

Introduction

There's a story you may have heard before; it gets repeated a lot. It's one story, but it's about four people. In 1958 in Los Angeles, a twenty-two-year-old composer named La Monte Young wrote a piece in which, over the course of nearly an hour, hardly anything happens: three string instruments play extraordinarily lengthy, still tones interspersed with silence. A short while later, in grad school in Berkeley, Young met Terry Riley, who became similarly preoccupied with music that moved at a glacial pace. After a stint in Paris, Riley wrote *In C*, a score that instructs a group of instrumentalists to repeat a series of short riffs that accrue into a wash of sound. At a rehearsal for *In C* before its premiere in 1964, Riley's San Francisco neighbor Steve Reich—a percussionist and budding composer—suggested that the musicians might be able to stay together more easily if someone constantly struck two C keys on the piano, to provide a steady pulse. Not long afterward, Reich spliced recordings of a street preacher's voice to create a soundscape of eerie and unexpected acoustic effects. After moving back to New York, Reich held a retrospective of his music, where he reencountered an old Juilliard classmate, Philip Glass. Glass joined Reich's ensemble of musicians, whom he recruited to play new scores based on his tape experiments with close musical canons. And Reich joined a similar group created by his friend, with which Glass was developing an idiosyncratic style, influenced by Indian ragas, in which repetitive musical phrases hypnotically expanded and contracted.

Young's drones, Riley's loops, Reich's pulses and phasing, Glass's additive processes. Each composer pioneered a set of techniques that built the most important and influential movement in avant-garde music of the late twentieth century: minimalism. Over the span of a little more than a decade, minimalist music went from austere long tones and grating harmonies to toe-tapping, accessible tonality. Glass and Reich have since become household names, selling millions of records and influencing pop culture from movie soundtracks to David Bowie songs; Young and Riley remain cult figures, but essential protagonists in minimalism's origins. They weren't the Beatles, but sometimes the quartet is called the "Fab Four."

This is the classic story of musical minimalism.¹ It's a good story: it's a clean narrative. It has a happy ending: it suggests that, decades after Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, there could be a movement of contemporary composition that trickled out into mainstream culture, a popular and harmonious avant-garde. (Or, for others, it's a sad ending: a radical style developed in lofts and galleries sells out to the Carnegie Hall establishment.)

It's a story that keeps getting told, again and again: in memoirs and monographs, liner notes and lecture halls. But it's far from the only story. It leaves out key players, like the composer-performer Julius Eastman, who created work so iconoclastic that he seemed to deliberately write himself out of the story. It leaves out others, like composer and meditator Pauline Oliveros, who didn't look or act like the typical founding father. When it talks about the major figures—Young and Riley, Reich and Glass—it breezes past the weirder aspects of their work, from failed technological research to discipleships with gurus to the imbibing of psychedelic drugs. And it sidelines musicians considered essential in other genres and who should be considered essential to this one, like John Coltrane, Brian Eno, and Donna Summer. Chances are, anyone who wasn't a white man who consciously assumed the identity of a capital-C Composer in the Western classical tradition didn't make the cut.² They were the loose threads to be snipped away. The history of minimalism was too tidy for them.

WHAT IS MINIMALISM?

We'd like to tell you a different story. It's about how minimalism became minimalism, and it's also about many things that *are* minimalism but

haven't been *called* minimalism. It's a retelling of the history of musical minimalism—a revisionist history—through the presentation, and contextualization, of important documents. These documents come in many forms: newspaper reviews, magazine features, interviews with composers, and more. Some involve detailed, technical explanations of compositional approaches or unconventional tuning systems; some involve quasi-indecipherable, seemingly hallucinogenic rants. (Occasionally, there's both at once.) Many take the form of manifestos: artists arguing for the necessity of their practices, or critics proposing far-reaching, new musical developments. All illuminate aspects of minimalism's musical history, whether the stories of lesser-known figures, or lesser-known stories about the bigger names.

So what is minimalism, anyway? In its beginnings, minimalism was not "Minimalism." When critics and musicians started to buzz about the uncanny, slowed-down music that they were hearing in San Francisco and downtown New York in the 1960s, they used terms like "drone-based," "repetitive," or "modal." Writer Robert Palmer examined the emergence of "trance music," critic Alfred Frankenstein declared Riley's *In C* an example of "extended-time music," and musician Joan La Barbara dubbed Reich and Glass members of the "steady state school."³ "Minimalism" was just one more name in this nominative jumble. Scholars agree that the actual descriptors of "minimalist" and "minimal" music first cropped up in the British press, when critic Jill Phillips described a 1968 performance of La Monte Young's *Death Chant* as a "minimalist piece."⁴

