

Four Musical Minimalists:

La Monte Young,

Terry Riley,

Steve Reich,

Philip Glass

Keith Potter



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1 La Monte Young

La Monte Young's career divides geographically into three parts: his childhood and undergraduate years mainly in Los Angeles; his time as a graduate student at Berkeley, in the San Francisco Bay Area; and the period that saw his establishment as both composer and performer, as well as concert organiser, teacher and much else, following his move to New York City. Young was almost twenty-three when he went to Berkeley; just twenty-five when he moved to settle permanently on the East Coast. In terms of his output as a minimalist, the story begins while he was still an undergraduate, and becomes of substance with a composition he took with him when he went to northern California to begin graduate studies. Young is not only the first true musical minimalist, but was producing radically innovative work at a much younger age than Riley, Reich and Glass: some of his most important compositions were written when he was twenty-one and twenty-two.

Central to Young's development is his tendency to combine an involvement with improvisation – an involvement so extensive that the distinction between composition and improvisation sometimes becomes hard meaningfully to preserve – with a concern to establish a firm theoretical base for his music. The latter contributes to his slow rate of creative output as much as it productively intertwines with it. Not least among the effects of these things is a tendency to work on a composition over many years: extending its theoretical investigations, adding to its material, and testing ideas through improvisation. The best example of this is *The Well-Tuned Piano*, which originated in a tuning devised in 1964 and some improvisations made using it, and which, over thirty years later, is still open-ended, at least in principle. It makes little sense to abandon consideration of this in the mid-1970s; accordingly, the story of this major work will be taken beyond the present book's official cut-off date. Young also continues to use material originally conceived for use with the famous group he had with John Cale, Tony Conrad, Terry Jennings, Terry Riley, Marian Zazeela and others in the mid-1960s, which makes it difficult to establish clear lines of chronology and closure. Some aspects of Young's development – for instance, his move away from ensemble work and towards solo performances, to which the first sustained and successful period of work on *The Well-Tuned Piano* in 1974–5 contributes an important statement –

mark the mid-1970s as something of a watershed in his development. Yet many of the essentials of Young's aesthetic, style and techniques were firmly established by the mid-1960s, thus making detailed commentary beyond this period less important to an understanding of his significance.

Wim Mertens divided Young's output into the customary three periods.¹ Though not an entirely accurate reflection of the composer's development, they provide a useful point of departure. Mertens characterises the compositions of 1955–8 as 'serial music'; Young discovered what came to be called 'sustenance',² the use of long sustained sounds, while working with serial principles as a basic framework. Mertens' 'second period' covers the years 1959–61; this was the period when, under the influence of John Cage, Young moved away from conventionally notated compositions and into a range of performance art works that are commonly – though in Young's view erroneously – included as an integral component of the Fluxus movement which flourished in the early 1960s and beyond. The third and final period begins in 1962, characterised by Mertens as the 'actual repetitive period'. Mertens was writing in 1979, and other ways of dividing what is now a period of over three decades are available besides that which pinpoints the mid-1970s. One could, for example, argue that Young's more recent return to ensemble work – with The Forever Bad Blues Band and Big Band, both reincarnations of The Theatre of Eternal Music newly inspired by his old love, jazz – represents a new 'period', beginning in 1990. Yet it still seems sensible to view the obsessive concern with 'sustenance' and drones, which dominates almost everything the composer has done since the early 1960s, as one long development: emerging from his discovery of long tones in the 1950s, and separated from this by a short period of more theatrical – but still crucially related – activities.

No scores by Young are published in any conventional sense and few commercial recordings of his work exist.³ For many years, he habitually made access to would-be interviewers extremely difficult and, to this day, all private tapes can be listened to only in his loft, while scores and documentation are lent extremely selectively. That documentation is extensive: no activity in his daily life, whether musical or otherwise, is too insignificant to escape the tape recorder, the photocopier or the filing cabinet. Between 1979 and 1985, the Youngs took advantage of the lavish sponsorship bestowed on them by the Dia Foundation in the ordering, notation and copying of some of this material. While the archive he jealously guards with the help of Zazeela – his constant companion – and several assistants is not as thoroughly catalogued as it would be in the hands of a professional librarian, it could form the basis of an extensive biography far beyond the aims of the present book.

Early years

La Monte Thornton Young was born in a log cabin in Bern, a Mormon hamlet in Bear Lake County, Idaho, on 14 October 1935. His parents – Dennis and Evelyn – were poor; when the composer was born, his father was a shepherd. Young relates that ‘the very first sound that I recall hearing was the sound of the wind blowing under the eaves and around the log extensions at the corners of the log cabin’.⁴ In an earlier interview, he describes this as ‘very awesome and beautiful and mysterious; as I couldn’t see it and didn’t know what it was, I questioned my mother about it for long hours’.⁵ Continuous sounds – man-made as well as natural – fascinated Young as a child: the humming harmonics of the step-down transformer at the local power plant; train whistles across the river; lathes and drill presses; wind, insects, water, trees. The telephone poles in Bern produced a continuous chord from which, much later, he recalled the four pitches he named the ‘Dream Chord’, basing many of his mature works on it. Southern California, in general – with its ‘sense of space, sense of time, sense of reverie, sense that things could take a long time, that there was always time’⁶ – helped Young to conclude from an early age, well before he encountered the ideas of Cage, that the external world was quite possibly more fascinating than art.

