

---

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

# Minimalism and Its Repercussions

In the musical world of the 1960s and 1970s, anything seemed possible. Chapter 13 considered a number of composers who responded to the absence of taboos by seeming to embrace all of music history in their works. At the same time, however, there were those who reacted by radically limiting the range of ideas and materials they explored in individual compositions. This movement, which became known as Minimalism, touches on all the postwar musical trends we have been discussing. But, as we can hear in *Four Organs* (1970) by Steve Reich, Minimalist music also marked a decisive break with what had come before (Ex. 14.1).

In place of the ametrical rhythms typical of serial, indeterminate, and texture music, maracas in *Four Organs* pound out a steady pulse throughout the 16-minute-long piece. As if to shut out the huge sound world available to him, Reich employs an austere, monochromatic timbral palette. Rejecting the fashion for constant change, *Four Organs* features incessant repetitions of a single chord that evolves only as each of the pitches is gradually lengthened. In contrast to the emancipated dissonances and atomized pitch structures of previous decades, Reich presents what he called “the longest V–I cadence in the history of Western Music,” basing the piece on an E dominant eleventh chord that suggests a resolution to A. And unlike the cryptic techniques of serial, indeterminate, and texture music, Reich makes his structural devices audible for anyone who chooses to listen.

**Example 14.1:** Steve Reich, *Four Organs*, mm. 1–4 (the steady eighth-note maraca part is not shown)

①  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 200$  ② ③ ④

Organ 1  $f$  3 + 8

Organ 2  $f$  3 + 8

Organ 3  $f$  3 + 8

Organ 4  $f$  3 + 8

All of this helps explain why Minimalism, although it has become one of the most influential trends in contemporary composition, has also been the most controversial. Consider this scathing review by Harold C. Schonberg, then the chief classical music critic for *The New York Times*, of a 1973 performance of *Four Organs*:

An amused and, in some cases, vocally resentful audience listened to Reich's chordal manipulation and then started walking out in large numbers. The music is indeed a bore. There is no "content" in this kind of music, it is pure sound, and there is nothing to "understand" in it.

What Reich has done is confuse an acoustic phenomenon with music. As such, *Four Organs* is non-music, just as so many minor baroque compositions, written in tonic-dominant formulae without a trace of personality, are non-music. Or as so much modern art is non-art—three white triangles against a white background, or something like that. Really it is "art" for people who are afraid of "art." Or do not understand what art really is. Or who are too emotionally inhibited to want to share the emotional and intellectual processes of a real creator's mind. *Four Organs* is baby stuff, written by an innocent for innocents.

Minimalism has provoked strong opposition not only from concert audiences and critics, but also from many musicians and composers affiliated with other contemporary trends. In many cases, the antipathy was mutual; Minimalist composers willingly separated themselves from both mainstream classical music culture and the new-music establishment by creating alternative models for building a career and for performing and disseminating their music.

Despite such strident opposition, Minimalism has attracted a large and passionately devoted cadre of fans. What began as a distinctively American fringe movement associated with the composers La Monte Young (b. 1935), Terry Riley (b. 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936), and Philip Glass (b. 1937) is now a well-established international phenomenon. Minimalist composers have written successful operas and mainstream film scores, and have been featured in high-profile collaborations with jazz, rock, and world musicians. Minimalism's emphasis on loops and layers has made it particularly relevant to rap and electronic dance music producers.

Even in its early stages Minimalism as a movement was far from unified, and it is even less homogeneous today. In most cases the composers themselves rejected the label of Minimalism, or applied it to only a small part of their output. Yet it is this very diversity of interests and perspectives that has made Minimalism so influential, while allowing its founders to branch out in such unpredictable and distinctive ways.

## ORIGINS AND LOCALES

In light of their subsequent “outsider” status, it is surprising that all four composers were products of major institutions and interacted with many of the figures we have encountered in previous chapters. Glass and Reich studied at the Juilliard School in New York City, Young and Riley at the University of California at Berkeley. Reich went on to do graduate work with Berio and Milhaud at Mills College in California. Glass traveled to Paris to study with Boulanger, while Young and Riley spent time with Stockhausen, Cage, and other avant-garde luminaries at Darmstadt. But although they could have joined the ranks of the established leaders of new music, they all ultimately chose different paths.

