

Fink, Robert. 2005. *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Reviewed by Rob Haskins

The music of the American minimalist composers—above all, Steve Reich and Philip Glass—continues to excite an increasingly diverse, international public. DJs have hammered out artful and groovy remixes; online mavens have banded together in chat groups; and the advertising industry has licensed Glass's music and commissioned Reich knock-offs as parts of campaigns for cars, cereal, soft drinks, and many other products. The composers have found success in more conventional venues as well. Last fall, Reich won the Edward MacDowell Medal, while Glass saw the premieres of his eighth symphony and his twenty-first opera.

This unusual assortment of venues and events connected with minimal music makes it—perhaps more than any other twentieth- or twenty-first-century Western classical repertoire—admirably suited to a sustained examination of its wider cultural contexts. For the most part, however, few have ever attempted such a study. Most scholarly works on minimalism resolutely privilege its formalism and have used sophisticated music-analytical tools to explicate the music's structure (among many fine examples, see Cohn 1993); only recently have scholars undertaken broader, culturally grounded inquiries (Grimshaw 2002).

Thus, Robert Fink's *Repeating Ourselves*, a major work of such cultural criticism, is long overdue. Fink, an associate professor of music at UCLA, has a lively mind that has led his teaching and scholarship in a variety of directions, from the dizzying array of genres (and subgenres) of electronic dance music to Freudian readings of Brahms and Schoenberg. In all his work, he profitably reads music against the grain to disclose unexpected cultural connections and resonances; his best work discusses popular and classical musics in such a way that he honors both without reinscribing traditional (and sometimes problematic) methods of determining their value.

Fink situates American (and some European) minimal music in a number of concurrent cultural activities. In chapter 1, "Do It ('til You're Satisfied): Repetitive Musics and Recombinant Desires," he counterpoises Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians* with Donna Summer's "Love to Love You, Baby" (both from 1976) to explore the multivalent and erotically charged teleology of minimalism and disco. Chapter 2, "A Colorful Installment in the Twentieth-Century Drama of Consumer Subjectivity": Minimalism and

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the Phenomenology of Consumer Desire,” examines the culture of repetitive advertising in the 1960s, theorizes it (with the help of Jean Baudrillard’s ideas of postmodernity), and briefly considers how several compositions by Reich and Glass might be heard to echo it. Fink continues this inquiry in chapter 3, “The Media Sublime: Minimalism, Advertising, and Television,” with more sustained analyses of Reich’s *Eight Lines* (1979), Terry Riley’s *In C* (1964), Louis Andriessen’s *Hoketus* (1977), and “The Grid,” from Glass’s score for Godfrey Reggio’s film *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). Chapter 4, “‘A Pox on Manfredini’: The Long-Playing Record, the Baroque Revival, and the Birth of Ambient Music,” considers the repetitive, mood-regulating therapy offered by automatic record changers loaded up with mediocre performances of Vivaldi, Telemann, and other composers of Baroque *Tafelmusik*. Finally, Fink turns to the intersections of minimalism and Suzuki violin instruction in America in chapter 5, “‘I Did This Exercise 100,000 Times’: Zen, Minimalism, and the Suzuki Method,” and ultimately concludes that repetitive musical and social activities facilitated the minimalist process-works of the mid- and later 1960s.

The brilliant central chapters 3 and 4 provide the finest examples of Fink’s talent for interdisciplinary scholarship. His central thesis in chapter 3 asserts that minimal music “arises with and mirrors a key historical transformation of the consumer society: the self-conscious postwar transfer of the repetitive structures of mass production from the material realm of the object into the symbolic realm of discourse . . . the mass production of *desire for goods through discourse*” (81–82; original emphasis). This desire, Fink tells us by way of Baudrillard, is wholly inauthentic, and the need we think we perceive for specific objects is actually a need to create social meaning, which can never be fulfilled (97). The system of mass production and mass advertising creates a discourse in which consumption is no more than an act of signification—and the constant proliferation of signs within the discourse ensures that consumers will be forever lost in a hall of mirrors, consuming without ever feeling satisfied.

