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REPEATING OURSELVES

AMERICAN MINIMAL MUSIC
AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

Robert Fink

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

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

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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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).

690697809

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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 minimalist 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 large assumption that the composer is a (production) specialist whose abstract sound-products demonstrate total disengagement with conventional commercial culture.⁵ As portrayed by its devotees, musical minimalism indeed simpler, more consonant, more rhythmic, more sensual, even more popular than integral serialism — while remaining just as "purified" (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 proletarian, 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 music style that is cultivated without being "classical.")⁶ In any case, a more chromatic 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 unremitting consumption of sensations."⁷ To this *cri de coeur* one can reply only that the mystification was always in the critical image, not in art and music. This study will engage directly with the commodity for art: unremitting 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 encodes can never be named, much less specified and evaluated.

Nor is anybody outside the world of contemporary art music likely

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 flattened 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 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 minimalist music has one "true meaning," or that my text, musicological 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 with which the style can function. The result cannot be a devaluation of minimalist 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 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 Dunne, and Susan Sebbard; I am deeply indebted to my fellow fellows and c

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 Selwell, Nadine Hubbs, Rebecca Leydon, Byron Adams, Ruth Charloff, Judith Peraino, and Luisa Vilar-Paya. 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 pace*.

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

DeDonato and Kalicia Pivrotto, dealt elegantly with a complex and tricky world of late-twentieth-century permissions, examples, and illustrations. I also thank Annahid Kassabian, Michael Cherlin, Rose Subotnick, and especially Richard Leppert for taking time to do close readings of the manuscript. Obviously I bear the responsibility for any errors — but there are doubtless far fewer than there might have been thanks to this powerhouse editorial collective.

My work bears the intellectual traces of my teachers, most obviously Richard Taruskin and Joseph Kerman, distinguished senior scholars who have seen it evolve from some fuzzy yet urgent intuitions about the way music might be thought to “go” into a very different kind of historical and cultural study. To Professor Kerman, I owe immense gratitude for the space and breadth of his musicological vision — it was he who demanded that my dissertation, which was supposed to be a relatively modest study of Rossini and Verdi, include both Beethoven and minimalism. He upped the ante on *me* quite successfully, it turns out — and if there is any felicity in my prose, much of the credit goes to his careful pruning of an exuberant (!) young writer's worst habits. On the other hand, it was in a seminar run by Professor Taruskin that the initial kernel of this book's analytical thesis was planted; he has consistently taken a lively interest in how its shoots developed, ever wary of conventional conclusions, sloppy argumentation, or editorial grandstanding. He may not recognize some of the more exotic blooms, but none of my intellectual work would have taken root in quite the same way without his help and encouragement.

My colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles, have been the best anyone could wish: this manuscript is deeply marked with the traces of their collective intellectual ferment. Elizabeth Upton, Elisabeth Le Guin, Ray Knapp, and Tamara Levitz have been friends, coworkers, and group inspiration: they represent my ideal readers. I fear that Mitchell Morris doesn't quite realize the effect he has had on this and all my work (even the parts I didn't show him or anybody else); he is my oldest and closest musicological sibling, and I truly would not be writing this or any other book without his pioneering presence at Berkeley and beyond. Robert Walser has been a mentor, editor, Chair, inspiration, sparring partner, and good friend; in addition to indefatigable shepherding of my career and work, he was responsible as Chair for securing the several crucial leaves and course reductions that made the final writing *ushes* possible. I hope that he finds the result worthy.

Pride of musicological place must go to Susan McClary, whose intel-

lectual influence shines from every paragraph of this study. It is no exaggeration to say that I would not have produced this or any other scholarly work without her pioneering critical thought; actually working beside and with her at UCLA on a daily basis is even more inspiring. I also want to acknowledge some quite specific and fundamental propositions about music, temporality, and desire gratefully borrowed; I hope their idiosyncratic use here provides payoff with (at least some degree of) interest. This book's long gestation period spanned a sea change in musical ideology, and it seems absolutely incumbent on me to remind the reader that in 1990, when I began this work in earnest, Susan McClary was not only a powerful musicological example — she was *the* only musicological example of the kind of scholar I sought someday to be. Someday, is, as these things turn out, just about . . . *now*. I hope she will be pleased at what I wrote — and she has wrought.

Pride of place overall must go to Kimberly Fox, my life companion on this long intellectual journey. She met me when I was a stressed-out graduate student casting about for a dissertation topic and has thus drunk the relationship cup labeled “married to a writer” right to the dregs. Words cannot express the depth and complexity of my debt to her as a person and a thinker. (To acknowledge just the most obvious debt, the title of this book is hers.) All I know is that she is surely as relieved as I am that this is the last sentence of the first book I ever wrote.

INTRODUCTION

The Culture of Repetition

Is a sacrifice necessary? Hurry up with it, because — if we are still within earshot — the World, by repeating itself, is dissolving into Noise and Violence.

Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977)

I woke up this morning thinking that I might not want to listen to repetitive music ever again — the endless looping of images yesterday was enough for me for quite some time.

Message posted to the .microsound e-list on September 12, 2001

It is late on a Friday night in the industrial consumer society at the turn of the twenty-first century. The culture of repetition is in full swing.

In a converted warehouse near the urban core, hundreds of dancers are moving in rhythm to highly repetitive electronic music; many of them are under the influence of controlled substances, most notably 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), known to them as E, X, or Ecstasy. The DJ, who has been building erotic tension for 45 minutes by carefully interweaving current hard trance with classic disco tracks from the 1970s, pulls a prized 12-inch record from his crate: the 17-minute dance remix of Donna Summer and Giorgio Moroder's “Love to Love You Baby.” He spins the record to the halfway point and begins to inter-

cut Summers's elaborately structured moans into the driving groove that issues from his other turntable; as the crowd realizes what he is doing, they begin to scream and moan along with the record. Everyone reaches climax together as the bass drum kicks in . . .

A solitary late-night shopper wheels her cart down the soup aisle of a nearby supermarket; she finds the repeating pattern of the colored labels vaguely relaxing as she glides by. (Clinical monitoring of her eye-blink rate would show that she has entered the first stage of hypnoid trance.) She wonders, as she does every time she traverses this aisle, why there are so many different brands of soup and who buys them all. She remembers, suddenly, that she has been wanting for a long time to try some chunky chicken noodle. The music drifting down from speakers embedded in the ceiling hardly registers on her consciousness . . .

