



# **A Minimal Guide on Minimalist Music & Composers**

Recommended for Lower Secondary & Up

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# A Minimal Guide to Minimalist Music & Composers

## New Music in the Exciting 20th Century

Music in the 20th century was all about exploring new ideas in music, including dissonance<sup>1</sup>, new rhythms, and new combinations of instruments and this was broadly termed **new music**.

20th century music had a lot of different styles, some of which we hear in the movies today. For example, chance music emerged, involving some element of chance in creating it. In one piece of music by the prolific American composer John Cage, he cut up little pieces of paper and dropped them from a ladder onto the floor below and wrote down how it looked. That was how the piece of music was created.

New music was being created with the use of electronics too. Great advancements in music technology were made during this time, especially in music recording. The record, cassette tape, compact disc, and mp3 files were all popular ways to record music. Popular music like jazz, rock 'n' roll, rap, bluegrass, country, and blues all made a great impact. **Minimalism is part of the new music that flourished in the 20th century.**

## 3 Things about Minimalist Music

- It emerged in the late 1960s and can be associated with a group of American composers classified as 'minimalists'.
- Unlike most classical music you listen to, minimalist music did not come from the likes of conservatories in Europe but in lofts and art spaces of New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco.
- Composers such as **La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, John Adams** and **Steve Reich** were credited for the growth of Minimalist music.

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<sup>1</sup> Dissonance is when notes create a sound that sounds kind of crunchy to us or bugs us because it does not sound sweet and smooth

## A Minimal Guide on How to listen to Minimalist Music

### 1. Pulse

Minimalist Music usually has a very strong sense of pulse. This gives the music its energy and it feels like the ‘engine’ of the music. Listen out for the constant pulse and tap your feet along with the pulse.

### 2. Repeated Melodic Unit

Next, listen out for a melodic unit that will be repeated many times!

### 3. Instruments

The instruments used in minimalist music is often unusual as Minimalist composers use different instruments to create a colourful sound world.

## A Pioneer of Minimalism – Steve Reich

Born in the United States of America in 1936, **Steve Reich** (pronounced ‘Rahysh’) is a **pioneer of minimalism**.

Reich established his reputation in the late 1960s and early 1970s as one of the several composers who rejected the complex technical and intellectual styles of much mid-20th century music in favour of the **simple and hypnotic repetitive rhythms** of the style we now call **minimalism**. Many of his compositions are also influenced by non-Western traditions.



*Image credit: CC0 - Nationaal Archief, the Dutch National Archives*



For little-known facts about this influential composer, check out “Excuse me, Mr Rahysh?” – *Eight mini facts about Steve Reich*.  
URL: <https://bit.ly/2SupeXM>

## Phasing in Minimalist Music

Steve Reich wrote many pieces that used **phasing**. With this technique, **two musicians play the same part but at slightly different speeds**.



One of Reich's most notable pieces is ***Clapping Music*** written in **1972**. Reich was on tour in Brussels, Belgium with his ensemble and he watched a **flamenco** music performance. He used this performance as inspiration for the piece.

Read more about how the work came about.

URL: <https://bit.ly/2TaDRiB>



### How does phasing work?

There are two performers. One of the performers claps the exact same rhythms over and over again for the entire piece. The other performer starts out clapping the same rhythm, but after 8-12 bars, he shifts the first note to the end of the pattern. This pattern continues until the second performer has shifted all the way back to where they started and the two performers are clapping the same rhythm together again.



This clapping rhythm can be heard at the beginning of the song ***On Top of the World*** by the American band, Imagine Dragons. Listen to it here.

URL: <https://youtu.be/w5tWYmIOWGk>



# The Influence of Minimalism

## In Music

The style of minimalism has also spread to other music styles like Pop, Trance, Techno, Punk, Ambient and Grime. Psychedelic Rock, Progressive Rock, Experimental Rock, Art Rock, and Alternative Rock also use repetitive structures in their music. It was through English musician, **Brian Eno**, that the principles and practices behind minimalism would properly, and most lastingly, permeate the pop mainstream.

## The Big Screen

Minimalism has become the dominant form in contemporary cinema outside of Hollywood and an increasing force inside it.

Composers, **Philip Glass** and **Brian Eno** are key influences, both sharing a common lineage stretching back to the early music for piano and prepared piano<sup>2</sup> by **John Cage**. Today, Glass's influence is heard in the work of many lesser-known film composers.

Have you ever seen *The Truman Show* (1998), *The Hours* (2002), *The Illusionist* (2006), *Secret Window* (2004), or *No Reservations* (2007)? If so, you have heard the film scores written by minimalist composer **Philip Glass**.

Another minimalist composer to make a heavy impact in film is the UK's **Michael Nyman** who also wrote the film score for *The Piano* (1993).

One key contributor to the style of minimalism in film music is composer **Hans Zimmer**, who has been consistently strong of late (*Sherlock Holmes* marked his seventh Oscar nomination; he won for *The Lion King*). His film music for award-winning film, *Inception* (2010), was written in a minimalist style and mimicked the narrative structure of the film.

