Sound Beginnings

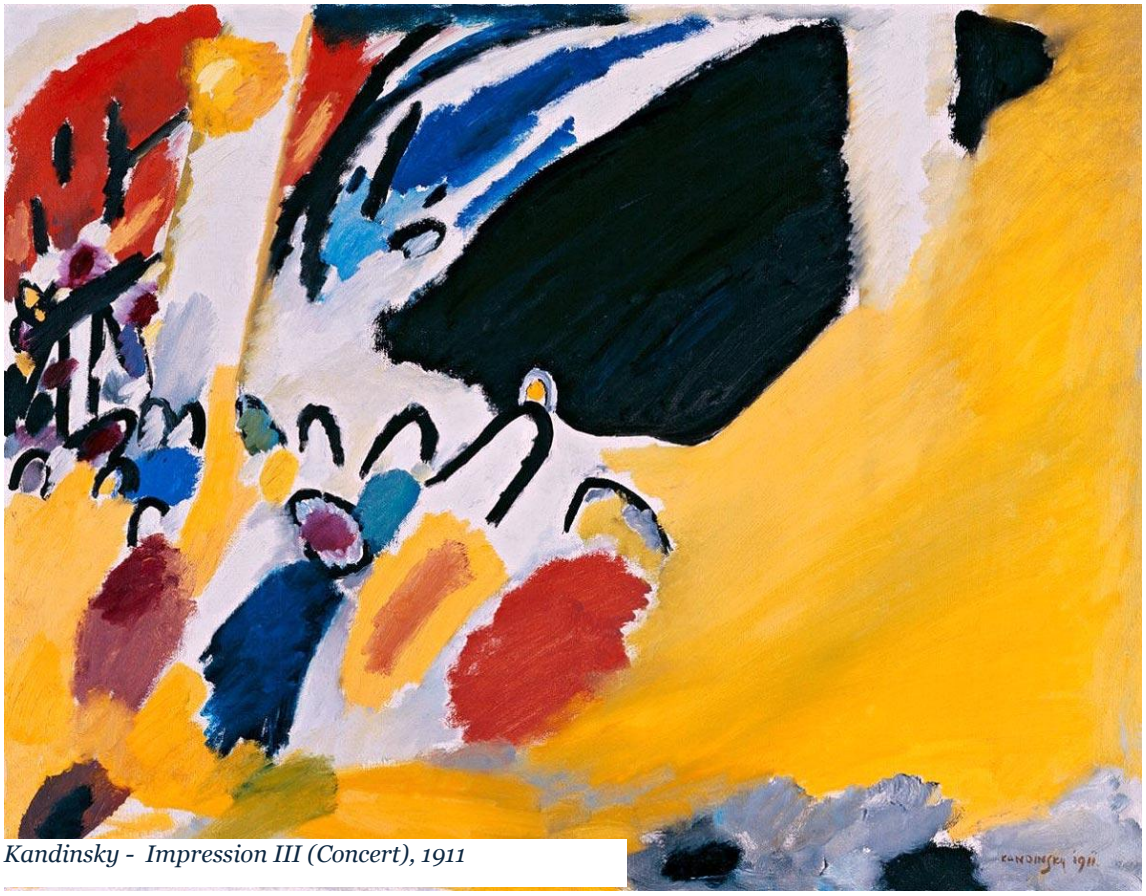
Robert Stein

Talk 1
The Sounds of the Explosion

A World Breaking Apart, 1911 - 1913

Modern music did not emerge in isolation. Its roots lie in the extraordinary cultural upheavals of the years surrounding 1910, when artists, writers, and composers across Europe and America began to feel that inherited ways of understanding the world had become inadequate. Virginia Woolf famously wrote that “on or about December 1910 human character changed,” and in her reflections on literary modernism she described hearing everywhere “the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction.” Her words apply just as powerfully to music.

What had changed? Partly, it was the rapid acceleration of technological and industrial life. Artists like Giacomo Balla, celebrating speed and machinery in works such as *Velocity of an Automobile*



Kandinsky - Impression III (Concert), 1911

(1912), embraced modernity as something exhilarating. At the same time, traditional realism was being rejected. Wassily Kandinsky's *Impression III (Concert)* (1911), painted after hearing a concert by Arnold Schönberg, transformed the familiar image of a concert hall into an abstract field of colour and spiritual intensity. For Kandinsky, as for many composers, dissonance was no longer decorative—it became expressive, capable of acting directly on the soul.

Scientific and philosophical revolutions added to this atmosphere of uncertainty. Freud's psychoanalysis, Einstein's relativity, Nietzsche's challenges to morality and religion, and Marx's critiques of society all undermined confidence in stable truths. Artists increasingly explored fragmentation, alienation, and interiority. In painting, figures like Emil Nolde and Henri Matisse turned away from conventional representation; in music, composers began doing something similar, questioning harmony, form, and beauty itself.

This cultural atmosphere helps explain why the years 1911–1913 became so explosive musically. A famous moment came at the Skandalkonzert in Vienna on 31 March 1913, where audiences reacted with outrage to works by Anton Webern, whose *Six Pieces for Orchestra* (1909) condensed orchestral music into fleeting, angular gestures; Alexander von Zemlinsky, whose *Four Orchestral Songs on Poems by Maeterlinck* (1910–1913) represented an important transitional voice; Arnold Schönberg, whose *Chamber Symphony No. 1* (1906) had already pushed tonality to its limits; and Schönberg's student Alban Berg, whose refined, distilled *Five Orchestral Songs on Picture-Postcard Texts by Peter Altenberg* (1912) proved particularly provocative.