A writer sits in his suburban study watching a videotape of network television. He has almost 100 sets of tapes, 24 hours of every channel available from his local cable provider on a given day almost two months ago. He is watching them all, trying to make sense of the torrential flow of information pouring from the nation's TV sets. He has seen dozens of sitcoms, hundreds of reruns, literally *thousands* of commercials, and he has *thousands* more to go. He is exhausted — and a little terrified. Downtown, a junior advertising executive sits in a conference room with a computer printout. He is engaged in a strangely similar task, tallying against the agency's media plan the thousands of television and radio buys they executed last week for a major soft-drink account. The plan, carefully calibrated to maximize both audience reach and frequency, plots bursts of advertising in various mass-media vehicles (the vertical axis) against time (the horizontal axis); it looks rather like the output of a MIDI sequencer in piano-roll notation . . .

A college student sets out to read 150 pages of an overdue sociology assignment. Settling down at her desk with pencil, highlighter, and a one-liter bottle of Diet Coke, she decides the only thing lacking for her inviolable study ritual is some sonic ambience. Thumbing through her collection, and passing over the many pop and rock CDs, she picks her favorite relaxing-and-study music, a bargain reissue of a 1958 recording of Vivaldi violin concertos that includes the famous *Four Seasons*. She figures that if she mixes up the 20-odd movements on the 65-minute CD with random and repeat play, she should have enough familiar music in the background to keep her focused for several hours. Absently tapping her pencil in time with the soft music, she begins to read . . .

Down the hall, the girl's mother silently enters the darkened bedroom

of her six-year-old son. The headphones have slipped off, so she gently puts them back before flipping the cassette tape over. The music begins again (it is a Vivaldi concerto from the same set that her daughter is half-listening to next door), and she thinks, not for the first time, how strange it is that the Suzuki teacher demands they listen to the same few tracks over and over, even when sleeping. Their first, equally strange, group lesson was the previous afternoon: she was amused and a little intimidated by the repetition and discipline, her little boy sawing away in a line of 12 other children at an exercise that sounded like "peanut-butter sandwich" over and over — his teacher said, laughing, "Let's do it *ichi-man*," which she later found out meant, in Japanese, 10,000 repetitions! — and then bowing ceremonially at the end of the lesson. It's not music, it's just playing the same thing over and over; repetitious like factory work, she thinks, or like beginning meditation, like the idea of "just sitting" that cropped up in a little book her yoga teacher gave her, called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Turning out the light, she says a short mantra that it works. After all, taking up classical music can help improve performance in school, especially for boys, and it's never too soon to start thinking about college for this last one . . .

In a university electronic music studio, a sophomore composition major is fiddling with a keyboard and computer sequencing software. She has been listening obsessively to Steve Reich's 1976 *Music for Eighteen Musicians* and, trying to get the same effect, has created several slow, overlapping analog-string melodies and some faster figures for a sampled marimba. (The dot-dash piano-roll notation she is staring at looks oddly like the ad executive's media plan.) She clicks the mouse a few times, putting virtual repeat signs around all the loops, and starts playback. Cool. Very cool. Of course she'll never show this to her composition teacher — he'd just frown and sentence her to 10 more hours of Schoenberg. And, to tell the truth, if he asked her why anybody should care about two idiotic minimal loops repeating over and over and slowly going out of phase, she'd have no answer.

Except that it sounds like, *feels* like . . .

Her life.

The fundamental claim of this book is that the single-minded focus on repetition and process that has come to define what we think of as "minimal music" can be interpreted as both the sonic analogue and, at times,

a sonorous constituent of a characteristic repetitive experience of self in mass-media consumer society. Repetition, regimentation, and process are, of course, basic to any form of human organization more complex than hunter-gatherer bands. But the rationalized techno-world that began to take final shape in industrialized societies during the long post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s created for the first time the theoretical possibility of a strange feedback loop, whose many paradoxical complexities I want to fold into the single notion of a "culture of repetition." A culture of repetition arises when the extremely high level of repetitive structuring necessary to sustain capitalist modernity becomes salient in its own right, experienced directly as constituent of subjectivity; it is in this sense that we are constantly "repeating ourselves," fashioning and regulating our lived selves through manifold experiences of repetition. "Pure" control off/by repetition has become a familiar yet unacknowledged aesthetic effect of late modernity, sometimes experienced as pleasurable and erotic, but more often as painfully excessive, alienating, and (thus) sublime.

Often very repetitive musical experiences literally structure a given culture—as at the discotheque, in the Suzuki violin class, on classic FM radio, or at the experimental music concert—and thus analyzing the complicated way various kinds of repetitive musicking function within very broadly construed cultural contexts will be one of the basic aims of my study.¹ (We'll need to consider along the way such seemingly extramusical issues as the precise number of orgasms simulated by Donna Summer in her 1975 hit "Love to Love You Baby," the unintended consequences for listening practices of the 1948 "battle of the speeds" fought by Columbia and RCA-Victor, and the doctrinal debate between Rinzai and Soto Zen lineages on the most effective path to enlightenment.) But understanding repetitive music as a cultural practice must also include the possibility that repetitive minimal music itself, taken as an autonomous, not overtly representational cultural practice, might have a hermeneutic aspect: a set of "hidden" meanings that might point at much larger contemporary cultures of repetition, might trope off them, even signify on them in some ambivalent and not easily reducible way.

Eros and Thanatos: Music, Subjectivity, and the Culture(s) of Repetition

The few critical studies to date that attempt a hermeneutic of minimalism have limited themselves, it seems to me, by a pair of reductive assump-

tions. First, following (at whatever critical distance) the later Freud, they assume that the tendency to repeat is essential to human psychology, a kind of built-in homeostatic mechanism for reducing tension. Freud, biological essentialist to the core, postulated that all organic life strove toward the inorganic, a tendency he identified with Thanatos, the phantasmagorical "death drive." Critics of repetitive music have not forgotten that Freud invented the death instinct to explain a particular war neurosis, the *compulsion to repeat* traumatic events that seemed to seize shell-shocked veterans, in direct defiance of what had seemed an unvarying principle, that organisms always act to avoid displeasure. With Freud, modern interpreters seek the cultural significance of musical repetition "beyond the pleasure principle": repetition in music is thought to negate teleological desire, and thus repetitive music is allied with any and all psychic forces antithetical to Eros, to the goal-directed patterns of tension and release that define the ego-creating "life instinct."

