

Post-Minimalism: A Valid Terminology?

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Recent Minimalist music written by American composers as Adams, Reich and Glass, and European composers as Nyman, Andriessen and Pärt, features major esthetical and stylistic transformations if compared with the “classic” Minimalist works developed by Young, Riley, Reich and Glass in the 60s and 70s. Does this new Minimalist music should still be considered Minimalist or the terminology Post-Minimalist would be more appropriate to describe its new features, stylistic and esthetical transformations? Our aim in this paper is to discuss the concept of Post-Minimalist in the light of a number of musical works that started to emerge in the late 70s and in the early 80s.

In plastic arts it was Robert Pincus-Witten who first coined the term and idea of Post-Minimalism. Pincus-Witten called Post-Minimalist, according to Strickland in a restrictive chronology, the period of American art between 1966-76.¹ Pincus-Witten says that the style he regards as Post-Minimalism is the one that “actively rejects the high formalistic cult of impersonality.”²

A parallel may be traced with music, since early Minimalist works, based on “impersonal” processes, served as a departure point for works in which the technical procedures Minimalism are less systematic, the style more flexible, and the aesthetic more inclusive. While in the 70s there was already a debate in plastic arts about Minimalism and Post-Minimalism, the idea of Post-Minimalism in music was conceived much later in the 80s. Post-Minimalism in music was originally associated with the output of American composer John Adams, who started to use the term and occasionally call himself a Post-Minimalist composer. Music critic K. Robert Schwarz later embraced the term.³

Although chapter 6 of Robert Schwarz’s book *Minimalists* is entitled “Adams, Monk and Post-Minimalism”, the subject of Post-Minimalism is treated in a few paragraphs, and in an incipient way. Schwarz associates the idea of Post-Minimalism with the name of John Adams limiting to say that

The term *post-minimalism* has been invented to describe Adam’s eclectic vocabulary, one in which the austerity of minimalism now rubs shoulders with the passion of Romanticism... it is true that in Adam’s music minimalism becomes only one style among others.⁴

If Schwarz were interested in discussing the concept of Post-Minimalism in depth, a wider approach would be necessary. Post-Minimalism can only be justifiable as a terminology if it has the potential to be applied to a significant body of works, by different composers, that can be recognized by common

esthetical and stylistic features, within an historical and chronological perspective. Creating a terminology that refers to the work or style of only one composer does not seem a worth enterprise. As adopted by Schwarz, the term may seem superfluous or even pretentious.

If we assume that Post-Minimalism is a valid terminology to describe eclectic vocabularies in which the austerity of Minimalism is robbed, works by European composers as Nyman, Andriessen, and Pärt, who took Minimalism in a “second hand” basis as Adams, should be examined more closely. Andriessen’s *De Staat* (1972-76), Pärt’s *Tabula Rasa* (1977), Nyman’s *In Re Don Giovanni* (1977), and works by early Minimalist composers as Glass’s *Satyagraha* (1980), and Reich’s *Tehillim* (1981), which were developed around the same time of the beginning of Adams’ mature output (1977-78)⁵, could also be considered good candidates for the Post-Minimalist status. Actually Schwarz acknowledges that Andriessen’s *De Staat*, “with its raucous and pulsating combination of voices and instruments, offers a startling anticipation of the later works of John Adams”,⁶ and that around 1976, Reich and Glass started to move away from Minimalism in an extent that the term could no longer be applied to their music.⁷

It is a general consensus that from the late 70s onward, some important features started to change in the Minimalist aesthetic and style, both in America and Europe. In 1976 Reich completed and premiered *Music for Eighteen Musicians*,⁸ a work that has more harmonic movement in its first five minutes than in any other work by Reich to date. Reich says that from 1976 onward the term Minimalism becomes less and less descriptive for his music and “until the time you get to *Tehillim* and *The Desert Music*, it is only called Minimalism because I wrote it.”⁹

Philip Glass expresses similar ideas when saying, in an interview given in 1992, that