Rather than seeking commissions or teaching at a university or conservatory, Glass worked as a plumber, furniture mover, and taxi driver for ten years after returning to the United States in 1976. He used his earnings to pay for tours by his own Philip Glass Ensemble, the only group capable of or interested in performing his music at the time. Glass's first major success came with the five-hour-long opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), created in collaboration with stage director Robert Wilson. The abstract, nonlinear libretto, centering on Albert Einstein and the birth of the atomic age, features a hodgepodge of sometimes

nonsensical texts relating to current events and popular culture. After touring Europe with the piece in the summer of 1976, Glass rented the Metropolitan Opera House in New York for two well-publicized performances that brought wide attention to his highly amplified, very fast, and extremely repetitive music.

Reich likewise founded his own ensemble, Steve Reich and Musicians, whose first recording appeared in 1969. Nine years later his *Music for 18 Musicians*, on the German jazz label ECM, sold over 100,000 copies and was even named one of the ten best pop albums of the year. In an interview published in 1987, Reich explained why he felt so strongly about separating himself from the postwar European avant-garde and their American followers:

Stockhausen, Berio, and Boulez were portraying in very honest terms what it was like to pick up the pieces of a bombed-out continent after World War II. But for some American in 1948 or 1958 or 1968—in the *real* context of tailfins, Chuck Berry, and millions of burgers sold—to *pretend* that instead we're *really* going to have the dark-brown *Angst* of Vienna is a *lie*, a musical lie, and I think these people are musical liars and their work isn't worth [*snaps fingers*] *that!*

#### MINIMALISM AND THE COUNTERCULTURE

For the Minimalist composers, and even more for their early audiences, an important context for their music was the emerging counterculture. Glass writes of coming of age in the 1960s, the era of “civil rights, pop music, and drugs,” and realizing that his friends who were popular musicians were “living in a very connected way with their culture, and many of us wanted to have the same connection in our work.” In New York City, Glass gravitated toward the hip downtown neighborhood of SoHo, as opposed to the more academic uptown scene centered around Juilliard and Columbia University. Reich, Young, and Riley thrived in the countercultural Mecca of San Francisco, distinguished by its openness to non-Western musics, Eastern religions, and psychedelic drugs.

The *New York Times* review of *Four Organs* suggested that the point of the piece was for the listener “to saturate himself in pure sound, concentrating, departing to other spheres on a cloud of musical zen.” Indeed, *trance music* was a popular synonym for Minimalism in the early years, reflecting the genre’s association with new forms of spirituality and chemically altered consciousness. While drug culture did not play a major role in early Minimalism, there were specific references to hallucinogens in pieces like Riley’s *Mescaline Mix* (1963), which filtered the sounds of laughter, voices, and soft piano chords through psychedelic tape echo effects.

Minimalism’s connection to the countercultural ethos is further evident in Riley’s *In C* (1964), whose participatory character had much in common with the loosely structured Fluxus and performance art “happenings” of the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to Morton Subotnick, who played in the premiere

of the piece at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, police showed up on the day of the performance to investigate a fire code violation and a report that the participants were into “drugs and nude dancing.” He recalled that the audience was garbed in the colorful manner of the “psychedelic dress-up era,” with Riley wearing a “floppy purple bow tie and orange pants.”

Young wrote a set of pieces in 1960 in Berkeley and New York entitled *Compositions 1960*, which consisted of Cage- and Fluxus-inspired written instructions for a liberating merger of art and life. *No. 10*, for example, directed the performers to “draw a straight line and follow it,” while *No. 5* anticipated the flower power imagery of the mid-1960s: “Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area. When the composition is over, be sure to allow the butterfly to fly away outside. . . .” *Compositions 1960* also show early signs of the interest in drones that would become central to Young’s distinctive approach to Minimalism, as in *No. 7*, which consists of a B–F# perfect fifth “to be held a long time.”