It follows, second, that many psychoanalytic readings simply assume repetition-structures in music are unequivocal markers of regression—if not all the way back to the inorganic, than certainly back before the human subject, back to the nondialectical psychic states (infancy, schizophrenia) that precede ego differentiation. Theodor Adorno set the tone in *Philosophy of Modern Music* when he attacked Stravinsky's frozen ostinatos as musical "catatonia"; Wim Mertens, whose 1980 monograph still stands as the single extended culture-critical treatment of American minimalism, provides an explicit Frankfurt School echo, turning suddenly at the end of a long and detailed survey to denounce repetitive music as regressive and infantile. He himself appears in the grip of a repetition compulsion, reproducing a sonorous psychoanalytic diagnosis out of prewar Adorno as if by rote: "In repetitive music, repetition in the service of the death instinct prevails. Repetition is not repetition of identical elements, so it is not reproduction, but the repetition of the identical in another guise. In traditional music, repetition is a device for creating recognizability, reproduction for the sake of the representing ego. In repetitive music, repetition does not refer to eros and the ego, but to the libido and to the death instinct."²

Mertens is, of course, aware that within experimental musical circles repetition is prized precisely for its ability to dissolve traditional formal dialectics, unleashing strange and unpredictable surges of intensity; as Fluxus composer Dick Higgins once noted, implicit within extreme boredom is extreme danger, and thus extreme excitement.³ Critics less politically worried by minimalism have followed Mertens in linking those

nondialectical fluctuations of intensity to Lacanian tendencies in French thought, turning for an interpretive matrix to the antiteleological *jouissance* of French feminism and the anti-Oedipal "libidinal philosophy" practiced by Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze. Here repetitive music is valued precisely for its refusal to route musical pleasure through the symbolic order, for its self-negating regression to a pre-subjective space that Lacanian psychoanalysis calls "the Real." In a memorable turn of phrase, David Schwarz has argued that the repetitions of John Adams's *Nixon in China*, by cutting us off from memory and anticipation — that is, from Eros — cut us off from the self, "trapping us in a narrow acoustic corridor of the Real." By Naomi Cumming's account, the motoric string ostinatos in Reich's *Different Trains* are not just train sounds. They are sonorous pieces of what Julia Kristeva called the "pre-articulate," of the Real as refuge from the Holocaust and its "horror of identification."⁴

These psychoanalytical approaches can be elegant, suggestive, and highly ramified; they also demand attention because no one has, as yet, proposed a viable hermeneutic alternative. Lacanian theory has done a service — it has empowered at least a few scholars to "read" minimalist musical repetition as a cultural practice — but its assumptions can lock a critic into a rigid explanatory matrix where repetition is an abstract, purely psychic construct, and its singular meaning is always some form of self-annihilating regression unto death (or birth). One goal of this study is to wean the reader from attachment to such psychoanalytic rigor by linking repetitive music, flexibly and at multiple epistemological levels, to specific historical formations of material culture presented in their thickest, most irreducibly contingent aspects. It will be neither possible nor desirable to read musical repetition as the single aesthetic effect of any one cultural cause. "Culture of repetition" is a neat name for a deliberately shaggy portmanteau concept, useful precisely *insofar* as it refuses to assert a unitary psychological model or a single chain of cause and effect; rather than assume that one innate subjective drive to repeat always, everywhere, and in the same way weaves culture, why not explore the many different ways that our repetitive subjectivity is constituted, over and over, within the multiple, complex webs of material culture we weave? Reified categories handed down through the Frankfurt School and its epigones will be of little use here. For instance, it is simply not true, as Mertens claims, that teleological desire and subjectivity, the domain of Eros, are irrelevant to this new, supposedly "nondialectical" musical style.⁵ In the pages that follow, we'll trace the presence in mini-

malist music of both Eros and Thanatos, of dialectical entrainment and desire as well as libidinal liberation from it, never forgetting that these lofty psychoanalytic terms are just metaphors for the bodily effects of material social constructions.

The nearest precedent in methodology and scope for the current study is undoubtedly the fourth chapter, "Repeating," of *Noise*, Jacques Attali's influential 1977 treatise on the political economy of music. A alert reader will have recalled that Attali used transformations in the production and consumption of music to predict the advent of "repetitive society," a radical and general transformation of lived experience in postindustrial capitalism:

Repetition is established through the supplanting, by mass production, of every present-day mode of commodity production. Mass production, a final form, signifies the repetition of all consumption, individual or collective, the replacement of the restaurant by precooked meals, of custom-made clothes by ready-to-wear, of the individual house built from personal designs by tract houses based on stereotyped designs, of the politician by the anonymous bureaucrat, of skilled labor by standardized tasks, of the spectacle by recordings of it.⁶

Clearly Attali is not trapped in psychoanalytic categories; his interpretive field takes in the key twentieth-century material developments in media, technology, and the consumer society. But psychoanalytic obsession with repetition as Thanatos, as drive to death, provides his analysis with its grim subtext. The sound object, infinitely reproducible as commodity and endlessly repeatable as experience, is nothing less, it turns out, than a harbinger of mass cultural suicide. Stamped en masse from a model at basically no cost, pumped up with ersatz exchange-value by crude manipulation of demand, stockpiled uselessly by consumers who thereby mortgage the very time they would need to consume them, mass-produced musical recordings enact the collapse of all systems of value and the cancerous proliferation of meaningless, pleasureless sign exchange. "Death," intones Attali, "is present in the very structure of the repetitive economy: *the stockpiling of use-time in the commodity object is fundamentally a herald of death.*"⁷

