

Adorno and Minimalists

In his *Philosophy of New Music* Adorno makes a comparative analysis of two composition schools: the new Viennese school represented by Schoenberg and the neoclassical one exemplified by Stravinsky. These two alternative figures reflected two polar types of thinking in 20th-century music.

Schoenberg is an offspring of Romantic music at its critical point, who continued to develop its constituents such as extreme individualism, subjective self-expression, an anthropomorphic, dynamic model of time, and an authentic style revealing a highly original musical language. All of this came to be manifested in the 12-tone technique.

On the other part, Stravinsky is a carrier of the objective world perception, an exponent of the ontological model of time, and an advocate of the composer's alienated language in favor of the historical polyphonic style in the "music about music."

A conceptual analysis of Schoenberg and Stravinsky made Adorno, a veritable supporter of Schoenberg and a critic of Stravinsky, outline the basic categories of New Music, which had far anticipated the creative tenets of minimalism.

An underlying idea in the *philosophical and creative conception* of minimalism is the emancipation of sound as such and the new perception of time. As a matter of fact, these aspects are closely interrelated since they delineate different facets of the same phenomenon. Minimalism emerged within the most radical avant-gardist trend - "experimental music" headed by John Cage and his school. This trend with its ideas opposed to the entire European musical tradition, including the avant-garde of the 1950s-1960s.

The philosophy of sound professed in "experimental music" is manifest in Cage's following words: "Sounds become 'abstract' if instead of listening to them for their own sake you content yourselves with listening to their interactions <...> I know perfectly well that things are subject to interpenetrating. I believe that the interpenetrating of sounds is much more abundant and intricate when I exclude any interaction. There and then they begin integrating and merge into a certain entity, into a unit <...> They exist on their own and since each sound lives on its own, a unit makes up a set"¹.

The tonal material underwent radical changes in 20th-century new music. Never before any reforms in the evolution of a musical language had touched upon a deep-rooted, ontological, layer of musical substance, sound as its prime element. Sound turned into a phenomenon of modern music, its emblem. The expansion of its bounds and changes in its treatment, listening, hearing and perception, are evidenced by the composers' following utterances:

"I have always longed for the emancipation of sound" – Edgar Varèse².

"For the ear open to any sound, everything can sound as music! Music is not only what we regard as beautiful but also life itself" – John Cage³.

"Sound is a palette of the finest and richest color nuances,"⁴ "the space of timbre is the space of a perspective" – Eduard Artemyev⁵.

"There are scales of noise within which it is possible to achieve a perfectly chromatic articulation of consonants. This is quite a different unprecedented kind of music" – Karlheinz Stockhausen⁶.

"Perhaps, the semantic integration of timbre and a musical object is the most topical question nowadays" – Pierre Boulez⁷.

The American minimalists have inherited Cage's philosophy of sound as a self-sufficing object. Though, past experience in the serial technique has neither disappeared without leaving a trace in their works. Webern's pointillism seemed to be directed toward the opposite pole and guided by different motivations, but in purely outward appearance it was akin to the same autonomy of sounds-dots in the scattered tonal texture. At the same time, interaction of sounds in the serial technique draws quite a different picture, compressing

time to microcosmic superdensity. Minimalism reduces sound to the autonomy of a blank sheet, a prime element free from systemic relationships and disaffected by the subjective world. Of course, it was out of the question in the music of Schoenberg or Berg because their sounds are affected. But beginning with Webern, the subjective world got already scattered whereas time disengaged itself from a dynamic process. And the minimalists came to remove the psychological substance completely. Ontological time is devoid of any pressing associated with a happening wherein each gesture reads as a novel. "Ontological and psychological time are equivalent in minimalism"⁸.

Models of Time

Sound as a prime element is placed into a system of space-time coordinates alien to the 17th - 20th c.c. European music with its expressively dynamic, anthropomorphic experiences of time and space. The minimalistic model of time and space is akin, on the one part, to the archaic and medieval European thinking and the perception of non-European nations, on the other part. Time as an objective continual process turned into a key idea of American minimalism. Its static character is expressed in the term "vertical time" coined by Jonathan Kramer. The image of *perpetuum mobile* is close to its meaning: dynamic movement at the scale of infiniteness acquires static character.

Back in the 19th century Wagner was moving toward the static experience of time. In the overture to *The Rhine Gold* he had already mused about time passing into space, and in *Parsifal* he had developed this idea not only in his music but also had it formulated in the libretto: "here time transforms into space".

Liszt had also foreshadowed static time in his later works. In his *Nuages gris* for piano (1881), the extremely concentrated development led eventually to braking, making time vertical.

Adorno was the next after Wagner to raise the matter of "time passing into space" but already with regard to Stravinsky⁹.

Credit for the discovery of nonanthropomorphic time in music goes to Stravinsky. It is Stravinsky who had made a breakthrough in the European musical perception from the humanistic model of time as "the subject's inward time" to real ontological time. Adorno defined the latter insightfully (even though from the vision of Stravinsky's opponent) as a "heterogeneous and alienated stream of events"¹⁰.

