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*at the Turn of the 21st Century*

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**American musical minimalism  
in its interaction with mass genres**

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**Abstract.** As long ago as its formative stage in the early 1960s, American musical minimalism revealed a close connection with the aesthetics and practices of popular genres rooted in their shared origins in the countercultural movement of the radical left youth. In subsequent decades, this tendency towards integration between the two cultural layers continued. The aim of this article is to examine

the mechanisms of interaction between minimalism and popular music (primarily rock culture) throughout its formation and development over more than sixty years. The main research method is comparative analysis of the studied material, including multidimensional sociocultural, historical, and stylistic analogies and parallels. Cross-cultural influences are identified at several levels: musical language (a return to expressive simplicity—diatonicism, clear metrical pulsation, and multiple repetition of material); compositional methods (repetitive techniques, sampling, delay); concert practice (performances not only in concert halls and museums, but also in nightclubs and bars); self-presentation of musicians acting as composers, performers, and, in recent decades, producers (including the creation of original ensembles combining acoustic and electronic instruments); audience and critical reception, marked by a gradual blurring of boundaries between art music and popular music; marketing strategies, such as the establishment of independent record labels and the promotion of aesthetically and stylistically similar bands and albums; and genre classification (indie classical, post-genre, post-style), reflecting the liminal character of contemporary minimalist compositional practice. The article considers three generations of musicians: 1) the founders of minimalism La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass (1960s–1970s), 2) the *Bang on a Can* collective—Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe (1990s–2000s), and 3) musicians of the millennial generation—Missy Mazzoli, Judd Greenstein, David T. Little, and Nico Muhly (2010s–early 2020s). Generational continuity is shaped by their shared New York cultural background, their reliance on minimalist techniques and repetitive processes, and, above all, the diffusion of various stylistic elements drawn from both the classical tradition and popular genres.

**Keywords:** American musical minimalism, repetitive technique, mass genres, rock music, indie classic

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*Музыкальное творчество  
рубежа XX–XXI столетий*

Original article

**Американский музыкальный минимализм  
в аспекте взаимодействия  
с массовыми жанрами**

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**Аннотация.** Американский музыкальный минимализм уже на стадии своего формирования в первой половине 1960-х годов обнаружил тесную связь с эстетикой и практикой массовых жанров, что было обусловлено общими корнями, уходящими в недра леворадикального контркультурного молодежного движения. В последующие десятилетия курс на интеграцию двух пластов продолжал сохраняться. Цель исследования — проследить механизмы взаимодействия минимализма с массовой музыкой (прежде всего рок-культурой) в процессе его становления и развития, охватившего более шестидесяти лет.

В качестве основного метода исследования избран компаративистский подход к изучаемому материалу, обеспечивающий возможность многомерных социокультурных и историко-стилевых сравнений, аналогий и параллелей. Кросс-культурные влияния были установлены на разных уровнях: на уровне музыкального языка (возвращение к простоте высказывания — диатонике, ясной метрической пульсации, многократной повторности материала); методов композиции (приемы репетитивной техники, семплирование, дилей); концертной практики (рециталы не только в академических залах, музеях, но и в ночных клубах и барах); самопрезентации музыкантов, выступающих в роли композитора, исполнителя, а в последние десятилетия и продюсера (создание авторских оригинальных ансамблей, объединяющих акустические и электронные инструменты); рецепции аудитории и критики, отмечающей последовательное стирание границ между академическим и популярным искусством; маркетинговых стратегий, обусловленных организацией собственных звукозаписывающих лейблов и продвижением эстетически и стилистически близких коллективов и альбомов; жанровой классификации (инди-классик, постжанр, постстиль), отражающей пограничный характер творчества современных композиторов-минималистов. В статье представлены три поколения музыкантов: 1) основоположники движения минимализма Ла Монте Янг, Терри Райли, Стив Райх и Филип Гласс (1960–1970-е годы), 2) содружество «Стук по консервной банке» (*Bang on a Can*) — Майкл Гордон, Дэвид Лэнг, Джулия Вулф (1990–2000-е годы), 3) музыканты поколения миллениалов — Мисси Маццоли, Джадд Гринштейн, Дэвид Т. Литтл, Нико Мьюли (2010-е – начало 2020-х годов). Преемственность поколений детерминирована единой культурной почвой Нью-Йорка, а также опорой на арсенал выразительных средств минимализма и репетитивной техники, но прежде всего — диффузией всевозможных стиливых явлений, принадлежащих как академической традиции, так и массовым жанрам.

