

Minimalism

Minimalism involves a general reduction of materials with an emphasis on repetition and stasis as well as gradual change. Early minimalist works contained a steady pulse, short melodic patterns (recurring ostinati) that were gradually extended, contracted, or modified in some way, phrase relationships that were based on gradual nonsynchronization, and a tonal bias. Minimalist music is a type of compositional process. Some of the early minimalists were Terry Riley, Lamonte Young, and Steve Reich. Philip Glass extended the minimalist's procedures into the world of music theater.

Types of minimalistic music:

(1) **Tape loops** - Recurring ostinati. Sounds were recorded on magnetic recording tape. The tape was then spliced and taped back together to form a loop. This created an infinite number of repetitions of the sound when the tape loop was played back. See *Come Out* by Steve Reich.

(2) **Live performance** - Reich often composed pieces for two or more of the same instrument. *Piano Phase* was written for two pianos. *Four Organs* involves the gradual increasing of durations of individual tones within a single chord.

(3) **Nonpulsed minimalism** - No pulse, and limits are placed on a certain music parameter or parameters creating a sense of a fluctuating stasis. There is generally a more precise notation employed. Ligeti's *Atmosphères* uses sound masses that gradually ebb and flow. Arnold Schoenberg's op. 16, no. 3 involves a single chord which is filtered through various colors.

Four basic compositional techniques employed by minimalist composers:

(1) **Additive Melody** - Extends or reduces a repetitive melodic pattern by increments of the smallest rhythmic value.

Two staves of music illustrating Additive Melody. The top staff shows a melodic pattern in 3/8 time, repeated four times (4x), then in 2/4 time, repeated three times (3x), and finally in 5/8 time, repeated three times (3x). The bottom staff shows the same pattern in 3/8 time, repeated four times (4x), then in 4/8 time, repeated four times (4x), and finally in 5/8 time, repeated five times (5x).

(2) **Rotation** - Successive statements of a melodic or rhythmic pattern begin at different points within the pattern.

A single staff of music illustrating Rotation. A melodic pattern in 6/8 time is repeated four times (4x), with each subsequent statement starting at a different point within the pattern.

(3) **Texture Construction** - An ostinato fabric of multiple voices may gradually grow more or less complex as individual members enter or leave the texture during repetitions.

Three staves of music illustrating Texture Construction. The top staff shows a melodic pattern in 4/8 time, repeated four times (4x). The middle staff shows a second voice entering in the second repetition, also repeated four times (4x). The bottom staff shows a third voice entering in the third repetition, including a triplet of eighth notes, also repeated four times (4x).

(4) **Isorhythmic Overlap** - Ostinati of various lengths are stated simultaneously.

Two staves of music illustrating Isorhythmic Overlap. The top staff shows a melodic pattern in 6/8 time, repeated six times (6x), then in 4/8 time, repeated five times (5x), and finally in 3/8 time, repeated four times (4x). The bottom staff shows a melodic pattern in 6/8 time, repeated two times (2x), then in 5/8 time, repeated four times (4x), and finally in 2/8 time, repeated six times (6x).