# Minimalism: towards a definition

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It is somewhat ironic that the Minimalist movement, which has been hailed by many as a welcome return to simplicity, has arguably provoked more terminological confusion than any other musical movement in the twentieth century. What is Minimalism when applied to music? Is it an adequate term to describe this movement or does it have misleading connotations? Does it show parallels with its counterpart in the visual arts? In what context did it arise? These are all frequently asked questions which this chapter will attempt to answer. Many of the attempts to define Minimalism thus far have only focused on obvious surface features without probing deeper into its musical core. The result of all this is that after thirty years of Minimalist scholarship we have a widespread acceptance of a term which is still not fully understood. In order to address this situation comprehensively, this chapter will be divided into two distinct but nonetheless intrinsically linked sections. The first section will focus on the inadequacy of 'Minimalism' as a descriptive term when applied to music. Ultimately, however, it must be conceded that it is too late for a name change and we must accept what is now a common currency in musicological terms. Since this is the case and we are dealing with an accepted term, an understanding of the generic essence of the music itself and an awareness of the term's limitations is necessary. This is the argument which will comprise the second half of this chapter. I will examine the nucleus of this music and put forward a definition which will adequately describe the music of La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass, the four composers most associated with the movement. This definition of Minimalism will place it in a context which also considers the post-Cagean and post-war Serial movements. Finally, I will define the distinction between 'Classic' and 'Post' Minimalism which I feel is necessary to cater for the influences of Minimalism in more recent compositional trends.

The term 'Minimalism', borrowed from the fine arts, was formally transferred to music in 1974 by Michael Nyman, the English composer and critic, in his book *Experimental Music: Cage and*

*Beyond*.[1] Both Nyman and the American writer Tom Johnson had used the term on and off in their writings since the late 1960s but it wasn't specifically denominative until Nyman's book.[2] In the world of the fine arts the term had been in circulation as early as 1960, though it wasn't until 1965 that it received its formal introduction by Richard Wollheim in an article for *Arts Magazine*.[3] 'Minimalism' in the art world has been just as troublesome as its musical counterpart and questions ranging from whom exactly to include under its label to what is its exact meaning show interesting parallels. When viewed in its totality though, one adjective used frequently in the art literature to describe Minimal art is 'reduction'. This becomes quite a tangible prospect when one considers the black paintings of Frank Stella composed under the dictum of 'less is more' or the chequerboard 'floor pieces' made by Carl Andre. It was certainly in this context that Nyman first used the word 'Minimalist' to describe the early works of Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass.[4]

It is well known that the Minimalist composers based in New York in the 1960s were on far better terms with the artist community than with the musical establishment which took considerable time to win over. Most early Minimalist concerts took place in artist's lofts and galleries, largely due to the hostility they provoked from the more conservative concert-going audiences who were confronted with hitherto unheard of levels of repetition and perceived monotony. The most famous examples are Reich's mainstream debuts of *Four Organs* by the Boston Symphony at Symphony Hall in Boston on the 8 October

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[1] Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (New York: Schirmer, 1974). Hereafter referred to as Nyman, *Experimental Music*.

[2] Johnson had written numerous articles for the *Village Voice* on the work of Alvin Lucier, Steve Reich and Philip Glass where he describes such music as Minimal or Minimalist. The first of these 'The Minimal Slow-Motion Approach: Alvin Lucier and Others' was published in the *Village Voice*, 30 March 1972. In October 1968, Nyman published a review entitled 'Minimal Music' in *The Spectator* describing the work of Cornelius Cardew.

[3] Richard Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', *Arts Magazine*, January 1965, pp. 26–32.

[4] In Robert Schwarz's book *Minimalists* Nyman is quoted as saying 'When I introduced it to music in 1968 it was a valid art historical term, and without thinking about it too much it seemed there was a musical parallel'.

