

University of Alberta

**Postmodern Innovation in Music Compositional Practices on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
From the Disruption of Tonal Music to Holy Minimalism**

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“A wide variety of music has been labeled ‘avant-garde’. What does this term really mean when applied to music? Some writers seem to take the avant-garde as synonymous with modernism, for others it apparently equates with innovation. Some identify it with originality, and others with novelty.”

(Kramer 2002a, xi)

## **Introduction**

Culture is the result of the combination of numerous factors, it is in close relationship with tradition, continuity, rupture, evolution and such. It is also understood as the manifestation of society caused by the awareness of its environment. The voice of artists is shaped by their culture, therefore music expresses culture and changes according to the atmosphere where it is created. The social aspect of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by individualism and self-confidence, postmodernist music was not an exception, and diversity and innovation were probably the motor for creation. Experimental music enabled multiplicity of thought and compositional techniques. On a scenario like the one described we wonder how innovation became part of the toolbox of composers. Is it possible to believe in a postmodern musical landscape? Why and how specific musical pieces stood out from a large amount of sonic experimentation?

To get to the analysis of the movement known as Holly Minimalist carried by the composers John Tavener, Henryk Górecky and Arvo Pärt, we will begin this research by examining the figure of the music composer on the postmodern scene. Previously, we will establish the social environment around 1975, followed by an analysis of the changes that music composition experienced since 1900s and how the incorporation of innovation bloomed amongst the artists, which seems to be the principal reason for a cultural moment characterized by multiplicity of voices. Innovation will be defined as the factor that helped some musical pieces to pass through anonymity in an artistic world where everything seemed to be possible.

## **To be a postmodernist composer**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by world wars, discoveries, and technological revolutions, these and many other global matters are reflected on the voice of music composers, which its

figure in a society has changed accordingly. Somehow, around 1975 composers seemed to be free souls, while some kept alive the concept of tonality, others decided to re-formulate the practice and create new means of expression. The possibilities unlocked by the irreversible damage of the tonal system after integral serialism, in combination with technological advances and social studies, forced minds to be imaginative, to experiment, and to trust the structures of their musical pieces to other-than-traditional musical parameters, to the ones that were mostly “complements” of the musical discourse for long time. Other composers instead, focused their attention in the incorporation of new concepts and musical philosophies.

It is a time of change and renovation, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard for the first time used the word “postmodernism” in 1979, on the book *The Postmodern Condition*, this philosophic writing celebrates what were considered first, signs of the injuries of a wounded society in modernism because of nostalgia, which produced fragmented art and broken literature. (Lyotard 1984, 81-82). These fragmentation and multiplicity of concepts is also present on the avant-garde music composition, which arouses from individual experimentation. For example, there are composers that build their pieces by re-signifying traditional concepts of the past, but without being nostalgic nor conservative, they found their music on renewed understandings of repetition, rhythmic patterns, citation and such (Kremer 2002b, 13-14). On the other hand, there were others that set the foundation of their music practices on elements that traditionally were secondary, like texture, timbre or spatialization, just to name few. Finally, there were the ones that created their practices based on original concepts like antiform, chance, silence, process, deconstruction, rhizome, indeterminacy, and many others (Taylor 2002, 95).

Either way, the pieces composed on the postmodern era reflect a segmented social reality; they reproduce the loneliness and cosmopolitan new vibe of the world, the constant-changing feature of society, and the multi-culture. The result of this individualism ended up in diverse proposals and aesthetics for organizing music. Anyhow, not all of them stood to succeed.

### **Composition on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Towards the end of modernism**

To describe the musical scene during the 20<sup>th</sup> century is as hard as defining modernism or postmodernism, to contextualize the musical happenings, tendencies, and developments I will present a concise description of some of the most significant composers, tendencies and some of

the connections amongst them. It is crucial to understand that, some names will be linked to just one musical style or technique, when truly most of them did develop their work on many.

The dismantlement of the tonal language as the only approved system to create music shook the world of academia since 1900s, late romanticism already was causing serious problems with the stability of a tonal center, situation that allowed composers to start thinking on new ways of understanding the tonal concept. This shifted the practice of composition for the first time after hundred of years, there where many new approaches on how to adapt the tonal system to organize the musical dialogue differently than usual: some examples can be found on the impressionism of Claude Debussy and Erik Satie (for instance on the non-functionality of its chords); on the rhythmic folk-based constructions of Igor Stravinsky and his superimposition of musical chords with the goal of creating a texture more than a harmonic function; on the axis system of Bela Bartók; on bitonality and polytonality; and even on the atonal language of Arnold Schönberg (that it defines itself negatively, as “non-tonal”). James McHard group these composers and practices as the beginning of the “sound-based composition” (MacHard 2008, 25-26). These music creators started pointing towards new theories and concepts, they needed to be more creative, and take care no just on the music writing, but also on the difficult task of wrapping the piece into a self-generated system.