**Ключевые слова:** американский музыкальный минимализм, репетитивная техника, массовые жанры, рок-музыка, инди-классик

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*Introduction*

In recent years, foreign scholars have made multiple attempts to identify points of conversion between American musical minimalism—particularly its individual representatives—and popular genres. The issue has been addressed in articles [1], conference papers,<sup>1</sup> and monographs [2, 3, 4]. Patrick Nicholson [3] reintroduces the forgotten figures of early minimalism and considers them alongside members of non-commercial rock bands. Situating the new movement within the revolutionary context of the 1960s, he characterizes its participants as pioneers of a powerful and lasting process of the democratization of art. Kerry O'Brien and William Robin [4] emphasize minimalism's departure from art music and highlight its influence on ambient jazz, electronic music, and doom metal. Russian musicologist Anastasia Yu. Slobodchikova observes that it is sometimes difficult to draw clear boundaries between American minimalism and non-commercial post-rock [5, pp. 45–46], which reflects their active convergence. She further emphasizes that “the classics of minimalism were incorporated into the performance practice of experimental rock musicians” [6, p. 67].

Russian scholars have been actively engaged in the study of minimalism and issues related to its evolution. They examine the American repertoire, which is remains little known in Russia [7], as well as a body of European avant-garde works in which certain minimalist techniques can be identified [8]. However, their main focus lies on the Russian composers—Alexander I. Rabinovich-Barakovsky [9], Nikolai S. Korndorf [10], Anton A. Batagov [11]—particularly on their approaches to repetitive process. Russian musicologists address the dialogue between American minimalism and popular genres through the works of earlier composers [12; 13; 14; 15]. At the same time, the genesis and stylistic evolution of this interaction between two cultural spheres, art music and popular music, still requires scholarly attention and systematic analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> *Berryhill A., Waltz S.* David Bowie and Philip Glass at the Intersection of Minimalism and Rock. The project is implemented in Don and Karen DeRosa University Center (DUC) April 27, 2024. Research & Creativity Showcase, 2024.

The present article seeks to trace the characteristics of these cross-cultural intersections at multiple levels: musical language and compositional techniques, concert practice, modes of self-presentation, marketing strategies and genre classification, as well as reception by critics and audiences.

*The Founders of Minimalism in Dialogue with Popular Genres*

One of the defining features of American musical minimalism is its genetic kinship with popular genres, particularly rock culture. The formation and consolidation of new artistic movement unfolded during the turbulent era of the 1960s and reflected its rebellious spirit. The history of the intense interaction and mutual influence between minimalism and rock music in the United States has already been examined in Russian research literature. In particular, the diffusion between art music and popular music has been described as a process that “leveled the long-standing hierarchical system dividing genres into high and low, elite and democratic” [16, p. 88].

The nature of the concert presentation of the works by the founders of minimalism brought them closer to popular genres in many respects: the choice of unconventional performance venues (rock clubs and art galleries), the formation of composer-led ensembles to perform their own compositions (La Monte Young’s *Theatre of Eternal Music*, *Steve Reich and Musicians*, the *Philip Glass Ensemble*), the use of electric instruments and amplification. Extended compositions were structured around repetitive processes.

Minimalist projects were especially welcome in the experimental art world—among the artists and sculptors of Minimal Art (Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Serra). Thus, minimalist music was aimed “both at an intellectual audience that ‘read’ the subtle and inventive work with the repetitive process, and at a wider audience that immersed itself in a psychedelic trance under the influence of the endless ostinato of the simplest patterns” [14, p. 11].

The classics of minimalism continued to follow their chosen path. Philip Glass composes operas and symphonies, but his music is also featured in Hollywood

films and video games.<sup>2</sup> In *Radio Rewrite* (2012) for instrumental ensemble, Steve Reich draws on material from two songs by the rock band *Radiohead*: the first, third, and fifth movements are based on *Jigsaw Falling into Place*, while the second and fourth on *Everything in its Right Place*.<sup>3</sup> Repetitive processes, including gradual phase shifting (developed by Reich), delay experiments first tried by Terry Riley, and sampling have become integral components of the contemporary musical vocabulary.

