An Examination of Minimalist Tendencies in Two Early Works

by Terry Riley

Ann Glazer Niren
Indiana University Southeast

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Minimalism is perhaps one of the most misunderstood musical movements of the latter half of the twentieth century. Even among musicians, there is considerable disagreement as to the meaning of the term “minimalism” and which pieces should be categorized under this broad heading. Furthermore, minimalism is often referenced using negative terminology such as “trance music” or “stuck-needle music.” Yet, its impact cannot be overstated, influencing both composers of art and rock music. Within the original group of minimalists, consisting of La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, the latter two have received considerable attention and many of their works are widely known, even to non-musicians. However, Terry Riley is one of the most innovative members of this auspicious group, and yet, he has not always received the appropriate recognition that he deserves. Most musicians familiar with twentieth century music realize that he is the composer of In C, a work widely considered to be the piece that actually launched the minimalist movement. But is it really his first minimalist work? Two pieces that Riley wrote early in his career as a graduate student at Berkeley warrant closer attention. Riley composed his String Quartet in 1960 and the String Trio the following year. These two works are virtually unknown today, but they exhibit some interesting minimalist tendencies and indeed foreshadow some of Riley’s later developments.

However, before investigating these pieces, it is important to be clear about the definition of minimalism in music. There are probably as many explanations of this term as there are scholars who have attempted to define it. Among the most notable of these authors are

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2 Terry Jennings was a lesser-known member of the original group, but his compositional career was extremely short, and therefore, he is often not included in discussions of early minimalism.
Edward Strickland, Robert Carl, Elaine Broad, Timothy Johnson, and H. Wiley Hitchcock. After studying their writings, I have integrated many of the ideas together into a cohesive description. Of course, not every piece that is labeled “minimal” will contain all of these ideas, but should contain most of them. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, here is a list of characteristics generally found in minimalism:

1. Simplicity of elements
2. Repetition or long-held tones
3. Continuous form
4. Lack of a teleological focus
5. Possibly complex texture, but perhaps only because of surface details
6. Mostly tonal focus with generally consonant harmonies
7. May feature improvisation
8. Influence from other musical cultures, especially India

In addition, Terry Riley’s approach to minimalism focuses on the inter-relationships of motives and “cells that are continuously repeated.” Two other important aspects of Riley’s music are a return to tonality and the implementation of a regular pulse. Finally, Riley

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4 Edward Strickland, American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 123.

5 Wim Mertens, American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Translated by J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn and Averill, 1983), 40.

himself reflects on his own musical style: “I like to listen to a lot of layers. If they’re interesting, I like to listen deep into what's happening. When you really start listening deep, you begin hearing all kinds of connections you didn't hear before.” Not only does Riley’s comment speak to the essence of minimalism, this quality is already apparent in his early works.

In order to understand and appreciate Riley’s String Quartet, it is first necessary to examine a work that had a profound influence on this piece, namely La Monte Young’s Trio for Strings. Riley and many others credit this composition, written in 1958, as being the first minimal piece. This work uses unusually long, sustained tones in all of the instruments to a degree not often heard before. In addition, the use of silence is equally important, as witnessed in the opening bars (Example 1). This composition also illustrates the serial / atonal writing style favored by Young during his graduate student years. Young notes that he was greatly influenced by Anton Webern and gagaku music, a type of Japanese court music. He states, “You start a long tone, that tone has its own life until it extinguishes, and then the next one starts.” Young’s assessment of this work illustrates one aspect of time found in Indian music, a focus that continues to be important to him even today.

Riley’s String Quartet was affected by other factors as well as Young’s Trio, including John Cage’s String Quartet in Four Parts, written in 1950, which utilized highly static

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8 In the 1940s, Yves Klein wrote works using sustained tones and Christian Wolff did something similar beginning in 1951, but Young claimed to be unfamiliar with these works. See Dean Paul Suzuki, “Minimal Music: Its Evolution as Seen in the Works of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and La Monte Young,” Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1991, 65, 69.

