

Repetitive minimalism in the work of Philip Glass. Composition techniques

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Abstract: *The music which renders Philip Glass' vision is based on repetition. Musical figures are structured according to the so-called additive method – undoubtedly the main technique determining the characteristics of his style. It consists of adding new elements to the basic melodic and/or rhythmic structure, resulting in an expanding musical discourse which is augmented or diminished and is applied more and more melodic and rhythmic constraints, depending on the intentions of the compositional project. There is also the loop technique, which becomes manifest by a series of added elements from electro acoustics and which is almost omnipresent as a basic minimalist technique.*

Key-words: *American minimalism, repetition, additive technique, loop*

Introduction

In minimalist music, repetition functions as a reproduction of an ancestral past of the being, who interrogates itself (and it also reflects the present). It represents a mark of the deep penetration of the phenomenon into the living temporality. It is interesting to notice that what is desired is the repetition of that which is *unrepeatable* – it is not just that a second or third repetition is (simply) added to the first (see the idea of a rejection loop), but the pattern is raised to the power of n . Furthermore, this repetition does not modify anything within the repeated object itself, but produces a change in the contemplating spirit. The pursuit of the minimalist composers is a dialectics which highlights the hidden potential in the repetition of successive instances/structures. One such potential is the experienced present as well as the living present of which the past (as a positive power) and the future are part. It is a nostalgia of the lost consistency with a tendency of creating an innovating unique context into which to integrate traditional elements (Iorgulescu 2012, 9).

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The repetition principle is therefore correlated to the Myth of the Eternal Return², articulated in its ideal scrutiny by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). According to the German philosopher's synthesis, repetition emerges within this principle which involves the destruction of all forms impeding its functioning; these are representational categories incarnated in the *sameness*, that which involves the identical, the similar. Moreover, there is the idea that "only that which is similar differs; and only differences are similar" (Deleuze 1995, 176).

Therefore, by becoming aware we profess the obsessive involvement of a repetition – which is eventually perceived as archetypal due to its universality. It is not always that notable philosophical ideas have been perceived by artistic pursuits as in an attentive, present mode. The inference of the myth of the eternal return is a prerequisite of a special philosophical and spiritual culture, which is not immediately adjacent to the syntax of repetitive sonorous structures. It could be a weak point of the American school that of not being involved in this cognitive, axiological pursuit. It was even accused of succumbing to simplicity, monotony and commercial interest (Anghel 1997, 40). Even so, it paved the way towards eventual decisions to reconnect with the past and open new, truly revolutionary future perspectives.

2. Philip Glass

In the second half of the 20th century, the minimal pursuit connects to the permanently innovative and surprising process of transforming the musical language. On the American scene, the works circumscribed to this school, by musicians like La Monte Young (b. 1935), Terry Riley (b. 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936), Philip Glass (b. 1937), are proof points to that.

Philip Glass (b.1937) initially studied the flute, then the piano, also harmony and composition with Louis Cheslock (1909-1993). He completed his studies at the Julliard Music School and in 1960, he had the opportunity to study with Darius Milhaud (1892-1974). Between 1964-1966, he would be tutored by Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) in France. In Paris, he composed the music for a feature film and met Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakka, *tabla* players.

He composed around 80 works before 1960, of which 20 were published. They display a more traditional style (Mertens 1983, 67), which the composer would disown as of 1968. That was due to his visiting Tibet and India, between

² See the interpretation and symbolism employed by the philosopher in depicting the status of the legendary hero in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

1966-1967 and his growing interest for extra European music, with special attention directed towards musical traditions based on the principles of additive structure. At the end of 1967, he settles in New York where he founds his own group, the Philip Glass Ensemble.

His first opera *Einstein on the Beach* – a collaboration with the experimental theatre director Robert Wilson (b. 1941) premiered in Avignon (1976). The music of the opera is characterized by an apparent immobility established along an infinite duration. The simplicity of rhythmical structures, of harmonic progressions, the short, continually repeated melodic motifs are typical features of his work. In 1971, he founded his own record label *Chatham Square*.

