GCSE Composition Guide

Minimalist Music

By

Omar Khokher

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Minimalist Music - Teachers Notes

Aims of this Guide.

This composition guide aims to familiarise teachers and pupils with the use of minimalist composition techniques. This guide can be used with the following GCSE areas of study:

Syllabus	Area of Study	Application
AQA	Music for Film Dance Music Orchestral Landmarks	Music of Philip Glass and Michael Nyman Techno and Drum & Bass Music 20th Century Orchestral Works
EDEXCEL	New directions in Western Classical Music Rhythms, scales and modes in music from around the world	Study of Minimalist Music Gamelan Music
OCR	Techniques of Melodic Composition Traditions and Innovations	Developing melodic patterns from Chords Study of Minimalist Music
WJEC	Music Evolution	Study of Minimalist Music

What is Minimalist Music?

Minimalist Music was born in the late 1960's and can be associated with a group of American composers classified as "minimalists". However, the origins of Minimalist music can be traced to the 'total serialism' music of Webern whose music was based on the mathematical control of the musical elements.

Minimalist music consists of cells which are 'looped' at shifting time intervals. This creates a hypnotic quality to the music as the cells shift in and out of 'phase' with each other. One way of thinking about Minimalist Music is as the musical comparison of 'Splitting the Atom' or analysing a DNA chain. Minimalist music could almost be described a 'molecular music'.

Biological and Musical Analogies:

Cells –Repeated Musical Phrases
Molecules – Very short musical phrases
Atoms – Single Notes
Altered DNA – A phrase which has been changed by fragmentation, augmentation, diminution etc.

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Minimalist Composer – Philip Glass

Philip Glass

Born in Baltimore, 1937.

At the age of 23 Glass moved Paris and spent two years of intensive study under Nadia Boulanger. In Paris, he was hired by a film-maker to transcribe the Indian music of Ravi Shankar into notation readable to French musicians. In the process, he discovered the techniques of Indian music. After researching music in North Africa, India and the Himalayas, he returned to New York and began to apply eastern techniques to his own work. By 1990, Glass was regarded as an established star of Minimalist music. Glass's work ranges from works for percussion ensemble, string quartet, orchestral works, operas and soundtracks. The diversity of Glass's music is influenced by associations with Ravi Shankar, Brian Eno and David Bowie.

Key listening:

Einstein On The Beach (CBS Master Works) – 1976
Glassworks (CBS) – 1982
Koyannisqatsi – Film Soundtrack - (Antilles) – 1981
Satyagraha (Sanskrit for 'life force) – An opera based on Ghandi's experiences in South Africa. Also draws on the life of Martin Luther King and Leo Tolstoy. (CBS Masterworks) – 1985
Powaqqatsi – Film Soundtrack - (Elektra / Nonesuch) – 1987
Passages – with Ravi Shankar (Private Music) – 1990
'Low Symphony' – with David Bowie and Brian Eno (Point Music) – 1997
'Heroes' Symphony – influenced by Bowie & Eno (Point Music) – 1997
Dracula – film music to accompany the original Bela Lugosi film of 1931, played by the Kronos Quartet – (Nonesuch) - 1999

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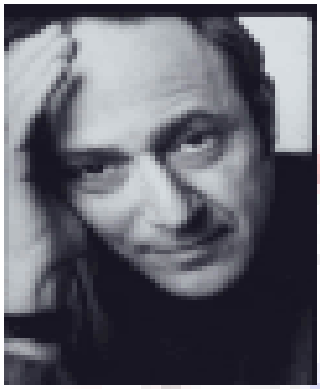
Minimalist Composer – Steve Reich

Steve Reich



Born in New York, 1936.

Steve Reich has been recognised internationally as one of the world's foremost living composers. From his early taped speech works *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966) to *The Cave* (1993), Reich's music has embraced not only aspects of Western classical music, but the structures, harmonies, and rhythms of non-Western and American cultural music, particularly jazz.

During the summer of 1970, with the help of a grant from the Institute for International Education, Reich studied drumming at the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ghana in Accra. In 1973 and 1974 he studied Balinese Semar Pegulingan and Gamelan Gambang at the American Society for Eastern Arts in Seattle and Berkeley, California. From 1976 to 1977 he studied the traditional forms of cantillation (chanting) of the Hebrew Scriptures in New York and Jerusalem. In 1966 Steve Reich founded his own ensemble of three musicians, which rapidly grew to eighteen members or more.

Key Listening:

Drumming (Deutsche Gramophone) – 1974

Music for 18 Musicians (ECM) – 1978

Different Trains - written for string quartet pre recorded tape. The tape consists of vocal samples of Holocaust survivors depicting Jewish people being sent on 'different trains' to concentration camps. The string quartet emulate speech patterns and melodies - (Elektra – Nonesuch) – 1989

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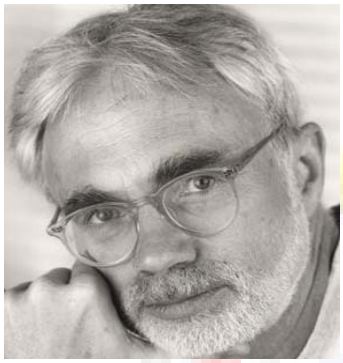
Minimalist Composer – John Adams

John Adams



Born in Massachusetts, 1947

After graduating from Harvard University in 1971, Adams moved to California, where he taught and conducted at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music for ten years. His innovative concerts led to his appointment firstly as contemporary music adviser to the San Francisco Symphony and then as the orchestra's composer-in-residence between 1979 and 1985, the period in which his reputation became established with the success of such works as *Harmonium* and *Harmonielehre*.
In 1985 Adams began a collaboration with the poet Alice Goodman and stage director Peter Sellars that resulted in two operas, *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, worldwide performances of which made them among the most performed operas in recent history. A third stage work, *I Was Looking At The Ceiling And Then I Saw The Sky*, a "song play", was also staged in more than fifty performances in both the US and Europe.
In September of 2003 Adams succeeded Pierre Boulez as Composer in Residence at Carnegie Hall.

Key Listening:
The Chairman Dances - Including 'Short Ride in a Fast Machine' (Elektra / Nonesuch) – 1986 (a highly recommended 'taster' to minimalist music)
Fearful Symmetries – (Elektra / Nonesuch) – 1989
Hoodoo Zephyr – (Elektra / Nonesuch) – 1993
Shaker Loops – (Nonesuch) - 1996

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Minimalist Composers – Michael Nyman

Michael Nyman

Born in London, 1944.

Nyman had abandoned composition in 1964, preferring to work as a musicologist, editing Purcell and Handel, and collecting folk music in Romania. Later he wrote as a critic for several journals, including *The Spectator*, where, in a 1968 review of Cornelius Cardew's *The Great Digest*, he became the first to apply the word 'minimalism' to music. That same year, a BBC broadcast of Steve Reich's *Come Out* opened his ears to further possibilities, and a route back to composition began to emerge. In 1968 he wrote the libretto for Harrison Birtwistle's 'dramatic pastoral' *Down by the Greenwood Side*. Later, Birtwistle, now Musical Director of the National Theatre, London, commissioned him to provide arrangements of 18th century Venetian songs for a 1976 production of Carlo Goldoni's *Il Campiello*, for which Nyman assembled what he would describe as 'the loudest unamplified street band' he could imagine: rebecs, sackbuts, shawms alongside banjo, bass drum and saxophone.

Nyman kept the Campiello Band together after the play's run had finished, adding his own energetic piano-playing to the ensemble. However, a band needs repertoire, and Nyman set about providing it. The Band's line-up expanded, amplification was added and the name changed to the Michael Nyman Band. This was the medium in which Nyman formulated his compositional style around strong melodies, flexible yet assertive rhythms, and precisely articulated ensemble playing.