9 Strickland, Minimalism: Origins, 125-6.

Example 1 – La Monte Young's *Trio for Strings* (1958), beginning

sections. Also, Riley notes that he was influenced by the string quartets of Beethoven, Debussy, and Bartók. However, the most important and most unusual influence on this piece was the location in which it was written. At the time, Riley lived in San Francisco. At night, he often heard the foghorns from the ships coming and going in San Francisco Bay, and it was this particular sound that formed the basis for his *String Quartet*. Riley imitates the sound of

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the foghorns by his primary focus on the intervals of the fourth and fifth, although seconds and
the occasional thirds are present as well. Keith Potter notes,

The constant permutations of the pitches of these foghorns fascinated him; though they recurred
at the same register, they seemed to have no pattern. Without the example of Young’s Trio for
Strings, however, Riley admits he would never have thought of writing a piece based on
foghorn pitches … He (Riley) wrote the piece on a practice-room organ at Berkeley, which
allowed him to experiment with sustaining pitches for long periods … 13

At first blush, it would seem that a brass ensemble would be better suited to imitate the sound
of foghorns. When asked why he chose a string quartet, Riley replied it was because there was
a string quartet available to perform the piece while at Berkeley. 14 As we shall see, the timbre
of the string quartet is just right for this piece.

In order to mimic the sounds of the foghorn, Riley has requested some very specific
string techniques from the players. There is frequent use of sul ponticello, sul tasto, con sordino
and harmonics. Most of the piece requires an absence of vibrato. Furthermore, the dynamic level
never reaches above a mezzo piano, often hovering around pianissimo. In addition, the score
advises, “Bow changes as unnoticeable as possible.” 15 In this way, the listener is forced to really
hear and observe the long tones and very gradual changes at the extremely slow
tempo requested. Keith Potter observes, “Within this context, the piece concentrates on single
notes in constantly and unsystematically overlapping and changing pitch permutations, rather
than anything resembling melody.” 16

The tonal material that Riley uses reflects the transitional nature of this piece, moving

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13 Keith Potter, Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass (Cambridge,

14 Terry Riley, telephone conversation with author, August 15, 2007.

15 Terry Riley, String Quartet, unpublished score, 1960, preface.

16 Potter, Four Musical Minimalists, 97.
from a serial / atonal focus to a more tonal one. Wim Mertens, a noted writer on
minimalism, feels that the String Quartet is “closer to Classical Western music” than Riley’s
earlier works, which were sometimes influenced by Karlheinz Stockhausen. Mark Alburger
notes the use of chromaticism and modal centers. I would assert that this work contains enough
pervasive chromaticism to rule out the likelihood of widespread modal content, although it is
possible that some sections might seem to reference a mode. Furthermore, the occasional use of
thirds does hint at the resurgence of tonality that would reappear with In C.

Example 2 shows the beginning of this piece. It makes sense that, since Riley
was interested in recreating foghorn sounds, that he should begin his work in the cello, using two
varieties of fourths. The cello’s C-sharp in measure 4 produces a half-step with the viola as it
enters. Along with the fourths, seconds become an important intervallic focus in this
work. Clearly, Riley was more interested in creating a specific type of sound rather than
remaining faithful to a particular system of pitch organization. Indeed, when asked if there were
other harmonic or tonal reasons for his choice of pitches, Riley responded that he wrote “by
ear,” having no set tonal or atonal pitch framework.

These first four measures are followed by a complete bar of silence, another aspect
that proves basic to the structure of the quartet. At the simplest level, these seemingly
random silences serve as a means of dividing one subsection from another, but on a deeper
level, they allow the listener to process what he / she has just heard, functioning in a similar

17 Wim Mertens, American Minimal Music, 36.
18 Mark Alburger, “Shri Terry: Enlightenment at Riley’s Moonshine Ranch,” Twentieth Century Music 4 no. 3
19 There is some question as to whether motives from In C are present in the String Quartet, but Riley insists that
they are not.
Example 2 – page one from Terry Riley’s *String Quartet* (1960)
Example 2, continued – page two of the String Quartet
fashion to the long-held notes. At the extremely stow tempo required, the silences might seem interminable to listeners as well as performers unfamiliar with twentieth century music. One is immediately struck by similarities to John Cage’s landmark work, *4′33″*, although obviously on a much smaller scale.

