

**Minimalism: A Term of Controversy**

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## Minimalism: An Introduction

As impressionism was a term borrowed from painting, minimalism was firstly used in sculpture. In late 1960's-1970's, it started to be a term for certain musical style in the new music.

Minimalism, from the meaning of *minimal*, can be interpreted as the minimal use of materials in the composition. And the characteristic of minimalist style is repetition and simple materials. It is “a term borrowed from the visual arts to describe a style of composition characterized by an intentionally simplified rhythmic, melodic and harmonic vocabulary.” (Potter, n.d.), or in other words, “This form of composition relies on simple patterns and repeated figures, where the musical skill lies in subtle progressive or cyclical alterations to this tapestry to achieve its effects.” (<http://www.mfiles.co.uk/Composers/Michael-Nyman.htm>).

Repetition is one of the oldest techniques of composition. In most of the music primitive tribes we can find the repetitive characters (for example, African drum music, Indian traditional music which inspired Philip Glass). In the common practice era of western music, repetition of simple material still can be found. Baroque composer Johann Pachelbel's masterpiece *Canon in D* has a famous eight-note bass pattern which is repeated throughout the whole piece without any change, the changes operate in the upper voices.

In the prelude to *Das Rheingold* (1869) by Richard Wagner, he only used different

position of the tonic triad for the beginning of music. This is the simplest harmony found in Wagner's music, even among all composer before him. To certain extent, his treatment for the beginning of the prelude can parallel with the idea of minimalism that to use "simple harmonic vocabulary".

Some people may consider Erik Satie as the first minimalist (Duckworth, 1995, p.282). Satie's piano pieces is famous of in simple harmony and structure, and the repetitive characteristics. And the use of repetition was pushed to extreme in his *Vexation* (1893), the piece is a series of chord progressions, and Satie required the player to repeat the series of chord for 840 times (approximate duration is 17.5 hours).

Maurice Ravel composed his *Bolero* for Madame Rubinstein in 1928. This brilliant orchestra show piece is just based on a theme in C major, repeated in different orchestration, with a steady repeating rhythm played by the snare drum.

The above examples show that the use of repetitions and simple materials is existed in western music tradition for a long time, numbers of composer paved the road to the condensation that these practices became the trend of minimalism in the 1960's -1970's.

Who found minimalism actually? It is the key question in the discussion of this essay.

## The Controversial Issues of Minimalism

The first controversy is that when is the first use of “minimalism” in music. Michael Nyman is well-known as the first people to use “minimal” in music criticism, this can be found in most of the biography materials of Nyman. For example, the biography by Nick Kimberley in the homepage of Nyman (<http://www.michaelnyman.org/>), “Later he wrote criticism for several journals, including The Spectator, where, in a 1968 review of Cornelius Cardew's *The Great Digest*, he became the first to apply the word 'minimalism' to music.” (Kimberley, n.d.). In the webpage [www.mfiles.com](http://www.mfiles.com), there is an article on Michael Nyman and has a statement, “One of its (*Experimental Music, Cage and Beyond*) chapters was devoted to "minimalism", a term that Nyman is now credited with inventing” (<http://www.mfiles.co.uk/Composers/Michael-Nyman.htm>). Even when Steve Reich talk on minimalism, he also said “I believe it was first used by Michael Nyman in 1971”<sup>1</sup> (Duckworth, p.293). However, Edward Strickland disputed that I his “*Minimalism: Origins*” (1993) (Potter, n.d.). But it still cannot deny that Nyman is one of the pioneers of using the term “minimalism” in music critic, also music composition.

The second controversy is that if Philip Glass ‘invented’ minimalism in the mid 1960’s, it is related to who is the first minimalist among the four big (La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass) in the US. Young was considered as “Father of

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<sup>1</sup> The first use of the term “minimal” by Michael Nyman should be the article “Minimal Music” in *The Spectator*, published on 11, October 1968. Steve Reich maybe made a incorrect reference to the book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* which published in 1974 but not 1971.

minimalism”(Duckworth, p.271), and he insisted that his *Well-Tuned Piano* (1964) has strong minimalist style already, “a great deal of repetitive activity – very rhythmic, with a very limited set of tones” (Duckworth, p.271). In another interview with Terry Riley, he claimed that an earlier work by Young, *Trio for Strings* (1958) did establish the style of minimalism already. On the hierarchy of the four American minimalists, Riley told this story:

Obviously it was La Monte who was the first one. The *Trio for Strings* is a landmark minimalist piece... I think that without that there could have been no *In C*, because *In C* is a static piece in that same tradition... So then, Steve Reich played in the first performance of *In C*... so obviously, after *In C* he (Steve Reich) changed his style, and started using repetition and development his style of phases and pulses. Then after that, Phil Glass played with Steve, and of course Steve was his teacher.

