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An Exposition of Similarities and Differences  
in the work of the Four Seminal Originators of  
Minimalist Music: Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass

In my mind, albeit a tired and dirty one with relatively little history in the study of minimalism, there seem to exist two schools of thought/practice in minimalist music: the California School and the New York School. The California School is represented by the pseudo-hippies La Monte Young and Terry Riley, while the New York School is embodied by beat-generation Philip Glass and Steve Reich. Well, OK, so this distinction may be a tad tenuous: Steve Reich was known to have taken a train back and forth between the west coast and the east to visit his divorced parents (a situation which culminated in the inspiration for Different Trains) and spent a while living in San Francisco; conversely, Terry Riley moved to New York City to work for some time; and La Monte Young inspired Philip Glass while in NYC. Well, my silly little thesis has a stronger foundation than superficial habitat. Glass was born in Baltimore, MD and educated at Juilliard; Reich was born in NYC and eventually (after a stint at Cornell) educated at Juilliard as well--both east coast boys. Both Young and Riley were born and educated in California. I propose that this geographical distinction between the composers comes through in their music.

Before I delve into the geographical thesis, I would like to propose another look at the differences between the composers. This distinction is purely

temporal. La Monte Young is heralded as the father of minimalistic music, for he was creating quasi-minimalistic pieces as early as 1957 (Trio for Strings being the most quoted example). Some may argue that these early pieces are still in the serialistic vein; the pieces were, after all, supposedly inspired by Webern's Bagatelles. Of course, with changes in the score occurring only every fifteen seconds or so, these early works seem far removed from their twelve-tone inspirations. Even if these pieces sound nothing like the Glassian motoric arpeggio textures commonly associated with minimalism today, one has to admit that Young's work at least embodied a literal interpretation of minimalism. Anyway, with Young as the tenuous first minimalist, Riley comes in second. Riley used to play the tin cans with Young in concert and was part of Young's Theatre of Eternal Music. Riley's In C premiered in 1964 and his output continued to about 1969 with A Rainbow in Curved Air. Young and Riley, the California School, therefore constitute the "early" stages of early minimalism. Well, then Reich comes in third. He played on Riley's first performance of In C, (he was the one who suggested the metronomic repeated octave C's in the piano to keep the musicians together) and therefore, in a sense, was influenced by his music. Reich's output is generally later, too: Come Out in 1966 to Music for 18 Musicians in 1976. And last is Glass. His works stem from around 1969 and continue well into the 1980's with his minimalist style. A sort of continuum is seemingly set up, starting with Young and ending with Glass. In fact, Riley used to complain that Reich had ripped him off, just as Reich complained that Glass ripped him off. Well, he who laughs last.... Anyway, I do not want to continue this temporal exploration, since it implies that each successive composer gained most of his material from the previous when the actual case seems to be more of an "influence" than a theoretical foundation. However, it is still interesting to

note that time also divides the two minimalist schools of thought which I have created.

Maybe I am stretching for straws at this point, but I have also noticed another similarity / difference which evenly divides the two schools of minimalism. Young and Riley's main background lies in popular music--jazz, cowboy songs, etc. They both excelled on saxophone in swing bands, and Riley was even an accomplished ragtime pianist. Reich and Glass, however, have a weaker link to the "improvisational" musical forms. Glass was strictly classically trained, of course, beginning as a flutist and then a pianist. He studied composition with the classical masters of the time, including Milhaud and Nadia Boulanger. Reich also studied with Darius Milhaud, as well as Luciano Berio, giving him too a strong formal study in composition. Reich, though, began music as a drummer, and was pulled towards ethnomusic such as drumming of the Ewe tribe in Ghana and the Balinese Gamelan. Of course, though, all four original minimalists found inspiration in "non-western" forms of music: Young and Riley both studied and played Indian traditional music with Pandit Pran Nath, and Glass once transcribed the music of Ravi Shankar for western musicians to read and recreate. The ties between minimalism and eastern music is already too much discussed in other books and frankly, as a topic of discussion, bores the hell out of me, so I'll take those connections for granted.

Moving on....

