

A Forest from the Seeds of Minimalism:

An Essay on Postminimal and Totalist Music

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Being asked to write about the current state of minimalism is like being asked if you've stopped beating your wife. You can't answer without contradicting yourself. Minimalism is dead as a doornail, of course, and minimalism is also thriving splendidly, thank you.

If minimalism means the stripped-down, diatonically tonal, pattern-repetitive style that arose in the '60s - and it probably should mean this - then it is in a state of suspended animation. As far as the public is concerned, it is very much alive, since Steve Reich and Philip Glass, at least, continue to lead highly visible public careers. As far as most professional musicians are concerned, however, minimalism is moribund at best, since the style is widely regarded as insultingly simple, and virtually no younger composers have continued writing in it. Glass, fairly or not, has become the paradigm of the composer who has "sold out," who writes dumbed-down music for mass audiences not sophisticated enough to

understand anything better. Reich, because his music offers more variety and more of a veneer of chamber-music detail, has fared somewhat better, turning into the Grand Old Man of a dead but respectably historical idiom.

And thus we have the common wisdom about minimalism: that it was a historical dead end, a moment in which a superficial new brand of music achieved a quick but ephemeral surge of public acceptance.

What the common wisdom leaves out of account, of course, is the dozens and even hundreds of young composers on whom minimalism acted as an energizing electric shock. The Deutsche Grammophon recording of Reich's Drumming appeared in 1973; Glass's Einstein on the Beach hit the Metropolitan Opera in 1976. At that moment an entire generation was beginning its musical education. The music schools, the established composers, had been telling youngsters that music, to be valid, should be complex, dissonant, difficult to understand. Throughout the '60s the world of musical composition had been hermetically cut off, by its own choice, from the rest of society. The atmosphere was arid, the motivations were competitive, and few had anything but contempt for non-musicians too faint of heart to follow the avant-garde.

Then Terry Riley's In C came out, and Drumming, and Glass's Music in Fifths. Unlike the *official* new music (whether serialist or post-Cage conceptualist),

these pieces were easy to understand on first hearing. Yet they also sounded new and different, which the official music tried to do and often failed. Minimalism's first appeal was its audaciousness, its in-your-face refusal to seek conventional subtlety or variety. But what became apparent was that - for the first time since the 19th (or even 18th?) century - musicians and non-musicians alike enjoyed listening to the newest music around, enjoyed it in the most physical, visceral sense. And what gradually dawned on the young composers was the bald-faced truth that, contrary to what their elders had told them, music was not like stomach medicine: it did not have to taste awful to be good for you.

Still, the young did not consequently embrace minimalism with open arms and closed ears. Who wants to write in D-flat major for 50 pages at a stretch, as in Reich's Octet? Who wants to churn out streams and streams of steady eighth-notes, as in Glass's Music in Fifths? Who wants to be limited to one idea, one texture, one sound-concept, in every work? Not very many composers. And so the young listened critically, absorbing minimalist strategies but meanwhile planning new ones of their own.

In this way, *Post-minimalism* was born. Then the question becomes, was minimalism really a dead end? or was it simply the initial stage of a whole new musical language?

The initial developments of postminimalism came around 1980. In

1978-79, William Duckworth (b. 1943) wrote a cycle of 24 piano pieces called The Time Curve Preludes. For the most part, they shared minimalism's clean, non-modulating tonality, though spiced up with an occasional smattering of sharp dissonance. They shared minimalism's steady eighth-note beat, though only a couple of the pieces involved minimalistic repetition. They grew from minimalistic additive and subtractive processes, often moving A, AB, ABC, and so on. More importantly, though, they were more subtle and mysterious than minimalist music; they didn't wear their structure on the outside, and you couldn't completely figure out what was going on just from listening. Duckworth had been an avid student of Olivier Messiaen's self-retrograding rhythmic structures, and The Time Curve Preludes moved with a very non-minimalist sense of mystery.