1971 and Carnegie Hall on 18 January 1973 which managed to enrage both conservative audiences to an inordinate degree.[5]

Another connection between both the art and music downtown communities was the frequent collaborations between both groups. The premiere of Reich's *Pendulum Music* (1968) at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1969 was given by the composer James Tenny and three Minimalist artists, Michael Snow, Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman; Glass has collaborated frequently with Serra since the late 1960s and even became his full time assistant for a period; Robert Morris was part of the *Fluxus* movement with La Monte Young in the early 1960s.

Bearing this in mind, it must nevertheless be conceded that any assessment of the relevance of a musical term must begin with the literal meaning of the term itself. The Oxford dictionary defines the word minimal as meaning 'very small, the least possible'. Even before we apply this term to music, the art critic Lawrence Alloway accurately identified the terms inherent shortcomings:

> because there is no consensus on what is Enough, or Too Much, one cannot accurately characterize (such art) as minimal. [...] It is a weakness of 'Minimal' as a critical term that it assumes or rather memorializes, a point in time when such work was less than expected.[6]

Because there can be no generally accepted consensus in this regard the term is immediately problematic as a critical term. When exactly is a piece of music deemed to be Minimalist and in what context of its design is this minimalization perceived to exist? Much of the artist's impatience with the term centres around the assumption that the movement is a reaction against the complexity of Integral Serialism or Abstract Expressionism by espousing an aesthetic not only based on compositional economy of organization and materials but also on economy of intellectual engagement. In this regard a term such as Minimalism only encourages a derogatory view of a low brow opportunistic art form masquerading ingenuously as high art. It is not

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[5] Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 208. Hereafter referred to as Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists.*

[6] Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, p. 3.

surprising then that artists, both sonic and visual, have resisted the term vehemently since its inception.

Inherent weaknesses aside, it can nevertheless be assumed that composition in a 'Minimalist style' may involve a number of possibilities. These could include limiting the duration of a work, working with a very small amount of basic materials, or a limitation of the means by which the materials are processed or developed. The first aspect concerning duration can be universally dismissed, for if one thing is certain it is that Minimalist compositions are rarely short events. The first performance of Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1975–6) lasted five and a half hours, while Riley is famous for his all-night concerts. La Monte Young adopted an epic timeframe from the beginning, stretching back to his pre-*Fluxus* compositions. His performances of his magnum opus *The Well-Tuned Piano* (1964–) average six hours, while it is reported that in the 1970s he kept a constant sine wave drone going in his loft for twenty four hours a day for periods of up to a few months at a time.[7] In general, however, the processes used by Minimalist composers are time oriented, making extended duration a necessity for these processes to come across convincingly.

The remaining two aspects of what can be deemed Minimalist features were alluded to by Nyman in his 1973 study:

> This music 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 which are focused with an extremely fine definition.[8]

In essence this means that this reduction occurs texturally in terms of the amount of materials chosen and, secondly, in the adoption of certain procedures which allow the listener to focus his/her concentration on the already reduced material. The first aspect of this theory accounts for the initial reason why the term 'Minimalism' ever came into being in the first place: namely because it is the only obvious surface characteristic

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[7] Eric Strickland, *Minimalism; Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 156. Hereafter referred to as Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*.

[8] Nyman, *Experimental Music*, p. 139.

which was perceptible amongst all four composers in the initial stages of their work. The opening section of Young's *Trio for Strings* (1958) contains only three notes and lasts around five minutes, in Riley's *Keyboard Studies No. 2* (1964) only eight different notes are used, Reich's *Piano Phase* (1966–7) contains a repeated twelve-note figure and Glass's *One+One* (1968) contains only two repeated rhythmic figures. Such a drastic limitation of materials had never before been seen by a collective of composers working at the same time in close proximity to each other.

However, this initial reduction lasted only a short while, hardly long enough to define a whole movement. A single glance at slightly later works such as Reich's *Drumming* (1970–1) or even what many consider to be the quintessential Minimalist piece, Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), reveal textures as dense as anything previously composed in western music. Besides, a more important factor to consider is that this initial reduction served only as an experimental parameter in order to refine and develop certain techniques which would later become important developmental devices. For instance, in Reich's *Piano Phase* (1966–7) the material is reduced to a single twelve-note pattern played on both pianos. However, it is not the reduction that is important but rather the stasis and gradual process achieved by the phasing technique. The reduction allowed Reich a more concentrated arena in which to refine the phasing technique. A similar situation applies to Glass's rhythmic processes and Young's work based on sustenance. None of the four composers set out to compose music using a minimum of means solely as its *raison d'être*; while there is an initial reduction it is never the most important aspect of the music.

