

PATRICK SIMPSON  
#10 SCRIPT

POP MUSIC GETS A BAD RAP. IT'S DESCRIBED AS MINDLESS, ANNOYING, MANUFACTURED... BUT I'LL BET THE MOST COMMON COMPLAINT YOU HEAR, IS THAT IT'S JUST TOO REPETITIVE.

[THE POLICE - ROXANNE]

THIS IS ROXANNE BY THE POLICE, PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS EXAMPLES OF REPETITIVE LYRICS IN MUSIC.

[ROXANNE]

AND JUST SO YOU KNOW, I WOULD'VE PLAYED SOMETHING MORE MODERN, AND POSSIBLY MORE IRRITATING DEPENDING ON YOUR TASTES, BUT I DON'T WANT TO DATE THIS TOO MUCH, AND I ALSO DON'T WANT YOU TO TURN THIS OFF BECAUSE OF HOW TERRIBLE FRIDAY IS, OR SOMETHING.

THE POINT IS THAT WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT POP, OR ANY KIND OF MAINSTREAM MUSIC, THEY MAINLY TALK ABOUT HOW SIMPLISTIC IT IS, HOW FRUSTRATING IT IS TO HEAR THE SAME DULL CHORUS REPEATED OVER AND OVER AGAIN ON EVERY RADIO STATION.

[ROXANNE]

SURELY, THESE PEOPLE SAY, THIS CAN'T BE QUOTE-UNQUOTE "ART." ART HAS TO BE COMPLEX, CRAFTED WITH GREAT ATTENTION TO DETAIL BY SOMEONE WHO'S WORKED FOR YEARS TO DEVELOP THEIR SKILLS. BUT WHAT IF THERE WAS A KIND OF MUSIC THAT WAS SOMEHOW EVEN MORE REPETITIVE THAN POP, EVEN MORE DEVOID OF APPARENT DIFFICULTY IN MAKING IT, EVEN MORE, WELL, BORING?

[PHILIP GLASS - CLOSING]

THIS IS MINIMALISM. IT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT IDEA IN MUSIC FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, INFLUENCING EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE FROM PUNK ROCK TO FILM COMPOSITION, FROM GRANDMASTER FLASH TO THE WHO. IT'S STRIPPING MUSIC DOWN TO ITS BARE ESSENTIALS. AND YES, IT CAN BE TEDIOUS, BUT JUST TAKE A LISTEN: IF YOU LAST LONG ENOUGH, YOU MIGHT HEAR SOMETHING YOU NEVER HEARD BEFORE.

I'M PATRICK SIMPSON, AND THIS IS MELOMANIA.

[CLOSING]

SO, LET'S SET THE STAGE. IT'S THE 1950S.

[BILL HALEY AND THE COMETS - ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK]

ROCK AND ROLL IS ON THE RISE. WE'RE IN THE POST-WAR ECONOMIC BOOM. SUBURBIA IS EXPLODING, AND EVERYONE HAS A CAR. IT'S A PRETTY GREAT TIME OVERALL. WELL, UNLESS YOU'RE NOT WHITE, MIDDLE TO UPPER CLASS, STRAIGHT... WELL, LET'S NOT GET INTO ALL THAT. IT'S A PRETTY GOOD TIME.

BUT THE GUYS UP IN THE IVORY TOWER AREN'T SO EXCITED ABOUT JOHNNY B. GOODE. YOU SEE, SINCE WE LEFT OFF LAST EPISODE WITH SCHOENBERG'S INVENTION OF THE TWELVE-TONE TECHNIQUE, SERIALISM HAS BEEN WIDELY ADOPTED AROUND THE WORLD IN ACADEMIA. IF YOU WANT TO BE A COMPOSER DURING THIS TIME, YOU HAVE TO COMPOSE ESOTERIC PIECES LIKE THIS:

[MILTON BABBITT - PARTITIONS]

AND THIS ISN'T TO SAY THAT SERIALISM IS BAD—IN FACT, I JUST MADE AN ENTIRE EPISODE DEFENDING IT. AND IT ISN'T EVEN THE ONLY THING GOING ON DURING THIS TIME; IT'S JUST THAT MANY COMPOSERS FELT LIKE THEY WOULDN'T BE RESPECTED IF THEY WENT BACKWARDS TO TONALITY. THEY FELT RESTRICTED BY WHAT SOME CALL THE “SERIALIST STRAITJACKET.”