Berg's brief orchestral songs demonstrate how modernism could make even the smallest poetic fragment feel emotionally overwhelming. The music is dense and expressionistic, yet often quiet and delicate. One song begins with a woman gazing "beyond the borders of all we know," contemplating something beyond ordinary life. Nothing dramatic appears to happen, yet the atmosphere is charged with uncertainty and emotional intensity. Everyday impressions are transformed into concentrated emotional scenes.

Sensuality, Mysticism, and the Collapse of Beauty

Not all musical explosions came through violence or dissonance. Some emerged through beauty itself—beauty made strange, unstable, and dangerous.

A striking example is Claude Debussy's *Syrinx* (1913), one of the first major solo flute works since CPE Bach's Flute Sonata in A minor (c. 1747). Inspired by the Greek myth of the nymph Syrinx, transformed into reeds while fleeing the god Pan, Debussy's short piece unfolds with improvisatory freedom. It feels sensuous and elusive. Debussy famously said, "I want to drown tonality," yet unlike Schönberg, he achieves this without sounding aggressively atonal. Narrative recedes; atmosphere and timbre take precedence.

A more extravagant form of transcendence appears in the music of Alexander Scriabin, particularly his *Piano Sonata No. 6* (1911). Here sensuality and mysticism merge. Scriabin described the sonata as "nightmarish… murky… dark and hidden," and believed his music could express the inexpressible. Its harmonies and textures seem weighted with symbolic meaning, striving toward something beyond ordinary human experience.

His ambitions became even more extravagant in *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1910), sometimes described as his Symphony No. 5. This vast work includes a “light keyboard” intended to project colours alongside orchestral sound, reflecting Scriabin’s synaesthetic belief that sound and colour were spiritually connected. Choirs sing without words. Music and light combine in an attempt to lift listeners toward transcendence. It is Symbolism in its purest musical form: an effort to transform sound into a gateway to another world.

Yet this rich, overloaded Romanticism was approaching collapse. One of the defining moments came in Richard Strauss’s *Salome* (1905), especially in its final scene (below), where Salome kisses the severed head of John the Baptist. The opera’s intense dissonances and psychological extremity push late Romantic sensuality to its breaking point. The shocking climax feels like an ending—not only for the drama, but for an entire musical worldview.

From Collapse to Atonality: Schönberg and the Inner Mind

As music collapsed under the weight of its own excess, Arnold Schönberg responded not by retreating, but by moving decisively into new territory.

His *String Quartet No. 2* (1908) already points toward this transformation. In its final movement, a soprano sings the words “Ich fühle Luft von anderem Planeten”—“I sense the air from another planet.” It is a fitting description of what Schönberg was attempting: not simply innovation, but an escape into an entirely new expressive space.

That journey culminated in *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), one of the foundational works of musical modernism. Based on twenty-one poems by Albert Giraud, the work follows Pierrot, the melancholy clown of commedia dell’arte, transformed into a modern symbol of alienation and psychological instability. The music abandons conventional singing in favour of *Sprechgesang*, a heightened speech-song. Tonality collapses; expression becomes fractured and obsessive.

One poem, *Galgenlied* (“Gallows Song”), offers an example. The text is grotesque and darkly comic, describing a hanging victim whose “last lover” is the noose itself. Schönberg mirrors this with a “thin” instrumental palette—piccolo, viola, cello, and piano—avoiding lush sonorities. The voice is cold and impassive. The result is eerie and unsettling, ending in sudden collapse.

Yet *Pierrot Lunaire* is not merely psychological disorder. It is also a triumph of concentration and concision. Music no longer seeks grandeur; it distils experience into fleeting moments of heightened awareness.

New Directions: Nationalism, Rhythm, and Primitive Power

Modernism did not belong only to central Europe. Across the Atlantic and further east, composers were forging alternative paths.

In America, Charles Ives created *Putnam’s Camp* from *Three Places in New England* (1912), a remarkable collage of marching tunes, patriotic songs, and dreamlike fragments. Inspired by Revolutionary War history and childhood memory, the piece layers familiar materials in confusing simultaneity. Heroic marches become uncertain and fragmented. Music becomes a landscape of memory rather than a single coherent statement.

In Hungary, Béla Bartók’s *Allegro barbaro* (1911) transformed the piano into a percussion instrument. Drawing on rural folk traditions, Bartók embraced irregular rhythms, raw sonorities, and what has been called “rural music as an archaic avant-garde.” Violence itself becomes an aesthetic value. The piano no longer sings; it strikes and hammers.

Finally, Igor Stravinsky brought all these developments together in *The Rite of Spring* (1913). Its Paris premiere famously caused a riot. Subtitled “Pictures of Pagan Russia,” the ballet depicts primitive rituals culminating in human sacrifice. The music foregrounds awkwardness: strange instrumental colours, pounding rhythms, registral extremes, and abrupt accents.

The opening bassoon solo sounds almost painfully strained, while the “Auguries of Spring” introduces one of the most revolutionary rhythmic passages in musical history. Beauty is no longer the point. Instead, Stravinsky offers force, shock, and physicality.

Interestingly, just months before composing *The Rite*, Stravinsky attended a performance of Schönberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*. He might have chosen Schönberg’s inward, compressed path. Instead, he turned outward—to colour, rhythm, and collective ritual.

