

Minimalism and Improvisation as Teaching Tools:
Bringing Contemporary Music to the Instrumental Music Classroom

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M-SK 5103: Writing About Music

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December 6, 2017

Secondary music education often falls into a rut of ensemble-based instruction, where students play together as part of a larger group, working through repertoire together with only occasional musical discussion beyond the notes on the page. While this method is useful when ensemble playing is the only goal, it abandons students that may be struggling with basic concepts that were left unaddressed in the pursuit of ensemble proficiency. Minimalist music provides a unique solution to effectively teaching core musical concepts in the instrumental music classroom while still developing ensemble skills. Including an improvisatory element to the instruction leads to development of a more advanced level of individual artistry that provides a strong foundation for future musical study. Many students are never exposed to minimalism as a musical genre and never explore musical improvisation, leaving gaps in their education and development as musicians. This paper will provide a methodology for teaching and using minimalism in the classroom to introduce improvisational ideas and expand students' musical knowledge.

Minimalism, in relation to music, refers to the reduction of musical ideas to their most basic form – a simplification of rhythmic and chordal structure with an emphasis on repetition and developing musical ideas over a long period of time.¹ Early examples of this style can be seen in chant music of the medieval period and traditional Indian ragas. As composers of the early 20th century began making the move towards nontraditional compositional methods and ideas, composers like John Cage began to experiment with minimalistic ideas. Cage's *4' 33"*, a work of programmed silence, was among the first forays into minimalism as a musical genre.² This deconstruction of the musical idea led composers

¹ Keith Potter. "Minimalism." (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music Musicians*. Edited by Stanley Sadie and J. Tyrrell. London: Macmillan, 2001).

² Brent Heisinger. "American Minimalism in the 1980s." (*American Music* 7, no. 4 (1989): 430-35).

such as Dennis Johnson and La Monte Young to begin writing long-tone compositions in the 1950s, sparking the true minimalist movement. Of note are three composers whose works drew the attention of both musically trained and general audiences: Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass.³

Each of these composers had their own distinct style of using the minimalistic idea. Terry Riley's compositions often included modal themes and slowly evolving textures over a long period of time.⁴ His genre-defining composition *In C* represents his style well; all players read the same part, however the speed at which they move through the music varies from player to player. The resulting texture gives the impression of a through composed polyphonic work while still utilizing minimalistic compositional techniques.

Steve Reich approaches minimalism from a rhythmic perspective. Inspired by Yoruba bell patterns, many of his compositions use the same grouping of eighth notes (3 – 2 – 1 – 2)⁵. By using a technique called “phasing,” Reich's compositions create thicker textures through displacing rhythmic phrases by a beat, causing rests in one part to be replaced by sounds in another. In other examples of Reich's phase music such as *Piano Phase* and *Drumming*, performers increase tempo in contrast to one established and constant tempo, resulting in a similar displacement of the original theme.

Philip Glass takes more of a harmonically based approach to minimalism. His compositions each use their own chord structure that is repeated over the course of the work. While many musical works utilize this method, Glass moves much slower through

³ Heisinger, “American Minimalism in the 1980s:” 434-36.

⁴ Keith Potter. “Terry Riley's *In C*.” (*American Music* 29, no. 3 (2011): 388-91).

⁵ Justin Colannino, Francisco Gómez, and Godfried T. Toussaint. “Analysis of Emergent Beat-Class Sets in Steve Reich's “Clapping Music” and the Yoruba Bell Timeline.” (*Perspectives of New Music* 47, no. 1 (2009): 111-34).

each progression and offers little change in the thematic material.⁶ Similar to Terry Riley's *In C*, Glass's later works take a unison ensemble approach in works such as *Music in Similar Motion* and *Music in Twelve Parts*, where each player is playing a unison or similar part, though in contrast to *In C*, players move through the music together. Typically, he leaves instrumentation open as to allow for a variety of textures to occur across different performances.⁷ Glass, Reich, and Riley are only a select few of dozens of influential minimalist composers, however they have been chosen as the focus for the purposes of this research to serve as a surface level look into the minimalistic genre for students in the instrumental music classroom.