Young’s early years in this Idaho dairy community dominated by Mormon values was not, however, bereft of musical experiences. The composer says that the harmonica was the first instrument he ever played; ‘however, at the age of two, this was soon followed by singing and guitar lessons from my Aunt Norma, who sang in the local high-school operettas [and rodeos]. The songs I learned to sing at that time were cowboy songs’.⁷ He played his maternal grandparents’ piano a little. When he was aged three or so, the family moved to Montpelier, the nearest town to Bern, where he also had tapdancing lessons; at the age of four, he was singing and tapdancing at Montpelier’s Rich Theater. The family moved to Los Angeles when Young was five, to Utah when he was ten, and then back to settle finally in the Los Angeles area when he was about fourteen. Young did not learn to read music until he was seven, when he began learning the saxophone, taking lessons from his father. His first performing experience on this instrument came via Mormon services. The saxophone – first alto, later tenor and, particularly, soprano – was, though off and on, his main performing outlet until 1964. Between 1951 and 1954, he had lessons on the clarinet as well as saxophone with William Green at the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music.

Between September 1950 and June 1953 Young attended the

John Marshall High School in Los Angeles, a rough school which was nevertheless known for its music making and was capable of attracting at least a few artistic and intellectual high fliers. His harmony teacher, Clyde Sorenson, turned out to have been a pupil of Schoenberg at the University of California, Los Angeles; Sorenson, who played a recording of the Six Little Piano Pieces, op. 19, first introduced Young to Schoenberg's music. While in high school, he accompanied the dancing of an Apache friend, encountering native American music for the first time. As he points out, American Indian music, like the cowboy songs he learned in early childhood, is essentially static. But Young's most important high-school musical experiences came through jazz.

Jazz was Young's first love, and though not a direct influence on most of the first compositions he would now regard as his own, it dominated his musical activities as a teenager. It was later to have a considerable influence on his music. Almost the first thing he did on returning to Los Angeles in 1950 was to join a Dixieland band that played outside every morning before school classes began. He played extensively in his high-school and early college days; jazz was, he says, 'the burning thing'. John Marshall High School had a strong jazz tradition and high playing standards. Young's jazz-playing schoolfriends included Pete Diakinoff, a tenor saxophonist who advised him to study with Green and introduced him to the latest trends in bebop and cool jazz; and David Sanchez, known as 'Gordo', a precocious trombonist – and local gang leader – who had already been on the road with Perez Prado's band by the time he was in tenth grade (aged about fifteen). Young and his friends were often hired to play for dances, but never asked back since they were considered too modern. 'I stopped playing in dance bands for money, accepting dance gigs . . . because I only wanted to play pure jazz', he says.

From September 1953 – by which time he had moved out of the family home to live with his paternal grandmother – to June 1955, Young attended Los Angeles City College, studying counterpoint and composition both in school and privately with Leonard Stein, who had been Schoenberg's disciple and assistant. In February 1956, after further private work with Stein, he registered for a year at Los Angeles State College, additionally returning to Los Angeles City College for the fall semester of 1956. In January 1957, he enrolled for three semesters at the University of California at Los Angeles; here he majored in music, taking music theory, composition and ethnomusicology, and some English, finally obtaining his BA in June 1958. Composition studies were undertaken with Boris Kremenliev and John Vincent; Lukas Foss, then running one of the earliest free-improvisation groups, also encouraged him. He was, in addition, a

pupil of Robert Stevenson, who taught him Baroque and sixteenth-century counterpoint and keyboard harmony.

At UCLA, Young encountered a fellow student called Dennis Johnson when he heard him practising Webern's *Piano Variations*, op. 27; the two became firm friends. Johnson – whose own compositions (only rarely publicly performed after his student days) would, for a while, also be influenced by Young – was to become, says Young, the only person in the late 1950s besides Jennings and Terry Riley to understand his music. Johnson's role, Young says, 'along with that of Terry Jennings, was extremely important in the formative years of minimalism in the late 1950s through 1961 and 62. Dennis developed some of the most original and feelingful ideas about music, including the social implications of concerts and venues, of anyone I had ever met'.⁸ Johnson's idealism was to lead to the withdrawal of his work from public performance, since he ceased to believe that the concert arena had any worth for the presentation of serious music. In 1959 or 1960, he once described to Young an outline for a piece to be 'staged in some far away wooded countryside . . . heard only by those who just happened to come across it by happenstance'. The overall conception of this – and in particular the plan for the musical material to consist of a perfect fourth 'which would sound for a long time from some far away undiscoverable place' before falling a minor third and continuing at the new pitch – was evidently influential on Young's subsequent development.

At Los Angeles City College Young had continued his involvement with jazz, competing successfully against Eric Dolphy for the second-alto chair in the award-winning City College Dance Band; the first alto was a brilliant player called Lannie Morgan. (In the College Symphony Orchestra, Dolphy played first clarinet, Young second.) Young additionally played in the College Jazz Combo. He was invited by the pianist Don Friedman to join his trio, which ultimately led to the formation of Young's own group with the guitarist Dennis Budimir, the drummer Billy Higgins, and the bassist Hal Hollingshead, which played regularly at Studio One in downtown Los Angeles. Others sat in from time to time, including the trumpeter Don Cherry, whom Young already knew, and guitarists Buddy Matlock and Tiger Echols, the latter of whom became an important influence on Young's early blues playing. The earliest surviving recording of Young performing appears to be a 'demo' disc of 'All the things you are', made in the summer of 1955, on which he plays with this group. By that time, he was living in Hollywood with friends, plus his step-uncle Kenny Young, who moved in a social circle which included James Dean and Vampira.

