

MHL 603 – Post-Minimalism

I. Why Minimalism? *Because serialism's focus on ultra-complexity created a need for it*

Hallmarks:

- 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)

What is 'post-minimalism?' *It's embedding elements of minimalism inside a piece with various other stylistic elements ... usually, this means that the 'process-driven' determinate of form is left out, but the textures/rhythms/harmonies of minimalism are audible*

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...

II. John Adams: Chamber Symphony (1992)

- PLAY opening: sounds on first hearing very non-minimalist, but in fact...
 - it contains pulsing rhythms (ie, cowbell)
 - it contains repetitions of short phrases
 - most importantly, it is 'layer-driven' — ie, built by stacking layers of horizontally-driven music (ie, overall harmonies are not part of the musical focus)
 - in short, this is a minimalist piece *with atonal noteheads: ie, the only thing different is the harmony*

- what else is distinctive about this piece?

• though atonal, the layers have a familiarity: the walking bass, the gypsy violin, the jazz clarinet

• why would John Adams move into this world after so many years of writing 'pure' minimalism? *Because, just as serialism created a need for something different, minimalism created a need for something different — in this case, more complex and chromatic*

III. Aaron Kernis: Symphony in Waves (1994)

- PLAY opening couple of minutes: where is the minimalism? *It's in the highly repetitive, fast-changing scales in the strings & winds*
 - that is, it's not layer-driven: the minimalism here is in the accumulation of rapid, repetitive scales whose lightning-fast shifts are the primary musical focus

- this is 'post-minimalism' because it borrows minimalist ideas but uses them in a non-process-driven piece — ie, the shape of the piece is constructed in a more traditional manner, not in a Reichian manner (which takes a process — a loop that's phasing — and lets it play out over entire piece)

- Kernis is an eclectic composer who draws from many styles — romantic, minimalist, serial, you name it — but is best known for works such as his String Quartet No. 2, which won the Pulitzer Prize (simple harmonies but lots of rhythmic activity)

IV. Thomas Ades: Living Toys (1992)

- PLAY first movement: does this have *any* minimalist tendencies? Yes — it is layer-driven music that focuses on textures ... but for sure, minimalism is only one of *many* styles that pass through Ades

- background

- Ades is an extremely gifted 'complete musician,' like Britten, who performs as a pianist as well as conducts

- brilliant at creating pieces that are highly dense on the micro level (ie, virtuosic writing for all the instruments) but clear on the macro level (ie, form)

- he is influenced by both ultra-complex European models (French spectral music, post-serial procedures, etc) as well as a more communicative American ones (minimalism, jazz, etc)

- one of this favorite techniques is to build a section around a long, stretched-out melody by..
 - ...passing the melody to various instruments and embellishing it with other textures
 - ...designing various accompaniments in seemingly different tempi than the melody
 - ...all while keeping focused on the larger musical shape