Together, these works define the “sounds of the explosion.” From Bartók’s *Allegro barbaro* (1911) to Schönberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) to Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (1913), music was transformed. The old assumptions of elegance, proportion, and decorum gave way to something new: awkwardness, sensuality, violence, interiority, simultaneity, and the sublime unfamiliar.

Modernism did not simply reject the past. It answered a challenge. For Schönberg, music had become too bloated. For Stravinsky, too seductive. For Ives, too one-dimensional. For Bartók, too polite. For Debussy, insufficiently sensual. For Scriabin, too bound to earth.

Music in our own time – as we will hear – still bears the traces of these explosions.

Music played

Alban Berg	3rd Orchestral Song on Picture-Postcard Texts by Altenberg
Claude Debussy	*Syrinx*
Alexander Scriabin	Piano Sonata No. 6
Arnold Schoenberg	String Quartet No. 2
	Gurrelieder
Richard Strauss	*Salome*
Arnold Schönberg	*Pierrot Lunaire*
Charles Ives	*Putnam's Camp*
Béla Bartók	*Allegro barbaro*
Igor Stravinsky	*Three Japanese Lyrics*
	The Rite of Spring

Recommended further listening

Alban Berg	Three Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6; Violin Concerto
Claude Debussy	*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune; Nocturnes*
Alexander Scriabin	Piano Sonatas Nos. 9 and 10; *The Poem of Ecstasy*
Richard Strauss	*Elektra*
Arnold Schönberg	*Erwartung;* String Quartet No. 4;
	Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16
Charles Ives	*3 Places in New England; The Unanswered Question*
Béla Bartók	Piano Concerto No.1; String Quartets 3 and 4
Igor Stravinsky	Symphonies of Wind Instruments; *Les Noces*

Talk 2
Listening to Nothing

Webern, Cage, and the Discovery of Silence

In New York in 1950, two young composers walked out of a concert performance of Anton Webern's Symphony Op. 21 (1928). The men were John Cage and Morton Feldman, and the concert they abandoned was not a protest but an act of admiration. They did not want the fragile, concentrated world of Webern's music to be diluted by what followed on the programme. Webern's symphony, written for a small orchestra, had created a new conception of musical space: weightless, crystalline, suspended almost outside time. Webern, born in Austria in 1883 and killed in 1945, was one of Arnold Schönberg's pupils, and Schönberg's revolutionary idea of the "emancipation of dissonance" lay behind his work. Dissonance no longer had to resolve comfortably into harmony; music could exist in a state of uncertainty, sparseness and tension.

For Cage and Feldman, however, Webern's importance was not his twelve-tone technique but his sound world itself. Webern showed that music could be stripped down almost to nothing while remaining emotionally charged. Silence, isolated notes and tiny gestures became as meaningful as grand melodies or symphonic development.

John Cage, born in 1912 in the United States, initially hoped to study with Schoenberg himself. Schoenberg famously described Cage not as a composer but as "an inventor of genius." Cage briefly attempted to write twelve-tone music, but he soon realised that his own path lay elsewhere. During the 1930s and 1940s he became interested in percussion and noise, partly through his work accompanying dance performances. This led to one of his most famous innovations: the prepared piano, developed in the 1940s by placing screws, bolts and pieces of rubber between piano strings so that the instrument produced metallic, percussive and non-Western sounds.

Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1948) represents the culmination of this period. Influenced by Indian aesthetics and ideas of tranquillity, the music rejects the traditional piano's rich, expressive "ego." In the short Sonata No. 4 (1948), lasting little more than a minute and a half, one hears a strange mixture of fragility and primitivism. The structure is simple, repetitive and static, but the altered piano produces sounds resembling drums, bells and distant string instruments. Cage was not trying to express personal emotion in the Romantic sense. Instead, he wanted listeners to encounter sound itself.

This search for neutrality continued in Cage's *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1950). Although there are still melodies and recognisable instruments, the music avoids conventional progression. Phrases do not build toward climaxes or resolutions. Cage once said proudly that the quartet was going "nowhere," and that was precisely the point. Western music had traditionally depended upon tension, direction and narrative; Cage wanted music simply to exist.

At the same time, Cage was increasingly influenced by visual art. Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951), large blank white canvases painted with ordinary house paint, fascinated him because they seemed to "catch whatever fell upon them": light, shadow, dust and movement in the room. Cage recognised in them a visual equivalent to what he wanted in music. This led directly to his most notorious composition, *4'33"* (1952), in which a pianist sits silently for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The work is not empty. Instead, it frames ambient sound — coughing, breathing, traffic, shifting bodies — as music. Silence becomes impossible, because the world itself is always sounding.

Morton Feldman and the Floating World of Sound

Morton Feldman, born in 1926, took Cage's discoveries in a different direction. Like Cage, he admired Webern and moved within the circle of New York abstract painters that included Philip Guston, Jasper Johns and Jackson Pollock. Feldman often spoke about sound as though it were a physical substance, something to be shaped like paint on canvas. He once declared that he was interested in "touch rather than musical forms."

Guston - Painting (1954)

This fascination can be heard in works such as *Piano (Three Hands)* (1957). Feldman's music moves slowly and delicately, balancing sound against silence. Notes seem suspended in mid-air, without gravity or destination. Feldman compared this sensation to the paintings of Philip Guston, whose abstract canvases appeared to hover somewhere between the surface of the painting and the viewer. Silence in Feldman is not emptiness but space: a medium through which sound drifts.

