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THE “EXPERIMENTAL” STAGE OF MUSICAL MINIMALISM

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the “experimental” stage of musical minimalism in the late 1950s and early 1960s as an autonomous phase in the formation of the movement, rather than merely a “prehistory” of so-called classical minimalism. Drawing on early works by La Monte Young, Dennis Johnson, Terry Jennings, and others, it analyses compositional principles of radical reduction of sonic material, extended duration, a stable tonal centre, repetition, and additive processes – features that give rise to a new mode of listening. The study also examines a range of socio-cultural factors that shaped the emergence of experimental minimalism.

Keywords: *minimalism, experimental stage, Fluxus, conceptual art, performativity, intermediality*

Musical minimalism is now widely regarded as one of the key currents in late twentieth-century art music. Its influence extends far beyond an “avant-garde niche”: minimalist approaches to musical time, repetition, and the reduction of parameters have permeated film music, popular genres, media art, and performance-based practices. Yet in most surveys the history of minimalism is presented from a canonised perspective, in which the emergence of iconic works of the 1960s is treated as the point of departure and attention is focused primarily on Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and their followers.

In such accounts “minimalism” is often equated with a relatively stable stylistic complex: clear pulse, diatonic or modal harmony, gradual processes of change, and repetitive modules that can be easily recognised and analysed. The experimental phase of the

late 1950s and early 1960s tends either to be compressed into a short prelude or is relegated to the status of marginal “precedents.” As a result, the specifically radical nature of early minimalism – its challenge to conventional notions of form, listening, and even the musical work as such – is frequently underestimated. To restore the autonomy of this stage means not only to add several forgotten names to the canon, but also to revise the basic narrative about how minimalism emerged and what problems it originally addressed.

Before this “classical” layer of American minimalism took shape, however, an experimental stage developed in the United States, associated with composers engaged in radical explorations of how listening itself might be transformed. The early works of La Monte Young, Dennis Johnson, and their immediate circle do not yet constitute a stable style in

the conventional sense, but they already reveal a new mode of musical thinking.

The origins of minimalism are most often dated to the early 1960s, although certain precursors can be identified earlier. La Monte Young's *Trio for Strings* (1958) – a work composed almost entirely of sustained tones and pauses – is frequently cited as a point of departure for minimalist music. An equally important figure within experimental minimalism is Dennis Johnson, the composer of *The Second Machine* (1959), which employs only four pitches borrowed from Young's *Trio for Strings*. That same year he produced his most large-scale work, the piano piece *November*, which lasts approximately six hours. Here, features that would later become defining for minimalist writing emerge with particular clarity: a stable tonality sustained throughout, repetition, additive development, and a meditative mode of perception.

It is symptomatic that many of these works were initially performed not in traditional concert halls but in semi-private or alternative spaces, often with a small and prepared audience. The experimental stage of minimalism was thus closely tied to a particular “micro-public” that was willing to accept radically extended durations and a high degree of apparent “non-eventfulness.” This social dimension is important, early minimalism was less a ready-made style than a laboratory of new listening habits.

Among the first to experiment with long durations in Young's wake was Terry Jennings (1940–1981), a prodigy who played saxophone and clarinet. In 1960 he composed *Piano Piece*, based on slow, sustained sonorities reminiscent of Morton Feldman's early music, as well as a *String Quartet* consisting of only 43 notes and lasting 28 minutes. Jennings's subsequent development, however, was interrupted by drug addiction, and he was killed at the age of forty-one.

Alongside the work of La Monte Young, Terry Riley made a major contribution to the emergence of repetitive minimalism. One of his earliest experiments was *Music for The Gift* (1963), composed in Paris for Ken Dewey's theatre production *The Gift*. The project involved a jazz quartet led by trumpeter Chet Baker, who performed Miles Davis's “So What.” Riley recorded each instrumental

part separately (trumpet, trombone, double bass, and drums) and then, through studio processing, shaped the material into an autonomous tape composition.

At the production's 1963 premiere, the recordings were played back in parallel with the live performance, generating a complex polyphonic texture. In this work Riley first employed the tape delay loop technique – superimposing recorded phrases upon themselves with a temporal offset, producing an endless echo and a gradual accretion of layers. One machine played back the sound while a second recorded it with a delay; the signal was then routed back to the first device and combined with subsequent fragments. This setup allowed the material to be repeatedly duplicated and subtly varied, creating the effect of an expanding stratum of improvisatory elements. *Music for The Gift* is often regarded as a turning point, in which jazz improvisation was reimagined through studio technology and the composition itself as one of the earliest examples of a musical “remix” (Margasak P., 2025). The piece anticipated many later developments in electronic and minimalist music – from loop-based sound collages by Brian Eno and Robert Fripp to sampling practices in ambient and hip-hop decades later.

