

The Case Against Nyman Revisited: 'Affirmative' and 'Critical' Evidence in Michael Nyman's Appropriation of Mozart.

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My lord, the case against the defendant, Michael Lawrence Nyman, is, in a nutshell, that he has brazenly plagiarised Mozart, and has committed what in effect is a blatant intellectual theft. Joseph Haydn's marble bust.¹

What I do looks deeply into Mozart's musical language and makes discoveries about it. *Ok* the music is remodelled, I impose a postmodern aesthetic on it, but I *do* treat it with respect. There's a vein of educationalism in me. Michael Nyman.²

In *Letters, Riddles and Writs* (1991), part of a BBC project aimed to provide an opportunity 'for six contemporary composers and filmmakers to produce their own homage to Mozart' in the bicentenary of his death, Michael Nyman decided to end his personal tribute to the master by staging a trial in which he himself would be accused of plagiarism of Mozart's music. Amadeus (Ute Lemper), shaking with fever in his deathbed, has a series of confused dreams. One moment he is singing to his father the list of his latest economic incomes, a moment later Leopold's semblances have fused with those of Sarastro, and son and father are singing a duet and arguing about Amadeus' resolution to marry Costanze. In the last of these feverish visions, Mozart finds himself in a courtroom in the company of Joseph Haydn and Beethoven, or rather busts of these two, who figure as lawyers heatedly arguing respectively for and against Nyman's prosecution. 1

What is unintentionally ironic in this bizarre scene is that the charges of 'cannibalisation of eighteen-century repertoire'³ posed to Nyman are in reality so undisputed that the idea of them provoking a quarrel seems too fanciful even for such a surreal courtroom. As a matter of fact, the critical adversity towards Nyman has manifested itself through a fairly unanimous silence.⁴ When a voice has risen to articulate the general indignation, Nyman's use of pre-existing materials has often been the focus: 'too overtly dependent' and 'facile'⁵, Nyman's 'parasitic' appropriation of historical materials is considered to be the measure of his 'commercial opportunism'.⁶ 2

From the beginning of his compositional career in the late 1970s to the very early 1990s, Nyman consistently and explicitly based his works on pre-existing materials. Within a fairly heterogeneous collection of materials, spanning a variety of Venetian popular songs arranged under the commission of Birtwistle for Goldoni's *Il Campiello* (1976), numbers from Purcell's *King Arthur* and *The Fairy Queen* re-written for Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) and Chopin's Mazurkas used in the *Celan Songs* for Ute Lemper (1990), Mozart's presence, even just on the basis of statistical considerations, had a prominent position, rising well above a case of occasional reference or circumstantial convenience. By the time of composing and directing his multimedia homage in 1991, Nyman had already acknowledged the significance of Mozart's music for his work on a number of occasions and had explicitly used Mozart's texts as pre-compositional material in several instances. In this study I will focus on three of these instances, namely: *In Re Don Giovanni* (1977), the first occurrence of Nyman's use of Mozart's music, based on the opening of Leporello's aria 'Madamina il Catalogo e' Questo'; *Trysting Fields* (1988, originally written for Peter Greenaway's movie *Drowning By Numbers* and later rearranged as a concert piece), based on the slow movement of Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante K364;⁷ and *I Am an Unusual Thing* (1991), the conclusive song of *Letters, Riddles and Writs*, based on materials from Mozart's quartets K428 and K465, and the last of Nyman's explicit uses of Mozart's music. 3

My discussion of these recompositions will focus on how stylistic codes and aesthetic markers of Mozart's music could be reinterpreted and appropriated by Nyman in order to satisfy specific ideological and expressive needs. This implies first of all situating Nyman's practice in its proper compositional network. Together with the explicit use of second-hand materials, Nyman's appropriations of Mozart display a strong affiliation with the aesthetic of 'reduction' and 'simplicity' proper to minimal music. 4

One of the major differences I've always drawn as a critic and as a composer between the European minimalists and the American [is that] our tradition is European, and I get all my musical kicks and ideas from the European symphonic tradition... my clothes are Mozart.⁸

The combination of minimalism and 'explicit intertextuality'⁹ taking place in Nyman's appropriations will be considered both synchronically and diachronically: through analysis of *In Re Don Giovanni* and *Trysting Fields* I will thematise and discuss two specific aspects arising from this combination; in my discussion of *I Am an Unusual Thing* I will argue that Nyman's constructions of Mozart change over time in relation to Nyman's increasing departure from the structural and expressive limitations of minimalism and explicit intertextuality. The two streams of minimalism and intertextuality thus define the theoretical field within which my discussion will move.

