
London Philharmonic Orchestra

Steve Reich

Clapping Music

(1972)



GCSE BrightSparks 2025/26 Teaching Resource

Steve Reich (b.1936)

Steve Reich is one of the most famous and well-respected composers alive today.



- ★ Born in New York
- ★ Attended the Julliard School
- ★ Trained as a percussionist
- ★ Had a fascination with repeated rhythm
- ★ Experimented with electronic music and music for percussion
- ★ Was at the forefront of the minimalist movement in the 1970s

Minimalism

Minimalism was a radical musical movement which originated in the USA in the 1960s.

Minimalist music is constructed by using a small number of musical ideas that are repeated many times, which generates music that gradually changes over a long period of time.

Pioneered by Steve Reich, minimalist music was initially made up of short, rhythmic 'cells' that were repeated lots of times and put through a number of processes allowing the music to very gradually develop and transform.

Minimalism: techniques

Interlocking

- ★ Staggering two cells so the rhythms interlock and create a more complex pattern

Gradual Transformation

- ★ After many repeats, the cell changes by just one note or duration

Phasing

- ★ The same cell is played by two people, but one slowly moves out of sync with the other by very slightly altering the speed or length of the cell, and each mismatch creates new rhythms and/or harmonies

Shifting

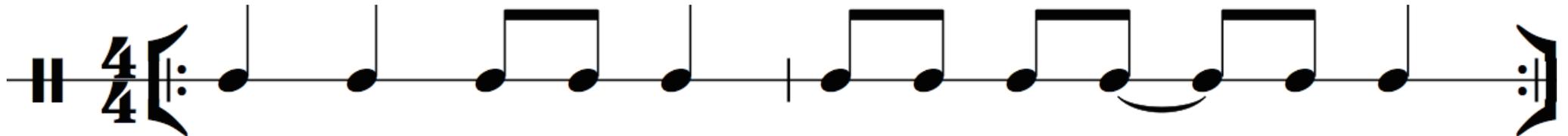
- ★ Similar to phasing, one pattern shifts its emphasis by moving the last note to the beginning (or vice versa) creating a new pattern

Minimalism warm-up

Here's a warm-up to get the compositional creativity flowing...

First, we need to learn to clap the following rhythm. You might recognise it if you like football!

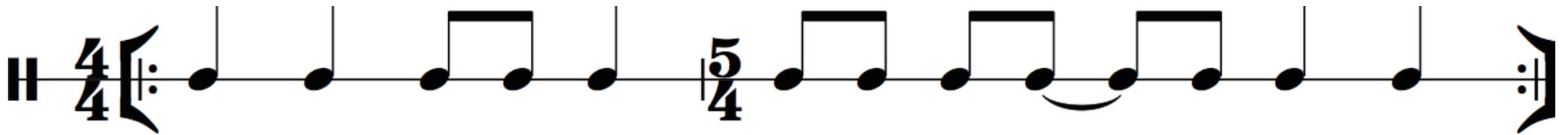
Let's clap it four times round:



Tip: If rhythm reading isn't your strong suit, you can add words to help you break the rhythm down, e.g. 'I like fish and chips, I like them ve-ry much'. Feel free to get creative!

Minimalism warm-up

Now, we're going to change the rhythm very slightly by adding a whole crotchet beat to the end like this:



Can you clap this one four times round?

When you're ready, let's kick this up a notch...

Tip: Break it down again if you need; you can develop your words from before, e.g. 'I like fish and chips, I like them ve-ry much, yes-'

Minimalism warm-up

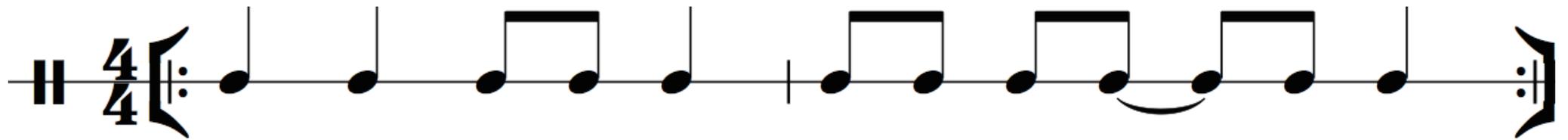
Split your class in half. One side of the room is going to clap our the first pattern with 8 beats, and the other side will be clapping our second pattern with 9 beats.

Clap the patterns round and round. You'll notice that they will go in and out of sync with each other, and it will be quite tricky to keep going, but eventually you'll go back to clapping in sync!

The next slide has the rhythms on, so focus in and get ready for a challenge!

Minimalism warm-up

Rhythm 1



Rhythm 2



Minimalism warm-up

Did you have to try a few times, or did you get it on the first go?

Was there something about this task that was particularly tricky?

Either way, well done! You have just performed a **phase** - one of the most important of all the minimalist techniques!

Fancy an extra challenge? Try switching parts and performing it again!

Definitions

Have a look at the terms below. What do they mean?

Ostinato

Motivic development

Pentatonic

Definitions

Ostinato

- ★ A short melodic, rhythmic or chordal phrase repeated continuously through a section of a work or the whole piece

Motivic development

- ★ A compositional technique where a short musical idea - or 'motif' - is transformed and elaborated throughout a piece to create coherence and unity.