So all these extramusical distinctions I have made between the two schools of minimalism are very nice, but does the separation exist in the actual music itself? Of course. The horse comes before the cart you know. The main thrust of the argument lies in the tendency for the California school's minimalist pieces to have an improvisational sound / nature, while the New York school's minimalist pieces tend to have a more carefully planned formal structure and purpose.

Unfortunately, and maybe as a result of my thesis, much more recorded music exists for the New York School than the California School. The differences and similarities I will draw between the two minimalistic tendencies will therefore be based on only a few, albeit very well known, pieces by Riley and Young. Since so much music exists for the New York School, I will go into more detail on Glass and Reich. And I will also try to establish some differences between Riley and Young for all you lovers of gray out there.

Now, as I have said, the California School is based more upon improvisation than those minimalists working on the east coast. And, of course, this improvisation stems from their extensive dabbling in the jazz medium. But since no apparent "jazz" licks appear in the music, how do we find improvisation? Well, what is improvisation? People screwing around on a scale? How much do they weigh? (argh) Improvisation in the jazz genre includes sections in the music which are *left to chance*. So, chance operations in the minimalist genre would be typical of the California School. But wait a minute. Chance operations aren't only native to jazz. Weren't the serialists messing around with chance? Weren't Cage and Feldman leaving entire pieces up to complete chance? Yes. So how do we know Young and Riley's chance operations came solely from jazz? Well, in fact, they didn't. Young, starting with Webern, was initially drawn to the post-Schonbergian world and later even expressed his admiration for Stockhausen's Gruppen. Riley was still tonal, though. Glass and Reich, however, strongly voiced their dislike for modern classical trends. Reich said Milhaud contributed "less than zero" to Reich's musical growth, and Glass wanted to get out of Paris because he felt contemporary classical thought was creating "crazy creepy music".

So in what pieces are the California School's trend for improvisational styles apparent? With Young's Compositions 1960, there was almost no musical

notation (or music for that matter), as the works were more performance pieces than musical creations. Most of the pieces called for the performer to bring bales of hay and buckets of water to the piano, or turn off the lights and let the sound of the audience be the piece, or build a fire, or release some captive butterflies, or draw straight line....etc. The actual sound thusly created would have been rather random. The only piece with true musical notation is #7, calling for the performer to play a perfect fifth which is "to be held for a long time". In a sense, almost half of the compositional content of even that piece has been left up to chance. In his later work of The Well-Tuned Piano (1964), more musical processes are left to improvisation and chance. I do not believe an actual score exists for this piece, for the only record of the work exists on taped recordings of Young at the piano. If each playing of the piece were exactly identical, someone could probably fabricate a score for Mr. Young. However, the piece varies greatly from decade to decade. The original playing clocked in at under one hour, while the 1982 version had pushed the time all the way up to six hours. Whole themes were extended or developed or absent or introduced in each subsequent performance of the work, showing that the compositional method of the piece must be improvisational in nature. Even upon listening to the work, I got the feeling that Young was merely improvising/playing with a few chord shapes, switching slowly back and forth as his whims directed him.

Riley shows similar improvisational/chance operation tendencies. His first influential work, In C, is organized among lines similar to Cage or Feldman in their desires to give some of the compositional power to the performer. The score consists of a numbered list of fifty-three motivic cell units. The instrumentation does not matter (similar to Feldman again). All that is required is that a performer play each musical unit in order. He can repeat the unit as many times as he likes (maybe with some ensemble experience, basing his

number of repetitions on the trends of the rest of the group), and the piece ends when all the musicians reach the final unit and are playing in unison. The score itself and the performance practice seems very similar to some of the serialists attempts at variety. But, of course, the musical result is much different, for all the musical units are based around C major (with a few B-flats and F-sharps thrown in for spice) instead of twelve-tone theories. Later pieces by Riley still keep the improvisational feel. Both Poppy Nogood and A Rainbow in Curved Air are dated 1969. The listener does not sense any subtle motivic play, but merely free improvisation around a structural drone. The saxophone solo, wet with delay and echo effects, in Poppy Nogood epitomizes this strong feel of loose drone improvisation. My simple theoretical explanation behind these pieces is probably quite close to home, for just such improvisational practices were common for Riley in his All-Night Concerts of the late 1960's. This basis on free improvisation made Riley's work very accessible to the simple-minded rock culture of the day, and many rock outfits became inspired by Riley's recordings and their psychedelic covers, including Curved Air, Agitation Free, and The Soft Machine.