#### RILEY’S *IN C*

*In C* was the first Minimalist piece to attract wide attention, reaching many through the recording released four years later on Columbia Records. The work consists of 53 figures, ranging from two notes to extended melodies, to be performed by any number of players (Riley suggests approximately 35) on any instruments, including voice (Ex. 14.2). The musicians can repeat each figure as many times as they choose and wait as long as they want before moving on to the next one; the result resembles a slowly shifting mobile of diverse sounds pulsating together as it moves. In place of a conductor, the ensemble is “led” by a person playing the optional eighth-note pulse on the top two Cs of a piano or mallet instrument.

*In C* was meant to be a communal exercise rather than a display of anarchy. The piece, which usually lasts between 20 minutes and an hour depending on how many times the figures are repeated, works best when the musicians listen to one another carefully, sometimes asserting their own voices and other times stepping back to focus on the polyrhythmic combinations of the patterns.

*In C* illustrates the cornucopia of ingredients that came together in early Minimalism. Like Reich’s *Four Organs*, there are echoes of serialism in the way the content and order of the figures are strictly defined. There are also indeterminate aspects in the scoring and length of the piece and the ways the figures come together. Riley’s incorporation of the basic elements of tonality, exemplified by the stylized opening figure with its grace note and major third, reveals an affinity with the New Romanticism (see Chapter 13), while the overall effect is comparable to the texture music of Penderecki and Ligeti (see Chapter 12). But the work’s cheeky, back-to-basics title provides a clue to Riley’s provocative iconoclasm: with its bright, steady pulse and relentless repetitions, *In C* thumbs its nose at music that takes itself too seriously.

**Example 14.2:** Terry Riley, *In C*, excerpts 1–15

## MINIMALIST ART AND MUSICAL PROCESSES

The free-wheeling sprawl of Riley's *In C* shows that early Minimalist music was hardly minimal in every respect. The same can be said of contemporaneous Minimalist art, from which the label for the musical style is borrowed. Indeed, the four composers we have been discussing were closely connected to the Minimalist painters, sculptors, and filmmakers who rose to prominence in the 1960s. Just as Minimalist composers reacted against the music of the previous generation, Minimalist artists like Sol LeWitt, Frank Stella, and Donald Judd distanced themselves from the emotionally charged canvases of the Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock, opting for a radical simplification of materials, cool emotional affect, smooth surfaces, and a focus on the object rather than the creating or viewing subject.

In Minimalist art the emphasis is often on the pattern of an arrangement rather than any intrinsic meaning or interest in the parts themselves. *Rainbow Pickett* (1964) by Judy Chicago, for example, consists of six beams of decreasing sizes leaning against a wall at the same angle; as the beams get smaller, their colors grow progressively warmer, from cool blues to orange and ochre (Fig. 14.1). Sol LeWitt designed a series of more than 100 “wall drawings” consisting solely of patterns of lines, which he communicated by means of instructions intended to be realized by other artists in multiple locations. *Wall Drawing 56* (1970), for example, describes a square “divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts, each with lines in four directions superimposed progressively.”

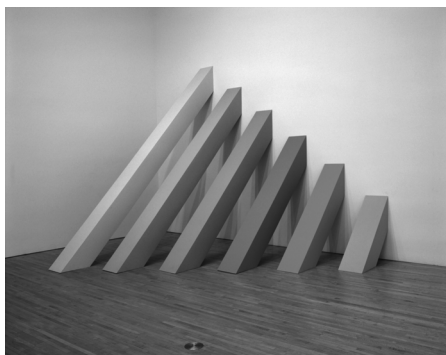
Many early Minimalist scores present similar repetitions of a single musical “object”; Reich, for example, created pieces using a chord (*Four Organs*), a rhythm (*Clapping Music*, 1972), and a tape loop (*Come Out*, 1966). In each, Reich arranges these simple objects into slowly evolving patterns. As described in his essay “Music as a Gradual Process” (1968), for Reich a musical process had four

essential characteristics: First, the process should determine all the details of a work as well as its overall form. Second, the process should be perceptible to the listener, in contrast to the hidden structural devices in serial and indeterminate music. Third, the process should be gradual and invite close and sustained attention. Fourth, once set in motion, the process should run by itself, without needing input from the composer or performer.

