



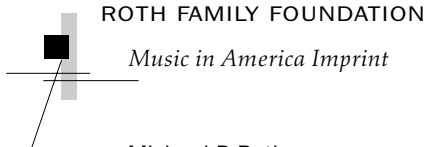
REPEATING OURSELVES



american minimal music as cultural practice **ROBERT FINK**



REPEATING OURSELVES



ROTH FAMILY FOUNDATION

Music in America Imprint

Michael P. Roth
and Sukey Garcetti
have endowed this
imprint to honor the
memory of their parents,
Julia and Harry Roth,
whose deep love of music
they wish to share
with others.



REPEATING OURSELVES

AMERICAN MINIMAL MUSIC
AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

Robert Fink

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 2005 by The Regents of the University of California

Fink, Robert.

Repeating ourselves : American minimal music as
cultural practice / Robert Fink.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-520-24036-7 (cloth : alk. paper) —

ISBN 0-520-24550-4 (pbk : alk. paper)

1. Minimal music — History and criticism.

2. Music — Social aspects. I. Title.

ML197.F54 2005

781.3 — dc22

2005006616

Manufactured in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R 1997)
(*Permanence of Paper*).

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the generous contribution to this book provided by the Lloyd Hibberd Publication Endowment Fund of the American Musicological Society.

This page intentionally left blank



Contents

Preface ix

[Minimalism is just . . .]

Introduction. The Culture of Repetition i

PART ONE

THE CULTURE OF EROS: REPETITION AS DESIRE CREATION

[. . . the higher disco]

- 1** Do It ('til You're Satisfied): Repetitive Musics and
Recombinant Desires 25

[. . . like a soap commercial]

- 2** "A Colorful Installment in the Twentieth-Century Drama of
Consumer Subjectivity": Minimalism and the Phenomenology
of Consumer Desire 62

[. . . what television should be]

- 3** The Media Sublime: Minimalism, Advertising, and Television 120

PART TWO

THE CULTURE OF THANATOS: REPETITION AS MOOD REGULATION

[. . . wallpaper music]

- 4** "A Pox on Manfredini": The Long-Playing Record,
the Baroque Revival, and the Birth of Ambient Music 169

[. . . *sitting*]

5	“I Did This Exercise 100,000 Times”: Zen, Minimalism, and the Suzuki Method	208
	Notes	237
	List of Illustrations	267
	Index	269



Preface

By custom and precedent, the cover of this book should have been a smooth, uniform gray, white, or black broken only by contrasting lettering, preferably lowercase, in an unobtrusive sans serif type. If an image on the cover were needed, it ought to have been a carefully lit art object of reductive purity — perhaps a dark pinstripe painting by Frank Stella, one of Dan Flavin's cool fluorescent-bulb installations, or an assembly of metallic boxes by Donald Judd.¹ The word *minimalism* tends to elicit a generic “tasteful” response from designers and typographers; its once dangerous asceticism has, as Edward Strickland lamented in his own gray-jacketed monograph, become a graphic cliché.²

Cliché or not, the formalized emptiness that defines most book jacket images of the “minimal” does tell us something: it is quite easy to judge a monograph on minimal art or music by its neat gray cover. The works discussed inside will be considered completely autonomous abstractions; they will be valued for being rigorous and difficult; messy or imprecise connections between the world of art and the larger culture will be cleaned up, or better, suppressed altogether; the general ambience will be the tasteful, understated elegance of the Museum of Modern Art.

Judged by *its* cover, the musicological study you hold in your hand promises, in comparison, to be somewhat vulgar and uncontrolled. (Unless you are looking at a library hard cover, where durable and defensive minimalism is the norm.) Juxtaposing the garish, repetitive imagery of mass consumer society with signs of musical repetition, I have chosen

to figure musical minimalism not against the neutral ground of the museum wall, but against the riotous backdrop of the supermarket cereal aisle and the color television set. My central argument is that the most recognizably “minimal” contemporary music is actually maximally *repetitive* music, and that as a cultural practice, this excess of repetition is inseparable from the colorful repetitive excess of postindustrial, mass-mediated consumer society.

What we now recognize as a “consumer society” first took shape in post–World War II America, and it has been under attack since it was first theorized in the late 1950s. Denouncing wasteful overproduction of consumer goods (John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society*) and the pervasive yet sinister advertising practices that mobilized demand for them (Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*), academics and journalists began laying the foundation for a countercultural critique of consumption as meaningless repetition. Minimalist art and music have usually been considered part of that counterculture. Even if 1960s minimal artists tended to avoid political statements, their art stood ascetically aloof from the world of consumption and its clotted signs. Minimalists, unlike Pop artists, have tended to align themselves with labor, not capital, and with overt imagery of production, not consumption. Richard Serra’s stint as a junkyard crane operator, Donald Judd’s machined boxes, even Andy Warhol’s Factory — all point to the preference for work over shopping that led Robert Morris in 1961 to exhibit (for sale, of course) a crude plywood box containing a tape recording of the hammering that had gone into its construction.³