The central purpose of incorporating minimalism into secondary instrumental pedagogy lies at the core concept of the genre; repetition. When learning any skill, be it musical or otherwise, repetition is the first step towards mastery.⁸ However, at the secondary level of education, it can often be a struggle for students to find the motivation to put this repetition into practice. Introducing minimalist repertoire into the curriculum provides an engaging way for students to learn and effectively practice certain concepts through repetition while still being rewarded with active music making. This minimalist-based pedagogy can be applied to developing basic note recognition, rhythmic proficiency, and overall ensemble skills such as communication, blend, and balance between different players. Additionally, through choosing works that incorporate more open

⁶ Rob Haskins, Philip Glass, and Michael Riesman. "Philip Glass and Michael Riesman: Two Interviews." (*The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (2002): 510-11).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kirt Saville. "Strategies for Using Repetition as a Powerful Teaching Tool." (*Music Educators Journal* 98, no. 1 (2011): 69-75).

instrumentation in comparison to typical instrumental literature, it guarantees that all students are able to participate.

Focusing on the composers Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, specific works can be selected that meet different pedagogical needs for instrumental students. Terry Riley's *In C* serves as a useful tool for teaching and developing basic music reading skills. As seen in the excerpt in Figure 1, the melodic lines used in the composition are simple and repetitive. While the rhythms somewhat increase in difficulty as the piece progresses, accommodations can be easily made to fit the needs of different skills levels.



Figure 1 - Excerpt from *In C* by Terry Riley⁹

Taking cell 1 in the excerpt as an example, the written grace notes could be omitted for students that find it too difficult. Similarly, with the more complex phrases beginning in cell 13, the rhythm could be simplified and some notes omitted to allow students a greater chance of success. The nature of the piece works within the philosophy of spiral curriculum, an approach in which students are taught one concept that serves as a foundation for future concepts; as students continue to progress to more complex ideas, each idea they had previously learned aids in their understanding of the next one.¹⁰ This

⁹ Terry Riley. *In C*. (G. Schirmer, Inc.: New York, 1964).

¹⁰ R. M. Harden and N. Stamper. "What is a spiral curriculum?" (*Medical Teacher* 21, no. 2 (1999): 141-43).

technique is often used in the beginning stages of teaching how to read music and play an instrument – students learn a small set of pitches, then use those pitches in a short etude, and then continue to add to the same set of pitches, progressively spiraling up towards more complicated musical phrases.¹¹

Steve Reich's music offers a more rhythmically based study of minimalism and music. Students will at first be exposed to different syncopated phrases, then asked to perform these phrases in counterpoint to other students. The best application of this is Reich's early work, *Clapping Music*, which takes his iconic syncopated pattern and shifts it by a beat in one of the parts while the other remains steady (see Fig. 2). This presents the added challenges to students of keeping track of the piece's progression, reading and performing different syncopated patterns, and maintaining tempo despite the complex counterpoint that results from the combined parts. While the piece is typically associated with percussion, it is an effective way for developing rhythmic proficiency for any instrumentalist.



Figure 2 - Excerpt from *Clapping Music* by Steve Reich¹²

Philip Glass's works typically consist of both slightly more advanced rhythms and slightly more complex melodies, which can prove useful as a combined realization of both

¹¹ Freya Bailes. "Translating the Musical Image: Case Studies of Expert Musicians." (In *Sounds in Translation: Intersections of Music, Technology and Society*, edited by Chan, Amy and Noble, Alistair, 41-60).