Minimalism reflects this feeling not merely through its use of repetition as a surface compositional device, but more deeply in its ambiguous interpenetration of slow metamorphosis—or even slower rhythmic strata (as in many of Reich’s works)—and sparkling, kinetic surface activity. In a dazzling passage, Fink calls attention to the resonance that this characteristic of minimal music shares with the experience of two principal characters in Georges Perec’s novel *Les Choses* (1965), characters so obsessed with objects and the act of consumption that they experience, as Perec writes, “‘a pleasure so intense as to verge on numbness: an impression, almost exactly opposite and almost exactly identical to the experience of speed’” (101; original emphasis).

Fink uses this image as a complement to his analysis of Reich's *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ* (1973). In this work, a two-chord harmonic progression in the voices and organ slowly and systematically appears in longer rhythmic values as the faster-moving percussion parts grow increasingly dense. At a certain point, the rhythmic values of the harmonic progression gradually return to their original durations. Eventually, Reich repeats this design twice more, with different progressions and (in one instance) a different meter. In the final section of the work, a fourth progression appears; this time, however, the augmentation of rhythmic values results in longer note values than in any other section of the piece, and is not followed by a complementary diminution process. In Fink's words, this section functions "as if a potentially infinite process of doubling and redoubling had simply broken off at the limits of human endurance" (114).

Something in this characterization represents the experience as emptied of expressive content, much in the same way that the principal characters of *Les Choses* are never authentically satisfied by the objects of their consumption. This impression is most plausible, of course, when one considers the rhythmic processes alone. But certainly the affective experience of the music rests on more than its rhythmic processes. What of the choices Reich makes for the pitch and harmonic content of the work's four sections? In the case of *Music for Mallets*, the progressions of the first three sections all follow a similar pattern: the second chord of each progression is a minor triad preceded by a major chord a minor third higher. This gives the music a somber, serious affect, which is made more poignant since the pattern occurs throughout the first three sections of the work. In the final section, however, the progression is completely different, culminating on a flat dominant seventh chord—a dominant for a major chord that never appears. The chord's unexpected appearance, and its concurrent projection in continuously augmented rhythmic values, suggests a subtle expressive strategy in the music more nuanced than the rather bleak and hopeless evocation of postmodern subjectivity that Fink offers in his reading.

I can imagine an important reason for Fink's neglect of such details, however. Just as certain modes of formalist musical analysis too often privilege the content of a musical score without an adequate account of its surrounding cultural context, a comprehensive reading of *multiple* aspects of a musical composition might foreclose the experiences of different kinds of musical audiences. I believe Fink means to describe the listening experience of the (largely) untrained musical audience—such people listen to music in their daily lives but do not experience musical details as carefully as might a classical musician, a DJ, a critic, a record producer, or many other professionals who work with music regularly. Fink's acknowledgement of this

audience deserves the highest respect I can give, especially since it allows wider access to music scholarship than is often the case.

Of course, Fink also speaks to more traditional audiences of music scholarship. He deals helpfully with details of harmony in several passages of the book, for instance. A discussion of a descending long-range linear bass pattern in Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians* explains the dramatic shift of tonality (to F# Minor) that occurs midway through the work and thus elucidates the special kind of teleology that occurs in minimal music (52–55). But for him this shift is something rather momentary, like the effect DJ Frankie Knuckles produces by suddenly turning off the lights and playing a recording of a train for drugged-out and otherwise altered revelers struggling toward their final ecstatic moments after a night-long adventure on the dance floor (41). For me, however, the expressive impact of that sudden turn to F# Minor only continues to deepen as Reich extends this tonality in successive sections of diverse instrumentation and figuration and as he works his way back to the D Major/B Minor tonality with which the piece began. The effect is not unlike the subtle changes of beat patterns, tempos, and timbres that contribute to the “build” in extended mixes of electronic dance music. I would argue that the most discerning enthusiasts for this music could savor the long-range planning in Reich's work as well.

