

**Nicolás Arnáez. 2015.**

**Minimalism and Sound Art**

*“For several hundred years Western music has been based on composition and performance. Most attention has been focused on the conception and generation of sound, very little on its propagation. Written notes are two-dimensional symbols of a three-dimensional phenomenon. No matter how complex a system of notation or how real the illusion of depth, written music is trapped on a flat plane. [...]. We have been so concerned with language that we have forgotten how sound flows through space and occupies it.” (Lucier, 1979)*

## **Introduction**

The twentieth century has been characterized by the coexistence and proliferation of aesthetic expressions in the arts. The phenomenon of reductionism was one of those expressions, covering also many performing arts during this agitated century. On the music scene particularly, it bloomed on the 50's and got popular on the 60's, mostly represented by the pieces written by La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Phillip Glass, Terry Riley and John Adams, among others. Discussions are normally held around the music of these “traditional” minimalist composers, but there were other artist's visions and approaches to the phenomena. Many composers have continued experimenting with this principles onto the music in our days; by extrapolating the concept of little material/elaboration to different musical parameters like dynamics, rhythms, pitch collections, form, timbre (and any combination of those) they raised the conceptions of minimalism to a point extremely interesting to bring to the table and analyze.

According to my understanding, the artistic expression known as Sound Art (represented on the Urban Music and Sound Installation genders) is predominantly composed by using many principles that are typical of minimalistic music. Among others, we can name the little constrained sonorous material and non musical development. A particular characterization of Urban Music and, many times Sound installations, is the requirement of

the use of on non-traditional scenarios for their performances (like galleries, public spaces, site specific, etc.). The combination of these two facts encourages me to set the following hypothesis (to be justified on this work): Minimalism is the larger musical gender where the use of natural and social landscapes is structural for the music.

This work then will try to answer questions like: Why and how Sound Art appeals to minimalistic principles on its music processes and elaboration? Why some minimalist artists choose urban scenarios to mount their pieces/ perform their work? Which is the musical importance of a social space for music composing?

## **Minimalism**

An attempt to define minimalism could take us to a dead-end situation. There are already issues with the term itself, composers known as “minimalist” tend to reject been qualified as such. I will avoid this discussion because is not related directly with the topic of this article, for allowing the flow of the ideas I will use term ignoring consciously this situation to reefer to this kind of music.

Normally minimalistic music is qualified as “repetitive music, in which melodic or rhythmic figures are incessantly repeated, often with some gradual change taking place, like lengthening or phase-shifting” (Gann, 2013). Despite the fact that this definition (or something among those lines) is the most common, it describes just a little part of the big picture. If we consider Minimalism was born on the 50’s we will notice that is has been alive for more than 60 years, which is quite impressive for a contemporary musical gender. The success of this line of musical thought is probably derived from the composers’ different approaches to the phenomena. From the fifties until today, hundreds of musicians have created music inspired in minimalistic principles, the ramifications of the gender are numerous.

An extended and more accurate definition is given on the article *Introduction: experimental, minimalist, postminimalist? Origins, definitions, communities* by Kyle Gann and company. Briefly they say that, not universally nor exclusive or mandatory but recurrent, minimalist music responds to (Gann, 2013):

- Harmonic Stasis
- Repetition
- Drones
- Gradual Process
- Steady Beat
- Static Instrumentation
- Metamusic
- Pure Tuning
- Audible structure

These characteristics denote the tendency of minimalistic music towards non-development musical form, which is in my opinion one of the most peculiar and expressive elements of this music.

### **Space and music**

The definition of space in music is commonly confusing and sometimes controversial. One of the first approaches to solve this can be traced back to 1925, where musicologist Herbert Antcliffe was one of the first theorists in thinking about space and music:

“One of the essentials of the expression of space is simplicity, simplicity in thought as well as in utterance, simplicity in mind rather than in means, though of a nature to find and employ the simple means. The composer who uses a single melodic line may or may not express space, but it is certain that the composer who multiplies his

melodic lines for the sake of multiplicity (whether he is aware of it or not) will not do so, for his mind and his means both lack the necessary simplicity.” (Antcliffe, 1925)

An extension of this conception of space can be read as the physical space on the music parameters, for example: the needed frequency difference between one pitch to another to generate harmony; or the time elapsed between one rhythmic figure to the next one to generate the regularity or irregularity of the musical line, and even the timing on the intellectual exercise of recognizing repetition in the small or big picture of a tonal musical piece. Space meaning the distance between one particular thing to the next one of equal category.

