

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 21 Jan 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

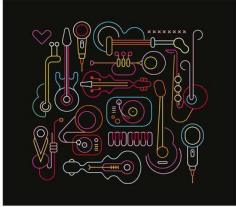
Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis Expanding Approaches

Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, John Brackett



The Aesthetics of Drone

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544700-14>

Jonathan W. Bernard

Published online on: 18 Oct 2018

How to cite :- Jonathan W. Bernard. 18 Oct 2018, *The Aesthetics of Drone from: The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis, Expanding Approaches* Routledge

Accessed on: 21 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544700-14>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

THE AESTHETICS OF DRONE

Jonathan W. Bernard

Any essay with the word “aesthetics” in its title is bound to traffic to some extent in generalizations, and this one will be no exception, partly because of the looseness, even vagueness of the term. For this very reason, perhaps, in some of my previously published work on music of the past hundred years I have found aesthetics useful as a vehicle for attempting to get beyond matters of style or technique, which in their particularity can easily deflect attention from what one might call root causes or foundations. But dealing exclusively in generalizations can often prove frustrating for both the writer and his or her audience—especially, perhaps, to a repertoire-minded audience that would like to see general ideas eventually illustrated in more concrete terms—so as a kind of counterbalance I propose to frame my inquiry here with the following set of questions, which should enable me to get down to cases at least once in a while:

First, what is drone, exactly? (To play upon Raymond Carver’s famous title: What do we talk about when we talk about drone?)

Second, what is drone’s relationship to minimalism? Are the two mutually exclusive? Or do they overlap? Or is drone, as practiced in a Western musical context, a subset of minimalism? There are sound historical reasons, as we’ll see shortly, to posit some sort of connection between drone and minimalism. Perhaps this connection is only a function of their common origin—and, in fact, my interest in drone was aroused initially as a kind of byproduct of my study of 1960s minimalism and its subsequent offshoots. But this common origin may also indicate a relationship that is more intricate than a simple divergent branching.

Finally, third: Given that “drone” is a word that comes up regularly in writing about both art music (as we often call it for lack of a better term) and popular music (also a less than perfectly satisfactory term), is there any meaningful relationship between the two usages? Is it merely a coincidental resemblance? Or, conversely, are the two so closely related that there is no good reason to place them, even conceptually, in separate repertorial categories?

Although we’re probably stuck with it at this point, the term “drone,” it must be acknowledged, is not the most felicitous of terms imaginable for a musical genre, even if one is able to avoid associating it with the name for a flying machine operated by remote control that kills people. Beyond the usages of modern warfare, “drone” has other unlovely connotations (the monotonous lecturer’s tone of voice; the denizen of a beehive that does no work other

than inseminating the queen). Stuart Dempster, noted trombonist, didjeridu player, and co-founder of the Deep Listening Band, doesn't care for the term; in conversation a few years ago, when I asked what drone meant to him, he replied, "New Age," or any type of music that emulates wallpaper, music designed not to be listened to, really, at all, or at least not attentively, such as (as he finds it) Brian Eno's ambient music.¹

But assuming that drone is going to remain current terminology for the foreseeable future, it is surely worth trying to define what else it might mean. Perhaps it seems that the first of the questions posed above ought to have an obvious answer. What is drone? Well, of course (one might respond), it is music that is substantially composed of continuously sustained tones. This definition, however, reasonable though it may sound, turns out to be neither necessary nor sufficient, as the following two examples will demonstrate.²

SOUND EXAMPLE 1: Rhys Chatham, *Guitar Trio* (1977). Judging from the numerous live performances gathered and issued in the box set entitled *Guitar Trio Is My Life!*, *Guitar Trio* always assumes the same basic shape and consists of a single chord, Em7, strummed over and over again to a more or less unvarying rhythm, for a period of time that may range from just over 16 minutes to about half an hour. This rhythmicized playing, reinforced by a performer on drums, is thus by definition not literally or uniformly sustained, although the insistent presence of a single sonority is definitely the point.³

SOUND EXAMPLE 2: David First, "Zen Guilt / Zen Blame," from *Privacy Issues: Droneworks 1996–2009*. In these pieces, there typically occurs a gradual "morphing" of the sustained tones to other tones, sometimes resulting in a kind of "resolution" from basically dissonant to basically consonant states. Granted, these shifts do happen slowly, as a rule; but even a brief excerpt from any of these often quite lengthy pieces—"Zen Guilt / Zen Blame" lasts nearly 36 minutes—should make it obvious that one of the problems with my initial attempt at a definition of drone is that it says nothing about how long the tones would need to be sustained in order to qualify as drones. Furthermore, nothing is said either about what would count as a disruption or interruption of the sustention. A movement in pitch? A shift in timbre? An increase or decrease in loudness, or a change in tempo, or in the rhythmic envelope?

To address, first of all, the matter of interruption. Since a drone is, first and foremost, a pitched entity, it seems reasonable to posit that only a change in the principal tone or tones of a sustained sound could affect its identity as a drone—a change that might even, in extreme circumstances, have the power to disrupt its function as a drone. Even this criterion, however, cannot be regarded as absolutely determinant, since the matter of duration remains to be dealt with: that is, presumably a drone piece could be made up of a series of sustained tones, but what is the lower limit on duration of each of them?