Unfortunately, no professional studio recording of this work exists, although Mr. Riley informs me that the Calder String Quartet will be recording it this fall. In the meantime, with Mr. Riley’s permission, I have asked an ensemble of faculty and students at Indiana University Southeast to record key sections of this work and the *String Trio* for the purposes of this presentation. Let’s listen to the opening of this work.

Much of the rest of the piece alternates between sections of stasis and activity. During more active sections, the instruments extend their respective ranges, use disjunct motion, and focus on double stops and harmonics. Even during these active times, the dynamic level never rises above a mezzo piano. Towards the middle of the piece, there is a slight emphasis on the interval of a third, sometimes in the form of a triad, allowing us a preview of future tonal works.

The static sections contain pronounced silences. In addition, the listener is treated to a series of very short sonic events, which might even sound random. Often, the instruments engage in a type of timbral interplay, in which one instrument plays the same note already begun by another, and then the first instrument drops out. This focus on timbre over melody shows an important influence from Webern and Debussy. The short cells continue until almost the end of the piece, with the return of harmonics and more continuous sound, partly through the use of repeated and / or sustained pitches. In the final two measures, the viola and cello return to their original registers for the last chord, while the first violin plays an E /C diad.21 Some might argue that the presence of an inverted C Major triad on the final chord allows us to

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21 This instance is perhaps the only reference to Riley’s *In C*, albeit in a different register.
view the quartet as being in C. However, the G-flat which rubs against this chord, as well as a few other similar passages, seems to preclude such a traditionally tonal view of the piece (see Example 3). Let's listen to the final page of the composition.

How, then, may this piece be considered to be a minimal work? Let us review the characteristics that we established to see if this work qualifies.

1. Simplicity of elements

To a certain extent, this piece meets the requirements. There is not much simultaneous activity, but rather, the work focuses on isolated cells. When there are simultaneities between instruments, the piece still doesn’t sound particularly busy, in part because of the long durations. The fact that there is a minimum of interval types is, in itself, a minimalistic quality.

2. Repetition or long-held tones

Of all of the characteristics of minimalism, this one is probably the most prominent. The long durations clearly demonstrate an influence from Young, especially in his *Trio for Strings*. There is also a bit of imitation, which might qualify as repetition.

3. Continuous form

To a certain extent, this piece may be viewed as having a continuous form. However, because of the changes in texture and register and the entrances and exits of the instruments, there do seem to be some fairly clear-cut sections. The beginning of the piece, shown in Example 2, would constitute one such section. However, it would be difficult to label this piece with a very distinctive formal designation such as sonata-allegro form.
Example 3 – last page of the String Quartet
4. Lack of a teleological focus

Most of our Western music possesses a narrative quality, i.e., the listener perceives that the piece is telling a story, moving from Point A to Point B. However, this work, while showing some contrast, does not present the idea of moving between points. The ideas are organic, one springing from the other. However, at the end, there is a sense of return, not in the manner of a true recapitulation, but more as a codetta.

5. Possibly complex texture, but perhaps only because of surface details

Overall, this work does not exhibit a complex texture. Any complexity that occurs does so because of the staggered entrances and exits of the individual instruments. The lengthy durations actually work to make the piece appear less complex.

6. Mostly tonal with generally consonant harmonies

While there are some reasonably consonant harmonies, this work may not be considered to be tonal, in large part because of the sharp dissonances of seconds and tritones. Again, the idea was to recreate a particular sound, not necessarily to write a tonal work.