To illustrate the idea of a gradual process, Reich offered the image of “pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it gradually come to rest.” He turned this analogy into a piece with *Pendulum Music* (1968), which consists of two to four microphones suspended by their cables to swing freely in front of an equal number of loudspeakers. The performers start the microphones swinging in broad arcs and adjust the amplifier level so that a burst of feedback is produced when a microphone passes in front of a speaker. Once the process is under way, the performers are instructed to sit down and join the audience in listening to the shifting rhythmic patterns until all the microphones have come to rest and are producing continuous feedback. The piece ends with the theatrical gesture of the performers pulling out the amplifiers’ power cords.

#### PHASE SHIFTING

The most important musical process in Reich’s work is what he called “phase shifting,” a reference to the mathematical formula that shifts the curve horizontally in a graph of a sine wave. In a musical context, phase shifting involves placing a simple repeating pattern in different combinations with itself. Reich compares the idea to traditional canonic technique, but with the distance between the leading and the following voice being infinitely variable. He discovered the process accidentally while working with tape loops; when he played identical loops simultaneously on two tape decks, the equipment’s slight differences in speed caused one loop to move very gradually ahead of the other. One of the most influential of Reich’s works is the tape piece *Come Out*, which is based



**Figure 14.1:** Judy Chicago, *Rainbow Pickett* (1964)

on a short tape loop of the phrase "Come out to show them." The words were taken from a recorded interview with Daniel Hamm, one of six black teenagers arrested and convicted for the murder of a white shop owner in the 1964 Harlem riots. Reich's work, which was written for a benefit concert to support efforts advocating a retrial of the "Harlem Six," uses an excerpt of Hamm's account of being beaten while in police custody.

Reich applied phase shifting to live performance in a series of pieces including *Clapping Music* for two people clapping, *Piano Phase* (1967) for two pianos, and *Violin Phase* (1967; see Anthology 25), which can be performed either by four violinists or by one live player and three prerecorded parts. *Violin Phase* begins with a one-measure repeating pattern played by two violins (one of which may be prerecorded); when the lead violinist increases the tempo slightly, the two layers slowly drift out of phase. Performing the phasing process takes considerable practice and discipline, especially to avoid the tendency to move ahead too quickly or to fall back into synchronization.

For Reich the phasing process was a revelation. Starting with a simple musical idea, it produced rich and varied rhythms, melodies, harmonies, timbres, and textures. Early in the phasing process of *Come Out*, for example, the effects are primarily acoustic and timbral as the repeating words, "Come out to show them," stretch out and echo. As the two loops move further apart, we start to focus on the melody of the speech, the shifting rhythmic patterns, and the percussive timbres of the consonants. When the number of layers is doubled to four and then again to eight, the voices turn into a richly pulsing texture.

In *Come Out* it is the listener's job to pay attention to the "resultant patterns" produced by the musical process, but in *Violin Phase* the lead violinist is instructed at several points to bring out the rhythms, melodies, and harmonies that he or she notices. Reich writes in his program note:

As one listens to the repetition of the several violins, one may hear first the lower tones forming one or several patterns, then the higher notes are noticed forming another, then the notes in the middle may attach themselves to the lower tones to form still another. All these patterns are really there; they are created by the interlocking of two, three, four violins all playing the same repeating pattern out of phase with each other.

Although conceptually *Violin Phase* depends on tape music techniques, it also points to the increasing importance of live performers in Reich's works. With this piece, Reich began to approach composing through an intensive rehearsal process in which he often played alongside the performers and benefited from their insights. In his preface to the score Reich indicates that the violinists Shem Guibbory and Paul Zukofsky contributed several of the resulting patterns that he incorporated into the work.



We can hear a slightly more complicated process in Reich's *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* (1973; Ex. 14.3). Here, the fourth marimba gradually assembles an out-of-phase version of the ostinato played by the third marimba, starting with one note, then two, then three, and so on, until the pattern (shifted three eighth notes ahead) is completed. Starting at Rehearsal 2, glockenspiel 2 uses the same process to reconstruct the pattern of glockenspiel 1, shifted five eighth notes ahead. While the percussion instruments are busily employed in these efforts, Reich initiates another process of systematically lengthening the chords in the voices and organ, recalling the technique he used in *Four Organs*.