Tackling this issue brings us into the realm of the second large structuring question posed at the beginning of this paper: whether there is a relationship between drone and minimalism. It is the work of La Monte Young that first made this question pertinent for Western musicians, and it is worth enumerating, at this point, the sources of Young's intense interest in drone. The first, abundantly documented by the composer himself and his biographers, was the implacably continuous hum of electric transformers or high-tension wires, which even as a boy he could groove on for hours on end. The second, arriving in the form of an early LP recording of Indian music that Young first heard sometime in the late 1950s, was the tamboura accompaniment to Ali Akbar Khan's sarod.⁴

What these two sources have in common is their ostensible status as background; in both cases, though, Young found them sufficiently deserving of attention to focus upon them

as if they were foreground. This crucial conceptual shift has played a major role in Young's development as a composer, encouraging him to begin, in the late 1950s, writing pieces such as the *Trio for Strings* (1958), with tones extended to durations far longer than anyone had found musically viable up to that time. Not much later comes the famous *Composition 1960 #7*, consisting of the pitches B3 and F#4, notated on a treble staff with open ties indicating no particular duration, and the simple verbal direction "To be held for a long time"—a piece that would seem to lay fair claim to being the purest imaginable kind of drone composition. It also motivated the founding of the Theatre of Eternal Music, where the sustained tones eventually acquired amplification and took over the entire show. (The stages by which Young arrived at this musical result are significant: At first, soprano sax and drum improvisations were played over the drone, but after a while Young decided to dispense with them.) The interested reader/listener may derive some very hazy idea of what this ensemble sounded like from the lo-fi recording that ex-Young acolyte Tony Conrad released, much to Young's displeasure, several years ago (SOUND EXAMPLE 3, *Inside the Dream Syndicate, Volume 1: Day of Niagara* [1965]).⁵

Given that Young is often referred to these days as "the father of minimalism" and is counted among the so-called Founding Four, one is impelled to ask: are these drone compositions (which, conceptually at least, go on forever) really minimalist works too? We lack a consensus on this issue in the scholarly literature, as is clear from just two prominent examples. Keith Potter, in his authoritative, widely cited study, *Four Musical Minimalists*, treats most of Young's music, including *The Tortoise, His Dreams and His Journeys* (of which *Day of Niagara* in SOUND EXAMPLE 3 forms one part), as works in the minimalist canon simply because they are products of Young's mature period as a composer.⁶ Robert Fink, by contrast, for the sake of considering American minimal music principally as an artifact of cultural practice, in his book *Repeating Ourselves* sets aside all compositions in what he calls the "drone minimalism" category in favor of "pulse-pattern minimalism," referring to works featuring the regular pulse that became a kind of stylistic hallmark from Terry Riley's *In C* (1964) on.⁷ In Fink's view of minimal music, pulse-pattern minimalism is the real minimalism; thus he rejects what he calls Edward Strickland's historical revisionism⁸ and any assertion of prior claims held by the so-called "original" minimalists, principally La Monte Young. This view enables Fink to connect (post-*In C*) minimalism convincingly with what followed, as the early work of Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass gave rise to what is now termed "post-minimal" music—all generally pulse-oriented—and assumed its vast influence on Western music of the late 20th and, so far, early 21st centuries. (It should be noted here that Tony Conrad, writing in 1996, acknowledges much the same thing in a different way: that is, by wistfully lamenting that minimalism did not continue to develop along the lines supposedly projected into the infinite by the Theatre of Eternal Music.)⁹

And yet, there may be little basis for making a categorical distinction between process-oriented, pulse-pattern, call-it-what-you-will "classic" minimalism on the one hand (as exemplified by the compositions of Riley, Reich, and Glass from the late 1960s and early 1970s), and drone on the other. Here are two arguments against it. First, although drone and "classic" minimalism appear to be quite different from the point of view of style or technique, their aesthetic underpinnings reveal a kind of continuum extending from the most extreme or "pure" form of one to that of the other, along which an effective infinitude of points might be found. Second, thanks to the fact that the past 40-plus years have delivered a vast (and still growing) body of post-minimalist music, the musical observer/critic today

has enough material to work with, and sufficient historical distance in the bargain, to be able to trace this continuum, at least roughly, in terms of actual pieces.

To buttress these arguments, it falls to me now to sketch the trajectory of this continuum. If we place pieces like *The Tortoise...* at one extreme end of the spectrum (calling it “left,” for purposes of convenient reference), we might find next in order, proceeding rightward, works in which, likewise, the fundamental tone remains firmly fixed but other elements provide some aural variety—whether in the form of rhythmic “activation,” as in Chatham’s *Guitar Trio*, or in the slight (yet clearly audible), unpredictable fluctuations in each of the four settings used to generate Alvin Lucier’s *Music on a Long Thin Wire*. SOUND EXAMPLE 4 is provided in two forms, one of them an online video clip documenting a latter-day reconstruction of this piece, which shows how the sounds of this piece were generated: the “long thin wire” is anchored to a tabletop at each end, with each end of the wire connected to an amplifier and a large magnet placed at one point along its length.

