

## **The Mutual Influence between Asian Cultures and American Minimalist Music: An Essential Channel for Aesthetic Exchange**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to show the mutual influence between Asian cultures and American minimalist music. This cultural exchange that started with John Cage, before continuing with Toru Takemitsu and then, Tan Dun, has been a fruitful channel of communication for new compositions in both continents. The paper explores the close connection between early minimalist composers (Reich, Glass, La Monte Young, and Terry Riley) and Asian music and philosophies (Zen Buddhism and Spirituality) as well as some of the ramifications of these traditions over the past five decades. The concept of minimalism was first applied in the arts as a return to simplicity, in tune with Asian philosophies. For some artists, the practice was already present in Asian arts before it appeared in the West. The minimalistic endeavour starts with the experimental works of Cage and Feldman; followed by the movement “Fluxus”. This coincided with what is often considered early minimalism, leading to the great variety of styles and mix of compositional techniques employed by current Asian composers influenced by American minimalism. This paper also analyses the use of minimalism in the Western and Asian curriculum.

*Keywords:* Asian culture, Asian minimalists, John Cage, minimalism, Tan Dun

### **Introduction**

Minimalism is often considered the most significant musical movement of the late 20th century as it is the contemporary style most performed in concert halls today (Peterson, 2014). The style originated in United States during the 1960s and its roots can be traced to philosophical ideas from Asia. However, despite its popularity in the West, minimalism is somehow new to Asian audiences. This paper aims to fill this gap of research by

examining its aesthetic ideas and links to Zen Buddhism, Asian visual arts, and culture. In this way, future Asian performers will be able to connect the style to their own musical and cultural experience.

### **The Influence of Asian Cultures in Minimalist Music**

In recent years, minimalism has been described as “the single most important idea of the last century, the one that made possible virtually all that we now listen to ... from punk and techno to ambient and grime” (Sande, 2010). The term “minimalism” was first used by Michael Nyman in 1971 (Duckworth, 1999, p. 293). The movement began in the 1960s, not as a coherent aesthetic but more as an eclectic practice dominated by the visual arts. Meyer (2001) defined this movement as a practical field in the arts (p. 6).

A key feature of minimalism has been the influence of non-Western cultures (Gann, 2004). During the 1960s, four Asian traditions were the main influence of the style: Indonesian gamelan, Indian classical music, Japanese *gagaku* and the philosophies of Zen Buddhism. It should be noticed that in the last years the style has been under scrutiny and for some Asian artists this practice was already in use in some countries including Japan before it appeared in the West.<sup>1</sup>

This new aesthetic was adopted in the late 1960's by several New York-based composers: La Monte Young (b. 1935), Terry Riley (b. 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936), and Philip Glass (b. 1937). These musicians became the first of minimalist composers at a time dominated by European styles (serialism, neo-classicism, nationalism, and the avant-garde) (Schwartz & Godfrey, 1993, p. 263). These American composers were heavily influenced by the visual arts and brought multiple non-Western influences into their compositions such as: Indian Hindustani music or the Balinese gamelan. Zen Buddhism is also an influential element in their philosophical and aesthetical approach. From the beginning of the movement there has been a strong link to Asian cultures and some of these composers had performed with Asian musicians like Ravi Shankar.<sup>2</sup>

### **John Cage and the Influence of the Zen Philosophy**

Buddhism has been present in the United States from the mid nineteenth century since the arrival of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants to Hawaii and the West Coast. From the late nineteenth century, an elite group of artists and intellectuals including the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) became close to Buddhist practices (Burgan, 2012). The 1950s and 1960s saw a “boom” of Zen Buddhism in the United States (Burgan, 2012). Painters like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, the sculptor and painter Ron Bladen, or the minimalists Tony Smith and Agnes Martin had spiritual practices close to either or both Judeo-Christian and Asian philosophies (Chave, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> A recent exhibition, *Minimalism: Space. Light. Object*, held at the National Gallery in Singapore, re-examined the origins of minimalism in Southeast Asia. A Cambodian minimalist artist, Sopheap, proposed that the Asian tradition of minimalism is far older in Asia than in the West and that minimalism was “happening in Japan way before the word was created” (National Gallery of Singapore, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Ravi Shankar and Philip Glass collaborated in the album *Passages* in the late 1960s.

John Cage (1912-1992) was the first Western composer to apply in his music some of the concepts related to Zen Buddhism and other Asian philosophies. His aesthetic ideas had a great impact on American composers and the visual artists, particularly on minimalists. Cage, who had studied Zen with Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, believed that music's true purpose of art was to "sober and quiet the mind" (Brown, 2000, p.1). This approach to art is in tune with Zen Buddhism and some techniques of meditation and performance practices in South and East Asia, such as the Japanese Shinto chanting or the Hindu ecstatic devotional music (*Kirtan* and *Namawali Bhajan*) (Henry, 2002).

Before his learning of Zen, Cage had approached Indian classical music in the 1940s, studying the concept of *rasa*, the mood or character of a musical scale or *raga*. His pieces at this time experimented with Indian rhythmic structures, as well as with the different *rasas*, and have a particular contemplative character. The culmination of this period is his *String Quartet* (1950) where he introduces concepts related to Indian culture: "the view of the seasons, which is creation, preservation, destruction, and quiescence; also, the Indian idea of the nine permanent emotions, with tranquillity at the centre" (Kostelanetz, 2003, p. 66).