7. May feature improvisation

No improvisation is called for in this work.

8. Influence from other musical cultures, especially India

This feature is not particularly prominent in this work. The two most important influences on this piece are Young’s Trio for Strings and San Francisco foghorns. However, the long-held tones could be seen as mimicking the drones often found in Indian music.

Therefore, the most obvious minimalist characteristics found in Riley’s String Quartet are the long-held tones, a certain lack of teleological focus, simplicity of elements, and
to some extent, continuous form. It is fairly significant that this work illustrates four characteristics of minimalism, although in varying degrees.

Now let us examine Riley’s String Trio, written in 1961. Of his works, Riley notes that “this was the first piece that uses tonal repetition, combined with chromaticism.” The repetition undoubtedly was influenced by the tape loop studies he had already undertaken at that time. In many ways, the String Trio is even more of a transitional work than the String Quartet. Riley integrates the long tones from the former, influenced by Young’s Trio for Strings, with the repetitive cells of later works, a steady pulse, and early hints of tonality. Keith Potter suggests that this work, while beginning in A Major, becomes more chromatic as the piece progresses. He also notes that this work is “more rhythmically and texturally varied than the earlier String Quartet.”

These areas of tonality and repetition clearly seem to be linked. Even a quick glance at the score gives an indication of the great changes that have occurred in Riley’s style since the quartet. The opening A / C-sharp diad in the viola gives a tonal quality to the work, despite the harmonic clash against the other two instruments. This aspect in itself indicates the work’s transitional nature between atonality and tonality. The viola plays this diad in repeated eighth notes for eight measures, then rests for more than six. The violin alternates between a quadruple stop and an A-flat, producing a sort of ostinato effect, while the cello continues the long held notes from the quartet. In this manner, we see the evolution of Riley’s style, from an

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22 The source of this confusion of dates stems from the autograph score. The front cover and the first page show the date of 1961, but the very end is dated “San Francisco May 2, 1960.” However, immediately following this indication, in the composer’s own handwriting, is written “(Must be 1961! The composer).” (sic). See Terry Riley, String Trio, Unpublished score, 1961, cover, 1, and 15. Suzuki also notes that 1961 must be the correct year, because that is when Riley received his degree, as this piece was written for his master’s thesis in composition at Berkeley. Suzuki, “Minimal Music,” 370.


26 Keith Potter, Four Musical Minimalists, 99.
imitation of Young, to his own use of repetition. The silence in this work is still rather significant, but because of the repetition and faster tempo, it is not evident to the same degree that it was in the quartet. **Example 4** shows the beginning of the piece.

The focus on repetition and pulse continues throughout the work, providing a sense of moment that was intentionally lacking in the *String Quartet*. Slightly later, in measure 20, the viola plays a rhythmic ostinato of eighth notes which cut across bar lines, broken by eighth rests. Therefore, in this new section, Riley provides homogeneity through the use of the motivic cells, just as he did in the earlier work. Despite the use of repetition, there are also several sections of long notes, linking this composition with the previous one. While the String Trio, like its predecessor, begins at a very soft dynamic, it is markedly different in its focus on a wide variety of dynamics throughout the work, ultimately reaching *fortississimo*. Let us now listen to the beginning of the piece.

On page 6, a new section begins that might even be called a type of recapitulation. The A/ C-sharp diad from the beginning, played in even rhythms in the viola, is coupled with a sustained C / E diad in the violin, followed by its opening motive (**Example 5**). A homophonic, chorale-like section on pages 10-11 gives way to a very active section that follows, continuing until the end of the piece. There is greater registral flux, faster note values, and greater dynamic contrast, as well as pizzicato and glissandi. The pulse returns on page 13, continuing off and on until the end. Notably, it is almost always presented as thirds, albeit not the A / C-sharp diad of the beginning. That particular diad reappears at the bottom of page 14 in the viola part. The opening quadruple stop in the violin also returns twice on the last page, as does
Example 4 – page one from Terry Riley’s String Trio (1961)
Example 4, continued – page two of the *String Trio*
Example 5, measures 140-153 of the *String Trio*

the opening diad in the cello part. Therefore, this closing section might be viewed as a codetta, reinforcing the “recapitulation” of page 6. In this way, Riley provides motivic unity as well as a sense of closure at the end.

