Engaging Piano Students With minimalism

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As teachers, our quest to find contemporary piano music that appeals to students, yet presents worthwhile challenges, has become an overwhelming endeavor. Today we are faced with more composers and musical styles than ever before. The task of embracing the music is complicated: teachers can often feel slight apprehension toward approaching unfamiliar music and composers. Overcoming their biases requires a shift from the comfortable pieces that abide by a
tonal or modal idiom toward the more abstract and eclectic musical writing evident today. One of these more recent musical styles, known as "minimalism," offers a wealth of valuable repertoire for piano students of every level.

What Is Minimalism?

Minimalism arose during the 1960s as a reaction to the academic rigidity of serialism and the logical absurdity of indeterminacy. Its beginnings were defined by four composers who are now thought to be the pioneers—La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Musical minimalism shares its aesthetic with the American visual arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s bearing the same name: both mediums seek a new mode of expression using a meager economy of means. In music, repetition of short motivic cells and ostinatos is part and parcel of the minimalist repertoire, and its use ranges from the overly repetitive and conspicuous musical patterns as seen in Terry Riley’s orchestral work In C (and nearly all of Philip Glass’s music) to the wonderfully disguised tapestries in John Adams’s piano works.

Minimal works possess various characteristics that are inviting for students. There is no rite of passage common to myriad avant-garde styles, which demand that listeners be acquainted with the composer’s theories and thoughts on music to gain any real understanding or appreciation. Minimalism eschews elitism in favor of an all-inclusive music for the masses that appeals to music connoisseurs, students and casual listeners alike. Such an open receptivity has led to its increasing popularity as a new and exciting, yet serious form of musical expression.

Another factor for its success has been its synthesis with other musical styles and aesthetics. The Estonian composer Arvo Pärt writes minimal music with a mystic quality that reflects his profound belief in the doctrines of the Russian Orthodox Church. American composer Michael Torke combines his love of jazz and minimalism in the Telephone Book and various other works. John Adams’s childhood experiences listening to LP recordings of Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and other romantics, and his late teenage exposure to Steve Reich’s music, imbues his minimalist works with passionate outbursts characteristic of the romantic era. And David Lang, co-founder of the Bang on a Can Festival in New York, composes a more industrial type of minimalism. It is also easy to witness how mainstream culture has embraced minimalism with a preponderance of minimalist music in contemporary films ranging from Philip Glass’s scores, such as The Hours and The Truman Show, to Michael Nyman’s The Piano and countless others.

On Learning Minimal Repertoire

The notion that minimalism is overly repetitive should not be viewed as a flaw, but rather, as its most defining and enticing quality. We can perceive change more precisely when it is subtle and gradual. From a pianist’s perspective, the repetition of an arpeggio, ostinato or some other musical pattern allows a student to focus on technical difficulties, including balanced dynamics between each note, hand position and movement, legato and the many other articulations. When playing repeated short musical patterns, students memorize music more easily, thereby devoting more time to the proper execution of the music by ensuring their hands are not engaged in unwanted movements or other bad habits. The conscientious repetition of a musical pattern translates to better coordination at the piano if approached correctly. Thoughtful and reflective repetition instills an effective practice method that is easily adaptable to all musical styles.

Minimal music presents unique pianistic challenges. While many of the pieces are not difficult from a technical standpoint, they do present various synchronization problems that test a pianist’s aural awareness. In classical repertoire from previous centuries, organic growth is made manifest through, among other things, melodic development, but growth in minimal music is experienced as subtle transformations of repetitive patterns. These patterns can be very disorienting, and students must make effort to ensure they perform the exact number of repetitions for each musical pattern since playing fewer or more repetitions bears ramifications on the formal structure of the piece. Playing by sight doesn’t solve this issue since the repetitive musical patterns have a strong visual homogeneity on the page that can prove challenging to follow without stumbling.

A Closer Look At The Composers And Their Music

A representative selection of works by Steve Reich, Philip Glass, John Adams, David Lang and Michael Torke provides an overview of varied compositional techniques used by minimalist composers. Steve Reich’s Piano Phase (1967) for two pianos (or two marimbas) is a defining piece of the early minimalist style (see Example 1). It features "phasing," where both pianists repeat the same musical figure for a specific duration, but tempo fluctuations in the second piano give the effect of sounding in- and out-of-phase with the first piano. After repeating the second measure the number of times indicated in the score, the second pianist accelerates slowly and microscopically so his pattern is eventually a sixteenth note ahead of the first pianist. This gradual process continues until the original musical pattern lines up in unison once again, which signals the end of the section.

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The second pianist will find it quite challenging to break away from the unwavering tempo set by the first pianist. Students first learning this piece will undoubtedly accelerate too quickly, ending up more than a sixteenth note ahead of the previous pattern. The demands on the pianist are primarily aural rather than technical: each time the second pianist moves a sixteenth note ahead, the vertical (harmonic) intervals generated between the pianos rotate, giving the aural impression of a new pattern. Students will want to practice the contiguous patterns without phasing at first to hear their nuanced variations. After much practice, students will have a greater control and awareness of tempo fluctuations, which will aid in the performance of other musical styles.