### *Bang on a Can and the Millennial Generation*

The founders of the style paved the way for the next generation of American composers. David Lang, Michael Gordon, and Julia Wolfe formed the *Bang on a Can*<sup>4</sup> collective in 1987. Above all, the influence of Reich and Glass manifested itself in a new strategy of interaction between art music and popular culture. Like the leading figures of minimalism, Gordon developed a keen interest in rock music, which led to the creation of the *Michael Gordon Philharmonic*.<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of his career, Gordon made extensive use of microphones and amplification, finding appreciative audiences in nightclub venues. Although he moved away from rock stylistics in the 2000s, his 1990s compositions display clear connections to the genre, as evidenced by the timbre of the electric guitar, amplifiers, emphasized backbeat, and prevailing repetitive principles in the construction of musical material.

Lang's music demonstrates an even greater degree of convergence between art music and popular culture. He broadens his range of stylistic references, at times drawing from the traditions of Broadway musical theater (for example, Crouch's aria from the opera *Anatomy Theater*), and at others evoking the sound world of post-rock, as in the vocal cycle *Death Speaks*.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, *Pruit Igoe* from Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* is featured on the soundtrack of the video game *Grand Theft Auto 4*, where it is broadcast on the in-game radio station Journey. The video game *Chime* incorporates Glass's composition *Brazil*. Philip Glass also composed the original soundtrack for the strategy game *Old World* (2020, Windows). See The Journey, Videogame Soundtracks Wiki. (n.d.). *Fandom*. Retrieved February 5, 2026, from [https://vgost.fandom.com/wiki/Grand\\_Theft\\_Auto\\_IV#The\\_Journey](https://vgost.fandom.com/wiki/Grand_Theft_Auto_IV#The_Journey)

<sup>3</sup> *Radio Rewrite*. (n.d.). *Steve Reich*. Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://steverreich.com/composition/radio-rewrite/>

<sup>4</sup> *Bang on a Can*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://bangonacan.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Michael Gordon Band. (n.d.). *RYM (Rate Your Music)*. Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://rateyourmusic.com/artist/michael-gordon-band>

In 1992, the composers founded their own ensemble, *Bang on a Can All-Stars*, which performed both classical minimalist works (Reich, Glass, Meredith Monk) and collaborations with DJs popular in nightclubs [2]. Its instrumentation, combining acoustic and electronic resources (cello, double bass, piano, percussion, electric guitar, clarinet) became a model for a generation of millennial minimalist composers born in the late 1970s and early 1990s. Numerous ensembles were established by the composers themselves: David Little's *Newspeak*<sup>6</sup> (female vocals, clarinet, violin, guitar, cello, piano, percussion, drums), *NOW Ensemble*<sup>7</sup> by Judd Greenstein and Patrick Burke (double bass, electric guitar, clarinet, piano, flute), *Victoire*<sup>8</sup> (French for "victory"), created by Missy Mazzoli (violin, clarinet, piano, double bass, electric bass guitar, soprano). The unconventional instrumentation and reliance on amplification reflect the hybrid character of this music, which integrates elements of the classical tradition with features of rock culture. The geography of their performances is broad, as is typical of minimalists: from Carnegie Hall to the art club (*Le Poisson Rouge* in New York's bohemian Greenwich Village, and from major festivals (*Ecstatic Music Festival*<sup>9</sup> and *Bang on a Can*) to bowling alleys.

The terminology itself is deliberately subjected to cross-stylistic blurring. Missy Mazzoli describes her sextet as a "bandsemble" ((rock) band + (chamber) ensemble). In this group, each performer plays their own part, and the repertoire consists of works by a single composer, who also serves as organizer and performer.