Nyman's work ranges from compositions for the Michael Nyman Band, Symphony Orchestra, Vocal Works and soundtracks. His work as a minimalist composer also draws on Baroque influences; at times one can hear Vivaldi or Handel in his music.

Key Listening:

The Nyman / Greenway Soundtracks – (Virgin Venture) - 1989

The Essential Michael Nyman Band – (Argo) – 1992

The Piano – (Virgin Venture) – 1993

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Minimalist Music – Listening Guide

Key features:

- Minimalist Music usually has a strong sense of pulse, this gives the music it's energy and feels like an 'engine'. Often the pulse is repeated crotchets or quavers.
- The instrumentation is often unusual as Minimalist composers will break 'orchestral' conventions and utilise conflicting instruments in order to create a colourful timbre. For example, the line up of the Michael Band is typically:

  String Quartet (2 Violins, Viola and a 'Cello)
  Bass Guitar
  Alto, Tenor and Baritone Saxophones (sometimes doubling Soprano or Bass)
  Trumpet
  French Horn
  Bass Trombone (doubling euphonium or tuba)
  Piano
  (Note all these instruments are amplified)

- Often a percussion ensemble may be used. This is either all untuned percussion (e.g. Drumming) or all tuned percussion.
- The Marimba is a popular instrument in the music of Reich and Glass.
- Melodic ideas are simple and repeated as 'loops' or ostinatos.
- The texture of the music is 'polyphonic' and often layers up in steps.
- There may be changes of time signature involving irregular time signatures e.g. 5/8 or 7/8, which help throw the music out of phase.
- The music can become monotonous if there are not frequent changes in timbre or rhythm.
- The tempo tends to stay the same even if there are changes of time signature.
- The music has a Hypnotic quality.
- Electronic effects may be added to instruments (e.g. reverb, chorus or delay) and there may be live instruments playing over a pre-recorded tape, e.g. 'Different Trains'.
- Minimalist Music is usually 'Tonal' and tends not to be Dissonant.

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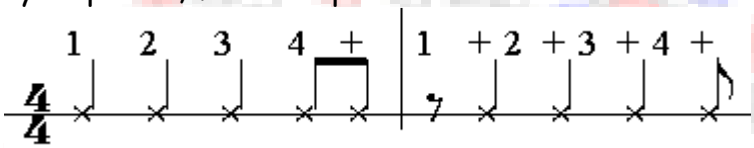
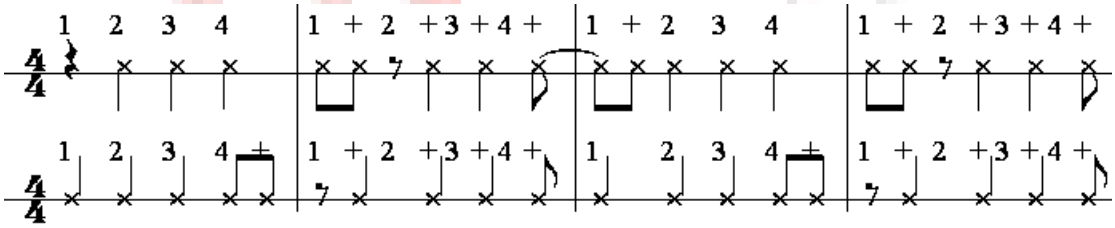
Minimalist Composing – Project 1

Aims:
The aim of this project is to compose a minimalist piece of music for four untuned percussion instruments influenced by Reich 'Clapping Music'.

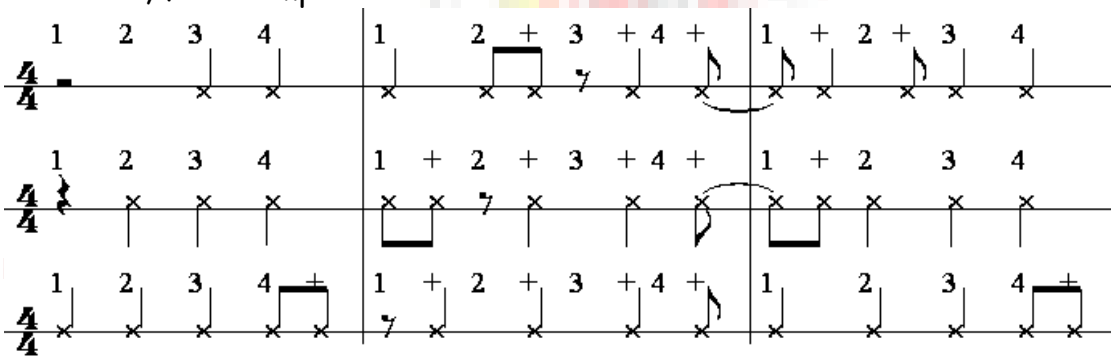
Begin by teaching a making up a repeated 2 bar rhythm which uses syncopation, for example:



After one repetition of the rhythm add a part (starting on bar 3) which repeats the rhythm but starting on beat 2.
Make sure you change the instrument, for example:



After another repetition add another part (starting in bar 5) starting on beat 3, for example:



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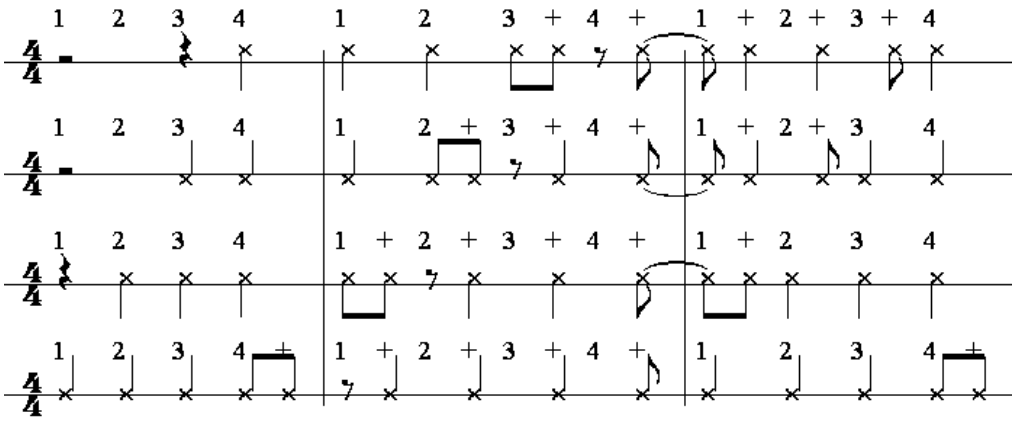
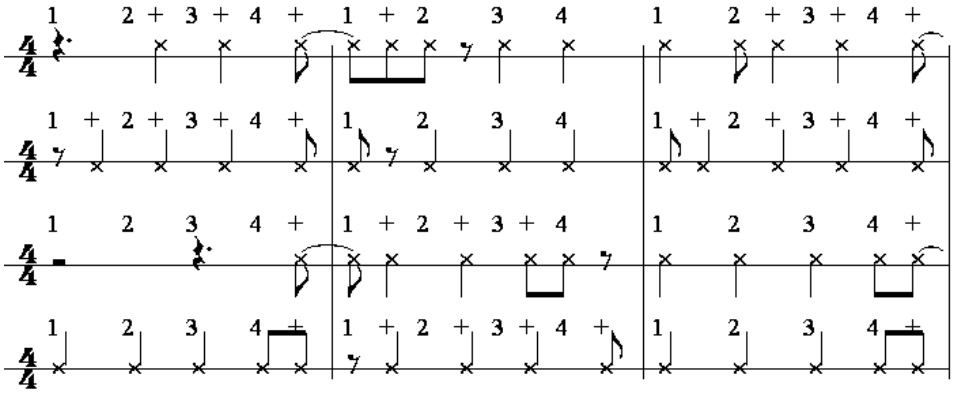
Finally add at bar 7 another part copying the original rhythm, but starting on beat 4, for example:

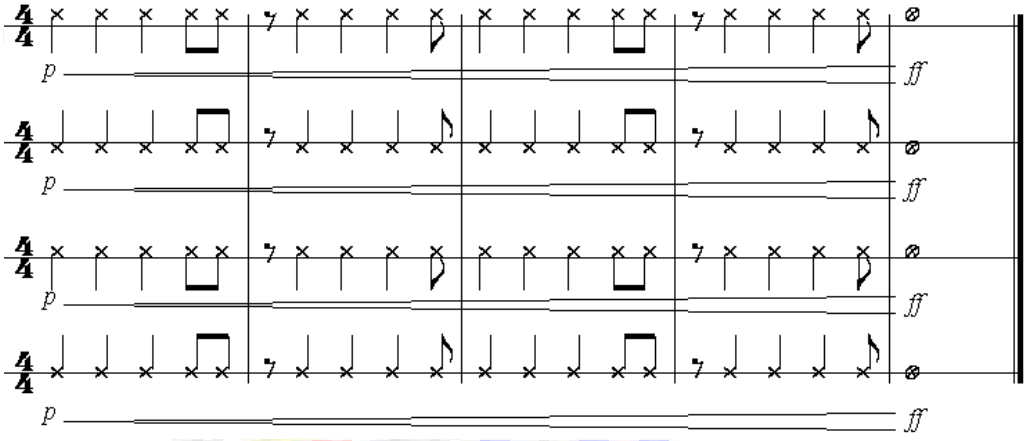


Once you have done this experiment with starting the rhythm on quaver off beats as well as changing the order of the entries of the instruments, for example:



HINT - This might make a 'busier' middle section.

End you composition with all the percussion instruments playing the same rhythm in unison with a crescendo…



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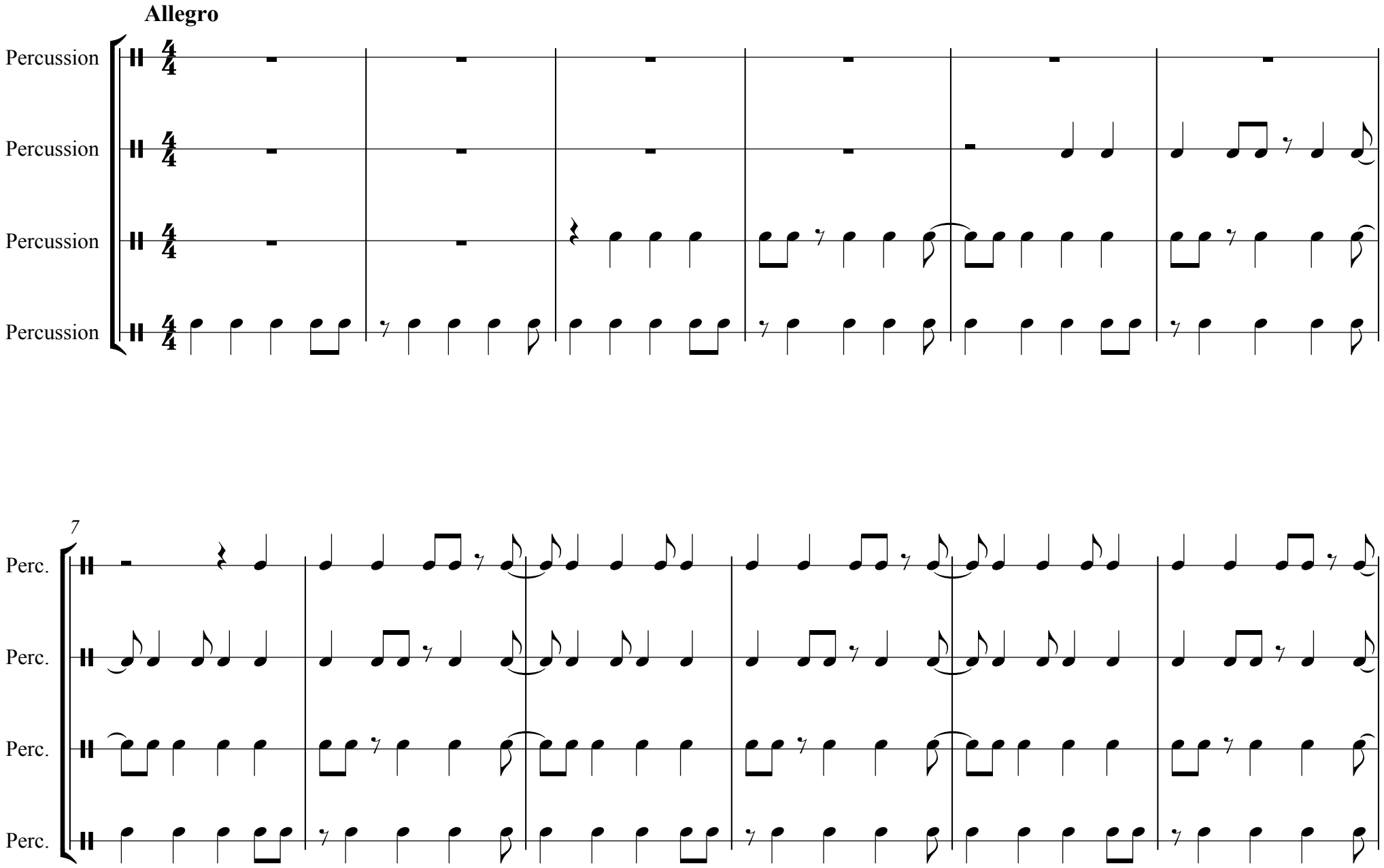
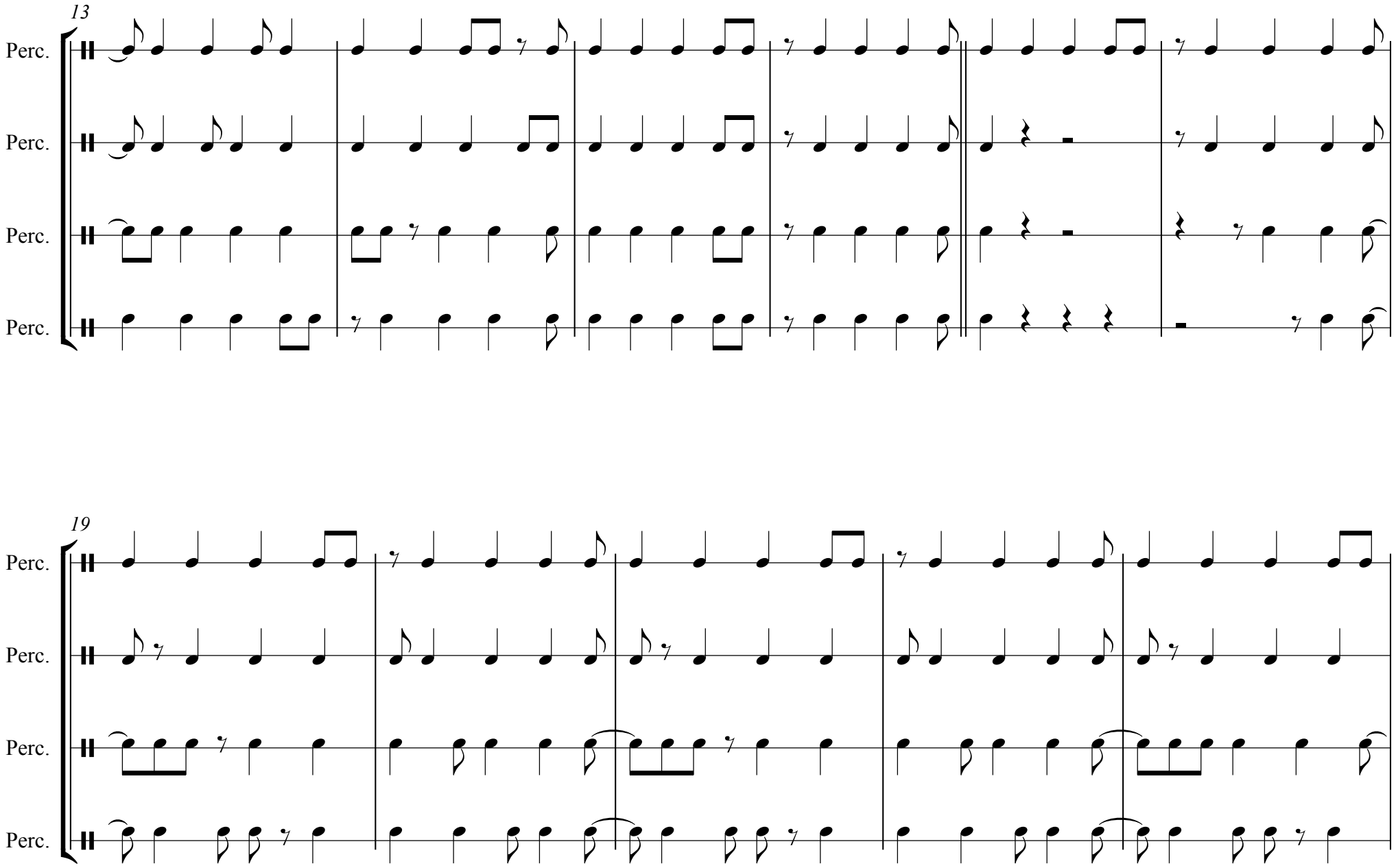
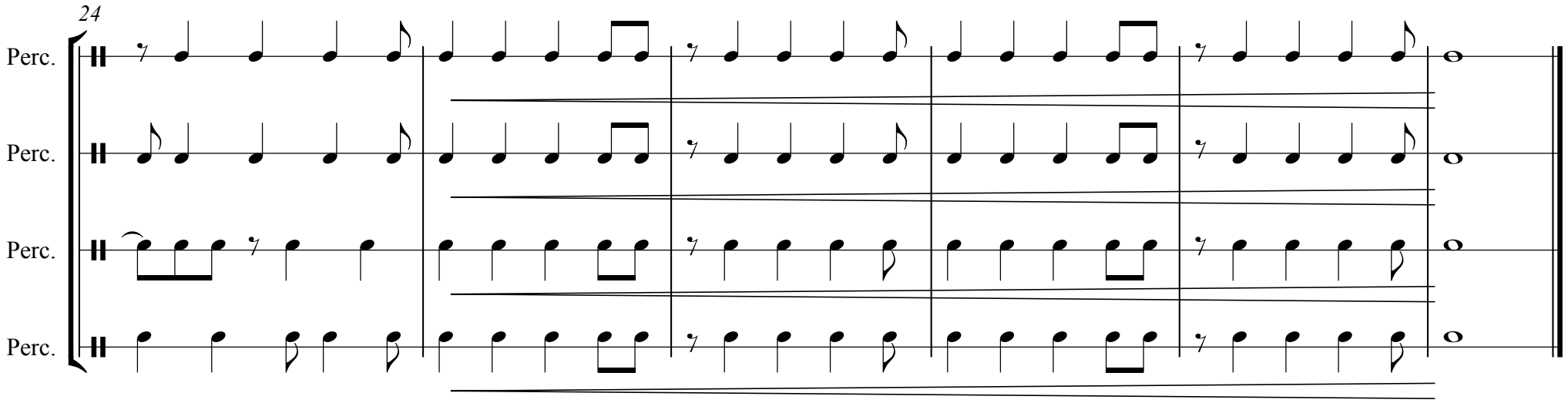
Minimalist Composing Project 1