Unlike Cage, Feldman was not trying to eliminate beauty. Cage increasingly distrusted beauty because he associated it with taste, ego and artistic control. Feldman remained deeply attracted to sensuous sound. Cage once criticised Feldman's music for being "closer to what we know is beautiful," while claiming that his own music was "closer to what we know is ugly." Yet Feldman's beauty was fragile and uncertain, never rhetorical.

One of Feldman's later masterpieces, *Why Patterns?* (1978), for flute, bass flute, glockenspiel and piano, demonstrates this approach. Inspired partly by Persian rugs and Jasper Johns's patterned paintings, the music repeats figures that almost, but never quite, recur exactly. Patterns emerge and dissolve. The listener becomes aware of tiny shifts in colour, spacing and emphasis. Meaning no longer comes from dramatic development but from close attention to minute changes.

Cage's own later work also moved toward an increasingly spacious and impersonal sound world. In *Four2* (1990), written for choir, pitches are specified but durations are left flexible, allowing performers to create shifting clouds of sound. Cage described the music as rising and falling "like traffic" rather than speaking like traditional musical discourse. Silence and openness became central elements of his final style.

Minimalism: Repetition, Process and Ritual

By the 1960s, the ideas explored by Cage and Feldman began to influence a new generation of American composers who would become associated with Minimalism. Yet Minimalism was not a single style. One branch pursued absence, stillness and drones; another embraced energy, repetition and pulse.

La Monte Young, born in 1935, pushed reduction to an extreme. His *Composition 1960 No. 7* (1960) consists simply of a perfect fifth that performers sustain "for a long time." Harmony, rhythm and narrative disappear almost entirely. The music resembles certain Minimalist sculptures of the

same period, such as Robert Morris's *Untitled (L-Beams)* (1965), which emphasised plain materials, literal presence and the spectator's role in perception.

Terry Riley's *In C* (1964) introduced a more communal and joyful form of Minimalism. Written for any number of performers, the piece consists of short repeated phrases that musicians cycle through independently. A steady pulse underpins the music while patterns overlap and shift unpredictably. Unlike Cage's quiet emptiness or Feldman's hesitant delicacy, Riley's music is exuberant and collective. Listeners hear performers gradually joining together, creating an atmosphere of openness and celebration.

Philip Glass, born in 1937, transformed these ideas into tightly controlled musical processes. In *Two Pages* (1968), originally written for electric keyboard, tiny changes occur within relentless repetition. Notes are gradually added or removed while rhythm and harmony remain nearly static. The process itself becomes audible, rather like watching a geometric drawing unfold step by step. Glass initially resisted the label "Minimalism," preferring the term "process music."

Glass - *Einstein on the Beach*

Glass later carried these techniques into opera with *Einstein on the Beach* (1975), created with theatre director Robert Wilson. The work abandoned traditional operatic storytelling in favour of repetition, ritual and abstract imagery. Number counting, repeated patterns and mechanical pulse replaced conventional arias and narrative. Yet the result was strangely theatrical. Minimalism, once associated with reduction and impersonality, could generate overwhelming intensity.

Steve Reich, born in 1936, explored another aspect of repetition through tape loops and phasing processes. In *Come Out* (1966), based on recorded speech by Daniel Hamm, a young Black man assaulted by police, Reich repeated fragments of recorded speech until they slipped out of synchronisation. The words gradually dissolved into rhythm and noise. Repetition here was not calming but disturbing. Mechanical process exposed social violence and fragmentation.

Minimalism and the Return of Ritual

By the 1970s and 1980s, Minimalism increasingly merged with spirituality and religious ritual. One of the most important figures in this transformation was the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, born in 1935.

Pärt began as an avant-garde composer deeply influenced by serialism and experimental techniques. His dramatic work *Credo* (1968), for piano, choir and orchestra, collides violent modernist textures with quotations from Bach. Pärt later explained that the Christian commandment “Love your enemies” profoundly affected him during this period. The work represents an inner conflict between complexity and simplicity, modernity and faith.

Eventually Pärt rejected the avant-garde language entirely and developed his distinctive “tintinnabuli” style, based on simple triads, slow movement and silence. In *Pari Intervallo* (1976, arranged for organ in 1980), music unfolds with extraordinary restraint. Pärt claimed that “a single note beautifully played” could be enough. Silence became not emptiness but consolation.

A similar spiritual Minimalism emerged in Britain through the work of John Tavener, born in 1944. Tavener’s early *Requiem for Father Malachy* (1973) still contains modernist dissonance, but its ritualistic chanting, bells and gongs already point toward the austere sacred style that later made him famous.

In *The Last Sleep of the Virgin* (1991), written for string quartet and handbells, Tavener creates an intensely contemplative atmosphere. Slow repeated phrases, drones and delicate bells suggest Byzantine ritual and suspended time. The composer instructed performers to play “at the threshold of audibility.” Yet unlike Cage’s impersonal silence, Tavener’s quietness feels both profound and devotional.

