

Minimalism

So taken for granted was the extremism of the postwar avant-garde that advanced composers began to worry about impending dead ends. "How can you make a revolution," Charles Wuorinen asked an interviewer (thinking perhaps of Cage), "when the revolution before last has already said that anything goes?" That was in 1962. By the end of the decade, the answer was clear: "No, it doesn't!" Many of the most self-consciously innovative composers who came into prominence during that decade had begun experimenting with a new kind of radicalism: radically reduced means. Because of that reduction, and because of its reliance on a great deal of (near) repetition of small units, the trend became known (after a comparable tendency in the visual arts) as minimalism. But that term, originally intended (like impressionism or even baroque) as pejorative, has never sat well with the makers of the music, and there are aspects of their products—extravagant length being one—that definitely contradict the convenient label. The way they have talked about it suggests that "pattern and process" might better describe their music. At least the second term in the proposed phrase was explicitly embraced by Steve Reich (1936-), one of the movement's pioneers, in the title of one of his most characteristic statements of principle. The main principle was that the process informing the music's unfolding (unlike the principles informing serial or aleatoric music) should be wholly available to perception. It would be a mistake, however, to regard minimalism, or pattern-and-process music, as a break with the postwar avant-garde rather than a part of it. Its crucial point of likeness with earlier avant-garde attitudes (and even with earlier *isms* like neoprimitivism and neoclassicism, both associated with Stravinsky) was its unequivocally embraced impersonalism, its lack of interest—ringingly declared in Reich's final sentence—in human psychology or subjectivity. Still and all, the trend was distinctive, and highly significant in that it was the first American classical style to exert a strong technical and structural influence on the music of European composers.

Music as a Gradual Process

I do not mean the process of composition but rather pieces of music that are, literally, processes.

The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously. (Think of a round or infinite canon.)

I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.

To facilitate closely detailed listening a musical process should happen extremely gradually.

Performing and listening to a gradual musical process resembles:

pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it gradually come to rest;

turning over an hour glass and watching the sand slowly run through to the bottom;

placing your feet in the sand by the ocean's edge and watching, feeling, and listening to the waves gradually bury them.

Although I may have the pleasure of discovering musical processes and composing the musical material to run through them, once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself.

Material may suggest what sort of process it should be run through (content suggests form), and processes may suggest what sort of material should be run through them (form suggests content). If the shoe fits, wear it.

As to whether a musical process is realized through live human performance or through some electromechanical means is not finally the main issue. One of the most beautiful concerts I ever heard consisted of four composers playing their tapes in a dark hall. (A tape is interesting when it's an interesting tape.)

It is quite natural to think about musical processes if one is frequently working with electromechanical sound equipment. All music turns out to be ethnic music.

Musical processes can give one a direct contact with the impersonal and also a kind of complete control, and one doesn't always think of the impersonal and complete control as going together. By "a kind" of complete control, I mean that by running this material through this process I completely control all that results, but also that I accept all that results without changes.

John Cage has used processes and has certainly accepted their results, but the processes he used were compositional ones that could not be heard when the piece was performed. The process of using the *I Ching* or imperfections in a sheet of paper to determine musical parameters can't be heard when listening to music composed that way. The compositional processes and the sounding music have no audible connection. Similarly, in serial music, the series itself is seldom audible. (This is a basic difference between serial—basically European—music, and serial—basically American—art, where the perceived series is usually the focal point of the work.)

James Tenney said in conversation, "Then the composer isn't privy to anything." I don't know any secrets of structure that you can't hear. We all listen to the process together since it's quite audible, and one of the reasons it's quite audible is because it's happening extremely gradually.

The use of hidden structural devices in music never appealed to me. Even when all the cards are on the table and everyone hears what is gradually happening in a musical process, there are still enough mysteries to satisfy all. These mysteries are the impersonal, unintended, psychoacoustic by-products of the intended process. These might include submelodies heard within repeated melodic patterns, stereophonic effects due to listener location, slight irregularities in performance, harmonics, difference tones, and so on.

Listening to an extremely gradual musical process opens my ears to *it*, but *it* always extends farther than I can hear, and that makes it interesting to listen to that musical

process again. That area of every gradual (completely controlled) musical process, where one hears the details of the sound moving out away from intentions, occurring for their own acoustic reasons, is *it*.

I begin to perceive these minute details when I can sustain close attention and a gradual process invites my sustained attention. By “gradual” I mean extremely gradual; a process happening so slowly and gradually that listening to it resembles watching a minute hand on a watch—you can perceive it moving after you stay with it a little while.

Several currently popular modal musics like Indian classic and drug-oriented rock and roll may make us aware of minute sound details because in being modal (constant key center, hypnotically droning and repetitious) they naturally focus on these details rather than on key modulation, counterpoint, and other peculiarly Western devices. Nevertheless, these modal musics remain more or less strict frameworks for improvisation. They are not processes.

The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note details and the overall form simultaneously. One can’t improvise in a musical process—the concepts are mutually exclusive.

While performing and listening to gradual musical processes, one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outward toward *it*.

Steve Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” first published in 1969 in the catalogue to *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. Reprinted in Steve Reich, *Writings on Music 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34–36.