The repeated, rhythmic pounding of a hammer on a nail is certainly within the sonic parameters set the previous year by La Monte Young’s foundational text of repetitive musical minimalism, *arabic number (any integer) to Henry Flynt*. Young had dedicated his *Composition 1960 #10* (“Draw a straight line and follow it”) to Morris, and in 1961 he recorded a performance of *arabic number* in which he rhythmically pounded 1,698 times on a piano with both forearms as loud as he could. As a work that dramatically foregrounds the labor of composition/performance and just as theatrically resists commodification (Young’s recording, though widely bootlegged, has never been authorized for commercial release), *arabic number* actually harmonizes quite well with the austere high modernist ideology of a previous generation of art-music composers. One can easily imagine Young retorting, when audiences broke into cursing and spontaneous protest-singing during an abrasive 1960 protominimalist happen-

ing (he was dragging a gong along the floor while Terry Riley repeatedly scraped a wastebasket against the wall), “Who cares if you listen?”⁴

Thus it is not surprising that students of experimental and repetitive music, while disagreeing violently with Milton Babbitt on issues of structure and information density, tend to agree implicitly with his larger assumption that the composer is a (production) specialist whose abstract sound-products demonstrate total disengagement with conventional and commercial culture.⁵ As portrayed by its devotees, musical minimalism is indeed simpler, more consonant, more rhythmic, more sensual, even more popular than integral serialism — while remaining just as “purified” of contamination from the compromised world of signs beyond the acoustic. This book will argue at length a contrary position: that as a cultural practice, repetitive music implicates creators, performers, and auditors in repetitive commercial culture like advertising and television; in the consumption of low-caste repetitive functional musics like Muzak, Vivaldi concertos, and disco; and in production “methods” like Shinichi Suzuki’s strange repetitive hybrid of Zen pedagogy and the violin factory floor.

My thesis may seem iconoclastic, even destructive, but I disclaim quite explicitly any brief against the music under examination. Rather, I seek to honor minimalist repetitive music for what it truly is: the most protean, popular, and culturally significant music to arise within the last half century of what Richard Crawford has called the “cultivated” tradition of American music. (Minimalism is the perfect example of a musical style that is cultivated without being “classical.”)⁶ In any case, a monochromatic image has been notably ineffective in protecting repetitive music from commercial appropriation. Strickland, confusing cause and effect, admits: “The later history of Minimalism marks the transition of twentieth-century art from its waning as an autonomous and implicit critique of mass culture to its demystification and acceptance as but another commodity . . . in a society geared progressively on all levels to the unrelenting consumption of sensations.”⁷ To this *cri de coeur* one can reply only that the mystification was always in the critical image, not the art and music. This study will engage directly with the commodity form, unrelenting consumption, and pure sensation as a foundation for artistic practice, and will apologize for none of it — for what is the alternative? Minimalism understood as an empty gesture of negation, in a cultural vacuum so absolute that whatever “implicit critique” of society it encodes can never be named, much less specified and evaluated.

Nor is anybody outside the world of contemporary art music likely to

be intimidated by a hands-off attitude from formalist musicology. Mainstream culture has tended to deal summarily and satirically with minimalism's pretensions to objectivity and abstraction, taking the style at its "meaningless" word: witness the reliably recurring *New Yorker* cartoons of confused museum patrons staring blankly at bricks, trash, a janitor's broom in the corner, a blank wall, *et cetera seriatim*. The situation is harder to dramatize with sound, of course, but the music and figure of Philip Glass have become a byword in popular art for the culturally null. Witness his cameo during the first season of the Trey Parker–Matt Stone animated series *South Park*. A mordant subplot in the show's first holiday special is the systematic evisceration of South Park's school Christmas pageant by the forces of rampant political correctness. One by one, the usual religious and cultural signifiers are ruled unusable because they might conceivably offend: no nativity scene (Jews), no Christmas trees (environmentalists), no flashing holiday lights (epileptics), and, most damagingly to the pageant, no songs about Jesus, Santa, Frosty, or any of the familiar seasonal figures. What's left after this literal *reductio ad absurdum*?

Announcer: And now, South Park Elementary presents The Happy Non-offensive, Non-denominational Christmas Play, with music and lyrics by New York minimalist composer Philip Glass.

The kids are in green leotards dancing about strangely.

Philip: As I turn and look into the sun, the rays burn my eyes. [Happy, happy, happy, everybody's happy.] How like a turtle the sun looks . . .

Sheila: What the hell is this?!?

Music: [Happy.]

Sheila: This is horrible!

