

## Minimalism in Music: in search of a definition

Introduction for the catalogue for the exhibition of *Musica Silenciosa*,  
curated by the author at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid

### Tom Johnson

#### A view from 1972

To begin, let me go back to March 30, 1972, when I wrote an article in the *Village Voice* entitled "The Minimal Slow-Motion Approach." This is generally considered the first time that any music critic spoke of "minimal music," and the idea already meant quite a few things. The article concerned three pieces by three artists, presented in a now historic concert at the Village Presbyterian Church in Greenwich Village. The first piece, *A Sagging and Reading Room* by Stuart Marshall, was performed by three people moving cassette tape recorders from place to place, and I described it in this way.

*A pre-recorded voice is heard: "At the time of the next statement, this cassette will be closer to microphone one than Alvin's cassette, and further from microphone two than Mary's cassette." Then a different voice: "At the time of the next statement, this cassette will be further from microphone one than Stuart's cassette, and further from microphone one than Mary's cassette."*

That was all that happened. Just the three performers, changing places on the stage, allowing the three cassette tape recorders to play for the microphones. All we heard were these simple sentences that described where everything was in relation to everything else. I described the next piece in this way:

*The second piece on the program was Mary Lucier's "Journal of Private Lives." It begins with a sort of prelude, consisting of black and white slides, depicting different forms of currency, along with newspaper clippings, which are reversed and almost impossible to read. The body of the work consists of three simultaneous events. On a screen at the left, one sees a hand slowly writing a message: "In the dream I am writing you a letter. I don't know what I am saying in the letter, but you must mail me a letter arranging to meet me on such and such a day...etc." On a screen at the right is a series of color slides showing slightly different views through a window. All are rather hazy, and a good deal of concentration is required in order to pick out the differences between them. The third event takes place on a central screen. For a while there are slides of solid colors, only slightly different in shade. Then there are two simultaneous projections on the screen, and a couple begins slow-motion ballroom dancing, casting mysterious double shadows on the screen. The whole piece is in dead silence.*

Again, nothing much happened, and what did happen took a very long time. The elements were visual and textual. There was no sound at all. I knew, of course, that John Cage had presented four minutes and thirty three seconds of silence as a piece of music on that famous day in Woodstock, New York, in 1952, but at this point I had not thought seriously about silent music as a form of minimalism. The third piece of the evening was minimal in a third way:

*The program ended with Alvin Lucier's "The Queen of the South." Here four singers sit around a square metal plate, about three feet across, with sand sprinkled on it. As they sing into their microphones, the metal plate vibrates, causing the sand to shift into many different patterns. It had a very religious feeling that night, with everyone staring at the sand as it moved into one intricate design after another. Most of the singing was not very pleasant to listen to, but it didn't matter, because the movements of the sand had some of the same magic for us that the Navajo sand paintings must have for the Navajos.*

This was essentially a static situation. Nothing moved. Everything took a long time. There was sound, but it wasn't going anywhere – just drifting into the symmetrical formations of the shifting sand.

Several things stand out for me as I reread this article some 30 years later: 1. I don't think I fully realized yet that my own *Four Note Opera*, written on a four-note scale that very same year, was also a form of minimal music. 2. The minimal experiences I was talking about had nothing to do with the music that most people thought of as minimalist music a few years later. 3. It was a concert with few musical elements and lots of text and visual images, and for me today that emphasizes how easily minimal ideas move between the aural, the visual, and the verbal. 4. Perhaps the most radical thing of the evening, and the thing that led me to use the word "minimal," was the total silence of the Mary Lucier piece. This was not a silent film series, after all, it was billed as a concert, and yet here was a piece with absolutely no sound.

#### **A view from 1982**

Ten years later minimal music was widely known, but most listeners only knew about one particular type of it, which can be labeled more exactly as "repetitive music." It was a music of constant eighth notes that owed much to the cycling polyrhythms that Steve Reich had brought back from his studies in Ghana, to the irregular meters that Phil Glass had studied in India, and to the jazz that they and all of their colleagues loved. The fine ensembles of these particular composers, along with the international success of *Einstein on the Beach*, drew so much attention to "repetitive music" that listeners tended to forget all the other ways in which one can make music with minimal means. When I read one day in the national weekly *Newsweek* that "the originators of minimalism are Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Phil Glass," I couldn't resist writing a sarcastic response ("The Original Minimalists," *Village Voice*, July 27, 1982). I pointed out that a few years earlier the official list always began with La Monte Young, and also included Terry Jennings, wondered who had dropped these names from the list, and why, and went on to observe that a lot of other names were also missing:

*I spent some time trying to come up with a more valid list of original minimalists, just to show how long such things can get. I restricted myself to composers who are genuine minimalists, who are Americans, and who are in the same general age group as the official minimalists, and who have undeniably done at least some genuinely original, genuinely first-rate work. Some are almost as famous as the famous minimalists, some are not nearly so famous, and some might better be considered infamous: Maryanne Amacher, Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Harold Budd, Joel Chadabe, Philip Corner, Alvin Curran, Jon Gibson, Daniel Goode, William Hellermann, Terry Jennings, Garrett List, Annea Lockwood, Alvin Lucier, Jackson MacLow, Meredith Monk, Charlie Morrow, Gordon Mumma, Max*

*Neuhaus, Phill Niblock, Pauline Oliveros, Frederic Rzewski, Steven Scott, Richard Teitelbaum, Ivan Tcherepnin, Yoshi Wada, and last in this alphabetical listing, but certainly not least, La Monte Young. And of course, there are probably a lot of others whose names just didn't happen to come to the mind of this particular list maker.*

So my definition was broadening little by little, and my list was getting longer and longer, but I still wasn't ready to include earlier work like Eric Satie's *Vexations* and John Cage's *4:33*, and I hadn't even heard of Alfons Allais at this time. And of course, American musicians then were generally ignorant of what their colleagues in Europe were doing, and in many cases they continue to be so today.

### **A view from 1990**

I moved to Europe in 1983, and of course, viewing the problem from the other side of the Atlantic made me much more aware of how many other composers, all over the world, were also seeking to escape the complexities of serialism, to reduce music to something they could hear and understand. I became aware of the minimal music of Michael Nyman (England) and Arvo Pärt (Estonia) and Louis Andreissen (Holland). I encountered the *Presque rien* pieces of Luc Ferrari, and heard more of the droning electronic synthesizer of Eliane Radigue (both French). I went to Budapest and met Sary Laszlo and Jeney Zoltan, who were reducing music to essentials in their own ways. I heard other wonderful minimal works of Victor Ekimovsky (Russia), and Tomas Szikorski (Poland), and realized more and more that some of the earliest and most extreme minimal music had been the work of Juan Hidalgo (Spain) and Walter Marchetti (Italy). It was hardly an American movement, no matter what the other critics were saying.

When I was asked to write an introduction for a collection of the articles I wrote in the *Village Voice* 1971-82 (published as *The Voice of New Music*, Het Apollohuis, 1990, and now out of print) I had a much broader definition of what this all meant:

*The idea of minimalism is much larger than most people realize. It includes, by definition, any music that works with limited or minimal materials: pieces that use only a few notes, or pieces that use only a few words of text, or pieces written for very limited instruments, such as antique cymbals, bicycle wheels, or whisky glasses. It includes pieces that sustain one basic electronic rumble for a long time. It includes pieces made exclusively from recordings of rivers and streams. It includes pieces that move in endless circles. It includes pieces that set up an unmoving wall of saxophone sound. It includes pieces that take a very long time to move gradually from one kind of music to another kind. It includes pieces that permit all possible pitches, as long as they fall between C and D. It includes pieces that slow the tempo down to two or three notes per minute.*

### **A view from 2001**

That article in 1990 already included a vast range of styles and composers, but today minimalism seems older, broader, more international, and more significant than ever before. One can even say that Mies van der Rohe's watchword "Less is more" was one of the central themes for the entire century that just ended, and this is something that may even be more clear in the sculpture and architecture of *Minimalismos* than in the "silent music" room, the pedagogical corner, and the concerts. How could an idea so simple, so minimal, have become so prevalent?

Sometimes philosophers have the broadest view of things, and a recent book by the German philosopher Hannes Böhringer has taught me a lot about minimal art, and the motivations we have for making it. It is called *In Search of Simplicity* (available, unfortunately, only in German as *Auf der Suche nach Einfachheit*), and it is highly relevant to minimalism, which is always basically a search for simplicity. In the first chapter, devoted to “Nothing Special,” Böhringer gradually makes us understand that “almost nothing can be almost everything.” He takes a very short score by the Fluxus artist George Brecht as an example:

*Piano piece, 1962*  
*A vase of flowers*  
*On(to) a piano*

A score of this nature, which simply suggests one ordinary gesture, is nothing special at all, but at the same time, it suggests a whole universe of possibilities. What kind of flowers? What kind of piano? Is the action done emotionally? Quickly? With a musical tempo and phrasing? Who is placing the vase on the piano? Or could it be performed without a pianist? Does the vase just appear, perhaps lowered from above? Is Brecht’s piece more interesting to think about than to actually perform in a concert hall? Might it be considered “silent music” and included in our exhibition?

