Christophe Levaux, We Have Always Been Minimalist: The Construction and Triumph of a Musical Style, trans. Rose Vekony

ap Sion, Pwyll

Twentieth-Century Music

DOI:

[10.1017/S1478572221000141](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572221000141)

Published: 21/12/2021

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

ap Sion, P. (2021). Christophe Levaux, We Have Always Been Minimalist: The Construction and Triumph of a Musical Style, trans. Rose Vekony. *Twentieth-Century Music*, 18(3), 481–487. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572221000141>

Hawliau Cyffredinol / General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Review

Twentieth-Century Music 0/0, 1–7 © The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press
doi: 10.1017/S1478572221000141

Christophe Levaux, *We Have Always Been Minimalist: The Construction and Triumph of a Musical Style*, trans. Rose Vekony (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), ISBN: 978-0-520-29527-8 (pb).

Michael Maizels, *In and Out of Phase: An Episodic History of Art and Music in the 1960s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), ISBN: 978-0-472-13193-8 (hb).

On page 3 of *In and Out of Phase: An Episodic History of Art and Music in the 1960s*, author Michael Maizels states that ‘the term *minimalism* has fallen out of scholarly favor – with its original scent of critical aspersion and ex post facto imposition still lingering’. Christophe Levaux would surely beg to differ. As the title of his book suggests, *We Have Always Been Minimalist: The Construction and Triumph of a Musical Style* starts from the premise that minimalism as a term has since acquired ‘a major place in contemporary American culture’ (198).

‘Minimalism’ may be largely conspicuous by its absence in Maizels’s account (he only directly addresses it on page 79; and then only briefly, in relation to artists’ opposition to the word), but it appears on almost every page of *We Have Always Been Minimalist*. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that musical minimalism (as opposed to minimalist art) remains difficult to pin down. In a sense, its ambiguity has contributed to its longevity. Nevertheless, whether a movement, style, aesthetic, attitude or technique – or merely a catch-all term used by record labels to market certain kinds of music – minimalism remains ‘one of the most important and influential trends of twentieth-century music’, as the book’s dust-jacket proclaims.

Levaux’s study draws together a reception history of minimalism through archival deep-digging and detailed study of critical and scholarly publications spanning a period of over fifty years. In order to locate and examine those modalities of meaning, Levaux’s study makes use of Bruno Latour’s ‘actor-network theory’, which sees the emergence and evolution of terms, concepts, definitions, and theories as by-products of *human* thoughts and actions. Levaux states that ‘a fact, if ignored, will never become accepted as fact’ (3–4); therefore, his aim is ‘to trace, in the literature on minimalism, those modalities that transform established facts into new facts and ultimately into proven facts’ (10).

At various points during the book, Levaux asks the question: ‘What did contemporary American music mean at that time?’ He does this in order to tease out shifts in attitudes and opinions relating to the development of twentieth-century music in general and minimalism’s position within it.

During the early 1960s, Levaux points out that ‘we find absolutely nothing on the subject’ (18): minimalism at that time was a mere twinkle in the eye of discourse on new music. When it arrived, La Monte Young’s drone-based music first elicited incomprehension (or downright hostility) from composers and music critics such as Roger Smalley, H. Wiley Hitchcock and Eric Salzman. Nonetheless, as the decade wore on, a clutch of writers warmed to Young’s pared-down approach, with Cornelius Cardew’s article in the November 1966 edition of *The Musical Times* providing one of the first thoughtful and balanced appraisals of Young’s work. It was also in relation to a performance of the composer’s *Death Chant* (1961) that Jill Phillips used the term ‘minimalist’ in relation to music, in a 1968 review that predates Michael Nyman’s first published reference to it by a few months. As seen in Chapter 3 (‘Transcribing Music’), art critics such as Jill Johnston, Barbara Rose, and Lucy Lippard were far more responsive to this new musical form than their musical counterparts.

What soon emerges from Levaux’s account is that authors’ viewpoints were often predicated on previously held beliefs, opinions, or downright prejudices. For example, when he first came across Young’s music, eminent John Cage advocate Richard Kostelanetz related it to a ‘theatre of mixed means’ whose origins lay in Cage’s happenings and the work of Fluxus artists during the early 1960s. As Levaux notes: ‘Kostelanetz’s high praise for Young [served to elevate] his own concept’ (48), while simultaneously underplaying other (equally important) influences, including improvisation and Eastern spiritualism.