I haven’t written any minimal music in twelve years... I don’t think ‘minimalism’ adequately describes it. I think it describes a very reductive, quasirepetitive style of the late sixties. But by 1975 or 76, everyone had begun to do something a little bit different.¹⁰

Around the same time when Reich and Glass were turning their compositional trajectories, there was a group of composers who were working with Minimalism as a departing point, but were manipulating the Minimalist language from a different historical perspective. Adams, Andriessen, Nyman and Pärt, among others, were the heirs of a musical language already established by the founding fathers. Around 1976-1978, both in America and Europe, several composers were working in the same direction, departing from Minimalism but extending its boundaries.

Between 1977-78 in America, John Adams was composing his first mature works, *Phrigian Gates* and *Shaker Loops*. In these works Minimalist processes are diluted in a great extent. *Shaker Loops*, a work articulated in four movements, “emphasize contrasts in timbre, texture, dynamics, and figurations. ... *Shaker Loops* depends upon accelerandos and ritardandos to strengthen climatic points.”¹¹ The surface of the work displays several changes in short periods of time, what creates a more dramatic experience than usual Minimalist music.

In England around 1977, after a long compositional silence, Michael Nyman started to compose a series of works for the Michael Nyman Band. What is characteristic in Nyman’s new Minimalist language is the borrowing of materials from the traditional Western music.

As he says

I get all my musical kicks and ideas from the European symphonic tradition... I tend to work in a very Westernized harmonic language.¹²

Nyman submits iconic elements of Western music, as harmonic progressions, ground basses, melodic lines, to Minimalist processes, “creating a post-modernist reinterpretation of the musical past.”¹³

In 1976 in Germany, Louis Andriessen was finishing *Da Staat* a work that reflects a strong fusion of American Minimalism with European Modernism. The composition features several Minimalist elements, in mixture with a high degree of dissonance, abrupt shifts of color and texture, and long modal melodic lines. These features define a unique sonic universe that anticipates several of the characteristics found in Adams’s Post-Minimalist works.

During 1976-77, Arvo Pärt started to develop a series of influential works, like *Tabula Rasa* and *Frates*. These works features a mixture between elements of medieval music (which Pärt studied deeply in the years before) with esthetical characteristics of Minimalism. Pärt, however, has to be considered one exception, since his music does not depart overtly from Minimalism like the music of Adams, Nyman and Andriessen. Technically Pärt’s music is based on his own *tintinnabuli* technique, which was developed and crystallized between 1976-77.¹⁴

Aesthetically, however, Pärt’s music departs from Minimalism and it would not be possible without the Minimalist enterprise. Works as *Tabula Rasa* (first movement) and *Arbos*, which have fast and moderate pulses, are indicative of the strong link Pärt has with the original Minimalist style and aesthetic. Pärt admits he had known Riley’s *In C* still when still in Soviet Union, and confirming these influences, Reich says that

Pärt I’ve met and he did tell me he’d heard my music in the Soviet Union. I was very pleased to hear that. ... It (Pärt’s music) may be influenced by some of the things I

have done, for which I'm very, very proud...¹⁵

Pärt is a composer who was deeply influenced by the Minimalist aesthetic, but at the same time was able to absorb, adapt, and transform it in a personal style, through his own *tintinnabuli* technique. Considering its origins and chronology of creation, Pärt's *tintinnabuli* music could be described much more appropriately as Post-Minimalist than Minimalist.

Therefore if Post-Minimalism is a valid terminology, it has to be used to refer to a body of works produced by different composers, from different countries,¹⁶ starting in the late 70s. The common esthetical feature of these works, is that they depart from Minimalism in some aspects (technical, stylistic, esthetical, or altogether), but eclectically mix it with other techniques, other stylistic elements, reaching original artistic results, but in which Minimalism is still felt.

One may consider that this definition is too broad and that it would be better to maintain the label Minimalist for these developments. However if it is acknowledged that there are more distinctions than similarities between Minimalist and Post-Minimalist works, both terms may be used advantageously, in a more clear and specific way.

