

Time and religious feeling in Postmodernism: Louis Andriessen

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Abstract: *This paper addresses a recent issue, which cannot be said yet, whether it is a new look at the minimalist music of postmodernism or the discovery of a not yet fully realized new direction in the history of music. Having abandoned the technique and the axiology of tonal music, with notions such as key, hierarchy of intervals, reprise, crescendo, etc. rendered irrelevant, postmodernism, and to a greater extent its minimalist version, seemed to be immune to the religious dimension of human sensibility, which essentially resembles the experience of connecting the present moment to an immutable, eternal, over-time order. However, the minimalist aesthetics of the post-war era made up for the loss of hierarchical and teleological structures of tonality by what Jonathan Kramer called "vertical time". Sustained sound, sine (sinusoidal waves), the sound environment are attempts to recover temporality through the extension of the present moment, the unison filling with the symbolic charge of an archetype. Closing modernity between brackets, humanity rediscovers the sources of its spirituality. The paper suggests a way of listening and interpretation, emphasizing the importance of the audience in the music of the last decades.*

Keywords: *musical minimalism, timelessness, postmodern religiosity, Louis Andriessen*

1. Introduction

To say that 20th century music was oriented towards structures characterized by logic of commutativity rather than the differences distributed over the time axis seems to be insufficient. In the collection of papers published along half a century (since 1955), entitled *Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Composition (Musiques formelles: nouveaux principes formels de composition musicale, 1963)*, Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001) distinguishes between musical entities or structures conforming to a temporal order ("in time") and musical structures independent of time ("outside time") or becoming. Among the latter, he includes monophonic music, combinations of Byzantine music, or *cantus planus* of medieval choral music.

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The revival of this outside time tradition is associated by Xenakis with Debussy and the elimination of the hierarchy of intervals into big, small, rare, tonal triads (F. Lerdaahl, R. Jackendoff, 1983) through the invention of the whole tone range. A similar effect seems to have the invention of the halftone range of atonal music (full and chromatic tones, the intervals being the same), but Xenakis laments the reintroduction of the temporal dimension by Schönberg who established rules for sound sequences. He declares himself willing to go through the deconstruction of the tone - with its intervals hierarchy of intervals - and the teleological conception by applying to the musical structures a model borrowed from the New Physics (complexity or the combination of chaos and determinism) as well as an ontogeny inspired by stochastic processes, probabilistic computation and electronic technology.

2. Timelessness and the Sacred on Either Side of Modernity

Born out of a sense of the historicity of human and social existence and of the consciousness of a radical break with what had preceded it, modernity also shaped artistic creation and musical aesthetics. *Ars antiqua*, the Byzantine and Gregorian modes of the past knew only differences in the height of sounds perceived as autonomous. *Ars Nova* perceived agreements, relationships in time, intervals, appreciating some (major third) and demonizing others (the octave and the fifth). Derrida's difference / difference distinction at the basis of the linguistic sign (difference vs. postponement, succession over time) could also be applied to musical language. In the introductory essay, "Difference", from *Marges de la Philosophie* (1972), Derrida argues that the chain of signifiers achieves both a spatial differentiation (*espacement*) of the signs and a temporal difference of the meaning of each along the chain which is not the sum of the meanings of all the words. For example, in Mallarmé's famous verse, *Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu* (*Coup de dés*), the word "lieu" changes its initial meaning to its opposite: "to have no place, not to happen" versus the poem being reduced to its space - the white page, the typographic spacing of the book. A word opens up endless possibilities of meaning which only the end of the statement will sort out.

Such change of effect will occur in tonal music, for example in question and answer structures. Although the same sound material is used, the sequence of sounds in time determines different perceptions: waiting, a feeling that the message is incomplete, or, on the contrary, a complete musical phrase by return to tonic. In contrast to the dynamics of tonal language, as Dorothea Redepenning remarks in reference to the "Ewe Lamb" *Ballad Model* (1973) by Corneliu Dan

Georgescu (Redepenning, 1918), in the minimalist music of the postmodern era, spatial differences are not accompanied by perceptions of changes on the time axis:

"The static aspect is manifested in: the predictability of the evolution of music, the monotony, the lack of surprises, the lack of a normal differentiation of new information at different structural levels (which can be achieved both by "extreme poverty" and by "abundant wealth"), in the end, by the lack of narrativity in the common sense, by the lack of or the unnoticeable sense of evolution. The "iterative character" consists in repetitions with or without variations, or generally in a certain periodicity, especially micro-structural. Elements that serve time orientation in a musical form are avoided; important moments - such as culmination - do not play any role, they are not assigned a "structural value". Characteristic is also the "decoupling from the context" by isolating events until they become totally independent of each other and transfigured into a "permanent presence." (Redepenning 1918, 43)

As Redepenning remarks, time can only be abolished on the level of its subjective perception, since the absence of landmarks, distinctions, oppositions, cause-and-effect relationships among the elements of the score, Corneliu Dan Georgescu manages to create the illusion of an extatic state of contemplation, extended to an indefinite end.