Of course history is not lineal, and there where already some artists working outside tonality and experimenting with newer concepts while “sound-based” composers where experimenting with tonality, examples of these are the Italian Futurist and Dadaists that since 1909 incorporated noise as a mean of expression on the works by Filippo Marinetti and Luigi Russolo. Other composers combined diverse music languages in the same musical piece, using multiple structures, polymeters and spatial organization, like can be seen on the music by Charles Ives (MacHard 2008, 150).

After 1925 these new approaches for music composing started to diversify and being developed on their own, for example the innovation on the textural concept awakened by Debussy was revived by Olivier Messiaen on his early works, and later with German and French electronic music. Schönberg will develop the atonal principle to dodecaphonism and serial music, which Anton Webern and Alban Berg will develop and embellish to a point where timbre was seen as a musical parameter on its own. This focus on timbre had many other subdivisions, one to highlight is the work by French composer Edgard Varèse. Coming back to the serial idea,

in 1950s we can witness how Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen extended the organizational principle applied first to the pitches to every single music parameter. On a different track, it is also possible to connect Futurist and Dadaist music practices and philosophies with the work of John Cage and Henry Cowell. Finally, multiplicity of sonic events will see its development in Conlon Nancarrow's music for player piano, as well as in the micro-polyphonism idea of György Ligeti.

The younger generations of the 20th century (composers born on the 20's and 30's) will witness this broad scene without experience the social mandate of composing tonal music, fact that will give them the freedom to absorb these new tendencies and dismember them to their wish. Another factor that differentiate this group of artists with the past were the universal technological advances like electricity and communication, the advances on musicology, ethnomusicology and the feeling of a universal restitution that both world wars awakened, this ambience set an unavoidable scenario to allow postmodernism to take over. Among others, we find in this new generation composer like Iannis Xenakis (b.1922), György Ligeti (b. 1923), Luigi Nono (1924), Pierre Boulez (b.1925), Luciano Berio (b. 1925), Earle Brown (b. 1926), Morton Feldman (b. 1926), Max Matthews (b. 1926), David Tudor (b. 1926), Pierre Henry (b.1927), Karlheinz Stockhausen (b. 1928), Toru Takemitsu (b. 1930), Alvin Lucier (b. 1931), Pauline Oliveros (b. 1932), Henryk Górecki (b. 1933), Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933), Murray Schafer (b. 1933), John Chowning (b. 1934), Christian Wolff (b. 1934), Steve Reich (b. 1935), Terry Riley (b. 1935), Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), La Monte Young (b. 1935), Phillip Glass (b. 1937).

### **Postmodernism and free innovation**

The artistic panorama on 1950 and 1960 positioned the figure of music composers in a place saturated with freedom and individualism. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernism already set new aesthetics that seemed to be promising, these new approaches to structure music were an alive proof of the success of incorporating innovation in the creative practice, the next logical step was to base music in innovation, applied to both, continuity and rupture, lets analyze some more aesthetic paths:

- Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Milton Babbitt and many others took the ideas of sound-based composers and shaped and reshaped dodecaphonism into

integral serialism, which had supporters and adversaries. As followers we find for example Brian Ferneyhough, which will develop it until what is known today as the New Complexity School. Between those against, we find composers like Ligeti who begun working on the concept of “micropolyphony”, a fresh starting point for composers like Iannis Xenakis and Krzysztof Penderecki that will focus many of their works on the sound mass composition concept.

- Schaeffer and Henry in Paris, and Stockhausen and Herbert Eimert in the Studio for Electronic Music of the West German Radio worked in electronic and mixed music extensively since 1948, works that will allow Max Matthews, Luigi Nono, Alvin Lucier, Pauline Oliveros, John Chowning, and others to set the foundation of electroacoustic practices.
- John Cage’s ideas will end up resulting on the use of indeterminacy, the incorporation of chance in music composition, graphic notation, improvisation and others. Cage worked closely with other composers of the New York School like Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown who will generate their own approaches as well.

There is even more: Luciano Berio was working on extended techniques to achieve specific timbric results on his *Sequenzas*. Murray Schaeffer and Pauline Oliveros were focusing their works on the experience of listening. Alvin Lucier was interested in sound and architectural responses, etc. The list can continue extensively, but I think we have reached an understanding of how music composition has changed from the romantic and even the modern era. As it can be seen, multiplicity and innovation was the characteristic of this era, the impact of this situation reinforced a postmodern music landscape, where each individual had his own voice and was able to base his work on a personal theoretical foundation.