Young’s *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys* for the Theatre of Eternal Music (described by Keith Potter as his *magnum opus* for the ensemble) thus received several conflicting readings: reductive-harmonic (Hitchcock), theatrical (Kostelanetz), and audiovisual (Young and Zazeela) (50). For Levaux, it appeared that ‘[the] more the New York composer’s work was studied, the less any consensus on the content and meaning of his music seemed possible’ (50).

Others writing in the 1960s, such as Hugh Davies and Elliott Schwartz, sought to connect Young with electronic music. One could have also added two other minimalists to this category – Terry Riley and Steve Reich – although at the time ‘the general public knew of no connection between [these] composers’ (57). In chapter 7, Levaux traces writers’ attempts to bring together Young, Riley, Reich, and Philip Glass, despite the fact that ‘the profusion of divergent readings’ of their work and ‘the complete absence of a proven relation among them’ (58–9) suggested that their music was very different. Here, as occasionally elsewhere, Levaux emphasizes certain facts over others in order to support his argument.

Later on, Levaux states that the first monograph to group them together, Wim Mertens’s *Amerikaanse repetitieve muziek* (translated as *American Minimal Music*), served to ‘[strengthen] the supposed ties between the four composers and [render] their association even more factual’ (123). While it is certainly true that the four minimalists were not a group in the sense that, for example, The Beatles were, they nevertheless shared common ground. Young and Riley worked together during the early 1960s, remaining close friends. Reich forged (albeit briefer) alliances with Riley (around 1964–65) and then Glass (1967–69). *Village Voice* critic and composer Tom Johnson, in addition to several others writing around this time, would have been very aware of both the connections and the disconnections

between them. While it is clear that all four had evolved their own distinctive style and aesthetic by the end of the 1960s, it is nevertheless incorrect to claim a complete absence of any proven relationship existing between them. Reich acknowledged the impact of Riley's tape compositions on his early works, and Glass initially dedicated one of his first minimalist pieces to Reich.¹ These were blurred edges.

Perhaps more importantly was the 'war of words' waged among critics as to how best to describe this new aesthetic. Johnson favoured the 'New York Hypnotic School', while others emphasized the music's flat, static, and hypnotic qualities. Reich's own influential 1968 essay, 'Music as a Gradual Process', discussed in chapter 8, offers yet another term: 'process music', while chapter 12 surveys British 'systems' music as an offshoot of minimalism.

It was only after the publication of Nyman's influential *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* in 1974 that minimalism started to '[garner] the support of the music establishment' (80). A broad consensus then followed, where historical accounts of twentieth-century music by writers such as Salzman and Hitchcock reflected a sea change within 'mainstream' musicology. 'Minimalism' as a term nevertheless struggled to establish itself, as shown by its omission from the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, published in 1980, which instead referred readers to Paul Griffiths's entry on 'System' (103).

Nevertheless, the tide was turning. Griffiths's own survey of modern music after the Second World War, *Modern Music: The Avant-Garde Since 1945*, concluded with a chapter on minimalism, prompting Levaux to state that by this point '[the] progress of minimalism [during the 1980s] was underway' (117). Europe appeared to be leading the way, resulting in yet another perceptual shift. Mertens's aforementioned *American Minimal Music* (1980/83) sought to explain minimalism as 'the final stage of an anti-dialectic movement that has shaped European avant-garde music since Schoenberg' (Mertens, quoted on page 126). Earlier writers (such as Daniel Caux, Dominique Avron, Guy Rosalto, and Ivanka Stoianova) had already engaged with minimalism on more deeply aesthetic, philosophical and theoretical levels, drawing on the work of cultural theorists Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard to foreground the music's 'nonnarrative, nondirectional, and antifunctional' qualities (140). Minimalism was finally being taken seriously.

Yet such discussions appeared to ignore another elephant in the room, namely its relationship with popular music. Richard Middleton's dialectical reading of repetition connected it to French semiologist Roland Barthes's notion of *jouissance* (143), while John Rockwell saw minimalism as a type of American vernacular music. Even Edward Strickland's more 'inclusive' historiographical perspective appeared to situate the movement more towards the popular end of the art music spectrum. Minimalism's connections with pop were seemingly strengthened in the 1980s by Glass and Reich's move to more 'accessible' musical styles, as heard in the former's Walkman-friendly *Glassworks* (1981) and the latter's *Electric Counterpoint* (1987), part of which was used by electronic dance group The Orb on their 1991 debut album *The Orb's Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld*.

