CHAPTER 35

1. Explain the political climate of the 1960s and the impact it had on popular and “art” music.

With an unpopular war, racial tensions, cultural politics (over race, gender, and sexuality), assassinations of prominent national figures, Cold War anxiety, riots, student protests, generational division, and the rise of the counterculture, the 1960s was a tumultuous decade with a lasting effect on the arts. In this environment, popular music rose to prominence as the voice of the youth; it became a symbol of personal and generational identity with close ties to the social justice movements of the time. The cultural authority of “art” music declined in response to its perceived elitism and increasing irrelevance, at least in its “pure” forms, but popular fusions between high and low drastically reconfigured the nature of both forms: Popular musicians adopted “art” music techniques, and classically trained composers drew inspiration from pop.

2. How did the Beatles and subsequent progressive rock bands help to bridge the gap and blur distinctions between popular and art music? Why were *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *The Who’s Tommy* important in this respect?

The Beatles developed an ambitious creative approach blind to the popular/art music dichotomy. Their range of musical influences—including R&B, Anglo-Celtic folk, jazz, avant-garde classical, and Indian—was unprecedentedly broad for a pop band. For their late albums, they abandoned touring (and thus live audiences) entirely, instead preferring to create elaborate “concept albums” in the studio. Such albums drew on the Romantic tropes of artistic unity and autonomy. For example, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* is a seamless collection of songs that borrows techniques from “art” music, including an extended orchestral glissando in “A Day in the Life” reminiscent of Ligeti or Penderecki. Its sonic texture is dense and packed with enigmatic riddles. Borrowing the language of high art, the Who followed with *Tommy*, a narrative song cycle dubbed by promoters as “the first rock opera.”

3. Describe the various types of fusion between high and low genres of music that prevailed in the 1960s, as reflected in progressive rock, Third Stream, and minimalism. Why do you think the mixed aspects of these genres were so controversial? How did these controversies reflect larger social debates?

Progressive rock musicians blended rock with classical music, often in the form of experimental techniques, increased complexity, large-scale song and album forms, and arrangements of music from the classical canon. Many band members were musically literate, with classical or jazz training. Third Stream brought together the rhythmic vitality of jazz with the formal and tonal complexity of classical. Minimalism fused the literate, experimental tradition of classical music with jazz, rock, and a variety of non-Western styles. These genres were controversial because they signaled the encroachment of popular music upon the “purity” of traditions invested with high art cache; many saw the commercial power of pop as a cheapening, contaminating agent.
These controversies reflected the broader social dynamics of the time: The disillusion of musical boundaries was a manifestation of the larger questioning of racial, cultural, generational, socioeconomic, and sexual hierarchies characteristic of the period.

4. In what ways did minimalist composers mix high and low art forms? Which composers and works were influenced by jazz, popular, and non-Western music?

La Monte Young had a polyglot background of popular music, jazz saxophone, Schoenberg-style compositional training, and Indian music and spirituality. His drone-based music (e.g., Composition 1960 #7 and String Trio) eschews all literate signs of compositional complexity in favor of participatory, process-driven engagement.

Terry Riley shared Young’s serial composition background. His In C applies tape loop procedures to actual performers with repetitive, simple sequences to be played (by any instrument) until the player feels like moving on. Riley challenged the social hierarchies and technical virtuosity endemic to classical music culture, and the piece received an enthusiastic reception usually reserved for popular music.

Steve Reich had a doctrinaire serial training, but he was most fascinated by Stravinsky’s neoprimitivism, early and Baroque music, and bebop jazz, particularly in their emphasis on strong rhythmic pulse. He was also deeply influenced by West African percussion and Balinese gamelan. It’s Gonna Rain and Come Out use tape loops to enact gradual rhythmic phasing; Drumming, which employs the technique of “rhythmic construction,” draws explicitly from his studies in Africa.

5. Explain the various ways that minimalism was influenced by the political culture of the 1960s. How do minimalist works such as Reich’s Drumming and Music for 18 Musicians reflect ideals about social hierarchy and interaction that were prevalent in the 1960s?

Minimalist composers espoused a radically egalitarian, democratic conception of music-making with clear connections to the political and cultural upheavals of the 1960s. Reich’s Drumming and Music for 18 Musicians exemplify this social philosophy. The pieces do not require a conductor for performance; instead, the performers coordinate their activities among themselves. Performers face each other in a tight, interactive unit, and clothing is typically less formal and restrictive than the standard symphonic attire. Concerts are modeled more on a spiritual ceremony or ritual rather than bourgeois entertainment. Further, the music is non-virtuosic, opening it up to a range of possible performers. All of these features reflect the non-hierarchical, communitarian ethos of the 1960s.

6. Minimalist composers were a part of the first generation of musicians that grew up with recording technologies. How did these technologies influence their attitudes and their music?
Minimalists grew up in an environment saturated by records and radio, and the sheer ubiquity of recorded music exposed them to a diverse range of sounds hitherto inaccessible to composers. Minimalist composers’ eclectic influences reflect this “horizontal” transmission of music: with recordings, all music—ancient, modern, exotic, popular—is functionally equalized, and influence does not have to flow along a linear, vertical trajectory through time. Their music, in its fusion of stylistically diverse elements (avant-garde classical, jazz, rock, non-Western, etc.), demonstrates the profound leveling of musical influences brought about through recording technologies.

7. Describe Reich’s views on musical process. How are these ideas reflected in his music?

Reich believed that musical process should apply not to the compositional process per se, but rather to the actual experience of sonic unfolding perceptible to listeners. This imbues the music with a sense of direction and purpose. Such music should be extremely gradual in its development in order for listeners to focus on the actual process of transformation rather than on the results. This idea is reflected in his early tape-loop compositions, which consist of source recordings that begin in sync then gradually phase out of rhythm with each other.

8. In what respects is Glass’s Einstein on the Beach a Postmodernist work?

*Einstein on the Beach* exhibits many features characteristic of Postmodernism. Its text consists of a hodge-podge of poetry composed by an autistic child, numbers, and solfège; the visual scenario revolves around the recurring appearance of three seemingly unrelated images; and the music is set for an eclectic array of musicians, including onstage violin soloist. Its incorporation of commercial musical practices, aloof meanings, and fragmented, diffuse narrative align it with the prevailing tendencies of Postmodernism.

9. Describe the minimalist works of Pärt and Górecki and the prominent spiritual component in their music.

The minimalist works of Pärt and Górecki feature pared-down melodic and harmonic material (influenced by Medieval music), stark textures, and a steady, generally slow pulse. Pärt captured the sounds of bells—a fixture of Russian Orthodox churches—with his “tintinnabular” style, using arpeggiated triads to mimic the complex overtones of bells. These composers saw in the radical reduction of minimalism a potent means of evoking spiritual quietude.