13
Perc.
Perc.
Perc.
Perc.
19
Perc.
Perc.
Perc.
Perc.

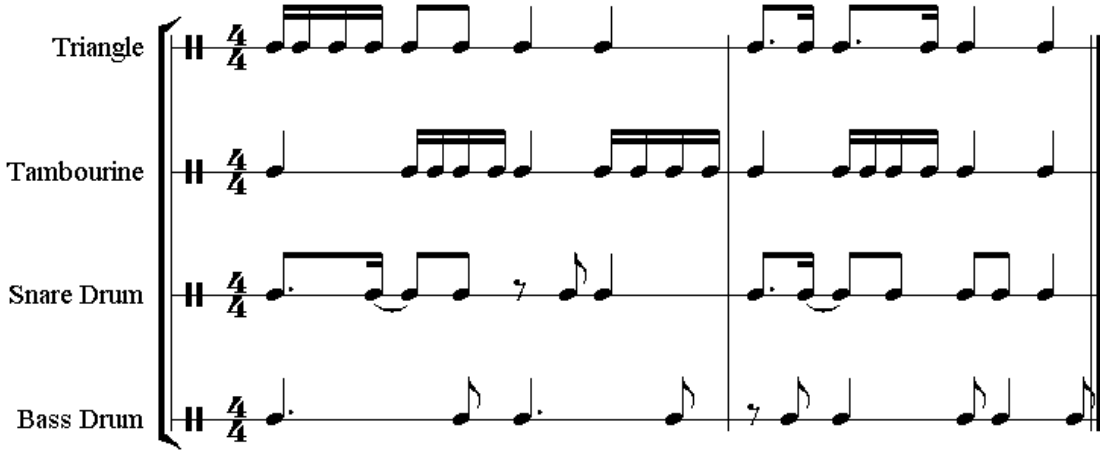

24
Perc.
Perc.
Perc.
Perc.

Minimalist Composing – Project 2

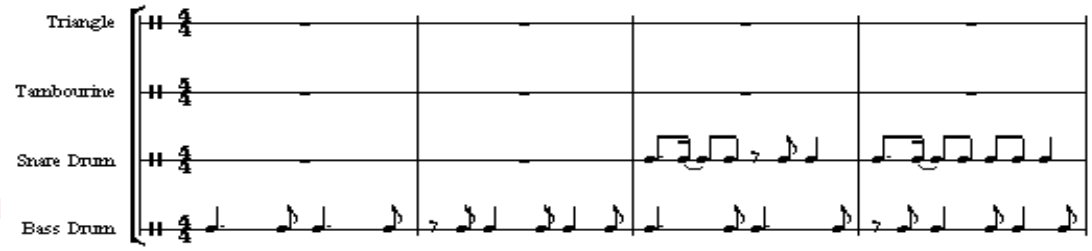
Aims:
The aim of this project is to compose a minimalist piece of music for four untuned percussion instruments each using a different loop. Irregular time signatures are also introduced for augmentation and diminution of rhythmic cells.