Also at this point on the spectrum is the music of Pauline Oliveros, notably her ravishing *Horse Sings from Cloud* (1975), in which two drone instruments—Oliveros’s voice, and her accordion—combine. Each keeps to its own fixed pitch setting throughout, but the fact that both instruments breathe, and at different rates, gives the drone feature a special character. That is, with no pitch change whatsoever throughout its approximately 22-minute duration, the piece could be described as static—and yet, because of the slight differences imposed by air intake and expiration, the resulting sound is subject to constant variation, if within a very narrow range. The intense concentration on *the sound itself* evident in such pieces comes across as a kind of vibration of the acoustic space, something to be discussed later in this essay as a crucial aspect of the drone aesthetic.¹⁰ The visual image accompanying the online SOUND EXAMPLE 5 shows Oliveros with her very large accordion, also used as an illustration for the LP release (and CD re-release).

Continuing our progress to the right, we come to works in which pitch fluctuation may be said to occur, although at an almost impalpable level, often registering to the ear as a process of going in and out of tune, or an alternation between clarity and fuzziness of sound. The meticulous control necessary for such microtonal shifting is well illustrated in much of the music of Phill Niblock, including the work cited here as an illustration (SOUND EXAMPLE 6). An excerpt from one of his other scores (see Figure 14.1) will serve to reveal the precision with which the microtonal deviations (given in ranges of cents above or below) are notated.¹¹ The demands thereby placed upon performers are emblematic of Niblock’s uncompromising, absolutist stance: what might well be termed his “dronitude.” Figure 14.2, from the sleeve of one of his record releases, provides apt affirmation.

Moving still farther along the spectrum, we encounter drone textures that incorporate pitch change of a more readily perceivable kind, although still so gradually introduced for the most part that we barely notice it until it has been accomplished. Many of the group compositions of the Deep Listening Band fit this category; the process of gradually taking certain sounds out of the mix and gradually introducing new ones has been greatly aided by the site-specific nature of their recording project, carried out in the Fort Worden Cistern at Port Townsend, Washington, with its remarkable reverberation time of 45 seconds (SOUND EXAMPLE 7).¹² David First’s *Droneworks* (previously referenced as SOUND EXAMPLE 2) also employ this basic approach to drone.

The next music to be sampled on the spectrum is drawn from the works by Charlemagne Palestine collectively titled *Strumming Music*. The “strumming” involved here is, eventually, quite different in effect from that of Chatham’s *Guitar Trio*; Palestine’s pieces, in the end,

#9 (number nine)

Phill Niblock

Score & instructions realized by Guy De Bièvre as directed by Phill Niblock

instructions:

#9 (number nine) is quite remarkable within the ever expanding collection of Phill Niblock's works in that it does not begin with a unison. On the contrary it starts with a dissonant microtonal cluster, ranging from almost a quarter tone below B_♭ to B_♭. Then gradually the pitches go down (in a polyphonic manner, each of the 40 voices at its own speed) to F, over A, A_♭, G G_♭ and up to 40 cents below or above these pitches. It leads then to another unusual feature: a jump back up (or down) to B_♭, occurring for the first time two thirds of the way to the end. All but ten voices gradually move toward the jump to B_♭ (the last one 3 minutes to the end). The ten remaining voices sticking to the final F, concluding the work with a consonant (a pure 4th/5th) minute, providing a very conceptual interpretation of what "resolution" can be in a densely microtonal drone fabric.

This work was made possible by a grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts in New York – the John Cage Award in 2014

*Pitch: the indications in the score refer to a microtonal adjustment of the indicated pitch.

+1 +10 cents +2 +20 cents +3 +30 cents +4 +40 cents

-1 -10 cents -2 -20 cents -3 -30 cents -4 -40 cents

these are approximate values (e. g +1 could average between +5 and +15 cents).

Figure 14.1 Phill Niblock partial score instructions



Figure 14.2 "Dronitude" from the sleeve of one of Phill Niblock's records

turn out to be far more prolix, having as they do a definite "build" from extremely simple openings to positively roaring textures that then scale back to (relative) simplicity once again, only to build anew to a different kind of climax, and so on. This type of dramatic trajectory is unusual in (some might say inimical to) a drone environment, and begins to suggest a connection to minimalism, in that a kind of *process* is at work, even if it is not a process that can be readily followed in the way that Steve Reich was referring to when he laid down the law of strict minimalism in his essay, "Music as a Gradual Process." What Reich sought, as he explained in that essay, were pieces that are in themselves processes, pieces in which there is no difference between processual form and the sound material that is employed to realize it.¹³ The impression of process in, for example, *Strumming for Bösendorfer Piano* (SOUND EXAMPLE 8) is reinforced by the fact that the changes involve the gradual accumulation of notes to the strumming pattern; see Figure 14.3.¹⁴ Owing apparently to the indicated performing technique, this accumulation results more or less inescapably in a steady crescendo as each section progresses. That this dynamic does not entirely dissolve the drone environment, in the performance (slightly over 52 minutes in duration) recorded by Palestine himself in 1974, is largely owing to the fact that the notes strummed upon