Attali deals with repetitive music *per se* only once in his dark meditation on the repetitive society: minimalism, as it gives rise to the autonomy-negating relationships inside the Philip Glass Ensemble, makes a brief cameo appearance as pseudodemocratic "background noise for a repetitive and perfectly mastered anonymity."⁸ In her afterword, Susan McClary tries to revise *Noise* so that Downtown minimalist composers

like Laurie Anderson and Philip Glass, both linked by noisy immediacy and outsider status to the punk and New Wave explosions just over Attali's critical horizon, can participate in the "collective play" that he awaited under the utopian rubric Composing.⁹ But I suspect that Attali would likely disagree with his musicological interlocutor, preferring to read the pervasive repetition of minimalism as a nightmarish simulacrum of the fully repetitive society, the nonstop refrain of an all-embracing round dance of death. *Noise* is intentionally (and problematically) vague about what styles might ensue once the musical means of production are liberated, but a fully notated, high-tech, nonimprovisatory music performed by professionals, disseminated on recordings, even (in recent years) stockpiled in bulky and expensive box sets is certainly *not* on the menu.¹⁰

Itinerary: Among the Cultures of Repetition

Attali's broad grasp of socioeconomic realities is unmatched, as is his materialist understanding of how technological advances in production and reproduction engender pervasive repetition in consumer society — but he is too in love with Thanatos to see how complex and multivariate our experience of that repetition might be. The absolute dystopia of Attali's repetitive society is a powerful polemical construct, but an inflexible hermeneutic tool. Accordingly, in the interpretive excursions that follow, I will take up in turn various cultures of repetition, seeking flexible, ad hoc contexts for diverse moments of musical repetition. Some of these will indeed have little to recommend them; but we'll also visit repetition cultures of liberation, self-gratification, even subliminal resistance to authority.

Repeating Ourselves can be divided, on the largest scale, into two not-quite balanced halves, correlated loosely with the two ways that repetition and subjectivity have traditionally been understood to interact, giving rise to formations that I will refer to, in metaphoric Freudian shorthand, as the *culture of Eros* and the *culture of Thanatos*. In the culture of Eros, repetition is a technique of *desire creation*, a more-or-less elaborately structured repetitive entrainment of human subjects toward culturally adaptive goals and behaviors. In Chapter 1 we confront repetition as desire creation in its most unabashed form, the genre of popular music that the Reverend Jesse Jackson once denounced from the pulpit as "disco sex rock." Under the rubric "Do It ('til You're Satisfied)," we'll uncover through close musical analysis the presence of a complex syntax

of goal-direction in disco, taking as our text one of the most famously urgent dance floor meditations on sexual desire and, in early 1976, the occasion for one of the first extended dance mixes ever released, Donna Summer and Giorgio Moroder's notorious 17-minute version of "Love to Love You Baby." Moving from disco to what critics of the time liked to call "the higher disco," a correlate analysis of similar linear-harmonic structures in Steve Reich's exactly contemporaneous *Music for Eighteen Musicians* will uncover a similar syntax. Disco and minimalism appear as two linked instances of a new theoretical possibility in late-twentieth-century Western music: not the absence of desire, but the recombination of new experiences of desire and new experiments in musical form across a bewildering spectrum of teleological mutation. Process music's *recombinant teleology* supports a revisionist (and perhaps transgressive) interpretive conclusion: its repetition is not the negation of desire, but a powerful and totalizing metastasis. Minimalism is no more celibate than disco; processed desire turns out to be the biggest thrill of all.

The two chapters that follow make an attempt to excavate the material cultural framework for these new musical thrills. It was clear to most observers that 1970s disco was equal parts sexual desire and consumer display, perhaps even sexual desire *as* consumer display; Chapters 2 and 3 will move back to the 1950s to uncover the mercantile roots of repetitive desire creation in the higher disco. We'll be tracking down the most elusive species of hermeneutic game imaginable, attempting to argue that the pulse-pattern minimalism of Riley, Reich, and Glass uses the incessant pulsed repetition of mass-media advertising campaigns as what Lawrence Kramer would call a *structural trope*, a musical "procedure, capable of various practical realizations, that also functions as a typical expressive act within a certain cultural/historical framework."¹¹ It may be disconcerting to realize that within the cultural-historical framework of postindustrial consumer society, executing a media plan to deploy the thousands of advertising messages deemed necessary to sell automobiles and underarm deodorant qualifies as a "typical expressive act." It will no doubt be just as deeply dispiriting for partisans of musical minimalism to see the structural tropes of advertising used as a plate-glass hermeneutic window into the "blank" music they have consistently portrayed as resistant to commercialization by virtue of its very opacity.

Though the first wave of 1960s repetitive music has always been positioned as a particularly countercultural kind of noncommercial music — thus the pervasive anxiety of early partisans in the face of its subsequent success), it actually has more in common with Thomas Frank's mor-

dantly expressed alternate view of the 1960s counterculture as "a colorful installment in the twentieth-century drama of consumer subjectivity."¹² Chapter 2 will link *minimalism's* recombinations of teleology to the post-World War II debates over formations of subjectivity and desire in what was being understood for the first time as a newly "affluent" consumer society. Economists and sociologists outlined what appears in retrospect as a crisis of consumption: as rising productivity threatened to flood industrialized economies with a glut of goods, attention shifted to theories of desire, and desire *creation*, that could rationalize a society dependent for the first time on the systematic mass production of desire for objects—in other words, a society dependent on advertising. Advertising executives, proclaiming that "what makes this country great is the creation of wants and desires,"¹³ began to harness repetitive marketing strategies to transform the rather incoherent field of people's lived desire for objects into a fully rationalized system—a system that, as sociologist Jean Baudrillard points out, only at this postwar moment achieved the discipline and functionality of the preexisting system of mass-produced consumer objects. The subjective experience of desire within this system of objects was radically transformed through repetitive process. Consumer *telos* thus underwent in the 1960s the same recombination as did tonal desire in repetitive music. The isomorphism will become clear when we compare the representation of this experience within contemporary literature with the unmarked yet identical phenomenology of minimalist process music. (We'll read closely for structural tropes in George Perec's remarkable experimental novel-of-consumption, *Things: A Story of the Sixties*.) Thus forearmed, we can trace the phenomenology of consumer desire deep into the rhythmic and tonal structures of a pivotal text of musical minimalism, Steve Reich's 1973 *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*.

