

Being Faithful to Life: Performing and Listening in Minimalist Music from the 1960s and 1970s

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Abstract—Minimalism in music, as a new trend of musical style and performance, has been developed in the 1960s. It is a musical form often contrasted to expressionism and serialism. Based on American-born composers, La Monte Young (b. 1935) and Terry Riley (b. 1935), which are regarded as pioneers of this trend, minimalist music has expanded the techniques of musical performance, extending the performance venue from the conventional concert hall to the museum. This research will explore in some detail the interpretation of minimalist music written in the 1960s and 1970s by Steve Reich and Philip Glass. It also examines the relationship between the performer and the listener based on two concepts: concentration and relaxation. Minimalist music is different from the absolute music of the Baroque period and program music of Romantic period. For the performer, concentration and relaxation rests on the perspective and manner of execution of the music and in how to convey it to the listener. For the listener, concentration and relation means a new avenue to appreciate the fascination and timbre of minimalist music. This research will examine a new way of performance practice for the performer and provide an innovative sense of attention for the listener in relationship to the setting as for example when the performance venue has been transformed from concert hall to the museum and the reaction of the listener has become part of the performance in the live performance. Selected works exemplifying these two concepts include *Violin Phase* and *Clapping Music* by Steve Reich and Philip Glass's *Strung Out*.

Index Terms—Minimalist music, violin, concentration, relaxation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Minimalism as an art form developed in the 1960s and 70s in contrast to the abstract expressionism and complexity of modernism.[1] Scholars and musicologists have analyzed the compositional skills and the concepts and ideas informing minimalist composers in a number of existing publications. They have revealed how these composers derived influences from popular music, non-Western Classical music and musical inspiration derived from technology, the arts or their life experiences. For example, Steve Reich's (b. 1936) use of African polyrhythms and Balinese gamelan music in his 1971 work *Drumming*, [2] and Philip Glass' (b. 1937) collaborative works with Sitar maestro Ravi Shankar (1920-2012) and ambient musician Brian Eno (b. 1948).

Minimalist music involves psychological thinking, interpretation, extensive hearing and life experience. For example, when playing *Violin Phase* or *Strung Out*, the performer must practice the resulting rhythmical and

melodic patterns, lead the listener's perceptions and guide their ears to melodic combination who they may not have heard throughout their experience [2]. These minimalist compositions challenged a performer's routine acquired in physical training and their psychological groundwork as well as the listener's sensation of hearing. As an example, we can note the smooth transitions from one simple chord to another and the tensions that occur because of endless-like repetitive patterns and long lasting time.

This research will explore the relationship between the performer and listener in minimalism. The perception means a comprehensive explanation of minimalist music as interpreted by the performer and an appreciation of listening minimalist music by its listeners. Concentration and relaxation as principle concepts will be explained, followed by an analysis of selected minimalist compositions. For the performer, it requires a degree of sympathy for learning the music and understanding the beauty of performing minimalist music. Whether doing the daily practice or executing music in the concert, it needs a well-structured physical practice routine, innovative ways of thinking and various strategies of stage arrangement. For the listener, it is a challenge to experience new ways of listening and to enjoy the execution instead of a concert. Some playing techniques and understandings of what it means to listen to a performance will change based on the venue and the performer's preference.

II. DEFINITION OF MINIMALISM IN MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP

In the 1950s, the musical schools most influential were indeterminism led by John Cage in New York and total serialism guided by Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-200) and Pierre Boulez (1925-2016) in Europe [3]. Minimalism is a reaction to the dominant modernist climate of the 1950s. [4] As defined in the *Oxford Music Online*, "minimalism is a term borrowed from the visual arts to describe a style of composition characterized by an intentionally simplified rhythmic, melodic and harmonic vocabulary. [4] " The complexity of modern musical forms such as total serialism stands in full contrast with the simple style of twentieth century's minimalism. Minimalism also has been defined as minimal music in different forms by different nations and musicians. Examples include "trance music" in Europe, the "systems music" of Michael Nyman's music, the "process music and solid state music" of Philip Glass and the "repetitive music and structuralist music" of Nyman's collaborative work with Peter Greenway[5].