#### PROCESS MUSIC, RITUAL, AND POLITICS

For both performers and audiences, the "process" works of Reich, Young, Glass, and Riley require a focus and concentration that Reich described as "a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outwards towards *it*." The objectivity, strictness, and impersonal nature of this formulation of process music relate to both serial and indeterminate music. But Reich is careful to differentiate the audibility of his musical processes from the "hidden structural devices" of pieces like Boulez's *Structures* and Cage's *Music of Changes* (see Chapter 10). He similarly contrasted his attraction to an "impersonal" compositional approach with Cage's goal of removing his likes and dislikes from the act of composition: "What I wanted to do was to come up with a piece of music that I loved intensely, that was completely personal, exactly what I wanted in every detail, but that was arrived at by impersonal means. I compose the material, decide the process it's going to be run through—but once those initial choices have been made, it runs by itself."

While some do indeed experience the ritualistic aspect of process music as liberating, both Minimalist music and art have been criticized for being shallow, limiting, and even coercive. Writing in 1984, George Rochberg (see Chapter 13) linked Minimalism with both Modernism and Postmodern "Tower of Babel" pluralism: "Much of what still goes by the name of 'music' is either simply sound-generation or soul-less complexity or mindless minimalism." In his book *The Minimal Self* (1984), the historian Christopher Lasch attacked Minimalist art as retreating from history and responsibility. In its focus on objective surfaces, he argued, Minimalism "not only denies the reality of inner experience but denies the reality of surrounding objects as well. It annihilates the subject and object alike."

One of the harshest criticisms of Minimalism came from Elliott Carter in 1982, who was also responding to what he heard as an element of coercion: "About one minute of minimalism is a lot, because it is all the same. One also hears constant repetition in the speeches of Hitler and in advertising. It has its dangerous aspects." It is thus striking that while Rochberg critiques Minimalism for its links to a "soul-less" insular Modernism, from Carter's perspective it

**Example 14.3:** Steve Reich, Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ, mm. 1A–E and 2A–D

The musical score is organized into two systems, each with five staves. The first system covers measures 1A through 1E, and the second system covers measures 2A through 2D. The instruments are: 2 Women's Voices and Organ, Metallophone, Glockenspiels (1 and 2), and Marimbas (1, 2, 3, and 4). The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. Dynamics include *f*, *mf*, and *ff*. The score features complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, with some parts marked with circled letters (1A-1E, 2A-2D) indicating specific measures. The organ part includes vocal-like lines with lyrics 'ee' and 'ce'.

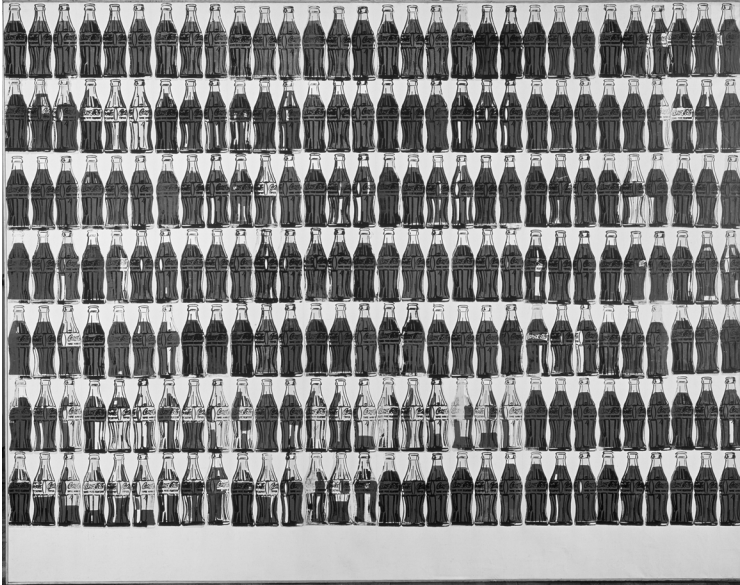


Figure 14.2: *Andy Warhol, Green Coca-Cola Bottles (1962)*

is Minimalism's similarities to the unceasing repetitions of propaganda and advertising in consumer culture that should provoke our distrust.