The adoption of reduction in the early stages of these composers' careers could be viewed as analogous to the simplified textures and instrumentation in the formative years of any composer's early career. Although this initial reduction is admittedly austere, it paved the way for the techniques of each composer to be adopted into more advanced large scale forms. Glass has since written a number of successful operas and eight symphonies while Reich and Riley have been commissioned to write works for similar large ensembles. Young's work remains the most confined to smaller ensembles. There is, however, a progression away from the early sustenance works to larger works such as *The Well-tuned Piano*. It is also interesting to note that

none of the composers have reverted back to the stark reduction of their early years which would seem to confirm the view that reduction, while an important developmental necessity, was never considered a central feature of their aesthetic.

The second aspect of Nyman's statement concerning 'highly disciplined procedures which are focused with an extremely fine definition' is again partly true, but only relevant to certain early works which use reduced material.[9] In order for the phasing technique to be developed, the reduced material in Reich's *Piano Phase* is submitted to repetition which does indeed focus the listener's attention on the gradual process. This simple procedure could be argued to be somewhat Minimal but only within this reduced context. In pieces like *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ* (1972–3) or *Drumming* (1970–71) where the texture is consistently dense and constantly changing, the repetition of the melodic patterns and the sustained tones of the voices produce a complex interlocking of material in which the attention level required from the listener is extremely high if everything is to be followed. It is a similar situation with Glass's additive and cyclic techniques. While the basic techniques themselves are quite simple, the textures that result in a work such as *Music with Changing Parts* (1970) when these techniques are combined result in a complex web of sound which refutes any notions of a Minimal aesthetic in this regard.

In keeping with current trends, it was inevitable that the prefix 'post' would sooner or later be attached to the already ambiguous 'Minimalism'. Most musicologists would agree that 'Classic Minimalism', ended around the mid-1970s with Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians* (1974–6). Music composed after 1974 exhibited a new level of harmonic and melodic enrichment. Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians* had already contained a level of chordal progression which had never been present in Minimalist compositions before. At the same time, composers outside the 'Minimalist quartet' began to incorporate Minimalist surface features in their work. The music of John Adams for example has adopted Minimalist style repetition underpinned by a neo-Romantic harmonic language indebted to his American predecessors such as Ives, Copland, Gershwin and Bernstein. Therefore if we accept, as most commentators do, that

[9] Nyman, *Experimental Music*, p. 139.

Minimalism is an inadequate term to describe anything but the initial stages of the movement, it would seem that the term 'post-Minimalism' only adds to the confusion by conversely giving the term 'Minimalism' increased terminological clout.[10] To classify a work as post-Minimalist implies a certain connection with Minimal reduction, but most of the music written by composers after 1973, which is classified as post-Minimalist, shows no evidence of the drastic reduction that was present in the early works of Reich or Glass.

Since Nyman's book, however, the term Minimalism has resisted all challenges. Numerous other descriptive labels have vied for position including 'repetitive music', 'trance music', 'pulse music' and 'process music', not to mention the more than occasional derogatory branding such as 'stuck in the needle music' and 'pop-music for intellectuals'.[11] The frequent pronouncements of its death by both critics and composers have, according to Erick Strickland, become 'the surest testimonial to its staying power'.[12] It seems pointless then, in one sense, to continue to argue over the term's shortcomings. The label has stuck and is now the accepted term to describe this music. Nonetheless, a certain caution must always be exercised when using the term. If we are to continue to use it as a critical label then we must bear in mind its inherent weaknesses and misleading connotations. The term must only be used when referring to the movement as a whole rather than functioning as the dominant characteristic of the music.

