

MHL 603 – Minimalism

I. Hallmarks of Minimalism – *review* (discussed in last class)

- pulsing rhythms
- repetition of short, cell-like motives
- simple harmonies
- focus on slowly-shifting, hypnotic textures
- focus on process — ie, Steve Reich’s ‘phase pieces,’ where the entire form is determined by a process (in that case, having one phrase stay rhythmically constant while the other slowly increases in speed)

II. Terry Riley — *In C* (1964) *we discussed this briefly, but it would be nice to touch on it again*

- PLAY a few minutes of Riley’s “In C” (they should have score handout from last week)
Then ask them....
 - ...to name the instrument playing the pulsing rhythms (A: marimba, high piano)
 - ...to explain how the overall texture slowly shifts (A: as players change figures)
 - ...to discuss ‘harmony’ (A: the title says it all, though there are some F#’s & Bb’s)
- this combination of aleatoric operations & simple musical materials informed much of the early minimalist pieces, such as...

III. Steve Reich — *Music for 18 Musicians* (1974ish — **they should have copy of score in minimalist packet that also has Riley**)

- was fascinated by tape loops : two recordings going slowly out of phase was the inspiration for much of his early music (PLAY “It’s Gonna Rain”)
- how could he turn this into music for instruments? PLAY “Piano Phase” — one player stays constant, the other slowly speeds up
 - so it becomes like a micro-canon, with the two pianists getting ‘off’ by one 16th, then two 16ths, then 3...
- later moved beyond the phasing technique into other minimalist techniques
 - augmentation: gradually increasing the length of a phrase each time it returns (or, every fifth time it returns) ...
 - in “Four Organs,” for example, the opening chords are short and staccato — but by the end, they are completely sustained
- early training in jazz and percussion shaped his harmonies and rhythms ... later, in the early 70’s, he studied drumming in Ghana
- at the California Tape Music Center, he worked with Terry Riley (in addition to many others)
- he was involved in the premiere of Riley’s “In C” and suggested the use of the 8th note pulse on high marimba or piano
- TRY TOGETHER: “Clapping Music” (handout) ... split class in two parts and have one play the ‘steady part’ and the other play the ‘changing part’

IV. *Music for 18 Musicians* (1974-6)

- classic minimalist work composed during 1974-1976. Its world premiere was on April 24, 1976 at Town Hall, New York.
- written for a cello, violin, two clarinets (both players double on bass clarinet), four pianos, three marimbas, two xylophones, a metallophone, and four women's voices.
- The piece is based around a cycle of eleven chords. A small piece of music is based around each chord, and the piece returns to the original cycle at the end. The sections are aptly named "Pulses," and Section I-XI. This was Reich's first attempt at writing for larger ensembles,
- PLAY opening few minutes and look at score (HANDOUT). Ask students to tell you what is happening. What are the layers? (Pulsing 8ths with slowly-shifting chords around them.) What is the harmonic rhythm? Ask them to listen again and raise a hand when they feel the harmony change.
- Like "In C," this piece combines minimalist figures with chance operations. What is the point of the chance elements here?

V. Glass and Wilson – Einstein on the Beach (1976)

Metropolitan Opera, Nov 1976 – Preview at Avignon Festival July 1976 – Made tremendous critical impression (pro & con) – Especially by its extreme difference from 19th-century model, indeed from anything previously called "opera" – Much imitated, but no one has done anything just like this again (not Glass, not Adams)

Some novel features

Extremely long – about 5 hours

No "plot," no "story" – just themes – e.g. Einstein, trial, trains

No logical connections between scenes

No sung text – recited prose vs. sung syllables

No solo singing – solo speaking, choral singing – Act 3 "aria" is the exception

Action on stage is mainly dancing, repetitive actions

Minimalist musical idiom

PLAY "Air-conditioned supermarket" CD around 3 minutes – Listen for features

What are musical characteristics of "minimalism"?

repetition – of melodic patterns, of cadential patterns

incremental change – rhythms, melodic patterns

tonal – scales, triads, cadences – sometimes modal

drones

PLAY Spaceship on CD – Listen for "minimalism"

Changing rhythmic patterns

Vocal style – numbers instead of words

"Separation of elements"

Glass and Wilson on separation – Wilson on candelaba

What are elements? – words, music (harmony, melody, rhythm), dance (movement), song, character

How separated in excerpts we just listened to?

Spaceship – song w/o words, melody vs. rhythm

Supermarket – words w/o song, 3 distinct elements, others added onstage

PLAY DVD 8 – Look for separation of elements – Does separation force you to rediscover each element as Wilson would like?

Compare Brecht's notion of separation – Same or different? – Brecht wants listeners to connect the dots as he does – Glass and Wilson want listeners to make their own connections

Dramaturgy of Einstein – PLAY DVD 11

Plot – replaced by themes (Einstein, spaceship, bus, courtroom) – All these are very familiar and audience brings its own associations

Purposeful action replaced by everyday action, repetitive action

Action not co-ordinated with music – simultaneous but independent

Stasis within scenes – repetition of all elements – contemplation of possible meanings

Open rather than closed – audience makes connections, audience brings possibilities
Does Einstein have any meaning, any message(s)?

FINAL NOTE: I'll be emailing them info about the final exam (which we discussed)