In 1980, Janice Giteck (b. 1946) produced Breathing Songs from a Turning Sky. Deeply concerned with ritual, she had been writing American-Indian-influenced theater works filled with rough sounds. Now she turned more to Balinese music for inspiration, creating contagiously melodic diatonic textures. The early music of Daniel Lentz (b. 1942) had been pretty solidly minimalist (a tendency he began before coming in contact with the musics of Glass or Reich). With The Crack in the Bell (1986), based on an e.e. cummings poem, he vastly expanded his music's frame of reference, quoting patriotic tunes and Renaissance motets. Minimalist pieces tended to stay in one key and one

tempo for long periods, but The Crack in the Bell - though it still used quasi-minimalist arpeggios and pretty chords - darted all over the place.

Ingram Marshall (b. 1942), became involved with the early minimalist scene and started using tape delay as minimalist Terry Riley had. But in his popular Fog Tropes (1979/82) and Gradual Requiem (1979-81) Marshall used it to create filmy, indistinct textures far removed from minimalism's bouncy momentum. Jonathan Kramer (b. 1942) had been a 12-tone composer. Stimulated by minimalism but distrustful of its simplicity, he began - in Moving Music for 13 clarinets (1975-76) - paring down his language to only five or six pitches for an entire work. By Moments In and Out of Time (1981-83), he was writing postminimal orchestral music severely limited in tonality but by no means repetitiously or structurally minimalist.

The names Riley, Reich, Glass, and even La Monte Young (to reinstall the original minimalist) are famous ones. By comparison, Duckworth, Giteck, Lentz, and Kramer remain relatively unknown. Why?

Perhaps for a simple reason. The minimalist scene was geographically specific, growing out of the activities of a handful of composers mostly active in New York, though also in San Francisco. The minimalist pioneers formed a relatively unified (if contentious) group during the years 1964-73, and were much written about as a new movement.

Subsequently, however, minimalism spread from a common root to isolated branches. Duckworth taught in Pennsylvania. Giteck lived in Seattle. Lentz moved from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles. Marshall lived in San Francisco. Kramer taught at Columbia University. Other postminimalists, Peter Gena (b. 1947) taught in Chicago, Paul Epstein (b. 1938) in Philadelphia. Elodie Lauten (b. 1950) was a punk rock singer and keyboardist in Manhattan's unruly Downtown scene. All of these people took inspiration individually from the doings of Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass. Most of them, however, didn't know until years later that the others existed.

Postminimalism was never a scene. Not until the late 1980s did it become apparent - and many, many critics fail to see it even today - that a unified body of work had grown out of the seeds of minimalism; that minimalism, in effect, had matured in the hands of a new generation.

Here, music critics dropped the ball. Briefly intrigued but eventually disappointed by minimalism's lack of intellectual pretension, they began pronouncing minimalism dead in 1978. From that point onward, any composer who wrote diatonically tonal music with a steady beat was written off as a Johnny-come-lately minimalist. Music critics did not take the care to hear how different the musics of Duckworth, Giteck, Lentz, and Marshall were from that of Glass and Reich, nor did any of them ever discover enough of the new music to realize that a complex, well-rounded new style had emerged.

For the undeniable truth is that a collective style did emerge from the works of dozens of composers working independently. Duckworth, Giteck, Lentz, Kramer, Marshall, Lauten, Gena, Epstein, Peter Garland, Paul Drescher, Mary Jane Leach, Stephen Scott, Mary Ellen Childs, David Borden, Guy Klucevsek, Phil Winsor, Joseph Koykkar, Thomas Albert, Sasha Matson, Wes York - all of these composers developed personal styles which, while recognizably individual, could still be generally characterized in common terms. By and large, despite fascinating differences, their music was tonal, mostly consonant (or at least never tensely dissonant), and usually based on a steady pulse. The music rarely strayed from conventionally musical sounds, although many of the composers used synthesizers. Postminimal composers tended to work in shorter forms than the minimalists, 15 minutes rather than 75 or 120, and with more frequent textural variety. And the preferred medium for most of them was the mixed chamber ensemble pioneered by Glass and Reich, though without the minimalist habit of ensemble unison.