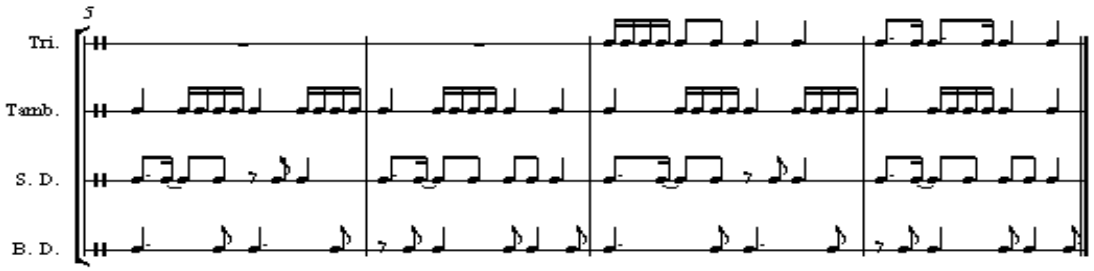
Begin by selecting four un-tuned percussion instruments e.g.:
TRIANGLE
TAMBOURINE
SNARE DRUM
BASS DRUM

Make up a repeated two bar rhythm in 4/4 for each instrument e.g.:



Arrange the rhythms so the instruments enter every two bars e.g.:





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You can now repeat the whole ensemble rhythm for four bars (bars 9 - 12) – Any longer and the piece could become BORING!

The next step is to fragment the ensemble rhythm by using:

AUGMENTATION – adding rhythmic values

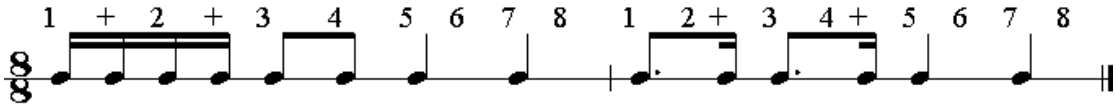
DIMINUTION – subtracting rhythmic values

This can be done with the use of IRREGULAR time signatures such as 5/8, 7/8 or 11/8
Notice that these time signatures avoid an even division of the bar.

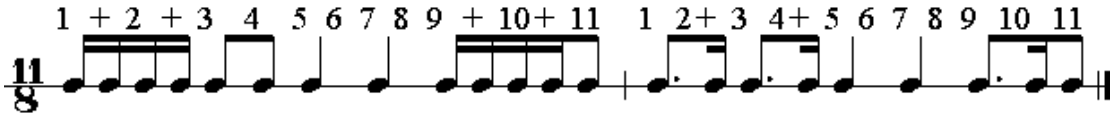
Or by using COMPOUND time signatures such as 3/8, 6/8, 9/8 or 12/8.
Notice that these time signatures are based on multiples of three.

If we remember that 4/4 is also equal to 8 quavers in the bar (8/8), we can AUGMENT the rhythm by adding the quavers from the beginning of the rhythmic pattern e.g.

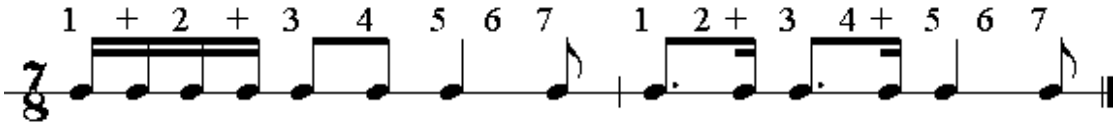
This Rhythm in 4/4 (8/8):



Will become this when AUGMENTED into 11/8:



If DIMINUTION is used the rhythm becomes:



These techniques are very effective and can be applied to the whole ensemble rhythm or indivdual rhythms. This gives the effect of a broken clock or scratched record. This could make an interesting middle section.