Other jazz experience gained at this period included occasional performances as featured soloist with the Willie Powell Big Blues Band. Also playing in this primarily black and Mexican band was another white alto saxophonist, the then thirteen-year-old Terry Jennings: a pianist and clarinetist, but ultimately most brilliantly a saxophonist, who had recently entered John Marshall High School and whom Young had already heard on tape. Jennings was to become a close associate for many years. During jam sessions around Los Angeles, Young played sets with Ornette Coleman; both Cherry and Higgins later became members of Coleman's original free-jazz quartet.

When in school and college, Young had at first intended making a career in jazz. Stylistically, he seems to have been ahead of many of his playing colleagues; he favoured an approach, influenced in particular by the saxophone playing of Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh, which tended to fragment the beat. Though surviving tapes of his playing at this time suggest a move towards the kind of 'free jazz' Coleman was shortly to pioneer, Young began to feel jazz's limitations: 'Jazz is a form, and I was interested in other forms'.⁹ His involvement with jazz peaked in 1955–6; Young's decision not to register for the fall semester of 1955 at City College was due partly to his wish to play more jazz sessions. A piece called *Annod* – a twelve-bar blues in a style influenced by the playing of Konitz and Miles Davis on George Russell's *Ezzthetic* (1948) and *Odjenar* (1949), and perhaps particularly by Johnny Carisi's 'Israel', one of Capitol Records' landmark 'birth-of-the-cool sides' with Davis, recorded in 1949–50 – was written some time between 1953 and 1955. *Annod*, which spells the name of a girlfriend (Donna Lee Lathrop) backwards, includes a ten-bar bridge that abandons melody and regular beat and employs a degree of polytonality; its composer claims it as a precursor of both his later use of sustained sounds and what he came to call the 'Dream Chord'.

By the time Young moved to UCLA in January 1957, he had for the moment abandoned serious saxophone playing 'and was really headed into composition. I never took up jazz in the same way ever again'. Jazz nevertheless returns as a direct influence on his work from about 1962, when he took up the soprano. And he considers that 'many things about jazz absolutely never left me: for instance, the fact that I became so interested in improvisational forms'. In addition to the better-known influence of jazz on his later saxophone playing, he also began to develop a style of piano improvisation based on the standard twelve-bar blues. Called 'Young's Blues' by the composer, it was characterised at this stage by a continuous alternation of the chords in the left and right hands – for example, in a left-*right*, right-left, right, right-left pattern – which Young

Example 1.1 'Young's Blues', characteristic rhythmic structure



describes as 'ka chunk chunka chunk chunka':¹⁰ see Example 1.1. The detailed evolution of this 'Young's Blues' style is far from clear. Riley recalls that Young's blues playing in the practice rooms at Berkeley in 1958–9 was at first in the form of 'funky bebop in the right hand over some sort of walking bass in the left hand'. Then, one day at Riley's house on Potrero Hill, he recalls Young playing in the later characteristic 'ka chunk chunka chunk chunka' style and saying, 'This is something new I'm working on'; after this, Riley never heard his friend play blues in any other way. Other evidence – for example, the testimony of the tenor saxophonist Michael Lara, a friend of the composer's from his Los Angeles City College days – suggests that 'Young's Blues' originated some four years earlier, or even as far back as 1953. But it was only fully developed much later when he began playing regularly with Jennings in New York.

The significance of jazz was in any case shortly to become intertwined with an influence equally compelling, and arguably even more important, in Young's later development: that of non-Western musics in general and North Indian classical music in particular. The realisation that a classical art form could also involve improvisation helped feed an interest in the creative potential of performing that had initially been nourished by jazz. In addition, the approach to harmony in both jazz and a variety of non-Western musics – very different from that of Western classical music – is clearly an important influence on Young's development of 'static' structures.

Young's education on the West Coast allowed him at least some contact with non-Western musics as early as 1957. Strolling one day, he heard Indian music broadcast across the UCLA campus: an experience which sowed the seeds of what was to become important to him a decade later, and eventually an overwhelming preoccupation. Young cites an early recording by Ali Akbar Khan (sarod) and Chatur Lal (tabla) – of two ragas, *Sind Bhairavi* and *Piloo* (heard on the radio and then purchased) – as particularly influential, since it 'essentially introduced the longest example then available of masterfully played Indian music'.¹¹ Perhaps at least as importantly, it provided him with his first opportunity to hear the drone instrument, the tambura, with its timbral harmonic array, played solo at the beginning of the recording by Shirish Gor. Young says that this experience had a profound effect on him, furthering his interest in sustained sounds and harmonics; the tambura eventually became the instrument he

played in his studies of vocal music under Pandit Pran Nath. In 1961–2, two other Indian musicians – the shenai player Bismillah Khan and the South Indian flautist T. R. Mahalingam – became the major influences, along with John Coltrane, on Young's soprano saxophone playing.