He wrote the music scores for the films *North Star* and *Marc di Suvero* for which he won awards at the Chicago Film Festival.

In 1977, he composed his second opera *Satyagraha* which premiered in Rotterdam in September 1980. Glass revitalized the opera genre by expanding and restructuring it in a ceremonial non-narrative manner within a theatre of ritualistic music. These are permanent features of the previously mentioned operas, as well as of *Akhnaten* (1983). Worth mentioning are also *Strung Out* (1967) for electric violin, *600 Lines* (1967), *Two Pages*³ (1969); finally his well-known works *Music in Fifths* (1969) and *Music in Similar Motion*⁴ (1970).

In *Music with Changing Parts* (1973), Glass manifests an interest for the acoustic sound resulting from the repetition of notes and cells and also for the sound produced by combining the notes played by two instruments. Other works are *Music in Twelve Parts* (1974) - where he employed techniques such as the additive process, repetitive construction, the movement of the continuous tremolo, pulsation, a stable harmony of parts, and sudden modulations; *Another Look at Harmony* (1977) – constructed on the hypothesis of string equality. Overall his work is extremely diversified comprising operas, symphonies, concerts, chamber music, theatre music, dance music, soundtrack, piano works, etc.

2.1. Melodic models. The technique of additive Pitches

The additive technique as related to pitch range is the manner in which structure configuration is melodically processed. It consists of adding foreign elements to the consonant chord used to model the sonic flow. Aggregates are thus created in a process (of a slow temporal cadence) which naturally enables the dissolving of dissonance into consonance. Yet consonance remains the vital generative element,

³ In which he first used the additive structure method in an ensemble.

⁴ A step is taken towards harmony as a structural principle and the expanding of vertical construction.

together with other adjoining consonances as a vehement aesthetic reaction to the hyper saturation imposed by the serial expression.

Upon trying to chart the arch of the historical understanding of consonance, that seems to occur with the minimalists, in its primary stage of elaboration, just as during the 9th and 10th centuries, certain modal songs would unfold in connected series of parallel fifths and fourths (see Figure 2 further down, Philip Glass' work, *Music in Fifths*) (Nyman 1999, 149). The new simplicity actually referred to a return to natural resonance, to the first harmonics at the sound base without imposing the status of the actual dissonances, which emerge into the natural resonance through the distant harmonics.

The status of the atonal discourse is thus placed under interrogation and even denied, while the consonant proximities bring to the limelight the ancient expressions, like the tonal one. Thus in the work *Two Pages* (1968) proceeding from a minimal musical material of five sounds (G, C, D, E, F) and also from a single rhythmical value, the eighth, Glass creates a repetitive consonant musical motif, which is dynamic due to augmenting and/or diminishing the rhythmic structures of the sonic material and flow (a sonic occurrence with no beginning and no ending). The respective rhythmic contraction may involve giving up on one or two melodic elements as compared to the initial ones (see Figure 1).

Two Pages

Philip Glass

Feb. 1969

Fig.1. Philip Glass, "Two Pages"

Figure 1 shows the emerging of a musical material by means of a number of *defective* time loops. The addition – of an unpredictable manner – of some elements which (sometimes) have been left aside – enables them to emerge even more vividly. Therefore the five sound scale has its own expanding time span within the sonorous space. The numerically indexed boxes evoke exactly the asymmetry of the configuration thus created by the play of the five sound multitudes. It is like a repertoire of the combinations and permutations of these sounds. All of Glass' scores display an element of *open syntax* (see *Opera Aperta*) where the writing of the parts is unfinished. The players are thus part of the composing endeavour; they choose *ad libitum* the sounds which accommodate the musical structure in various moments of the musical progress.