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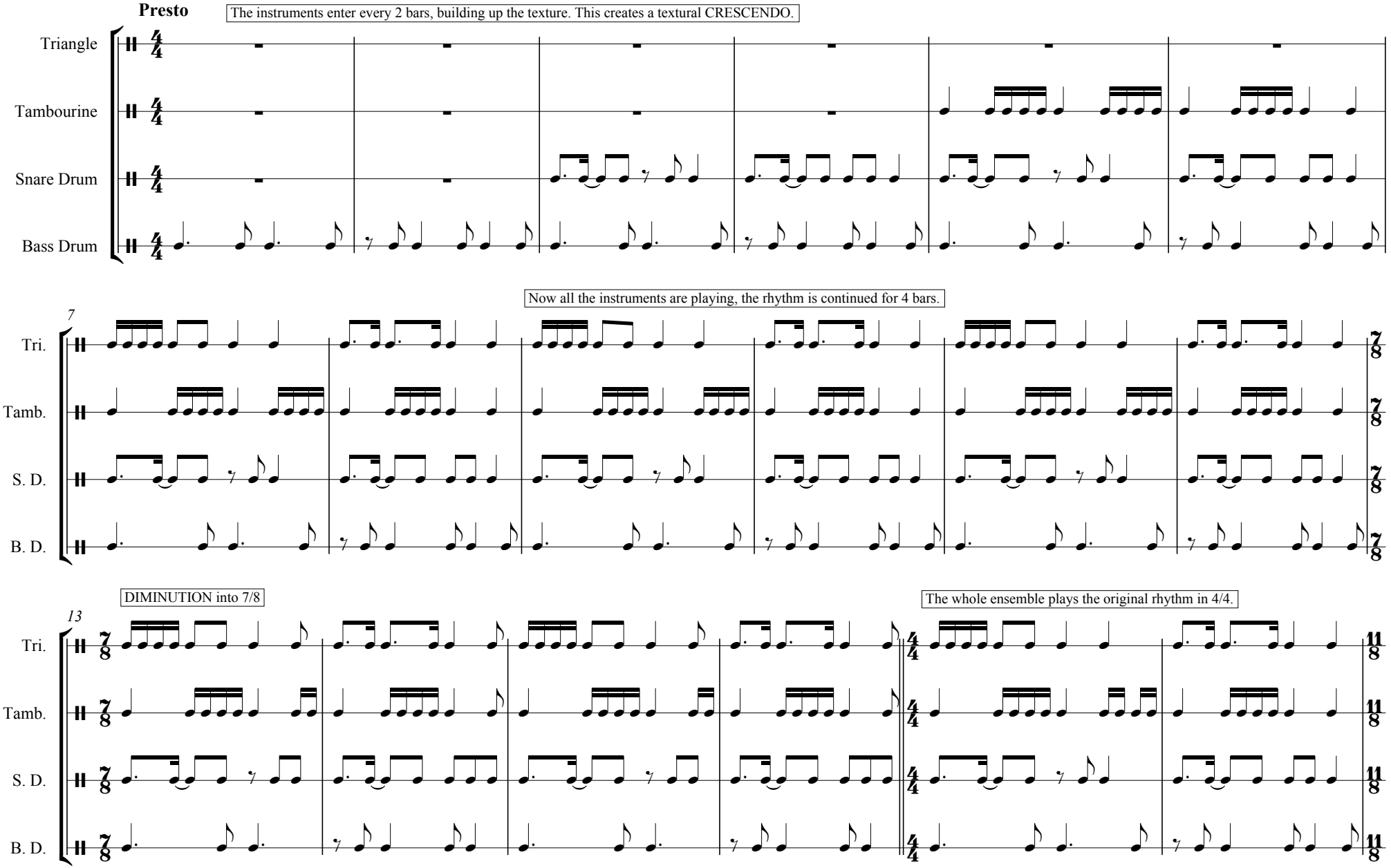
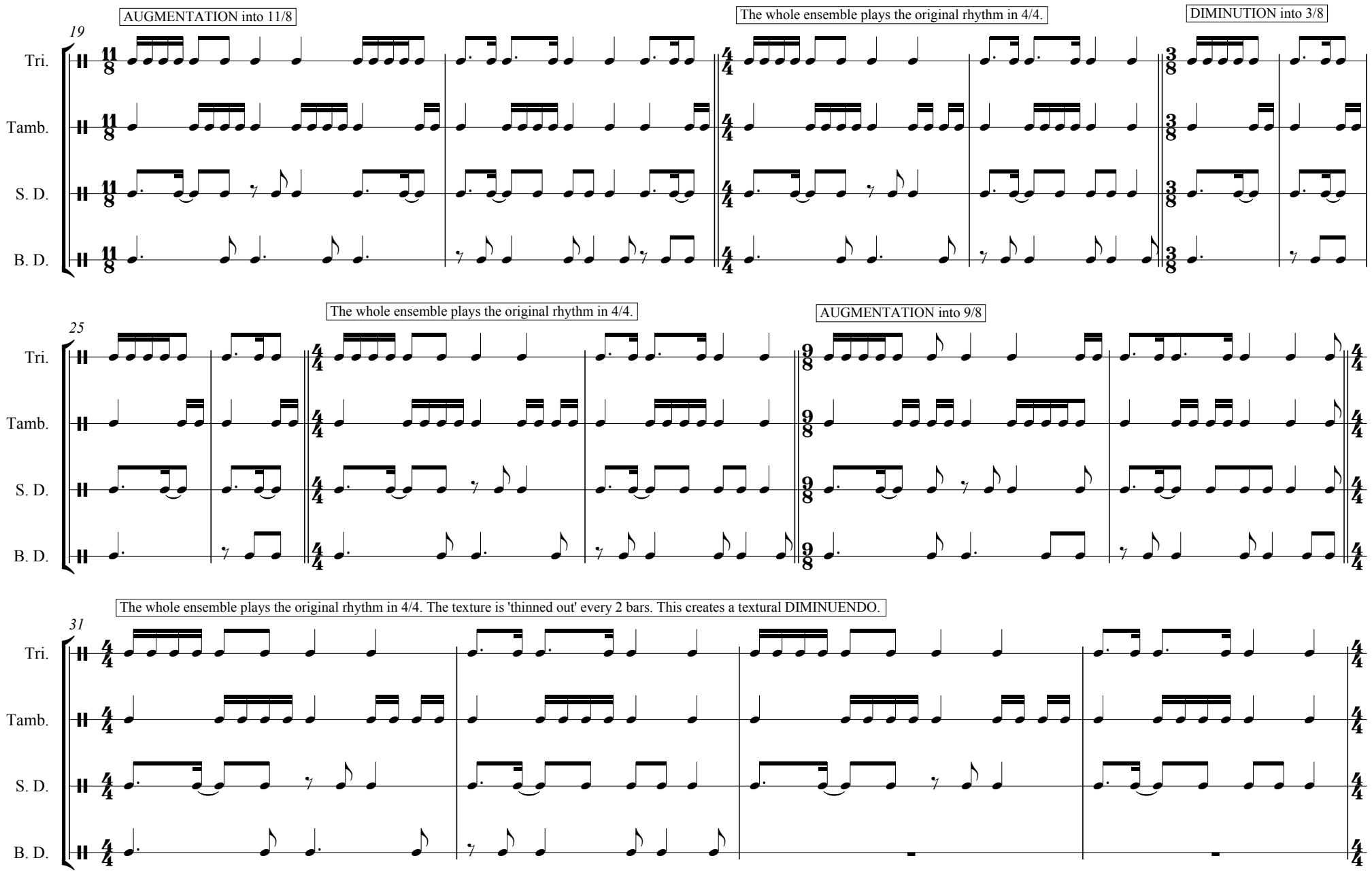
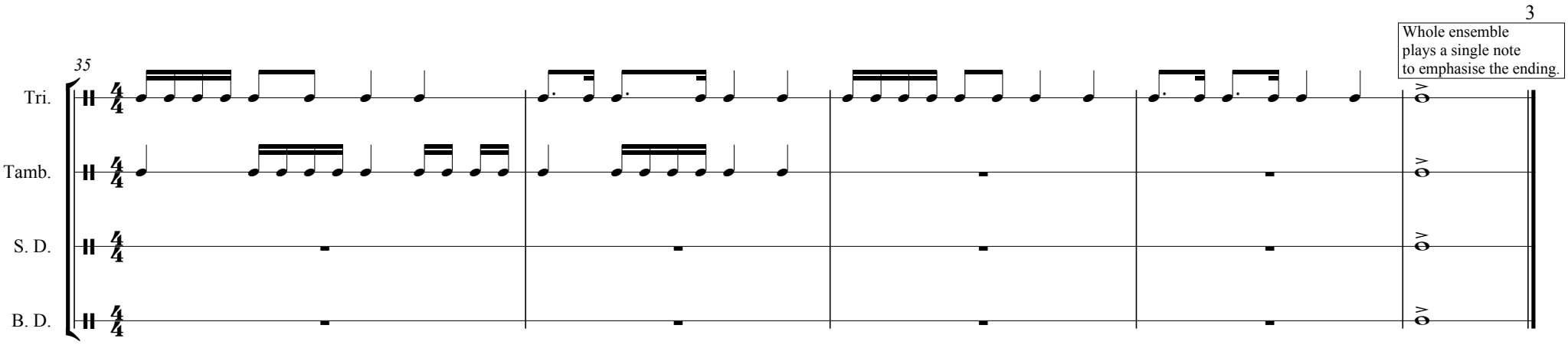
Minimalist Composing - Project 2




AUGMENTATION into 11/8
The whole ensemble plays the original rhythm in 4/4.
DIMINUTION into 3/8
19
Tri.
Tamb.
S. D.
B. D.
The whole ensemble plays the original rhythm in 4/4.
AUGMENTATION into 9/8
25
Tri.
Tamb.
S. D.
B. D.
The whole ensemble plays the original rhythm in 4/4. The texture is 'thinned out' every 2 bars. This creates a textural DIMINUENDO.
31
Tri.
Tamb.
S. D.
B. D.


35
Tri.
Tamb.
S. D.
B. D.
Whole ensemble
plays a single note
to emphasise the ending.

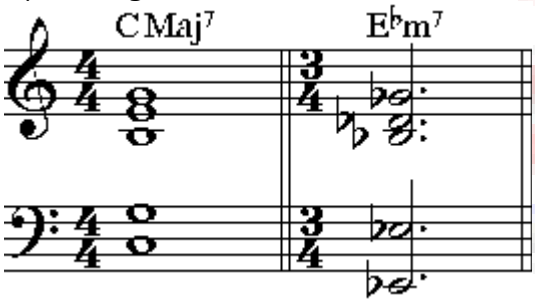
Minimalist Composing – Project 3

Aims:
The aim of this project is to compose a minimalist piece of music for tuned percussion instruments each using a different loop, a keyboard instrument can also be used to support the harmony by playing drones. The loops are based on chord notes and arpeggio patterns. Irregular time signatures are also used.
The techniques studied so far can be applied to writing for orchestral instruments – try writing for string quartet or even the Nyman Band line up.

Begin by selecting four tuned percussion instruments and add a keyboard instrument e.g.:
GLOCKENSPIEL
XYLOPHONE
MARIMBA
VIBRAPHONE
HARPSICHORD

The composition is based on two chords; each uses a different time signature. These chords can be totally unrelated.

Select two chords (e.g. C Major and Eb Minor), you can extend the chord by adding the 7th or 9th to make it more colourful. For example:



These chords are the foundation of your composition. Play them and become familiar with the notes of each chord.

HINT – The right hand of the chords can be played as repeated quavers over the bass drone. This helps give the music a rhythmic 'drive'.