UCLA had a particularly good ethnomusicology department, with its own student gagaku orchestra and Japanese instructors; Young listened a lot, but did not attempt to play. The combination of precision and serenity found in gagaku, in the context of a sense of musical time quite different from that of most Western musics, has been acknowledged by him as a significant influence on *Trio for Strings*, in particular. Quite early on, he also heard plainchant and organum on records. Later, while at Berkeley, he visited a local Dominican monastery to hear chant. This, however, was only after he had pursued – to quite new, and extraordinary, conclusions – the dominant modernist musical aesthetic and technique of the day: serialism.

Towards serialism, and away from it

Young's earliest compositions were, he says, written in the style of Bartók, with some additional influence from Debussy. These include Variations for String Quartet (1954); 'after that', the composer reports, 'Leonard Stein announced to people that I was a composer'. He had also been attracted to serialism; he says that his schoolteacher's association with Schoenberg made him 'predisposed to the twelve-tone technique'.¹² Like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, however, Young preferred the freely atonal compositions of Schoenberg to his twelve-note ones. 'Farben', no. 3 of the Five Orchestral Pieces, op. 16, was singled out for comment: not surprisingly, since what he called its 'mirage-like motifs disappearing and reappearing over recurrent droning textures'¹³ exhibit precisely the qualities – static, drone-based, essentially repetitive – of Young's later music. He had little interest in the more conventionally thematic approach of Schoenberg's twelve-note works.

It was Webern who was more useful to Young in pointing the way forward to a new 'static' music. On going to college, Young came to Webern largely through Stein, and investigated a post-Webernian idiom for himself. Webern's integration of serial technique and motivic materials interested Young more than the sorts of integral procedures being developed 'out of Webern' by the Europeans; so did the extent to which Webern's serial processes were audible. But it was the apparent contradiction between an aesthetic still rooted in the dynamism of classical forms and a resulting music that was often essentially static that probably fasci-

nated him most. One technique of significance to Young, as to others, was Webern's tendency to repeat pitches at the same octave, as found, for instance, in the Symphony, op. 21, and the Variations for Orchestra, op. 30; though he seems not to have appreciated the potential of this until after he composed *Trio for Strings* in 1958. This brought greater structural clarity; it also suggested the constant repetition of material to create what Young saw as a non-developmental form of striking economy. Thinking along these lines, twelve-note music easily became understood as 'the same information repeated over and over and over again, in strictly permuted transpositions and forms, which recalls the thirteenth-century use of *cantus firmus*';¹⁴ European Renaissance music had, after all, also been a strong influence on Webern. The latter's influence on Young was not, however, confined to the twelve-note works; in Webern's Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, op. 9, he heard 'little static sections, like a chime, or a music box, or time ticking off'. Webern and, more selectively, Schoenberg turned out to offer models as potent for the development of a 'static' music as did jazz and non-Western musics.

In developing his idea of minimalism using serialism as a direct inspiration in the creation of an innovative static style, Young by no means ignored the twelve-note method's usual function of generating non-tonal pitch material. As a result, his early but already highly individual approach to minimalism has more in common with other, more conventionally non-tonal, modernist musics than does the early minimalism of Reich or Glass. Yet while Young's compositions of 1956–8 adopt the basic principles of the twelve-note method, they soon depart quite radically from any of the styles to which the method had previously given rise. Webern may have used sparse textures; but Young quickly takes economy of material to such an etiolated extreme that the term 'minimalist' becomes the most natural word to describe it. The most striking difference between Young's music and earlier twelve-note and serial practice is its increasing reliance on sustained notes. His choice of intervallic vocabulary – rejecting thirds and sixths in favour of perfect intervals and major sevenths – is, however, also important. These tendencies culminate in *Trio for Strings*, the most remarkable work of this period; its extremity alone should guarantee its place in the history of musical minimalism.

In the evolution of Young's serial compositions from exercises in Second Viennese twelve-note music to the establishment of 'sustenance' as his own mature minimalism's chief concern, the extent and function of sustained sounds provide the main point of reference. These already play a role in the Five Small Pieces for String Quartet (2–16 November 1956), the

earliest of Young's compositions to receive more than very occasional performance today. Young says that the Five Small Pieces, written when he 'was deep into my studies with Leonard Stein . . . were the first works that I composed using twelve-tone row technique'.¹⁵

The pervasive atonality of the Five Small Pieces, in which individual intervals nevertheless emerge as prominent, shows an obvious debt to Webern. But they also include, in their composer's own words, '[l]onger static sections of pulses and ostinato figures, and even a hint of the sustenance to come in my later works'. Interestingly, the subtitle of the Five Small Pieces – 'On Remembering a Naiad' – suggests the Romantic imagery conjured by Schoenberg's op. 16, no. 3 (subtitled 'Summer Morning by a Lake'), or by Webern himself in his own accounts of his compositions, rather than post-Webernian abstraction. Variations for alto flute, bassoon, harp and string trio (11 February 1957), apparently inspired in particular by the palindromic variation structures of the second movement of Webern's Symphony, op. 21, emphasises the perfect fourths and fifths and major sevenths that were to become characteristic of Young's later music; significantly, too, these intervals can be contemplated in the silences that surround them.