1 See Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 197.

Minimalism's eventual admission into the musicological 'canon' is covered in chapter 19 ('Confirming an Established Fact'), where articles on the subject by K. Robert Schwarz, David Epstein, Jonathan W. Bernard, and Richard Cohn appeared in hitherto 'highbrow' journals such as *Perspectives of New Music* and *The Musical Quarterly*. The analytical findings of such authors made it increasingly difficult to challenge or question 'the essentially serious nature of [minimalist music] or to deny [its] importance in the musical landscape' (174).

The final chapters in Levaux's engaging account bring minimalism's reception history up to date by placing it in the context of postmodernism, postminimalism, and the new musicology, lifting the movement we are told, 'to the height of contemporaneity' (193). Given the surfeit of publications on minimalism during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it is perhaps disappointing that recent research by Kyle Gann, Keith Potter, Robert Fink, Susan McClary, Martin Scherzinger, Sumanth Gopinath, and Jelena Novak is somewhat glossed over. The proliferation of writings on the subject in recent years – from feminist musicology or the politics of race (Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach on Julius Eastman, Martha Mockus on Pauline Oliveros, Gopinath on Reich) to post-opera (John Richardson and Novak), and the study of composers' sketchbooks (Kerry O'Brien, Ryan Ebright, David Chapman, John Pymm, Matthias Kassel, Twila Bakker, Celia Casey, and many others) – is largely ignored, while the Paul Sacher Stiftung, which acquired the Steve Reich Collection in 2008, is not even mentioned.

In a book that often argues that hypothesis and conjecture start to acquire the status of 'truths' when repeated often enough, Levaux is careful to get his facts right – although this is not always the case. Dave Smith was not a member of the Promenade Theatre Orchestra, as stated on page 99 (and therefore not a 'lead actor' in that particular musical 'network' theory). Like the many texts that it subjects to close scrutiny, Levaux's *We Have Always Been Minimalist* ultimately sets out its own provisional truths: truths that may well be questioned, revised, revisited, and reinterpreted at a future date.

If *We Have Always Been Minimalist* attempts to map out as far as possible minimalism's musicological terrain, *In and Out of Phase* revisits the interface between minimalist music and art during the 1960s from several thought-provoking perspectives. Author Michael Maizels makes clear at the outset that his study 'eschews [any attempts] to provide comprehensive coverage' by focusing instead on four case studies that allow both disciplines 'to understand the extent to which their histories are bound up in one another' (3).

A well-known photograph of a performance of Steve Reich's *Pendulum Music* at the Whitney Museum of American Art captures this sense of interconnectedness. Included as part of the *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* exhibition that took place between May and July 1969, the image shows all four participants (with microphones in hand) as the piece is about to begin. The two artists Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman are seen alongside filmmaker Michael Snow and musician James Tenney. Reich is placed in the background of the shot, in between the quartet of performers, adjusting the controls behind a mixing desk.

It would be incorrect to read too much into the photograph, however. While some minimalist composers and artists certainly shared aesthetic experiences and synergies around this time, it is also true that others continued their path along separate trajectories. Both La Monte

Young and visual artist Dan Flavin arguably belonged to the latter category, yet their interests in harnessing the power of electricity to creative ends is persuasively brought together in chapter 1 ('Current').

The story starts with Flavin's 'discovery' of the power of illuminating, fluorescent lighting in his *Diagonal of May 25, 1963*, which according to Maizels, forms a striking parallel with Young's almost simultaneous use of electricity to power his own drone-based sound installations. The author notes that 'whereas Flavin's explorations centered on colored light, La Monte Young's work focused on isolating and extending single sounds' (20). Beyond this straightforward comparison, Maizels notes that 'the most significant link between these two artists was the notion of an experience transfixed through electrical current', which provided 'a window onto ways in which artists navigated the changing landscape of an America becoming modern' (21).

It's an analogy that is almost as striking as the *Pendulum Music* photograph. Nevertheless, at times one senses that Maizels is pushing these connections in order to support his own claims. Perhaps the most controversial comparison is found in chapter 2 ('System'), where the author links artist Sol LeWitt's preoccupation with predetermined systems and patterns in his 1966 *Primary Structures* exhibition with Milton Babbitt's twelve-note methods, developed a decade or so earlier. Maizels argues that LeWitt's attempt to synthesize ideas developed by Babbitt and others in this area '[comprised] a kind of heterodoxy bordering on incomprehensibility' (49), yet it is Maizels's own argument that appears somewhat incomprehensible at this point. It is well-known that minimalist composers had very little time for serial music, with Glass stating in an interview with composer Robert Ashley in 1976 that the European avant-garde scene during the 1960s was 'dominated by these maniacs, these creeps, who were trying to make everyone write this crazy, creepy music'.² As Keith Potter notes, minimalism '[represented] an American reaction to the serial models offered by European composers such as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and by American serialists such as Milton Babbitt'.³