The main esthetical difference between Minimalism and Post-Minimalism is that Minimalism was born as a son of Modernism, with a mode of composition that is systematic and exclusionist. Minimalist works are born from a systematic mode of composition in which the process is almost an end in itself. Minimalism is also a highly original and "pure" mode of composition, it does not admit mixture with other compositional techniques, and does not borrow features from other compositional styles and aesthetics.

Contrarily the Post-Minimalism aesthetic is not exclusionist, and expresses itself through a more inclusive mode of composition, where the mixture of the Minimalist elements, with elements and techniques from other styles and aesthetics, are welcome and employed as legitimate compositional resources.

An analogy may be traced between the distinction of Minimalism vs. Post-Minimalism, as discussed here, and the distinction of Modernism vs. Post-Modernism as attempted by Kramer. Talking about Minimalism, Kramer says that

Some path-braking early minimalist works strike me as more modernist than postmodernist. The purity, the strong statement, and the radical newness of such pieces as Steve Reich's *Violin Phase*, or Philip Glass' *Music in Fifths* are throughout modernists... minimalist diatonicism and repetition can produce both modernist works (such as *Einstein*) and postmodernist works (such as Reich's *Tehillim*).¹

While Minimalism may be considered one of the esthetical movements of Modernism, Post-Minimalism may be considered one of the esthetical movements of Post-Modernism.

Minimalism and Post-Minimalism share similar roots, but to make possible a distinction, they have to be considered two different esthetical attitudes. In his article “Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?” Johnson makes a point for defining Minimalism as a technique rather than as style or an aesthetic. According to Johnson the five main characteristics of the Minimalist technique, that are in direct correspondence with the five main characteristics of the Minimalist style, are: continuous formal structure, an even rhythmic texture and bright tone, a simple harmonic palette, a lack of extended melodic lines and repetitive rhythmic patterns.¹⁸

Johnson points out that many pieces that project all characteristics of the Minimalist technique do not exhibit the qualities of the Minimalism style and aesthetic. He then concludes that style and aesthetic are not determinant factors for the definition of Minimalism, saying that Minimalism can be defined more accurately as a technique. Johnson demonstrates that later works by Reich, and works by Adams, Andriessen, and Torke (which are examined closely in his article), combine Minimalist techniques with other compositional elements, transcending Minimalist aesthetic and style.

Johnson does not express a concept of Post-Minimalism, but tries to define something that is beyond Minimalism. Talking about Adams he says that

By embracing the textural, harmonic, and rhythmic aspects of minimalism, Adams has adopted the minimalist technique, but he has transcended the minimalist aesthetic and style through his expansion of these features and through his frequent use of extended melodic lines.¹⁹

It seems Johnson has a conceptual difficulty to deal with the new stylistic and esthetical features of recent Minimalist (or Post-Minimalist) music and then tries to “solve the problem” restricting the concept of Minimalism as a compositional technique.

In our view however his attempt is not legitimate, since it tries to make an artificial separation between aesthetic, style and technique, dismissing the fact that these categories are strongly interrelated in the history of music. A particular new technique, or set of techniques, can not be created in an antiseptic environment, without a specific stylistic and esthetical context. It is especially true for Minimalist music.

If works by a new generation of composers, and later works of Reich and Glass, which employ Minimalist techniques in mixture with other elements, can not be considered Minimalists anymore, both in style and aesthetic, there are

only two conceptual possibilities for dealing with the situation:

- 1) Minimalism is reduced to a technique, these works employ Minimalist techniques but are dispossessed of a particular style and aesthetic.
- 2) These works are mixing Minimalist elements (technical, stylistic and esthetical) with elements extraneous to Minimalism, defining therefore a Post-Minimalist aesthetic.