During these years, Cage also composed music for mediation imitating the structure and sounds of the Indonesian gamelan music. In his set of works for prepared piano (started in 1938), nine of these pieces are given a gamelan-like treatment and one of them is a short "Prelude for Meditation" (1944) composed only on 4 tones. Cage is also a pioneer in using new technology and collaborating with other artists, mixing music with other media (dance, theatre, and the visual arts). His collaboration with the choreographer Merce Cunningham produced a type of music theatre in which he explores the sound of the prepared piano to imitate the Indonesian gamelan. *Music for Marcel Duchamp* is his masterpiece of the time and a major influence on the minimalist composers.

In the 1950s, after the study of Zen Buddhism, Cage looked inward towards a pure music, emphasising the importance of silence and isolated sounds: "I've thought of music as a means of changing the mind. I saw art not as something that consisted of a communication from the artist to an audience, but rather as an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let the sounds be themselves" (Kostelanetz, 2003, p. 42). Silence in Cage's music become pervasive as opposed to areas of sound, in a clear influence of the Japanese philosophy of the simultaneous presence and absence of all things. His passion for silence in music comes both from his interest in Eastern and Western spirituality. His readings on the Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna, and on the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart, who emphasised silence as expression of the divine (Retallack, 2015).

For Cage, silence and duration are the essential elements of music structure as opposed to Beethoven's preference for harmony (Shultis, 1995). In his search for new means of expression during these years, he composed poetic texts that follow musical ideas, creating a clear connection between poetic and music structures. For example, in his *Lecture on Nothing* (1959), this text is organised musically from a set of durations, proportions, and groups of rhythmic structures or musical measures (Figure 1). The text is written in four columns to show the structure: "There are four measures in each line and twelve lines in each unit of the rhythmic structure. There are forty-eight such units,

each having forty-eight measures. The whole is divided into five large parts, in the proportion 7, 6, 14, 14, 7” (Cage, 2011, p. 109).

I am here , and there is nothing to say .  
 those who wish to get somewhere , If among you are  
 any moment . What we re-quire is  
 silence ; but what silence requires  
 is that I go on talking .  
 Give any one thought  
 a push ; it falls down easily .  
 ; but the pusher and the pushed pro-duce that enter-  
 tainment called a dis-cussion .  
 Shall we have one later ?  
 ♪  
 Or , we could simply de-cide not to have a dis-  
 cussion . What ever you like . But  
 now there are silences and the  
 words make help make the  
 silences .  
 I have nothing to say  
 and I am saying it and that is  
 poetry as I need it .  
 This space of time is organized  
 . We need not fear these silences, —

Figure 1. Excerpt from *Lecture on Nothing* by John Cage (Cage, 2011, p. 109)

A few years before this text, Cage had started composing music with no intention or goal, following the *I-Ching* or *Book of Changes*. This is an ancient Chinese book of divination that provides answers and guidance. Used by Buddhists as well as Taoists and Confucians to make moral decisions, it has a long history of interpretations and is considered a book of wisdom. Cage’s reading of the *I-Ching* led him to a new style of composition, chance music or indeterminacy, music with no intentionality, as in his *Music of Changes* (1951).

The search for “indeterminacy” or aleatoric music comes directly after his study with D.T. Suzuki and his reading of the *Huang Po Doctrine of Universal Mind*. Cage realised the inherent opposition between Western and Eastern musical aesthetics, whereas Western classical forms aim for narratives with clear goals and expectations, Eastern aesthetics propose a contemplative (non-goal oriented) experience.

At the core of this conflict lies causality and intentionality: “In the course of a lecture ... Suzuki said that there was a difference between Oriental thinking and European thinking, that in European thinking things are seen as causing one another and having effects, whereas in oriental thinking this seeing of cause and effect is not emphasised but instead one makes an identification with what is here and now” (Cage, 2011, p. 46).

The Zen composer needs to free himself of his intentions and the new “chance music” would be Cage’s answer to this aesthetic search (Timmerman, 2009).

This doctrine of non-obstruction means that I don’t wish to impose my feelings on other people. Therefore, the use of chance operations, indeterminacy, etcetera, the non erection of patterns, of either ideas or feelings on my part, in order to leave those other centres free to be the centres (Kostelanetz, 2003, p. 224).

Cage uses the *I-Ching* to make musical decisions regarding notes, structure, instrumentation, or rhythm, but not as a book of wisdom (Kostelanetz, 2003 pp. 17 & 83). Pieces like *Music of Changes* (1951), *Imaginary Landscape No 4* (1951), and *Cheap Imitation* (1969) use the *I-Ching* to decide the musical components of the compositions. In this aleatoric music the composer is only part of the compositional process, as Cage sets the initial conditions and throws the dice, he is not making decisions but only contemplating the random result of this process. The *I-Ching* for Cage is also a book to reflect on his music, “Very often you can ask a question and then find out that it gives you an answer that makes you aware of another dimension you haven’t thought of” (Kostelanetz, 2003, p. 17). The aesthetic result of these chance-controlled compositions was foreign to Western ears, as the pieces lack directionality, expectations, or goals. Against this type of criticism, Cage had a favourite quote showing his awareness of the aesthetic differences between the East and the West: “In Zen they say, If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all” (Cage & Gann, 2011, p. 93).