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III. MINIMALISM IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE DECADES OF THE 1960S AND 1970S

Minimalism is a trend developed in different fields including visual art, sculpture, painting and architecture. Minimalist composers and artists worked and socialized together in New York city in the 1960s and 70s [6]. Most minimalist composers were born in the 1930s and completed their musical training in the United States in the 1950s. These composers include La Monte Young (b. 1935), Terry Riley (b. 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936), Philip Glass (b. 1937) and John Adams (b. 1947). The majority of their minimalist works were written in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Their music established fundamental minimalist elements including tonality, use of grouped intervals, dissonance harmony, steady pulse, and the repetition of musical phrases or motifs. These works also revealed the composers' musical influences, particularly from non-Western classical music, which include the use of African rhythmic patterns and Indian music. Reich applied a range of African drumming patterns and dance music and Glass utilized dance and rock music in their writings respectively [3]. Minimalist composers also utilized tape loops and amplification in their writing. For example, in *Violin Phase* (1967), Reich indicates that is written for four live violins or for one violinist with three playback recorded tracks. Glass's *Strung Out* (1967) is written for amplified violin.

IV. THE INTERACTIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERFORMER AND THE LISTENER

While discussing the interactive relationship between the performer and the listener, there are questions both performers and listeners assume inform their relation: a) How to perform minimalist music? b) How to make the music interesting to the audience? c) How to listen to minimalist music? As Reich addressed in *Music as a Gradual Process* (1968) [7].

While performing and listening to gradual musical processes, one can participate in a particularly 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*.

This research will explore the interactions, the performance, and the techniques that inform the relationship between the performer and the audience in works written by American minimalist composers during the 1960s and 70s. There conventional performance skills required for the performer developed a different listening experience for the audience. It has clarified the relationship between the composer, the performer and the audience. The composer gives precise musical indication and the performer has to portray the depiction of the music to the audience. Each performer would have his or her interpretational manner that means each performance is unique and interesting. Based on personal feeling or experience, the audience would have different sensitivity of listening to the music through the performance. Young's *Composition 1960 #7* has been extensively analyzed by Henry Flynt, who explained its division of labour as:[8].

"a) The author of the score, the composer.

b) Those who realise the score, the performers.

c) Those who witness the performance-usually form the massed seating."

Each performer's performance is unique, particularly their interpretation. The composer gives the performer the freedom to execute the music, even though the music has a precise performance instruction listed in the first page of the score. In the meantime, the listener would respond to each performer and his or her performance in diverse ways. This can explain the subtlety of the relationship between the performer and the listener. It has been extended and developed in the 1960s and 1970s minimalist music performance. As Sun stated in *Theatre of Minimalist Music*, "..., both listeners and performers can participate in shaping the meaning of the performance. [9]"

For example, *Violin Phase* is written for four live violins or one live violin with three recorded tracks or playback sound tracks. This piece is written based on ostinato repetition of six-beat one measure motif that is stated in four violin parts and each violin has different tempo marking indicated on the score. The performer needs to maintain regular practice by use of computer generated system such as MIDI or can use a mobile phone to record his/her practice and play with it. Besides adjustable factors, the tuning setting of a computer is very useful and precise.

Different performers would set his/her preferred tuning setting between A= 440 and A=442. In *Violin Phase*, Reich has different tempo indications and repetition instructions. *Strung Out*, another example, is based on "pentachord and divided into two tied-notes pattern (dyad) and three tied-notes phrase (trichord).[10]" The performer could arrange various practice routine patterns to get used to the playback sound. The playback instrumental sound is slightly different from real instrumental sound. Reading the music score is another challenge of concentration. Minimalist music, frequently, the performer might have to walk followed by the music.

Another piece that could be used to practice concentration is Reich's *Clapping Music*, written in 1972. It is a piece written for two performers and is performed by clapping entirely. This piece is an extension of Reich's phasing technique such as *Piano Phase* or *Violin Phase*. (See Fig. 1) [11]. In 2015, it was transformed and developed into an iTunes App and an online research project by Queen Mary, University of London with the London Sinfonietta [12]. It is a good piece to practice concentration for the performer. The performer could practice this rhythmic pattern with MIDI or App by himself/herself. (See Fig. 2) [13].

Concentration is one of the keywords commonly considered or asked by both performer and listener. For the performer, practicing or performing minimalist music should be fun and pleasing. In interpreting or practicing minimalist music, one must concentrate on what one does in the process. "If you make one little hesitation you can find yourself at a place in the piece where you have to figure out where you are to get things right. [14]" For the listener, listening to a long and repetitive work could be boring and tense. Whether practicing or playing minimalist music, people should "get the idea and enjoy it. It's only a four or

five minute piece - some people might have a particular moment they enjoy in the piece” as Reich described in his interview [14]. Concentration is always a challenge to either performing minimalist music or listening to the performance. It is easy to concentrate on single line or musical development, but it is a challenge to concentrate on all musical features without hesitation or thinking.