Rather than reduce Minimalism to a technique as wishes Johnson, it is necessary to recognize its esthetical growth and stylistic transformations. In the understanding of this author, in the 80s and 90s, a representative body of works that could be considered fully Post-Minimalists was developed. If we take a group of works as Reich's *Tehillin* (1981), Part's *Stabat Mater* (1985), Adams's *Harmoniewerke* (1986), Torke's *Adjustable Wrench*²⁰ (1987), Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2* (1988), Glass's *Fifth String Quarter* (1991), and Cervo's *Abertura e Toccata* (1995), it is possible to distinguish at least three prominent features common to all these works, which are well extraneous to Minimalism:

- 1) All works depart from Minimalist in some aspect aspects (technical, stylistic, esthetical, or altogether), and eclectically mix it with other techniques, other stylistic elements, reaching original artistic results, but in which Minimalism is still felt.
- 2) The use of melodic lines and melodic expressiveness is of paramount importance. Melodic lines may assume a main role in the composition, they may appear alone or with Minimalist elements working as a background accompaniment for them.
- 3) The works are articulated in several movements or sections, with different tempi, that are contrasting and/or can be easily distinguished from each other, breaking the sense of continuity typical of Minimalist works.

Trying now to focus the discussion about Post-Minimalism in a more specific and technical way, we will start an analysis of Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2*. The analysis will be focused in the third movement, and it aims to identify the three differential aspects between Minimalism and Post-Minimalism cited above.²¹

Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2* is articulated in six movements, each one with his own tempo, and each one governed by its own rhythmic cycle: 4-beat, 5-beat, 7-beat, 9-beat and multiple cycles in the final movement. The rhythmic organization of the Quartet is based on rhythmic concepts of Hindu music. Cyclical structures and speeds are related with the choreographic function of the score. Nyman openly accepted the given rhythmic information (choreographer-imposed), attempting to overlay his personal melodic, harmonic, and structural vocabulary within this frame.²²

The third movement of the Quartet is constructed with three main elements (Example 1), which are:

- 1) The *ostinato* eight-note figuration in Violins I and II.
- 2) The ground bass [Bb, A, C], played by the Cello.
- 3) A melodic line featured by the Viola.

Example 1 – Nyman’s *String Quartet no. 2*,
third movement, measures 10-18.

Musical score for measures 10-12. The top two staves (Violin I and II) feature an ostinato eight-note figuration. The bottom staff (Cello) features a ground bass with a '2' below it. The middle staff (Viola) features a melodic line with a '1' below it.

Musical score for measures 13-15. The top two staves (Violin I and II) feature an ostinato eight-note figuration. The bottom staff (Cello) features a ground bass with a '3' below it. The middle staff (Viola) features a melodic line with 'solo' and 'elision' markings.

The image shows a musical score for four staves. The top two staves are for Violin I and Violin II, both in treble clef. The bottom two staves are for Viola and Cello/Double Bass, both in bass clef. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The score consists of three measures. The first two measures show a steady eighth-note pattern in the violins and a simple ground bass in the lower strings. The third measure features a melodic line in the Violin I staff that overlaps with the end of the previous measure, marked with the word 'elision' above it. The ground bass in the lower strings continues with a slight rhythmic variation.

Let's now see how Nyman manipulates these elements between measures 1-36. The eight-note figuration in Violin II is worked out through a systematic process of repetition, identical every measure. The figuration on Violin I is manipulated through technique of variation in mixture with repetition. The eight-note pattern is kept, but the contour changes freely and new variations are repeated each 3 or 2 measures. The ground bass [Bb, A, C] is repeated each three measures, or 18 beats. In measures 1-12 the ground bass appears in its simple form, but from measure 13 onward, slight rhythmic variations takes place. The melody, first introduced in measure 13, lasts 16 beats and it is repeated systematically. Because the melody has 16 beats and the bass pattern has 18 beats, every three measures the melody becomes 2 beats out of phase in respect the bass. The melody undergoes a clear Reichian phasing process. As example 1 shows, there are elisions between the end and the beginning of each statement of the melody, what makes it difficult to identify the 16-beat pattern at first sight.