Music played

Anton Webern	Symphony
John Cage	Sonata No. 4 from Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano
John Cage	*String Quartet; Four*[2]
Morton Feldman	*Piano (3 hands); Why Patterns?*
LaMonte Young	*Composition 1960 No. 7*
Terry Riley	*In C*
Philip Glass	*2 Pages; Einstein on the Beach*
Steve Reich	*Come Out*
Arvo Pärt	*Credo; Pari Intervallo*
John Tavener	*Requiem for Father Malachy;* *The Last Sleep of the Virgin*

Recommended further listening

Anton Webern	Six Pieces, Op. 6; String Trio
John Cage	Music for Pieces of Wood; *Two*
Morton Feldman	*Rothko Chapel; Violin and Orchestra*
Terry Riley	*Salome Dances for Peace*
Philip Glass	*Satyagraha;* Symphony No. 3
Steve Reich	*The Desert Music;* Double Sextet
Arvo Pärt	*Stabat Mater; Berlin Mass*
John Tavener	*The Veil of the Temple; The Repentant Thief*

Talk 3
From Minimal to Maximal

Starting from nothing

Minimalism in contemporary classical music often begins with an apparent paradox: how much can be achieved with as little as possible? In its earliest forms, minimalism was an exploration of reduction—few notes, simple patterns, repeated structures, and a deliberate resistance to traditional musical drama. Yet over time, this aesthetic of restraint expanded outward, becoming richer, louder, and more emotionally ambitious. The journey from minimal to maximal traces not only changes in musical style but also shifts in how composers understood repetition, structure, and expressive possibility.

One of the defining figures of minimalism is Steve Reich, whose work demonstrates how simple processes can generate remarkable complexity. Reich's *Come Out* (1966) and *Different Trains* (1988) showed how technology and recorded sound could create musical patterns that seem simultaneously precise and unstable. Yet when minimalism moved from tape and electronics to live instruments, it often embraced even greater austerity. The question became: what can music do with almost nothing?

Richard Serra Tearing Lead (1968)

This spirit echoed developments in visual art. Jasper Johns famously wrote, "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it." Minimalist artists such as Richard Serra explored exactly this principle, transforming ordinary industrial materials through repetition, process, and physical intervention. Serra's works with molten lead—hurled into corners or torn into ragged sheets—revealed beauty in raw matter itself. Minimalist music pursued a parallel ambition: beginning with the most basic sonic materials and discovering what transformation might emerge through persistence and variation.

Reich's *Clapping Music* (1972) is perhaps the purest musical embodiment of this idea. Two performers clap the same rhythmic pattern, but one gradually shifts ahead by a single beat. Nothing changes except timing, yet the resulting textures are endlessly varied. The piece is starkly manual, almost primitive, and profoundly human. It recalls the physicality of Serra's work: simple materials subjected to repeated action until something unexpectedly rich appears.

The turning-point

By the mid-1970s, minimalism had begun to expand. Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976) represents a major turning point. The repetitive structures remain, but the sound world becomes warmer, softer, and more luminous. Human voices and woodwinds rise and fall over pulsing percussion, creating what Reich described as music that "shimmers, vibrates, washes." Here minimalism becomes less about mechanical process and more about atmosphere. The strict architecture remains, but it is softened by breath, resonance, and a distinctly Californian sense of openness.

Not all minimalism, however, embraced this gentleness. In the same year, Dutch composer Louis Andriessen offered a more aggressive alternative with *De Staat* (1976). Setting texts from Plato's *The Republic* and scored for female voices, electric guitars, and ensemble, the work rejects the softness of strings and instead presents a relentless, confrontational sound. Minimalism here becomes political—rhythmically forceful, ideologically charged, and unapologetically sharp. If Reich's music suggests meditation, Andriessen's suggests protest.

Minimalism also found an unexpected home in opera. Philip Glass's *Akhnaten* (1983) transforms repetitive musical structures into ritual rather than drama. Telling the story of the Egyptian pharaoh who attempted to establish monotheism, the opera avoids conventional theatrical conflict. Instead, repetition becomes the language of ceremony—funerals, coronations, prayers, and hymns. Glass discovered that minimalism could excel not at narrative momentum but at expressing timelessness, devotion, and sacred repetition.

By the 1980s, minimalism began evolving into something broader: post-minimalism. This new phase retained repetitive foundations but welcomed richer orchestration, greater emotional range, and more eclectic influences.

A striking figure in this transition is Julius Eastman, whose music brought intensity and confrontation to minimalist forms. A Black gay composer working in late twentieth-century America, Eastman infused his compositions with personal and political urgency. Works such as *Evil N****r* (1979) for four pianos combine relentless repetition with drama, surprise, and emotional abandonment. The familiar minimalist pulse remains, but it is charged with anger and resistance.

The most prominent post-minimalist, however, is John Adams. Unlike earlier minimalists who emphasized purity and process, Adams embraced expressive richness. His choral work *Harmonium* (1981) demonstrates this transformation beautifully. Setting poetry by Emily Dickinson and John Donne, Adams creates vast evolving sound fields in which harmony becomes the primary force. The regular pulse recedes, and literary depth enters the foreground. Music swells and accelerates with ecstatic intensity.

Adams's first opera *Nixon in China* (1987) extends this development further. Here minimalism becomes theatrical, political, and even satirical. The repetitive structures remain, but they are mixed with influences from jazz, Stravinsky, and Wagner. The opera treats political history as ritual while also exploring the humanity of its characters. Minimalism, once detached and abstract, becomes emotionally and dramatically engaged.

Another important direction emerged in New York through Bang on a Can, a collective founded by Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe. Their music reconnects minimalist repetition with contemporary vernacular sounds—rock, amplification, and industrial noise.