However, we do not share the view that this composer is typologically different from the representatives of Western minimalism. On the contrary, through the superposition of musical language / plastic language, generated by digital artists, he subscribes to one of its constitutive principles. The idyllic scenery flooded by an ison-ostinato on F recorded on magnetic tape against whose background bird songs are heard is doubled by a symphony of the colours accompanying or commenting on the symbolic meaning of the ballad's events (for example, purple red for the passages where the vocal ensemble evokes the killing of the shepherd or the golden light of the eternal, perpetual cosmos into which the pastoral drama is absorbed. The composer starts from two fundamental sounds, using the additive series ($1 + 1 = 2$, $2 + 1 = 3$, $3 + 2 = 5$...) and respecting the proportions of the Golden Section, which places him in relation both with the Platonic model and with the Fibonacci series of the Middle Ages (of the mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci, 1170-1240).

The timeless language of postmodern music differs, however, from the pre-modern traditions to which it seeks to return by focusing on the physicality of the constituent elements of difference: height, intensity, timbre, colour,

commutability, combinatorics. On the contrary, ancient and medieval music was not self-reflexive, a metamusic, narcissistically contemplating itself in its logico-mathematical engineering of sounds, but oriented towards the revelation of a transcendental order.

2.1. Ut pictura música

Whereas *ut pictura poesis* expresses the neoclassical ideal of the fusion of the two arts, whereby poetry aspires to the graphical expressiveness of painting, there has been a *rapprochement* between the fine arts and music in the last half of the century, especially in the case of the minimalist version of the two arts, artists and composers often describing their principles of composition through mutual references.

James Hugonin (1950), a contemporary British painter, made a curtsy to the medieval aspiration to the infinite, which gave birth to the Gothic towers and stained glass glorifying the light of Creation, by producing himself some stained glass of Saint John's Chapel in Northumberland and by painting in such a way as to create the illusion of time slowing down, of calm, even stasis. It is to this purpose that he uses rectangular spots of close tones with a rhythmic, musical distribution, according to his own statement in poetics. Although the sequence of eight paintings, out of which we reproduce the sixth, is entitled "Binary Rhythms," it is not the binaries of the homogeneous, centered structures of traditional painting, but the "duality of order and hazard" that is the epistemic model of New Physics that he has in mind (the universe is characterized by complexity, that is, a combination of chaos and determinism). Colour distribution does not follow a regular rhythm (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. James Hugonin, *Binary Rhythms*, VI

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	32	33	34	35
36	37	38	39	40	41	42
43	44	45	46	47	48	49
50	51	52	53	54	55	56
57	58	59	60	61	62	63
64	65	66	67	68	69	70
71	72	73	74	75	76	77
78	79	80	81	82	83	84
85	86	87	88	89	90	91
92	93	94	95	96	97	98
99	100	101	102	103	104	105

Fig. 2. Bryn Harrison, *Surface forms (repeating)*

Describing his recent compositions in an article in the *CeReNeM Journal* (3 / Nov. 2012), on "Scanning the Temporal Surface: Aspects of Time, Memory and Repetition in My Recent Music", **Bryn Harrison** (1969) quotes Hugonin, adding to the latter's aesthetics, but also inspired by the New Physics, self-similarity (a characteristic of fractals), that is, the iteration of musical structures at irregular intervals. In *Surface Forms (Repeating)*, he deliberately uses cyclic structures, too long and thick for the listener's memory to distinguish an intelligible message transmitted over time. His purpose is to "disorient the listener's memory" and in this way to cancel the temporal dimension. By resuming the same material on a few pages (the score has about one hundred), by making new combinations, the pitch events through time make up a canon in three parts (signalled by the three colours in Figure 1). The effect, writes the composer, is "of a continually unfolding textural field without beginning or end, not dissimilar to the perception of a continually falling Shepard tone" (Harrison 2012, 65) The repetitive distribution of the sound material is indicated in a table that looks like the warp of Hugonin's paintings - a spatial configuration and not a temporal development with theme, development and recapitulation (Figure 2).