00:00	slow (non-strummed) introduction
00:46	E4-B4, rapidly strummed (alternating sixteenth notes)
07:16	E5 added
10:30	F# added (sporadically at first)
13:47	D5 added
15:26	G4 added
17:28	A5 added
19:35	D4 added (sporadically at first)
21:33	B3 added
24:04	“clearout” to B3-E4-B4-E5
25:03	B3 deleted
26:18	G4, D5 added
27:38	C4 added (suggestion of G3?)
28:50	A3 added
30:10	A4 added
34:12	alternation of cumulative sonority to this point with A3-D4-A4-D5-A5
34:55	D3 added (alternation continues)
38:50	alternation continues (C4, G3 prominent)
40:55	“clearout” to D3-A3-D4-A4

Figure 14.3 Charlemagne Palestine, *Strumming Music for Bösendorfer Piano*, pitch development in the first two large sections

at the outset of each section—for example, E4 and B4 at the beginning of the work—are retained throughout and emerge unscathed, as it were, at the end of the first section nearly 24 minutes later, by themselves again, although with a couple of added doublings. Is it possible to consider such a work a kind of hybrid of drone and minimalism? Or does the initial impression, as any of the *Strumming* pieces begins, of a drone texture simply turn out to be an illusion? Works of this kind may be the clearest evidence in the repertoire of Western music that the boundary between drone and minimalism, rather than a sharp line, is more accurately characterized as a blurred, transitional zone.

The feeling that we have begun to verge upon musical territory properly belonging to minimalism (even if not having entered fully upon it) is strengthened at our next stop in rightward progress, the site of pieces that, while maintaining the continuous flow of sound that is essential to drone textures, also accommodate changes in pitch that are not necessarily gradual or produced by the kind of overlapping that is characteristic of the previously discussed groups. Prominent at this location are Glenn Branca’s symphonies, in which the massed-guitar textures familiar from Chatham’s work are put to quite different purposes. The first movement, “Slow Mass,” of Branca’s *Symphony No. 2* (SOUND EXAMPLE 9), deploys a widely varying rate of change, producing an inexorably rising progression over a period of nearly 20 minutes, from about two minutes after the beginning to almost the end of the movement. Branca makes use of a kind of “Shepard-tone” technique to keep this rising progression going: sounds ascend in pitch to a certain point, then gradually fade out as their lower doublings take over and continue the ascending motion. The effect is quite eerily beautiful. A steady crescendo is further reinforced after the nine-minute mark, as percussion instruments gradually enter and eventually assume a thunderous presence alongside the massed mallet guitars. All of this has happened by about halfway through the movement; the remaining ten minutes or so are wavelike, devoted to a series of droppings-back, followed by crescendi to the previously highest level reached, or higher, before a final few minutes in which the sound gradually ebbs away.

Music of this sort seems to reside at a kind of tipping point, where one is impelled to acknowledge that *drone* is no longer the principal factor determining the overall musical experience, even if the familiar pulsed, process-oriented environment of “classic” minimalism is not especially in evidence either. This view of things more or less squares with that of Branca himself, who does not feel that he is much indebted to (for example) La Monte Young. In a recent personal e-mail communication, he vigorously rejected any imputation of musical relationship to Young’s work, identifying the major influence on him instead as minimalism and naming, besides Riley and Reich, such composers as Niblock and Palestine, as well as certain unspecified figures from the rock world, among whom (knowing something of Branca’s personal history) I’d guess Sonic Youth would likely be included.¹⁵ Listening through eight of his symphonies (the latest among them No. 13), I’ve observed the generic resemblance of their consistently featured climax-directed builds to those of Palestine’s *Strumming Music* pieces, something which sets the work of both composers quite apart from the “steady-state” textures that prevail farther to the left on the spectrum. In fact, with Branca these climactic builds have become, if anything, fiercer, more aggressively dissonant, even angrier in the later symphonies.

Summarizing my sense so far of drone’s relationship to minimalism, I find that the more involved the music seems to be with the sound itself of the sustained or otherwise projected tones *as foreground events* (with the performers “getting inside the sound,” as La Monte Young has famously termed it), the less it will be involved with the kinds of patterning that are typical of minimal music as it developed at the hands of Riley, Reich, and Glass, the less it will be concerned with projecting the kind of readily perceivable “gradual process” that Reich valorized in his famous essay—and the more such music will subscribe to the conditions of drone. If “development” can be said to occur at all in drone, it is not the type that is much engaged with getting from Point A to Point B to Point C and so on until the end, as classic minimalism typically is. Rather, what seems to happen is a kind of *radiative development*, with palpably new events periodically sprouting, as it were, from the central tone or tones, perhaps even, as they arise, (gradually or abruptly) changing the pitch(es) of the drone itself without interrupting the eternally enforced continuity. Ultimately, these new events give way to other new events without any implication of linear progression from one to the next.