Another way to characterize the postminimalism of these composers is negative: it was the exact antipodal opposite of serialism. Like the serialists, the postminimalists sought a consistent musical language, a cohesive syntax within which to compose. But where serialist syntax was abrupt, discontinuous, angular, arrhythmic, and opaque, postminimalist syntax was precisely

the opposite: smooth, linear, melodic, gently rhythmic, comprehensible. The postminimalist generation, most of them born in the 1940s, had grown up studying serialism, and had internalized many of its values. Minimalism inspired them to seek a more audience-friendly music than serialism, but they still conceptualized music in terms familiar to them from 12-tone thought: as a language with rules meant to guarantee internal cohesiveness.

And so by the 1990s, the postminimalists had achieved a repertoire of enchanting music quite different from anything the minimalists had done. Besides those listed above, some of the best works are Duckworth's Southern Harmony (1980-81), a choral cycle based on shaped-note hymns; his Imaginary Dances (1985/88) for piano; Giteck's Om Shanti (1986), a Sanskrit-language prayer for AIDS patients couched in Balinese textures; Lentz's Apologetica (1992-95), his hour-long homage to native peoples; Lauten's video opera The Death of Don Juan (1987); her Tronik Involutions for overdubbed synthesizer (1993); Gena's McKinley (1983) based on political folksongs; Drescher's Double Ikat for trio (1988-90); Epstein's Gertrude Steinish Chamber Music: Three Songs from Home (1986); Leach's Mountain Echoes (1987) and other sensitive works for women's chorus; Scott's Minerva's Web (1985) for bowed piano; Childs's Carte Blanche (1991); Borden's mammoth cycle The Continuing Story of Counterpoint (1976-87); Klucevsek's gentle Viavy Rose Variations (1989)

based on melodies from Madagascar.

These are enough examples, I hope, to strongly suggest that postminimalism is not a small, isolated, or ephemeral phenomenon. Involving composers working independently from Alaska to Florida and from Hawaii to Maine, it constitutes an American repertoire that dwarfs minimalism in quantity and frequently surpasses the best minimalist works in quality as well.

The postminimalist composers, however - most of them born in the 1940s - tell only half the story of minimalism's aftermath. The American generation born in the 1950s came of age when minimalism was already a fait accompli, and their response was quite different.

Unlike their elders, these composers grew up on rock, and in school they were the first generation to encounter African and Asian musics taught as a standard part of the curriculum. The success of rock convinced them that music could be authentic and valid and still appeal to a mass audience. Asian and African musics taught them that music could be rhythmically complex and still exciting and followable for unsophisticated listeners. And so while they admired the way minimalism communicated with audiences, they saw no necessity for its quiet chords, pretty textures, and rhythmic simplicity.

And so the '50s generation began writing pieces that had the textural clarity of minimalism, but the rousing energy of rock and the rhythmic intricacy of Indian and African musics.

First came the attempt to fuse minimalism with rock, which began with the 1977 Guitar Trio by Rhys Chatham (b. 1952), a loud continuum of overtones drawn from one pitch on electric guitars. Soon after, Glenn Branca (b. 1949) began writing symphonies for electric guitars. Both composers moved into areas of rhythmic complexity far beyond the realm of minimalism. Chatham's An Angel Moves Too Fast to See, for 100 guitars (1989), sets guitar groups banging in varying simultaneous rhythmic cycles; Branca's Symphony No. 10 (1994) features tempo canons a la Conlon Nancarrow.

Still younger composers took rhythmic intricacy further. Mikel Rouse (b. 1957) wrote a 12-tone piece for rock quartet using layered isorhythms of three-against-five-against-eight, called Quick Thrust (1984). Michael Gordon (b. 1956) trained his ensemble - the Michael Gordon Philharmonic - to play rhythms such as eight-against-nine, and built up works like Four Kings Fight Five (1988) using layers of as many as eleven tempos at once. Lois V Vierk (b. 1951) made minimalistically gradual process pieces such as Go Guitars (1981) that crescendoed to a rock-like momentum. John Luther Adams (b. 1953) more gently layered different rhythms on top of each other with a Feldmanesque quiet, as in Dream of White on White (1992). I myself (b. 1955) started borrowing tempo-shifting techniques from Hopi and Pueblo Indian musics in Mountain Spirit (1983).

