

Anton Bruckner - Holy Minimalist

James McCullough

Musical minimalism is generally looked upon as a trend in post-war Western music. It is often analyzed in terms of a turn from the “high modernity” of the early and mid-twentieth century toward something less imposing, more self-effacing, even fun. Prominent names in minimalist music are Steve Reich [b. 1936] and Philip Glass [b. 1937]. The style is traced to the work of La Monte Young [b. 1935] and the late American composer Terry Riley [1935-2015].

Typical descriptions of musical minimalism speak of: “... pared-down means of composition, with no sense of time-oriented direction. Stasis and repetition replaced the melodic line, tension and release, and climax of conventionally tonal music.”¹ Beginning in the 1980s and into the 90s, several European composers adopted minimalist techniques in their compositions with often explicit Christian themes and usages in mind. Among these practitioners are the Estonian Arvo Pärt [b. 1935], Henryk Górecki of Poland [1933-2010], and the late John Tavener of England [1944-2013]. A fellow traveller among these so-called “holy minimalists” is the Scottish composer James MacMillan [b. 1959]. MacMillan's style since the latter 90's has become something better generalized as eclectic, drawing a wide variety of styles and techniques, but with roots still in “minimalized modernism” as it were. Of his own aesthetic predilections as well as those mentioned above, MacMillan writes:

Why are we seeing such a flourishing of spiritual composers at this time? The music of [Tavener, Górecki and Pärt] on the face of it is very beautiful, it is music which avoids the complexities common in a lot of contemporary, avant-garde, modernist music of the twentieth century. There is a return to some sense of modality, if not tonality, and there is an ethereal atmosphere in their music that I think makes people relax and feel vaguely spiritual. There seems to be a hunger for something to fill the spiritual void and some of this music at least gives people a kind of folk memory of what spiritual sustenance was about.²

Associating the music of Anton Bruckner with twentieth and twenty-first century minimalism may seem counter-intuitive. Bruckner is generally identified with the idioms of late Romanticism with its lushness of sound, density of texture, and expansiveness of dimension. Bruckner in particular is primarily associated with his symphonies, works which were characterized as “boa constrictors” by no less a composer than Johannes Brahms. Even his shorter works, the motets in particular, are again written along the lines of late nineteenth-century religious vocal scoring.

But a closer consideration of one aspect of the compositional technique employed by Bruckner may give rise to a new perspective on his work and uncover more than one connection between this giant of late Romanticism with aspects of late twentieth century minimalism, especially in its “spiritual” guise. I want to suggest that there is a minimalist element in Bruckner's work and that this element, along with his daring harmonic language, heightened chromaticism, angular melodic constructions and aspects of his orchestration (the prominent and leading role given to the trumpet, for example), underscore Bruckner as a progenitor of twentieth-century modernism and beyond.³

Perhaps the root of all “holy minimalism” lies in church chant. Bruckner grew up in early nineteenth-century Catholic Austria, immersed in chant, especially throughout his time at the St Florian monastery. Gregorian Chant, with its purity of line and temperance of melodic shape, is the source of religious minimalism not only in technique but in character. Its (apparent) simplicity of expression, its relative accessibility, its contemplative evocation, its sometimes hypnotic quality, its harmonic “stasis and repetition” are some of the qualities minimalists aspire to achieve. Chant shaped Bruckner's aesthetic as well as aspects of his melodic inventiveness, particularly of course in his sacred vocal music which, as is well documented, seeped into even his symphonic works.⁴

¹ Lucy Davies, “Minimalism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. Alison Latham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 781.

² James MacMillan, “God, Theology and Music,” *New Blackfriars* Vol.81, issue 948 (2000), 16-26. For further reflections on MacMillan's work see James McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality: The Arts and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene, OR, USA: Cascade, 2015), pp. 89-104.

³ I would even include his decreased usage of Italian score directions in favor of increasingly vernacular (in his case German) directions (i.e. *Feierlich langsam, doch nicht schleppend*) as indications of modernity. Bruckner's connection to twentieth-century musical developments, especially in relation to Mahler and Schoenberg, is documented in Dika Newlin, *Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg* (New York: Kings Cross, 1947).

⁴ Closely related to this would also be Bruckner's penchant for modal melodic and harmonic qualities, which is beyond the scope of this present essay.