The work *Music in Fifths* (1969) differs from *Two Pages* by the use of the intervallic simultaneity within the sonic flux. There is not one single melodic line thus, but a bicinium. In this case the additive process is not perceived as a formal pattern univocally manifested but serves the purpose of pursuing the psycho-acoustic effects on the audience (Figure 2).

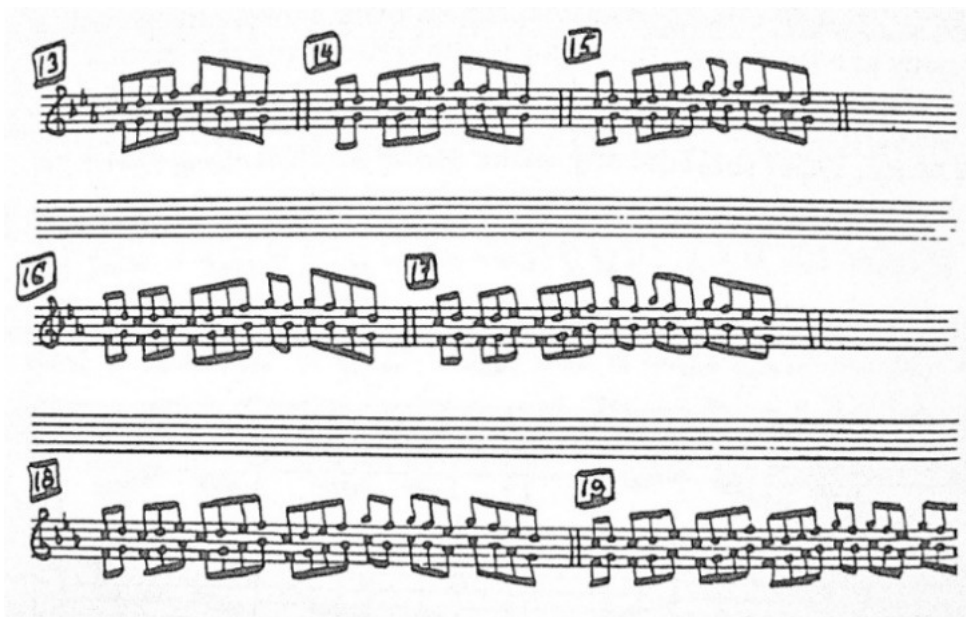


Fig. 2. Philip Glass, "Music in Fifths"

2.2. Rhythmic patterns. The Additive technique of rhythmic structures

The piece *Knee Play No 4* is part of the *Trilogy Sonata*. It consists of a transcription by the composer of the so called portrait operas *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), *Satyagraha* (1980) and *Akhnaten* (1984). Glass chooses a part of each of the three operas and this compositum forms the *Trilogy Sonata*. *Knee Play No 4* is the correspondent of the first opera, *Conclusion, Act II* refers to the opera *Satyagraha* while *Dance, Scene 3* retrieves elements from *Akhnaten*.

In *Knee Play No 4* Glass uses five chord structures which are displayed melodically (C-F-A flat; D flat -F- A flat; C sharp -E-A; D sharp-F sharp-A; B-E-G sharp), each placed within a bar. The construction of the piece resorts to a refined transformation on the level of the five chord structures. The polyphony imposed by the three elements of an arpeggio chord structure successively turns its sound around. The rhythmic character of the exceptional tertiary division of the generative phrase is asymmetrically shorted out (2 triplets +1) within each bar, while the left-hand part maintains the rhythmic ternary cadence (dotted half-notes). The next repetition (bar 6) suddenly changes the rhythm and the beat; the triplets become pulsating sixteenths in a homogenous binary cadence.

Therefore, each rhythmic model also changes its metre. The model unfolds in a 2/4 metre (bars 6-10), followed by the sequence of the generative phrase (3/4 metre). Then the basic construction element of the previous models is retrieved until the interval dilates into an octave (from bar 21). The subsequent evolution of the musical discourse will employ the same scheme (of augmenting and diminishing the initial models). Moreover, the permanent addition or extraction of sonic pitches to/from the private space of the generative phrase becomes an important occurrence within the work; and since the chosen material is poor in constitutive elements, the audio perception becomes engaged with the process, with the perpetual movement and not with the actual components of the material.