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<sup>2</sup> A prepared piano is a piano that has had its sound altered by placing objects between or on the strings. You can explore more about John Cage's use of the prepared piano through this app: <http://johncage.org/cagepiano.html>

## Explore Further

### Timeline of Art Movements in the 20th Century and Beyond

When we discuss the history of art and music, we study the development and stylistic changes of art and music over the course of time. An art movement is a specific style of art that was used by a group of artists and composers for a period of time, and often involved multiple studies such as art, philosophy, music and literature. Many of the development in art is mirrored in the development of music, and vice versa, including minimalism.

Art Period/ Movement	Year	Characteristics	Key Artists and Composers	Historical and Major World Events
Fauvism and Expressionism	1900– 1935	Harsh colours and flat surfaces (Fauvism); emotion distorting form	Artists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henri Matisse</li> <li>• Ernst Ludwig Kirchner</li> <li>• Wassily Kandinsky</li> </ul> Composers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arnold Schoenberg</li> <li>• Alban Berg</li> <li>• Anton Webern</li> </ul>	World War I (1914–1918)
Cubism, Futurism	1905– 1920	Pre- and Post- World War 1 art experiments: new forms to express modern life	Artists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pablo Picasso</li> <li>• Georges Braque</li> <li>• Fernand Leger</li> </ul> Composers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Erik Satie</li> <li>• Igor Stravinsky</li> </ul>	Russian Revolution (1917); American women franchised (1920)
Dada and Surrealism	1917– 1950	Ridiculous art; painting dreams and exploring the unconscious	Artists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marcel Duchamp</li> <li>• Salvador Dali</li> </ul> Composers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Edgard Varése</li> <li>• Peter Maxwell Davies</li> </ul>	Disillusionme nt after World War I; The Great Depression (1929–1938); World War II (1939–1945) and Nazi horrors; atomic bombs dropped on Japan (1945)

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Abstract Expressionism	1940s - 1950s	Post–World War II: pure abstraction	<p>Artists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maxim Gorky</li> <li>• Jackson Pollock</li> <li>• Mark Rothko</li> </ul> <p>Composers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Morton Feldman</li> <li>• Miles Davis</li> </ul>	Korean War begins when North Korea invaded South Korea.
Minimalism and Pop Art	1960s	Expression without form; popular art absorbs consumerism	<p>Artists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carl André</li> <li>• Andy Warhol</li> </ul> <p>Composers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steve Reich</li> <li>• Philip Glass</li> </ul>	Cold War and Vietnam War (U.S. enters 1965)
Postmodernism and Deconstructivism	1970 onwards	Art without a theme and reworking and mixing past styles	<p>Artists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sherrie Levine</li> <li>• Robert Longo</li> </ul> <p>Composers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John Adams</li> <li>• Luciano Berio</li> <li>• Harrison Birtwistle</li> </ul>	Communism collapses in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. (1989–1991)

## Explore More – The Composers

### Steve Reich:

- Steve Reich's official website: <http://www.steverreich.com>
- Steve Reich talking about composing some Rock & Roll music: <https://youtu.be/N92LQf1Vsi4>
- Steve Reich on his musical influences: <https://youtu.be/DWFeYyOGfck>
- A free app that challenges you to improve your sense of rhythm through *Clapping Music*: <http://clappingmusicapp.com> (for iPhone and iPad only)

### Philip Glass:

- BBC Music – Philip Glass: <https://bbc.in/2yGwfwg>
- Music from *The Hours* OST: <https://youtu.be/heu9tD0dzkY>
- *Violin Concerto*: <https://youtu.be/9ySGfGr7JsU>

### Terry Riley:

- Terry Riley's website: [www.terryriley.net](http://www.terryriley.net)
- *In C*: <https://youtu.be/aX96z7AulCs>

### John Adams:

- *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*: [https://youtu.be/5LoUm\\_r7It8](https://youtu.be/5LoUm_r7It8)
- *Shaker Loops*: <https://youtu.be/Wx0fkVIErEA>

### Brian Eno:

- Brian Eno's website: [www.brian-eno.net](http://www.brian-eno.net)
- BBC Music – Brian Eno: <https://bbc.in/2SoNvhU>
- *Music for Airports*: <https://youtu.be/vNwYtlyt3Q>

### Michael Nyman:

- Michael Nyman's website: [www.michaelnyman.com](http://www.michaelnyman.com)
- BBC Music – Michael Nyman: <https://bbc.in/2qhcWFu>
- *The Heart asks for Pleasure First*: [https://youtu.be/NsQBKr\\_x-P4](https://youtu.be/NsQBKr_x-P4)

### Hans Zimmer:

- Hans Zimmer's website: [www.hans-zimmer.com](http://www.hans-zimmer.com)
- *How Hans Zimmer Makes Music Scores You remember*: <https://bit.ly/2ggF3of>
- The Best of Hans Zimmer YouTube Playlist: <https://youtu.be/PSeJckOUZrs>

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