These random rhythms of colour spots or sounds are the final point of the deconstruction of centered, hegemonic, hierarchical structures which had emerged before World War II, the first example that comes to mind being the modular structures of Constantin Brâncuși (the infinite column, the landmark of another composition by Corneliu Dan Georgescu).

In a book by Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), *Mundus subterraneus*, the boundaries of worlds, celestial or subterranean, of species, of myths have disappeared.

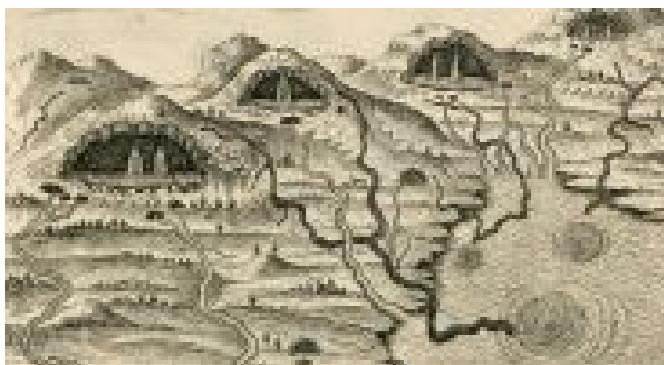


Fig. 3. *Mundus subterraneus*.

<https://www.agosto-foundation.org/cs/tag/athanasius-kircher>

One of its modularly structured engravings (Figure 3) seems to be a hologram of the composition Andriessen dedicated to him (*Theatre of the World*), where musical planes develop independently (unlike polyphonic harmonization), the wind instruments travelling apparently through centuries of styles, alternating with electric guitars, synthesizers and electronic drums, communicating a kind of sardonic jubilation of the spirit contemplating the dissolution of the authority structures of the Dark Age, but also the vital lines or rhythms of the universe.

3. Andriessen – a Minimalist with Transcendental propensities

As well as in other arts, where the playful spirit and randomness make room for the anxious searches of spiritual certainties, especially in the sphere of religion, music too shows signs of the revival of the sense of the sacredness of being. A case in point is Louis Andriessen (1939), who does not limit himself to the processing and borrowing of traditional modal elements, but is also attempting a restoration, a recovery of Augustin's philosophy of the relationship between music and the divine creation or creation through imitation of a famous model, as was the complex personality of Athanasius Kircher, who, with *Mundus Subterraneus* (1664), did indeed return, along with other personalities of the Renaissance, to the search for correspondences between the human body and cosmic order (Figure 4).

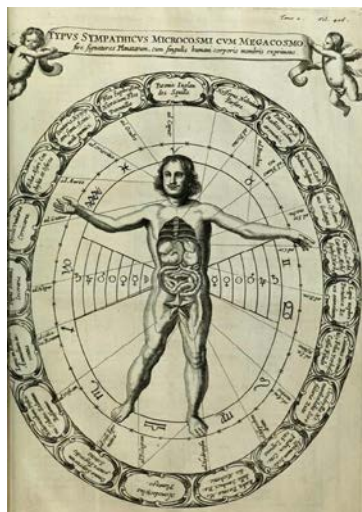


Fig. 4. The Zodiac Man (*Mundus subterraneus*, 1678)

However, even in Kircher, mythological eclecticism has replaced belief, while Satanic curiosity disturbs the predetermined order of the Creator, descending deeper rather than looking up to heaven, crossing a world torn by religious conflicts (he himself being about to be hanged by Protestants), decimated by the plague or the outburst of Vesuvius in whose crater he had the courage to descend.

As described by composer Andriessen, the opera *Theatre of the World* about Kirchner's life is an exercise in the grotesque, the fragments of Gregorian chant being countered by the alternate, dissonant rhythms of percussion. Andriessen follows a compositional principle expounded by Xenakis in the second edition of his book on mathematical formalism applied to music by working out a "global musical style" with combinations of earlier patterns - a baroque diversity of inner symmetries and asymmetries.

Even in another work by Andriessen, *De Tijd* (Time, 1981), by far a more serene instrumental-vocal composition, St. Augustine's binary of *musica humana* and *musica mundana* (music of spheres) in *De Musica*, corresponding to the antagonism between the City of God and the City of Man (*De civitate Dei*), is transposed, as Maarten Beirens persuasively argues, into a diatonic / atonal combination that allows the ear to capture both the modulations of a sound track over time and the pendulum mechanics of the time in the calendar:

"One of the curious aspects of *De Tijd* is that it succeeds in taking different paradigmatic compositional techniques from American minimalism to denote the opposition between stasis/eternity (drones, sustenance, the avoidance of harmonic resolution) and progress/time (pulse, rhythmic cycles, hockets, process-like acceleration). Remarkably, both aspects of the time/eternity or verticality/linearity opposition become symbolised through paradigmatic minimalist tropes, which were in Kramer's theory supposed to be associated only with the realm of 'vertical time'. (Beirens 2012, 87)

We have seen Hugonin and Harrison in search of a language capable of defeating temporality as an end in itself. Their minimal contrasts are coded, their binaries resembling the signifier/ signified difference generating the linguistic sign as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).