Perhaps the most effective analysis—and by far the most entertaining—is the one Fink supplies for Andriessen's *Hoketus* (153–57). Drawing on advertising theory, Fink describes television as a “low-involvement” medium that blandly prepares consumers (in a future purchase situation) to apprehend a sudden rush of desire for the product they had previously seen hawked ad infinitum in intermittent television ads—ads to which they had paid hardly any attention. For Fink, the process is similar to the sudden wrenching shifts of tonality and texture that occur in *Hoketus*.

Aspects of this reading resonate strongly with my own experience of the work, and, like Fink, I can savor his analysis without losing any of my great admiration for *Hoketus* itself. Still, I suspect there is some difference between the way I hear the piece and the way Fink does. He insists that the architects of repetitive television advertising assume viewers will remain largely unaware of individual iterations of the ads, which suggests that his claim for minimal music's complicity in the same *Zeitgeist* similarly assumes that most listeners will not—*cannot*—attend to the repetitive content of the music. Fink occasionally makes explicit this corollary assumption in the book, as for example in this description of the sensibility underlying the rise of light Baroque and minimalist music in the 1960s:

The most characteristic venue for Vivaldi was not the party where he was ignored, but the study or office, where he was indeed listened to, but in

a new way. Barococo minimalism is music not for pleasure (Eros), but music for mental discipline, for mood regulation . . . 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*.

. . . 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. (12–13)

I will readily admit that some listeners do not pay the kind of close attention to minimalism that various other musical professionals might. I will even grant that some of my musician colleagues are unlikely to pay this music the kind of close attention that I do. But Fink seems to deny that close attention is truly possible, which is why he hopes we will find a way to extricate ourselves from the emptiness of repetitive culture:

If Mozart speaks only in the language of power to [Christopher] Small, perhaps we would be better off listening to Shinichi Suzuki, who heard in the Clarinet Quintet, K. 581, a musical expression of profound equality within “the great soul of Buddhism.” If in the West, Mozart and Vivaldi have been trapped in repetition, perhaps only the Zen-like repetition of Saino-Kyoiku can set them free.

We repeated ourselves into this culture.

We may—nurtured through love—be able to repeat ourselves out. (235)

Concomitantly, Fink suggests that when close attention is attempted at all, it necessarily consigns a consideration of minimalist music to an arid, formalist wasteland that segregates it from wider, more traditionally humanistic domains:

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 . . . in each case the analytical methodologies that had served to parse Schubert and Schoenberg [were] tweaked somewhat so as to pay attention less to harmonic stasis and more to rhythmic complexities. (18)¹

The only other responses to minimalism that Fink acknowledges are those of insiders who, echoing Susan Sontag’s famous dictum against interpretation, simply describe the music (17) or of those who see the music as a revivifying transferal of Eastern philosophies and cultures “into a dying

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Eurocentric musical discourse” (13). I would like to believe in the existence of another community of listeners, one who listens carefully to minimalism and responds thoughtfully and proactively to it.

As a modest example, I offer the following supplement to the discussion of Glass’s “The Grid” in chapter 3 (161–66). This music accompanies the climactic sequence in Godfrey Reggio’s film *Koyaanisqatsi* that shows various aspects of urban life—traffic patterns, people entering and leaving subways, conveyor belts bearing Twinkies and hot dogs, and more—usually at dizzyingly fast speeds. Fink characterizes the relentless assault of images and the progressively faster rhythmic values in Glass’s rapid music as a careful preparation for a shot in which a woman and her children watch a television set in the middle of a sales floor surrounded by other television sets. In the next scene, we see an onslaught of quickly alternating images from television programs and commercials:

In this culminating moment the overall trajectory of the film becomes clear. Monumental scenes of unspoiled nature have given way over the course of an hour to machines and industry that rip at the land; then to a completely man-made landscape of repetitive production and consumption; and, finally, to the utter alienation of televisual flow washing over us at the speed of media. (162–63)

But we have heard other variations of “The Grid” music in previous scenes of the film: in the majestic evocation of unspoiled nature in “Cloudscapes,” and in “Vessels,” where the first human beings in the film—along with the audience—contemplate some monumental edifices of the modern world including skyscrapers and jet planes. Both these scenes include clear statements of a three-chord harmonic progression that also figures prominently in “The Grid.” In “Cloudscapes,” Reggio portrays clouds and waterfalls untouched by man, so that the music originally accompanying unspoiled nature later recurs with images that (for Fink) suggest only a one-dimensional rejection of life mediated by technology and industry. At the very least, these three instances of related music problematize the more straightforward indictment of technology that one might apprehend from Reggio’s imagery alone. The scoring might also offer a way to view technology and mechanized society as cultural sites that can engender both concern and celebration, an interpretive stance that seems more in line with a quotation Fink cites of Glass describing the “vitality, and a sense of beauty” that the composer sees in the hyperactive city imagery (164–65).

Fink’s cultural reading of minimalist music also suggests how important it is to consider the larger aesthetic fabric and sociocultural dimensions of twentieth-century music after 1950. Minimal music forms only one thread

in this fabric, of course, and the compositional choices of Glass, Reich, and others respond both musically and culturally to other composers of their time as surely as they do to the repetitive culture that Fink considers. The very different responses of John Cage and Reich to the idea of process, for example, extend the model of Fink's repetitive culture in other valuable directions. Reich's sustained critique of Cage in the well-known essay "Music as a Gradual Process" (2002:34–36) points out Cage's reliance on compositional processes that cannot be heard as such. But Reich fails to see that Cage's interest in a music emphasizing the process of life actually offers listeners a myriad of possible interpretive stances of equal validity. Put another way, Cage's music does not alienate listeners searching for meaning so much as it creates a space in which they can find their own particular meanings. And in the 1960s, as evidenced by his computerization of the *I Ching* with the help of Lejaren Hiller, Cage thought of computers and similar process-oriented technologies as tools of artistic creation used by many people working in concert, and thus as models of societal cooperation without hierarchies (see Cage 1973:22–24). A broader look at such ideas about technology and its cultural reception would help contextualize Reich and Cage alike.

No book is free of errors. I will mention two particularly unfortunate ones involving musical examples since they might mislead readers who have not seen these scores. First, the final vocal/organ chord in example 10 (115) should read A \flat –E \flat –C \flat –E \flat . In example 18 (232), I believe Fink wants to cite Glass's *Strung Out* (1967) as an example of an ultra-repetitive violin piece that Shinichi Suzuki would not enjoy playing. Instead, he quotes a kind of impromptu realization of Glass's ensemble piece *Two Pages* (1968). *Strung Out*, a work far less repetitive than *Two Pages*, might well have appealed to the famed pedagogue as an interesting exercise.²

These lapses should not deter readers of various backgrounds and viewpoints to read and re-read (and re-read) *Repeating Ourselves* and to enjoy it as a thoroughly researched, vastly entertaining, and often surprising *tour de force* of musicology and cultural studies. I believe the book provides an important example of how we might read a musical repertoire and its various realizations in larger socio-historical contexts. I hope it stimulates further work that addresses other audiences for and experiences of minimal music, as well as scholarship that considers other twentieth-century concert music with respect to its wider socio-cultural aspects.

Notes

1. Of course, it is possible for sustained music-analytic scholarship to elucidate twentieth-century music in more traditionally humanistic domains. As an example, see Arnold Whittall's discussion of Elliott Carter's *Syringa* (2003:153–57).

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2. For score excerpts of both works, see Potter (2000:278) (*Strung Out*) and (2000:289) (*Two Pages*).

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