The cultural environment within which these two streams run is that of 'postmodernism'. Despite the well-rehearsed dangers of the term's elusiveness,¹⁰ relating Nyman's appropriation of Mozart to the cultural trend of postmodernism is unavoidable at least in the sense that Nyman's practice 5

openly defines itself against the international style of musical modernism.¹¹

Nyman's brief description of his use of Mozart's music (above) suggests another sense in which his appropriations could be described as 'postmodern'. I am referring not to Nyman's claim of imposing a 'postmodern aesthetic' on Mozart (a statement which rather provides an example of a misuse of the term as conciliatory and self-explanatory), but to Nyman's promotion of his readings of Mozart as simultaneously 'authentic' (insightful and 'educational'), and 'inauthentic' (resulting from the deliberate imposition of a contemporary aesthetic perspective). While on one hand the problematic amalgamation of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' is intrinsic to any process of reception, being unavoidably linked to the recipient's shifting aesthetic position, on the other hand this amalgamation acquires a specific relevance within the postmodern discourse, where the 'confusion' of codes is deliberately embraced and thematised. 6

In the specifics of this study, the postmodern debate will provide a theoretical framework for two aspects of Nyman's appropriations of Mozart and for the general nature of the contradictions that these two aspects raise. The first of these aspects regards Nyman's use of Mozart as a 'cultural pivot' used to efface distinctions between high and mass culture; the second will concern Nyman's use of Mozart as a 'mask', a way of bypassing a felt inability to 'present things directly' provoked by the awareness of the 'already-written'. These two major issues, the bridging of the 'Great Divide'¹² and the embracement of what, paraphrasing Genette, could be called an 'expressivity of the second degree', are primarily related respectively to the minimalist and intertextual streams of Nyman's cultural network, and have been considered trademarks of postmodernism by both its supporters and detractors. 7

Nyman's palimpsests, when interpreted in these terms, reveal a mixture of critical and affirmative elements. Distinctions have been made between a 'postmodernism of reaction', characterised by total condemnation of modernism as a cultural mistake and exploitation of the cultural codes of tradition for programmatic and affirmative purposes, and a 'postmodernism of resistance' that arises as a 'counter-practice [...] to the official culture of modernism' but avoids 'the "false normativity" of reactionary postmodernism' and is concerned with a critical deconstruction of cultural codes rather than a return to them.¹³ On the one hand this framework will provide the background for my discussion of the affirmative and critical implications of Nyman's appropriations of Mozart; on the other hand, while mapping out these implications, I will argue that seeing Nyman's practice as *either* affirmative or critical simply won't do. The interest of Nyman's appropriation of Mozart lies precisely in its 'ambidexterity', a third feature of Nyman's practice that resonates with the discourse of postmodernism, that seemingly paradoxical 'mixture of the complicitous and the critical'¹⁴ which constitutes the focus of my investigation. 8

The Effortlessness of *In Re Don Giovanni* (1977)

You listen to a very, very simple bit of Mozart; it's like a folk song

and it's done effortlessly. It has more overpowering effect than something where a lot of work has been expended.
Michael Nyman.¹⁵

In Re Don Giovanni (1977), based on the declamatory opening of Leporello's aria *Madamina Il Catalogo e' Questo* from Mozart's opera, combines two seemingly contradictory aspects. It presents Mozart's opening virtually untouched, with no alterations to its melodic and harmonic structure, while at the same time standing as a manifesto of Nyman's compositional practice: 9

Uno dei miei primi pezzi, In Re Don Giovanni, contiene, racchiuse nel nucleo di pochissimi minuti, molte delle caratteristiche stilistiche presenti nelle mie opere successive. Se osservi quella partitura puoi intuire in che maniera si sarebbero sviluppate le cose, e questa musica e' nata all'improvviso in me, in maniera quasi magica.

[One of my earliest compositions, *In Re Don Giovanni*, contains, in a nutshell, many of the stylistic features characterising my following works. By analysing that score you will be able to see how my music would have developed, a music that was born in me all of a sudden, almost magically.]¹⁶

Indeed in its literal reliance on Mozart's text, which blurs the edges between reception and recomposition, and in its combination of the two repertoires with which Nyman had been most involved in his activity as editor and critic – the eighteenth-century repertoire and the American experimental tradition – *In Re don Giovanni* functions as an ideal watershed between Nyman's roles as a critic and as a composer.¹⁷