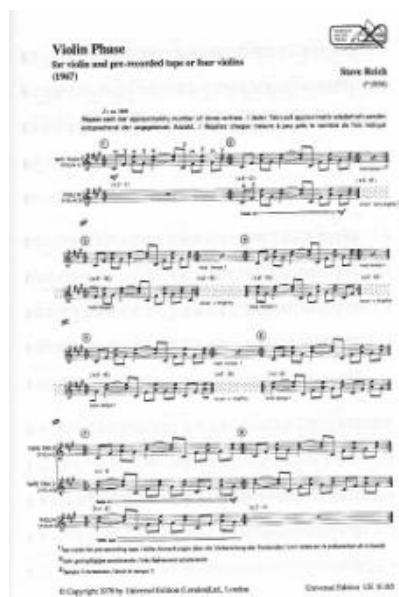


Fig. 1. An example of rhythmic pattern in *Violin Phase for Violin and Tape or Four Violins* [11] Reprinted.



Fig. 2. Steve Reich's *clapping music: For two performers* [13].

V. CONCENTRATION

What concentration method could be used in performing minimalist music? What does this idea bring to us? Concentration explains that the performer has to concentrate on playing music and deliver their feeling to the audience. The listener has to focus on the performance and pay attention to the performance.

Two essential elements should be considered when performing and listening to minimalist music: concentration and relaxation. It is not only applied to the performer, but also can be extended to the sensitivity of the listener. For the

performer, physical and mental concentration requires precisely practicing and performing music including intonation, rhythm, and tempo. Like Reich explained in the philosophy to play *Piano Phase* (1967); this same idea can also applied to *Violin Phase* (1967). As the music is to be played by same instruments, after a while, you don't know who's playing what; all you know is that all this is happening, and you being hearing all kinds of sub-patterns because everything blends together [15]. Philip Glass's *Strung Out* (1967) is another example of concentration. The performer also has to be careful while walking and playing the music. This piece should be played by amplified violin, which means the stage setting would involve some power cables and current leads placed on the stage. The performer has to be aware of the wire attached to the violin and not to step on the current lead. For the listener, after listening to intensive repetitive music for a minute, they would easily lose their concentration and would not appreciate the beauty of the music any more.

VI. RELAXATION

Impressionism is regarded as an embryonic form of the latter minimalist art before the 1960s. Thus works mainly written for piano such as *Gymnop élies* (1888) by Erik Satie (1866-1925), *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (1909-1910) by Achille-Claude Debussy (1862-1918) or *Jeux d'eau* by Joseph Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) are examples of early minimalist music. These works offer the listener a surrounded audio atmosphere, calm mood, aesthetic imagination and colourful timbre. Compared with the early minimalist of the above composers, mostly played in mediation-based or coffee-lounge music, minimalist works written in the 1960s and later have been used in television shows or documentaries such as Glass composed music for the minimalist documentary *Koyannisqatsi* directed by Godfrey Reggio (b. 1940) in 1982. Since the 1960s and 70s, performing minimalist music and listening to minimalist music should be relaxed and calm. As Reich had said:

“...My work, and that of Glass and Riley, comes as a breath of fresh air to the new music work...”[16].

Playing minimalist music should be the same as executing conventional music such as Baroque music or Classical music. The fundamental training for a performance is the same. Some conventionally-trained performers would regard minimalist music as technical books or daily exercises. It is a common reaction from the performer when he or she just sees the first page of the score. The first impression would be that the music is not so hard to perform or practice. In fact, the music has a lot of technical requirements shown in different sections. For example, Reich's *Violin Phase* has various tempo changes indicated in different phrases followed by numbered repetition markings. The performer has to find a suitable timing to turn the page while the pre-recorded or live loop part is in process. Mentally, playing music requires concentration and the intensity of the concentration must be very high. Physically, the tightness of muscle and the erection of body movement would be also very tense. The performer has to find a method to release the tension when executing repetitive finger movements and interpreting music

throughout the whole piece. Relation certainly becomes an important subject whether in the learning process or playing the music lively.

Minimalist music can be considered as simplified music, but it enabled an understanding of its subtle and noticeable change in complexities of musical process. The music somehow would not convey a calm mood for the listener and it certainly challenges the listener's sense of hearing. For the listener, he or she might immediately imagine meditation music or spiritual music when first hearing minimalist music. Meditation music normally has a connection with religion. This type of music might sound uninteresting or uncomfortable because of endless repetition or similar patterns performed more than twenty minutes such as *Strung Out*. The listener's mind might have shifted back and forth when listening repetitive music elements. The complexity has more connection with life experiences in tense musical progressions that exemplify minimalist music.