A modernist approach to space and music is reflected in the conceptualization of spacialization, positioning, translation and velocity of movement of sound sources as a music element. Started maybe by Hector Berlioz and the classical Italian opera in 1800's, to be retaken by Bela Bartok at the beginning of the twentieth century, to finally (and more important) been conceptualized by Karlheinz Stockhausen in the 50's. The idea of sound motion as a new musical parameter has been with us since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. Stockhausen writes on 1955 referring to his latest composition at that time *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955-56):

“In our present work we have to show whether this, the first stereophonically conceived work in total structure, will lead to a new, active art form of musical composition and listening.” (Eimer, 1955).

After this concept was established, composers experimented in acoustical music by asking performers to be positioned in a specific area of the space of reproduction, or make specific movements while performing, or even walking from one point to the other during the

duration the piece (although this practices were already done before 1950, non of them did it because space was a constructive element of the piece).

The most explicit research and development of music spacialization have been developed on the electronic music gender in both subdivisions: traditional fixed media and real-time sound processing. Specific computational technics for sound spacialization like Intensity Panning, Ambisonics, VBAP and others are at the disposal of composers nowadays, and they are improved day by day.

Finally, a newer conception about space and music comes up from the environmental artistic approach to music, therefore more important to the present work: The integrity of everyday sounds into the musical structure. We can find examples in the field recording practice, the urban music composition, the soundwalking experience and others. Some musicians and artists consider that:

“Western music culture has spent five centuries increasingly retreating from the sounds of everyday life - enclosed ‘behind padded walls’ of the concert hall, where ‘concentrated listening becomes possible’. It remains anathema for street sounds to spill into the auditorium or the recording studio for that matter, cocooned in its acoustically *neutral* bubble” (Levack 2009).

The obvious reaction of those artists was to translate the performance space to public places, using everyday soundscapes as a stage for their performances, this practice forces the music to depend on the inclusion of the area’s natural sounds to exist. For this group, space is understood as environmental scenario for art presentation and, at the same time, a structural and unavoidable part of the piece.

## **Sound Art**

Defining Sound Art can be as difficult as defining Minimalism. The ramification of the gender has been unstoppable and continuously rising since the conceptualization of the artistic capability of expression of sound during the 1900's. Artist working on this field use sound understood as the pure acoustical phenomena, without the dictatorial organization that music theory applies to it.

These ramifications cross and mix diverse disciplinary artistic expressions, music gets mashed with theatre, visual arts, literature, cinema, media arts, media activism, sciences, engineering, etc. Artists working on the field are not just musicians (Kahn, 2014). If we try to track this activity we can find an early antecessor on the artistic concepts by Futurist painter Luigi Russolo at the beginning of the twentieth century, followed by Dadaists a couple of years later. Russolo's famous manifesto "*The art of noise*" (1913) expresses that:

"Noise accompanies every manifestation of our life. Noise is familiar to us. Noise has the power to bring us back to life. On the other hand, sound, foreign to life, always a musical, outside thing, an occasional element, has come to strike our ears no more than an overly familiar face does our eye. Noise, gushing confusely and irregularly out of life, is never totally revealed to us and it keeps in store innumerable surprises for our benefit. We feel certain that in selecting and coordinating all noises we will enrich men with a voluptuousness they did not suspect." (Russolo, 1916)

After the Futurists and Dadaist, these concepts are revitalized during the 50's on Pierre Schaeffer's *Music concrete*, a bit later on the work by John Cage to be finally invigorated on the 80's by Murray Schafer. In the book *Tuning the World* (1977), Schafer introduce the idea of *Soundscape* (Kahn, 2014). The concept of *Sound Art* is also established during this era, artists from different disciplines creates different kind of artistic expressions by using sound as the principal matter. Also the term "Sound Art" got legitimized during this time, is discussed more often in writings and used to qualify the category where certain pieces are created. Just to name few branches of it we can name Sound Installations, Interactive Sound Installations,

Sound Sculpture, Soundscape Composition, Noise Music, Sound Poetry, Spoken Word, Radio Art, Urban Music, among many, many others.