Reed Streams (1965) was Terry Riley's debut album. It contains two instrumental tracks, “Untitled Organ” and “Dorian Reeds,” both built on repeating figures and sustained concentration on a single tonal centre. Riley himself observed that “an ecstatic effect can be achieved by staying on one note... this is a path toward a transcendent experience of music” (Toop D., 1995, 185). This philosophy is audible throughout the album. From short motives (roughly four to twelve notes), Riley develops a kind of “one-note shamanism” – endless variation around a central pitch or sonority. He was also drawn to the quiet noises and mechanical overtones of the organ, which subtly change through the prolonged repetition of a single pattern. This led him to formulate an improvisational approach: “If I can play one pattern virtuously, I can unfold an entire piece from it” – a principle that underpins the second track (Red Bull Music Academy, 2018).

At this point a number of important differences between the experimental stage and

later “classical” repetitive minimalism can be identified. In the former, repetition often functions not as a clearly articulated rhythmic ostinato but as the almost imperceptible recurrence of long tones and intervals. Pulse is frequently absent or blurred, metric hierarchy is weakened, and the listener’s attention shifts from following form over time to inhabiting a quasi-static field of sound. By contrast, in the music of Reich, Glass, or early John Adams, repetition becomes structurally explicit: processes of phase shifting, additive rhythms, and modular construction are foregrounded as organising devices. Thus, the experimental stage may be described as a “pre-pulsed” minimalism, in which continuity and duration are more decisive than pattern and beat.

The emergence of musical minimalism as an artistic phenomenon took place within the broader socio-cultural context of the 1950s and 1960s, marked by the breakdown of boundaries between art forms, the rejection of generic hierarchies, and an active rethinking of perception itself. At its initial stage, proto-minimalism did not yet possess stable stylistic characteristics, since its meaning was determined less by specific musical devices than by a conceptual stance and a particular mode of artistic thinking.

Eastern philosophies – above all Zen Buddhism and Daoism – were of special importance in this context, influencing key figures such as John Cage and La Monte Young. Cage’s idea of “silence” as a mode of active perception (as in *4’33”*), along with his refusal of hierarchies among events and his pursuit of “zero-eventness,” established fundamental principles later taken up by Young and other early minimalists. As Jonathan Bernard emphasises, pulse “was never substantially present in La Monte Young’s works” (Bernard J. W., 2003, 122). In place of metric organisation, Young’s music privileges extended durations and stable fields of frequency.

The impact of conceptual art is likewise difficult to overstate. The notion of “art as idea” was articulated by Henry Flynt in an essay in which he defines “concept art” as art whose material is not matter but concepts (Flynt, H., 1963). This brings early minimalist experiments into proximity with the aesthetics of artists such as Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth. La Monte Young’s *Compo-*

sition 1960 series operates precisely within this framework. These works take the form of written instructions, whose realisation may be literal or metaphorical, while their artistic significance lies in the very act of following an idea. Young’s formulation “Draw a straight line and follow it” in *Composition 1960 No. 10* exemplifies a shift of the aesthetic centre from result to process, from form to concept.

The aesthetic and organisational principles of minimalism were also shaped to a considerable extent by intermedial artistic practices. Particularly significant was the Fluxus movement, whose participants (Joseph Beuys, George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, among others) sought to erase the boundary between life and art, making active use of chance, ritual, corporeality, and the simplest everyday objects. Their events often lacked a rigid structure and resembled happenings – event-based forms of art in which what mattered was not staging but the participants’ involvement, spontaneity, and unpredictability. These traits also resonate in the experimental phase of minimalism: its “open forms,” multiple realisation options, and orientation toward experiencing what unfolds “here and now” make it intermedial in nature.

It was precisely within this atmosphere of radical artistic rethinking that the *Theatre of Eternal Music* emerged – a collective led by La Monte Young that included Marian Zazeela, Tony Conrad, John Cale, and others. The group developed long-duration, near-static soundscapes grounded in sustained tones (drones), microtonal intervals, and subtle modulations that exert a psychoacoustic effect on the listener. Central to their practice was the embodied experience of sound – its vibrational, frequency-based presence – while musical form was aligned with ritual, mantra, or altered states of consciousness.

From the perspective of listening practices, the experimental stage of minimalism may be described as a training in a “vertical” perception of time. Instead of tracking thematic development or harmonic progression, the listener learns to focus on the internal life of a seemingly homogeneous sound: beating patterns between close intervals, slow shifts of timbre, acoustic illusions arising from prolonged exposure to a narrow frequency band. This type of listening later proved crucial not

only for minimalist and postminimalist composition, but also for ambient music, drone, and various forms of sound art.

Thus, the experimental stage of minimalism took shape as the result of a synthesis of musical, visual, philosophical, and performative practices. Its proponents focused primarily on constructing a distinctive sonic space, perceived by the listener as a “here-and-now”

phenomenon. Their creative strategy was not to fix music as a finished artefact, but to generate an acoustic experience actualised only in real time – an approach that aligns their work with concepts of performativity and processualism in contemporary art. These orientations later became foundational both for “classical” repetitive minimalism and for its subsequent transformations.

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