SECOND EDITION

MUSIC IN THE WESTERN WORLD

A History in Documents

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I believe, The Beatles exemplify this feature, then we have reached (strange though it may seem as coincidence with our planet's final years) a new and golden renaissance of song.

Ned Rorem, "The Music of The Beatles," *New York Review of Books,* 18 January 1968. Reprinted in Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (eds.), *The Lennon Companion* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988), 99–109.

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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.)

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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.

One of the most notable differences between minimalism and other avant-garde styles was the fact that minimalist pieces produced euphoria in audiences and attracted a large following. That fact was used, of course, to impugn it by those who, in keeping with older (Romantic) versions of modernism like that of T. W. Adorno (see p. 442), regarded popularity and avant-garde as mutually exclusive terms. The basis of the style's appeal is well conveyed in a memoir by Ransom Wilson, a flutist and conductor, who attended one of the benchmark events in the history of twentieth-century opera: the now legendary performance of *Einstein on the Beach*, an opera composed by Philip Glass (1937–) and staged by Robert Wilson (1941–), at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. It was not a presentation by the Metropolitan Opera company; the performers had merely rented the house on a night when it was free. A dozen or so years later, however, the Metropolitan did indeed commission an opera from Glass, called *The Voyage*, to be performed in 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. It was only the third Metropolitan Opera première in half a century, and an impressive testimonial to the minimalist movement's success.

My first encounter with "minimalist" music was at the Metropolitan Opera House on November 28, 1976. I was in the audience for one of the sold-out performances of *Einstein on the Beach*, the opera by Philip Glass in collaboration with dramatist Robert Wilson. As I listened to that five-hour performance, I experienced an amazing transformation. At first I was bored—*very* bored. The music seemed to have no direction, almost giving the impression of a gigantic phonograph with a "stuck needle." I was first irritated and then angry that I'd been taken in by this crazy composer who obviously

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doted on repetition. I thought of leaving. Then, with no conscious awareness, I crossed a threshold and found that the music was touching me, carrying me with it. I began to perceive within it a whole world where change happens so slowly and carefully that each new harmony or rhythmic addition or subtraction seems monumental.

There were no intermissions. The work continued relentlessly in its grip on all of us in that packed house. Suddenly, at a point some four hours into the opera there occurred a completely unexpected harmonic and rhythmic modulation, coupled with a huge jump in the decibel level. People in the audience began to scream with delight and I remember well that my entire body was covered with goose bumps. I left the theater regretting the performance was over, and so excited that I remained awake far into the night.

Ransom Wilson, notes to Angel DS-37340 (1982).

Like Reich, Glass has formed his own performing ensembles to propagate his work, thus restoring the bond between the creative and recreative roles that romanticism, and then modernism, had rent asunder. Both Reich's ensemble (in which Glass at first participated) and Glass's (in which Reich at first participated) used instruments, like electric organs, that were mainly associated with rock, thus furthering by means of timbre the rapprochement of high and low genres that the sixties had set in motion. Also like Reich, Glass has been a willing explicator of his methods. What follows is his own account of his stylistic development up to the event that Ransom Wilson attended, the effects of which Wilson found so powerful.

The musical forces for *Einstein on the Beach* were built around the ensemble for which so much of my music since 1968 has been written. This consisted of two electric organs, three winds (doubling on saxophones, flute and bass clarinet) and one solo soprano voice. A chamber choir of sixteen mixed voices carries the weight of the vocal music in *Einstein*. A violinist, costumed as Einstein, plays a featured part and completes the lineup.

Einstein was planned as an extended evening performance (four hours, forty minutes) without formal, prescribed intermissions. We knew there would be few people able to sit straight through the entire work, and the audience was expected to take their own breaks (quietly, of course) when needed. Personally, I can say that, after more than fifty performances of *Einstein*, I have never seen the entire work straight through without interruption, though many people constantly assure me they have, as it were, taken it "whole." Still, the work was never intended to be seen as a whole, narrative piece. Its "wholeness" comes from its consistency of subject matter and overall structure and becomes the theatrical equivalent of an "act of faith" for the audience.

The sheer unbroken length of *Einstein* clearly presented musical problems that had to be worked out. With that much music to be performed, the orchestra had to be divided into smaller alternating groups, everyone coming together only occasionally for the big *tutti* numbers. The Knee Plays [i.e., joints, Glass's term for entr'actes], for example, feature the chorus and violin with occasional help from one organ. Since the violinist is sitting halfway between the orchestra pit and the stage, it focuses attention in front of the curtain—a real advantage since there was a scenery change during each of the Knee Plays.

This was actually one of my minor miscalculations in writing *Einstein*. Since the Knee Plays were conceived for smaller groupings of musicians and produced a more