

**Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll Ap Siôn, eds. 2013. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*. Burlington VT: Ashgate. 458 pp. ISBN 978-1-4724-0278-3 (ebook), ISBN 978-1-4094-3549-5 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-4094-3550-1 (PDF)**

Patrick Nickleson

Volume 33, Number 2, 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1032704ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1032704ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

**ISSN**

1911-0146 (print)

1918-512X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Nickleson, P. (2013). Review of [Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll Ap Siôn, eds. 2013. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*. Burlington VT: Ashgate. 458 pp. ISBN 978-1-4724-0278-3 (ebook), ISBN 978-1-4094-3549-5 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-4094-3550-1 (PDF)]. *Intersections*, 33(2), 172–175. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1032704ar>

the many informative footnotes that bolster the overall impact of the publication by bringing to the twenty-first century names that might otherwise have slipped into oblivion many years ago. Be it the Hungarian conductor Ferenc Fricsay (1914–63 [150n10]), the Croatian conductor and composer Lovro von Matačić (1899–1985 [104n9]), the British organist, composer, and choirmaster Boris Ord (1897–1961 [202n4]), these and like references underscore just how rich, how vibrant, and how diverse music's tapestry truly is—and we have Varga to thank for the subtle reminder itself.

GREGORY J. MARION

Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll Ap Siôn, eds. 2013. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*. Burlington VT: Ashgate. 458 pp. ISBN 978-1-4724-0278-3 (ebook), ISBN 978-1-4094-3549-5 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-4094-3550-1 (PDF).

*The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music* is the first collected volume of essays on minimalism, correcting a longstanding absence in the published literature on the style. In the volume, editors Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll Ap Siôn have drawn together scholarship that moves beyond “the big four” minimalists—La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass—and the notion that minimalism is a fundamentally American phenomenon. Between the *Companion* and the 2007 foundation of the Society for Minimalist Music (at the conferences of which many of these articles first appeared), it seems minimalism has finally earned its due as a field of musicological inquiry, with its own institutions of support and exchange.

Following the notable absence of any collected volumes on minimalism, the titular inclusion of “and postminimalist” comes as a surprise, but essays on the style are indeed crucial to the *Companion*, with the “post-” taking on a more clearly defined and delimited definition than minimalism itself. While the editors' introduction presents ten technical characteristics of minimalism—such as harmonic stasis, repetition, gradual process, audible structure, metamusic (a surprising inclusion that is left unexplored in the essays), and others—postminimalism gets extensively treated and is more concisely defined. Kyle Gann, for example, focuses on process, quotation, and limitation of materials in postminimalism, and offers a compelling metaphysics in which “the part can stand for the whole” (58), thus creating a sense of hermeneutic intrigue in which a static surface of sound in fact warrants analysis to reveal structural games that produce the prevailing surface texture and harmony. John Richardson and Susanna Välimäki likewise offer a thorough explanation of the “audiovisual impulse” in postminimalist music, primarily through treating postminimalism's suitability to soundtracking storytelling of an “existential and phenomenological disposition” (237).

In contrast, despite the editors' suggestion that minimalism being “allowed to mean *anything* is not in the best interest of scholarship” (4), it often feels as if

the term *can* mean anything. This likely results from the editors' desire to complicate the reigning "metaphysical" view of minimalism, argued for by Branden W. Joseph in *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (2008) as a style exclusive to four composers, two cities (New York City and San Francisco) and two decades (the 1960s and the 1970s). In pursuing this goal, the term is overextended beyond what many readers and listeners can sensibly recognize as "minimalism" as we have known it. It is difficult to maintain a clear understanding of the term across all of the music covered in this book—especially the many European composers and pieces new to many readers—at least partially because scholars have largely left aside the historiographical consequences of arguing for foundational pieces of early minimalism. Disagreements as to which piece marks the "beginning" of minimalism—Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), La Monte Young's *Trio for Strings* (1958), Dennis Johnson's *November* (1958; see Gann 2009), or the collaborative work of the Theatre of Eternal Music / The Dream Syndicate (ca. 1963–66)—are grounded in differing political and cultural understandings of what in these pieces made them the beginning of something new. Each leads to a different understanding of which "straight line" to follow (to paraphrase the title of La Monte Young's iconic word score) historically through the composers and musics we have already defined as "minimalist," and thus which composers, pieces, and sounds are near enough to those parameters to allow an expansion of criteria. To recall Timothy A. Johnson's seminal 1994 article, it seems necessary, once again, for scholars of minimalism to ask, is minimalism an "aesthetic, style or technique?" Or is it a politics? A relationship to the audience? A performance practice? Jonathan Bernard, in his excellent chapter on minimalism's close ties with rock music, sums up the taxonomic confusion around minimalism that results from the expanding literature: "I would venture to say that there is less certainty now than ever before about just what minimalism actually is" (353). This is the productive result of a growing discourse on the style, of course; my point is that it's worth noting that, within the *Companion*, postminimalism is comparatively clearly defined, at least partially as a result of William Duckworth's *Time-Curve Preludes*, which Gann elsewhere (2004) calls the first "postminimalist work" offering an agreed-upon generative point for the style.