¹² Steve Reich. *Clapping Music*. (London: Universal Edition, 1972).

ideas previously presented by Reich and Riley. In Glass's *Music In Similar Motion*, the pitch sets used include only five notes at a time, however the order in which they are played changes in subtle ways that encourage students to pay closer attention to the music as it is happening. This allows students to develop more mature music reading skills and introduces the concept of sight reading. For students that struggle with watching their fingers or hands while they play their instrument, it forces them to trust their hands more and pay closer attention to the music. Each repetition (see Fig. 3) adds a small level of complexity to the repeating phrase, therefore making memorization more difficult, if not nearly impossible for the average secondary level student. Looking past the technical challenges, this piece also relies on effective ensemble communication to keep the group together and ensure all players are moving through the piece in the same way and at the same time.



Figure 3 - Excerpt from *Music in Similar Motion* by Philip Glass¹³

Despite the discussion of these works focused primarily on concepts typically introduced at earlier stages in instrumental education, the pieces and associated lessons are easily transferrable to older age groups with more experience on their instruments. More advanced students would be able to perform the works with more of the original

¹³ Philip Glass. *Music in Similar Motion*. (New York: Dunvagen Music Publishers, 1981).

intention and work on overall musical interpretation. Going beyond the specific pedagogical uses discussed, this material has further reaching significance in students' musical careers.

While the repetitive themes in these pieces allow students to develop their own technical skills, it also offers benefits in mental capabilities by building skills such as auralisation. This skill allows students to read music and have a rough auditory idea of the music in mind before actually playing.¹⁴ Some of the inherent simplicity found in the repertoire also lends itself to refinement of basic ideas through a more advanced lens; even well-established professional musicians return to basic ideas that were taught to them at an early level.¹⁵ Furthermore, an introduction to minimalism as a style opens a creative door for students to study similar contemporary literature and begin their own experimentations in personal compositions and playing. A study conducted by Diana Blom notes the accessibility of the minimalistic style for secondary age students interested in composition, linking an early introduction to the style as a stepping stone to deeper interaction with contemporary culture.¹⁶

As previously introduced, a second half to this proposed pedagogy is the element of improvisation. Improvisation has long been known to have lasting benefits for music students at a variety of ages, helping in the development of individual creativity, musicianship, and overall comfort in the musical discipline. It can often be found in specific methodologies such as Suzuki, Kodaly, and Orff, and is also found in many of the National

¹⁴ Bailes. "Translating the Musical Image: Case Studies of Expert Musicians." 41-60.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Diana Blom. "Engaging Students With A Contemporary Music – Minimalism – through Composing Activities: Teachers' Approaches, Strategies and Roles." (*International Journal of Music Education* Os-40, no. 1 (2003): 81-99).

Standards for Music Education.¹⁷ Looking through a more clinical lens, improvisation follows closely to the educational philosophy of Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI). Improvisation allows a more personal look into an individual's approach to music which gives teachers an idea of how best to instruct each student.¹⁸ Similarly, CGI is designed to provide teachers with a better understanding of their students' individuality in regards to the learning process. A book on educational reforms details the core idea behind CGI in the context of a math classroom, stating, "it is about learning—learning about the mathematical thinking of one's students and about the practices that will support the development of that thinking."¹⁹ Despite the benefits, improvisation is often difficult to implement within the classroom simply due to a level of trepidation that is associated with the idea – students often feel pressure to "play the right notes" or feel like they have no musical ideas to offer. Framing improvisation within the minimalistic style eliminates some of the apprehension by first providing a smaller palette from which students are able to choose, such as using only a few notes and rhythmic values. As students become more comfortable with the idea of improvising, they can begin to implement more elements, gradually easing them into more complex improvisations.

To test this proposed methodology, I was afforded the opportunity to teach a lesson and gather data from a classroom-based case study. The case study was conducted in the form of a three-day instructional unit taught in a high school percussion class that focused

¹⁷ Rachel Whitcomb. "Teaching Improvisation in Elementary General Music." (*Music Educators Journal* 99, no. 3 (2013): 43-51).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Thomas P. Carter., and Megan L. Franke. "Cognitively Guided Instruction: Challenging the Core of Educational Practice." In *Expanding the Reach of Education Reforms: Perspectives from Leaders in the Scale-Up of Educational Interventions*, by Glennan Thomas K., Bodilly Susan J., Galegher Jolene R., and Kerr Kerri A., 41-80. (Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2004).

