

Highlights of repetitive minimalism in the work of composer Liana Alexandra

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Abstract: *Repetitive minimalism is a benchmark in the development of 20th century music. It emerged in the early 60s, evidently intending to oppose the dominance of structuralism and serialism – by promoting aesthetics which vehemently denied the principles underlying both movements. Its opposition was directed in particular at dodecaphonic music. It was manifest simultaneously on different continents as a necessity to implement new valences which could re-kindle the true meaning of music.*

While on the American continent the new trend can be clearly outlined by any description of the work of composers such as La Monte Young (born 1935), Terry Riley (born 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936) and Philip Glass (b. 1937), within the Romanian territory there are mere influences of repetitive minimalism manifest in certain works of composers such as Liana Alexandra (1947-2011), Sorin Lerescu (b. 1953), Aurel Stroe (1932-2008), Horatiu Radulescu (1942-2008), Mihai Mitrea Celarianu (1935-2003), Liviu Danceanu (1954-2017), Lucian Metianu (b. 1937), Stefan Niculescu (1927-2008), Iancu Dumitrescu (b.1944), Mihai Moldovan (1937-1981), Liviu Glodeanu (1938-1978).

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1. Principles of repetitive-minimalism aesthetics

A series of universal principles underlie the aesthetics of this sonic movement – two of which constitute the actual brand of the aesthetics itself – *the repetitive* and *the minimalist* principles, along with *the gravitational-tonal*, *the pulsatile* and *the continuity* principles.

The resort to oral traditions seen as “intuition containers” (Tartler 1984, 62) caused a recourse to certain practices of elementary music – with magic connotations – such as the *continuous repetition* of rhythmic and melodic elements. Modern composers employed these techniques in order to reveal the

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contemporary sensitiveness since “basically the rhythm, repetition, temporal dilation and compression, all these primitive music techniques could resemble the heartbeat, the World’s Will heartbeat according to Schopenhauer: an awareness of the deep inferiority of things, getting in touch with the spiritual home” (Tartler 1984, 64).

As for utilizing *minimalism* – it is embodied in the use of the most elementary musical *archetypes* – respectively those which facilitate an insight into the essence of emotions. Therefore one can say that minimalist aesthetics is one of essentiality, which would later influence the emergence of the *archetypal* movement on the Romanian scene – dominated by the idea of reducing the music format to the form of the essence, of the core, of the permanence of the aesthetic object. This kind of music - which employs a minimum of construction elements – is underlain by an archaic substrate, a correspondence with the past.

Another technique generator principle – the *tonal gravitational* principle – points up to one more aspect called to attention by the minimalist, spectral, archetypal movements. Just as repetition (along with the gravitational space) was originated into an archaic practice – as means to repeatedly return (with a certain degree of variation) to a certain pattern, a certain positive source – so the restoration of the harmonic- tonal balance on a functional level came as natural, as a necessity. Thus, while returning to gravity was possible by making music based on natural resonance (spectrality), restoring (reactivating) the tonality concept was due exclusively to the promoters of the minimalist movement. The tendency towards consonance (commonly known as the *New Tonality*), is the *modus operandi* in this case, it being considered one of the fundamental origins of the melos, along with *pulsation*.

With regards to this last aspect, it was in the 60s that *pulsation* (which used to define the music of ancient times) would be recovered. Archaic sources would be again resorted to, precisely that raw, primary, unaltered compound – not affected by any cultural evolution – that maintained the primitive essence of one cult or another. Last but not least it has to be mentioned that the recovery of the pulsatile continuity was a successful pursuit. It envisioned a profound intimacy with Nature’s *experiences*, by establishing connections with process phenomena, the ones based on continuous evolution (slow or rapid), ‘imposing a certain linearity - archetypes, permanent cosmic time-marked patterns” (Anghel 1994, 35).

2. American vs Romanian minimalism

Some considerations are necessary before analysing the creation of one of the representatives of Romanian repetitive minimalism. The first refers to the fact that according to Romanian composers, the American repetitive school succumbed, in its intention to restore the fundamental existential data and the viability of the artwork, to simplification and commercialism. For Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Frederic Rzewski (b.1938), and later John Adams (b. 1947), Laurie Anderson (b. 1947) and others, the reduced sonic material was a means to promote an exaggerated simplicity.