Perhaps the main question is: Why? Why did Brecht do it, and why did Marcel Duchamp accept “objets trouvés” as works of art, and why have so many sculptors returned to simple forms, like cubes, squares, triangles? There is no simple answer, but it seems clear that faster communication, better transportation, cheaper manufacture, affluence in general has brought so many new objects and so much new information into our lives that we need to clear things out, to start over, to find new beginnings. Some want to find art (objets trouvés) rather than adding new things to the clutter around us. Others want to find total originality, to begin from some new zero point, rather than to work in relation to some known style, some past work. Everyone longs to write on a clean slate, a *tabula rasa*, and that, incidentally, or not so incidentally, happens to be the title of a composition by Arvo Pärt – the key composition in which he abandoned his earlier eclectic style and launched the minimal white-note music for which he is now known.

And now I have another question. Is this search for simplicity not also intimately related to another central theme of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, abstraction? I won’t insist on it, though I do myself see a relationship. Abstraction began mostly by twisting images and breaking them up, but it can be considered a process of subtraction too. First you subtract parts of the guitar, then you subtract the guitar altogether and just work with lines and colors, and if that isn’t enough, you straighten out the lines and eliminate most of the colors and end up with a square and one color. And then, of course, you discover that the extremely simple, abstract thing you now have is at least as complex, as difficult to explain, as the painting of the guitar was before all this simplification and abstraction began.

This reminds me of something Gérard Condé wrote about my own music over 15 years ago (*Le Monde*, Jan. 1, 1985), a remark which has truly helped me to understand myself and my music, and which I continue to think about from time to time. It is worth quoting here, because it is highly relevant to many of the works in *Minimalismos*, both visual and musical:

*Tom Johnson likes to push austerity to the ultimate, and with his bare materials, he enjoys demonstrating that a new complexity arises there where we thought we had reached the ultimate simplicity.*

Another theme of the century, another way to get the clutter out of our lives and art and arrive at something minimal, something simple, is through rationality and order. One draws a line, for example, makes a rule about how each subsequent line must follow, and ends up with a logical structure, which may have many lines, but which has only one rule, one idea.

And if we really want to unclutter our lives and our art, we can go further than this. We can get rid of the art or the music altogether, disembodied it, completely dematerialize it, be satisfied with virtual art and virtual music, be satisfied with the ideas by themselves. We can eliminate sound and allow music to go directly to the mind of the viewer-listener. Music becomes silent music. Scores to be performed become scores impossible to perform, though it is still possible to hear them in the mind.

Before I go on to talk specifically about "silent music," let me add one more little quotation. It is just something I happened to find one day in an anonymous hymn, nothing profound or philosophical - just a little refrain that turns over in my mind sometimes, something very ordinary, like a vase on a piano:

*There's a song in every silence,  
seeking word and melody.*

## **Silent Music**

In my 1990 list of the types of minimal music, only my last category approached the idea of silent music: "pieces that slow the tempo down to two or three notes per minute." Today, however, this seems to be the very essence of minimalism in music: slowing the notes down to practically no movement at all, and even eliminating them completely. One can slow the music down to two or three notes a minute, or two or three changes per minute, or one can eliminate even this and have music that is 90% silence, or 95% silence. Or one can go even further and have music that is 100% silence, which is what we have here in this room of "Silent Music," and which can be *heard* as the total minimalism.

Of course, by the usual definitions of these two words, "silent music" is a contradiction in terms. But then, it was also a contradiction in terms when Magritte painted a pipe and wrote underneath "this is not a pipe," and contradictions are basic to almost everything that is now generally defined as "conceptual art." When artists begin to play not just with objects, but with dematerialized objects, concepts behind the objects, words behind the concepts, and contradictions that lie behind all this, there are hundreds of possibilities. There are hundreds of ways to make "silent music" too, and it will be best not to generalize any further and to consider individually the works selected here.

## **Silent Beginnings**

Is minimalism a French Idea? One can not really claim that, though it is historical fact that the first monochrome paintings and the first extreme minimal music in Europe were produced by two curious men from Honfleur, Normandy: Eric Satie and Alfons Allais. If minimal architecture has roots in Adolf Loos, minimal music has roots in the work of these two, who, already in the 1890s, in Paris, began their own subtracting processes, taking away images, emotions, decorations, and trying to get to the essentials of art and music.