2.3. The Loop as a technique in the minimalist composition of Philip Glass

“A piece of work becomes a process when it relates to itself” (Mertens 1983, 89). By extension the loop can be defined as finite sonic sequence repeated *ad infinitum*. This has been employed as an additive process of some layers of unitary musical material overlapping the material of one and the same generative phrase.

According to composer A. Vieru within the loop, as far as combination is concerned, a permanent circular permutation occurs (Vieru 1994, 56). What defines the loop technique is the fact that once the respective layers of material are overlapped, some of the early material is lost. A texture of layers thus

accumulates until it results into an expression of untranslatable sonority. Yet the initial phrase is preserved, *in absentia*.

A historical perspective on this repetitive process is noted by Anatol Vieru who finds similarities with the early musical forms. For instance, a “da capo” canon in several voices represents the overlapping of the same loop but at a given temporal distance; the same happens with any ostinato which is partially or temporarily present in any musical piece (Vieru 1994, 55).

In the 20th century, the process of the rejection loop expanded, especially in the studios recording electroacoustic music in Europe during the 50s. The studio in Cologne was one such. On the other hand, there was the tape recorder which enabled loop creation. Two tape recorders serially connected (in the process of sampler recording) where one produced the music for the other was such an example. The tape recorder was at the same time a tool for mass culture and was popular in the American universities.

2.3.1 “Opening” for piano from the “Glasswork” series

It is a monochrome work which juggles with the material within a tonal perimeter. The key signature, the three flats is not included to define the centre (E flat major) but to signal the constant presence within the global construction of the respective accidentals. The composer uses the pulse pedal as a meeting commonplace for minimal music. There is a state of metre -measured time which prevents one from realizing that time actually flies by. The work employs the loop and the interruption of the loop. Thus the loops are considered as repetition modes attached to the formal segments in the process. The first segment (suggesting the F minor tonality, step I in direct state) is represented by bars 1-4.

Loop 1 starts with bar 5. The initial segment is included in 3 loops, which means the audio perception will be oriented towards the idea of endlessly repeating the same formal sequence (see bars 1-4 for comparison). When the entire setup is replayed, there is a loophole which is present right at the end of the third loop (bars 13-16). Due to this interruption the initial melodic line is abandoned and the music advances towards the emergence of a new segment built on the tonic chord in the second overturn in F minor. The composer renounces the tonal relations between chords. The absence of the sensible introduces a chord built on the subtonic of the announced tonality (see bar 19). The first loop will be included in the process, with view to faithfully replaying the previous segment (bars 21-24). Loopholes will occur in the subsequent form structures following the same algorithm as in the first formal block. After the second and the third repetition of the segments 1, 2, 3, the one and same short fragment will be

executed (bars 45-48) which realizes the transition towards segment 4. This segment reunites within its scope all the other previous ones, including the short fragment mentioned before. Despite the key signature being constantly maintained, the ending does not consider any specific or predictable tonal evolution, the last cadence is established on the tonic of B flat major.

3. Conclusion

It can be certainly said that the works composed in the year 1969 by Philip Glass comprise melodic figures short/long, augmented or diminished by addition or omission of the initial melodic cells.

In the same way, it can be said that Philip Glass manifests – by additive technique – his interest for acoustic music resulted from the repetition of notes and cells and also for the sound resulted by combining notes played by various instruments. The minimal timbre setup is more frequently resorted to (few instrument, a cameral space). The composer - as if mocking the technical practice excessively repeated by players - employs the interchangeability of melodic figures. These are marked on the score by letter symbols and by numbers, indicating a relatively generous form of improvisation based on a uniform “mechanics”.

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