In spite of their commercialist meltdown there is no denying the impact the American minimalists had up to a certain point and by certain marks they indisputably left. Minimalism was a universal necessity, a natural vehement reaction to everything that music had displayed up to that point. One should not fail to mention the composing techniques the four promoters of American minimalism employed in outlining the architecture of some of the most representative works of the respective movement – these techniques and composing patterns refer to either the melos or to the rhythm, or they are a mixture of both. Such were the repetition of one and the same sound/succession of long, sustained notes (La Monte Young), the additional technique of pitches (La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Philip Glass) or of rhythmical structures (Terry Riley, Philip Glass), the de-phasing technique (La Monte Young, Steve Reich), the repetitive patterns (Terry Riley), the technique of rhythmic construction and augmentation (Steve Reich), the loop and interrupted loop (Philip Glass).

As for this musical movement on the Romanian scene, one should notice the manner in which composers chose to relate to certain deep meanings, how it was reconsidered with view to its archetypal valences (Anghel 1994, 50). Thus it was tackled in an innovative manner on a much profound level aimed at rendering the essential meanings it was in pursuit of, throughout the scores of such works, circumscribed to the movement.

In conclusion, the aesthetic fundament consisted of an employment of a minimum (restricted number) of sounds, in addition to a tendency to restore some essential principles of sonic order, to re-direct attention towards the past, to re-discover the natural in music. Thus its representatives managed to pave the way towards a new musical movement which was deeply connected to this base inasmuch as the basic techniques (minimalist and repetitive) express within themselves fundamental and archaic truths, essences embraced and promoted by the new current.

3. Highlights of repetitive minimalism in the work of Liana Alexandra

Liana Alexandra graduated as the country valedictorian from the Ciprian Porumbescu Music Conservatory (1971). Her tutors were Tudor Ciortea and Tiberiu Olah and she completed a PhD in composition. She was awarded George Enescu merit scholarships throughout her student years as well as a U.S.I.A. grant (USA, 1983) and also attended further international courses in Darmstadt (1974, 1978, 1980, 1984).

She carried out intense didactic activity – as of 1971 she taught Composition, Orchestration and Musical Forms – and made a contribution to musicology in programs for the Romanian Radio and Television Society, in articles, music analysis studies, and in specialty books.

In 1990 she founded along with Serban Nichifor (b. 1954) the duo *Intermedia*, which promoted the contemporary postmodernist music with special focus on the neo-consonant trend. They concerted and recorded in Romania as well as abroad. The initiative also resulted in the foundation of a music festival *Nuovo Musica Consonante*, in 1998.

She was a multiple award winner – the Romanian Academy award in 1980; the UCMR award in 1979, 1981-82, 1984, 1987-88; 20th Century Prestigious Woman, US, 2000; International Personality of the Year, UK; Scholar of the Year, 2001, US; US Honorary Medal in 2003; a.o.

3.1. Evolving Repetitiveness

Her work is characterized by a clarity of orchestration and particularly by an evolving repetitive structure which induces a feeling of plenary meditation. Her composing style is defined by simplicity, accessibility and clarity, in accord with the 20th century composers' wish to approach consonance (a new type of consonance), minimalism and archetype.

These aspects materialize in a series of works where the composer employs various types of persistency along certain periods, repetition and highlight of some rhythmic and melodic structures, etc. Works such as the *Consonance* series (1978-1998) come to mind here, which reflect the sonic coincidences resulting from the superior harmonics of certain fundamental sounds; also evident are the use of a certain type of modality and the varied, apparently improvisational rhythmicity.

Symphony III *Diachronies* (1982-83) is another work circumscribed to these tendencies. Its debut – a dynamic framework of the transformations of some rhythmical units – seem to allude to the regenerating potential of the human soul. Yet another such work is *Concerto for flute, viola and chamber orchestra* (1980) which yet again advances a melody based on the superior harmonics of some fundamental sounds (pedals) which are no longer audible; the music emerges from silence, it oscillates through tiny alterations which materialize in short motifs later expanded in impressively splendid melodic arches. **Liana Alexandra** here uses, as in other instances, the *ostinato* technique by which various “sonic fabrics” (Alexandra 2009, 12) are woven. Throughout the work fragments can be discerned which are realized with several rhythmic motifs repeated in an identical manner horizontally.