Unlike them, Louis Andriessen adds a philosophical dimension, a vision of the dramatic human destiny, torn by the conflict between aspiration to harmony and duration, and the implacable striking of the clock which always reminds him of the limits of his existence.

As early as 1979-81, while working on *De Tijd* for women's choir and ensemble, Andriessen seemed to be attempting a way out of minimalist narcissism. St. Augustine's meditations on music inspired him to meditate on the human condition defined as drive or aspiration to the eternal, to the absolute. In the introductory part, the delicacy of the female voices in prolonged tones seems to suggest the continuum of life, the female principle of eternal creation. A second pattern can be identified at bar 10 when the percussion launches a series of bell-like beats that generate a dynamic rhythm, mathematically calculated as independent of the first. As in Xenakis, chains of sound events are executed simultaneously, but the lack of links among them, as is the case with polyphonic harmonization, bars the sense of a teleological deployment of the melodic line. The choir of women, spelling syllable by syllable the Augustinian text, seems to release into the air sonorous monads, each carrying a singularity of information or sound from the divine Word. The second plane mentioned, of percussion beats, seems to structure the texture of being in an order measured by the spirit.

Finally, at bars 97-123,

„Andriessen introduces a third compositional technique, in the form of three superimposed rhythmic cycles played by the centre stage group of percussionists. This consists of a log drum playing a beat every six quavers, a gong striking every seven quavers and a xylophone playing one beat at irregular time intervals, but at an average of every twelve beats. The mechanical character of this composite 6-7-12-quaver cycle is reinforced by the dry percussive sound of the instruments, which enhances the association with clockwork mechanisms.” (Beirens, 79).

Time Chronos returns, but this time it has been tamed, taken into possession, governed by the creative mind of *Homo Artifex*.

Minimalist music is, we believe, the supreme test of the possible recovery of the religious spirit or transcendental aspiration, of meditation on ultimate questions such as the destiny of man in the universe in the era which sceptical spirits call “post-human”. The question is whether, by escaping narcissistic self-reflexivity towards referentiality - aesthetic or transcendent - minimalism can jump over its own shadow without losing its identity.

4. Conclusion

The return to music with a religious subject or religious atmosphere in postmodernism has been repeatedly noted in the composers such as: Langlais (inspired by Gregorian music), Messiaen (formed in the spirit of Catholic theology but using also non-European and non-Christian musical elements), Estonian Arvo Pärt (inventor, creator of an original language with echoes of the Gregorian model), Kristoph Penderecki (who juxtaposes different traditions, funerary music, prayers and religious drama to create a timeless space of meditation and reunion), Stockhausen or Alois Zimmermann, who, through the combination of serialism and quotation, sought to simulate the spherical form of time.

We chose, however, to focus on the disposition to open to the archetypal and transcendent of a school of composition that emerged in the postmodern age and whose language is not inspired by tradition but by the compositional principles of other contemporary arts (architecture, painting, literature), thus creating a typical matrix of the time.

Born as an avant-garde movement, minimalism spiralled later into a spiritualist movement. The reason behind the selection of Louis Andriessen as the typical representative of the school was precisely his evolution from the rejection in *De Staat* (early 1970s) of the Platonic model (where the music of the spheres is an ontogenetic principle, consubstantial with the cosmos created by the Demiurge after the paradigm of the musical scale) to the use in *DeTijd* at the end of the same decade of the theocratic philosophy of St. Augustine's time in *De Musica*, an evolution confirmed and reinforced by the opera *Theatre of the World* (2016), filled with the esoteric eclecticism of Late Renaissance. Escaping from the narrow stylistic area of narcissistic postmodern minimalism, Louis Andriessen reconnected with tradition through quotes de familiarized with playful freedom, while the electric bass synthesizer interferes with the more familiar wind instruments, piano or flute. Often compared to the eclectic American composer John Adams, Louis Andriessen has been classified by some critic as "post-minimalist". Putting modernity between brackets, trying to break away from the static and reductionist hypostasis which was the response of an energy of opposition to the excesses of a demonic history in the last century, art is plumbing again its sources of spirituality.

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