In his decade writing for the *Village Voice*, composer Tom Johnson had a front seat to the musical phenomenon developing in the neighborhood known as SoHo. He declared the existence, in 1972, of a "New York Hypnotic School" comprising Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass. "Some of their pieces employ traditional scales and some do not," he wrote of this new school. "Some of them chug along with a persistent beat and some float by without any rhythmic articulation. Most of them are loud and employ electronic resources. And some employ standard instruments without amplification or electronic manipulation of any kind. Yet they all have the same basic concern, which can be described as flat, static, minimal, and hypnotic."⁵

Two years later, in his influential book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, composer Michael Nyman perpetuated that four-man grouping under the heading "minimal music," with lengthy musical descriptions, accompanying scores, and the addition of a few similarly

minded English composers. Nyman described the music as a response to serialism, the atonal style developed by Arnold Schoenberg, which had found prominence in the American academy; and as a response to indeterminacy, John Cage's radically deconstructive approach to composition. Minimal music, for Nyman, "not only cuts down the area of sound-activity to an absolute (and absolutist) minimum, but submits the scrupulously selective, mainly tonal, material to mostly repetitive, highly disciplined procedures."⁶

And that was basically it. The style's musical qualities were clearly defined: minimal materials, mostly tonal, repeated with discipline; sometimes amplified, often static, almost always hypnotic. And the four-man grouping responsible for it endured, in scholarly histories and the popular imagination, from *Time* magazine features to musicological inquiries. (The subtitle of Keith Potter's major study says it all: *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*). Glass was the most popular of the "Big Four," a celebrity with mainstream film scores, crossover records, and iconic Chuck Close portraits; Reich served as the most prestigious and classically credentialed, with a belated Pulitzer recognition in 2009; despite his eclectic oeuvre, Riley's role in the story was secure because of the seismic influence of *In C*; and the ever-experimental Young was treated as the founding father, whom Brian Eno once dubbed "the daddy of us all."⁷

The work of many musicians, critics, and scholars, over time, created this category of "minimalism": the Big Four grouping is as much a description of historical truth as it is a historiographical action performed again and again.⁸ But even if they have long been presented as preordained, such groupings do not have to endure, this same way, forever.⁹

Still, this is a book titled *On Minimalism*, and not a book titled *On Trance Music*, or *On the Steady-State School*. We acknowledge the gravitational pull of traditional narratives, and the weight (and power) of those who argued, again and again, that "minimalism" was the way to describe this important musical movement. But we also argue—and we are by no means the first—that the Big Four view of musical minimalism has left us with an impoverished understanding of its history. Rather than compile a comprehensive overview of the music-making of Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass, we instead look back to ask: Where was repetition- and drone-based music happening, in the 1960s and onward? Who was there? What did it sound like? How was it described? And what is missing from how it is now remembered?

WHO IS A MINIMALIST?

So, if minimalism was much more than the Big Four, who did it include? Who can be called a minimalist? Because Reich and Glass are widely considered card-carrying minimalists—despite their aversion to the term itself—can everything they ever composed be labeled, ipso facto, minimalism? What about when Pauline Oliveros spent years droning on her accordion—was that her “minimalist period,” or was she always a minimalist? Can Frederic Rzewski write a handful of influential minimalist pieces, like *Les Moutons de Panurge* and *Coming Together*, but not be considered a proper “minimalist composer”? And why is it that Reich, Young, and Riley are frequently described as “former jazz musicians”—they were all postbop performers in their early years—but radical Black musicians who improvised with drones, including Don Cherry, McCoy Tyner, and John and Alice Coltrane, are not considered minimalists?¹⁰

These are some of the questions we began to ask when we started to compile this book: we made a massive list of names of musicians who had been called minimalists, along with those who hadn’t been called minimalists but who created music shaped by drones and repetition. We couldn’t include everyone, but we wanted to try. (Sadly, Rzewski didn’t make the cut.) And as we gathered documents related to their artistic work, we realized that these figures actually *weren’t* always left out. When Robert Palmer wrote about trance music for the *New York Times* in 1975, he highlighted Tyner and the Master Musicians of Jajouka alongside Reich and Glass. In 1980, when the Columbia radio station WKCR presented a marathon festival of minimalist music, it included Cherry, Julius Eastman, and Catherine Christer Hennix. As it turned out, in the documentary history, some minimalists were hiding in plain sight.