Young had not yet abandoned more conventional idioms. Other pieces from 1957 are simply exercises: the Prelude in F minor for piano, for instance (24 March), was written as 'a personal assignment in $\frac{5}{8}$ meter' for Stevenson's Baroque counterpoint class at UCLA; yet in 1989 Young numbered it among his favourite compositions. A Canon for two instruments (24 April), an assignment for Kremenliev, demonstrates the fledgling composer's 'enthusiasm for the contrapuntal disciplines as applied to serial technique and developed in the works of Schoenberg and Webern'. It was played on two pianos at UCLA by the composer and Johnson, but it can be performed by almost any two melodic instruments, or even as a piano solo. Even after he went to Berkeley, Young was responding to his teachers' requests to write, for example, 'a work in a Baroque dance form, but using a "modern" scale'. The result in this case – a *Sarabande* for piano (late 1958 or early 1959) using major-seventh chords with a minor third – actually emphasises the very intervals, major and minor thirds, which he had already made a characteristic of avoiding. This mixture of works is hardly surprising in a twenty-one-year-old or even twenty-three-year-old student. What *is* surprising is the significance Young today ascribes to even so obviously exercise-like a piece as the Prelude: it is a good example of his obsession with the significance of everything he does.

for Brass (the lower case f is deliberate), completed only four months after the Variations, is already a much more independent statement.

Example 1.2 *for Brass*, bars 54–66

(♩. = 63)

56 60 65

ppp

con sord

pppp

con sord.

pp

x - Harmon mute with plunger extended

Finished in June 1957, this is a single movement lasting, according to the score, thirteen-and-a-half minutes for an octet consisting of a pair each of French horns, trumpets, trombones and tubas. It is the first of Young's works to use sustained notes as more than an incidental feature. According to its composer in 1966, the middle section of *for Brass* introduces 'notes sustained easily for three or four minutes . . . [N]othing else would happen except other occasional long notes overlapping in time, and there would be rests for a minute or, at any rate, a few beats, and then another long note or chord would come in'.¹⁶ Inspection of the score and a performance on tape reveal that this is rather an exaggeration. In the section in question, single notes, dyads and trichords, even a single four-part chord – presented just twice – are characteristically held for between twenty and thirty seconds, though some are shorter (see Ex. 1.2). Silences, too, vary only between about five and eight seconds in length.

Throughout *for Brass*, the intervals of the perfect fourth and fifth and the major seventh predominate, frequently presented by the pairs of the octet's instrumentation. The set on which the work is based emphasises these intervals. The opening two pairs of pitches (G \sharp , A, G \natural and D) also form what the composer was later to call the 'Dream Chord', and it is this which becomes the real building-block for the whole work; 'throughout the work', he has written, 'numerous examples of the Dream Chords are stated at various transpositions for the first time in my music'.¹⁷ This was the chord inspired by his childhood experiences of the hum of telephone-pole wires. Young in fact formulated four 'Dream Chords', described in more detail below with respect to *The Four Dreams of China* (1962). Their characteristics – stress on secundal and quartal intervals, and avoidance of thirds, both major and minor, but particularly major – now became the basis of Young's harmonic vocabulary, as he began to formulate his 'own musical mode'. 'I began to realize', he has said, 'that this interval of a major third didn't convey any of the feelings that I was interested in'.

In the context of major sevenths such as C B, omission of the major third – either as E above C or G below B – also permitted what Young argues is 'the true character'¹⁸ of the equal-tempered major seventh (eventually to be translated into the ratio 17:9 in *The Four Dreams of China*) to emerge unencumbered by 5:4 associations above the dominant G, or 3:2 associations above the major third E. (There is a difference of only 1.05 cents between the equal-tempered and the just-tuned 17:9 major sevenths, even less than the 1.96 cents' difference between the equal-tempered and the just-tuned 3:2 perfect fifths.) Either, or both, of these associations tend to establish the more conventional tonally functional leading-note character of the 15:8 major seventh. The notion that 'the major third sounded worn out and used up' was later to receive theoretical justification when Young began to investigate just intonation and the expression of intervals as ratios using prime numbers. More generally, the particular qualities contained in the simplest of intervallic relationships had, for him, already taken the place, both structurally and expressively, of those aspects of music – thematic, tonal, serial or whatever – which most other composers regard as their basic building-blocks.

Though the outer sections framing the slower middle one – forming what is basically a three-part arch structure with coda – are durationally less extreme, these basic methods obtain throughout. While even the held notes of the middle section, which forms an exact palindrome, are not as consistently long as those of the later *Trio for Strings*, they already signal the adoption of a technique which turns Webern's pulverisation of musical grammar to quite new ends. Though *for Brass* also fails to exploit low

dynamics with the bare-faced consistency that characterises their use in the *Trio*, it remains an unusually radical and reductive statement for its time.

