

# Minimalism

Minimalism is a fusion (joining up) of Western Art Music with Non Western cyclical structures. In the 1960's and 1970's composers of Western Art Music, like Steve Reich, experimented by using features of Indonesian Gamelan music and African drum music (Non Western cyclical structures) in their compositions. The result was Minimalist music.

What is a cyclical structure?

Cyclical structures use a limited range of notes and rhythms. Short phrases ('melodies') or rhythms are repeated over and over again, changing slightly each time, to create gradual change. It is very different to the balanced phrasing, Q & A and verses & choruses used in Western Music.

What is Gamelan music?

Indonesian Gamelan music is played on metal xylophones. In Gamelan music each xylophone part uses the same tune. However, some xylophones play the tune using long notes and others play the tune using shorter notes. The xylophones play at the same time, going in and out of time with one another.

Features of Non Western cyclical structures used in Minimalist music:

Phase (also called 'phase shifting'). This is where parts that are the same or similar are played at the same time. They go in and out of time with each other because

- (a) they are played at different speeds
- (b) slightly different length phrases or motives are used.

Polyrhythms. These are different rhythms, played at the same time. African drum music is based on polyrhythms. The master drummer leads the changes in drum patterns.

▶ Pulse and rhythm tend to be an important feature of cyclical structures. Often the pulse helps to drive the music forwards.

Layering. This is where one part is added on top of another to produce the final full effect. There is often a gradual build up during the music.

▶ Texture (layers in the music) is an important feature of cyclical structures. Timbre (the sounds used) is also an important feature of the music. There is no 'tune' to listen to so the listener tends to focus on the sounds of the different layers and how they interact with one another.

Harmonies are not created from chords. They are created by the layers piled on top of one another.

The use of technology in Minimalist music:

- Looping. In the 1960's when composers wanted to loop (repeat) a sound pattern, they literally cut the length of tape they wanted to repeat, stuck it to form a loop and looped the tape around a bottle.
- Sampling. 'Foreign' sounds, like talking or train noises, were recorded and included in the music
- Multitracking. Tracks were recorded separately and combined later. This was done on tape in the 1960s.
- Editing. Recordings were adjusted after they had been made.
- Sequencing. Sequencers were used to create electronic or other desired sounds.

Features of Western Art Music used in Minimalist music:

- Conventional instruments like violins and clarinets were often used.
- Conventional groupings of instruments, like the string quartet (2 violins, a viola and a cello) were often used.
- Conventional genres like the concerto (for soloist and orchestra) were sometimes used.