Michael Gordon's *Industry* (1992) for amplified cello exemplifies this approach. Beginning with just a few repeated notes, the piece gradually intensifies into a distorted, frenetic confrontation. The cello becomes something mechanical, almost metallic. This is minimalism transformed into resistance: disciplined, rebellious, and physically overwhelming.

Over time, Bang on a Can's music matured. The youthful aggression softened into reflection, though themes of justice and suffering remained central. David Lang's Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Little Match Girl Passion* (2007) combines the story of Andersen's suffering child with the structure of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. Four singers and simple percussion create a music of extraordinary restraint. Emotion is not expressed directly but intensified through repetition and hesitation. The result feels less like religious ritual and more like meditation.

Julia Wolfe's *Fire in my Mouth* (2019) carries minimalism into yet another domain: multimedia political memorial. Written about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the work (above) combines orchestra, choirs, protest chants, courtroom testimony, and staged visual elements. Repeated rhythms mimic industrial machinery and the terrible inevitability of disaster. Here minimalism becomes a vehicle for collective memory and mourning.

Returning to the source

Yet even as minimalism expanded outward toward grandeur and political engagement, another branch returned to quietness and near-silence, reconnecting with the legacy of John Cage and Morton Feldman.

Swiss composer Jürg Frey asks perhaps the most minimalist question of all: "How little is needed for music to exist?" His work consists of sparse sounds, long silences, and quiet sonic spaces. Influenced by conceptual art and Fluxus, Frey shifts attention away from composition itself and toward listening. Like George Brecht's event scores or Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), his music explores boundaries—between art and life, performance and perception. His String Quartet No. 3 (2014) exemplifies this aesthetic of extreme reduction.

Canadian composer Linda Catlin Smith shares this commitment to slowness and spareness, but with greater warmth and sensuality. Inspired by painters such as Agnes Martin and Rothko, she thinks of sound in tactile terms: velvet, silk, roughness, light, and shadow. Her Piano Quintet

(2014) is quiet yet restless, its small melodic fragments circling and transforming. Here minimalism becomes richly textured rather than stark.

Finally, Lithuanian composer Justė Janulytė offers what she calls “monochrome music.” In works such as *Clessidra* (2023), long-held tones and blurred instrumental identities create wave-like masses of sound. Different sonic layers slowly descend and rise like sand passing through an hourglass. Unlike Frey’s emptiness or Smith’s intimacy, Janulytė’s minimalism is expansive and immersive—a dense, luminous field of pure sound.

From two hands clapping to vast orchestral and multimedia landscapes, minimalism has travelled a remarkable path. It began with reduction: few notes, repeated patterns, and deliberate simplicity. Yet from those humble beginnings emerged a rich diversity of possibilities—ritual, protest, meditation, tragedy, and transcendence.

Minimalism, it turns out, was never simply about doing less. It was about discovering how repetition, patience, and attention can transform the ordinary into something profound.

Music played

Steve Reich	*Clapping Music; Music for 18 Musicians*
Louis Andriessen	*De Staat*
Philip Glass	*Akhnaten*
Julius Eastman	*Evil N****r*
John Adams	*Harmonium; Nixon in China*
Michael Gordon	*Industry*
David Lang	*Little Match Girl Passion*
Julia Wolfe	*Fire in my Mouth*
Jürg Frey	String Quartet No. 3
Linda Catlin Smith	Piano Quintet
Justė Janulytė	*Clessidra*

Recommendations for further listening

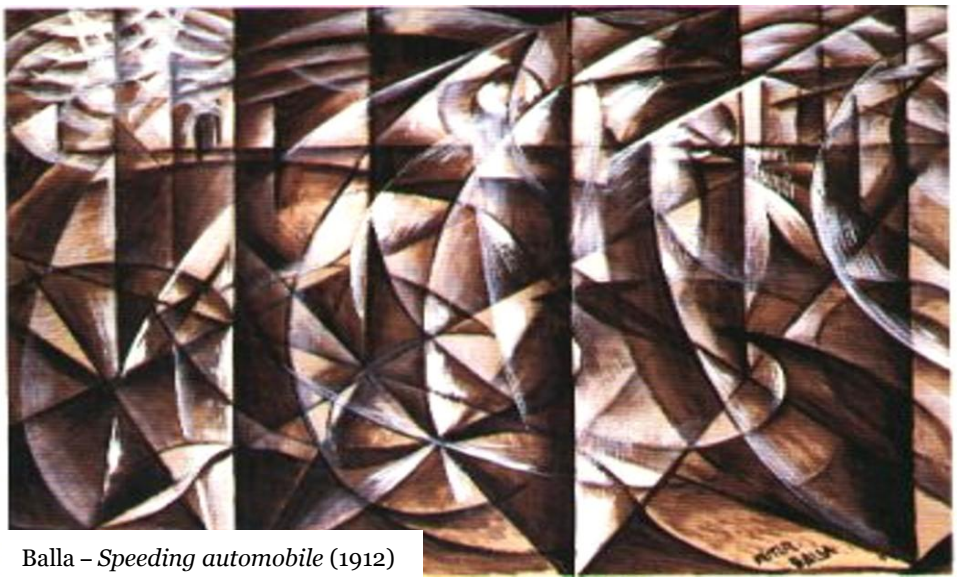
Louis Andriessen	*De Stijl; Facing Death*
Julius Eastman	*Gay Guerilla;*
	The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc
John Adams	*Harmonielehre; Shaker Loops*
Michael Gordon	*Big Beautiful Dark and Scary*
David Lang	*death speaks; shade*
Julia Wolfe	*Anthracite Fields; Lad*
Jürg Frey	*Because I could not stop for Death;*
	Polyphonie der Wörter
Linda Catlin Smith	*Among the Tarnished Stars;*
	With their Shadows Long
Justė Janulytė	*Unanime* for 8 trumpets;
	Warum betrübst du dich, mein Herz? for organ