One could compare, for example, Reich's constant repetitions of the cheery E dominant eleventh chord on four portable electric organs to the pop art repetitions of Andy Warhol's *Green Coca-Cola Bottles* (1962; Fig. 14.2). But viewers and listeners must decide for themselves whether these works represent a cynical acquiescence to commercialization, a critique thereof, or just as a fresh way of looking at a familiar object. As we will see, Minimalism draws on a wide range of styles and sources. How we interpret the ramifications of these connections, for our understanding of the music or of the composers, will depend upon our own perspectives and cultural contexts.

## PATHWAYS OF POSTMINIMALISM

Composers in many styles soon began adapting and extending the sounds, techniques, and ideas of Minimalism. A number of labels, including “Post-minimalism,” “Totalism,” and “Maximalism,” have been used to describe the works of composers whose music foregrounds a strong pulse, constant repetition, and very gradual changes, but in which the other defining elements of early Minimalism—namely, audible processes and a reduction in musical material—play a lesser role.

While early Minimalist composers tended to distill disparate influences into works with a unified tone, a rich eclecticism is often central to the meaning of works by Postminimalists like the American composer John Adams (b. 1947). Adams has written pieces that integrate many different styles and influences, including popular song, the jazz piano music of Jelly Roll Morton, the player piano works of Conlon Nancarrow (see Chapter 12), the idealized folk idiom of Charles Ives (see Chapter 4), and the cosmopolitan culture of the West Coast. Starting with his *Shaker Loops* (1978) for string ensemble and *Phrygian Gates* (1978) for piano, which use the techniques of early Minimalism—a steady pulse, tape-loop-inspired repetition, and slowly evolving processes—Adams introduced elements of nineteenth-century chromatic harmony to create a more lushly expressive idiom. Adams described his orchestral piece *Harmonielehre* (Theory of Harmony, 1985), which takes its title from Schoenberg’s 1911 treatise, as a manifestation of his desire to reach out and embrace “all that harmony that we weren’t supposed to touch.”

Adams also engaged with history and politics in a series of influential and often controversial operas, including *Nixon in China* (1987), based on President Richard Nixon’s groundbreaking visit to Communist China in 1972; *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), which depicts the murder of a Jewish passenger by Palestinian terrorists during the 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship; and *Doctor Atomic* (2005), which focuses on the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and the detonation of the first atomic bomb in 1945.

The libretto for *Doctor Atomic*, assembled by the stage director Peter Sellars from historical documents and memoirs, explores the enormous pressures and moral dilemmas Oppenheimer and his colleagues faced in unleashing such destructive force. *Doctor Atomic* also evokes the early stages of the Cold War and the doctrine of “mutually assured destruction” (see Chapter 9). The opera alludes to suspicions faced by Oppenheimer and some of the other scientists due

to their earlier leftist sympathies. Adams cites Cold War science fiction films as an important inspiration for the work: “a typical plot would involve a nuclear explosion in the desert—in Nevada perhaps. This would result in some disturbing phenomenon, something frightening and threatening. Nature would go awry, or a monster would appear.”

Illustrating the eclectic combination of elements associated with Post-minimalism, the music of *Doctor Atomic* includes passages with Minimalist rhythms and repetitive patterns, *musique concrète* to represent the storm and the sounds of machines, and a Neo-Romantic harmonic language. There are many allusions to the history of opera, starting with the large performing forces of the orchestra, chorus, and soloists. The libretto draws on poetry that was important to Oppenheimer, including passages from the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire and the ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Bhagavad Gita*. A sonnet by the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne provides the searing text for the aria *Batter my heart*, which Oppenheimer sings as he stands alone in front of the bomb he has created the night before its detonation (see Anthology 26; Opera Sampler). *Batter my heart* amplifies what Adams describes as “Oppenheimer’s enormous historical awareness” with the “archaic feel” of the D-minor chord sequences and the slow, stately form of the seventeenth-century chaconne. Adams also alludes to the vocal music of Donne’s era in the rhythmic gestures used to express the text, and he evokes pieces like “Dido’s Lament” from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas* in the flexible interaction between the lyrical melody and the repeating harmonic sequence and descending bass lines.