The other composition of significance in the evolution of the *Trio*'s style is *for Guitar*, completed on 21 June 1958, just before work on the *Trio* began. While not actually longer than those of *for Brass*, the long notes and silences of *for Guitar* are more consistent and pervasive. The application of these for the first time to an instrument incapable of sustaining a note for any length of time without fast repeated attack causes a quite different relationship to develop between sound and silence. *for Guitar* makes ingenious use of the possibilities the acoustic guitar offers for resonance; as a result, the work perpetually hovers in the territory between the decay of a sound and its total absence. The composer's own description of the work stresses the extension of what he calls 'my concept of abstract musical form which included identical and similar pitch constellations set in durational permutations occurring at points sometimes separated by long periods in expanded time structures'.¹⁹ The outer main sections of *for Guitar*'s four-part-plus-coda structure may still be audibly relatable, partly through the use of the same registers on repetition; and the second section (much longer than the first) is another exact palindrome. But the use, particularly in the third section – which extends the 'abstraction' of *for Brass* without the aid of a palindromic structure – of similar overlapping techniques to those of the earlier composition frees both repetition and silence to work more comprehensively to confound any attempts to make sense of the music as a balanced, goal-directed whole.

In a work for a single instrument, Young is almost bound to focus on fewer pitches at once; in general, *for Guitar* is more reductive and more rigorous. As before, he tends to avoid thirds and sixths, though the bottom E and open G string of the guitar inspire the occasional minor tenth. While *for Brass* had formed 'Dream Chords' from pairs of characteristic intervals, *for Guitar* generates what its composer calls 'three-pitch subsets' of the 'Dream Chords' by dividing the basic set – of eleven notes this time – into small groups, rather as Webern did. The outer sections focus almost exclusively on secundal dissonances: both narrow seconds and wide sevenths and ninths. Young himself sees the beginning and end of *for Guitar* as being in E-Phrygian, though as Example 1.3 illustrates, foreign notes are soon added. The third section introduces a perfect fourth (G#C#), a perfect fifth (C#G#) and a range of longer single pitches. Despite the potential these offer for establishing a modality, the prevailing impression is much more elusive.

Young did not find a performer for *for Guitar* at the time of its composition and it remained unplayed until 1979, when Ned Sublette, who had

Example 1.3 *for Guitar*, bars 1–3

The image shows a musical score for guitar, bars 1-3. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 26 (\text{♩} = 52)$. The score is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first bar starts with a half note G4, followed by a quarter rest. The second bar contains a half note A4, marked *mp*. The third bar contains a half note B4, marked *pp*. The score includes various dynamics such as *p*, *pp*, *ppppp*, and *mp*, as well as articulations like *acc.* and *tr.*. There are also some performance markings like *N* and *3* (triplets). The notation is dense with many accidentals and dynamic markings.

practised this extremely difficult work for three years, gave its première. A version using just intonation, made the year before this, was eventually performed by Jon Catler in 1986.

Trio for Strings

Trio for Strings was composed in Los Angeles with the help of experiments made on the pipe organ at UCLA's Royce Hall, one of the city's main concert venues, and copied in Berkeley, where the date of 5 September 1958 was added to the score. The work is cast in a single movement; an accurate observation of its metronome markings implies a performance of fifty-eight minutes. The most striking aspect of the work is, of course, its reliance on long sustained notes. Young has written that the *Trio* 'is the first work that I composed which is comprised almost entirely of long sustained tones. It is probably my most important early musical statement, and I feel it actually influenced the history of music since no one had ever before made a work that was composed completely of sustained tones'.²⁰ While long notes – and their counterpart, silences – had been important components of *for Brass* and *for Guitar*, in *Trio for Strings* they constitute the work's material and essence.

The opening viola note C#, for instance, has been timed from an actual performance at 4'23";²¹ and though it lasts longer than the two notes by which it is surrounded – the first on violin, the second on cello – it proves to be by no means 'eccentric' in the context of the work as a whole. (Example 1.4 reproduces the first two pages of the score.) Silences, too, punctuate the texture quite frequently; though they are much shorter than many of the sustained notes, some last as many as forty seconds. As with *for Brass*, each instrument's sequences of pitches in the *Trio* are not designed to be played 'as individual "parts," but as contributions to a chordal unit whose components are of different durations'.²² This makes the function of the lengthy silences clearer: they separate the chordal units so that they may be experienced as individual, isolated phenomena.

Some *scordatura* is necessary to achieve the full range; both viola and cello are required to tune to the B \flat a tone below their usual bottom pitch. Though the *Trio* employs, according to the score, ‘an absolute scale of eleven perceptible dynamic gradations (*pppppp* to *fff*)’, much of the work is extremely soft, as well as slow. Another important aspect of the *Trio* is the method of performance: ‘*senza vibrato*. Vibrato should not be used at any time, *ever!*’ says the score. The effect should thus consistently be of a timbre from which all colour has been bleached. This is but one of many special challenges for the players that the *Trio* creates; the range of less familiar techniques includes *flautando* and *col legno*, as well as quite extensive use of harmonics. Young also requests ‘the production of a smooth, steady bow stroke while also minimizing the audibility of the change of bow direction so that the long sustained tones sound as uninterrupted as possible’. Even – or perhaps especially – in this context, the instruction to make ‘the difference between adjacent dynamic markings (e.g. *ppp* to *pp*) just perceptible’ seems a tall order. The focus and concentration the work requires also has an effect on the listener’s experience of the *Trio* in concert. ‘The sculptural qualities of the sound’, as Dave Smith says, ‘are reinforced in performance by the statuesque appearance of the players’.²³

The entire pitch material of the *Trio* is derived from a twelve-note set, the subdivisions of which form two-, three- and four-note groupings based on the ‘Dream Chord’. Within these groupings, Young confines himself almost entirely to the intervals of the minor and major second, the perfect fifth and the possible inversions of these, again avoiding the major third. The only interval included in the work’s articulation of these groupings besides those given above is, Young says, ‘a very occasional augmented eleventh’. Such thirds as occur between groupings play no part in the harmonic articulation, and are in any case separated by substantial silences.