As Chapter 3 will make clear, the point is *not* to trash an influential compositional style, but to use close reading of its characteristic forms to illuminate both the music and a revisionist claim of materialist historical causality. Whatever their ideological relation to Fluxus experimentalism, Hindu mysticism, Ghanaian drumming, or any other countercultural scene you care to name, the repetition-structures of American minimal music broke into the Western cultural mainstream around 1965, the precise moment that the complete transformation of American network television by commercial advertising established the medium's distinctively atomized, repetitive programming sequence. Minimalism, whatever judgment of taste one might pronounce upon it, whatever local cultures

of repetition it might abet, thus takes on a unique cultural significance: it is the single instance within contemporary art music of what Raymond Williams called "flow," the most relentless, all-pervasive structural trope of twentieth-century global media culture. The sheer scope and intensity of this media torrent index an aesthetic effect that we might call the *media sublime*. Minimal music turns out to structure its repetitious desiring production in much the same polyphonic way as a spot advertising campaign spreads out across diversified media vehicles (we'll look quite carefully at just how such campaigns are conceptualized and realized); its effect on the listener is the sublime perception of all those campaigns and all that desire creation perpetually coruscating across the huge expanse of mass-media flow. Once again, in an aesthetic effect absolutely characteristic of consumer society, the sheer excess of processed desire turns out to be the biggest thrill of all.

The painful thrill of the media sublime has more than a little self-abnegating death drive in it; but the second large section of this study is devoted to the recuperation of Thanatos, to a sympathetic look at the use within industrial culture of ambient repetition as a form of homeostatic *mood regulation*. If the major issue in the first half of the book is the repetitive disciplining of desire—and thus the major focus socioeconomic—the overriding concern of the final two chapters is the use of repetition to discipline and control attention. Here technology comes to the fore, specifically as it facilitated a postwar culture of *repetitive listening*. The fortuitous combination of two technologies that had been invented to fight it out—Columbia's microgroove LP and RCA-Victor's super-fast 45 rpm record changer—created by about 1950 an entirely new and unintended possibility for repetitive musicking. One might place a single disc of "Music for Relaxation" on the changer and listen to it over and over—or, better yet, stack a half-dozen records, sit back, relax, and let the changer homogenize them for you into a home-made evening of *musical flow*. Like television—and actually a little before the broadcasting world caught on to its power—long-playing records could provide controlled ambience, dispensing hours of what the industry was happy to market (discreetly) as a seductive flow of "continuous and uninterrupted pleasure." (The technical language of repetitive listening echoes that of television; as instructional booklets continue to inform users, CD players that hold more than one disc are designed to allow the "programming" multiple recordings into a smooth "sequence.")

One of the most popular types of recording to pile on the spindle featured instrumental music of the eighteenth century. Baroque music had,

until this time, been a rather esoteric taste, but the advent of the LP and the record changer ushered in a revival, not so much of the Baroque *per se*, but of the kind of brisk, impersonal, generally upbeat concerto movements produced in large numbers by composers like Albinoni, Geminiani, Locatelli, and, of course, Vivaldi — a style of music so perfect for repetitive listening that it was quickly disparaged by musicological critics with the generic label *barococo*. Chapter 4 is built around one of the most powerful denunciations of the Baroque revival ever to see print, H. C. Robbins Landon's calling down of "A Pox on Manfredini" in the June 1961 issue of *High Fidelity*. Attacking in the harshest possible terms, he fashioned a sweeping indictment of barococo as corrosive solvent of traditional musical, cultural, class, and even sex-role distinctions. His hysterical overreaction betrays a profound unease at the effect on musical traditions of Attali's "repetitive society": the technologically mediated modernity exemplified by mass-produced box sets of concerti grossi consumed repetitively and subliminally on the record changer.

Robbins Landon denounced the new use of eighteenth-century concerted music as sonic "wallpaper," a term that prefigures 1980s attacks on minimalism; in both cases the real danger is a soi-disant classical music that submits to inarticulate flow, that allows its structures to dissolve under the antistructural bath of repetitive listening. It will be simple to uncover the sociojournalistic trope that casts minimalism as the "new Baroque," the repetitively patterned wallpaper music of its day; what may be less obvious is how the critical portrayal of composers like Vivaldi *during* the barococo revival had already cast them as unwitting purveyors of minimalist process music, an overdose of which on the record changer would make for a strikingly reductive, even hypnotic experience. (Adjectives like *stripped-down*, *flat*, and *minimal* start showing up in 1950s record liner notes — in descriptions of interchangeably motoric concertos by Telemann and Vivaldi — well before they crop up in art-magazine reviews of gallery events featuring Young, Reich, and Glass.)

Musicologists professed not to be surprised — just a little depressed — that the obscure eighteenth-century suites and concerti they had gone to such trouble to exhume sometimes ended up providing ambience at fashionable cocktail parties; after all, most of this music was in fact originally designed to function as background music. But barococo on the 1960s record changer was hardly just the technologically enhanced return of *Tafelmusik*. The most characteristic venue for Vivaldi was not the party where he was ignored, but the study or office, where he was indeed lis-

tened to, but in a new way. Barococo minimalism is music not for pleasure (Eros), but music for mental discipline, for mood regulation, for the homeostatic equalization of tension encapsulated in the very idea of "easy listening." The repetitive listening habits of the barococo revival were early harbingers of the way most music is consumed now, which in turn is a constituent of the way most people *are* now.

Annahid Kassabian has hypothesized that we live in a world of ubiquitous music, of repetitive, slowly changing tints and ambiances of sound used to regulate mood and construct loose nodal associations of subjectivities. Minimalism pioneered the deliberate creation of this kind of musical ambience in the 1960s, but it was not the first music to address itself successfully to the ubiquitous subject — in other words, like television, to influence everyone and be fully attended to by no one. Barococo concerto sets on the living-room record changer hold that controversial distinction. Satie's infamous *musique d'ameublement* was no more than a visionary failed attempt at "easy listening," as the composer, prodding his too-respectful audience to talk over his deliberately banal and repetitive musical wallpaper, must quickly have realized. What was needed, it turns out, was not furniture music, but just the right piece — from Philco, Decca, or RCA — of musical furniture.

