

Repetitive Minimalism: A historical style or a perspective in music

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Introduction

Minimal repetitive music began to appear in the sixties as a consequence of and/or a reaction against the avant-garde movements of European serialism and North-American New York School (Cage, Brown, Feldman, etc).

Steve Reich wrote: "Serialism and Cage gave me something to push against" (Reich, 2002, p. 159).

Minimal music, at first very American, began to be a new trend in art music, a style that was exported, enlarged and developed by different composers in Europe and Asia. It was a different way of approaching composition and of perceiving music, far from the already academic and powerful serialism. It was, for some, the beginning of a new (post-)modernity, a new - more public friendly - way for contemporary composers to develop their craft with public success. For others, just an idiot play with sounds, a regression in terms of culture, even in terms of psychological development.

Characteristics

What are the characteristics of this style of music?

Perhaps it is important to divide the two concepts "minimal" and "repetitive". "Minimal" refers to the used musical material: it has to be very poor, reduced to a minimum of musical parameters (a chord, a melody with just one or a few sounds, a simple infrastructure like pentatonic or modal, basic rhythms and meter). Long melodies, motives with changing chords, twelve-tone infrastructures, non metrical and complicated rhythms are, therefore, excluded. "Repetitive" refers to the process of composition, the way the composer chooses to deal with the musical material: simple, repetitive, slow transformation. It is also important that the process of composition stays clear, able to be heard, open to the comprehension of the common audience (whatever it is understood by "common audience").

Early minimal repetitive experiments of La Monte Young and Terry Riley seemed to be an extent of Cage's experimentalism, another step of confrontation by an audacious, challenging generation of artists and intellectuals against bourgeois mass culture. Soon the social shock effect became less important: a new way of interacting with music (for both musicians and public), a new public, a new stylistic tribe, perhaps a new academic counter-power. It grew with later proposals of Terry Riley and, especially, with Steve Reich, John Adams, Philip Glass, Michael Nyman, Louis Andriessen, and others.

Time (vital in all kinds of music) seems to occur in an almost chronometric way: psychological time perception stays unchangeable for very long periods, proposing some kind of abstraction. As Glass said: "(the listener) can perhaps discover another

mode of listening – one in which neither memory nor anticipation (the usual psychological devices of programmatic music whether Baroque, Classical, Romantic, or Modernistic) have a place” (in Reich, 2004: p.33).

Minimal repetitive composers were known, in 1969, as the “New York Hypnotic School” or, as Harold Schönberg wrote, “hypnotic or boring - depending on one's reaction to that sort of thing” (Strickland, 2000: p. 242).

The “hypnotics” were la Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass. In fact, the “minimal repetitive” label was used later.

A historically embedded style or way of understanding music

Minimal repetitive music was born as a style in the sixties. However, traces of minimal and/or repetitive music can be seen in different examples of music of the past.

Beethoven

Maetzel's Metronome and other machines

It is common to trace a relation between the use of repetition in Beethoven's music with the invention of Maetzel's Metronome.

In 1811 Beethoven wrote to Maetzel:

Thanks for your metronome; let us try whether we can measure Time into Eternity with it, for it is so simple and easily managed that there seems to be no impediment to this! In the mean time we will have a conference on the subject. The mathematical precision of clockwork is of course greater; yet formerly, in watching the little experiments you made in my presence, I thought there was something worthy of notice in your metronome, and I hope we shall soon succeed in setting it thoroughly right.
Beethoven, Letter to Maetzel, September 10th, 1811

Beethoven knew very well the multiple mechanical instruments that came to light in the turn of the century. But, in the words of Schering (1955), Beethoven criticized this mechanical trend, as he defended what E.T.A. Hoffmann called the “geistigen Prinzip” (Shering, 1955: p.16). Nevertheless, the repetition was there, and he used it several times. For Shering, the 8th symphony is a striking example of the use of repetition, making a dubious humour with its changes and abnormalities.