Still—like pop and R & B, or bebop and Cagean experimentalism—minimalism, as a musical genre and historical phenomenon, has been racially segregated, even when the reality of the music-making was not: Cherry improvised with Riley, and Anthony Braxton sat in with the Philip Glass Ensemble.¹¹ To follow this music as it radiated outward from the avant-garde—to understand it as a style that influenced rock producer Brian Eno, and that was produced, too, by disco legends Donna Summer and Giorgio Moroder—we document minimalisms that are often instead categorized as “jazz,” “pop,” or “ambient.” These artists’ work was often much more entangled than genre boundaries make it out to be. As we track minimalism from its origins to its current status, we dwell on the droning rituals of the Theatre of Eternal Music in the sixties,

the resonating wires of Ellen Fullman's Long String Instrument in the eighties, and the menacing incantations of metal band Sunn O))) today.

To tell this story, we include some of the more iconic primary sources in the history of musical minimalism, such as Steve Reich's manifesto "Music as a Gradual Process," and we reprint work from well-known publications like the *New York Times* and *Village Voice*. But we also look to other sources, from other communities, to tell other stories: the feminist magazine *Ms.*, the Black women's magazine *Essence*, the journal *Black American*.¹²

Studies of musical minimalism tend to follow proleptical patterns—history written with the benefit of hindsight, which can distort just as it attempts to reveal.¹³ When Tom Johnson, perhaps the greatest chronicler of minimalist music, repackaged his writings into a 1989 book, he made some small but significant tweaks—ones that we only began to notice after we looked past his easily accessible compilation to his original newspaper clippings.¹⁴ In Johnson's book, the 1972 article in which he first theorized the existence of the "New York Hypnotic School" is given an updated title: "La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and Philip Glass"; the original *Voice* article, though, had the vaguer headline "Changing the Meaning of 'Static.'" The revised, reframed headline bolstered a backwards-gazing, Big Four narrative.¹⁵

This might seem like a pedantic point, but—as anyone who knows that Milton Babbitt's infamous essay "Who Cares If You Listen?" was originally titled "The Composer as Specialist"—headlines make history. Johnson's invaluable collection has become the most widely cited group of sources on minimalist music, and many of the most influential studies unknowingly cite Johnson's revised titles.¹⁶

Restoring the original titles of newspaper articles is a relatively minor task, compared to the main work of this book.¹⁷ But it emblemizes a central goal of our project: to make enough tweaks to minimalism's traditional history that new narratives can be revealed. We are not naïve enough to think that this book won't, of course, produce new and fraught categories and hardened, canonic histories. But we hope to present a bigger, more unruly set of juxtapositions, and, because our aperture is wider, we hope to capture a bit more of the landscape.

WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

This is a revisionist history, but it's still a history: we start at minimalism's beginnings and conclude today. We have divided the book into

three main chronological sections: the early years, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s; from 1976—the year of Glass’s pivotal *Einstein on the Beach*, Reich’s classic *Music for 18 Musicians*, and C.C. Hennix’s undersung *Electric Harpsichord*—to the late 1990s; and from the year 2000 onward. Each chapter brings together multiple documents and centers on a single theme. Some, like a chapter on the loops and processes that Riley and Reich developed in the sixties, are necessary to any minimalist history; some, like a chapter on the role of gurus, highlight crucial aspects of the style’s evolution that have been understudied; some, like a chapter that brings together Miles Davis’s modal jazz and Yoko Ono’s Fluxus provocations, complicate and trouble conventional categorizations; some, like chapters on canonization and backlash, address the broader cultural phenomenon that minimalism became.

If you read this book cover to cover, we hope you discover the full and rich tradition of minimalism, described a bit unconventionally. But if you prefer, you can crack open the book at any page and dive into a world of metaphysics, of homemade instruments, of meditation and healing. If you’re a college professor teaching a course on minimalism, you can use these documents to supplement academic scholarship; if you’re a percussionist preparing to perform Reich’s music, you can read helpful essays and reviews; if you’re a longtime Julius Eastman or Meredith Monk fan, you can explore how they contextualized their work; if you’re skeptical of all of this, you can read a handful of skeptical takes on minimalism too.¹⁸

And of course, this is hardly half the story, because the real story is the music itself. We wish we could devise a book that blares out the cacophonous sounds of Yoshi Wada’s Earth Horns or the quietly entrancing lullabies of Eva-Maria Houben when you turn each page, but alas. The easy fix would be to design an accompanying online playlist for quick consumption, but that would fall into a familiar trap: assuming that minimalism’s history can be fully represented in widely available, commercial recordings. Much of minimalism’s musical lineage cannot be found on Spotify; for decades, many crucial recordings were only accessible at specialist shops, or in mail-order catalogs, or on illegal file-sharing platforms, or not at all. So, in the back of the book, you can instead find a list of recordings that correspond to each chapter: a quick internet search should help you find all of them, whether commercially released (and easily streamable) albums, or Bandcamp indie and vinyl releases, or bootlegs that crop up on YouTube. We encourage you to pay for the music you listen to, and support the musicians who continue to make this movement enduring and vital.