Talk 4
Music Reimagines Itself

Noises and beyond

Across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, classical music has repeatedly reinvented itself—not merely by adopting new technologies, but by rethinking what music can be, what counts as sound, and how listeners are meant to engage with it. If earlier revolutions challenged music's harmony, structure, or emotional language, later composers increasingly questioned its very boundaries. What happens when music absorbs the sounds of machines, incorporates silence and noise, dissolves into theatre, or becomes inseparable from visual art? Contemporary music, in many ways, has reimagined itself by stepping beyond its own traditional limits.

The impulse began early. In 1912, Giacomo Balla painted *Speeding Automobile*, celebrating the exhilaration of technological modernity. Around the same time, the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo argued in *The Art of Noises* (1913) that modern life—engines, sirens, industrial machinery—had created an entirely new sound world that music must embrace. His manifesto insisted that traditional orchestral sound was too old-fashioned to capture contemporary experience.



Balla – *Speeding automobile* (1912)

Although Russolo's own experimental noise instruments are largely historical curiosities, his influence proved profound. One important heir was John Cage, who later acknowledged Russolo's importance in opening what Cage called "the entire field of sound." Cage's prepared piano experiments, particularly from the 1940s, transformed ordinary instruments into hybrid sonic machines, demonstrating that music could emerge from altered objects and unexpected timbres.

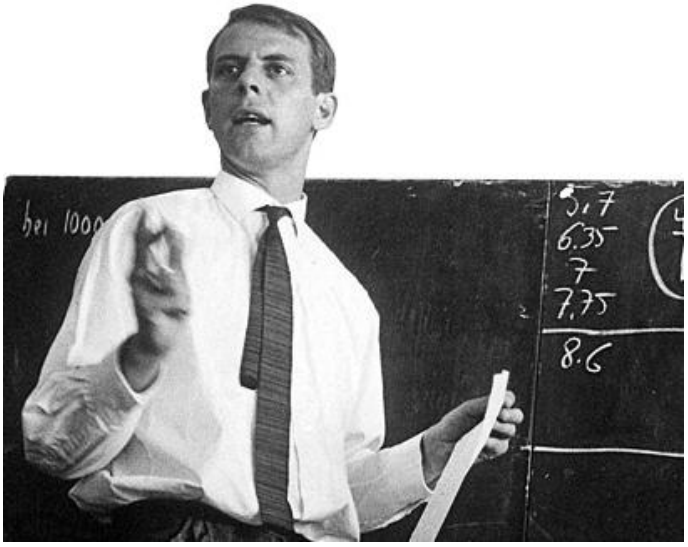
Another early visionary was Edgard Varèse, whose orchestral work *Amériques* (1918–1921, revised 1929) sought to depict not merely America as a place, but the idea of discovery itself—new worlds "on earth, in the sky, or in the minds of men." Massive orchestral forces, including

eleven percussionists and a siren, create an exhilarating sonic cityscape. Here, the orchestra itself begins to imitate modern urban life.

Technology soon enabled composers to go further. In France, Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry created *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1950), one of the foundational works of *musique concrète*. Rather than composing with notes, they assembled sounds from recordings: footsteps, breathing, cries, laughter, and mechanical noises. Schaeffer described the human being as an instrument far richer than any conventional twelve-note system. The resulting “Symphony for One Man Alone” is less celebratory than introspective—an exploration of loneliness, embodiment, and modern alienation.

Electronics and reinventions

By the late 1950s, electronic sound had begun to merge with live performance. Karlheinz Stockhausen’s (below) *Kontakte* (1958–1960) explores precisely this encounter. The title means “Contacts,” and the work stages interactions between percussion instruments and electronically manipulated sounds. Yet the piece is more than technological experimentation. It explores the relationship between the corporeal and the spiritual, between physical action and abstract sonic transformation.



For some composers, however, technology was not meant to sound futuristic at all. It could disappear into the background, quietly reshaping human expression. Jonathan Harvey, a student of Stockhausen, achieved this in *Mortuos plango, vivos voco* (1980) for eight-track tape. Built from recordings of a cathedral bell and the voice of Harvey’s son singing as a boy treble, the work blends ancient ritual with modern electronic manipulation. The title—Latin for “I mourn the dead, I summon the living”—captures the piece’s liminal quality. Human and electronic sounds merge so seamlessly that distinctions begin to dissolve.

Similarly, Giles Swayne’s *Cry* (1979) for twenty-eight solo voices and electronics blurs boundaries between human voice, natural environment, and technological mediation. Deeply influenced by African musical traditions and environmental awareness, Swayne creates a sonic world in which waves, wind, and vocal cries seem inseparable.

More recently, Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices* (2012) demonstrates how contemporary composers continue to reinvent vocal music. Combining speech, yodelling, sighs, whispered exercises, and fragments of historical dance forms, the work reconnects modern experimentation with ancient ritual and communal music-making. Its playful energy and emotional openness suggest that innovation need not abandon joy.