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<sup>6</sup> Official website of the ensemble Newspeak. *Newspeak* (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://newspeakmusic.org/audio/>

<sup>7</sup> Official website of the ensemble NOW Ensemble. *NOW Ensemble*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://www.nowensemble.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Official website of the ensemble Victoire. *Victoire*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://www.victoiresmusic.com/>

<sup>9</sup> Ecstatic Music Festival. (n.d.). *Concert Archives*. Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://www.concertarchives.org/bands/ecstatic-music-festival>; Ecstatic Music Festival (n.d.). New Amsterdam Records. Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://www.newamrecords.org/projects/ecstatic-music-festival>

At the same time, guitarists and percussionists from rock bands (such as Bryce Dessner of *The National*<sup>10</sup>) are invited to collaborate.<sup>11</sup>

For composers of Mazzoli's generation, the crossover experience appears to be the only possible condition for artistic development: "From a young age, ... I played guitar in a series of terrible punk bands, practiced my Beethoven daily, and wrote volumes of melodramatic music that I didn't share with anyone."<sup>12</sup> Electroacoustic ensembles with a symbiotic genre repertoires designed to appeal to diverse audiences, and performing in concert halls and bars, align with the tendency toward the erosion of hierarchical boundaries initiated by the classics of minimalism. On the one hand, "music that freely crosses stylistic boundaries is in demand by versatile audiences, regardless of gender, age, and social status"; on the other hand, "a new 'mixed' audience is creating demand for precisely such synthetic phenomena" [14, p. 9].

At the same time, composers who experiment across multiple cultural niches and have insider knowledge of mass culture are highly qualified graduates of prestigious American universities, including members of the Ivy League. A strong academic background shapes a certain perspective, a system of views on a fusion of genres. As composer Zoë Keating observes, "a lot of classically trained musicians ... who played classical music but did not listen to classical music. They don't see the genre boundaries the same way as an older generation does."<sup>13</sup>

Some minimalist composers have established independent record labels to promote their own work. In 2001, the members of *Bang on a Can* founded *Cantaloupe Music*,<sup>14</sup> through which they release their compositions and support young

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<sup>10</sup> Official website of the ensemble The National. *The National*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://www.americanmary.com/>

<sup>11</sup> For example, *Cathedral City* is the debut album of the bandsemble *Victoire*. The recording includes eight compositions by Missy Mazzoli, along with guest appearances by performers and composers such as Bryce Dessner of *The National*, Florent Ghys, William Brittelle, and Melissa Hughes.

<sup>12</sup> Heidrick, E. R. (2020). *Bandsembles and Bandsembling: The History and the Experience* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Doctor of Music)]. Florida State University, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Welch, K. (2016). *Performing with a post-genre ethos. A performance-led exploration of post-genre and indie classical music* [Unpublished master's thesis]. The University of Queensland, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Official website of Cantaloupe Music. *Cantaloupe Music*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://cantaloupemusic.com/>

emerging composers. In an effort to discover new talent, Lang, Gordon, and Wolfe have organized contemporary music festivals for over 20 years. The first summer gathering in 2002 brought together composers Judd Greenstein, Missy Mazzoli, Matt McBain, and Mark Dancigers [17, p. 57–58], who later co-founded one of the most prominent American independent labels, *New Amsterdam Records*.<sup>15</sup> The label provided artists with an online platform, financial support for the production and distribution of CDs, touring assistance, and professional services, including a public relations, design, and sound engineering. The marketing campaign was led by Steven Swartz, who studied composition with Morton Feldman at the University at Buffalo and worked for sixteen years as advertising director at *Boosey & Hawkes*. During the 2000s, the project’s participants mainly focused on popular music, particularly indie rock, rather than the traditional classical repertoire.

In 2010, Missy Mazzoli’s bandsemble released their debut album *Cathedral City*<sup>16</sup> on the New Amsterdam label. The recording received high critical acclaim in press<sup>17</sup> and sparked a discussion about genre classification. Mazzoli observed: “Some critics have claimed my recent album Cathedral City is not classical music, even though it is fully notated, uses several instruments straight out of the orchestra, harmonies straight out of Stravinsky and was written by a composer straight out of music school.”<sup>18</sup>

As Alex Ross has aptly noted, since the 2000s, “the cross-pollination between styles has become so commonplace that most attempts at categorization are futile.”<sup>19</sup> In 2007, New Amsterdam Records proclaimed a bold mission: “To provide a haven

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<sup>15</sup> Official website of New Amsterdam Records. *New Amsterdam Records*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://www.newamrecords.org/>

<sup>16</sup> Mazzoli, M. (n.d.). *Cathedral City*. *Missy Mazzoli, composer*. Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://missymazzoli.com/recordings/cathedral-city/>

<sup>17</sup> *Time Out New York*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times* named *Cathedral City* one of the best albums of 2010.