Satie is not represented in our exhibition, since he never wrote truly silent music. His most radical contribution to minimal thinking is *Vexations*, the 18-hour piano piece, which presents far less material in far longer time than anyone ever thought possible. He is also known, of course, for his *Musique d'ameublement*, which takes music out of

the concert hall and brings it into the world of daily activity, a little like Brecht's flower pot. It's a way of transforming music into "nothing special," which is a bit like "nothing at all."

Alfons Allais is present in the exhibition, however, in the form of his *Marche Funèbre*, "a funeral ceremony for a great deaf man" (1897), which is the earliest example in our collection. In the preface, as an explanation of the blank staves that constitute the music, Allais writes: "The author of this funeral march was inspired by the universal principal that the great pains of life can not speak. Therefore, the interpreters here must limit themselves to counting the measures rather than making indecent sounds that would destroy the solemn character of the best funeral." This work can be regarded as a mockery of audible music rather than the product of a true belief in silent music, but then, many important ideas have begun as jokes – like Allais' four one-color paintings, which are the first monochromes in the history of art, another innovation of Allais, some 30 years before Malievitch.

### **Silent Zen: John Cage**

The best known example of "silent music," something one could consider a true classic, is 4:33 of John Cage. Intended for concert performance, this piece was premiered by David Tudor in 1952, when, for 4 minutes 33 seconds, the piece was as silent in the concert hall as the original score is here on the museum wall. Sometimes considered nihilistic, the ultimate joke, the negation of all music, its originality and strength have also been greatly appreciated. Probably more widely disputed than any composition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the silence of 4:33 now also reverberates with 50 years of music history.

The importance of Zen in Cage's work is often observed, and that is particularly clear with this piece. But it is also important to note that Robert Rauschenberg was doing his famous white paintings around this same time. It is certainly not an accident that these two close friends decided to go in this direction at the same time, and this was typical of the communication between New York painters and artists in this period. A generation later the New York minimalist sculptors were also in close contact with their musical colleagues, and we must not forget that the term "minimalism" was commonly used in relation to New York sculpture some time before it was applied to music.

### **Silent Impossibilities**

Most of the artists and composers in this *Silent Music* exhibition have worked only occasionally in this way, but in the case of Walter Marchetti, one may say that silent music has been a true vocation for over 30 years. In fact, he has hardly ever written a normal score to be played by normal instruments. He did make a number of recordings in the 60s, which are quite audible, and many of which have been issued and reissued on the Cramps label, but his silent music also began in the '60s. The book *Arpocrate seduto sul loto* (1968) claims to be a text for teaching us how to compose, but it also includes "El libro de la forma," and teaches us how to hear "música mental." The book itself is silent, but you will probably hear something anyway. Marchetti's more recent *Composition for eight orchestras or eight instrumental ensembles or eight organs* could be considered a score to be performed, but finding eight large ensembles to play together is almost as unlikely as finding a church with eight organs. Furthermore the notes are to be held longer than any musicians could ever hold them, the pauses between fragments often last for several hours, and it seems clear that this music is destined to be forever silent.

"I am interested in music that is impossible to play," says Walter, and it is the sheer impossibility of this music that makes it so wonderful to look at and to imagine. The carefully written chords, in several colors of ink, are a pleasure to look at as well.

### **Silent Random Decisions**

Another piece of music that is silent simply because it is impossible to play is *Stochroma*, a piece written in FORTRAN by Clarence Barlow in 1972 and dedicated to Karlheinz Stockhausen, with whom Barlow had studied. The score consists of some 300 pages of computer output, containing a random assortment of the possible combinations of piano notes and durations. I have the feeling that the piece began as a normal sort of composition about piano notes and chance procedures, but that it then disappeared into the computer and came out totally dematerialized, a totally unplayable phenomenon. "Dematerialization" is a word that comes up often in discussions of minimal art, and one might also call this piece virtual music or conceptual music.

*Stochroma* is impossible music, in any case, because the computer made impossible choices. One random decision, already on the first page, is that the duration of the rest between event 4 and event 5 must last  $2^{52}$  seconds, which comes out to approximately 109,603,884,200 years. Not very practical. Later there are cases where the imaginary pianist (there will never be a real one) must play chords requiring three or four hands.