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[10] Wim Mertens, the first critic to pen a publication dealing at length with Minimalism in music (*American Minimal Music*), described it as only 'partially satisfactory' and quickly discarded the term after the opening chapter in favour of 'American repetitive music'. The most recent publication on Minimalism, Robert Fink's *Repeating Ourselves*, prefers the term 'repetitive music'. Other major publications such as Keith Potter's *Four Musical Minimalists*, Eric Strickland's *Minimalism: Origins*, and Kyle Gann's chapter on Minimalism in *American Music in the 20th Century*, have all began their respective studies of Minimalism with the seemingly obligatory preliminary discussion on the suitability of the term.

[11] Samuel Lipman, *The House of Music; Art in an Era of Institutions* (Boston: Godline, 1984), p. 48.

[12] Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, p. 1.

But what is the defining feature of this movement? Most musicologists divide Minimalism into two categories, 'Classic' and 'Post'. Classic Minimalism is considered to begin with La Monte Young's *Trio for Strings* and ended somewhere around 1974 with Steve Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians.* So what justifies this division? Generally speaking, the work of composers associated with Minimalism began to display a number of features including the expansion of forces and increased harmonic movement. Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians* had already contained a level of chordal progression which had never been present in Minimalist compositions before. Many commentators delineate this composition along with Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* as the end of a 'Minimal' aesthetic. However, I have argued in the first section of this chapter that there never really was a Minimalist aesthetic to begin with. So what was there?

With the benefit of hindsight it is quite understandable why Nyman coined the term 'Minimalism' in the early years, particularly when one considers the visual art movements of the time which, as Nyman has admitted, seemed to suggest a certain connection. More lasting features of Minimalist music such as repetition, gradual process and a resurgence of tonality cannot be consistently discerned in the music. This is especially so in the case of La Monte Young. Young's early pioneering work with sustained tones is atonal, his use of repetition is limited to a few conceptual works such as *X for Henry Flynt* (1960), and the presence of gradual process is negligible. Indeed it has been argued that Young's association with the group is solely as a founding father figure and formative influence on Terry Riley.[13] But this is not the case especially when one delves beyond the surface features of the music.

In his 1980 study of Minimalism Mertens makes the distinction between repetition in Classical music and repetition in American Minimal music:

> The traditional work is teleological or end-orientated, because all musical events result in a directed end of synthesis. Repetition in the traditional work appears as a reference to what has gone before, so that one has to remember what was forgotten. This demands a learned, serious and concentrated, memory-dominated approach to listening.

[13] Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 13.

> The music of the American composers of repetitive music can be described as non-narrative and a-teleological. Their music discards the traditional harmonic functional schemes of tension and relaxation, disapproves of classical formal schemes and the narrative that goes with them. Instead there appears non-directed evolution in which the listener is no longer submitted to the constraint of following the musical evolution. [14]

Teleology is derived from the Greek word *teleos* meaning purposes and is a branch of philosophy which deals with directed ends or final causes. The traditional musical work is teleological: it has a directed end written into the music by the composer and the events contained within the work are directed towards this particular point. In tonal music this normally consists of a return to the tonic key after numerous modulations and developments. The sonatas of Mozart and Haydn are classic examples of such a structure.

By contrast, 'Classic Minimalist' music is completely a-teleological. Although Minimalist music is tonal there are no functional harmonic progressions, which effectively rules out any form of teleology based on traditional tonally progressive concepts. Most Classic Minimalist music in based entirely on constantly repeated fragments which are gradually alternated by processes. This can take the form of phasing processes, the substitution of notes for rests or various additive processes. So, one may ask the question, isn't the teleology present in Minimalist music inherent in the unfolding of the process itself? Not quite. In Classic Minimalist music the processes are all focused on the repeated patterns so that, although the music is changing slightly all the time, it remains essentially in the same place. Furthermore, the processes themselves are not designed with an end goal in mind; instead what is important is the focus on the here and now. Although the processes may run out (as is the case with phasing) or reach a point of saturation (as is the case with substituting notes for rests), there are no hierarchical stages as there would be with a teleological piece. Each stage of the process is as important as the next. To quote Reich, 'Once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself. [...] By running this