[PARTITIONS]

COMPOSERS ARE ESSENTIALLY DIGGING THEIR OWN GRAVES; NOBODY'S LISTENING. SERIALISM IS STAGNATING.

BUT THEN THERE'S THIS GUY. TERRY RILEY.

[TERRY RILEY - A RAINBOW IN CURVED AIR]

HE DOESN'T REALLY CARE ABOUT ALL THAT. HE'S DOING HIS OWN THING. HE'S NOT LOOKING TO SCHOENBERG OR ANY OF THOSE GUYS FOR INSPIRATION. HE'S LOOKING TO WHAT'S GOING ON POPULAR MUSIC, IN JAZZ, AND EVEN TO THE TECHNOLOGY OF THE TIME.

SO IT'S 1963. RILEY IS IN PARIS, WHERE HE MEETS THE LEGENDARY JAZZ TRUMPETER CHET BAKER. THEY'RE BOTH ASKED TO COMPOSE A SOUNDTRACK FOR THIS EXPERIMENTAL THEATER PIECE CALLED “THE GIFT,” SO RILEY RECORDS BAKER PLAYING SOME TUNES WITH HIS BAND AND STARTS MESSING AROUND WITH THE TAPES. HE ENDS UP CREATING THESE SWIRLING COMPOSITIONS OF TAPE LOOPS, REPEATING SINGLE SOUNDS OR PHRASES AND COMBINING THEM.

[RILEY - MUSIC FROM “THE GIFT”]

THEY PHASE IN AND OUT OF SYNC, CREATING THIS BIZARRE EFFECT.

SO THEN, ELEVEN MONTHS LATER, RILEY IS BACK IN THE US, AND AN IDEA COMES TO HIM. WHAT IF HE TOOK THAT LOOPING CONCEPT AND APPLIED TO A LIVE PERFORMANCE? THE NEXT DAY, HE COMPOSED IN C.

[RILEY - IN C]

THIS, IS ESSENTIALLY THE BIRTH OF MINIMALISM.

[Dr. Rocky J. Reuter: "When somebody first hears it, they think it's just endless repetition of the same thing."]

THIS IS DR. ROCKY J. REUTER.

["Most people ask, 'is that your real name?' And I say 'yes, it's a legal, given name by my mother.'"]

HE'S A COMPOSER AND A RETIRED MUSIC PROFESSOR FROM CAPITAL UNIVERSITY IN COLUMBUS, OHIO.

["I started composing probably, I wouldn't call it composing yet, but experimenting with sound, when I was about four years old."]

AND HE'S STILL WRITING MUSIC TODAY, A LOT OF WHICH IS MINIMALIST.

["So, the idea is that you take a modicum, a small amount of material. It could be just two chords, it could be three chords, or two rhythms."]

FOR IN C, THESE MODICUMS AS DR. REUTER CALLS THEM, OR REALLY MODICA I GUESS WOULD BE THE PLURAL, ARE CELLS TO BE PLAYED BY EVERY PERFORMER IN ORDER. FOR EXAMPLE, THE FIRST CELL IS THAT (SINGING) C E, C E, C E, C E...

[IN C]

SO YOU WOULD PLAY THAT FOR A WHILE UNTIL YOU FEEL LIKE GOING TO THE NEXT CELL, WHICH IS THE (SINGING) C E F E, C E F E, C E F E...

[IN C]

["And you continually use those same materials, developing them very slowly over time. So early pieces tend to be quite long, they tend to be tend to take, you know, anywhere from ten to twenty minutes for the usual sort of piece, but could last for days, or months, or even years in the case of some of these early composers. Taking a simple concept, and just very gradually developing it over time."]

[IN C]

SO YOU'VE GOT WHAT'S CERTAINLY MINIMALISM'S MOST FAMOUS EARLY PIECE WITH TERRY RILEY, BUT EVEN BEFORE HIM, THERE WAS ANOTHER GUY. LA MONTE YOUNG.