Like Cage, minimalist composers like La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich continued applying in their compositions, numbers and musical processes, new technology, and an emphatic use of silence as well as aesthetic elements derived from Asian philosophies. The importance of Cage in bridging the gap between Asian and Western culture goes both ways, as in 1961 he visited Osaka to give several lectures on the composers of the New York School of the time (Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff) and his new chance music. Two Japanese leading composers attended these lectures, Toshi Ichianagi (1933) and Toshiro Mayuzumi (1929-1997), and they were exposed to a “self-evaluation of their own culture” (Heifetz, 1984, p. 451). A young Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996), influenced by Toshi Ichianagi, was initially shocked by Cage’s music but later acknowledged that thanks to Cage he had learned to appreciate his own musical culture (Burt, 2001, pp. 92-109). This cultural trip of Cage from West to East and the issue of influence, Takemitsu seems to embrace the dialogue between cultures as he claims, “It has now been agreed that there is not much point in arguing which influenced which first in terms of mutual circulation of cultures” (Takemitsu, 1992, p. 27).

From the mid-1950s, some major Asian composers influenced by Cage also applied the Chinese *I-Ching* and the concept of *yin* and *yang* to find variety and create balance in their compositions. This is the case of Toru Takemitsu, as well as the American Chinese composer Chou Wen-Chung (1923-2019), and the Korean composer Isang Yun (1917-1995) (Kim, 2022). These three composers also added other Asian elements to their aesthetics: Isang Yun often applied the *yin* and *yang* and Chinese calligraphy in his works.

Chou Wen-Chung composed musical gestures derived from the Chinese calligraphy and used the I-Ching and the *yin* and *yang*, as in his piece *Metaphors* (1961) (Zhang, 2015). Toru Takemitsu also composed music using water in a symbolic way as in his piece *Toward the Sea* (1981), in which each letter of the word “sea” is associated to a pitch-class set within the scale (Zhang, 2015). Chou Wen-Chung and Takemitsu would play an important part in shaping future generations of Asian composers as both were mentors of Tan Dun and Bright Sheng and other composers of the Chinese New Wave (Chou, 2019). This will be discussed later.

### **The European Avant-Garde’s Discovery of Asian Music**

It is worth mentioning that the European avant-garde composers at that time had also “discovered” Asian music in the 1950s, but they had focused on sonorities more than philosophies, concentrating on sound and timbre qualities. The influence of Asian music, especially East and Southeast Asia, was widespread use of extreme registers of the instruments, *portamento* and timbre effects, microtonal fluctuations, extreme dynamic range, and new instrumental techniques (Mayuzumi, 1964). In Asia, these instrumental practices have a clear aesthetic purpose and often a transcendental significance, whereas in Europe the sounds were conceived as extended possibilities of the instruments to experiment with or, in other words, new sounds deprived of their aesthetic content.

An example of this type of appropriation is an instrumental technique derived from a Japanese Zen medieval practice, the *Suizen* ritual practiced by the *Komusō* (*Fuke*) monks. In this ritual, the mendicant monks play single sounds on the *shakuhachi*, focusing on precise breathing control and the tuning of these sounds, as a form of meditation. This instrumental technique used by the monks utilises microtonal inflections of isolated sounds. This technique, as well as many other instrumental techniques used in Japanese traditions or Indian classical music, became part of the extended instrumental techniques appropriated by European composers since the 1960s. This appropriation focuses on the sound quality forgetting the ritual, contemplative, and spiritual meanings that the sounds themselves represent (there are some exceptions, as the Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988), who was close to Hindu and Buddhist philosophies (Kirchert, 1998).

The European avant-garde seemed reluctant to a synthesis or fusion of musical aesthetics between both continents, as Pierre Boulez shows in the 1960s, “The musical systems of East and West cannot have any bearing on one another, and this will be quickly realized by experienced composers of character” (Heifetz, 1984, p. 444). American minimalist composers, however, are interested both in the new sounds and the aesthetics behind these ritual practices, although, except for Cage and Riley, do not seem to mention in their works the spiritual value of these sounds. The aesthetics derived from Zen Buddhism is appealing to American minimalist composers as they can be applied to music.

## Spiritual Dimensions in Buddhism and Music Applications in the West

The connection between the early minimalists and Asian cultures goes beyond aesthetic preferences or a search of a new musical experience. Comparing minimalist pieces to Japanese and Korean Zen music, we find similar elements:

- The use of minimal rhythms and instrumentations, particularly in the accompaniment of the monk's chant.
- The use of simple rhythmic patterns that can last for a long time.
- The use of repetitive melodic or rhythmic patterns

*Figure 2.* Comparison of main features of minimalist and Buddhist Music.

Zen music has been part of the Japanese Buddhist repertoire from the Kamakura period (1185-1333) until today. Previously, Mahayana Buddhism had been brought from China to Japan and Korea during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), altogether with a new development in musical performance and the invention of instruments and genres as the *Gagaku* court music ("Traditional Music of Japan," n.d.)

The spiritual values of Buddhism as well as the religious chants are well present in South and East Asia. These values and traditions include not only the repertoire but many music practices. For example, Japanese music education has historically been linked to Buddhist, Confucian and Shinto aesthetics and practices (Keister, 2008).

Below there is a summary of some of the spiritual dimensions and their application to music performance (Figure 3 and Figure 4):

- The full experience of the moment, the here and now, with the aim of enlightenment.
- Tuning and resonance with the outside and inside.
- The flow of consciousness and complete immersion in performance of a task.
- Focus on body sensations.
- Consciousness and connection with others and oneself.