The basic pattern is established at the outset. A single note (in this case, the viola’s C \sharp) is sustained throughout the unit; to this are added a further two notes (in this case an E \flat on the violin and a D on the cello), disposed in a strict durational symmetry about the held C \sharp . (See Ex. 1.5 for a graphic representation of this.) Examination of Examples 1.4 and 1.6 will show the sort of variations on this pattern which Young immediately establishes. The opening trichord (C \sharp E \flat D) is followed by a group of four notes (F \sharp B F \natural E). Here, an initial dyad (rather than a single note) is sustained throughout, while the third of the four pitches, F, is repeated prior to the entry of the final one, E, and again later. Then we have another trichord (B \flat A \flat A \natural), consisting of an initial dyad to which a single pitch is added; and finally a fourth group consisting of a dyad (C G) on its own.

Example 1.4 *Trio for Strings*, pages 1–2

The musical score consists of three systems of three staves each. The first system starts with a tempo of 80 and a dynamic of *ppp*. It features a 'Dream Chord' (B \flat A \flat A) in the first measure, followed by an inverted form (I-9) (B \flat F C) in the second measure. The second system begins with a tempo of 100 and a dynamic of *mp*. The third system includes tempo changes to 112 and 132, and a dynamic of *pp*. The score concludes with a *cresc.* marking and a final dynamic of *pp*.

Subsequently, this set is fragmented into further representations of the ‘Dream Chord’ in a variety of ways. The next statement of the set, for example, presents an inverted form (I-9), whose initial trichord (B \flat A \flat A \flat) turns out to be identical, in pitch-class, to that of P-0’s third unit; each note enters separately according to a new, overlapping durational scheme. The second unit is also of three notes this time (F C F \sharp), returning to the simple symmetry of the opening. Instead of completing the presentation of I-9 with two further trichords, the F \sharp from group 2 is repeated, overlapping with G \sharp to form group 3. We are now left, again, with five pitches, divided, as before, into three (E \flat C \sharp D; again, identical in pitch-class to the first group of P-0) and two (B E) to complete the statement of I-9 without the

Example 1.4 (cont.)

The musical score consists of four systems of piano notation, each with three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The notation includes various performance instructions and fingering:

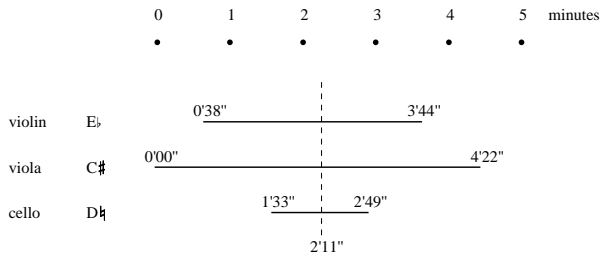
- System 1:** Features notes with fingerings 6, 10, 7, and 6. Instructions include *sul tasto*, *ppp*, *con sord.*, and *ord.*
- System 2:** Features notes with fingerings 7, 8, and 13. Instructions include *con sord.*, *sul pont.*, and *pppp*.
- System 3:** Features notes with fingerings 7, 3, and 2. Instructions include *senza sord.*, *sul tasto*, *sfmf*, and *senza sord.*
- System 4:** Features notes with fingerings 6, 7, and 7. Instructions include *rall...poco...a...poco...*, *con sord.*, *sul tasto*, and *pp*.

Tempo markings are present: $\text{♩} = 160$, $\text{♩} = 208$, and $\text{♩} = 176$.

aid of any further durational symmetry. It should be observed that, like the rest of the *Trio*, this statement frequently fails to respect the registral dispositions of the set's initial presentation.

In a variety of spacings and transpositions, this set and its attendant 'Dream Chord' divisions provide all the material needed to fill out the whole structure of the *Trio*, each group of long sustained notes unfolding in turn for the listener's contemplation before a silence separates it from the next. While the means of elaboration vary considerably, the constant alternation of chordal unit and silence increases the audibility of a structure devoid, like Webern's, of tonality or modality. A music is offered in which a minimum of material is slowly laid out before the listener in such

Four Musical Minimalists

Example 1.5 *Trio for Strings*, duration structure of first trichordExample 1.6 *Trio for Strings*, twelve-note procedures

"Exposition"

a)	b)

"Recapitulation"

c)	d)

an extended form, the connections between units becoming in the process so fragile, that a totally new form of listening must be developed. *Trio for Strings* seems to be the ultimate 'static' music.

