
London Philharmonic Orchestra



GCSE BrightSparks 2025/26 Resource

Teacher's Notes

Steve Reich
Clapping Music
(1972)



Information

This resource forms a part of a variety of resources linked to the London Philharmonic Orchestra's GCSE BrightSparks concert on 6 November 2025, but can also be used as a standalone resource for GCSE Music teachers.

In this resource, we introduce Steve Reich's minimalist piece *Clapping Music*, providing background information and a brief analysis about both the piece and the composer, as well as including some ideas for creative work in the classroom based on the theme of minimalism.

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This pack is available on the Learning Resources section of the London Philharmonic Orchestra's website along with many other free resources for schools.



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Steve Reich (b. 1936)

Steve Reich is one of the most famous and well-respected composers alive today. Born in New York and a former student of the Julliard School, he began his musical life as a percussionist, until his fascination with repeated rhythm led him to start experimenting with electronic music and music for percussion. In the 1970s he was at the forefront of the minimalist movement and has continued working within the genre ever since.



Minimalism

Minimalism was a radical musical movement which originated in the USA in the 1960s. Music from this genre is constructed from a small number of short musical ideas that are repeated many times to generate music that gradually changes over a long period of time. Pioneered by Steve Reich, minimalist music was initially made from short rhythmic 'cells' that were repeated a lot and put through a number of processes allowing the music to very gradually develop and transform.

Minimalist Techniques:

Interlocking

★ staggering two cells so the rhythms interlock to 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: one person 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

★ another form of phasing: one pattern shifts its emphasis by placing the last note at the beginning or vice versa, thus creating a new pattern

Ideas for creative work in the classroom

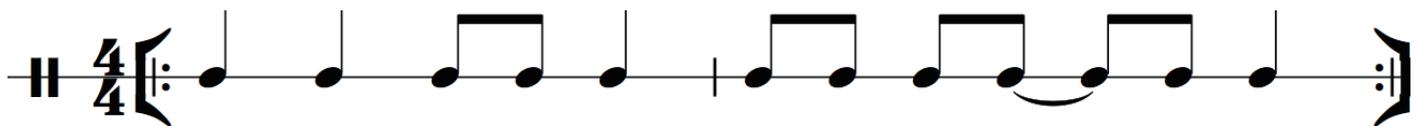
Creative tasks based on some of the techniques used within these pieces may help your students to understand the music from a hands-on point of view. Here are some suggestions for creative work that could be undertaken either in groups or individually.

Composing tasks: Minimalism

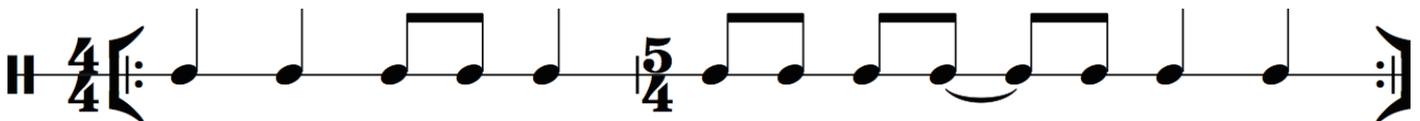
A classic minimalist warm-up

Before beginning creative composition with your students, a fun warm-up can help to get the creative juices flowing and this one explores a very important minimalist technique - **phasing**.

- ★ Clear your classroom and ask your students to stand in a circle
- ★ Teach them the following ('football') rhythm and as a class, clap it four times through:



- ★ Explain that you're going to change the rhythm very slightly by adding a whole beat onto the end like this:



NB: you must add a full crotchet beat onto the end and therefore augment the rhythm from eight beats to nine. It might help at first if this extra beat is a stamp or a shout rather than another clap

- ★ Practice clapping this and repeating it through four times
- ★ Now split your circle in half. One side will clap the original pattern with 8 beats, and the other side will clap the new pattern with 9 beats. They must clap their patterns round and around. Point out that the patterns are going to go out of sync and it will be hard to keep going but eventually the patterns will fit together again
- ★ When this is achieved, explain that they have just performed a **phase** - one of the most important minimalist techniques!

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Next, explain the following 'processes' to your class:

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

Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips* *juice* *Veg-gie bur* *and chips* *juice*

... or by squashing the notes up instead of adding a rest (this is a much harder process, although using the words does help!)

Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips* *juice* *Veg-gie bur* *- and chips juice*

- 2. Addition** - over many, many repetitions, notes are added to the ostinato to either create it from silence...

Veg *Veg-gie* *Veg-gie bur* *etc...*

... or to transform it into something else:

Veggie bur-ger and chips and juice *Veggie bur-ger and chips and cof-fee* **BIG** *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and coffee*

- 3. Phasing** - one ostinato is lengthened by one whole beat to create a mismatch with the others and therefore create a phase. Refer your students back to the 'football chant' warm-up on page 5.

Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice* *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice* *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and*

Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice **AND** *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice* **AND** *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice* **AND**

Stress to your class that these processes are designed to create a gradual change in the music and therefore take place gradually over many, many repeats. For example, if using subtraction, notes are subtracted slowly one note:

Veg-gie bur-ger and chips and juice *Veg-gie bur-ger and chips* *juice* *Veg-gie bur* *and chips* *juice*

4 Split your class back into its working groups and ask each group to choose at least one process from the ones outlined previously to apply it to their piece

5 When this is achieved, listen to all the pieces, evaluate and comment. Are the transformations gradual enough? Are they successfully executed?

- ★ At this stage you may want to put all the groups together to make one big minimalist piece.
- ★ Decide as a class how to structure the groups – do they all play at the same time or is there any structure to their entrances/exits?
- ★ Can two or three processes be lined up or is it more effective if they stay separate? The effect you are aiming for is gradual transformation of ideas and a lot of repetition but be careful that all your lines can be heard and you don't just create a 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>

Thank you

We hope this pack will give you some suggestions to support GCSE provision in your school. For further ideas, don't forget to look at Learning Resources on the LPO website, or book tickets to future BrightSparks concerts. We offer GCSE (London only), Key Stage 1 (London only) and Key Stage 2 (London and Eastbourne) BrightSparks concert per year.

You can find out more at www.lpo.org.uk/brightsparks/

We'd love to hear from you about your school's musical activities! Feel free to get in touch with us via email education@lpo.org.uk to find out more about our work here at the LPO, or if you'd like any guidance for musical work in the classroom.