Nyman makes two alterations to Mozart's text: he dislocates the texture so that its four layers appear one by one through four cyclic repetitions of the opening sixteen bars, and he assigns Leporello's line to a solo trombone. These alterations emphasise the convergence between certain stylistic codes of Mozart's text and defining stylistic and technical features of minimalism. The combination of a very small degree of intervention in Mozart's text on the one hand and the total appropriation of its stylistic codes on the other is crucial to the ironic presentation of Mozart as a 'minimalist *avant la lettre*': through these stylistic convergences, Nyman suggests an ideal kinship between Mozart and minimalism, a kinship centred on a constellation of aesthetic markers such as 'simplicity', 'effortlessness' and 'universality'. These markers, implicitly relying on familiar traits of Mozart's musicological and popular images, are used by Nyman to turn Mozart into the perfect partisan for his anti-modernist agenda, allowing the provocative gathering, in the name of an aesthetic unburdened by intellectual complications, of the popular directedness of Rock, the alleged grammatical simplicity of Mozart's music, and the tonal reductionism of minimalism. 10

First layer: the universality of Mozart's pulse and harmony

The conception of *In Re Don Giovanni* as a manifesto of Nyman's personal 11

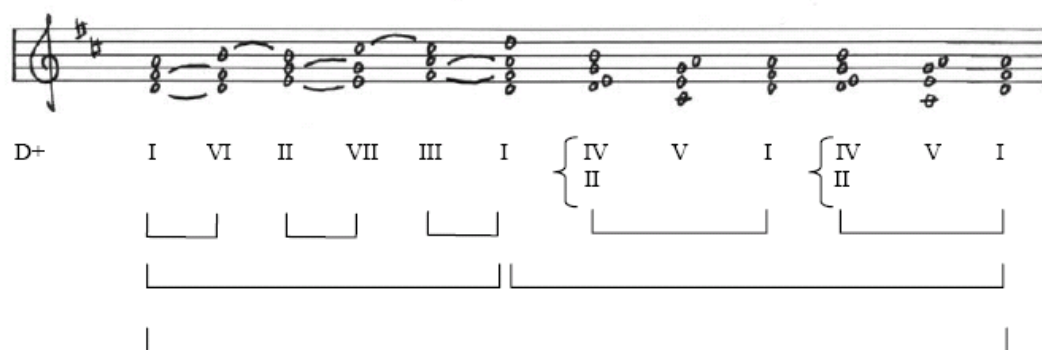
brand of minimalism is reinforced by the title. While stating the tonality of Mozart's aria, this title also alludes to Terry Riley's seminal work *In C* (1964), a work that introduced into the experimental tradition two apparently innocuous but contextually revolutionary features that would become defining aspects of minimalism: the reference to tonal harmony, and the installation of regular pulse.

On the broadest level, *In Re Don Giovanni*'s intended 'confusion' between Mozart and minimalism takes place precisely via the idea of stable pulse and tonal diatonicism. It is through the embracement of these two macro-features that minimalism seemed to provide for Nyman an aesthetic attitude that would legitimise some sort of liberating reconciliation of his split interests between the 'rock revolution' of the 60s and the 'classical' tradition:

Because I was educated as a dyed-in-the-wool classicist (I was a musicologist), all my musical allegiances were toward tonal harmony and melody. Minimalism said 'you can use tonal chords, you can use regular pulse,' and, of course that tied in with the kind of music I was listening to in the late sixties – Terry Riley, the Beatles, the Velvet Underground.¹⁸

In *In Re Don Giovanni* the pulsating quavers of the aria are extrapolated from their context and brought to the fore, suggesting a relationship with minimalism's 'explicit quantizing of musical time'¹⁹ and with the steady beat of rock textures.²⁰ The temporal dislocation that brings the pulsating quavers to the fore is itself an allusion to rock and the stereotypical gradual layering of instrumentation prompted by the development of multi-track recording.²¹

Closed in bar 16, Mozart's harmonic progression acquires a cyclical quality which suits the extension through obsessive repetition characteristic of minimalist constructions. On a generic level, the harmonic quality of Mozart's segment is largely compatible with the minimalist predilection for plain triads and diatonic collections and with the characteristic third-relationships and formulaic bass-motion of Rock progressions. On a more specific level, it is the highly patterned quality of Mozart's progression, emphasised by Nyman's loop, that makes Mozart's passage suitable to being 'confused' with the characteristically single-minded, 'automatic' quality of minimalist processes. Fig.1 shows the various levels of harmonic patterning in bb.1-16 (M)²².



▪ Fig.1: Mozart, 'Madamina, il Catalogo e' Questo' (from Don Giovanni), ▪
chordal reduction of VI.II and VIa. in bars 1-16. Square brackets indicating

the patterning of Mozart's Progression.