The Early New York School: Reich's first few pieces were far removed from the traditional boundaries of classical music. These works arose, of course, out of his interest in working in the tape medium. It's Gonna Rain and Come Out showed a radical departure from even the minimalist music going on at that time, for these two works used unvaried repetition for a specific effect: phasing. La Monte Young had pioneered the use of unvaried repetition in 1698 and [X], but these pieces, arguably, were mere repetition for the sake of repetition. In fact, Satie's Vexations are an even earlier example of pure repetition, but like Young's examples, the repetition served no other purpose than its own. Noone would stoop to call Satie the first minimalist....or maybe....hmmm....Anyway,

after Reich's dabbles in tape loops, he decided to move the phasing process over into the medium of musical notation. Piano Phase is the first example of this new trend. In this work, the exact musical content is notated precisely in the score. Well, actually maybe not. Reich does leave the actual amount of repetitions for each section up to the particular performance. But just because his score includes such vague instructions, do not think that Mr. Reich has left anything up to chance. Quite the opposite. He has a very specific idea of how the piece should sound. If humans were perfect in their ability to consistently slow down, Reich could have notated an exact rate of ritard for one part and then calculate the exact number of repetitions. But, sadly (or rather thankfully), humans are fallible. The rate and ability to phase shift varies from performer to performer. But nonetheless, this small ambiguity in the score differs greatly from the chance operations used by Riley and the improvisational techniques used by Young. Reich continues to use this small amount of indeterminacy in later works, but always for a desired purpose. Four Organs charts the gradual expansion of a dominant eleventh chord. Drumming continues as the last piece in his strict phasing output. His final early work, Clapping Music, discards all "chance" procedures, annotating the specific number of times each section should be repeated. In a sense, therefore, Reich is already trying to throw off the shackles of any random procedures in his composition.

Philip Glass is the antithesis, in the minimalist school, to chance operations. He carefully notates all music, just as music had been done for centuries before. The reason for this strict notation comes from some very basic compositional desires: Glass uses his repetition to introduce minute variations. He freezes rhythmic, dynamic, and temporal variety to force the listener to concentrate on his subtle additive/subtractive motivic method. As a result, his scores stretch for miles and miles in detailed notation. Ironically, the name for

his first major minimalist work, Strung Out (for solo violin), comes from the need to "string out" the twenty-page score on a series of music stands. This quality, in turn, forced him to amplify the violin for a constant dynamic level (one can't have the performer's movement from one music stand to the next affect the dynamics of the performance). In fact, Glass is one of the fervent supporters of the infusion of electronic/modern instrumentation into the classical music setting. An electric organ or two pops up in almost every single one of his pieces. Not coincidentally, his next series of works were written with organs as some of the primary instruments. This series included three pieces from 1969: Music in Similar Motion, Music in Contrary Motion, and Music in Fifths. The scores to these pieces are similar to Strung Out, except now with two voices instead of one. Glass spins out linear figures ad nauseam while introducing small changes in simple patterns, resulting in a complicated web of changing accents. The scores for these works are long and drawn out as well, leaving nothing to chance (in fact, the scores mirror the repetitiveness of the music so well, that the book by Wim Mertens uses the music as a sort of wallpaper for the inside covers). The final piece in Glass's early phase would be Music in Twelve Parts. I only listened to parts one and two, but I think I got the basic idea. Actually, these early parts were composed in 1971, as compared to the 1974 date that all twelve parts were completely finished. This collection of pieces uses constant repetition of carefully calculated interlocking phrases to create a continuous musical texture.