### **Silent Monochromes**

Another work almost well enough known to be considered a classic is the *Symphonie monoton-silence* (1949-1961) of Yves Klein. Famous for monochrome paintings, usually in Klein blue, the French New Realist decided to do a musical monochrome by simply asking an orchestra and chorus to sustain a D-major chord. This is an early precedent for extreme minimalism in music, but it is also a case of "silent music," because Klein specified that if the chord is held for five minutes, it must be followed by an additional five minutes of silence.

### **Silent Oscillator**

Many psychologists have discussed synesthesia, and many cases have been documented of particular individuals, who hear sounds when they look at something or see images when they are given an aural stimulus. As far as I know, no one has ever explained how this works physiologically, or how often it happens to how many people. Many visual artists have thought about synesthesia and attempted to create visual works that stimulate aural sensations. A synonym for "synesthesia" is "optophone," which is the title of several paintings of François Picabia, just to take one example, and similarly, musicians like Scriabin have attempted to correlate music with visual sensations.

I never fully believed that synesthesia could really happen in my ears or in my eyes until I encountered Karl Gerstner's *Color Sound* (1974). Hanging on the wall, it is motionless, and yet, at the same time, it seems to be in perpetual oscillation. Like the electronic oscillators that used to drive analogue synthesizers, it pulses with a precise sound in a regular tempo. Whenever I look at Gerstner's work, I hear inside my head a low sound, in the tuba register, that becomes louder and softer with great regularity, each pulsation taking slightly less than one second. I have shown reproductions of the painting to several friends, who tell me they have similar experiences, so I am convinced that many gallery visitors will perceive in "Sound Color" the same silent music I hear, or something similar.

One reason that synesthesia can be experienced here is no doubt because the artist has subtracted all other decorations, images and colors. It is also important that he did the work on a large scale. Like the Eric Satie of *Vexations*, like the Peter Zumthor of the Kunsthhaus in Bregenz, like the Richard Serra of the 20-ton sculptures, Gerstner understood that such an idea must be realized on a monumental scale despite its simplicity – or rather, because of its simplicity.

### **Silent Eroticism**

Esther Ferrer is best known for her solo performances and installations, but she has also done art objects such as the silent music included here, which is also the only erotic work in the exhibition. *Música celestial* and *Música angelical* contain no notes whatever, only musical staves and the performance instructions, everything laid out against a photographic background of a female sexual organ. The text comes exclusively from classical scores by Scriabin, Albeniz, Chopin, and others, and in both cases an erotic story takes place.

*Musica celestial*, scored for mezzo and tenor, begins slowly and romantically (*adagio, soto voce, avec une douceur caressante*). There is a mysterious murmur (*mysterieusement murmuré*), and then everything moves more quickly (*poco più mosso*). It is difficult to read all the details behind the pubic hair, but it is clear that this silent music gradually becomes more lively (*très animé, accelerando*) and moves into a joyous *presto* (*avec une joie débordante*), then thunder and dizziness (*foudroyant, en un vertige, con una ebbrezza fantastica*), which as in most erotic scenes, leads to tender embraces (*lento, dolce, tendresse*) and a general slowing down (*avec un langueur naissante...*). I leave you to interpret *Musica algelica* for yourself.

You may think that such direct eroticism would turn everyone on, but this does not seem to be the case. The same men who go crazy with the porno magazines and the hard core movies sometimes find *Musica celestial* almost offensive. Men like to be teased, rather than to look directly at photos of women's sexual organs and pubic hair. Why? Well, there seems to be a feminist message lurking back there behind the photo, but I had best leave further explanation to women.

### **Silent Melodies**

The drawings in Dieter Schnebel's *Mo-No, Musik zum Lesen* (*Mo-No, Music to Read*, 1969) are mostly melodies for me. They are generally linear, they start somewhere, move somewhere, come to a close at another point. But of course, they are virtual melodies rather than real melodies, and that is more or less normal today, when electronic letters replace paper letters (email), projections replace physical images (the safety lecture before the plane takes off), computers replace spoken voices (telephone announcements), synthesizers replace musical instruments (almost everywhere). So why shouldn't pictures of melodies replace melodies? It is virtual music, music you can't really hear physically, music you can't really play on an instrument, and yet music you can follow in your head with no problem. Many composers in many countries were doing works similar to Schnebel's about this same time, but most of this "graphic music" was intended to be performed, not simply read, and little of it was as striking visually as Schnebel's "music to read."