Minimalist music means integrity and can be presented as a reflection of life experience. Relaxation is the most essential issue to be considered in the preparation in a performance. For the performer, normally the length of a minimalist piece is no less than fifteen minutes. The performer has to repeat the same parameter patterns for a number of times or throughout the whole piece. For instance, *Violin Phase* (1967) is circa sixteen minutes and *Strung Out* (1967) is approximately twenty-three minutes. It requires the player to play a large number of repetitive patterns. The right hand has to maintain the regular tempo change and control the string crossing without interruption and the left hand has to do the same finger movement between single pitch and double-stop. *Violin Phase* challenges the performer to adjust the tension of the muscle, to calculate repetition numbers and to modify the change of designated tempo. In *Violin Phase*, the performer has to release the tension on both hands calculating repeated times through the performance.

While the performer attempts to adjust the way of his or her performance in order to execute the music accurately and pleasingly, the listener would feel very exhausted and uncomfortable after listening to endless-like music for more than ten minutes. The listener might start moving their body and look forward to the ending of the composition. The listener could attempt to change the way of watching and listening to the performance. Most of minimalist music performance has applied a lot of stage setting, surrounded audio technology and visual scenery. The audience could have more imagination while watching the performance such as watching the Broadway musical or sitting in the cinema. For example, La Monte Young's a series of *Compositions 1960* (1960) demonstrates this invented performance. This piece includes no. 2 "build a fire" and no. 5 "release any number of butterflies" in the performance area.

The manner of performing minimalist music is different from the Baroque or Classical music. The listener could regard the performance as an exhibition or a show. For instance, in *Strung Out* (1967) as indicated by Glass, the performer has to walk an "L" line as indicated on the score and play the music simultaneously. The setting of the

performance stage could be arranged as a museum exhibition or an act in a musical show. The listener could have a better imagination watching the performance while seating in the audience. It will help the listener to release the tension of listening to mechanical repetitive music. The listening can also try to experience the atmosphere of the performance portrayed by the performer.

VII. FUTURE STUDY

Minimalist music is not an entirely new developed musical style. It has a connection with the counterpoint of Baroque music style and distinctive rhythmic patterns from African music. In addition, some minimalist composers utilize various musical elements from Gamelan music, Indian music, Jazz music and Rock music. For instance, Steve Reich (b. 1936) uses specific rhythmic patterns and ensemble style from Ghana in his *Drumming* (1970-1971) [17].

Playing minimalist music requires a good command of conventional playing techniques, as well as maintaining precise rhythmic feeling, the ability to employ interactive skills when playing traditional instruments with new technology, and regular physical training as daily practice. Besides, the performer should acquire knowledge of modern history such as Jazz, Rock and non-Western classical music history.

This research has examined the relationship between the performer and the audience in minimalism. It also analyzes the meaning of concentration and its relationship to the performer and the audience. This research could be extended and explore more deeply in the future. First, the performer should spend some time in learning how to apply technology to develop his/her performance skills. Traditionally-trained performers may not be familiar with the use of a headphone or playing music and triggering on and off the pedal simultaneously. It needs a good coordination of body movement and mental concentration. Sometimes, the performer might have to play a conventional instrument with attached a pick-up and carry the electric line and/or small mixer while playing. It also requires the performer to adjust the manner of the performance and these additional demands should not affect the quality of the performance. The performance should also not be interrupted by doing these motions.

There are actually a number of documentaries that have used minimalist composers' works as background music. For example, *Hattie* (2011), a BBC television film uses *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) by Estonian minimalist composer Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) [18]. In listening to the music in this film, the audience must employ different ways to listen to minimalist music just like watching a Broadway musical, a television show or a film. Minimalist music requires a greater use of the imagination when approaching sound and the sense of the artistic. This research is just the beginning of this examination and will be continued to explore and investigate different compositions of other minimalist composers.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Minimalist music has become one of the major genres of the late twentieth century. This research has explored the relationship between the performer and listener. It is a comprehensive description of minimalist music interpreted by performers and the act of appreciation of listening minimalist music by listeners. Concentration and relaxation are principle concepts are examined by selected minimalist compositions in this research.

The performer, interpreting the minimalist music, should maintain well-structured physical practice routine and innovative strategy of stage arrangement. For a listener, it is to challenge a new way of listening and enjoy the execution. Playing the minimalist music in the concert has involved stage setting and visual effects. Some of the playing techniques and meanings of listening to a performance will be transformed based on the venue and the performer's preference. The minimalist music is not an entirely new musical concept, but the way of the performance definitely brings a new perception to the public during the 1960s and 1970s.

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