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[14] Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music* (London: Kahn and Averill, 1983), p. 8. Hereafter referred to as Mertens, *American Minimal Music*.

material through this process I completely control all that results, but I also accept those results without changes.'[15] Teleology, on the other hand, implies a narrative and a narrative implies contrast. Classic Minimalist music negates this contrast in favour of repetition or sustained elements. It does this to focus the listener's attention minute details and extremely gradual developments. But these are static developments, devoid of an intentional teleological goal. To say Minimalist music is teleological is incorrect and misreads the intentions of the music itself.

However a-teleological stasis as a concept in itself is not exclusively limited to Minimalist music. Both the European Serialists and John Cage had already 'achieved' it long before Minimalism. The third piece of Messiaen's *Quatre Études de Rythme*: 'Mode de valeurs et d'intensités' signalled the start of a new direction in European composition. The piece is based on a pre-compositional structure of three twelve-note modes. Each member of the mode is given a fixed duration, attack type, dynamic and remains in the same registral position for the entire piece. The starting note of the first mode is a thirty-second note and the subsequent pitches of that mode are determined by adding the duration of a thirty-second note to each successive note. Likewise, the second mode begins with a sixteenth note and the third mode begins with an eighth note and the same process applies. The score contains three lines, one for each mode. The end result is a constantly changing pointillistic sound which remains fundamentally static for its entire duration. It is entirely devoid of traditional teleology, there is no sense of progression towards a goal and when the piece is over it simply stops. Many of the early Integral Serial works followed this model and are entirely a-teleological. Works such as Boulez's *Structures No. 1* and the first group of Stockhausen's *Klavierstück* remain essentially static for their entire duration. Essentially the lack of progressive relationships means that there is no sense of when the piece should end and could for all intents and purposes continue indefinitely. The stasis which one can discern in works such as these has been accurately summarized by Christian Wolff:

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[15] Steve Reich, *Writings on Music 1965–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 35.

> Complexity tends to reach a certain point of neutralization, continuous change results in certain sameness. The music has a static character and goes in no particular direction. There is no necessary concern with time as a measure of a distance from a point in the past to a point in the future, with linear continuity alone.[16]

While the Europeans adopted a rigorous system in which every aspect of the music was strictly controlled, the American experimental school led by Cage adopted indeterminacy. In order to liberate sound and let it be itself, all aspects of control were abandoned. In this sense Cage's *4'33"* could be considered the conclusive study in a-teleology. Indeed Mertens has argued that the importance of repetitive music lies in the way in which its represents the most recent stage in the continuing a-teleological evolution of music since Schoenberg:

> It is clear that repetitive music can be seen as the final stage of an anti-dialectical movement that has shaped European avant-garde music since Schoenberg, a movement which reached its culmination with John Cage.[17]

What distinguishes and defines 'Minimalism', however, is not a-teleological stasis alone but rather the means used to achieve this concept. Repetition, which is undoubtedly Minimalism's most instantly recognizable surface feature, is a device which remains at a relatively fixed continuum when extended over time. The end result from constantly repeating a phrase or melodic fragment is stasis. The music goes nowhere and just is. Similarly the musical processes devised by Minimalist composers very often progress along fixed geometric parameters. Glass's strict additive techniques employed for the first time in *1+1* is one such example. The two rhythmic units in the work (here labelled as units 1 and 2) are combined in patterns such as 1+2, 1+2+2, 1+2+2+2, 1+2+2, 1+2, etc. Thinking along these lines also solves the La Monte Young dilemma concerning his lack of trademark Minimalist features such as repetition and gradual process. Young's use of sustained tones is employed to the same a-teleological ends as

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[16] Cited in Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, p. 79.

[17] Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, p. 87.

repetition and process is in the music of Riley, Reich and Glass. Repetition, process and sustained elements are all devices which remain at a fixed continuum when extended over time resulting in the a-teleological stasis that Mertens described.