*Figure 3.* The five dimensions of Spirituality in Buddhism (Hay, 2006, pp. 65-70)

- The music performer is focused on the moment, the production of sounds and nuances of the instrument, as well as the passing of time and the emotional content expressed.
- In a group performance each player is in tune with the others and with his own instrument. Resonance is a key element particularly in music for several strings, as sounds of similar frequencies (or natural multiples of them) resonate together, reinforcing tuning and instrumental blending.
- The performance flow enables the players to create an impression of a piece as a whole flux of sounds in time.
- The players focus on aural and bodily sensations, the ear perceives and the fingers and body react and adapt to each moment.

- Consciousness and connection are key elements among performers. Orchestra conductors often refer to “connection” as the state of mind that enables them to anticipate other musician’s responses and interpretations.

*Figure 4.* Application to music of the dimensions of Spirituality in Buddhism

This state of consciousness, however, can be easily mistaken with a Western concept, the “aesthetic state”, an idea developed by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) in relation to artists’ creativity. For Nietzsche, the “aesthetic state” is an altered state of consciousness that takes place during the artistic creation. Nietzsche’s philosophy had a great impact on post-modern art and the New York School, becoming mainstream in the 1960s and 1970s, to the point that a US president, Richard Nixon, read Nietzsche with “curious interest” (Crowley, 1998, p. 351). One key figure of the New York School and close to the minimalists, Mark Rothko, was heavily influenced by Nietzsche.

These two philosophical influences, Nietzsche’s “aesthetic state” and Zen meditative practices, are often referred to or even interlinked by Western artists in the 1960s. Cage, for instance, explains the meaning of meditation as “to open the doors of the ego from a concentration on itself to a flow with all of creation” (Kostelanetz, 2003, p. 20). Minimalist composers were familiar with Zen Buddhism from their contact with John Cage, but they tend to separate the cultural from the spiritual phenomena and the Zen values (except Terrey Riley). Scores are notated in a more experimental way (Feldman) or in a more conventional way (Reich or Glass), but in most cases the transcendental approach to the sounds, the ritual of meditation, is left aside. Unfortunately, this type of mislead approach to this type of transcendental repertoire is quite common in Western appreciation of Eastern values (Matsunobu, 2011).

### **Early American Minimalism and Asian Music and Philosophies**

The reception of the first American minimalists has been a mixed bag. The style has often been described as “ritualistic music”. Tom Johnson, a music critic who coined the term ‘minimalism’, described Philip Glass’ music as “hypnotic” (Johnson, 1989). The pioneers of minimalist music (La Monte Young, Terry Riley,<sup>1</sup> Steve Reich, and Philip Glass) were initially described as members of the “*New York Hypnotic School*” (Kostelanetz & Flemming, 1999, p. 114).

The ritual element in the music comes from the constant repetition of minimal patterns, extreme simplicity, slow melodic and harmonic unfolding, a pervasive use of silence, long drone notes, sustained dynamics, and avoidance of sharp contrasts. All these elements are often part of trance rituals (Becker, 2004). However, little has been discussed on the spirituality behind this “ritualistic music”.

Early minimalism (late 1960s and early 1970s) uses repetition in a stricter way and its aim is to achieve a state of “stasis” (especially Young). This early style is the closest to Asian practices and rituals, as it proposes a search of “static non developmental forms” (Fink, 2005, p.m14). As the style evolves in the 1970s, composers found that the label of “minimalism” was “less satisfactory” (Bernard, 2003, p.112).

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<sup>1</sup> Riley, although part of this school, was based in California, not New York.



The ritualistic music composed by the first minimalists was also linked to the output of John Cage and Morton Feldman (1926-1987) at the time, independent forerunners of the new style. Whereas Cage had been close to Asian philosophies aiming to liberate the sound of intentionality, Feldman was aiming to:

“Disrupt the dialectical continuity of music by removing all teleological and logical elements: ‘I make one sound and then I move on to the next’, he has said. Traditional causality is replaced by an atomised succession” (Mertens, 2007, p. 106).

Feldman’s compositions show a simple notation, sometimes using graphics, and a minimal sonority close to the minimalists. His melodies are often repetitive and slow evolving, using simple harmony and long, soft, and meditative sounds. The spiritual mood in these pieces link them to Buddhist music and had a great impact on minimalists’ works such as Riley’s *In C*, Reich’s *Clapping Music*, and Glass’s *Strung Out*.

This commitment to individual sounds, isolated durations and lack of intentionality is a clear influence of Cage and Feldman on La Monte Young, as we can see in his *Composition 1960 # 7* (Figure 5). The piece consists of only one sound that can be held for a long (unspecified) duration, in consonance with Cage’s *4’33”* and the constructive use of durations and silence in his compositions.

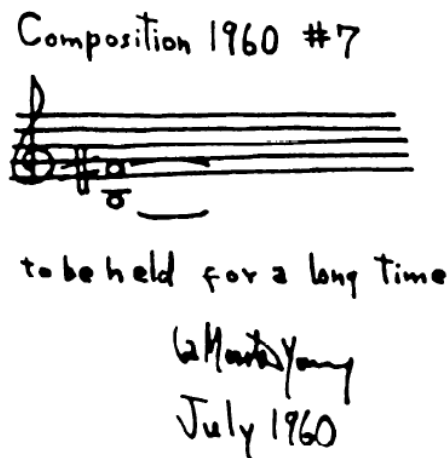


Figure 5. Score of La Monte Young’s *Composition 1960 # 7* (Young, 1960)