Should we call such music static, as compared to the progressive or successive program of minimalism? As usual, it depends on what one means by the term. Here is Tony Conrad, in conversation with Branden Joseph, recalling his experience as a violinist in Young’s ensemble:

I found that just when I thought I was playing in tune, I would listen again, and I would hear even more minuscule inner artifacts in the tone that would be moving around. Maybe they’re beats between harmonics, for example, and you know that way up the harmonic series, if you have a little inaccuracy, you’re gonna be generating beat tones that are going to be quite off. So the more you get closer and closer, the more you begin to hear things lining up and then not lining up. And a kind of hearing became necessary which I can only describe as going into the sound, going into the interstices of listening more carefully in the way that you can learn to discriminate like when you hear that there’s a number of pitches in one note ...¹⁶

Note the echo of Young’s “getting inside the sound.” Elsewhere, in an earlier article entitled “Inside the Dream Syndicate,” Conrad spoke of this process as an effort toward “static

control,” also noting, however, that “the exhaustion of stasis is impossible.”¹⁷ This seems to validate Barry Shank’s assertion—writing in connection with the Velvet Underground’s employment of drone, to be addressed shortly—that

Drones call our attention to the effort to contain the spread of difference, to stabilize it through endless repetition, even as the drone’s concentrated physicality demonstrates the impossibility of this containment ... each succeeding effort to sound the same varies from the one before.¹⁸

What I gather from both Conrad and Shank—largely confirmed by my own experience—is that the drone, although externally unchanging in its dominating, monolithic character, internally constitutes a world of its own, in which a never-ending preoccupation with the exactitudes of tuning precipitates a richness, a complex of harmonic layering that implies effectively infinite realms of musical expression. It seems to be symptomatic of an involvement with drone to be involved also with just intonation or some variant thereof: with great expanses of time available to hear individual intervals, and commensurately less concern about their placement in some functional system having to do with, say, melodic design or chord progression, it becomes that much more important to get those intervals exactly right: that is, in their “pure” as opposed to tempered form.

In any case, viewed from either (extreme) end of the drone-to-minimalism spectrum, these are only relative tendencies. My listening experience with this repertoire, which is by now extensive but hardly exhaustive, suggests that there is no sharp boundary between the two. Drone is not a subset of minimalism/postminimalism, nor are they mutually exclusive. The region of overlap is fascinating territory that well deserves further theoretical and analytical exploration.

The mention of Sonic Youth a short while ago anticipated this segue to the third structuring question posed at the beginning of this essay: Is there a meaningful relationship between drone in art music and drone in popular music? This last part of my essay makes even more modest claims to representative coverage of relevant repertoire than do the previous parts, owing principally to the fact that the sheer volume of recordings—online or on CD, commercially released or not—is already vast and is apparently increasing at a rate that no one listener could hope to keep up with. Sonic Youth was a group of New York rock musicians who quite consciously, starting around 1980, absorbed the lessons afforded by John Cale’s contribution to the Velvet Underground and put them to work, at least to a limited extent, in their own music.¹⁹ Cale, before he teamed up with Lou Reed and began producing a highly original (and at the time quite uncommercial) variety of rock, played for several years with La Monte Young and there developed a way of playing the viola, his main instrument, as a drone instrument: by sanding down the bridge so as to be able to play more than two strings simultaneously; by restringing it with guitar strings; and (last but certainly not least) amplifying it. (As he proudly described the result, “I got a drone that sounded like a jet engine!”²⁰) On tracks from the Velvets’ first album (*The Velvet Underground & Nico*), such as “Heroin” (SOUND EXAMPLE 10) and “The Black Angel’s Death Song,” Cale’s drone offers robust competition to Reed’s voice for the ear’s attention, even coming close to drowning it out completely at certain points.

The radical revamping of standard song structure represented by such efforts went hand in hand at the time with a widening of artistic license, as even major record labels became interested in signing musicians who exhibited some degree of outlandishness, who weren’t

even necessarily attempting to gain AM radio play for individual songs because their efforts were more channeled into albums as integral works. This interest in albums, in turn, had the effect of encouraging even well-established bands to record very long tracks featuring appreciable stretches that vamped on a single chord: precursors, in a way, to Chatham's *Guitar Trio*. Two examples come to mind. One is the Rolling Stones' 11½ minute "Goin' Home," on their 1967 album *Aftermath*, the last approximately two-thirds of which is a vamp on a single chord (overlaid, however, by Mick Jagger's improvised vocal stylings). Another is "Revelation," a track by the Los Angeles group Love, occupying the entire second side of their 1966 LP *Da Capo*, clocking in at nearly 19 minutes, and based almost entirely on a single harmony. Since it seems highly unlikely that the Stones or Love were listening to La Monte Young around that time, one must conclude that, the John Cale connection notwithstanding, avant-garde art music is just one of several factors contributing to the incorporation of drone or drone-like ideas in pop, varying widely in importance from case to case.

Interestingly, however, Young himself, besides providing Cale with an apprenticeship in drone, laid a kind of common ground between certain strains of popular music and his drone interests, as evidenced by his activities as founder and leader of the Forever Bad Blues Band. As he has explained, referring to the 12-bar blues progression in its simplest form:

This pattern of progressions already gave even the 12-bar form of blues a more static sound because of the six sequential bars on the I7 chord across bars 11 through 4 achieved through the elimination of the IV7 chord usually played in bar 2, and the elimination of the [V]7 / IV7 / I7 / V7 sequence usually played in bars [9 through] 12. Additionally, the fact that the I chord was always a I7 chord allowed a diatonic consistency which suggested a stronger, more static sense of modality.