### **Silent Compositions**

William Hellermann is a composer and guitarist, though he began by studying architecture, which explains why he learned mechanical drawing. As composers began experimenting with "chance" music and sometimes writing vague musical scores, to be

interpreted by the performer, Hellermann returned to graphic techniques and produced at least a hundred pieces such as these, that are more to be looked at than to be played. Often Hellermann's musical drawings involve puns and visual images, but one always hears music at the same time. The notes are carefully chosen, carefully drawn, carefully lined up. These silent pieces are as much compositions as any of the Hellermann pieces intended to be played and heard. The fact that no one will ever hear these works was no reason, as far as Hellermann was concerned, not to compose them carefully. Walter Marchetti would certainly agree, and don't forget the many medieval sculptors, who spent years carving stone statues that ended up way at the top of the cathedral, where they have been essentially invisible for centuries.

### **Silent Bagatelles**

My own principal contribution to the history of silent music is a collection of drawings called *Imaginary Music*, published in book form in 1974. Some of these drawings, like the "Geometric Canon in Four Parts," are ideas that I, or someone else, might wish to write down in performable form someday, but which in this form must simply be imagined. Some, like the "Complex Triplet," are music that is impossible to play (and a parody of actual works by some of my colleagues). Some, like the "Celestial Music for Imaginary Trumpets," are as impossible as anything Walter Marchetti has ever composed. Some, like the "Large Cluster," are sound ideas that are simply more easily perceived by eye than by ear. Quite a few of the 104 drawings make *Imaginary Music* in quite a few other ways, but all are audible in the imagination in one way or another, at least for me. Since they are all short, simple (minimal), one-page, black-and-white ideas, often with a sense of humor, I also like to think of them as "bagatelles."

### **Silent Instrument**

Any musical instrument makes silent music when it is not being played.

I encountered a particularly poignant example of this recently when I visited the Pablo Casals museum in Prades, in French Catalonia. There, in a glass case, was a beautiful cello, which Casals had played for several concerts in Holland in the '30s. According to the owner of the instrument, this cello has not been played since then. It has been silent for well over half a century. But the instrument still carries the Casals' fingerprints, still somehow holds the vibrations of his playing, and standing in front of the glass case, I had no difficulty hearing, inside my head, one of the maestro's inimitable Bach interpretations. The sounds we know so well from Casals' recordings still somehow emerge from this instrument, undisturbed by the glass case. Many people think that only composers hear music in their heads, and that this is some sort of special talent, but I am confident that anyone would be able to hear the silent music in the Casals cello, and most of the silent music in our exhibition as well. A friend asked me why I didn't try to include the Casals cello itself in the exhibition, and I replied that it would not fit, because it is not really a work of art. But now that I have written this, it seems to me that the Casals cello is in the exhibition already, in a dematerialized sort of way. Anyone who reads this paragraph, and who can imagine the Casals music, can also imagine the instrument there in its glass case. It's not necessary to remove it from its home in Prades.

Monika von Wedel's *Klangtafel II* is another instrument that makes silent music, but it is also a copy of *December 1952*, a work by Earle Brown, usually cited as the first "graphic score," that is to say, the first time a composer simply put down a few suggestive lines or other symbols and left all the specific musical decisions to the performer. Here, in Von Wedel's copy of the score, the lines are larger, and they are painted on canvas rather than drawn on paper. Most important, strings have been

stretched across the image, more or less the way strings are stretched across violins and guitars. That is why I feel this object is not a piece of graphic music, but rather a sort of instrument. We no longer have a score for audible music, but rather an instrument of silent music.

### **Silent Orchestra**

In Robert Filiou's *Musical Economy No. 2*, it is not difficult to imagine the little orchestra of plumber, mason, farmer, electrician, cook and mechanic, all making the sounds of their work under the direction of a cosmonaut. In fact, I find that this silent music rings more vividly in my ear than almost anything else in this collection. Of course, the work is 100% Fluxus, with the Fluxus sense of humor and the Fluxus tendency to deride traditional music and art. It clearly comes from that now largely forgotten period of piano destructions and violin burnings, but for me *Musical Economy No. 2* is simply better, more clever, more intelligent, than much of that repertoire – an image that deserves to hang on museum walls for centuries to come.

### **Silent Concerto**

Ben Patterson is also a Fluxus artist, ever since the famous Wiesbaden concert of 1962. Unlike most of the others in this group, however, he is also a musician, and in fact, spent several years in his youth as a professional bass player in symphony orchestras. So he knew what he was doing when he chose the musical notation pasted into this collage, and he had a good musical sense, as well as a sense of humor, when he selected his orchestra. Toy orchestras may be purchased in souvenir shops all over the world, and any of them would be amusing pasted onto such a work, but these toy musicians seem perfectly cast for the role. Would you not love to be the bass soloist playing a concert with this accompaniment? Try it. Try to hear how you and the animal orchestra would sound together.