Baroque concerto movements were not only fodder for repetitive listening; they also formed the raw material out of which Shinichi Suzuki, inventor of the *Saino-Kyoiku*, or Talent Education Method, of violin instruction, constructed perhaps the most systematic exercise in repetitive performance as cultural mood regulation ever attempted. In the final chapter of *Repeating Ourselves*, we'll investigate the way this gentle, unworldly pedagogue set out quite literally to repeat the world's children into better, more compassionate versions of their young selves. One of the most seductive cultural hypotheses about minimalism is that it is the revivifying result of the direct encounter of post-Cage experimental composers like Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass, under the sign of 1960s counterculture, with Eastern philosophies and cultures, followed by wholesale transfer of those philosophies into a dying Eurocentric musical discourse.¹⁴ Minimalism has certainly had a whiff of incense and patchouli about it from the beginning; nor is it useful to deny the obvious analogies between time-honored technologies of Vedic mood regulation like drones and mantras and what critic Tom Johnson, trying to make the point nominatively, dubbed the "New York Hypnotic School."¹⁵

But most such accounts are suffused with a gentle Orientalist longing, as Eastern culture quiets the vain striving of the modern Western compo-

sitional soul through its repetition-drenched otherness. Typically, whether the framework is Zen, Confucianism, or the Rig Veda, non-Western musics are characterized — with little regard to the complexities even superficial ethnographic research would uncover — as pure, unspoiled cultures of Thanatos, traditions of disciplined mood regulation as unitary and unchanging as their various musical forms are imagined to be. Even though minimalist composers rightly reject the “exotic” borrowing of musical instruments and textures, goes the argument, they have enriched Western musical culture through their openness to the radical structural difference of Eastern music, its use of “static nondevelopmental forms,” and their willingness to imagine those forms as the basis of a new, Western musical *Thanatopia*.¹⁶ My suspicion of this self-congratulatory historiographic trope should be obvious, but I have chosen to recoil from it in what might seem an idiosyncratic direction. Rather than attempt to attack the existence, accuracy, or motivation of Western appropriations of Eastern music, I hope to let the Oriental subaltern speak. We’ll consider, and identify as an unsung minimalist art music, the Suzuki Method, one of the most singular and successful appropriations of Western art music into Eastern culture and philosophy ever attempted.

This intense, cross-cultural culture of musical repetition was formed when a young Japanese violin teacher, steeped in both the formal study of Zen and a pedagogical method derived from Buddhist techniques of character formation, attempted to teach his young pupils to play the Mozart he had grown to love on recordings as naturally as they learned their mother tongue at home. Suzuki’s Method fused distinctly Japanese repetitive mood-regulation techniques from Zen Buddhist philosophy (teaching as repetitive drill; *katachi de hairu*, or “entering in through basic forms”) with the American-style industrial repetition of his father’s violin factory and the new technological possibilities for immersive repetitive listening provided by long-playing records and cassette tapes. The pedagogical spectacle that ensued took 1960s America by storm: the parents who had gotten into the habit of piling Vivaldi concertos on the home stereo were now watching, slack-jawed, as those same concertos were played in brisk, inhuman unison by platoons of perfectly turned-out children, some no more than four years old, in military formation on gymnasium floors.

We’ll consider Suzuki’s pedagogical Method as a unique hermeneutic window into the possible relation of Eastern philosophy and 1960s musical culture — can we really talk about “Zen-like minimalism” in music, and what happens when it crops up within Western musical practices?

Contemporary American accounts of Suzuki and his Method show the traces of profound cultural anxiety; evidently the Western subject did not recognize itself — or the musical practices long thought to underpin that self — when mirrored back through the *ongaku-do*, Suzuki’s explicitly spiritual “way of music.” The material metaphors that Western journalists reached for — machines, robots, factories, mass production — show Americans misreading Suzuki’s Zen-inspired repetition according to their own deep-seated ambivalence over the fate of individual subjectivity in a repetitive and industrialized society.

Suzuki explicitly denied any desire to manufacture musical automata, returning time and again to a fundamental Buddhist truth: that repetition leads not to the abnegation of the minimal self, but to an expansive mental state where, to quote the title of one of his most famous books, “love is deep.” The road to deep compassion passes through the powerful cross-cultural idea of repetitive performance as “practice.” In Western musical culture repetitive practice is indeed an industrial concept, a legacy of the nineteenth-century need to rationalize and systematize the mass production of musicality. But in the Soto Zen tradition from which Suzuki’s *Saino-Kyoiku* sprung, repetitive practice was valued for its own sake; the endless repetition of what Soto practitioners called “just sitting” (*shikan taza*) was not a means to some other end, but the goal itself: “These forms are not the means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture is itself to have the right state of mind.”¹⁷ Thus Suzuki’s Method transmuted one of the least inspiring aspects of Western musical culture, its use of repetitive practice in soul-destroying industrial models of pedagogy and performance, into an avant-garde redemption of musical repetition as a self-justifying act.

Suzuki himself, a lover of Fritz Kreisler’s Beethoven and Mischa Elman’s recording of Schubert’s “Ave Maria,” would undoubtedly have been confused by minimalist process music; but his tonalization exercises, short minimalist musical fragments designed to be repeated tens, even hundreds, of thousands of times, epitomize “Zen-like minimalism” in music. As an experiment, Suzuki himself once decided to repeat the most basic of his tonalizations, a single long tone, 100,000 times. (The year was 1957, and it took him 25 days.) Had he done this in a Soho loft, he would now be hailed as an avant-garde originator of musical minimalism; since hundreds of thousands of Suzuki students now do less strenuous versions of that experiment across the world every day, it seems that, taken as a form of musical minimalism, the Suzuki Method is the most powerful culture of repetition, and the most pervasive and suc-

cessful form of experimental musical practice, ever to come out of the fusion of Occident and Orient.

We in the West would do well to remember that the fusion was not on our terms, but theirs.

Minimalism Rescued from Its Devotees

I would like to finish this Introduction by acknowledging that my investigation into musical minimalism as a cultural practice is bound to appear extremely idiosyncratic in several fundamental ways to those familiar with the extant literature. Some of the motivation for these idiosyncrasies is doubtless to be found in the personality of the author, and its justification found in the overall success or failure of his work as it proceeds from here; but there are a few important methodological choices that, to avoid confusion, I feel it necessary to justify with some degree of formality before we begin.