Apart from minimalism, La Monte Young was also involved with the movement “*Fluxus*”, initially a visual art movement. “*Fluxus*”, which in Latin means “flow” or “flowing” was also a network of artists and composers founded by George Maciunas (1931-1978). “*Fluxus*” and experimentalism were initially interconnected in the 1960s. Only after the influence of John Cage, “*Fluxus*” became part of experimentalism in New York (Tate, n.d.). This movement was not defined by an aesthetic dogma but by the artists’ sharing of creations and experiences (Revich, 2018). Within “*Fluxus*”, several artists developed an interest in Zen, like Cage, La Monte Young, or the influential New York art critic Arthur C. Danto (b. 1924) who was inspired by Zen Buddhist Ching Yuan (Best, 2006). La Monte Young explores the connections of “*Fluxus*” between the arts, sound, and music in the 1970s. He introduces the concept of “stasis” that he defines as sameness. Opposite to this concept is differentiation, variation, contrast, or change, what

he calls “*fluxus*”. For Young, “stasis” and “*fluxus*” are both necessary to achieve a higher goal, the static goal, the triumph of ‘stasis’ or sameness. Young was also inspired by *Gagaku* music (traditional Japanese court music), imitating in his Trio the timbre structure and colours of this ancient music (Strickland, 1993, p. 125).

Terry Riley was influenced by Indian Classical Music, Indonesian gamelan and Jazz. After experimenting with tape loops and recorders he composed *in C* (1964), considered the first minimalist work. His approach to minimalism is based on short motives or cells that are repeated and superimposed in several musical layers. These cells are conceived as modular, as the player has certain freedom on repeating them more or less times. For Riley repetition aims to “rouse emotional vibrations in the listener” (Mertens, 2007, p. 37). Gamelan music was a source of inspiration to many of his works. His commitment to Indian Music is also present through the use of a very personal modal approach to music. His modes have a peculiar sonority and a mood that, similar to Cage’s works in the 1940s, resemble the Indian’s *rasa* or mood (atmosphere) of the *ragas*. Riley’s thought is closer to Buddhism, as he claims: “music has to be the expression of spiritual categories like philosophy, knowledge and truth, the highest human qualities. To realise this, my music necessarily radiates balance and rest” (Mertens, 2007, p. 45).

Philip Glass studied yoga and Buddhist meditation in the 1960s. During 1966-1967 he stayed in Tibet and India, growing an interest in non-Western music (Mertens, 2007). He believes that there are many commonalities between a musician and the teachings of *dharma* as “both require students to learn the basics, pay attention to details, and make an effort to improve. Buddhist artists often note how their meditative practices bolster their creative efforts” (Burgan, 2012, p. 53). Glass’s music is organised following additive principles of rhythm in Indian Music. He took *tabla* lessons with Alla Rakha, a performer in Ravi Shankar’s ensemble (Potter, 2006).

Steve Reich started his career experimenting with tape loops (like Riley). In the early 1970s he studied Indonesian gamelan and West African drumming techniques, which he soon used in more sophisticated pieces like *Violin Phase*. The interlocking rhythms of the Gamelan and their repetitive cyclic structures are featured in his works of this period (Tenzer, 2019).

From the 1980s, minimalism has continuously evolved and become an international eclectic style, open to individual styles and modifications, and merging with other musical traditions. The term post-minimalism has been often used to describe a style in which diatonic harmony, musical processes, and a strict pulse are in consonance with the “motto” of the early minimalist artists: “Make it pure and simple” (Strickland, 1993).

“The idea of minimalism is much larger than many people realise. 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 ... It includes pieces that move in endless circles” (Johnson, 1989, p. 5).

After all this survey of Asian influences and transcendental values in American minimalist composers, it should be mentioned that in the 1980s a group of Eastern European composers embraced a new type of “mystic” minimalism.

### **The Eastern European and Russian “Mystic” Minimalists**

This group includes the composers Henryk Górecki (1933-2010) (Polish), Sofia Gubaidulina, (b.1931) (Russian) and Arvo Pärt (b.1935) (Estonian). From the 1990s their music has been received more as “mystic” than as minimalist: Pärt’s music “unfolds with a quiet rapture, small units shifting and turning with a ritualistic mysticism” (Rockwell, 1993, p. 24).

Pärt’s mysticism is in tune with the Eastern Orthodox Church, Gubaidulina is a Russian Orthodox and Górecki was a Catholic. For all of them the meditative style is clear in their music content: “The ‘spirituality’ inference, however, often comes from clues within the score. The soprano’s text in the second movement of Górecki’s *Third Symphony* is a plea to the Virgin Mary from an inscription on a wall in Auschwitz, and in the third movement is a poem portraying Mary pleading to Jesus at the foot of the cross. Pärt’s catalogue is dominated by works on Christian texts in a variety of languages” (Potter, 2016, p. 319).

These composers’ spirituality is closer to a Christian mysticism than to Asian practices. It is worth noticing, however, how the minimalism style which had long roots in Zen philosophies from its beginning has finally found a mystic expression, as if this repetitive style was waiting for composers to match this music language with its original spiritual content. This music is based on ritual repetitions, long drones, simple melodies and harmonies, a “spiritual” use of silence and the avoidance of contrast. The influence of Zen Philosophy seems to find its own *modus vivendi* in this type of “mystic music”. Somehow, the success of these mystic composers makes us wonder if musical styles are much more than organised sound or a list of aesthetic preferences, as if the sounds needed to be guided by profound concepts or spiritual philosophies.