Anyhow, innovation was not the only factor to achieve accomplishment, despite the fact that a vast amount of music was composed at this time, not all survived to our days. The type of projects that stood to succeed, were those that had a delicate balance between innovation and tradition, where an idea triggered by one composer was re-elaborated in the hand of the youngest artist. This balance is doing both, to continue with a tradition (a returning aspect, or at least a little part of it), and innovating individually (allowing pluralism and new aesthetics). For some

theorist, this balance between continuity and rupture is the key notion that defines postmodernism (Gloag 2012, 2).

### **To be a composer in 1975**

In 1975 the composer is not anymore an engineer of a strict mechanism as it was in total serialism, or a fugitive of the tonal system like it used to be on the 1920's, and of course it is far to be a specialist of a system of composition that reigned for more than 200 years. A composer in the last quarter of the century is an inventor, a transgressor, somebody in charge only of his/her own destiny, they are free souls that have the entire past at hand to be used as a paint palette.

An excellent example of this new generation of composers that developed their music by innovating with concepts of the past are those known as minimalists. Although the term is not celebrated and yet fully accepted by many of them, it offers a concise description of the intension behind the style. The idea is simple, yet revolutionary: to use a little of something, as Tom Johnson, minimalist composer describes it:

It includes, by definition, any music that works with limited or minimal materials: pieces that use only a few notes, pieces that use only a few words of text, or pieces written for very limited instruments, such as antique cymbals, bicycle wheels, or whiskey glasses. It includes pieces that sustain one basic electronic rumble for a long time. It includes pieces made exclusively from recordings of rivers and streams. It includes pieces that move in endless circles. It includes pieces that set up an unmoving wall of saxophone sound. It includes pieces that take a very long time to move gradually from one kind of music to another kind. It includes pieces that permit all possible pitches, as long as they fall between C and D. It includes pieces that slow the tempo down to two or three notes per minute. (Johnson 1989, 5)

For example, David Cope mentions four of them: the first is named "silence", and he define it as the usage and exploration of the absence of sound, or the extremely little amount of it, that probably starts on 1952 with John Cage's *4'33"* and it gets extended to our days on the music of the Wandelweiser group. The second example is "concept music", where the score focuses on practices that are closer to the imaginary plane than in the physic world, without a doubt the Fluxus movement is a great example of this. The idea of "continuities" is understood as simple music gestures hold for a long time, which normally suffer little changes, on a slow

modulating entity like drone music, Holy Minimalism (which I'll discuss later), and phase and pattern music (Cope 1997, 216-219), which I'll focus next.

### **Steve Reich, phase and pattern music**

These are its elements: a fixed pulse, and repetitive patterns that play on top of that pulse (made of electronic recordings or live instruments), by changing tempo (slights *accelerando* or *ritardando*, or by extending one of their rhythmic values/silences) patterns lock themselves in a new harmonic relationships. This is phase and pattern music, many of the pieces composed by this principle made the beat audible by assigning one voice to perform it (like *In C* by Terry Riley, or *Music for Pieces of Wood* by Steve Reich), although some researches attribute this idea of an audible pulse to Reich (inspired on African drumming), some others talks about Reich borrowing it from “Moondog”, a famous composer and street performer in New York that played a constant pulse with a maraca and improvised rhythms on top of it (Cotter 2002, 288).

This pulsing maraca is the soul of one of the most famous works that uses this principle: *Four Organs* (1970). The setting is simple:

“I thought about a musician playing a repeated chord on an organ, and then holding one and then several of the notes down longer. . . . I thought of a musician playing a steady pulse with a rattle (maracas) that would enable the organists to count together as they held their notes down longer and longer.” (Reich 1974, 25)

*Four Organs* uses a harmony that never changes throughout the entire piece (a B dominant eleventh chord), which voicing is spread amongst the eight hands of the keyboardists. All four keyboards start by playing in rhythmic unison (always *forte*). The rhythm of the first measure is a 8<sup>th</sup> note, followed by 2 silences of 8<sup>th</sup> notes, and followed by the same sounding chord for another 8<sup>th</sup> note, ending up with 7 8<sup>th</sup> note silences, this first measure repeats “3 to 6 times”. The second measure is exactly the same, with the difference that one 8<sup>th</sup> note (left hand on the second keyboard) doubles its value, being the only sounding note on the second beat, and again repeats 3 to 6 times. From here, each new measure will introduce the extension of a new individual note of the chord. This algorithm of doubling rhythms keeps happening, to the point at the last measure where we find many tied whole notes. The entire processes takes about 15



minutes to be completed, and invites the listener to witness the process of a simple harmony being augmented from a quick explosive fragment to a continuous mass (Hoek 2002, 8).