At some point, I began to spend long periods of time on each chord, and not be concerned about counting how many measures had passed, giving a much more drone-like effect. Eventually, the combination of harmonic stasis and modal emphasis led to the genre of Young's Blues.²¹

(SOUND EXAMPLE 11: Forever Bad Blues Band [La Monte Young], "Young's Dorian Blues in G") By about a third of the way through the second hour of this performance, the 12-bar structure complete with the expected harmonies is clear enough—certainly much clearer than it is in the first hour, during which, as far as one can tell, the band sits immovably on I7. But the attentive listener will notice, in the indicated excerpt (see recommended time point in the Appendix), that not only is any articulation of the end of one cycle and the beginning of another minimized, but so are the chord changes to V7 and IV7. This is Young's doing: the keyboard does not follow these changes, leaving the bass to pick out the dominant and subdominant roots.

Might it be instructive to attempt, at least, to situate examples of "drone rock" on the spectrum previously laid out for art music? Certainly there are plausible candidates for inclusion. Some of Sonic Youth's less commercially directed work, such as their untitled vinyl-only release with one long track per side—"J'Accuse Ted Hughes" (SOUND EXAMPLE 12) and "Agnès B Musique"—is one example. What might be termed the "Glenn Branca connection" is quite evident here, again in the long slow crescendo and concomitant densification of the sound material. Another example, even more clearly connected to the Velvets and Cale, is Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* (SOUND EXAMPLE 13).²² This 64 '15 " barrage of densely mixed guitar sounds that have been modified by way of reverb, filtering, speed

alteration, and feedback stands as a testament to the lasting impact that Cale's droning viola made on Reed, long after he and Cale parted ways.²³

Other examples can readily be found in albums by Sunn O))) and Earth, bands that are perhaps the most prominent in the genre now known as "drone metal." An impressive example comes in the form of a 25½ minute track by Sunn O))), "My Wall" (SOUND EXAMPLE 14), the first half of which is played alongside the reading (mostly chanted, with occasional sung notes) of a long, repetitious poem, also titled "My Wall." In the second half, the drone material continues without the spoken component, slowly churning through low, heavily distorted frequencies, until beginning a gradual fade extending over the last minute and a half. Like many Sunn O))) tracks, here there is a distinct periodicity to the tone successions—something like an ostinato, although it may take a while to recognize the cyclic structure, since the repeating segments tend to be of rather long duration. Compared to other examples of cycling from this band, those of "My Wall" are of about average length. Disregarding, to the extent that this is possible, the vocal presence (for as long as it remains present), one might assign this track, along with much else produced by Sunn O))), to a position relatively far to the left on the drone–minimalism spectrum, since there is no real progression enacted by the material, simply an oscillation between the same two "states."

It is not, after all, so very surprising that much of the drone-based repertoire of popular music bears, to varying degrees, a resemblance to that on the avant-garde (or "art") side. The links between them have been forged by the activities of specific musicians, some of them quite well known, and have been there for some time. Besides Lee Ranaldo and Thurston Moore, the members of Sonic Youth who (as mentioned earlier) have participated in Branca's ensembles, there is Branca himself, whose first experience with music was in Theoretical Girls, a band that enjoyed a brief existence in the downtown New York No-Wave scene in the early 1980s. (Branca also produced Sonic Youth's first two albums.) David First pairs his dronework endeavors with his role as guitarist for the power trio Notekillers, whose work inhabits a position fairly far to the right on the drone–minimalism spectrum. Ranaldo, Moore, and their Sonic Youth bandmate Kim Gordon have all played in Rhys Chatham's *Guitar Trio* and his other massed-guitar works. Other collaborators with Chatham have included Susan Stenger and Robert Poss of Band of Susans, who have fed that experience back into their own music, notably in the magnificent "In the Eye of the Beholder (for Rhys)." (SOUND EXAMPLE 15)

Nevertheless, from the examples of drone rock so far cited, there can be little doubt that it is basically an instrumental phenomenon. And while there is a good deal of rock that is entirely instrumental, there is a great deal more that is not—something that necessarily constitutes a limiting factor in this art/pop relationship. One aspect of the popular-music landscape that the listener cannot help but notice, is that even when the drone has been promoted to something more than simply a throbbing bass note in the background, it is rarely possible for it to constitute the complete musical experience. If there is a vocal component that is not part of the drone, the listener is almost bound, in this kind of context, to focus on it—effectively relegating the drone to a more "conventional" background role—and even where there is no vocal to attract attention, there is often a solo instrumental part of some sort that will do much the same thing. Ultimately, perhaps, the conventions of popular music are difficult—even if not impossible—to dispel. Further, as intimated earlier, there is no reason to assume that the foregrounding of drone achieved in certain repertoires of avant-garde art music has been the only source of inspiration for rock musicians drawn

to the power of sustained tones. Musical traditions from beyond the Western world, such as *raga*, have undoubtedly played at least as significant a role in this regard.²⁴

Working within these limits, however, there is still room for fruitful musical activity. Stuart Dempster, as noted earlier, doesn't find much musical nourishment in Eno's ambient (and probably not in the music of his many emulators, either)—but by contrast, and partly as a result of his experience as a contributor to the mix on Sunn O)))'s album *Monoliths and Dimensions* (2009), Dempster spoke of their efforts in appreciative terms, finding the same kind of "healing" power in their music that Deep Listening seeks to project (in fact, he used the word "healing" several times in this part of our discussion). Just what "healing" might mean is a little difficult to pin down; but, intuitively at least, it makes sense when considered in light of Dempster's recommendations for productive engagement with Deep Listening repertoire: one needn't focus intensely all the time, he said; it's okay to lie down in front of your speakers (or with your headphones on) and bliss out for a while.²⁵ However one approaches the music, though, the important thing, clearly, is not to use it as background for some other activity.