This leads to a second, possibly contradictory criticism. The openness to new pieces and composers that expand or at least complicate our present understanding of minimalism also leads to a secondary difficulty. The two major monographs that concretized the formalist analysis of minimalism—Keith Potter's *Four Musical Minimalists* (2000), and Wim Mertens's *American Minimal Music* (1983)—both focus their analyses on what Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass do in their music, and use those compositional techniques to define minimalism. As a result, when scholars in the *Companion* move farthest afield—looking to lesser-known European composers who were unaware of the Americans' activities, or trying to examine the function of similar kinds of repetition in dance, theatre, performance art, and film—they are often forced to defer to the practices of Reich and Glass to authorize and ground their analyses as still "minimalist." Constant reference is made to Glass's additive

processes or Reich's replacement of rests with notes as analogues to the processes used by other artists.

While these essays attempt to escape the "metaphysical" narrative by offering further depth and new characters, the need to define techniques in relation to those of Reich and Glass creates an unexpected expansion of their power within the discourse. In attempting to escape the dominance of "the big four" in the minimalist narrative, their position recedes to one of disciplinary control, passively suggesting that while the time for direct and exclusive focus on their music has passed, they have now created the horizon of expectations against which new entries into the minimalist canon must be compared.

These broad concerns aside, many of the essays will certainly become required reading for scholars of minimalism, and reorient other scholars' understanding of the style for classroom teaching. Of particular note, Robert Fink's essay on the relationship between minimalist aesthetics and televisual "flow" summarizes and extends many of the ideas from his seminal study *Repeating Ourselves* (2005). Fink examines television theorists and shifts in viewing strategies to suggest that "the history of repetitive music in American culture looks quite different if one imagines its rise and fall correlated not just with the usual countercultural suspects—drugs, Eastern religion, pop music—but with the complex evolution of our consumer culture and its mass-mediated cultural forms" (210). Jeremy Peyton Jones's essay provides a theoretically rigorous reading of the effects of repetition in live performance of minimalism. He argues for minimalist performance as enacting the "final evaporation of the traditional contract between audience and performer" (146) and presents the 1968–69 height of minimalist austerity as marking "the very antithesis of the idea of the performer as interpreter or conduit for subject expression" (151). Similarly, several essays focus on minimalist music in film, and constitute substantial additions to literature on film music of the last several decades. Like Richardson and Välimäki above, these essays focus on the typical semiotic content of minimalist music in films. Rebecca M. Doran Eaton's essay on the semiotics of minimalist cues in otherwise traditional film scores is particularly valuable, articulating that, for listeners, a shift into a minimalist aesthetic often signifies the mechanical, protagonists' existential entrapment, or montages of mathematical and rational thought. Most importantly, Eaton argues that minimalist syntax refuses to mark dramatic cues and thus allows concepts and non-human subjects to create continuity. Of course, there is not room to mention each of the twenty-two essays included here, but also of substantial value is John Pymm's expository presentation of the content of Steve Reich's original source tapes from which *It's Gonna Rain* were derived, Richard Glover's consideration of the place of technology in minimalist music, and Dean Suzuki's reading of minimalism in relation to dance and video art. A final and particularly compelling addition was the set of concluding essays from the perspective of prominent performers of minimalism. The only valid complaint here—especially in relation to the essays by long-time Steve Reich and Musicians member Russell Hartenberger and pianist Sarah Cahill—is the brevity of these performers' chapters.

As in any collected volume of this sort, the contents cannot be comprehensive. Despite the editors' best efforts to represent the state of research in the field, several central topics have been left aside. Notably, there is no consideration of race or gender in minimalism (topics engaged most notably by Robert Fink and Sumanth Gopinath at the 2013 Society for Minimalist Music conference in Long Beach), there are none of the historiographical reconsiderations of minimalist literature thus far, as discussed above, and there is little effort to engage interdisciplinary concerns about minimalism. These complaints aside, several essays from the *Companion* are sure to become central reference points for scholars both of minimalism and of post-1960 art music broadly.

#### REFERENCES

- Fink, Robert. 2005. *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gann, Kyle. 2004. "Academie d'Underrated: William Duckworth." *Post-Classic: Kyle Gann on Music after the Fact*. [http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2004/01/academie\\_dunderrated\\_william\\_d.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2004/01/academie_dunderrated_william_d.html).
- . 2009. "Reconstructing November." *American Music* 28 (4): 481–91.
- Johnson, Timothy A. 1994. "Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?" *Musical Quarterly* 78 (4): 742–73.
- Joseph, Brandon W. 2008. *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Mertens, Wim. 1983. *American Minimal Music*. London: Kahn & Averill.
- Potter, Keith. 2000. *Four Musical Minimalists*. London: Cambridge University Press.

PATRICK NICKLESON