### **The Influence of Minimalists on Asian Composers**

Most Asian minimalists have developed their career in the United States. As the style became widely spread from the late 1990s, composers have used some of these techniques in the last 30 years, especially in orchestral pieces or concertos with orchestra, integrating minimalism with other compositional techniques and their own personal style.

Yoshimasa “Yoshi” Wada (b. 1943) is a Japanese composer living in the United States, a student of La Monte Young and a pioneer in the late 1960s of the “*Fluxus*” movement, after meeting its founder George Maciunas. His music at the time was very close to that of the American minimalists with a particular use of drones (repeated or sustained notes for a long period of time). He has experimented with sound installations, conceptual art, and electronic music (Eppley, 2015). Uzong Choe (b.1968) is a Korean eclectic composer with deep roots in Austria and France. His works have shown a great variety of musical styles and traditions, including Korean aesthetics from early music to more contemporary popular music and he has worked with the street theatre troupe Yo-Hee Dan since 1994 (College of Music Seoul National University, 2015). Minimalism is one of the styles he has made use of in his pieces (Song, 2017). The style is not essential in his creation but one more set of techniques in the palette of the composer.

From the 1980s, minimalism has contributed to an open approach to music and arts, free of dogmas and formalisms (Fink, 2005, pp. 16-20). Composers often mix musical traditions and explore individual styles utilising a great variety of compositional techniques. This open approach to arts liberated of dogmas is an indirect influence of

minimalism in the first Chinese New Wave of composers, who found at this time their own compositional response after being immersed in both American and Chinese cultures.

### **The Chinese First New Wave of Composers**

The composers Wang Xilin, Zhou Long, Chen Yi, Bright Sheng, and Tan Dun are part of the “New Wave” group of Chinese composers who went through the Cultural Revolution in the period 1966-76 and later became representative figures of the Chinese music scene. Although this is a heterogeneous group with very different styles, the New Wave composers feature the use of traditional Chinese and Western avant-garde musical elements and compositional techniques (Liu, 2010, p. 510).

The influence of minimalism is clear in Tan Dun and in some pieces of Wang Xilin, less in the other three composers who have used minimalism occasionally in their output (Dong, 2020). Cage is also a major influence of Tan Dun (van Raat, n.d.).

This group of composers became the first generation of Chinese composers to explore Western compositional techniques introduced in twentieth century music. From the mid 1980’s the group was known as a “New Wave” (*Xin Chao*). Since these techniques were drawn from the Modernist and Avant-garde composers in Europe and USA, the acceptance of this Western influence also meant a loss of some of their music national (Chinese) character. With time, each composer in this group also developed an individual style (Liu, 2010). These individual styles contrast with the previous forty years of “compositions in a similar style” in China (Liu, 2010, p. 516).

These New Wave composers attended the Beijing Central Conservatory in the late 1970s and early 1980s and later moved to the United States. At that time, Chou Wen-Chung and Toru Takemitsu had been invited in several Chinese conservatories to give lectures on Western contemporary compositional techniques and both had a strong impact on the New Wave young generation composers (Dong, 2020). Bright Sheng and Tan Dun were mentored by Chou Wen-Chung (1923-2019) at Columbia University (Chou, 2019), who also recruited Chen Yi to study at this prestigious university (Chang, 2007). Chou Wen-Chung became a mentor to these composers and firmly believed in a confluence of Western and Eastern musical ideas (in clear opposition to Pierre Boulez’s thoughts in the 1960s mentioned above), “It is my conviction that we have now reached the stage where the very beginning of a re-merger of Eastern and Western musical concepts and practices is actually taking place” (Chou, n.d.).

The New Wave composers reflect this confluence from popular modern styles such as “neo-romanticism or minimalism adapted for Chinese instruments”. For example, Tan Dun uses Renaissance music, a romantic style, and Chinese folk music in his opera *Marco Polo* (1995) (Dong, 2020, p. 19). Wang Xilin (b. 1937) is a Chinese composer who became well-known since the Mid 1990s. He was heavily influenced by the American minimalist John Adams (b.1947) and his piece for orchestra *Harmonielehre* (1985), in the creation of his *Symphonic Cantata Hai de chuanqi (Legends of the Sea)* (Op.35) (Liu, 2010). During the Chinese Revolution he was in contact with local folk music that became for him an important source of inspiration. “Wang’s passion for studying and for teaching himself new techniques has meant that he has been able to keep abreast of the times and has become one of the composers most able to communicate between China

and the rest of the world” (Liu, 2010, p. 502). Wang Xilin believes that the symphonic art tradition is “high art” and regards his production as a “pathway to the edification and purification of Chinese listeners.” (Liu, 2010, p. 640). Among his major works are the symphonic suite *Yunnan Tone Poem No 1, Spring Rain in a tea plantation* (1963) and the *Three Symphonic Murals- Legends of Sea, Op.35* (2009) (Wang, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Wang Xilin’s music has evolved from a Romantic style in his first two symphonies to modernist techniques in the early 1980s drawn from Schoenberg, Bartók, and Stravinsky. In the late 1980s and 1990s he moved to more contemporary techniques close to Penderecki and John Adams (Liu, 2010).

Chen Yi (b. 1953) is a Chinese American composer who was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music. She has used a great diversity of compositional techniques, including serialism and minimalism, combined with the use of Chinese tunes. She has composed mainly for orchestra, chamber groups, choir and piano and her style mixes both Chinese scales and Western tonality with other contemporary techniques (Liu, 2010). In her “Sparkle” for octet (1992), Chen Yi blends Western and Chinese cultures by the “perpetual rhythmic motion, the continuously flowing melodic line”, combining a Chinese tune and elements of Western serialism (Xin, 2002). She has also used minimalism techniques in the cadenza of the *Flute Concerto* (1997): “in my mind it’s kind of a minimalism approach: a very long, very even phrase with non-stop repeated patterns. Eventually the outcome was good because I told her (the player) to keep fluently going and she worked it out” (Smith, 2012, p. 68).