The list of works displaying minimalist-repetitive influences includes the chamber series *Incantations* (1972-2002) in which the varied rhythmicity accompanies some units from Byzantine melodies by **Filothei sin Agai Jipei**² – the theme is, in a rapid tempo, dilated and compressed by heterophonic means.

One distinctive work, the fantasy opera *The Snow Queen*, was composed in 1978 and followed a performing and recording route which started with a first audition in a concert at the Romanian Radiobroadcast, later on one at the Proceusium Radio Society in the US (1982-83) and marked the win of a Gaudeamus prize in the Netherlands (1980), its staging at the Romanian Opera (1982), or the inclusion in the repertoire of the 1982-83 season at the Opera in Utrecht.

The Snow Queen is a one act opera (Fig. 1) based on the fairy tale by **Hans Christian Andersen** and although it seems to have been composed in the spirit of Mozart’s music, it really is a vigorous sample of **Liana Alexandra**’s own style, which displays simplicity, persistence on certain periods, repetition and highlights of rhythmic and melodic structures. Its accessibility as it were, also resulted from it being understood and sung by children. The composition accommodates both primitive and modern techniques.

Along with creating an imaginary world that joins together fantasy elements with fragments of reality, the work displays a symbolical side – of sacrifice and the desire to challenge oneself.

With regards to the melos, it shows a tendency to break the thematic segments into “essence” units (Nichifor 2011, 26), within a continuous movement; the melodic profile is compelling and presents multiple combinatory possibilities.

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The image displays a musical score for the piece "The Snow Queen" by Liana Alexandra. The score is divided into three systems, each containing multiple staves for different instruments and voices.

System 1 (Measures 1-11): Labeled with a circled 'A' and "(1/4 3/4)". It features three staves for strings (1, 2, 3) and four staves for woodwinds (1, 2, 3, 4). The woodwinds are marked with *mf sempre*. The strings play simple rhythmic patterns.

System 2 (Measures 12-25): This system includes a vocal line (Voc) and four woodwind staves (1, 2, 3, 4). The vocal line begins at measure 16 with a *mp* dynamic. The woodwinds continue with *mf sempre* dynamics. A double bar line is present at the start of this system.

System 3 (Measures 26-35): This system features four woodwind staves (1, 2, 3, 4) and a string staff (1). The woodwinds are marked with *mf* and the strings with *mf*. The notation is more complex, involving many beamed notes and slurs.

Fig. 1. Liana Alexandra, *The Snow Queen*

The intervals preferred are the fourth and the fifth mirrored both in the melodic and in the harmonic profile. The sonic universe thus emerging befits the particulars of a show for children; in order to establish this coherent fundament, Liana Alexandra employs special aesthetics by which expressive means— simple and clear— in effect highlight an artistic message of precise finality, oriented towards enabling access to authentic values.

The scores freely reveal an idea of backing up musical parameters; one such is the timbre, which plays an interesting part – of outlining the poetic atmosphere and the characters. At the same time the disposition of the harmonics is often decisive for rendering the abstract within a concretely defined universe.

Imagining a fairy tale beyond the usual template of the opera representation the composer aspired to entwine the musical drama with the ballet, pantomime, the direction and scenography in order to create a total show and render the fantasy world alive.

4. Conclusion

The heterogeneous display rendered by the multitude of movements, directions, concepts featured in the musical artwork of the second half of 20th century defines the evolutionary dynamics of the aesthetics of modernist expanse as a whole, with a projection into postmodernism as well. Repetitive minimalism is a testimony of that. In an age defined by speed and continuous change, it renders beauty to the contemporary cultured music.

It is also a touchstone which, along with other movements that share the same idea (I here refer to the Romanian archetypal trend that I shall discuss in a further paper) acknowledges the past and embraces it re-establishing a cultural time and space axis connecting the beginnings of music history to the living present.

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