

Post-Minimalism:
Is it a Valid Terminology? ¹

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Recent minimalist music written by such American composers as John Adams (1947-), Steve Reich (1936-), and Philip Glass (1937-), and European composers as Arvo Pärt (1935-), Louis Andriessen (1939-), and Michael Nyman (1944-), features major aesthetical and stylistic transformations if compared with the “classic” minimalist ² works developed by Terry Riley (1935-), Reich and Glass in the 1960s and 1970s. Should this new minimalist music still be considered minimalist, or the terminology “post-minimalist” would be more appropriate to describe its new features, stylistic, and aesthetical transformations? Our aim in this paper is to discuss the concept of Post-Minimalism in the light of a number of musical works that started to emerge in the late 1970s and in the early 1980s.

In the 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 in between 1966-76.³ Pincus-Witten says that the style he regards as post-minimalist is the one that “actively rejects the high formalistic cult of impersonality.”⁴

A parallel may be done with music, since early minimalist works, based on “impersonal” processes, served as a departure point for works in which the technical procedures of classic Minimalism are less systematic, the style more flexible, and the aesthetic more inclusive. While in the 1970s 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 1980s. Post-Minimalism in music was originally associated with the output of American composer John Adams, who started to use the term and

¹ This article was originally written in 1998, in Seattle, USA, and was published in Brazil in 1999 [*Ictus* 01 (1999): 37-52]. The present version was prepared in 2005, adding a few adjustments to the original text.

² The expression “classic Minimalism”, in the context of this paper, refers to the minimalist works composed between 1964 and 1975. These works adopt, in a clear and radical way, processes of repetition that are well documented. Representative works of classic Minimalism are *In C* (1964) by Terry Riley, *Piano Phase* (1967), *Drumming* (1970-71), and *Six Pianos* (1973) by Steve Reich, *Two Pages* (1969), and *Music in Fifths* (1970) by Philip Glass, just to mention a few.

³ Strickland, Edward. *Minimalism: Origins*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 6.

⁴ Pincus-Witten, Robert. *Postminimalism into Maximalism*. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 9.

occasionally called himself a post-minimalist composer. Music critic K. Robert Schwarz later embraced the term.⁵

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."⁶

If Schwarz was 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, composed by different composers, that can be recognized by common aesthetical 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 put aside, works by such 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 such as Glass's *Satyagraha* (1980) and Reich's *Tehillin* (1981), which were developed around the same time as the beginning of Adams' mature output (1977-78)⁷, could be also 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",⁸ and also that around 1976 both Reich and Glass started to

⁵ Schwarz, Robert. "Minimalism/Music." In *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque*. (Swan Claudia, ed. New York: Eos Music, 1997), p. 10.

⁶ Schwarz, Robert. *Minimalists*. (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 170.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Schwarz, Robert. *Minimalists*. (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 207.

move away from Minimalism in an extent that the term could no longer be applied to their music.⁹

It is a general consensus that from the late 1970s 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*,¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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, quasi repetitive style of the late sixties. But by 1975 or 76, everyone had begun to do something a little bit different.”¹²

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 at the same time extending its boundaries.

In between 1977-78, in USA, John Adams was composing his first mature works, *Phrygian Gates* and *Shaker Loops*. In these works minimalist processes are diluted to 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.”¹³ Therefore the surface of this work displays several changes in short periods of time, which creates a more dramatic experience than usual minimalist music.

⁹ Schwarz, Robert. “Minimalism/Music.” In *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque*. (Swan Claudia, ed. New York: Eos Music, 1997), p. 10.

¹⁰ It is probably the most outstanding masterpiece that Minimalism ever produced.

¹¹ Duckworth, Willian (*Talking Music*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), p. 293.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 342.

¹³ Schwarz, Robert. “Process vs. Intuition in the Recent Works of Steve Reich and John Adams.” *American Music*, 8 (1990): 259.