It may well be (to indulge in a bit of speculation) that drone in art music and drone in pop and rock have begun to converge, and that this trend will continue, eventually to the point that they are no longer distinguishable one from the other. At least to the extent that drone in rock is also intended to absorb the listener's full attention, there already seems to be little difference between the art and the popular spheres. How, for instance, would one classify the work of the Dielectric Drone All-Stars? Amazon ranks their sales in the categories of hard rock/metal, rock, and pop; but the rationale for not ranking them as art music is difficult to discern.²⁶ (See SOUND EXAMPLE 16) And one final example: *Planetarium* (2017), a very recent example of collaboration between four eclectically minded composers—including one from pop music (Sufjan Stevens) and another from the art side (Nico Muhly)—provides further confirmation that drone can serve as an effective bridge between the two.²⁷ In any case, here, as in so many other realms of artistic endeavor, the barriers seem to be coming down.

Notes

- 1 Conversation with Stuart Dempster, July 2015.
- 2 All music cited in this essay is available in commercially issued recordings. Exact reference to the CD or LP that I have drawn on in each case, including (if needed) the timing location of the excerpt recommended for listening, is to be found in the Appendix; further, I have provided URLs to sites online (mostly YouTube) where these same recordings have been uploaded. In most cases, the timings given in the CD or LP citation are the same online.
- 3 A negative example here, however, will serve as a caution: to base a composition on a single chord is not necessarily to produce a drone work. The tones of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Stimmung* (1968) come entirely out of the harmonic series of a very low B-flat, thus are a projection (for a performance time of about one hour) of a single chord's components—but not the entire chord at any one time; and there is so much variegation in the way these components are presented, as well as other phenomena such as spoken material, that *drone* cannot really be said to be the main aim, or really any aim at all, of the piece.
- 4 Jeremy Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21, 25.
- 5 Very faintly at the beginning of this recording, one can hear the improvised drumming of Angus MacLise, but it drops out after the first few minutes.
- 6 Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): Chapter 1, "La Monte Young," 21–91.

- 7 Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 20.
- 8 Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), passim.
- 9 Tony Conrad, booklet essays for *Early Minimalism*, 4-CD box set (Table of the Elements, 1996), esp. 67.
- 10 *Horse Sings from Cloud*, like all of Oliveros' mature work, is an example of the practice she has called "deep listening" (also the name of the ensemble that she co-founded with Stuart Dempster, discussed later in this essay). As she has explained, "deep listening is a form of meditation," in which "noticing my listening or listening to my listening" enable the merging of entities and dimensions ordinarily kept separate, such as body and mind, time and space. See Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005), xxiii–xxiv.
- 11 This page of score is taken from Niblock's #9 (*number 9*), for orchestra (2014), with "score and instructions realized by Guy de Bièvre as directed by Phill Niblock." Numbers along the top are a calibration in minutes, meant to be interpreted approximately; the + and – figures situated next to pitch names indicate ranges of cents' deviation in multiples of ten: thus a maximum of 40 cents' deviation above and below.
- 12 During the last year of its existence, thanks to the development of the digitally enabled Expanded Instrument System (EIS), Deep Listening was able to achieve in live performance, in a concert hall, the kinds of long reverberation previously attainable only in the Fort Worden Cistern. Several recordings were made using the EIS setup, among them the CD *Great Howl at Town Haul*, taken from concert performances in January 2011 (Imprec P080, 2012).
- 13 Steve Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process" (1968), in *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34–36.
- 14 The timings shown in this chart are taken from the CD release of Palestine's own performance of the work, detailed as Sound Example 8 in the Appendix. Owing to the quality of the recording, which even for the mid-1970s is evidently not state of the art, and the fact that I was unable to consult a score of the work (it may not even be published), I can make no guarantee that my account of pitch accumulation over these 41 minutes is precisely accurate.
- 15 Glenn Branca, private e-mail communication, 8 September 2015. Two of the performers listed among the personnel for Branca's recording of his *Symphony No. 2*, Lee Ranaldo and Thurston Moore, were also members of Sonic Youth.
- 16 Tony Conrad (1995), quoted in Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 138–140 (ellipsis in original).
- 17 Conrad, "Inside the Dream Syndicate," *Film Culture* 41 (Summer, 1966): 5–8.
- 18 Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 109.
- 19 Kim Gordon, a founding member of Sonic Youth, has attested to this aim, referring to the band in its initial form as "faux-Velvet Underground" and recalling that at first "We strummed and made droning sounds on our guitars ... A lot of the first songs we all wrote and recorded were droning, with vague middles and even vaguer endings." See Gordon, *Girl in a Band* (New York: Dey St./William Morrow, 2015), 140, 122–23.
- 20 John Cale and Victor Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen: The Autobiography of John Cale* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 60.
- 21 La Monte Young, "The Forever Bad Blues Band," booklet essay for *Just Stompin': Live at The Kitchen*: (2-CD set, Gramavision, 1993), 6–7. The V⁷ placed in square brackets and the revision of bar numbers are corrections of what seem to be obvious mistakes (typographical errors, or otherwise) in the text.
- 22 The original recording on four LP sides necessarily enforced three interruptions in the otherwise continuous sound, interruptions that are preserved in the CD re-release.
- 23 Cale was forced out of the Velvet Underground in 1968. There was some suspicion, at the time that *Metal Machine Music* was first released (1975), that Reed had issued the record either as an elaborate joke or in annoyance at his record company (RCA at that time) for demanding yet another album from him on their contractual schedule. However, with the passage of time it has