The Chinese American composer Zhou Long (b. 1953), husband of Chen Yi, also shows an openness to use minimalism techniques in compositions, although he cannot be considered a minimalist composer. He considers minimalism as a style to be as useful in his production as other contemporary styles: “I listened to minimalist music when I arrived in New York ... Even minimalism—the wood, those kinds of repeated patterns. So in my music, I don’t reject anything, but you have to do it well” (Smith, 2012, p.79).

The music of Bright Sheng (b. 1955) has strong Chinese and Asian influences as in his pieces *Tibetan Dance* (2000) and *Seven Tunes heard in China* (1995), as a result of his diligent study of Asian musical cultures for over three decades. Bright Sheng studied at Columbia with Chou Wen-Chung and Mario Davidovsky, and he initially shows influence from Bartók, Hindemith, Ravel, Stravinsky, Ligeti, and Chinese folk music. Finally, he has fully developed his exceptional compositional skills into his own language (Chang, 2006).

In 2008, he was invited to compose music for the opening ceremony for the Beijing Olympic Games. He has composed pieces for orchestra of Chinese traditional instruments as well as pieces mixing Chinese and Western instruments, as his “Three Songs for Violoncello and Pipa” (1999). Among his major works are: *H’un* (“Lacerations”) *for Orchestra* (1988) and his violin concerto, *Let Fly* (2013) (Sheng, 2016).

In his essay “Melodic migration of the silk road: Music samplings of Northwest China”, he claims his influence as a mixture of cultures “from European classical music to jazz, folk, pop, new age, Asian, and African music. This multiculturalisation makes it possible for composers like Lou Harrison and me to have an audience” (Sheng, 2019).

Tan Dun (b. 1957) is an American Chinese composer of an international reputation. Famous for his film scores and his symphonic music, his main influences are Cage, Takemitsu, Reich and Glass. In his early works, there is a strong inspiration of using

unusual sound materials to perform music, in tune with the philosophy and experimentalism of John Cage, especially in his early operas (Zhang, 2015). For example, while Cage played with water sounds and experimented with noises on his homemade instruments, Tan Dun also experienced with similar sounds recalling back to his life experience while working in the farm with laborers.

The influence from Cage, including the use of a prepared piano, is clearly shown in his 1994's tribute work C-A-G-E. The piece seems to put together a "Chinese voice in an otherwise Western modernist language". On this occasion, the piano, the most representative instrument of Western music, has been transformed in its sonority. His prepared piano writing includes various skills drawn from the Chinese *pipa* repertoire, as the pianist has to strike and mute strings, or play with bare fingers on the piano to create different sounds (van Raat, n.d.). He has also experimented with mixing multimedia with the sounds of Chinese folklore to compose his works. He has also mixed Chinese and Western instruments in the form of Concertos. His *Ghost Opera* blends Western avant-garde and Chinese ritual culture as well as his personal musical experiences to create a very personal atmosphere. This opera was later expanded to become his *Pipa Concerto* (Smith, 2004). His latest opera, *Buddha Passion* (2018), shows a clear integration of Western and Asian cultures, in which the main characters speak in Chinese, English and Sanskrit (Los Angeles Philharmonic, 2019). The main theme of the opera is Spirituality, in connection with Zen Buddhism and his mentor John Cage, for whom, music was meant "to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences" (Brown, 2000, p. 1).

Tan Dun's film composition has shown an influence from both his mentor Toru Takemitsu and the minimalist composer Philip Glass. As in his concert works, his film music normally shares elements from Western and Eastern cultures. He also applies his Chinese heritage and philosophy as well as Chinese scales and instruments in most of his film scores, as in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (van Raat, n.d.). Tan Dun has made his own explanation of minimalism. For him, his major inspirations start with the letter "M". The first capital "M" in Tan Dun's vocabulary stands for "Minimalism". In 1986, during his years at Columbia University, he discovered minimalist and post-minimalist composers such as Philip Glass and John Adams. The Second capital "M" in Tan Dun's vocabulary stands for Mozart. He explains, "But Mozart is minimalist" (as in Mozart's piano sonatas, the music shows clear melodic line and the continuous repetitive left-hand pattern) ... and Eastern music (is also minimalist), from the Indian sitar to Chinese monks singing is often just endless minimalist patterns" (Dart, 2006).

These New Wave composers have applied their cultural heritage into their works. Their writing normally demonstrates their dual heritage, absorbing Western musical skills on one side and combining them with non-Western philosophy and aesthetics, particularly in their orchestral works (Smith, 2012). Their personal life in China had a strong impact in their later works. For example, Tan Dun adds to his music the scenes and colours of his stay in a farm, Bright Sheng applies Buddhist dance and folk tunes, Zhou Long and Chen Yi acclaim rural surrounding sounds (Smith, 2004).