Philip Glass’s repertoire offers an extensive minimalist piano collection that includes dances, etudes, concertos and pieces for numerous films. Glass’s Mad Rush (1979) contains many of his signature compositional techniques, including irregular meters, polyrhythms (most often two against three), transparent arpeggiated figures and additive structures. Pianists must perform the “mad rush” of arpeggiated notes excerpted below in a lively tempo. Most apparent here is his use of a single note value (sixteenth notes), which Glass reserves for fast passages in nearly all his piano works. Glass favors gradual harmonic changes using a contrast of tonally functional chords and embellishing chords that accentuate the dramatic character of his music. The excerpt illustrates the growth of Glass’s broken chords through an additive process, increasing by two notes at alternating iterations, which changes the meter.

Glass’s Mad Rush (Example 2) provides a useful finger workout that steers away from the monotony of traditional warm-up exercises. Students can work on evenness, balanced dynamics, a light touch aided by a relaxed wrist and on maintaining a quick but steady tempo. I suggest only half pedal to produce a clear and transparent sound. The metronome can initially be applied as a guide for establishing a working tempo, but since the meter is irregular, the sense of pulse alters in ways that cannot be accounted for by a metronome without disturbing the beat. To learn more about Glass’s style, I recommend exploring his Etudes (1994) for piano solo.

John Adams’s works frequently adopt Reich’s rhythmically displaced patterns (though without phasing), but the result is much freer. His first piano solo pieces, considered by various authors his “opus one,” include China Gates (1977) and Phrygian Gates (1977–78). The “gates” consist of abrupt changes to new sections through a change of mode. The musical excerpt on the next page (Example 3), drawn from China Gates, features an example of gating. Adams uses two related yet contrasting modes (A-flat Mixolydian and G-sharp Aeolian) that are delineated by the low resonating pedal notes. The ostinatos connect smoothly between sections through the reinterpretation of a single pitch—E-flat across the gate, now interpreted as D-sharp—a technique not entirely foreign to classical composers, referred to as common-tone modulation in tonal contexts. Another aspect that binds the sections is found in the left-hand patterns, which generate a retrograde inversion relationship centered on the gate change as its axis, revealing a small piece of the puzzle behind the workings of China Gates.

The textures in China Gates combine two ostinatos: the first is unchanging in its pattern while the second one mutates by contracting and expanding in length. Examples from minimalist literature such as China Gates helps students learn music that is not written in any time signature, and more importantly, they will learn to play music that frequently changes the metrical placement and length of the perceived pulse. Starting in the fourth measure, perceived downbeats occur every four notes and soon after contract to
every three notes; Adams commonly adds rhythmic interest in this manner. To create a soft and resonant sound, Adams advises in the performance notes to his score that “special attention should be given to equalizing the volume of both hands so that no line is ever louder than another.” Students accustomed to performing pieces with established metrical strong beats and weak beats will naturally want to emphasize what they perceive as downbeats, but they must resist the urge in order to intertwine the patterns and not give precedence to either pattern. Keeping an even dynamic level becomes more challenging when playing the notes that collide sporadically between the patterns, which must be pressed by both hands in order to maintain the flow of each ostinato.

The piano works of several other minimalist composers also merit exploration. Michael Torke’s Two Drinks (2000) infuses jazz harmonies that imbue the work with great intimacy. Torke describes his work as having two melodies that are suggestive of two people at the early stages of a relationship. “As the phrase moves up, one melody gets shorter, receding passively, while the other gets longer, becoming perhaps bolder. But as the phrase descends, the roles reverse.” The two phrases Torke describes consist of interwoven ostinatos that evolve in a quiet and intriguing way.

David Lang’s Gravity (2005) and After Gravity (2007), two recent minimalist works for four hands intended to be performed as a pair, are also a great addition to any contemporary pianist’s repertoire. Gravity features two descending repeated patterns derived out of seventh-chords, while a tune comes to the fore in the middle register. Lang describes After Gravity as conveying something “floating and weightless” by using structures that prevent the music from landing anywhere. This is the more difficult of the two pieces, due to the rhythms between the piano parts that give the illusion of different meters.

The composers mentioned here offer a wide array of repertoire for pianists of all levels. Students at their earlier stages would be advised to pursue Glass, Lang or Torke’s piano pieces, while those who are more experienced might undertake Adams’s Phrygian Gates for piano solo and Hallelujah Junction for two pianos. These compositions, although not outwardly flashy or virtuosic, teach students to be in sync with repetitive patterns common to the minimalist style, which is indispensable for performers striving to be well-versed in the diverse styles evident in musical writing today.

Notes