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.”¹⁴

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.”¹⁵

In 1976, in Holland, Louis Andriessen was finishing *De 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 feature a mixture between elements of medieval music (which Pärt studied deeply in the years before) with aesthetical features of Minimalism. Pärt however, needs to be considered an exception, since his music does not depart overtly from Minimalism, considering his technical procedures, like the music of Adams, Nyman, and Andriessen. Technically Pärt's music is based on his own *tintinnabuli* technique, a kind of two voice counterpoint in which one of the voice moves basically by step, while the other moves through the triad's notes. This compositional technique was developed and crystallized by Pärt between 1976-77 in works such as *Für Alina* (1976) and *Tabula Rasa* (1977).¹⁶

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 or 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 Union¹⁷, and confirming these influences, Reich says that

¹⁴ Schwarz, Robert. *Minimalists*. (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 197.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁶ Hillier, Paul. *Arvo Pärt*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 86-97.

¹⁷ Pärt moved from the Soviet Union (nowadays Estonia) in January of 1980, he then lived in Austria (Vienna) and after in Germany (Berlin).

“Pärt I’ve met and he did tell me he’d heard my music in 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 [...]”¹⁸

Pärt is a composer who was considerably influenced by the minimalist aesthetic, but at the same time was able to absorb, adapt, and transform such influence 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,¹⁹ starting in the late 70s. The common aesthetical feature of these works is that they depart from Minimalism in some aspects (technical, stylistic, aesthetical, 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 aesthetical difference between Minimalism and Post-Minimalism is that Minimalism was born as a son of Modernism, with a mode of composition that is radical, systematic, and exclusionist. Minimalist works are born from a kind of 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

¹⁸ Strickland, Edward. *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.), p. 46.

¹⁹ In Brazil there are some composers employing minimalist elements in mixture with local musical traditions and native rhythmic elements. Such works as *Viva Villa* (1987) and *A Lenda do Caboclo. A Outra*. (1987) by Gilberto Mendes (1922-), *Dialogues* (1988) and *Tristes Trópicos* (1990) by Rodolfo Coelho de Souza (1952-), *Toccata Amazônica* (1998) and *Toronubá* (2000) by Dimitri Cervo (1968-), among others, can be considered representative of a post-minimalist output in Brazil. In Latin America we point out the Cuban composer Leo Brower (1939-), with works like *La región más transparente* (1982) and *Paisaje Cubano con Lluvia* (1984), among others.

elements with elements and techniques from other styles and aesthetics are welcome and employed as legitimate compositional resources within a certain musical discourse.

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 Jonathan 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*).²⁰

Therefore, while Minimalism may be considered one of the aesthetical movements of Modernism, Post-Minimalism may be considered one of the aesthetical movements of Post-Modernism. Minimalism and Post-Minimalism share similar roots, but to make possible a distinction, they have to be considered two different aesthetical 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, which are in direct correspondence with the five main characteristics of the minimalist style, are: continuous formal structure, an even rhythmic texture with a bright tone, a simple harmonic palette, a lack of extended melodic lines, and repetitive rhythmic patterns.²¹

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

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Johnson, Steven. “Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?” *Musical Quarterly*, 78 (1994): 748.

has transcended the minimalist aesthetic and style through his expansion of these features and through his frequent use of extended melodic lines.”²²

It seems that Johnson has a conceptual difficulty to deal with the new stylistic and aesthetical features of recent minimalist (post-minimalist in our view) music and then tries to “solve the problem” restricting the concept of Minimalism as a compositional technique.

However, in our view his attempt is not legitimate since it tries to make an artificial separation, through a technical bias, between aesthetic, style, and technique, dismissing the fact that these categories are strongly interrelated in the history of music. A particular new compositional technique, or a set of techniques, can not be created in an antiseptic environment without a specific stylistic and aesthetical context. On the contrary, specific compositional techniques are developed in order to enable composers reach their aesthetical ideals. 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 minimalist 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 aesthetical) with elements extraneous to Minimalism defining therefore a post-minimalist aesthetic.

We think the second hypothesis is the correct one. Rather than reduce Minimalism to a technique as Johnson wishes, it is necessary to recognize its aesthetical growth and stylistic transformations.