Op. 53 Piano Sonata

But already in 1803 we can see, in the Op. 53 Piano Sonata, an interesting example of close repetition: 80 consecutive eight notes with small gradual harmonic differences, followed by a cadencial break. And then, again the same gesture, with a sixteenth note involvement. Repetition is, in my view, the main interest of the first section of this sonata.

With the appearance of the second section in E major, everything changes. Or perhaps not: the repetition is not so much a rhythmic but rather a melodic one.

Here the idea of a melodic curved shape is systematically repeated and explored until the end of the exposition. Altogether, rhythmic repetition and melodic shape repetition are, perhaps, the main ideas explored in all the first movement.

After the *Introduzione Adagio* (the second movement), the third movement seems to be very insisting on different kind of repetitions: curvilinear melodies (e. g. the insisting main theme and the intermediate ones), chord repetitions (the insisting tonic of the main theme, the repeating chords at bar 239 – in D flat Major), harmonic repetitions (the *arpeggi* in the beginning of the right hand, the very slow harmonic rhythm in all the movement). In fact, hearing this movement, it seems that the musical idea is always the same, although there are different tonalities, changes of mood, different ways of exploring the same material, of saying the same thing.

No doubt that this Op. 53 sonata is NOT an example of repetitive minimal music, because it is not minimal at all. But the process of close repetition of a specific material can be valued in the analysis and in interpretation, and, therefore, revealed in a contemporary performance of this piece.

Schubert

Great C Major Symphony

Franz Schubert is known for insisting on mesmerizing musical figurations and

for exposing the same musical idea consecutively at least twice.

In his Great C major symphony, two marching rhythms seem to take over almost all the first movement. With exception of the introductory section and the last 14 bars, each single bar has at least four quarter notes or the distinctive dotted quarter and eighth note rhythm. It is, in fact, a ten minute long march (or horse ride) without a break, full of consecutive melodic repetitions, always insisting on the same motives.

The same repetitive spirit goes on in the second movement (*Andante con moto*), perhaps not so systematically in terms of rhythmic figuration, but certainly in the consecutive repetition of phrases and chords, for more 13 minutes. The last two movements follow the same spirit, altogether more than 45 minutes.

Stockhausen Klavierstück IX

Stockhausen's *Klavierstück IX*, composed in 1954 and finished in 1961/62, presents the repetition of a specific chord: 140 times, 87 times, 13, 21, 8 and 5 times. Stockhausen's intentions in this work were to explore the dialectic between periodical and non-periodic occurrences. The chord repetitions are the periodical factor: they are systematic, according to the Fibonacci series and the mythical proportion PHI.

140	87	54	33	21	13	8	5	3
Phi→	1,61	1,61	1,64	1,57	1,62	1,63	1,6	1,67

These chord repetitions appear several times during the piece, among other slow, non-periodic passages.

The piece seems to go from periodic to non-periodic rhythms, lacking any climax. The process is somehow continuous, presenting from time to time the repeating chord as a new – less and less energetic – rebirth, reaching a point where a long ending passage presents agglomerates of very quick, light and high notes, assembled in free rhythmic groups, each time more sparse.

Stimmung of Stockhausen is, perhaps, an interesting example: it has apparently all the characteristics of minimal repetitive music.

Other examples of repetitive music are *Harmonics* from the Portuguese composer Jorge Peixinho (a 20 minute long improvisation using an overtone series of 9 notes, with a 6" canon), and the more para-serial piece *Étude I* (with long repetition of the same chord).

Conclusion

It is possible to comprehend, to practice and to perform these sort of pieces in a particular way: trying to emphasize chronometric time, to prefer abstraction instead of expression, to put a special interest in very long structural relationships, to accentuate sameness instead of teleological construction. The pleasure of close repetition and of circular movement seems to be also an interesting clue in a “repetitive” interpretation.

The fact of recognising repetition as a primordial matter in music implies a specific approach in terms of interpretation/performance and, in the end, in music appreciation.

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