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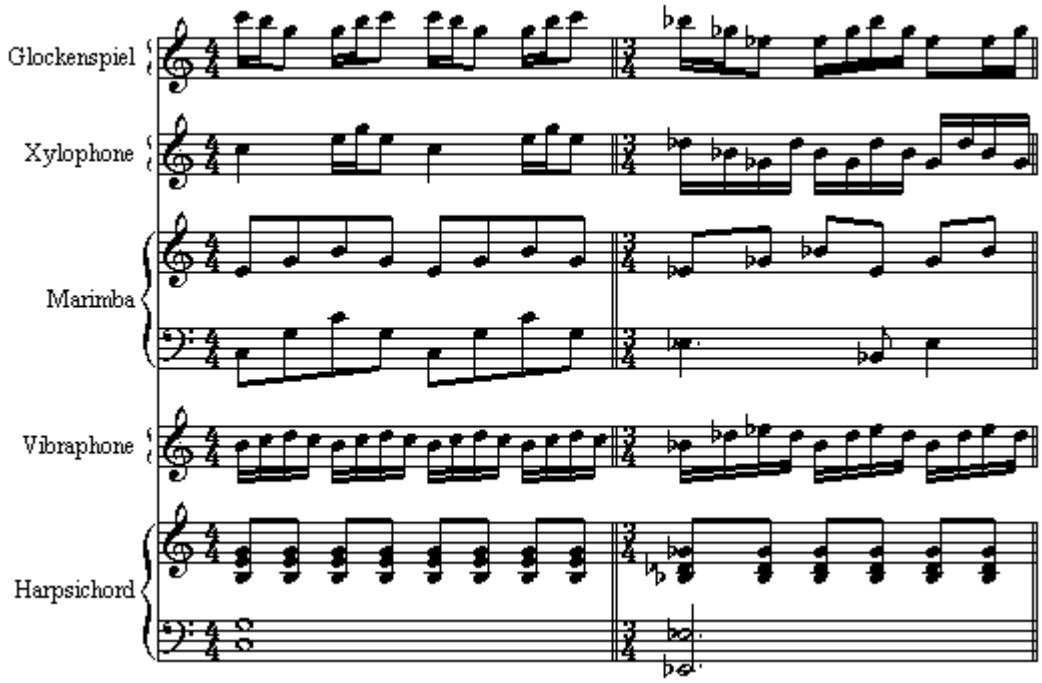
For each chord create melodic patterns made up of the arpeggio notes or using passing notes:



NOTE – If you are using Sibelius and the notes turn red this means you are writing beyond the range of the instrument and it is not possible to play! You can change the notes and still keep the rhythmic pattern.

You now have a number of 'cells' (bars of music), which can be layered up.

Begin your piece by introducing the 'cells' from the first chord and build up the texture, before this becomes monotonous change to the second chord and time signature.

Use AUGMENTATION and DIMINUTION to create vary the rhythmic patterns of the piece. This FRAGMENTS the music creating a musical MOSAIC.

Follow through the study score and see if you can recognise the compositional techniques…

HINT – When you have finished your piece don't forget to add DYNAMICS which will add to the interest and shape of your music.

