

Minimal Music (or Minimalism)

As the name suggests, minimal music uses very little musical material. Short rhythmic or melodic ideas are repeated many times. They are superimposed on one another to create layers in the music and these, deliberately, do not all take the same length of time to perform. The effect is rather like a musical kaleidoscope in which new expression and mood only slowly develops out of an on-going transformation of the sounds and ideas in the music. To get the most from a piece of minimalist music, therefore, you need to be able to concentrate very carefully on how the music develops over time. Just as the fascination of a kaleidoscope comes through the different arrangements of the same crystals, so too you must give yourself time in minimalist music to appreciate the shifting combinations of musical ideas. Often it is almost more of a meditative, trance-like style of music than the dynamic, contrasting style of hit songs or classical music.

Minimalism developed in the 1960s and has become very popular to a range of composers since, especially those writing for the cinema, video, dance or the stage.

In the 1960s many different directions in both popular and “high art” music seemed to be coming together after many years of going in very seemingly different directions. There were composers writing music where every detail was organised with mathematical precision (see the *Serialism* of Stockhausen or Boulez); others were writing *Chance* music (see Aleatoric music of Stockhausen or Cage; jazz musicians like Ornette Coleman or John Coltrane were experimenting with *Free Jazz*); rock musicians like Pink Floyd or Tangerine Dream were experimenting with *Electronic Rock*; western musicians from each extreme (e.g. Stockhausen and the Beatles) were showing more and more interest in both the philosophies and the musical techniques of the countries of the Asia; and, due to radio and television, all of these tendencies could be heard anywhere in the world. When you have heard some minimalist music, stop for a moment to think if you can hear any of these influences in the music. Listen, too, to music of the Javanese (Indonesian) Gamelan orchestras. This is an important source of inspiration for minimalist composers.

The most important composers of minimal music are

- La Monte Young (born 1935) (*Death Chant* -1961 uses influences from Indian tabla (drum) playing),
- Terry Riley (born 1935) (*In C* - 1965; *A Rainbow in Curved Air* - 1968: both make extensive use of the new synthesizers of the time),
- Steve Reich (born 1936) (*Piano Phase* - 1967; *Drumming* - 1971; *Six Marimbas* - 1986; *Different Trains* - 1988; *The Cave* -1993: a major developer of the techniques of phasing, even including video image phasing as part of his most recent extended musical compositions),
- Philip Glass (born 1937) (*Einstein on the Beach* - 1976; *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*: operas).

Because the style suits the logic of computers well, Minimalism is still a style which is very vibrant today. Many composers for the modern theatre (e.g. Louis Andriessen or John Adams) or for the cinema (Michael Nyman - “The Piano”) use minimalist ideas. Another minimalist of note, Arvo Paert, uses the technique without electronic instruments to produce a deeply religious meditative music.