Old and new styles collide

Another path of reinvention lies in stylistic collision. Alfred Schnittke's Concerto Grosso No. 1 (1977) exemplifies what he called "polystylism": the deliberate juxtaposition of Baroque forms, sentimental popular music, and modern dissonance. A prepared piano and harpsichord coexist with strings in a work that moves unpredictably between irony and sincerity, elegance and unease. Schnittke's music asks whether high and low culture, seriousness and entertainment, can meaningfully coexist within the same artistic frame.

For contemporary composer Tarek Atoui, these questions extend beyond Western musical traditions. His art/sound piece *The Wave* (2019) combines sound, ethnomusicology, instrument design, and performance. Drawing on prehistoric materials such as stone and ceramics alongside advanced digital technologies, Atoui's work invites listeners to experience sound physically—as something that addresses the ear, the eye, and the body simultaneously.

Such ideas resonate strongly with John Cage's own philosophy, expressed in *Silence* (1961): music, he argued, need not impose order on chaos but can simply awaken us to the life we are already living. For many contemporary composers, this means dissolving the boundary between music and performance art.

Irish composer Jennifer Walshe exemplifies this approach. Her opera *XXX_LIVE_NUDE _GIRLS!!!* (2003) combines female vocalists, instrumentalists, Barbie dolls, puppeteers, cameras, and recorded sound. It is deliberately chaotic, grotesque, and socially provocative. Rather than elevating drama in the traditional operatic sense, Walshe exposes modern vulgarity, digital excess, and cultural exploitation through parody and discomfort.

A more inward but equally radical approach appears in Rebecca Saunders' *Skin* (2016) for soprano and thirteen instruments. Drawing on texts by Samuel Beckett and James Joyce, Saunders explores the physical and psychological meanings of skin—as boundary, membrane, and vulnerability. The voice strains at the limits of language, while instrumental gestures scratch, whisper, and fracture around it. The result is less song than sonic embodiment.

Visual art offers powerful parallels here. The fragile sculptures of Eva Hesse, such as *Inside II* (1967) and *Sans II* (1968), suggest exposed interiors and delicate surfaces. Saunders' music similarly seems to peel back layers, asking what lies beneath sound's visible—or audible—skin.

Some composers push the integration of visual and musical experience even further. Danish composer Simon Steen-Andersen describes his work as "visual music." In *Black Box Music* (2012), music merges with puppet theatre, performance art, and absurdist humour. Hands become conducting gestures, theatrical props, and instruments simultaneously. His *Study for String Instrument No. 3* (below) (2011) similarly transforms the cello by masking its strings and

forcing it to produce only crackling, rattling sounds. By stripping away expected tone, he removes familiar associations and asks listeners to hear anew.

Finally, a more recognisably classical voice can still embody all these transformations. Unsuk Chin's Violin Concerto No. 1 (2001, revised 2023) appears, at first glance, to belong to the traditional concerto tradition. Yet beneath its familiar outline lies a radically reimagined sound world. There are no obvious melodies, little conventional dialogue between soloist and orchestra, and percussion is fully integrated rather than merely decorative. The violin drifts, glides, and suddenly bites. The listener hears not a pre-existing world being presented, but a new world being created in real time.

That may be the central achievement of contemporary classical music. Across all these composers—Varèse, Schaeffer, Stockhausen, Harvey, Shaw, Schnittke, Walshe, Saunders, Steen-Andersen, Chin, and others—music has not simply adopted new sounds or technologies. It has reimagined what listening itself can mean.

Technology has played a crucial role, but it is never merely about machinery. It is about expanding perception. Whether through electronic tape, manipulated instruments, theatrical gesture, or the embrace of noise, these composers invite us to hear differently—to encounter sound not as something fixed and familiar, but as something endlessly capable of becoming new.

Music played

Caroline Shaw (arr.)	*Lay all your love on me*
Edgar Varèse	*Amériques*
Pierre Schaeffer / Pierre Henry	*Symphonie pour un homme seul*
Karlheinz Stockhausen	*Kontakte*
Jonathan Harvey	*Mortuos plango, vivos voco*
Giles Swayne	*Cry for 28 solo voices*
Caroline Shaw	Partita for 8 voices
Alfred Schnittke	Concerto Grosso No. 1
Jennifer Walshe	*XXX_ LIVE_ NUDE_GIRLS!!!*
Rebecca Saunders	*Skin for soprano and 13 instruments*

Simon Steen-Andersen	*Black Box Music*
Simon Steen-Andersen	*Study for String Instrument No. 3 for cello and video*
Unsuk Chin	Violin Concerto No. 1

Recommended further listening

Edgar Varèse	*Ionisation*; *Déserts*
Karlheinz Stockhausen	*Gruppen; Mantra*
Jonathan Harvey	*Bhakti;* String Quartet No. 4
Giles Swayne	*Magnificat; Naaotwa Lala*
Caroline Shaw	*And the Swallow; Really craft when you*
Alfred Schnittke	Viola Concerto; Symphony No. 5/Concerto Grosso No. 4
Jennifer Walshe	*Physics for the Girl in the Street;* *A Late Anthology of Early Music Vol. 1*
Rebecca Saunders	*Neither; of waters making moan*
Simon Steen-Andersen	*Grosso;* String Quartet No. 2
Unsuk Chin	*Cosmigimmicks; Rocana*