Another aspect of Bruckner's “minimalism” is his use of ostinato. This too is rooted in Bruckner's immersion in church music, especially of the Baroque period. One reason why Bruckner lies so uneasily in late Romantic music is his fundamentally Baroque aesthetic, both in terms of musical technique (polyphonic texture, use of fugue, augmentation, inversion, etc.), antiphonal aspects of his orchestration, and its frequently religious subject matter. Ostinato means “persistent,” and Bruckner makes use of persistent, repetitive patterns. One thinks for example of the string figure that opens the Third Symphony in D minor (a figure making its initial appearance in the Symphony in D minor, “die Nullte”), Ex. 1:

Ex. 1 Symphony No. 3 (1889) opening

Mehr langsam. Misterioso

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
Double Bass

pp
pp
pp
pp

etc.

Here we see an ostinato pattern in the high strings accompanied by a rhythmic support in the low strings with no harmonic modulation for thirty bars. On top of this Bruckner introduces the symphony's main theme, on the trumpet, which in itself is an example of a kind of minimalism, Ex. 2:

Ex 2 Symphony No. 3, first theme.

Trumpet

p

Passages of non-modulating harmony are not original with Bruckner. One thinks of the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and its final eighty bars of pure C major belted out by the full orchestra, or the entire Prelude to *Das Rheingold* designed of hardly more than arpeggios of E flat major. Bruckner has his predecessors, but what functions as a concluding flourish or a theatrical effect in other works becomes something more *constitutive* in Bruckner's symphony.

One work where Bruckner's usage of repetitive patterns leads to almost disturbing effect is the infrequently performed Second Symphony in C minor. The first movement, for example, derives much of its character from a combination of ostinato in the strings and an intrusive “motto theme” in the trumpet which is employed almost monolithically throughout the movement⁵, Ex 3 & 4

Ex 3 Symphony No. 2, first movement, strings.

b. 97 Tempo I (moderato)

Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

p
p
p
p
p

⁵ Bruckner scholar Hans-Hubert Schönzeler identifies the trumpet theme as the first instance, albeit in a dotted variation, of the famous “Bruckner rhythm” that will make such endless appearances throughout his subsequent symphonic works; *Bruckner* (London: Marion Boyars Ltd., 1978), 59.

Ex 4 Symphony No.2, first movement, trumpets

The overall effect of the movement is of course one of density and texture, but it is built upon a foundation of almost monomaniacal repetition of figures and bare themes. A close listening of this oft-overlooked piece may bear out this analysis.⁶

Closely related to Bruckner's employment of repetitive patterns is his use of sequentially repeated phrases in the construction of his famous climaxes. One thinks immediately of the climaxes achieved in the Adagio movement of the Seventh Symphony in E Major, a motivic phrase it shares with the “Non Confundar” section of the *Te Deum*. The use of sequentially-repeated phrases is standard fare in Bruckner's symphonies, and again roots his compositional style in techniques associated with the Baroque.

One aspect of minimalist technique is the reduction of material down to its most fragmentary, atomistic elements which are then manipulated or more often used in highly repetitive patterns. Of all the symphonies one would think that the mammoth Eighth Symphony in C minor would be the least minimalistic. But close analysis of the workings of the piece may reveal otherwise.

Consider its opening theme, Ex 5:

Ex5 Symphony No. 8, first movement.

The image shows the opening theme of the first movement of Symphony No. 8, marked 'Allegro moderato'. The score is for the first four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is common time (C). The music features a four-note motif (B-flat, A, G, F) that is repeated and varied across the staves. The dynamic marking is 'pp' (pianissimo) for the strings.

This remarkable theme with its suggestion of Phrygian modality is *reduced and fragmented* by Bruckner into a four-note motif that is then deployed to create a whole texture in an extended passage in the middle of the development, bars 251-298. This opening theme returns in the Finale, as was Bruckner's wont, reduced to its four-note motivic form, bringing the symphony to its impressive and tonic-key affirming conclusion.

The use of motivic material and its manipulation is part and parcel of the whole Northern European musical tradition. Bruckner received and advanced this inheritance. Brahms makes similar moves, and in this light minimalism draws on these techniques of reduction, repetition and variation (or lack of it). Minimalism takes this inheritance and turns it against it, heightening it to effective (or annoying, depending on the listener) use. For some practitioners of this kind of minimalism, the aim of this reduction is to reveal something of the essential, even divine, lying beneath the music often lost in self-conscious clutter and banter of late Romantic/high Modern styles. My contention is that Bruckner is translating aspects of his Baroque sensibilities into late Romantic forms and so giving rise to the edifices of sound that for some evoke something of the divine-human relationship, for others something a little over-padded and meandering.⁷

⁶ Günter Wand's 1981 recording of this symphony with the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra (contained in the RCA boxed set of the nine symphonies) pulls no punches in exhibiting these qualities imbedded in the score.