Sound Art in general is based on the enjoyment of sound without the restrictions of music theory. The sounding material to be exposed tends to be simple: it is sound or simply noise. Noise itself, in the most scenarios, cannot be measured by using the traditional concepts of music: it has no pitch nor harmony, no defined timbre, and many times no rhythm. On the other hand, sound can be anything, inclusive a traditional melodic line, the difference is that the musical theory on the construction of the melody is ignored, here, it is just a sonorous object.

Finally, another peculiarity of Sound Art that separates it from the traditional music practice is that is not necessarily attached to the traditional atmosphere where music is reproduced (halls, concert venues, bars, recitals, etc.). It prefers to require non-musical scenarios like galleries, random rooms and open spaces.

### **Urban music**

Despite the fact that Urban Music can be defined as a ramification of Sound Art, I personally would like to dedicate to it an special mention on this writing for a particular reason: it is site-specific.

To understand the phenomena of Urban Music, I will borrow PhD María Anduenza Olmedo definition: "Public Sound Art can be understood as a set of practices using sound whether to shape and determine the public space or to point to the importance of aural culture and the role of sound within public spaces." (Olmedo, 2014). The work of urban artists is well defined by Michel Gallagher, who understands Urban Spaces through sociologist Henri Lefebvre concepts. According to Lefebvre, spaces are generated, maintained, contested, and reworked by different social forces (Gallagher, 2014). On this scenario, sound artists working on urban areas are one of these social forces, they "reconfigure spaces by adding material to their pre-existing acoustics, folding into their architecture an additional three



dimensional layer of physical vibration” (Gallengher, 2014). The sounding outcome of this practice is affected by the urban context, as well the urban context is affected by the artwork and a new meaning to the materiality is emerged (Olmedo, 2014).

### **The presence of minimalism in Sound Art**

If we watch the Sound Art conception through Kyle Gann’s minimalism definition, we will notice the compatibility in conceptions. Mixing in an imaginary sound blender Harmonic Stasis, Repetition, Drones, Steady Beat, Static Instrumentation, Metamusic and Pure Tuning the result is noise, or “sounds”. A piece of Sound Art responds to all this principles and, therefore, we can define Sound Art as a Minimalism subdivision.

Gann also talks about Gradual Process, which generates a musical Audible Structure. Regarding to form, artistic pieces build in the Sound Art gender normally use the idea of Open Work (Umberto Eco’s approach to multiplicity of readings): The pieces has neither beginning nor end, they are placed onto a space and the auditor experiences the piece; this piece begins when the auditor arrives, and ends when he leaves, it is a personal experience. They don’t need the traditional concept of musical form to exist. Although this, composers tend to organize somehow the sounding happening, and the inclination is to do it through gradual and slow processes. If auditors are willing to, they can perceive the overall structure, which can be cyclical or randomly generated.

### **Natural spaces as music structure**

Urban Music must be performed in a specific soundscape, Urban Music is a Minimalistic approach to composition: Minimalism is the larger musical gender where the use of natural and social landscapes is structural for the music.

Seems to be that the relation between nature and minimalist art is stronger than discussed here. Outside of the Sound Art world, we find musicians that take this natural union between minimal resources and soundscapes to other levels. An example of this is the

Wandelweiser composer and trombonist Creig Shepard, he has released two albums denominated "On Foot", one recorded in Switzerland (2011) and other in Brooklyn (2013). The basic idea of both albums was simple and greedy: To compose a piece in a very short period of time and perform it somewhere outdoors, in a public space (bridges, public squares, intersections, mountaintop, etc). The musical material is undoubtedly minimalistic, rhythms are modest, melodic lines are clear and slow, the average dynamics are quiet, the harmonization (when happens) is extremely simple, silences of the instrument are long and spacious. The most important fact is the conception of music and environment: "Careful listening will reveal the everyday sounds of these spaces, including furnaces, crows, traffic, fish and distant church bells. When played on home stereo equipment, the pieces frame the everyday sounds of the listener's home" (Shepard, 2011).

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