



American minimalists: the audience's revenge

[Leave a Comment](#) / [concerts, reviews](#) / By [Wynold Verweij](#)

Last Saturday, deSingel's stage in Antwerp was in the hands of BLINDMAN, a collective group of strings, saxophones, percussion, keyboard, tubax and electronics with a programme based around three iconic American minimalists – Philip Glass, Terry Riley and Steve Reich.

These three composers, all well into their eighties, have known each other since the late 1960s, when they played studio concerts together in New York's downtown, Greenwich Village and SoHo scenes. Initially, their common denominator was a deep-seated dislike of 20th-century European modernists and avant-gardists such as Pierre Boulez, Arnold Schoenberg and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Glass saw the work of the modernists as "a wasteland dominated by lunatics trying to get everybody to write this terrible music". According to Glass, the time had come for experimentalism to give way to pleasure. The public deserved to have its voice back. And Steve Reich said later (2013) in an interview with *The Guardian*: "What my generation did was not a revolution, it was a restoration of harmony and rhythm in a whole new way, but it brought back those essences that people wanted (...). Now we live in a normal situation again, where the window between the street and the concert hall is open".



Steve Reich @ Dan Callister



Philip Glass @The Creative Independent

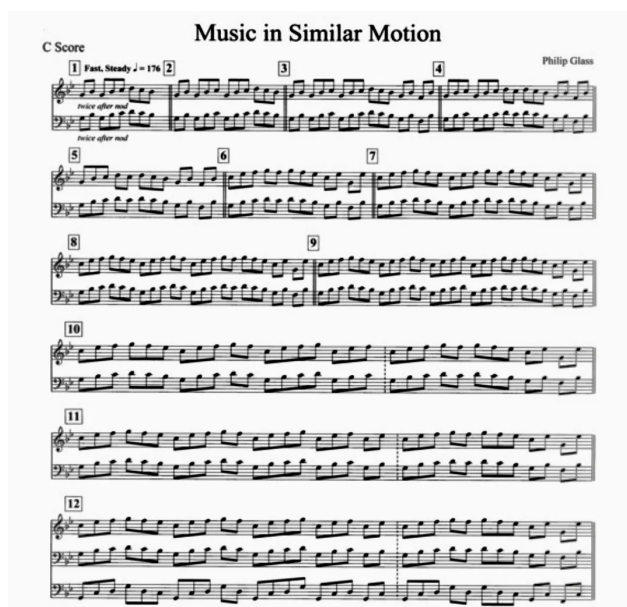
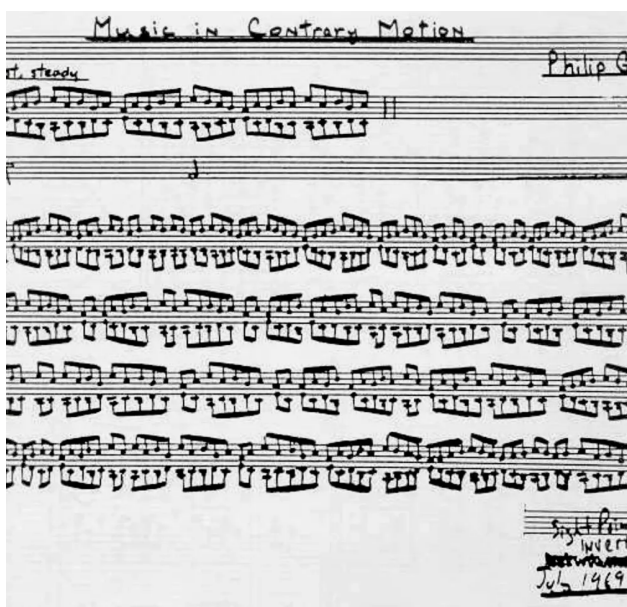


Terry Riley @ Robin Little

Repetitive

American minimalism is a compositional technique in which repetitive processes are unleashed on extremely limited musical material. Other characteristics include: an intellectual preoccupation with systematics – in line with the same modernists and serialists they hated – the introduction of non-Western musical styles (Reich: gamelan from Indonesia, Glass: raga from India) and collaboration with other artistic expressions such as theatre. Within the palette of structuring elements, the American minimalists placed rhythm over key and key over harmony.