(Duckworth, p.282)

In Terry Riley’s words, the hierarchy is La Monte Young, and then Terry Riley, and then Steve Reich, and at last, Philip Glass. When Young remembered the joint concert of the four minimalists in 1968 at Yale, he stated that, “(on Glass’s piece) there was none of what you would call minimalism going on at all... maybe he had other pieces hidden away in 1968 that were just full of minimal stuff. I don’t know” (Duckworth, p.240), in some way Young’s words are supporting the point of view by Riley. And in the two interviews, both of them have a strong tendency that Glass’s minimalist style was started under the influence which firstly started by Young.

However, Philip Glass himself claims that after 1967, “I already had discovered that these early pieces – the music for Beckett’s *Play* and a few chamber works... I was beginning to work in a highly reductive, repetitive style” (Glass, 1987, pp.18-19). And Strickland’s

article on Glass in the web-page [www.grovemusic.com](http://www.grovemusic.com) (the online edition of *New Grove Dictionary of Music*) also stated that, “Although Glass also provided some conventionally ‘modern’ music for sections of the film, his minimalist style was now beginning to emerge, most particularly in the spare lines of the theatre pieces he wrote in 1965 for what would become the Mabou Mines troupe (all works before this have since been disavowed).” (Strickland, n.d.). According to Glass and Strickland’s words, it seems that Glass developed his minimalist style by his own, which was come from the influence of Indian music (Glass, p.18).

Philip Glass’s own interpretation of how he became a minimalist seems annoyed La Monte Young and Terry Riley. In their interview, La Monte Young said, “Phil claims to come out of vacuum. Nobody ever existed before Phil Glass according to his book. At least that’s what I understand” (Duckworth, p.239). Terry Riley said, “I don’t know why they have this problem with each other... You always have to acknowledge your teachers. Otherwise you won’t go anywhere in the world. It’s part of the respect of a tradition” (Duckworth, p.283).

How Philip Glass became a minimalist, only he knows the truth. But no matter how is thr truth, La Monte Young’s *Trio for String* (1958) is enough to earn him the title of “father of minimalism”.

## Conclusion

There is an explosion of terminology since 20<sup>th</sup> century: impressionism, primitism, pointism, serialism, total-serialism... It can be an endless list. Since the huge vocabulary for describing music, the problem follows: how people know the term is correctly used? Steve Reich had the following speech when he was requested to define minimalism,

That kind of classification has traditionally not been the province of composers, even when they wanted it to be. Schoenberg was famous for loathing the word "atonal." He said there was no such thing and wanted to have his music called "pantonal." And nobody could give a tinker's damn what he wanted – the word twelve-tone and atonal have stuck to this day. And I think that that decision is correctly the province of journalists and music historians. I understand the reason for having it, but I don't get involved. My job is composing the next piece and not putting myself in some kind of theoretical box.

(Duckworth, p.293)

While Young and Riley fight for the 'first' with Glass, Reich just want to get out from the "minimalist". This shows a irony of a terms. To be, or not to be, this is the question.

In this essay only a minor issue of the origin of minimalism is included, actually there are still some related topics of minimalism is worth to be explored. Such as the minimalist style in pop music; not just in serious music composition, popular music also has case of extreme use of repetition. In Beatles' classic *Hey Jude* (1968), the last four minutes of the seven-minute song (over a half of the song) is just keeping repeat the same phrase, and it was end in fade-out, supposedly the song can be endless. Composer Giorgio Moroder's discotheque music (film music for *Midnight Express* (1978) is a typical example). And of course, the real stream form minimalism such as

ambient music can be included in the discussion.



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