According to Adorno, the absence of dynamic development in Stravinsky's compositions means the replacement of order by outward appearances. Apparently, order implies here three-phase character of a linear process (a beginning - culmination - an ending). Adorno's shrewd characteristics of Stravinsky's method may be safely applied to minimalist music after changing the value constituent of his judgment from minus to plus. And then we shall get the following positions. "There isn't any development <...> Since a thing is not subject to deep processing, it lays claims to <...> monumentality inherent in itself" ... An entity acquires "a kind of perpetual character" ... "The omission of dynamic development serves to give a garbled version of eternity," etc¹¹.

Indeed, minimalistic music does not endeavor to convey anything, it just exists as time itself does. No wonder that Stravinsky's model of time had captivated the American continent earlier (Varèse, Cage) than Western Europe (Boulez).

The model of continual time – *time as a stream* – is close to the prereflexive perception of archaic peoples. It does not denote a dynamic vector of development from one point to another, but represents a segment of a circle as a symbol of eternity. "This time is not goal-oriented, it is *not teleologic*. We can enter and leave it, for it lasts irrespective of this. It does not begin when we begin and it does not end when we are coming to an end. A piece is a section of the ongoing and never-ending stream. This is how the minimalist conception of time was defined by Alexei Lyubimov¹², the initiator and member of the first performance of Terry Riley's *In C* in Moscow in 1968.

The problem of authorship

Overcoming of the composer's "self" in minimalist music results directly from the new conception of time as opposed to the idea of opus. Adorno had discerned the mediated "self" in Stravinsky's music and

selected him as an object of his biting criticism when he sensed a tendency toward “self-preservation by way of self-alienation” in the composer’s estrangement from the psychological principle.

The strategy of “self-alienation” may be defined as a distinctive feature of minimalist music. Therefore, Adorno’s words about Stravinsky are fully applicable to minimalists but again in the positive sense. Indeed, a minimalist composition is invariably associated with the *continual process* as opposed to *opus per se*. The *opus perfectum et absolutum* dating back to the New Times is overcome here completely. This is explained primarily by the minimalistic delineation of process in its pure form. The process “cannot express anything but itself” (E. Stibler).¹³ Terry Riley calls it “accumulating processes,” Steve Reich, “gradual process,” while Philip Glass defines his composition technique as “additive process” and “subtractive process”.

The very word “process” discloses the metaphysical essence of music, its extrapersonal nature and, moreover, the composer’s dissociation from it. This metasytem seems to function exclusively owing to its intrinsic algorithm, not depending on anyone and existing on its own, creating and multiplying sound combinations without the composer’s interference and control. The latter’s role is reduced to the organization and “launching” of this system.

Therefore, Adorno’s assessment of the composer’s position in Stravinsky’s music is repeated almost literally by Steve Reich: “The outline of a process involves pitiless work on self-alienation”¹⁴.

The Principle of Listening

Adorno has transferred the concept of “self-alienation” onto the listener. Speaking about Stravinsky, the philosopher analyzes two types of listening: dynamically expressive and rhythmically spatial. “The former arises from singing, being oriented toward overcoming time by filling it, and in its highest manifestations it transforms a heterogeneous drift of time into a strong flow of the musical process. The other type is subject to beating of the drums. It is aimed at the articulation of time by dividing it into equal fractions, virtually annulling time and making it pass into space.”¹⁵ Ascribing Stravinsky’s music to the second type of listening, Adorno ascertains the relevant type of listeners: “his music attracted everyone wanting to get rid of their own “self”. Such critical position is directly related with minimalism designed for a specific type of listening.

Early in the 20th century many painters and musicians (Gauguin, Matisse, Goncharova, Stravinsky, Bartok) were captivated by archaic cultures allowing artists to derive primitive energy from them. Primitivism led to the use of avant-gardist means of expression. The first repetitive compositions dating to the period of classical minimalism - Riley’s *In C* (1964) and Reich’s *Piano phase* (1968) - also demonstrate the road of composers who began with analyzing traditional cultures and limiting themselves in the use of musical material. The music of other cultures fascinated them because the use of minimum material gave rise to different aesthetics and a different principle of listening.

The point is that traditional archaic material is primitive, its melodic and rhythmic formulas being not intended for development. The mode of its functioning in time is repetition. Moreover, a composer by using short structures gives them no chance to develop. The road to a transformation, the method of development used in compositions since the New Times, is blocked here. It only remains for us to resort to repetition, variance and combinatorics. Therefore, minimalism is inevitably related with repetition.

For a listener to European music based on the dynamic model of time, on development, each moment provides progression as a thread of narration according to the principle “from something to something else.” Such are teleological concepts of “from darkness to light,” “*per aspera ad astra*,” and “from suffering to enlightenment.” This is a linear, horizontal road, delineating cause-and-effect relationships. It is characterized by dynamism, contrasts, collisions and sudden changes, mounting and subsiding tension, a beginning, culmination and an ending.