For Philip Glass (b. 1937), these principles amount to a compositional quest in which triads of equal duration function as the main building blocks. There is no musical development or progression; the repetitive processes become increasingly dynamic and energetic. This was well reflected on Saturday in *Music in Contrary Motion*. The title refers to the inverse relationship between the low and high voices, which are also mirrored and grouped into four or five tones. The piece is written in 'open form', meaning that it does not work towards a final cadence, but simply stops. Glass's respect for the individuality of each instrument came across well. Starting with the keyboard (Fabian Coomans), the build-up to the *tutti* was developed step by step through percussion, strings, saxophones and tubax. Despite Glass's sympathy for the listener, he cannot help but poke fun at them. At first glance, this piece seems to be a kind of warm-up, and it is only when it stops that the listener realises that this was the point.



Steve Reich

The main part of the concert was taken up by Steve Reich (b. 1936). After the short duet for two marimbas, *Nagoya Marimbas*, two instruments that convey incomparable warmth and friendship, three longer pieces were performed. In *Cello Counterpoint*, cellist Suzanne Vermeyen interacted with seven cellos recorded on tape. Her playing was energetic and sparkling, and at times she seemed to be leading an ensemble. Then the listener felt that she was encouraging her fellow players, and with success. This made one curious to hear a live performance of all the cello parts. In the following *New York Counterpoint* for four saxophones and electronics, the saxophone quartet engaged in a dialogue with itself. Reich uses minimal pulse shifts that eventually lead to rhythmic canons. There are jazzy elements, too, but the musicians were a little less smooth than one might expect from early jazz.

Danceable

In the *Triple Quartet* for four strings, the listener was treated to a mixture of stirring rhythm and Eastern European melancholy. In Reich's usual fast-slow-fast structure, the performers showed how danceable pulsating rhythms can be. The piece was a feast for listeners and musicians alike. Had they gone on any longer, the aisles and stage would surely have been filled with swinging couples.

Terry Riley (b. 1935) was also present, albeit modestly, with the saxophone quartet *The Tuning Path*, an exploration of pure scale in stretched chords. The intervals begin crystal clear, the most intriguing parts being the transitions between them. As the piece progresses, the dissonances become more apparent, but this performance didn't do them justice. It could easily have been a little more abrasive.

The final piece was *Music in Similar Motion* by Philip Glass. This piece is special because Glass finds a place for harmony. The piece is based on repeated phrases that develop slowly. The piece starts with a melodic line, then adds another one a quarter above, then another quarter below, and a bass line. It sounds simple and uncluttered, but the transformation the music undergoes as a consequence is ingenious and convincing. This too was composed as an "open form", but was a bit brief.

WHAT: ICONS, American minimalists

WHO: BL!NDMAN

WHERE: deSingel, Antwerp

HEARD: 21 January 2023

AGENDA: A 3-CD box set "ICONS" (3 American minimalists) will be released by Warner Classics on 14 April 2023.

[← Previous Post](#)

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Search ...



Recent Posts

[American minimalists: the audience's revenge](#)

[plingplongvroemhap](#)

[Transit: new combinations but also modesty](#)

[Pain and consolation in eleven centuries](#)

[Music as ritual through the ages](#)

Recent Comments



[ChLev](#) on [plingplongvroemhap](#)



Stefan Ehrenkreutz on [Piet Swerts on the art of vers...](#)

Archives

[January 2023](#)

[October 2022](#)

[September 2022](#)

[August 2022](#)

[May 2022](#)

[April 2022](#)

[March 2022](#)

[February 2022](#)

[January 2022](#)

[December 2021](#)

[November 2021](#)

[July 2021](#)

[October 2020](#)

[September 2020](#)

Categories

[articles](#)

[books](#)

[cd's](#)

[concerts](#)

[events](#)

[interviews](#)

[poetry](#)

[reviews](#)

[Uncategorized](#)

Meta

[Log in](#)

[Entries feed](#)

[Comments feed](#)

[WordPress.org](#)