Pentatonic

- ★ A musical scale consisting of five notes (eg C, D, E, G, A)

Main Activity

Pure minimalism - Steve Reich



Composition task

In your groups, begin the process of composing your own minimalist music:

- ★ In your groups, pick an instrument each, making sure there are at least **two pitched instruments** in each group
- ★ Choose **five notes**, or perhaps a pentatonic scale, to use as the basis for your music (this might be different for each group, but if it's the same then you can put all your class ideas together at the end!)

Your group piece should feature:

- ★ **Up to three ostinatos** - make sure to practise playing them over and over on your instruments
- ★ **A neat beginning and ending** - if everyone can start and stop completely together, even better

Off you go! Make sure you're ready to share your ideas with the class.

Composition task - listening

Let's listen to each group's musical ideas. Think about these things as you listen:

- ★ How many ostinatos can you hear?
- ★ Is everyone in the group starting and stopping together?
- ★ Is everyone in the group playing the same ostinato pattern?
- ★ Do you think the piece is a good reflection of the minimalist style?

Minimalist composition techniques

Now we have some initial ideas, we can begin to edit and refine them to be even more minimalist in style. Here are some more techniques we might use:

Staggering

- ★ Beginning different sections of music on different beats of the bar, eg starting an ostinato on beat 2, 3, or 4 instead of starting at beat 1

Phasing

- ★ One ostinato is lengthened by one whole beat to create a mismatch with the others, therefore creating a phase. This is the same process as we used in our warm-up at the beginning

Minimalist composition techniques

Subtraction

- ★ Over many repetitions, notes are gradually removed from the ostinato until nothing is left. This can be done in two ways, either by replacing a note with a rest...

Musical notation illustrating subtraction by replacing notes with rests. The first measure (4/4) contains the full phrase: *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice*. The second measure (4/4) shows the first note replaced by a rest: *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips juice*. The third measure (4/4) shows the first two notes replaced by rests: *Veg-gie bur and chips juice*.

... or by squashing the notes up instead of adding a rest (although this technique can be more tricky!)

Musical notation illustrating subtraction by squashing notes up. The first measure (4/4) contains the full phrase: *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice*. The second measure (7/8) shows the notes compressed into a shorter duration: *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips juice*. The third measure (3/4) shows the notes further compressed: *Veg-gie bur -and chips juice*.

Minimalist composition techniques

Addition

- ★ Over many repetitions, notes are added to the ostinato to either create it from silence...

Musical notation illustrating the technique of addition. The first measure shows a single note on a treble clef staff with the lyrics "Veg". The second measure shows two notes with the lyrics "Veg - gie". The third measure shows three notes with the lyrics "Veg - gie bur" and "etc...". Vertical double bar lines separate the repetitions, showing how the melodic line grows from a single note to a more complex phrase.

... or to transform it into something else:

Musical notation illustrating the technique of transformation. The first measure shows a four-note melodic phrase with the lyrics "Veggie bur-ger and chips and juice". The second measure shows the same phrase with an additional note, with the lyrics "Veggie bur-ger and chips and cof-fee". The third measure shows the phrase further transformed with a new interval and a final note, with the lyrics "BIG Veg gie bur-ger and chips and coffee". Vertical double bar lines separate the repetitions, showing how the original motif is reworked into a more complex and varied phrase.

Composition task - editing

The minimalist composition techniques we have just learned about are designed to create very gradual change in the music over lots and lots of repeats. For example, if we were using subtraction, it would look something like this:



The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with three measures of music, each repeated a different number of times. The first measure is repeated 20 times (x20) and contains the lyrics "Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice". The second measure is repeated 25 times (x25) and contains the lyrics "Veg-gie bur-ger and chips juice". The third measure is repeated 30 times (x30) and contains the lyrics "Veg-gie bur and chips juice". The lyrics are written below the staff, and the repetition counts are written above the staff. The music consists of quarter notes and eighth notes, with some rests in the second and third measures.

It's time to edit your music. Go back to your groups and pick one of the processes we've learned about to apply to your piece.

Staggering

Subtraction

Phasing

Addition

Composition task - performance

Let's have a performance of each group's piece now that we have added another minimalist element to your compositions.

Here are some more questions to consider as you listen:

- ★ Can you hear which minimalist technique is being used?
- ★ Are all the transformations of the piece gradual enough?
- ★ Have the new elements been successfully executed?
- ★ What have the team done well, and what could they improve on?

One final challenge...

As one final challenge, you might like to finish by combining all your musical ideas to create one big whole-class composition!

Decide as a class how to structure your composition. You might like to consider some of the following questions:

- ★ Do all the groups play at the same time, or is it better to structure some entrances and exits?
- ★ Can two or three composition techniques be happening at the same time, or is it more effective when they stay separate?

Get creative and experiment; if you don't like the sound of something, you can always change it!

The minimalist effect is a gradual transformation of ideas, so be careful that you don't end up with one big minimalist 'fog'!

More Resources!

Can't get enough of our fabulous resources? Bit of time left at the end of your lesson?

Have a go at one of our Kahoot music terminology quizzes:

<https://create.kahoot.it/share/musical-directions-quiz/e8e0faf9-4382-4064-989e-e3b280464478>

<https://create.kahoot.it/share/london-philharmonic-orchestra-gcse-quiz-musical-terminology/27a93594-e51a-4904-8cf9-656e8af15d85>

Or why not watch a video? This one breaks down a movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No.5:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBU1LL0WL4w>