The other road is a *lingering* stay. Adorno characterizes it thus: there is “no development” but “severity of pure existent being.” This is a cyclic vertical road. Its aim is meditation, the sensation of touching time itself and being, concentration, contemplation, and immersion. This is Cages’s “void” Nothing, when “super-reality” stands out most tangibly.

The simpler the technique, the stronger effect it produces. Repetitiveness in its varying forms is the simplest technique. Repetition and variance exist in the European forms as well, e.g., in variations, strophic

compositions, and ostinato. Dodecaphony also makes use of repetition as the organization of tonal material, where the whole texture is based on the ongoing repetition of a series in the varying modifications. The work with segments of a series and rotation of sounds within the segments come close to the minimalist formulas. But there is a fundamental difference between these two methods: that what remains hidden in some way or another in dodecaphony, structured in a through process, minimalism discloses in its repetitive form, making it declaratory and easily perceivable.

In contrast to the structural complexities and reticence of dodecaphony, minimalism clearly outlines structural processes. In this respect, Steve Reich says the following: "I want to hear how the process is unfolding in the resounding music as an entity; in order to facilitate the perception of details, the process should develop in the most successive manner"¹⁶. This is what makes the basis of meditation, a goal that can be attained by drawing on the simplicity and clarity of abstract tonal structures.

References

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- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 316.
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- ¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 56.
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Summary

In a basis of the philosophical and creative concept of minimalism lays the idea of emancipation of sound and the new perception of time. The sound as primal elemental of music (Cage) is placed in the system of time coordinates close, on the one hand, to archaic and medieval European thinking, and with another – prereflexive consciousness of Non-European peoples. The model of time as objective continuing process (or static process) is embodied in the term «vertical time».

Wagner was the first to think over the concept of «time turning into space». After the composer it was Adorno who introduced spoke about «spatial time» («Philosophy of new music»). The critical analysis of the concept of Stravinsky has deduced Adorno on such characteristics of the basic categories of New music which anticipate creative positions of minimalism.

1. The concept of time. Stravinsky has made break in the European musical consciousness from the model of «inward time of a subject» (the concept of the Humanists) – to ontological time. Adorno characterized this perspicacious thought (though being opposed to Stravinsky) as «heterogeneous and alienated stream of events».
2. Overcoming author's «Self» in minimal music is the direct consequence of the new concept of time resisting to the idea of an opus/work (of art). Adorno criticizes Stravinsky exactly for that, i.e. «self-preservation by means of self-elimination» which he finds in Stravinsky's negation of psychological authorship. Adorno's idea is almost literally repeated by Steve Reich: «Forming of process is a ruthless work on self-elimination».
3. Adorno has transferred his concept of «self-elimination» on listener: «his music drew to itself everyone who wanted to get rid from one's own "Self"». Such position has the direct connection with the music of minimalism designed for special type of hearing.

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Santrauka

Minimalizmo filosofinio ir kūrybinio suvokimo pamatą sudaro garso emancipacijos idėja ir nauja laiko samprata. Garsas kaip pirminis muzikos elementas (Cage) yra įtalpintas laiko koordinatų sistemoje, kurią riboja, viena vertus, Europos archajinis ir viduramžinis mąstymas, o, antra vertus, Neoeuropos tautų prerefleksinė sąmonė. Laiko kaip objektyviai besitęsiančio proceso (ar statiško proceso) modelis yra išreikštas terminu „vertikalusis laikas”.

Wagneris buvo pirmasis, mąstęs apie „laiko, pereinančio į erdvę” suvokimą. Po šio kompozitoriaus buvo Adorno, kuris įvedė *spoke* apie „erdvinį laiką” („Naujosios muzikos filosofija”). Kritinė Stravinskio koncepto analizė atvedė Adorno prie tokių naujosios muzikos fundamentaliųjų kategorijų charakteristikų, kurios nuspėjo minimalizmo kūrybines pozicijas.

1. Laiko konceptas. Stravinskis Europos muzikinėje sąmonėje padarė šuolį nuo „subjekto vidinio laiko” modelio (humanistų konceptas) prie ontologinio laiko. Adorno apibūdino šią įžvalgią mintį (nors ji oponavo Stravinskiui) kaip „heterogeninę ir nutolintą įvykių tėkmę”.
2. Autoriaus „aš” nugalėjimas minimalistinėje muzikoje yra tiesioginė naujos laiko sampratos pasekmė, laiko, kuris oponuoja meno veikalo / opuso idėjai. Adorno kritikuoja Stravinskį būtent už tai, t. y. už „savęs išsaugojimą savęs eliminavimo priemonėmis”, kurias jis randa Stravinskio psichologinės autorystės neigime. Adorno idėją beveik paraidžiui pakartojo S. Reichas: „Proceso formavimas yra negailestingas savęs eliminavimo darbas”.
3. Adornas savąją „savęs eliminavimo” sampratą perkėlė į klausytoją: „jo muzika patraukė į save kiekvieną, kuris norėjo pasijuokti iš savo „aš”. Tokia pozicija tiesiogiai siejasi su minimalizmo muzika, skirta specialiam klausymo tipui.