[LA MONTE YOUNG - COMPOSITION 1960 #7 (FOR TWO CANDLES)]

HIS STYLE IS A LOT DIFFERENT FROM RILEY'S, BUT HE'S STILL CONSIDERED ONE OF THE FIRST, IF NOT THE FIRST MINIMALIST COMPOSER. THIS IS HIS COMPOSITION 1960 #7, A PRECURSOR TO DRONE MUSIC.

[COMPOSITION 1960 #7]

THE SCORE CONSISTS ONLY OF TWO NOTES, A B AND AN F SHARP, WHICH CREATES THE INTERVAL OF THE PERFECT FIFTH. BELOW THE NOTES IS AN INSCRIPTION THAT SIMPLY STATES, "TO BE HELD FOR A LONG TIME."

[COMPOSITION 1960 #7]

["La Monte Young, is kind of credited as being the first of the minimalists. And lived kind of out in the middle of nowhere. And was very close to an electric transformer, which, if

you've ever driven by one or been by one, they buzz, continually, with the electricity going through them, there's a hum. And he could hear that from his bedroom, from his living room, every time he went outside, and that turned into music based on drones.”]

[COMPOSITION 1960 #7]

SO AFTER YOUNG AND RILEY, THERE ARE THE TWO OTHER PIONEERS OF MINIMALISM, STEVE REICH AND PHILIP GLASS, THE LATTER OF WHICH YOU MAY RECOGNIZE FROM FILMS HE'S COMPOSED, LIKE THE TRUMAN SHOW.

[GLASS - TRUMAN SLEEPS]

AND THEY EACH HAVE THEIR OWN DISTINCT STYLES, JUST LIKE RILEY AND YOUNG. BUT ALL FOUR OF THESE COMPOSERS WERE THE SAME IN THAT THEY WERE INTERESTED IN SOMETHING THEY WEREN'T GETTING FROM SERIALISM AND OTHER MUSIC—SOMETHING THAT REFLECTED THE CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY OF THE TIME, AND SOMETHING THAT COULD DEEPLY AFFECT PEOPLE, AS A FORM OF MEDITATION OR EVEN A KIND OF SPIRITUALISM.

SO WHAT CAN WE GET OUT OF IT NOW? WHAT MAKES MINIMALISM STILL VALUABLE OVER FIFTY YEARS AFTER ITS INCEPTION?

[TRUMAN SLEEPS]

["It's like what you're hearing in the news. By the time a news story breaks, it's already old news and there's another news story coming right behind it, and day to day when you watch the news, it's like, you can't keep up with the developments. And so, this learning to—it's like, nobody reads books anymore, because it takes too long. They'd rather see the movie, they can see it all in 90 minutes and be done with it, you

know? But learning to go back into yourself, and, relax, and be able to hear it in a different way... I think we all need some time to meditate and think about stuff that's not barraging us so fast, so minimalism I think is a very good way to begin that process."]

SO TRY BOREDOM FOR A BIT. SINK INTO ONE OF THESE PIECES AND ESCAPE THE CONSTANT STIMULI OF THE INFORMATION AGE FOR A WHILE. AND THIS ISN'T TO BE ALL "TECHNOLOGY IS BAD, GO READ A BOOK YOU HOOLIGANS!" BUT I DO BELIEVE THERE'S REAL MERIT TO JUST SITTING DOWN AND LEARNING, TO PARAPHRASE STEVE REICH, TO SEE THE MINUTE HAND OF A WATCH MOVE. SO WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF WITH SOME FREE TIME, INSTEAD OF CLICKING INFINITELY THROUGH RANDOM YOUTUBE VIDEOS OR SCROLLING AIMLESSLY THROUGH YOUR NEWSFEED, FIND A PIECE OF MUSIC AND JUST REALLY LISTEN TO IT. IT DOESN'T EVEN HAVE TO BE MINIMALIST. JUST FOCUS ON THE SOUND. TAKE IT ALL IN. NOTICE EVERYTHING. OR, IF YOU WANT, JUST LET YOUR MIND WANDER, AND LET THE MUSIC WASH OVER YOU LIKE BACKGROUND NOISE. EITHER WAY, JUST LISTEN, AND DO NOTHING ELSE. IT'LL BE DIFFICULT, BUT IT'LL BE WORTH IT.

[STEVE REICH - PIANO PHASE]

MELOMANIA IS WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY ME, PATRICK SIMPSON.  
THANKS FOR LISTENING.

[PIANO PHASE]