is God
  - Concerned with expressing religious faith which he regards as "Truth"

Akhmatova Songs (1993)

Solo soprano and cello, arranged 1995 for solo + String quartet

Poems by Anna Akhmatova (1888-1966)
Tavener attracted to their "simplicity, their starkness, their lack of frills, their complete lack of complexity"

6 Songs:
I. Dante	IV. Couplet
II. Pushkin and Lermontov	V. The Muse
III. Boris Pasternak"	VI. Death

Dante

And even after death he did not return
To Florence, his of old.
In going, he gave no backwards glance.
To him I sing this song . . .
From hell he sent his curses upon her,
And in heaven he could not forget her . . .

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)

- Estonian composer
- *Credo* (1968) caused minor scandal in Communist Estonia for its Christian reference
- 1968-76 studied Gregorian Chant and 2-voice counterpoint

1976 began composing in new style:

Tintinnabuli: refers to bell-like sounds produced by simple harmonic procedure

Melody accompanied by simple drone (usually tonic)
Harmony created with pitches of the chord built on the tonic

Basic *Tintinnabuli* procedure

Magnificat (1989)

For unaccompanied choir
Uses traditional Latin text
Begins F minor sonority—explores the mode by moving around a drone on C in tintinnabuli style

Final measures of *Magnificat:* what is going on?
How would you describe the music? Which voice has
the "melody"?

Seven Magnificat Antiphons

No. 1 "O Weisheit"

Which of the parts is the "melody"?

Which parts are the "tintinnabuli"?

What sonority are the "tintinnabuli" voices limited to?

No 6 "O König aller Völker

Which of the parts is the "melody"

Which parts are the "tintinnabuli"?

What is the relationship between S2 and T2?