### **Górecki, Pärt, Tavener, repetition and Holy Minimalism.**

Harmonious contemporary music that is commercially successful and acclaimed by critics is the reason of the popularity of these three composers. On one hand this makes the overall new music exposed to trivial critic by the popular reviewers, stigmatizing the work of composers by writing nonsense affirmations like “mankind has lost its capacity to produce music of consequence” (Neuhaus 1995), but on the other hand it helps with the promotion of new music, and positions the image of the composer on a deserved place in society.

The movement known as “Holy Minimalism” is one of this phenomenon, also referred as “European Mysticism” or “New Simplicity”. Using a personal understanding of the idea of repetition Henryk Górecki, Arvo Pärt and John Tavener develop their music using religious-based and meditational texts, creating atmospheres of meaningful reflection and intimate connection. It also differs from North-American minimalists in the sense that it is connected closely with western tradition and not much with African or folk music (Teachout 1995, 52). Anyhow, Holy Minimalism can be related with drone music on the 50’s, started by La Monte Young.

*Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, is the name of the *Third Symphony* by Górecky, the first movement is an emblematic example of the use of heavily emotional text soaked into a swinging melody sung by a soprano (Teachout 1995, 52), the singer interrupts a long repetitive block of melodic strings every time it reappears, everything is set on a transparent tonal and simple shell. Some postmodernism philosophers use this piece as an example of how to recycle old concepts, in this case without much challenge more than composing such a piece on 1970, as many said. This was not supported Górecky, since he considered it one of the most truly avant-garde pieces of those times (Howard 2002, 196). The technique used by Górecky is the canon, which in combination with: the fifteen-century Polish prayers lyrics (the *Holy Cross Lament*), plus a text found in the wall of a cell at Gestapo headquarters, and one folksong (Phillips 1997, 47) create the perfect setting for a slow changing ambience of deep reflection.

Now, imagine a triad with a melodic line that moves freely on top, the pitches of the melody are the same than the triad. And as the triad changes, the melody is adjusted to the new

set of three notes. This is the “tintinnabulation” technique that Estonian composer Arvo Pärt used extensively, and the masterpiece of this idea is the work *Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Joannem* or simply *Passio* (1982). With no intension of chromatism or modulation, tintinnabulation creates the modal feeling of Gregorian chant but with a tempered and tonal material. In *Passio* particularly the text is based on the passion of Jesus narrated by John the evangelist, with a solo baritone (Jesus), solo tenor (Pilate), solo vocal quartet (Evangelist), choir, violin, oboe, cello, bassoon and organ. The tintinnabulation style can be found easily on the vocal part, where the voices move in previously assigned note patterns, in a rhythmic unison, and using diverse tonic notes according to whom is singing. These rhythmic units are simple, they derivate from the natural dictation of the phrases (which creates a declamation-like effect). Different singers use these rhythmic units over time (Oad Dobbs 2000,11-12).

The youngest of the three, born in 1944 in London, John Tavener became famous pretty early on his career, his dramatic cantata *The Whale* (1966) first appeared in 1968 and caused a big sensation on the audience. A later work that refreshed Tavener’s popularity and set him as a figure in the European minimalism was written 22 years after. *The Protecting Veil* for cello and orchestra is an eight sections piece, where “the soloist represents the Mother of God, singing her unending, cosmic song, while the string orchestra acts as a vast resonating chamber.” (Haydon 1995, 204). Each section is written in a different scale, taking the fundamental of each scale from the downwards movement of an F scale: the opening section is in F, the next one in E, the next one in D, etc. (Haydon 1995, 204-205). The minimalist approach can be found in both, the almost inexistent tonal and rhythmic elaboration of the “resonating chamber” part (string orchestra) that play continuously static chords, and the unending slow and rhythmically flat singing of the cello. Finally, the “holy” ambience is reinforced on the texts, chants and biblical passages that each movement is based on. Some authors say that this work (as most of the music by Tavener) is about the religious content and tangible genuineness, than about musical creativity (Teachout 1995, 52).

## **Conclusion**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century’s agitated social and world events are captured on the arts, in music as seen in this article, modernism and post-modernism allowed intertextuality, openness and liberty for those who wanted to innovate. This freedom encouraged innovation and experimentation, but

just some of them supported criticism and reached a historical position. Without a doubt Górecki, Pärt and Tavener are the kind of artists that covered the demand of being a composer at the end of the 20th century, free souls happily forced to be imaginative.

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