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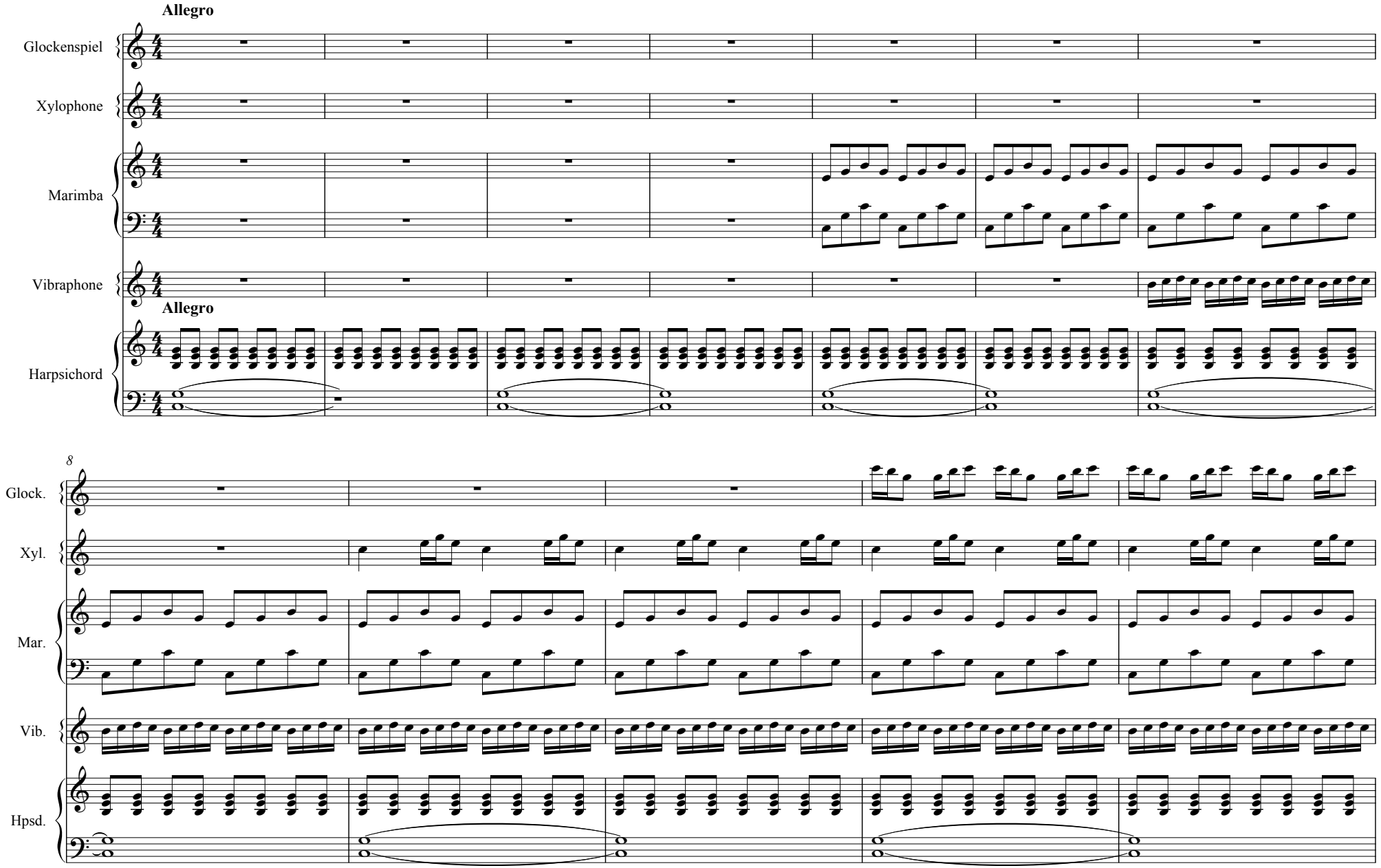
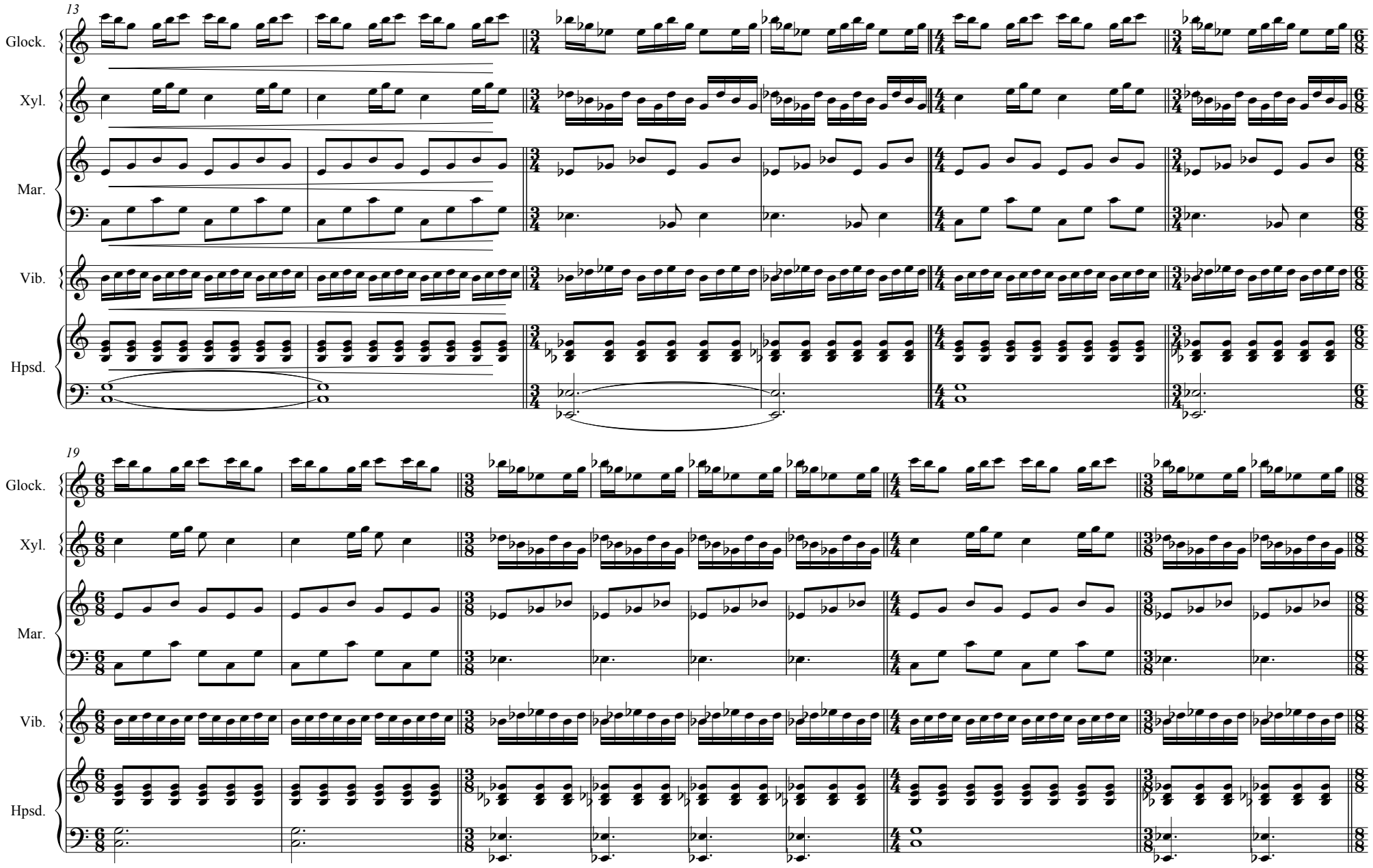
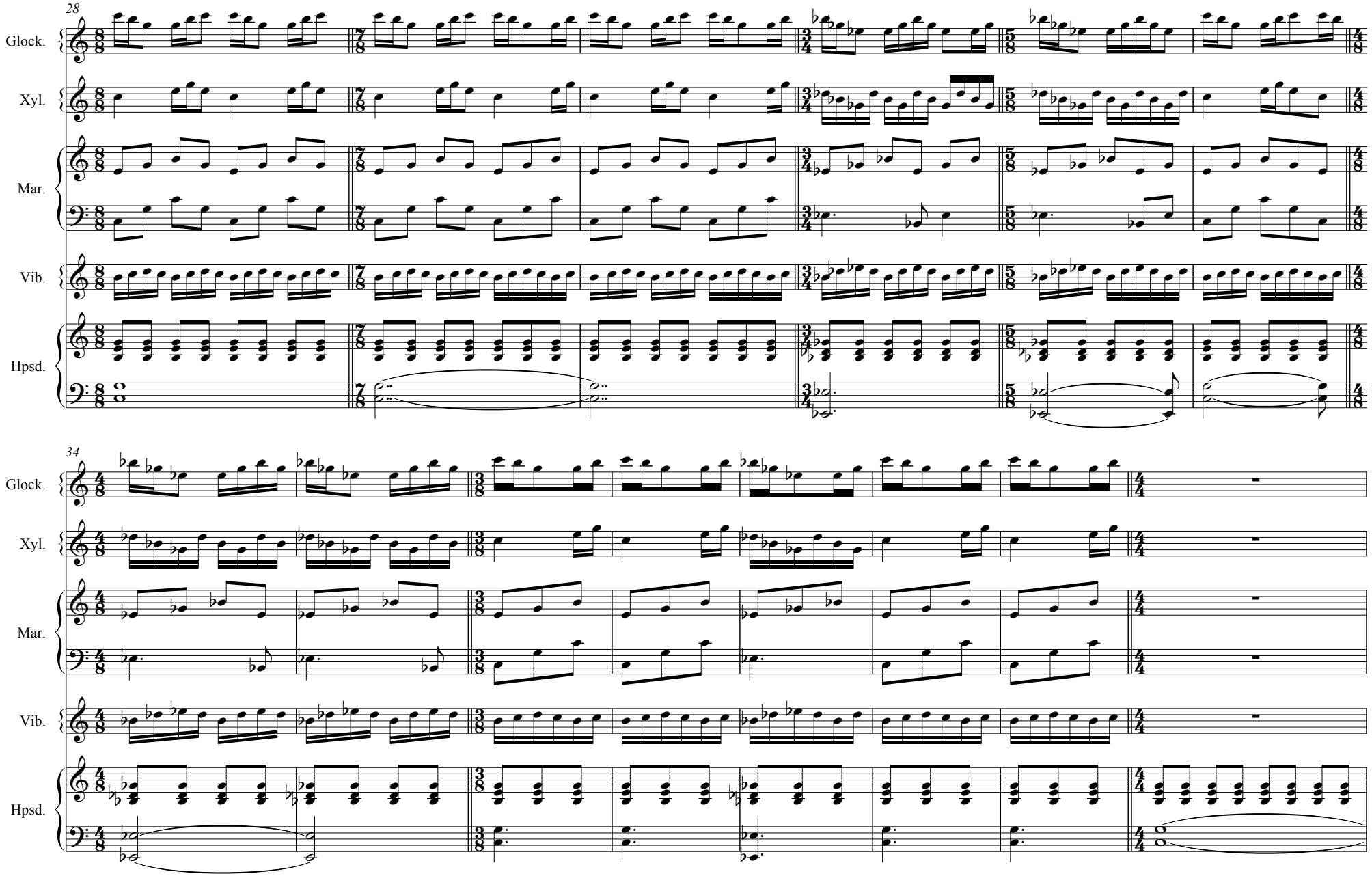
Minimalist Composing - Project 3 Study Score




13
Glock.
Xyl.
Mar.
Vib.
Hpsd.
19
Glock.
Xyl.
Mar.
Vib.
Hpsd.


28
Glock.
Xyl.
Mar.
Vib.
Hpsd.
34
Glock.
Xyl.
Mar.
Vib.
Hpsd.

Minimalist Composing – Use of ICT

As can been seen from the three projects, ICT can play a major role in facilitating the composition and realisation of a Minimalist piece of Music.

There are a number of opportunities available for ambitious student who have the facilities:

Using recordings of live samples of instruments which can be combined with a MIDI backing.

Adding effects to live recordings of instruments (e.g. delay, chorus etc.).

Setting a Poem in a Minimalist style (the operas of John Adams are a good influence).

Using a MIDI backing for a live performance, good for solo instruments and singers.

Combining MIDI with Digital Video to create a Film Score in the style of Philip Glass.

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