<sup>18</sup> As cited in Heidrick, E. R. (2020). *Bandsembles and Bandsembling: The History and the Experience* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Dr of Music)]. Florida State University, p. 5–6.

<sup>19</sup> As cited in Heidrick, 2020 p. 6.

for the young New York composers whose music slips through the cracks between genres” [17, p. 55]. Their slogan reads: “Music without walls, from a scene without a name” [17, p. 55].

Meanwhile, at the turn of the 2010s, Judd Greenstein began referring to New Amsterdam’s repertoire as *indie classical* (derived from “independent classical,” by analogy with the widely used term indie rock). The term was soon adopted by many musicians—Missy Mazzoli, Matt McBain, Nadia Sirota, and Nico Muhly, who, in turn, founded the record label *Bedroom Community*.<sup>20</sup> The necessity of positioning their own labels within a market environment encouraged the search for adequate advertising strategies and recalled earlier classification practices used by the popular American weekly *Billboard*. In the 1950s, the magazine applied the term “indie classical” to several small companies releasing recordings of art music. Decades later, the word re-emerged with a broader meaning. In 2010, Grinshtein explained: “the term ‘indie[-]classical’ ... contains a horizontal and vertical component—the ‘vertical’ axis of our connection to the classical tradition, and the ‘horizontal’ axis of our connection to other independent musics.”<sup>21</sup>

However, by the mid-2010s, the authors had abandoned this definition. Mazzoli noted:

It’s so easy to create an idea of what my music is based on its labels: classical, indieclassical, post-minimal, contemporary, chamber-pop, opera, orchestral, etc. None of these words really tells you anything about how the music sounds or how you will feel about it, and they actually get in the way. I spend half my time explaining why the work “is” or “is not” classical, why I’m a “composer” versus a “musician,” or how I feel about the term “indie”. There’s no real answer to those questions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Official website of Bedroom Community. *Bedroom Community*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://bedroomcommunity.net/>

<sup>21</sup> As cited in Heidrick, E. R. (2020). *Bandsembles and Bandsembling: The History and the Experience* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Dr of Music)]. Florida State University, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> As cited in Heidrick, E. R. (2020). *Bandsembles and Bandsembling: The History and the Experience* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Dr of Music)]. Florida State University, p. 10.

William Brittle, David T. Little, and Missy Mazzoli generally employ the term *post-genre*<sup>23</sup>, John Adams readily uses *post-style* [18, p. 540], a concept rooted in postmodern pluralism and the blending of diverse musical elements.

The transition of art into a post- or metamodern culture had become evident as early as the final quarter of the twentieth century and was recognized by scholars in various national traditions. American millennial composers fit into the current space through the synthesis of diverse phenomena: the Western art music tradition (from medieval polyphony to the avant-garde and metamodernism), electronic music, folk, indie rock, and pop, as well as repetitive processes such as Glass's linear addition/subtraction and Reich's phase shifting and rhythmic constructions.

#### *Summary*

Generational continuity among minimalist composers has mostly been shaped by the shared cultural environment of New York, which fostered their artistic quest. The topographical map of the city reveals a division between the prestigious uptown with the cultivation of high art music in legendary concert halls, and the bohemian downtown with its alternative music of nightclubs and bars. Let us recall that the genealogical tree of minimalism took root in the artistic districts of Lower Manhattan—Soho and Greenwich Village—the cradle of the experimental currents of American art.

Minimalist composers not only organically merged into the broader cultural movement toward the erosion of traditional genre boundaries and hierarchical distinctions, but also acted as its initiators and advocates in many ways. Their compositional strategies, inspired by the successful symbiosis of diverse stylistic sources grounded in repetitive processes, allowed them to create a universal language attracting artists from all over the world into its orbit of influence.

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<sup>23</sup> Welch, K. (2016). *Performing with a post-genre ethos. A performance-led exploration of post-genre and indie classical music* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Queensland, p. 13.

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