⁷ I wish to acknowledge Ken Ward's suggestive help in this analysis, and recommend Julian Horton's analysis of the first movement in “On the Harmonic Idiom of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony,” *The Bruckner Journal* Vol. 14, No. 3, Nov 2010, 20-34.

For this writer the “Holy of Holies” of Bruckner's “holy minimalism” is the 1884 setting of the medieval *Te Deum*. Here many of the conventions of Bruckner’s mature style are on display. Consider the unison string ostinato pattern that opens and provides the unique energy and propulsion of the piece, Ex.6:

Ex 6 Te Deum opening string figure

Allegro moderato
ff

Vln. I etc.
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

...over which Bruckner's chant-inflected choral line is supported, likewise in stark vocal unison, Ex 7:

Ex 7 Te Deum vocal line bars 2-7

Allegro moderato
ff

SOPRANO
ALTO
TENOR
BASS

Te De - um lau - da - mus: te Do-mi-num con-fi - te - mur.
Te De - um lau - da - mus: te Do-mi-num con-fi - te - mur.
Te De - um lau - da - mus: te Do-mi-num con-fi - te - mur.
Te De - um lau - da - mus: te Do-mi-num con-fi - te - mur.

The unison string accompaniment figure continues for the first ten bars of the work unabated and unmodulated. Its suggested presence is maintained in the strings throughout much of the twenty-minute long work, being reprised in the score explicitly at several points and bringing the piece to its affirmative conclusion. Like the symphonic examples here highlighted, the overall effect of the *Te Deum* may not be one of “minimalism,” but upon examination one sees that Bruckner creates the atmospheric and elemental effect of the work through sometimes minimalistic means. Self-conscious minimalism will simply pick up where such music leaves off and deploy it to heightened effect.

Reference to Bruckner’s influence on Mahler and Schoenberg has already been made. This influence can be further traced through the work of Anton Webern and Alban Berg in terms of orchestral innovations, motivic experimentations, and austerity of sound. And in the work of Arvo Pärt, for example, we don't find an immediate imitation of Bruckner’s style but a similarity of ethos in expressing religious sensibility through a reduction of means. Pärt's *Fratres* showcases the use of drone (or *ison*, drawn from the Orthodox Church musical tradition), modal harmonies, forays into dissonance, and chant-influenced texture and melodic invention. His Symphony No 3 (1971) is perhaps closer to Bruckner in terms of chorale-like passages of brass and clear references to chant in the orchestral writing. Pärt is perhaps best known for his choral works, including the *Te Deum* (1984) and the *Magnificat* (1989), which connect with Bruckner’s work in obvious ways.

The composer most closely associated with repetitive minimalism is probably the American Philip Glass. His Symphony No. 3 (1995) for string orchestra exhibits his characteristic style. While not generally associated

with the religious minimalists, Glass's work clearly shows spiritual interests. One thinks of his opera *Satyagraha* (1979), based on the life and thought of Mohandas Gandhi.

Perhaps the foremost rebuttal to any analysis of Bruckner's work along minimalist lines is the very length and densely-textured character of his symphonic works. But one needs to move with care. Bruckner's "cathedrals of sound" are in fact made-up of carefully constructed sectional blocks, sometimes separated by mere pauses, which gave occasion for Bruckner's contemporaries' critique of his apparent lack of smooth, seamless transitions *à la* Wagner and Brahms. The blocks themselves, harmonically daring and complex, are often not terribly lengthy. The achievement of length in the symphonies is from the construction of these blocks into an integrated whole that includes, well, moments of *stasis and repetition*.

Characterizing Bruckner's music as "minimalist" is forwarded with some degree of hyperbole, but in analyzing his work in this light aspects of his aesthetic are revealed. Minimalism in any artistic genre often evinces a sense of self-effacement, understatement, and an unpretentious presence of the artist. For religious composers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, minimalist techniques involve a conscious, post-modern retrieval of pre-modern sensibilities and outlooks on life. All of this, I suggest, finds an echo in Bruckner's work.

In conversation with the present writer at a conference at St Andrews University, James MacMillan spoke enthusiastically of the influence of Bruckner's work on his own, especially the Bruckner of the motets and masses. One finds a rather different melodic and harmonic orientation in MacMillan's work, but the two Catholic composers do share a common theological and aesthetic heritage. Both are "odd men out" in their own culture who nonetheless have achieved a remarkable standing in today's concert hall programs. Perhaps MacMillan is correct; there seems to be a "hunger for something to fill the spiritual void and some of this music at least gives people a kind of folk memory of what spiritual sustenance was about."

James McCullough (PhD, University of St Andrews) is the author of *Sense and Spirituality: The Arts and Spiritual Formation* (Cascade, 2015). He listens to Bruckner in St Charles, Missouri.