It is in this a-teleological sense that Minimalism is partly indebted to both Serialism and the music of John Cage. This may seem rather perverse considering that both Reich and Glass have expressed their lack of enthusiasm for European Serialism, particularly the attempts to build on the achievements of the Second Viennese School. Furthermore, the hostilities directed at Minimalism from the modernist establishment have been unrelenting and most regard both styles as polemical opposites.[18] However, while both Reich and Glass have made their opposition clear, both Young and Riley have freely expressed their early interest in Serialism, especially the music of Webern. Young, in particular, identified features such as Webern's tendency to repeat pitches in the same octave in works such as the *Symphony Op. 21* (1928) and the *Variations for Orchestra* (1940) as a form of stasis.[19] He has credited these 'little static sections' as formative influences on his later static music.

Although Cage's music comes from an intellectual background far removed from Minimalism it shares the fundamental preoccupation with a-teleological stasis. As Mertens describes it:

> Instead of the existential identification with dialectical time that one finds in traditional music, [...] Cage identifies with macro-time, which transcends history and can therefore be called mythic. The nature of

[18] Various composers associated with Modernism have spoken out against Minimalism, with the most vehement objections coming from Eliot Carter who is quoted in an interview with Michael Walsh entitled, 'The Heart is Back in the Game', *Time*, 20 September 1982, as saying 'About one minute of minimalism is enough, because it is all the same. Minimalists are not aware of the larger dimensions of life. One also hears constant repetition in the speeches of Hitler and in advertising. It has dangerous aspects'.

[19] Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, p. 126.

> macro-time is essentially static, and duration is an atomized conglomerate of moments, without relation to past or future.[20]

The difference with Minimalism is the means used to achieve stasis. Whereas Cage uses indeterminacy, Minimalists use devices which remain at a relative constant. I say relative because these devices may be subjected to slight changes during the course of a piece. This results in a massive aural distinction and in no way can Cage be termed a Minimalist as some have claimed.[21] Therefore a definition of 'Classic Minimalism' which accurately describes this music is as follows:

> A style of music which originated in America during the 1960s which uses devices such as repetition, sustained elements and musical process as a relatively fixed continuum resulting in an experience of a-teleological stasis over an extended period of time.

It is important to make this distinction between 'Classic Minimalism' and the later 'post-Minimalism'. 'Classic Minimalism' ends around the mid 1970s when a-teleological stasis is no longer the central trait of the music. Post-Minimalism on the other hand exhibits a more flexible teleological gradient in comparison to the flat surfaces of 'Classic Minimalism'. This is unmistakable in works such as Reich's *Desert Music* (1982–4) and Glass's *Violin Concerto* (1987), where teleology is restored and repetition acts as an important device in the construction of the tension/release principle. Nonetheless many of the surface features remain and the music of Riley, Reich and Glass is still largely based around constant devices such as repetition. Even outside the Minimalist quartet the surface Minimalist features remain unmistakably obvious as is the case with John Adams.

All of the above ultimately puts the scholar of Minimalism in a bewildering position. While on the one hand it is necessary to use the term since it has achieved universal acceptance, it is also a mandatory requirement to question immediately, before undertaking any extensive

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[20] Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, p. 87.

[21] Among many examples the headline of Cage's obituary in *the New York Times* on the 13 August 1992 listed him as 'John Cage, Minimalist Composer'. Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, pp. 124–25.

study, what is at first its most obvious meaning: a music based on reduction. It would have been much easier for all concerned if some vague label such as the New York School or something similar, which would assume no misleading preconceptions, had been applied from the beginning. Previous publications on the subject have fallen short when it came to laying out a transparent definition which rests on solid foundations. This is perhaps due to the momentum which the term 'Minimalism' has unfortunately gathered in the musicology discipline over the years. The definition above, by contrast, aptly captures the resultant static effect which the devices of Classic Minimalism achieve and which is discernable in the early works of Young, Riley, Reich and Glass. It is with this understanding of the nature of Minimalist music that I believe further investigation and references to Minimalism should proceed.

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