Between measures 37-48 there is a textural shift in the piece. The process carried out between measures 1-36, that was systematic in the Violin II, Viola and Cello²³, but relatively free in Violin I, gives place to other elements. In measure 37 a new ground bass [Bb, A, G, A], with an eight-note figuration, is introduced and repeated each 4 measures. The eight-note pattern in Violin II, becomes a sixteen-note pattern that is repeated each 4 measures (in synchrony with the bass). The melody migrates from Viola to Violin I, but the Viola keeps playing its contour. In measure 45 the melody starts to be freely varied in the Violin I. Example 2 shows the new features introduced.

Example 2 – Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2*,
third movement, measures 37-45.

Musical score for the first system. It consists of four staves: a vocal line (treble clef), a piano accompaniment (treble clef), a bass line (alto clef), and a double bass line (bass clef). The piano accompaniment features a complex, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The bass line is marked *leg.* (leggiero). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4.

Ground Bass: Bb, A, G, A

Musical score for the second system, continuing the composition from the first system. It maintains the same four-staff structure and key signature. The piano accompaniment continues with its intricate rhythmic texture.

Musical score for the third system. The piano accompaniment continues. The vocal line is marked "Free melodic variation" and shows a change in melodic direction. The bass line continues with its rhythmic pattern.

In measure 49 there is another important change in the movement. The original ground bass (Bb, A, C) comes back. The melody is still shared by Viola and Violin I, but now with exchanged roles; the Viola plays the melody while Violin I plays its contour through variations. Violin II and Cello feature different patterns each three measures (Example 3).

Example 3 – Nyman’s *String Quartet no. 2*,
third movement, measures 49-54.

The musical score for Example 3 shows measures 49-54. It is written for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The time signature is 6/4. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The Viola staff is labeled "Melody" and the Cello staff is labeled "Return of Ground Bass: Bb A C". The section is marked "sim." (sostenuto). The score shows a complex interplay of rhythmic patterns and melodic lines across the instruments.

The section from measure 49 to the end is, in a great extent, freely composed. The bass changes its pattern each three measures, and the melody in Violin I is, most of the time, freely varied. Patterns in Violin II assume different characteristics each 6, 3, 2, or 1 measures. The only element that remains “stable”, with a systematic phasing process, is the melody in the Viola. The movement ends abruptly, what is an esthetical gesture and stylistic feature typical of Minimalist works. Example 4 shows the last nine measures of this freely composed section.

Example 4 – Nyman’s *String Quartet no. 2*,
third movement, measures 58-66.

The image displays a musical score for Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2*, third movement, measures 58-66. The score is presented in two systems, each with four staves. The top staff of each system is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music features a complex, rhythmic texture with many sixteenth notes and eighth notes, often grouped in beams. The first system shows a melodic line in the top staff, a dense rhythmic pattern in the second staff, and a more sparse, rhythmic line in the bass staff. The second system continues this texture, with the top staff showing a series of sixteenth-note runs, the second staff showing a dense rhythmic pattern, and the bass staff showing a series of eighth-note chords. The overall style is characteristic of post-minimalism, with a focus on rhythmic complexity and texture.

The image displays a musical score for a string quartet, specifically the third movement of Michael Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2*. The score is written for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass. The top staff (Violin I) features a melodic line with a 'Free melodic variation' section indicated by a bracket. The other staves provide accompaniment, including a prominent bass line in the Cello/Double Bass part. The music is characterized by repetitive rhythmic patterns and a mix of melodic and harmonic elements.

It is noticeable that Nyman manipulates several different elements of Western tradition (within a “Hindu” rhythmic structure), which are affected, in a considerable extent, by Minimalist processes. Some of the processes can be considered systematic for a group of measures. In the context of the whole piece, however, processes are not systematic, they are suddenly replaced for other elements or just abandoned. In several instances some voices are subjected to a process while the others are evolving through free variation.