First, the very act of interpreting minimalist process music as a cultural practice contravenes musicological and critical orthodoxy. This is not simply a matter of twentieth-century musicology's built-in bias toward formalism. Minimalism sits squarely within the "New Sensibility" of the mid-1960s, and Susan Sontag was speaking for many when she observed that the key aesthetic stance tying together the diverse cultural productions — avant-garde Happenings, process art, pop music, New Wave cinema, etc. — that outlined that sensibility was an unremitting hostility toward the interpretation of art. In her 1965 manifesto "Against Interpretation," Sontag imagined cultural hermeneutics (the task of the present study, alas) as subjecting the pristine works of New Sensibility to a kind of environmental degradation, "like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere."¹⁸ Some quite extreme contemporary art strategies were understandable as part of an ongoing rear-guard action against interpretive pollution: art could flee into pure decoration, parody, even nonart. The defensive posture Sontag most admired has more than a tang of the minimalist aesthetic: "Ideally, it is possible to elude the interpreters in another way, by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be . . . just what it is."¹⁹

If the minimal work of art is to be "just what it is," there is little profit in worrying about what it might mean. Minimalist composers, like their compatriots in the visual arts, have tended to take extreme anti-interpretive stances for granted. Steve Reich, who studied analytic phi-

losophy in college, was particularly fond, at least in early years, of pronouncements that echo the prohibition encoded in the magnificent fin axiom — *Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent* —. Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "Music Dan Theatre Video and Film are arts in time. Artists in those fields who keep this in mind seem to go further than those mainly concerned with psychology or personality."²⁰ Most twentieth-century compositional theory has tended to this stern formalism; what is striking about the discourse around minimalist music is how many supposedly independent critical voices are also silent on that about which they assume they cannot speak.

One reason, of course, is that much of the critical discourse around experimental genre like minimalism has been that of insiders: overwhelmingly until the 1980s, and still significantly thereafter, those who wrote about minimalism also wrote minimalism, and the result has been criticism of a quite remarkable deadpan literalism: "[Music for a Large Ensemble] is a very colorful work, bright in its opening, a little darker in the second section, brighter again as it moves into the third. The first section's timbral blending of women's voices with cellos and basses is very effective within the texture. The mallet instruments, clear and solid at the beginning, gradually blend into the background as trumpets and soprano saxophones surge forward. One could watch and feel the rhythmic patterns lock into place as the players relaxed into the performance. It is a bright, joyous, and exciting work."²¹

Joan La Barbara clearly felt it her duty to report that Reich's work was . . . just what it was, in as much blankly descriptive detail as her editors would allow; clearly she is a supporter of minimalism, as her final simulacrum of a critical judgment attests. But it is not clear why we should care. Self-consciously "minimalist" criticism of minimalism — and examples could be multiplied from the pens of Tom Johnson, William Duckworth, K. Robert Schwarz, and others — limits itself to careful, systematic description of the surface details of musical structures followed by testimony as to their sensuous effects on the critic. Sontag argues — and I would agree — that there is immense cultural value in providing "a really accurate, sharp, loving description" of an artwork; and minimalist insiders have excelled at the kind of "transparent" criticism she championed: "*Transparency* is the highest, most liberating value in art — and in criticism — today. Transparency means experiencing the luminousness of thing in itself, of things being what they are."²² Especially in the early days of experimental minimalism, providing a transparent critical reflection of this strange, exotic luminosity was a worthy, even heroic, task:

given the complete disregard of repetitive music by the critical and academic establishment, the gleam of that reflection was often the only light anyone outside a small coterie could see.

But a generation has passed, and there is less need to carry a torch for minimalism. The critical landscape around this music has become cluttered with aging technical descriptions and restatements of compositional manifestos. At least in the neighborhood of contemporary music, the New Sensibility is growing old, and it may be time for Sontag's critical pendulum to swing back. Unfortunately the belated intervention of academic music theory has only exacerbated matters: after decades of ignoring minimalism because it had so obviously upset their modernist compositional heroes, some music theorists began to realize in the 1980s that this music in fact resonated perfectly with the extreme formalism in musical analysis that held sway within their discipline. Pioneering studies by Richard Cohn and Paul Epstein were undertaken at no little risk of apostasy from the high modernist church; but in each case the analytical methodologies that had served to parse Schubert and Schoenberg, tweaked somewhat so as to pay attention less to harmonic stasis and more to rhythmic complexities, seemed to work just as well on Steve Reich and Philip Glass.²³ Jonathan Bernard has been the only American theorist to push past "the music itself," seeking to analyze the structures of minimal music in the context of minimalist and process aesthetics in painting and sculpture. This is indeed a species of musical hermeneutics, but with a strangely tautological aspect: the ascetic formalism of minimalist music simply bounces back off the formalist asceticism of 1960s visual art, highly polished mirrors reflecting each other's cultural emptiness in infinite analytical regress. Pure musical formalism is breached (for which we must be grateful), but the larger formalism, that of the autonomous work of art with no relation to material culture or history, remains inviolate.²⁴

A true cultural hermeneutic of minimal music must do more than describe or analyze minimalism: it must attempt to make its emptied-out formal language *signify*. Success will come, in all likelihood, against the collective will of its creators and partisans. In fact, the one reliable source of hermeneutic intuitions about minimalist music is the taunting and jeering of its myriad enemies within the critical community. Minimalism's attackers have tended to show little sympathy for the New Sensibility and feel no compulsion toward a transparent, nonideological criticism. They are unimpressed by the way minimal music is *just what it is* — because they don't feel that *what it is* adds up to very much. Faced with

the uncomfortable sociological truth that such a simple-minded music has been vastly more popular than, by their estimation, it should be, they are almost forced to hypothesize about its cultural significance. If minimalism makes no sense on its own terms, perhaps it can be understood as a kind of social pathology, as an aural sign that American audiences are primitive and uneducated (Pierre Boulez); that kids nowadays just want to get stoned (Donal Henahan and Harold Schonberg in the *New York Times*); that traditional Western cultural values have eroded in the liberal wake of the 1960s (Samuel Lipman); that minimalist repetition is dangerously seductive propaganda, akin to Hitler's speeches and advertising (Elliott Carter); even that the commodity-fetishism of modern capitalism has fatally trapped the autonomous self in minimalist narcissism (Christopher Lasch).