Or is it? When asked about the structural audibility of the *Trio*, Young talks not of allowing the listener to meditate on the minutiae of each unit's 'perfect' deployment of pitch stripped to bare essentials and suspended in time on a potentially endless stream of symmetries and asymmetries, but of the extent to which it may be heard in terms of the formal thinking which apparently helped him compose it: sonata form. He insists that the work has 'extraordinarily deep roots in Classicism, both of the West and of the East', and that it was conceived as an exposition–development–recapitulation–coda structure articulated not so much by the twelve-note organisation as by pitch centres and by development as well as repetition. To suggest that the 'exposition' consists of the first twelve notes, the initial unfolding of the set itself, certainly makes sense in terms of sheer duration, since the music moves so slowly that these notes take more than ten minutes to play. (Example 1.4, in fact, includes this 'exposition', reproduced complete.) And since this does indeed lay out the *Trio's* basic material, it may not seem too far-fetched to describe the ensuing twenty

minutes or so in terms of what Young calls ‘a long kind of variations type of development section,’ and the last fifteen or twenty minutes as ‘a recapitulation of the exposition in a special set of permutations’, followed by a coda which includes the thirty-one bars’ duration of the concluding C G dyad in the cello – the longest single note or chord in the entire work.

We have already examined the opening of Young’s ‘development’ section in analysing the statement of I-9. As an example of how the basic material of the ‘exposition’ is reworked in the ‘recapitulation’, let us take the opening’s first and third chordal units. The first unit of the ‘exposition’ (Ex. 1.6a) consists of a ‘major-second’ dyad (C# E♭) underpinned by the note (D) a major seventh below its lower pitch (‘one of my favourite voicings’, says Young). The third unit (Ex. 1.6b) already presents this in a different, and transposed, form: the ‘major-second’ dyad has now become a minor seventh (B♭ A♭), and the underpinning note (A) is now just a semitone below. At the beginning of the ‘recapitulation’ (see Ex. 1.6c), the opening ‘major-second’ dyad has become a minor seventh (E♭ D♭), underpinned by the original pitch-class D now just a semitone below: in other words, the pitches of Example 1.6a in the voicing of Example 1.6b. Similarly, in Example 1.6d – the third unit of the ‘recapitulation’ – the minor-seventh dyad has become a ‘major second’ (G# B♭), underpinned by the original pitch-class A now a major seventh below: in other words, the pitches of Example 1.6b in the voicing of Example 1.6a.

If this hardly suggests the kind of evolutionary structural manoeuvres to be found in Beethoven, it surely makes it less surprising to learn that Milton Babbitt apparently admired Young at about this time, though he may not have seen any of the *Trio*. But its composer makes other claims for the work’s links with the Western classical tradition. The *Trio* is, he avers, ‘a rather tonal piece. It’s in some sort of C . . . probably . . . C-minor It doesn’t start there, but it gets there: in the cadence of the exposition and in the cadence of the recapitulation and in the cadence of the coda’. The first of these ‘cadences’ can be seen towards the end of Example 1.4: concluding on the C G open fifth of the cello. This is certainly the work’s first clear consonance; Young himself speaks of it as concluding ‘a kind of modal cadence’, in which the preceding B♭ A♭ dyad, to which A is then added, produces an effect ‘a little bit like a Landini cadence’.

While the glacial progress of this exposition in actual performance will be likely to produce an effect drastically different from its effect on the eye in the form of little more than a page of manuscript, the very attenuation created by the music’s speed must surely help blur the listener’s ability to distinguish between ‘atonality’ and ‘modality’. Yet the result will, of course, hardly resemble the dynamic tonality of sonata practice. More

interesting than the above details themselves, perhaps, is the fact that Young apparently thought about the material of *Trio for Strings* in this way. One might have expected that the purveyor of ideas as radical as those he was about to unleash on the New York avant-garde could have created a work of such stunning originality only by jettisoning the baggage of 'tradition' entirely. We should not forget the continuing influence in the *Trio* of jazz and Indian music and, in particular, that of Japanese gagaku, as well as whatever influence Western classical music still exerted on his thinking at this time. Modality, not atonality, was to provide Young with the key to his mature development, but his ability to synthesise elements from a wide range of musical traditions into multifaceted compositions is a hallmark of his development.

Now 'refined and perfected', as its composer calls it, the approach already identified in *for Brass* and *for Guitar* is here taken to extremes. In excluding 'almost any semblance of what had been generally known as melody', Young may not have entirely purged his music from past associations. But he had certainly created music with a degree of reductive focus – both of means and of expression – unusual, if not unique, in Western composition of the time. Edward Strickland has suggested that the 'dodecaphony' of the *Trio* could be argued as 'exclud[ing] the harmonic stasis theoretically afforded by tonal organisation'.²⁴ Yet the models Young had selected from the output of the Second Viennese School suggested that both free atonality and the twelve-note method could produce music much more static than anything propelled by the dynamism properly implied by 'tonal organisation'. Besides, Young had shown that it is possible to 'freeze out' the linearity implied in twelve-note theory, and often used as a prop in twelve-note practice, while continuing to use its basic techniques. Even the long silences, which Strickland also argues '[interrupt] the musical continuum',²⁵ call linearity into question in a context so removed from that of traditional musical discourse – not least in dynamic level – that what he calls a 'reciprocity' between sound and silence allows a new kind of continuity to develop. The *Trio for Strings* is undoubtedly Young's most important composition of this period, and the work which firmly establishes his place as the first composer to discover a truly minimalist language and to develop it in a totally individual way.

Young himself has described this revolution in terms of a move from 'ordinal' to 'cardinal'.²⁶ Serial technique, he argued, was essentially 'ordinal', being based on a linear sequence of pitches. The increasing emphasis 'on concurrent frequencies or harmony in my work', on the other hand, 'implied the possibility of the organization of the cardinal values both in regard to how many frequencies are concurrent and the