Although the motion of the bass suggests and ABA’ form [A (mm. 1-36) B (mm. 37-48) A’ (mm. 49-66)], the formal structure is obscured in a great extent. The cyclic repetition of the melody, the repetition of accompaniment patterns, the *chaconne* like movement of the bass, the static harmony, and the motoric rhythm, are elements that creates a continuous flux typical of Minimalist works, obscuring the ABA’ form.

The first listening experience may be somehow confusing, or entirely new, since many elements of Western tradition are easily recognized, but they have its iconicity distorted or affected by Minimalist processes. Playing with iconicity Nyman creates a hybrid musical discourse. A tender melody, which is essentially Romantic, ground basses as found in the Baroque, and the technique of variation as found in the Classicism, are formative elements which are eventually subjugated to Minimalist processes. The music sounds a little Minimalist, a little Romantic, a little Baroque, and a little Classic. One may conclude it is better to say that it sounds Post-Minimalist.

The features found in Michael Nyman’s *String Quartet no. 2* (third movement), suggests that Post-Minimalism may prove to be a valid terminology for describing musical works that clearly departs or are strongly influenced by Minimalism, but go beyond Minimalist style and aesthetic, through different kinds of mixture and fusion. These works started to emerge, both in America and Europe, around

Young, Riley, Reich and Glass. From the 80s to the present, a Post-Minimalist attitude can be found in works by several composers, including the first generation of Minimalists and a number of young composers.

NOTES

- 1 Strickland, Edward. *Minimalism: Origins*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 6.
- 2 Pincus-Witten, Robert. *Postminimalism into Maximalism*. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 9.
- 3 Schwarz, Robert. "Minimalism/Music." In *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque*. (Swan Claudia, ed. New York: Eos Music, 1997), p. 10.
- 4 Schwarz, Robert. *Minimalists*. (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 170.
- 5 The little chronological differences are not so relevant to track influences or relationships of cause and effect, since none of the composers could be immediately aware of what others were doing in such a short period of time.
- 6 Schwarz, Robert. *Minimalists*. (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 207.
- 7 Schwarz, Robert. "Minimalism/Music." In *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque*. (Swan Claudia, ed. New York: Eos Music, 1997), p. 10.
- 8 Probably the most outstanding masterpiece that Minimalism ever produced.
- 9 Duckworth, Willian (*Talking Music*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), p. 293.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 342.
- 11 Schwarz, Robert. "Process vs. Intuition in the Recent Works of Steve Reich and John Adams." *American Music*, 8 (1990): 259.
- 12 Schwarz, Robert. *Minimalists*. (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 197.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- 14 Hillier, Paul. *Arvo Pärt*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 86-97.
- 15 Strickland, Edward. *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.), p. 46.
- 16 In Brazil there are some composers employing Minimalist elements in mixture with local musical traditions and native rhythmic elements. Works as *Mesmamúsica* (1988) by Jamary Oliveira, and *Abertura e Toccata* (1991/1995) by myself, among others, can be considered representative of a Post-Minimalist output in Brazil.
- 17 Kramer, Jonathan. "Beyond Unity: Toward an Understanding of Musical Postmodernism." In *Concert Music Rock, and Jazz since 1945: Essays and Analytical Studies*. (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1995), p. 25.
- 18 Johnson, Steven. "Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?" *Musical Quarterly*, 78 (1994): 748.
- 19 Johnson, Steven. "Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?" *Musical Quarterly*, 78 (1994): 752.
- 20 Although some of the output of Michael Torke, as *Javelin*, *Bronze*, and *Green* may safely be regarded as new-romantic, Torke's *Adjustable Wrench* (1987) displays several characteristics of a genuine Post-Minimalism work.
- 21 For the sake of limiting our topic we are focusing in three differential aspects only. We do not assume that these cover all differences between Minimalism and Post-Minimalism, or that the presence of all three differential aspects is necessary to characterize a Post-Minimalism work.
- 22 Nyman, Michael. "Composer's Note." In *String Quartet no. 2* (London: Chester Music, 1992), p. II. (Score)
- 23 Noteworthy is a variation in measure 33 (Cello) that deviates in a great extent from the ongoing process.

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