on minimalism and improvisation, and using these ideas to develop musical skills. The study isolated three individual students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and followed their progress specifically to examine the lesson's effectiveness between different students. In the case study, these students are referred to as Student 1, Student 2, and Student 3 (see Table 1 for full student details). The school in which the study was conducted is located in a suburban region of southeast Kentucky, in what is often referred to as "coal-country." While the students have been awarded many opportunities to pursue

Table 1 - Analysis and objectives taken from lesson plan used in case study

Target Students (Chosen from Contextual Factors)	Educational Background of Student	Testing and Placement Procedures	Student Learning Objectives (SLO)
Target Student 1	Attended Pikeville Elementary School. Diagnosed with CLIPPERS Disease - affects learning capabilities and speed of comprehension. Misses multiple days of school during the year due to doctor's appointments. Plays the euphonium in the Wind Band Plays bass guitar in a church ensemble and as a hobby outside of school.	Student is required to be a member of the Pikeville Band program to be enrolled in the class. There are no specific rankings of students within the class, however the director assigns specific parts to students based on ability.	Student will attempt to participate in discussion portions of the lecture. Student will read and perform simple musical phrases in class with 75% accuracy. Student will improvise a simple minimalistic phrase that allows them to add to and participate in the ensemble.
Target Student 2	Attended Pikeville Elementary School. Member of the football team. Talkative but well-behaved student that enjoys pushing himself. Student has a history of seizures, last one recorded in 2012.	Student is required to be a member of the Pikeville Band program to be enrolled in the class. There are no specific rankings of students within the class, however the director assigns specific parts to students based on ability.	Student will remain quiet and respectful to other students during the discussion portions of the lecture. Student will also participate in class discussions. Student will read and perform simple musical phrases in class with 90% accuracy. Student will improvise musical phrases that fit within the style and parameters determined by the instructor.
Target Student 3	Attended Pikeville Elementary School Quiet but well-behaved student. Very musically adept, but he struggles to stay on task during lessons. Takes private lessons on percussion.	Student is required to be a member of the Pikeville Band program to be enrolled in the class. There are no specific rankings of students within the class, however the director assigns specific parts to students based on ability.	Student will actively participate in discussion portions of the lecture presentation. Student will read and perform musical phrases in class with 99% accuracy. Student will improvise musical phrases that fit within the style and parameters determined by the instructor.

music in various ways, their experiences and musical knowledge pale in comparison to students from more urban areas. Prior to the three-day unit, the students had little to no exposure to minimalism or improvisation.

The three days were organized to allow students as much time as possible to play instruments and perform works while also providing them with enough context to what they were doing. The first day used lecture-based instruction with some interactive elements to contextualize minimalism and improvisation by providing students with examples and ways to relate the concepts to those that were already familiar to them. The second day focused on lab-based instruction, allowing the students to have a more hands-on experience with minimalism; students learned and performed excerpts of *In C* by Terry Riley, *Clapping Music* by Steve Reich, and *Music In Similar Motion* by Philip Glass. The third day was much more student-driven, where the students were given the opportunity to use ideas that they had explored in the previous days by creating their own improvised ensemble compositions in the minimalistic style. First, students were given a specific set of parameters within which they could improvise and as the class progressed, more elements were added, leading to more complex improvisational ideas.²⁰

Throughout the course of the lesson, the students were asked to review and make connections to concepts that they had learned in relation to minimalism. In improvisation, students were asked to create phrases that mimicked the styles of the composers that had been studied during previous days to help reinforce the different styles that exist within the genre. Some students took more to playing drone music similar to early minimalistic

²⁰ John Tyree. "Minimalism and Improvisation in Percussion Composition." (Clinical Practice Teacher Performance Assessment. Morehead State University. 2017. 20-34.)

styles, while others preferred to repeat single rhythmic phrases as in the style of Steve Reich. The majority of students enjoyed playing through the minimalist pieces studied on the second day the most, many even asking to perform *In C* on a concert. The accessibility of the music appealed to the students' passion for playing as well as their lack of patience for learning a new piece of music that is more technically challenging.