The variety of these works was

chaotic. And yet, the rhythmic structures and tendencies were so similar from composer to composer that I finally wrote an article ("Downtown Beats for the 1990s," in Contemporary Music Review) pointing out the fact. Partly thanks to that article, the resemblances were noted, and the new style acquired a name that I didn't give it, but was the first to use in print: Totalism.

The "total" in totalist music implies, among other things, having your cake and eating it too: appealing to lay audiences, yet also providing enough underlying complexity to intrigue sophisticated musicians. Totalist music, like postminimalism, tends to be rather restricted in its harmonies, but unlike postminimalism, it doesn't adhere to consonance or prettiness. Rather than rely on a steady beat, it often sets several different tempos going at once; for instance, 678 Streams (1993) by Ben Neill (b. 1957), which uses the computer to generate rock beats at tempos of six-against-seven-against-eight. Totalist music is rhythmically complex, but always complex against a beat, never with the arrhythmia of serialism. Totalism is also more eclectic in its sources and more abrupt in its transitions than postminimalism, with little direct concern for stylistic consistency.

While there are many streams of new music active in America today, some of them (notably free improvisation) explicitly antagonistic to minimalism, totalism has been a dominant force in New York music of the 1990s. Rouse has expanded his structures into two

vernacular-based operas: Failing Kansas (1995) and Dennis Cleveland (1996), the latter a humorously entertaining opera in the form of a talk show. Gordon wrote a 50-minute magnum opus called Trance (1995), in which pitches minimalistically hammered out in complex rhythms culminate in a climax of sampled Muslim and Buddhist chants. Vierk, an expert on Japanese music, brought an Asian flavor to totalism in the pitch bends of her Timberline (1991). Neill has had crossover success in the ambient rock world, with computer environments such as his Green Machine (1994). John Luther Adams fused Feldmanesque clouds with subtle tempo complexity in a gorgeous hour-long work, Clouds of Forgetting. Clouds of Unknowing (1990-95).

Joshua Fried (b. 1959) has developed the minimalist tape-loop idea in vernacular directions using new digital technology. David First (b. 1953) developed a postminimalist technique of acoustic beats caused by gradual glissandos into such major works as The Manhattan Book of the Dead (1995). Los Angeles totalist Art Jarvinen (b. 1956), in works like The Paces of Yu (1990), has deployed timbral oddities such as grinding pencil sharpeners, hissing spray cans, and snapping mouse traps in delightful tape-loop-phasing techniques. And I made use of American Indian rhythmic techniques in my electronic, microtonal mini-opera Custer and Sitting Bull (1995-98).

The works I've cited exhibit

tremendous variety, from the delicate miniaturization of Duckworth's Time Curve Preludes to the massive dissonance of Branca's late symphonies; from the fluid evanescence of Vierk's Timberline to the narrow intensity of Gordon's Trance; from the rock-based populism of Rouse's Dennis Cleveland to the unearthly timbral world of Jarvinen's The Paces of Yu. And yet every one of these works exhibits some inheritance from the minimalism of Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass.

Often the inheritance is structural, in the use of additive process, or in the overlapping of rhythmic cycles out of phase. Sometimes it's melodic, in the preference for linear, hard-edged melodies and focus on a few pitches for long passages of time. Sometimes it's harmonic, in the use of a seamless tonality cleansed of goal-oriented European associations. Sometimes it's rhythmic, in the tendency to create geometric illusions from steady pulses. Sometimes it's textural, in the orchestration of mixed ensembles to create a fused, non-soloistic sound, often playing in rhythmic unison. Little postminimalist or totalist music exhibits all of these characteristics, but most of it exhibits more than one.

Listening to these mountains of music, looking at these dozens and dozens of active composers in their 40s and 50s, how can anyone say - as many have - "minimalism is dead"? It's true, in a way. It's true in the sense that one could look at a giant oak tree and say, "That acorn I saw 30 years ago isn't there any more." Minimalism isn't

much around any more. What we have instead are multiple streams of musics that took various aspects of minimalism as their starting points, musics that could never have happened without what the minimalists did first. One could imagine that some future history of music will describe the period starting in the late 20th century as follows: "Our current musical language arose in the 1960s and '70s. In its nascent, simplistic state, it was at first mistaken for a full-blown style in itself, and was termed 'Minimalism'...."

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