LeWitt's appropriation of serial methods arguably resonates more with Reich's own notion of a process that – once loaded up – runs by itself. Comparison between these two important figures in minimalist art and music has not gone unnoticed, particularly the latter's important 1968 essay 'Music as a Gradual Process', which appears to have been inspired from LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', published in the preceding year.⁴ Maizels does refer to the Reich–LeWitt connection, but only to emphasize their aesthetic differences, stating that: 'whereas LeWitt and the serialists had (differently) emphasized mathematical, algorithmic transformations, Reich's insisted on looking to intuitive, tactile processes . . . as the basis for making work' (72). Really?

2 Robert Ashley, *Music with Roots in the Aether: Interviews with and Essays about Seven American Composers* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 2000), 64.

3 Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 10 (my emphasis).

4 See, for example Michael Nyman's second interview with Steve Reich, conducted in 1976, reprinted in Steve Reich's *Writings on Music: 1965–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91–2. (The composer claims not have read LeWitt's essay when he composed this article.)

As was sometimes the case with Levaux's account, Maizels occasionally emphasizes certain points while downplaying others to suit his own narrative account. For example, early on Maizels states that 'Young had an enormous impact on . . . Steve Reich, one largely mediated through Terry Riley' (4); yet he prefers to develop the somewhat tenuous Young-Reich 'axis of influence' at the expense of Riley's more central role in the story, as presumably the latter is not deemed to be such an important figure from an art-historical point of view.

One senses that the reason for Reich's omission in chapter 2 is to reserve him for chapter 3. Subtitled 'Process', this chapter attempts to draw parallels between Reich's musical processes and Richard Serra's sculptures, with the former's ideas providing Serra with 'a crucial language in which to articulate his desire to collapse the traditional separate acts of creative inspiration and material execution' (9). Fair enough, but once again one is left wondering why Philip Glass was not used instead of Reich at this point? Maizels admits as much when he states that 'Serra chose to hire Glass as a paid assistant in 1968 – a selection that was motivated, perhaps, by his long friendship with Glass' (77). This creative relationship was a reciprocal one. In his autobiography, Glass describes his time as Serra's assistant as 'an irreplaceable experience', saying that 'I believe [Serra] benefitted from me as well.'⁵

Glass, quite literally, had a hand in Serra's use of lead as a material for his work (Glass himself worked as a plumber around this time). Serra acknowledged his debt to Glass in *Slow Roll: For Philip Glass* (1968) (an image is included on page 68 of *In and Out of Phase*). The book's cover even contains a still from Serra's film *Hands Scraping* (1968), which features the artist's and Glass's hands in motion (Maizels incorrectly attributes the image to Reich's hands (12), although he does correct this later (77)). Glass even points out in his memoir that 'the development of my own musical language, at least conceptually (not at all a small point!), *had a relationship to Richard's development*', all of which makes the comparison between Serra and Reich seem at the very least less obvious than the one between Serra and Glass.⁶

These points of criticism are not intended to undermine the many revealing observations about minimalist art and music in *In and Out of Phase*. The concluding sections in each chapter – where Maizels relates his findings to more general cultural trends of the time – are particularly illuminating, as is the final case study ('Body'), which draws interesting comparisons between composer Meredith Monk and artist Bruce Nauman.

Maizels observes early on that 'once an idea moves over a disciplinary border, its meaning can change in ways that seem thoroughly counterintuitive to its original context' (5). Some of his own choices do at times appear 'counterintuitive'; and in general, the book would have benefitted from a more thorough edit and final proof. Minor typos and inaccuracies appear throughout, in addition to more obvious issues, such as the confusion between German playwright Bertolt Brecht and his Fluxus namesake George Brecht (inexplicably, they both share the same reference in a poorly constructed index); repetitions of the same quote in several places, such as Monk's 'I realized that anything in my life could be used as material' (which appears four times in various guises, on pages 9, 98, 104, and 114); or the description

5 Philip Glass, *Words Without Music* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 246.

6 Glass, *Words Without Music*, 246 (my emphasis).

of John Cale as a ‘guitarist’ on page 31 (he played the viola, as any fan of The Velvet Underground will know).

One nevertheless gains much from Maizels’s in-depth understanding of the artistic climate that helped shape minimalist music at the end of the 1960s, especially when read alongside Edward Strickland’s important 1993 publication, *Minimalism: Origins*.

Pwyll ap Siôn Q1
papsion@bangor.ac.uk