Priest: This is the most god-awful piece of crap I've ever seen.⁸

Philip Glass can be absolved of any responsibility for the lyrical content of the South Park "holiday experience," but the episode's climactic musical passage is accurately Glass-like, if not precisely "(happy)": pulsating synthesizer chords that alternate between a minor tonic and its flatted sixth; faster, rumbling bass arpeggios; finally, a chanting, otherworldly bass choir—the whole a careful evocation of *Koyaanisqatsi* crossed with *Einstein on the Beach*. The creators of *South Park* have consistently shown both the talent and the inclination for dark musical parody. (For what other purpose is Isaac Hayes's "Chef" character?) But the most biting aspect of the South Park minimalist moment is extramusical, not the way Glass's music sounds but what it stands for.

Which is nothing. Nothing at all.

Can this public relations disaster really be the result of decades of formalist critical reductionism? Glass loses both ways: in the world of *South Park*, his “abstract” music, chosen because it ought to be completely inoffensive, since it has absolutely no connection to actual culture, immediately drives the cartoon audience into a show-stopping frenzy of mutual recrimination and escalating violence. Worse than the infamous early-twentieth-century explosion provoked by Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*—or even the aftershock triggered at Carnegie Hall in 1973 by a performance of Steve Reich’s *Four Organs*⁹—this cartoon riot has nothing to do with the mystified essence of “difficult music.” Of course, audience members don’t particularly like the little bit they hear, but what drives them to blows is not abrasiveness of sound. It is the void, the absence of cultural meaning, that repetitive music reflects back at them. It appears that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, “minimalism” is just another name for nothing left to lose.

With the help of a talking turd (don’t ask), the denizens of *South Park* ultimately rediscover a comedic simulacrum of “the true meaning of Christmas.” I do not mean to contend in these pages that repetitive minimal music has one “true meaning,” or that my text, musicologically unique, could stabilize that singular meaning for readers and listeners. But I will argue, passionately and at length, that minimalism in music has a meaning, has at least the theoretical possibility of meaning, and that careful exploration of its various cultural contexts in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s will begin to define the range of signifying practices within which the style can function. The result cannot be a devaluation of minimal music, for it seems self-evident to me that any meaning is preferable to no meaning at all.

I propose to colorize the minimalist monochrome.

Because everything sounds worse in gray and white.



This book took a long, long time to write. Some theoretical underpinnings go as far back as my doctoral dissertation, completed with the generous support of what was at that time not yet called the Alvin H. Johnson AMS 50 Dissertation-Year Fellowship. Much of the crucial research and drafting work took place in 1998–99 at the Stanford Humanities Center under the stewardship of Keith Baker, Susan Dunn, and Susan Sebbard; I am deeply indebted to my fellow fellows and our

compulsory lunches, especially Mark Seltzer, Bryna Goodman, Brian Reed (whom I particularly thank for his thoughts on video art and television), and Keith Chapin. Some critical ideas on minimalism and the Baroque revival were first tried out in a seminar at Stanford; thanks to Stephen Hinton and Heather Hadlock for hospitality, and to the members of that seminar for perception and patience. I was also a regular and grateful user of material at the Stanford Archive for Recorded Sound.

Previous versions of what are now the first three chapters were delivered as talks at Cornell and Princeton; I am grateful to the graduate students at both those august institutions for the invitations as well as their careful attention and colloquy. Well before that, outlandish ideas were circulating through seminars and colloquia at the Eastman School of Music; thanks for feedback and mentoring to my close colleagues in Rochester, Jurgen Thym, Ralph Locke, Ellen Koskoff, Gretchen Wheelock; and to the many graduate students with whom intense conversations at Danny's on the corner were a formative influence. The extraordinary graduate students at the University of California, Los Angeles, have also taken their collective part in this project through seminars, colloquia, and hallway conversations lubricated by a copious flow of Diet Coke; of many such I would mention those with Maria Cizmiciu, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, Griffin Woodworth, Andrew Berish, Dale Chapman, Yara Sellin, Lester Feder, and particularly Cecilia Sun, who also provided indispensable research support and gave generously of her own findings and insights into experimental music as the years went by.

Many musicological colleagues have provided moral, convivial, and intellectual support as this manuscript struggled into being: Andrew Dell'Antonio, Robynn Stilwell, Nadine Hubbs, Rebecca Leydon, Byron Adams, Ruth Charloff, Judith Peraino, and Luisa Vilar-Payá. Kristi Brown-Montesano has been a loyal friend and interlocutor for well over a decade. Philip Brett, in whose reading group at Berkeley I met many of the above-mentioned, is in many ways a spiritual ancestor of this work, which he always encouraged with both words and example. It is bitter indeed that he did not live to see it in finished form; *requiescat in pacem*.

The genesis of this book was so extended that it has benefited from the ministrations of no fewer than three editors at the University of California Press. I thank Doris Kretschmer for her interest, Lynne Withey for her (ahem) patience, and, most of all, Mary Francis for her advocacy, therapy, gentle encouragement, and expert editorial management. Griffin Woodworth, Glenn Pillsbury, and Lisa Musca provided key editorial support on my side, and with their opposite numbers at the press, Colette