### **Appendix: Minimalism in the Western and Asian curriculums**

Western music has been widely spread for several generations now in Asia, as “students increasingly attended schools in Japan and Europe, bringing back European ideas and training upon their return home” (Lau, 2008, p. 3). However, minimalist music is new to most students in the continent as it is not part of the curriculum yet (except in some music schools in Japan and South Korea). College students are familiar with Western music history from Baroque to Classical and Romantic music but lack a familiarisation with 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century music. For example, teachers of the major and more influential music centres in China like the Central Conservatory of Beijing or the Shanghai Conservatory do not commonly teach this repertoire. On another hand, Asian students are most familiar with *Rock* or *Jazz* styles than other contemporary styles in the West (Fung & Chung, 2000).

Pedagogically, minimalism has an advantage over other modern and contemporary styles as this style is only relatively new to Asian ears; students are familiar with the style in many current films and documentaries like Philip Glass’s “Dreaming of Fiji”, “Truman sleeps” or “The hours”, as well as other contemporary film music. This last movie soundtrack, “The hours”, was a strong influence for Tan Dun, composer of the soundtrack to “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” (Oteri, 2007).

Minimalism is already part of the music curriculum in Europe, Australia, and the U.S. Students at secondary school are exposed to this contemporary style and learn how to analyze basic minimalist techniques like *ostinato*, *layering* or *phasing*. Instructors normally introduce the historical background in class and selected musical works by Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, John Adams, the British composer Michael Nyman (b.1944) or the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen (1939-2021). Students often perform accessible pieces in class like Riley’s *In C* or Reich’s *Clapping Music*.

It is also common to use minimalism in the classroom to learn basic musical skills even from primary school, due to the simplicity of some of the pieces. Some teachers propose to use this style from primary to tertiary level of music education through composing activities with the aim of applying a “post-modernist perspective in music and its cultural and social context in the teaching strategy and classroom plan” (Blom, 2003, p. 87).

Minimalism can build a bridge between contemporary Western and Asian music. It can introduce Asian students to Western contemporary music and help them develop new skills such as aural and instrumental skills or audio recording processing. It is also a relatively simple style to perform with strong connections with Western, African, and Asian cultures. The style can provide a global cultural immersion in a diverse musical world, or a way of connecting with contemporary music in a globalised world. Teachers can introduce minimalist music and composition techniques in classroom activities, as the style contains various musical influences that will enrich a student’s ability and creativity in learning modal and stationary harmony, musical processes, timbre effects, or interlocked rhythms (i.e., rhythms constructed by the interaction of several musical parts to create a complex texture). Performers can also play this repertoire as the required skills are heavily based on conventional techniques. Playing this music not only examines a student’s fundamental techniques and aural training but also improves their physical and mental control abilities. The style requires a good level of training but, most importantly, great concentration and muscle memory.

Minimalist music might initially look simple on the surface, but it requires a particular understanding of the music and a precise technique to interpret it. As Albert Einstein once said: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler". The style aims initially for simplicity and some pieces like *Clapping Music* by Steve Reich are not complex to perform but others require a high level of proficiency in a new set of skills: tempo mastery, performance of accurate repetitions, high degree of independence of musical parts, or extreme speeds. Minimalist music also demands a high accuracy of intonation and tempo keeping as the music is often based on exact repetitions of short fragments that the listener will easily follow, expecting a high degree of precision in the repetitions. As Moncrieff notices: "The repetitive nature of minimalist music makes it easy to get lost" (Moncrieff, 2009, p. 22). These repetitions (often at a high speed) will also demand a great control of muscle relaxation, tempo accuracy, and concentration, "Concentration is paramount to the success of the playing of minimalist music. It also requires players to focus on the changes that should be made throughout the music" (Moncrieff, 2009, p. 15). Performing minimalist music requires a sharp concentration in both practice and performance. It is different from other styles in which difficult passages alternate with others of lower difficulty. In this style, performers may lose the concentration in counting repetitions or somewhere in the middle of the process, only performing out of muscle memory. Listening is also a key skill to perform this music. According to Philip Glass minimalism proposes a new type of listening to music: "What you hear depends on how you focus your ear. We're not talking about inventing a new language, but rather inventing new perceptions of existing languages" (Reich, 2018).

Listening is also discussed by Steve Reich, who emphasizes the experience of listening to complex textures in his piece *Violin Phase*,

The violinist should regard him or herself as a listener in the practice. All these patterns are really there; they are created by the interlocking of two, three, or four violins all playing the same repeating pattern out of phase with each other. Since it is the attention of the listener that will largely determine which particular resulting pattern, he or she will hear at any one moment, these patterns can be understood as psychoacoustic by-products of the repetition and phase-shifting" (Moncrieff, 2009, p. 26).

Minimalism can also introduce students to less conventional playing techniques and skills, enhancing the level of concentration, muscle memory and relaxation, tempo accuracy, or aural perception as, in this music, the technical skills are as relevant as the mental and physical states of the performer.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of "minimalism" was first applied in the visual arts as a return to simplicity, in an aesthetic search in tune with ancient Asian philosophies (Zen Buddhism). Early minimalist music focuses on the aesthetics of simplicity and contemplation in circular repetitions of time and, consequently, as a means to reach a trance-like state of flow or meditation. Culturally, the minimalist style has created a bridge of communication between Asian and American cultures, as contemporary composers in both contexts have been influenced by philosophies or aesthetics developed in each of their continents.



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### **Biography**

Dr Fernando Martin Pastor was a Fulbright Fellow in Music and studied at the University of California and University of Washington. He later received the AHRB fellowship from the UK government at Southampton University to complete his PhD in composition. He also studied contemporary music at King's College London, Conservatorio Superior in Madrid (Spain), and IRCAM Centre Pompidou in Paris.

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