### **Silent Meditations**

Yoko Ono organized concerts and events with La Monte young in 1960, exhibited "participation pieces" and "instructions for paintings" in George Maciunas' gallery in New York in 1961, performed with John Cage in Japan in 1962, long before marrying John Lennon. The book *Grapefruit* contains short texts, mostly from the early '60s, that for me are primarily meditations. The suggestions she makes sometimes require quite a long time to really perceive. Only gradually can you pick up all the resonances, which sometimes vibrate on several levels. Many *Grapefruit* texts have more to do with visual images or actions, but I have chosen a couple that to my ears are truly music, silent music.

#### Secret Piece

*Decide on one note that you want to play.  
Play it with the following accompaniment:  
the woods from 5 AM to 8 AM in summer*

1953 Summer

#### Snow Piece

*Take a tape of the sound of snow falling.  
This should be done in the evening.  
Do not listen to the tape.  
Cut it and use it as string to tie gifts with.*

*Make a gift wrapper if you wish, using  
the same process with a phono sheet*

1963 Autumn.

### **Silent Phonemes**

The poets and artists who contributed to the edition of the *Revue musicale* in 1971 dedicated to “La Musique lettriste” are largely unknown in the art world today. Isador Isou, generally recognized as the founder of the group, was the only name I could find among current listings in a recent visit to the Art and Architecture Library in Paris. Still, the work that these artists put together in a few exhibitions, and particularly in this little journal, clearly merits a page in the history of silent music. The central idea of the Lettristes, and the reason they chose a name dedicated to the “letter,” is their claim that the word itself is worn out. After so many centuries of literature, no more original creations can be made with normal language. Writers and poets must go further, must now deal with the letter itself, the phoneme, the phonetic center of all language.

Of course, as one reads such claims one can not help thinking that this particular avant-garde is not only looking for new forms of literature, but also making fun of literature. It is difficult to imagine true poets ready to give up words and sentences altogether. Be that as it may, the Lettristes had many interesting ideas, and they created several new forms of literature, and new names for these forms, and did so with great energy. Some of the terms they liked best are *aphonist*, *hyperphonique*, and *musique cryptique*, all of which essentially mean phonetic messages with mute phonemes, that is, silent music. The Lettristes didn’t want to actually pronounce their poetry of letters and phonemes, probably because this is what was already being done in another French avant-garde movement at the time known as *poésie sonore*. Naturally, the last thing any avant-garde group would ever do is to imitate something being done by another avant-garde group, so much of the work of the Lettristes was devoted to silence, and this adds a bit of poetry to our exhibition.

### **Silent Realism**

The Belgian artist, Baudouin Oosterlynck, has been working between the eye and the ear for some 25 years. He has conceived and presented many sound installations, conceived many others that were never presented, or were never intended to be presented, and he has devised a lovely collection of devices that change the direction and quality of one’s hearing. Most of these are strange looking objects that you must put over your head and ears.

The *Variations du silence* consist of 23 preludes that are clearly the product of the same Oosterlynck research, but they are concerned with silence rather than sound. Each of these 23 variations represents, in words and images, silences that Oosterlynck has heard in nature, usually while backpacking in the mountains of Belgium or France or Spain. Oosterlynck was very selective, however. Each of the silences he selected, on these walks in the mountains, is special in one way or another, as you will find as you read the notes and study the drawings.

I like to think of it as “silent realism,” because it is a little like the Nouveau Realistes. Oosterlynck just accepted elements he found in the real world, rather than trying to make anything new. This is quite another type of silent music: autobiographical, narrative, a personal testimony, but above all a simple collection of found silences. You may say, “but wait, that is not pure silence, the rivers and wind are making sound,” and that is true, But it is also true, as John Cage was so fond of pointing out, that true silence does not exist for us, because there are even sounds in our heads and bodies.

The silences in our lives always contain some ambient noises somewhere, and these are the silences that Oosterlynck is celebrating here.