Table 2 – Assessment Data taken from Clinical Practice Teacher Performance Assessment

Student	Pre-Assessment Results (complete prior to lesson planning)					Post-Assessment Scores (complete following learning sequence)					Change from Pre- to Post-Assessment Using + or -			
	Objective					Objective					Objective			
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4
Total Possible:	5	5	5	5		5	5	5	5		5	5	5	5
Points Required to Meet Objective:	3	3	3	3		3	3	3	3		3	3	3	3
Student #														
1	1	2	1	3		4	4	3	2		+3	+2	+2	-1
2	2	1	1	1		3	4	3	5		+1	+3	+2	+4
3	0	1	0	1		4	1	3	3		+4	0	+3	+2
4	0	1	1	0		3	5	2	1		+3	+4	+1	+1
5	3	1	0	2		3	2	4	2		0	+1	+4	0
6	4	1	0	4		4	4	4	3		0	+3	+4	-1
7	2	0	0	1		5	3	4	2		+3	+3	+4	+1
8	4	2	2	2		3	4	3	3		-1	+2	+1	+1
9	3	1	2	3		5	3	3	4		+2	+2	+1	+1
10	2	2	1	1		4	3	3	3		+2	+1	+2	+2
11	3	1	1	2		5	4	4	4		+2	+3	+3	+2
Average Class Score:	2	1	1	2		4	3	3	3		+2	+2	+2	+1
Number of Students Meeting Objective:	5	0	0	3		11	9	10	7		+6	+9	+10	+4

Based off of formative and summative assessments, the lesson was successful; students scored well according to the established rubrics for each assessment and were able to demonstrate retention of most the ideas taught during the lesson.²¹ Almost all students' scores increased from pre- to post-test, showing growth over the course of the unit (see Table 2). While official assessment used in the case study relied on more

²¹ Tyree. "Minimalism and Improvisation in Percussion Composition." 35-41.

objective methods such as pre- and post-tests and quizzes, students made observable improvement in their performance of the assigned works as well as their improvisational skills. Student 2 became much more aware of their role within an ensemble and interacted more with their fellow musicians; having had the freedom of “playing whatever they wanted” allowed the student to feel more relaxed behind their instrument. This relaxation gave them more confidence when playing with their colleagues or by themselves. Student 3 had shown signs of developing sight-reading skills before the lesson, however these skills now developed at a much faster rate. While Student 1 showed little improvement to their overall playing, they did begin improvising their own melodies after class on most days, often asking to play with others.²²

Due to the potential scope of the case-study, it was only conducted using a small class of 11 students to maintain pacing and student engagement within the available timeframe. However, there was an opportunity to give the minimalism lecture used during the first day of instruction to different classes such as a beginning wind band and beginning percussion class. The original lecture was modified slightly to accommodate the differences in each of the class’s contextual factors. Each class responded to minimalism well, though they differed in what musical elements resonated with them the most – some classes enjoyed the rhythmic drive behind Steve Reich’s music, while others preferred the slow motivic developments found in Philip Glass’s works. As an area for future study, the lesson used in the original case study could easily be modified to accommodate the different class sizes and ability levels. Furthermore, the case study could be expanded to different musical disciplines such as vocal and string music in addition to a wider age range

²² Tyree. “Minimalism and Improvisation in Percussion Composition.” 35-41.

to study the most effective way to integrate minimalism and improvisation in all music education, not just secondary instrumental music.

In order to provide students with a more well-rounded music education, teachers must find ways to incorporate contemporary music within the classroom. While the established pedagogy and music class set-up revolves around ensemble-based instruction, accommodations can be made that fit within these constraints and still develop more advanced musical concepts. When framed properly, minimalism with integrated improvisation provides these accommodations that allow for improvements to ensemble proficiency while also developing a student's individual musicianship, leading to a more mature and balanced musician.

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