In our view, in the 1980s and 1990s, a representative body of works that could be considered fully post-minimalist was developed. If we take a group of works such as Reich’s *Tehillin* (1981), Part’s *Stabat Mater* (1985), Adams’s *Harmoniewerke* (1986), Torke’s *Adjustable Wrench*²³ (1987), Nyman’s *String Quartet no. 2* (1988), Glass’s *Fifth String Quarter* (1991), or yet in Brazil, *A Lenda do Caboclo. A Outra* (1987) by Gilberto Mendes, or *Abertura e Toccata* (1995) by myself, it is possible to distinguish at least

²² Johnson, Steven. “Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?” *Musical Quarterly*, 78 (1994): 752.

²³ Although some of the output of Michael Torke, such as *Javelin*, *Bronze*, and *Green* may safely be regarded as new-romantic, Torke’s *Adjustable Wrench* (1987) displays several characteristics of a genuine post-minimalist work.

three prominent features common to all these works, which are well extraneous to Minimalism:

- 1) All works depart from Minimalism in some aspect aspects (technical, stylistic, aesthetical, or altogether), and eclectically mix 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 in these works. 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 classic minimalist works.

Now, trying 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.²⁴

Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2*, composed in 1988, is articulated in six movements, each one with its own tempo, and each one governed by its own rhythmic cycle: 4-beat, 5-beat, 6-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 that was composed for the choreographer and dancer Shobana Jeyasingh. Nyman openly accepted the given rhythmic information (choreographer-imposed), attempting to overlay his personal melodic, harmonic, and structural vocabulary within this frame.²⁵

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

- 1) The *ostinato* twelve -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.

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ Nyman, Michael. "Composer's Note." In *String Quartet no. 2* (London: Chester Music, 1992), p. II. (Score)

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

Let's see how Nyman manipulates these elements between measures 1-36. The twelve-note figuration in violin II is worked out through a process of repetition, identical in every measure. The figuration on violin I is manipulated through the technique of variation in mixture with repetition. The twelve-note pattern is kept, but the contour changes freely and new variations are repeated every two or three measures. The ground bass [Bb, A, C] is repeated every 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 ground bass has 18 beats, the melody becomes two beats out of phase in respect to the bass every three measures. 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,

which make it difficult to identify the 16-beat pattern at first sight (we have handwritten in the example two tied quarter notes in order to clarify this structure).

Between measures 37-48 there is a textural shift in the piece. The process carried out between measures 1-36, that is systematic in the violin II, viola and cello²⁶, 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 every four measures. The twelve-note pattern in violin II becomes a 24 note pattern (rhythmic diminution) that is repeated every four measures (in synchrony with the bass). The melody migrates from viola to violin I, but the viola keeps playing its contour (with eight-notes). 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.

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 with variations. Violin II and cello feature different patterns each three measures (Example 3).

²⁶ Noteworthy is a variation in measure 33 (Cello) that deviates in great extent from the ongoing process.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for measures 49-54 of Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2*, third movement. The score is written on four staves: Violin I (top), Violin II, Viola, and Bass (bottom). The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 3/4. Handwritten annotations include "Melodic Variations" with arrows pointing to the Violin I staff, "Melody" with an arrow pointing to the Viola staff, and "Ground Bass: Bb, A, C" with a bracket under the Bass staff. The Bass staff is marked "marc." and the Viola staff is marked "sim.".

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

The section from measure 49 to the end is, in great extent, freely composed. The bass changes its pattern every three measures, and the melody of violin I is, most of the time, freely varied. Patterns of violin II assume different characteristics each 6, 3, 2, or 1 measures. The only element that remains “stable”, with a systematic phase shifting process, is the melody in the viola. The movement ends abruptly, what is an aesthetical and stylistic gesture 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.

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, but only 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 repetitive process, while the others are evolving through free variation.

Although the motion of the bass suggests an ABA’ form [A (mm. 1-36) B (mm. 37-48) A’ (mm. 49-66)], the formal structure is obscured to 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 motor like rhythm, are all 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 their iconicity distorted or affected by minimalist processes. Playing with iconicity, Nyman creates a hybrid musical discourse. A tender melody, which is essentially romantic, a ground bass 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 has a post-minimalist aesthetic.

The features found in Michael Nyman's *String Quartet no. 2* (third movement), suggest that Post-Minimalism may prove to be a valid terminology for describing musical works that clearly depart 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 the late 1970s and were created by a generation of composers immediately after Young, Riley, Reich and Glass. From the 1980s 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 around the world.

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