### **Silent Romanticism**

The English artist Tom Phillips is best known for collages and painting over texts, but he has also had a keen interest in music, ever since his participation in the Scratch Orchestra in the '60s, and it is not surprising that he has come back to music periodically in his visual work. The *Last Notes from Enderich* is an homage to Robert Schumann, who passed the last months before his death in the asylum of Enderich, but the piece is neither sentimental nor metaphorical. Phillips did some research about the composer's death, about the unearthly music his wife Clara claims that he heard continually, and about the tone "A" which was always present in his ear. It seems that Schumann left a number of musical scraps in "wild orthography," which Clara found to be music of delirium and destroyed, but only a few hints remain as to what these notes must have looked like. Phillips writes that one day he went into "a strange trance of drawing. For perhaps the first time since childhood I found the marks coming unbidden and a structure forming itself unwilling." I think Phillips ended up with a rather convincing impression of the notations, the fantasies, the themes, the insane emotions, the crazed energy of the music Schumann was *trying* to write in the last days of his life. All of this is still silent, but it is not difficult to imagine the big romantic gestures, and the pathos that lie there somewhere behind the *Last Notes from Enderich*.

### **Silent Symphony**

The *Symphony 604* of Dick Higgins is a real symphony for me, big, pretentious, waiting for applause, as monumental and important as a symphony of Brahms or Mahler. The passionate brush strokes are penetrated by bullet holes, which still resonate around the orchestra parts, and seeing the four movements together, one does not feel that this is a miniature or a joke. It is music for a large orchestra, and it wouldn't normally be at all minimal, except that it happens to be silent, which by definition brings it squarely back to zero decibels, which is as minimal as any music can be.

*Symphony 604* is not a particularly original work. Dozens of artists and composers in the US and in Europe drew and painted on music paper, particularly in the '60s and '70s. It did seem necessary to include one example of this widely practiced genre, and I chose Higgins, because it seems to me that he did this particularly often and particularly well. I am told that this work belongs to a project he called "A Thousand Symphonies," and it is possible that he actually completed all thousand before his death.

### **Silent Serialism**

If one of the goals in minimal sculpture has been to disappear inconspicuously into the exhibition space, one of the goals in minimal has been to make written music disappear into its exhibition space, and the exhibition space of a musical score is of course the musical staff itself. Many composers have attempted to turn musical staves themselves into works of art and music, and it is not difficult to find five-line forms, suggesting musical notation, in the visual arts as well. I selected two such cases, which seem to me to be particularly successful, one created by the Japanese musician Takehisa Kosugi in the '60s, and one drawn much later by the Austrian, Gerhard Rühm.

Kosugi is best known as an improviser, and more recently as the musical director of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, but during one period he spent quite a bit of time simply drawing music paper and making beautiful, hand-made, color, embossed

editions of it. These have sometimes been shown in exhibitions of graphic music, but since they can not really be performed, they seem to me to be more at home in this exhibition of "silent music." This work is first of all a severe form of minimalism, because when one subtracts everything except the five-line staves, this is the musical equivalent of returning to a totally blank page. It is also important, however, to note how carefully the lines are drawn and colored. Kosugi's work reminds me of serial music, in which composers like Anton Webern carefully selected each note, following a 12-tone row, and drew them in, one by one. Kosugi's pages do not for me stimulate sounds in my inner ear as clearly as many of the other things here in our *Silent Music* exhibition, but as I look at one of his pages, I perceive precise sequences quite clearly.

Much the same can be said for Gerhard Rühm's *Tema mit Variationen*, except that Rühm has permitted himself to draw a few additional lines, connecting one staff with another, indicating relationships, sequences, inversions, directions, "variations." One can think of each page as a different way of orienting a 12-tone series.

### **Silent politics**

A pioneer of *Lautgedicht*, a member of the Wienergruppe, a consistent creator of both music and visual works, as well as literary works, it is not surprising that Gerhard Rühm has also done other types of silent music. One of my favorite pieces in this category, which is also the only piece of silent music I can find that uses photographs, and the only thing in *Silent Music* that makes a clear political statement, is a simple collage that combines a photograph of refugees departing from their bombed-out city with a page of a song that sings over and over, "Ade" (farewell). It is really just another farewell song, but a silent one, which no one even *wants* to sing out loud, and a touching memorial to the many places where one may still witness the exodus of political refugees.

### **Other Silences**

The types of "silent music" grow more and more numerous, but the list is certainly not complete. When we eliminate the sounds, we reduce music to almost nothing, and as Böhringer pointed out, almost nothing is almost everything. So there are certainly additional variations of silence to be considered, and each one will widen our definition of "minimalism in music" just a bit more. I hope to be able to update all this one day, perhaps with a "view from 2010".