Rather than abuse these critics, I want to use them, to gather clues about minimalism as a powerful cultural practice from those who would prefer to see it as a pathological cultural symptom. A truly idiosyncratic feature of the following study is the way it takes such critical putdowns with a kind of inspired literalism, applying hermeneutic jujitsu to flip and then open up dismissive analogies normally used to close off critical discourse. In the process, the implied value judgments are summarily suspended. Thus, a series of five disreputable diagnoses — metaphorical propositions of the form "Minimalism is just . . ." — provides the chapters of this book with an alternate structure, one that's set in the Table of Contents as subliminal commentary in editorial brackets:

- Minimalism is just . . . the higher disco (Chapter 1)
- Minimalism is just . . . like a soap commercial (Chapter 2)
- Minimalism is just . . . what television should be (Chapter 3)
- Minimalism is just . . . wallpaper music (Chapter 4)
- Minimalism is just . . . sitting (Chapter 5)

The final idiosyncrasy follows, to some extent, from the decision to follow those who take minimalism as an illness, and that illness as a metaphor: I am going to define "minimal music," the subject of inquiry, in a deliberately antinomian way. The idea that there is a coherent genre of music called "minimalism" is a belated journalistic construction that I am not anxious to reify further.²⁵ It has become standard parlance because it is terminologically vague enough to encompass the quite different musical strategies followed by a loose coterie of musicians who,

conveniently enough for the cultural historian, all knew each other and lived near one another—if not always in amicable proximity—in downtown New York City during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Other names—drone music, hypnotic music, repetitive music, pulse music, modular music—would have cut deeper, and in different ways, through the historical record; in what follows I will not discard entirely the label “minimalist,” but the body of music I want to discuss hardly follows the conventional boundaries that term outlines.

In a study of minimal music and late-twentieth-century cultures of repetition, we are primarily concerned, of course, with minimalism as repetition, particularly as repetition with a regular pulse, a pulse that underlies the complex evolution of musical patterns to alter listener perceptions of time and *telos* in systematic, culturally influential ways. In terms of experimental music of the 1960s and beyond, this repertoire includes at its center what I will refer to as *pulse-pattern minimalism*: the music of Terry Riley in his post-*In C* vein, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and their immediate followers. It does *not* include most of the drone minimalism of La Monte Young, excepting early works like *arabic number (any integer)* to *Henry Flynt*, one of the rare Young works structured by rhythmically regular repetition; nor does it include any composers who followed Young down the reductive path of sustained microtonal drones. Thus I am not invested in the historical revisionism that animates Edward Strickland's heavily researched study on the origins of minimalism; I have no brief in this book to refocus critical attention away from the “famous” minimalists—the pulse-pattern composers—back to the unsullied avant-garde attitude of “original” drone minimalists like Young (the invidious terms are insider-critic Tom Johnson's).²⁶ If we are interested in minimalism as a cultural practice, we will be drawn not to its purest, most unpromising instances, but precisely to where minimalism is most “famous,” where the cultural practice is widest and most significant. (This is not to deny that microtonal drone music is also readable as cultural practice—but the practice would be a very different one.)

Having disentangled from minimalism its core of repetitive music, we can add to it some key instances of repetitive *musicking*. Latent in the structure of this study, but worth stating openly, is the assumption that certain ways of performing, recording, disseminating, and consuming music can be considered to be forms of musical minimalism—insofar as “minimalism” is the name we give to musicking implicated in contemporary cultures of repetition—even if the music involved has little to do with the experimental avant-garde. Disco and electronic dance music are

“minimalist” in this way. It is not so much that any given dance track or record *itself* is like an autonomous, self-contained “piece” of minimalism; rather, it is the entire cultural matrix within which these tracks are chosen, combined, and listened to that defines a repetitive musical practice. Perhaps even more outlandish is my implicit claim in the final two chapters that, in postwar America, a certain subset of eighteenth-century instrumental music, epitomized by the concertos of Antonio Vivaldi, was transformed through advances in reproductive technology into the first widely available minimalist trance music. Obviously any given Manfredini concerto is not “really” minimalist or repetitive, except in a loose metaphorical sense when compared with, for instance, the dense complexities of the elder Bach. But stacking dozens of such workaday concertos on the record changer, turning down the volume, and half-following them in an atmosphere of studious concentration—that is *minimalism as a form of repetitive musicking*. (Christopher Small's definition of musicking includes *all* types of listening to music.) And learning a Vivaldi concerto by playing through its melodic patterns 10,000 times and then submerging your musical ego by performing it in unison along with 500 other students is, conversely, *repetitive musicking as a form of minimalism*.

One final thought: If the subject of this book is, at the most basic level, the implications within our culture of a widespread taste for repetitive musicking, then, as Small would be quick to point out, what is really at stake is a taste for certain kinds of repetitive relationships. “Musicking,” he writes, “is about relationships, not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those we desire to exist and long to experience.”²⁷ It is my belief that most commentators have shied away from a cultural reading of minimalist repetition because they cannot believe that we *really* desire the types of deadly, inhuman relationships (*I want my MTV?*) such musicking would seem to encode. To be sure, not all repetition cultures set up human relationships that are death-obsessed and oppressive, as the diametrically opposed, vigorously life-affirming examples of disco and Zen make clear. But perhaps the act of musicking is more complex than even Small gives it credit for; need every act of music making express the desire to actualize and idealize the often problematic relationships encoded in its structures? As will become clear in the explorations that follow, repetitive musicking rarely expresses a longing for

authentic relationships that don't exist, and in this way has at least the virtue of honesty that more traditionally avant-garde musicking often lacks. More often repetitive music provides an acknowledgment, a warning, a defense — or even just an aesthetic thrill — in the face of the myriad repetitive relationships that, in late-capitalist consumer society, we all must face over and over (and over and over . . .).

We repeated ourselves into this culture.

We may be able to repeat ourselves out.

PART I

THE CULTURE OF EROS

Repetition as Desire Creation