Riley again uses techniques such as *sul ponticello*, harmonics, and no vibrato. However, there is a different overall mood in this work. The *String Quartet* has an extremely static quality, while the *String Trio* presents a more vibrant one. Furthermore, in part because of the more active nature of this work, it requires a somewhat higher level of virtuosity than the quartet.

To conclude our discussion of this work, we must examine how Riley’s *String Trio* exhibits minimalist tendencies. Let us therefore return to our earlier checklist.
1. Simplicity of elements

Based on the extended use of repetition and similar intervallic content, the *String Trio* meets the requirements of this statement. The word “simple” has the potential to be misleading, however. The *String Trio* contains passages that might be referred to as simple, although there are just as many that are relatively virtuosic. Therefore, it might be more correct to state that the trio is seemingly simple, based on its focus on repetition.

2. Repetition or long-held tones

Obviously, there is no argument with this phrase, as the piece contains both. The opening pulse separates this work from its immediate predecessors, despite the presence of long tones.

3. Continuous form

Other than the pseudo-recapitulation on page 6, the form does not function in a very traditional manner. True, there are obvious sections, delineated by registral, instrumental, and dynamic change, but one section does not proceed to the next in an obvious way. Instead, the incoming section often interrupts the previous one, sometimes in a very abrupt manner.

4. Lack of a teleological focus

Although we have discussed the ersatz recapitulation of this work, in general the piece does not proceed from musical event to musical event in the traditional form of a narrative. Rather, the work presents a series of musical cells that evolve and develop and are often interrupted by new ones. In this way, Riley’s work bears a certain resemblance to those of Stravinsky, notably through the juxtaposition of musical ideas.

5. Possibly complex texture, but perhaps only because of surface details

Again, this statement seems congruous with this piece. Although there are several moments of tension and heightened activity, these may simply be viewed as surface details rather than a
true textural complexity, mostly because of the relative brevity of duration. In many places, the texture of this work is relatively simple, but not as much as that of the quartet.

6. Mostly tonal with generally consonant harmonies

While this work would never he confused with those of Mozart in terms of tonality, it is clear that Riley is moving away from his earlier excursions into atonality and returning to more tonal ventures. In this work, tonal centers are coupled with chromatic and atonal segments.

7. May feature improvisation

There is no true improvisation requested in this work.

8. Influence from other musical cultures, especially India

This feature is present only in an indirect way. Repetition and long held notes are frequently found in the music of India, especially through the use of drones. While Riley had not begun formal study in Indian music at this point in his life, it is possible he was exposed to it on some level at Berkeley and through his friendship with Young.

Therefore, many of our criteria for a minimalist piece are present in this work. Most notable are Riley’s emphases on repetition and drones, lack of a teleological focus, and a renewed interest in tonality, although here it is combined with some nonconsonant pitches. The String Trio might then be deemed an early minimalist work according to the definition that we have established.

This paper has showcased Terry Riley’s under-appreciated talents as well as illustrated ways in which two of his early works foreshadow some of his later important developments. Riley’s String Quartet and String Trio are both indebted to La Monte Young’s extreme exercises in long-tone composition, but they also show Riley’s own emerging style. The emphasis on pulse and repetition, especially seen in the String Trio, is an early harbinger of
Riley’s works such as *In C* and *A Rainbow in Curved Air*. Despite the many meanings of “minimalism,” the characteristics delineated here show that even in the early 1960’s, Terry Riley was truly a trendsetter and idealist, laying the foundation for the next generation of avant-garde musicians.
Bibliography

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_________. Telephone conversation with author, August 15, 2007.