The Turning Point and Later Minimalist Music: "For me, minimalism was over by 1974" said Philip Glass about his own work. And arguably, the same could be said of our three other minimalist progenitors. After 1974, the pure form of minimalism seemed to fade in favor of a more amalgamated product. Some of Glass's work in the later seventies, Mad Rush and his famous opera

Einstein on the Beach, began incorporating more tonality into the textures. Tonality had always existed, but harmony was always a rather static beast in the early work. Suddenly, obvious chord changes were being introduced into minimalist writing. Mad Rush even contains two distinct chordal areas (A and B), centering around different harmonic goals. What was still decidedly "minimal" about these pieces was the rarely varying accompanimental texture which fleshed out the chords. Of course, these textures were far from simple-minded: interlocking phrases and a concerned emphasis of three against two helped keep musical interest alive. Later, pieces such as Glassworks became even more harmonically oriented, and the term "New Age" cropped up to describe these harmonically simple yet texturally complicated works. Harmony continued to filter into Mr. Glass's work until he was inspired to write a song cycle, Songs from Liquid Days, playing with traditional chord movements and song forms (which unfortunately is not Philip Glass's area of expertise and hence caused this work to be a basically horrible production). One of Glass's most recent creations is the Low Symphony, a work based around motives from David Bowie and Brian Eno's art rock album of the same name. Obviously, Glass in his later years has compromised some of his "traditional" minimalist views in favor of a more popular product.

Steve Reich, after 1974, began introducing a more complicated sense of harmony into his works as well. "There is more harmonic movement in the first five minutes of Music for Eighteen Musicians than in any other complete work of mine to date", said the composer of that 1976 composition. The minimalists, were, in a sense, branching off into repetitive chord progressions rather than short motivic phrases. A decade later, in Electric Counterpoint and Different Trains, Reich still adopts an obvious use of harmonic motion in his writing. But similar to Glass, the textures he uses to flesh out the repetitive, simple chord

movements are anything but simple. A technique of overlapping and overdubbing (or interlocking if you will) creates a complicated web of sound over each chord. Reich's work with tape loops hasn't faded into the background either. Different Trains uses speech as a musical instrument, looping phrases as small motivic elements. The phase experimentation of the sixties, however, even when incorporating tape, is abandoned in favor of this new harmonic style.

As far as the California School is concerned, not much new work has been produced since the prolific era almost three decades ago. La Monte Young continues to produce new variations to his improvisatory Well-Tuned Piano, while Terry Riley has remained fairly silent in the minimalist field. His Kronos Quartet composition of Salome: Dances for Peace bears little minimalist underpinnings (or overpinnings for that matter). The style is fairly primitive and sparse, but nevertheless rooted in tonality and harmonic progressions.

So despite some changes which both schools of minimalism have gone through since their inception in the sixties, the minimalist style can still be divided into two patterns of thought. La Monte Young and Terry Riley represent the California School while Steve Reich and Philip Glass represent the New York School. The basis for this distinction lies in the music, of course: the music of Young and Riley tends to be more improvisational in nature, while the music of Glass and Reich is usually a carefully mapped out web of intricate motivic play. Extramusical qualities separate the two trends in minimalism as well. The basic education and birthplace of each composer divides the group of four into two nice couples. And even in the minimalist music which is created today, a sharp distinction exists which divides the prolific Glass and Reich with their motoric pseudo-harmonic styles from the less prolific figures of Riley and Young.

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Terry Riley--	In C	1964
	A Rainbow in Curved Air	1969
	Poppy Nogood	1969
	Salome: Dances for Peace	1986
Steve Reich--	It's Gonna Rain	1965
	Come Out	1966
	Piano Phase	1967
	Four Organs and Maracas	1970
	Drumming	1970
	Clapping Music	1972
	Music for 18 Musicians	1976
	Different Trains	1987
	Electric Counterpoint	1988
Philip Glass--	Strung Out	1967
	Music in Similar Motion	1969
	Music in Contrary Motion	1969
	Music in Fifths	1969
	Music in Twelve Parts	1974
	Einstein on the Beach	1975
	Mad Rush	1978
	Satyagraha (Act III conc.)	1980
	Glassworks	1982
	Songs from Liquid Days	1986
	Low Symphony	1992