- come to be taken as a serious musical statement, as the liner notes to the CD re-release by David Fricke attest.
- 24 For further reading about the relationship between minimalism and pop/rock in its more general manifestations, see Jonathan W. Bernard, “Minimalism and Pop: Influence, Reaction, Consequences,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Post-Minimalist Music*, ed. Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll Ap Siôn (Farnham, Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 337–355.
 - 25 Conversation with Dempster, July 2015.
 - 26 Thanks to Dean Suzuki for bringing this group to my attention.
 - 27 The other two musicians/composers on *Planetarium* are Bryce Dessner (from the band The National) and James McAlister. Especially noteworthy for its employment of long, sustained tones is the track “Black Energy,” but some of the other all-instrumental tracks on the album evince a similar propensity for drone or dronelike textures. The CD release is from 4AD Records (00009CD, 2017); as of this writing, some (perhaps not all) tracks have appeared on YouTube, but finding them in their proper order may prove something of a chore.

APPENDIX: Sound Examples

- 1 Rhys Chatham, *Guitar Trio* (1977). Radium. Table of the Elements TOE-CD-813, 2007 (3 CDs). www.google.com/#q=rhys+chatham+guitar+trio&spf=1499623043089 By about 2:36, the Em7 chord has fully come into its own.
- 2 David First, “Zen Guilt / Zen Blame,” on *Privacy Issues: Droneworks 1996–2009*. XI Records XI-134, 2010 (3 CDs). www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERmGfsVKizU
- 3 John Cale, Tony Conrad, Angus MacLise, La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela, *Inside the Dream Syndicate, Volume 1: Day of Niagara* (1965). Table of the Elements TOE-CD-74, 2000. www.youtube.com/watch?v=cT1vIQqdWrl
- 4 Alvin Lucier, *Music on a Long Thin Wire* (1977). Lovely Music LCD-1011, 1992. www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgy1E4YFef8 Video clip of a reconstruction of Lucier’s original setup, University of Huddersfield: <http://socks-studio.com/2016/07/12/music-on-a-long-thin-wire-by-alvin-lucier-1977/>
- 5 Pauline Oliveros, *Horse Sings from Cloud* (1975). Lovely Music VR-1901 (LP), 1982; re-released on Important Records (CD), 2007. www.google.com/#q=horse+sings+from+cloud&spf=1499623983111
- 6 Phill Niblock, “Held Tones,” on *Young Person’s Guide to Phill Niblock*. Phill Niblock, 1994 (2 CDs). www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kas7kKs2jkg
- 7 Deep Listening (Pauline Oliveros, Stuart Dempster, Panaiotis), “Lear,” on *Deep Listening*. New Albion Records NA 022 CD, 1989. www.youtube.com/watch?v=EskkbBbmDKE
- 8 Charlemagne Palestine, *Strumming Music for Bösendorfer Piano* (1974). Sub Rosa SR-297, 2010 (3 CDs). www.youtube.com/watch?v=bulibjyaQ0s Suggested listening point: 00:45.
- 9 Glenn Branca, *Symphony No. 2 (The Peak of the Sacred)*, first movement (“Slow Mass”). Atavistic ALP05, 1992. www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrMIyAV6oDI&list=PLSeCM6E66sTv-7_QN16mSZGsf-jmDsScw Suggested listening point: 02:06.
- 10 Velvet Underground, “Heroin,” from *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1967). Polydor 31453 1250 2, 1996. www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xcwt9mSbYE Suggested listening point: 01:44.
- 11 Forever Bad Blues Band (La Monte Young), “Young’s Dorian Blues in G,” on *Just Stompin’: Live at The Kitchen*, 14 January 1993. Gramavision R2 79487, 1993 (2 CDs). www.youtube.com/watch?v=pj0Mlnw8G2Q Suggested listening point: 1:21:37 = 19:43 on CD2.

- 12 Sonic Youth, "J' Accuse Ted Hughes," Side 1 of J' Accuse Ted Hughes / Agnès B Musique. Syr 7 (LP), 2003. https://music.amazon.com/albums/B0017CQF04?do=playfull&ref=pm_ws_dp_ald_tlw_pe_1_trk1&trackAsin=B0017CHPNA
- 13 Lou Reed, *Metal Machine Music*. Originally RCA Records LP, 1975; re-released by Buddha Records 74465 99752 2, 2000. www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIMSbKU2oZM
- 14 Sunn O))), "My Wall," on *White 1*. Southern Lord Recordings, sunn25, 1993. www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8hie_TuW4I
- 15 Band of Susans, "In the Eye of the Beholder (for Rhys)," on *Here Comes Success*. Restless Records 7 72789-2, 1995. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ecgm3HTVWbQ
- 16 Dielectric Drone All-Stars, Dr. One. http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Dielectric_Drone_All-Stars/Dr_One/