The implicit cultural subtext of these broad stylistic convergences is a problematisation of the 'Great Divide' between high art and mass culture. Related to this divide, Nyman's description of his aesthetic as 'postmodern' gains some substance. The challenge to the Great Divide, part of a general questioning of the legitimisation of aesthetic, cultural, and social discourses on which musical modernism has insisted and constructed itself as an 'adversary culture',²³ is one of the strongest arguments in favour of the use of the term 'postmodern' as descriptive of a number of cultural products emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In Re Don Giovanni displays not only this postmodern aspiration to cut across the Great Divide, but also the problematic oscillation between the critical potentials and affirmative dangers that this de-legitimisation of categories implies. Not surprisingly, Nyman's comments show an attempt to sharpen the critical edge of his crossovers by presenting them as a rebuttal of the strategies of exclusion adopted by musical modernism, whose aesthetic is essentially characterised by Nyman as 'dominant but dead', to use Habermas' formula:²⁴ 'dead' in its impassiveness to the significance of the mass-media-generated coexistence of high and low art, and thus inadequate to grasp the current cultural reality; 'dominant' in its institutionalised support of the Great Divide via the academy and related institutions which, as Middleton puts it, 'continue in [their] role of building "cultural capital", marking social distinction and excluding those with unapproved tastes':²⁵

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It seems crazy to write a kind of music today which doesn't acknowledged the existence of pop music. For the Stockhausens and Birtwistles of this world to totally discard and scorn that music as a phenomenon seems nonsensical.²⁶

When I was a student between '61 and '64 I wrote in a kind of a Hindemith-Shostakovich style. Then I came in contact with the Manchester school – Maxwell Davies, Birtwistle, and Goehr – and it was *de rigueur* then not only to write serial music but to consider any other music that wasn't serial as the music of idiots. You couldn't even show any allegiance to Benjamin Britten! Everything was Darmstadt, this post-Webern serial nonsense. I tried to write one serial piece, but I gave up. And I didn't write a single note from '64 to '76, because I couldn't come to terms with writing serial music.²⁷

The Mozart of *In Re Don Giovanni* plays a crucial role in Nyman's attempt to blur the Great Divide and find compositional alternatives: as Mozart's text provides Nyman with an opportunity to refer and gather under the same text stylistic codes of classicism, minimalism, and rock, so Mozart as a cultural icon serves as symbolic pivot between cultural hierarchies of high and low. Mozart can exploit this pivoting role by serving at the same time as a stamp of value, which answers the needs of validation of the Nyman 'dyed-in-the-wool classicist and musicologist', and as a popularised low-brow icon, part of daily life from the movie theatre to television ads, and thus answering to the Nyman dissatisfied

with the elitism of the modernist institutionalisation of high culture and interested in widening the audiences of contemporary composition.

In this sense, Nyman's Mozart in *In Re Don Giovanni* shows a collusion with the long-established image of Mozart as a universal, democratic icon.²⁸ Mozart's 'democratic universality', or, from a postmodern perspective, his ability to cut across the Great Divide, is implicitly related by Nyman to the alleged 'effortlessness' of Mozart's writing: 15

You listen to a very, very simple bit of Mozart; it's like a folk song and it's done effortlessly. It has more overpowering effect than something where a lot of work has been expended.²⁹

Nyman is here reiterating and reinterpreting a trope that characterises both the scholarly and popularly constructed images of the composer.³⁰ As Christoph Wolff sums up, this notion of effortlessness is embedded in a rich network of biographical tropes and ideological judgements, the notion of the 'untutored genius', the ideal of everlasting purity and simplicity:

The prevailing popular image of Mozart the composer is that of the prototypical musical prodigy, a genius blessed with heavenly gifts, who effortlessly created works of great beauty, deep expression, and exemplary perfection.³¹

In Nyman's description and appropriation of Mozart's 'very very simple bits', the myth of Mozart's effortlessness implicitly resonates with the anti-academicism of the experimental tradition, and is basically transformed into a slogan for the problematisation of the relationship between the academic discourse and musical value in contemporary music.

Nyman's use of Mozart is in fact oriented against a *specific* criterion of musical value that is sustained by the academic discourse: that of 'intellectual complexity'. In his essay 'Against Intellectual Complexity in Music', written simultaneously with *In Re Don Giovanni*,³² Nyman describes the aesthetic of 'simplicity' of trends coming from the Cage experience (in particular Morton Feldman's music and minimalism) in contraposition with the radicalisation of 'intellectual complexity' characterising the high modernism of Darmstadt. 16

[...] the aesthetic, structural, and expressive requirements of the so-called New Simplicity demand the development of a totally different, independent (some might say naïve, innocent, and simple-minded) compositional methodology.³³

By allying, through *In Re Don Giovanni*, Mozart's alleged 'grammatical simplicity' with the aesthetic of 'New Simplicity' of minimalism, and against the intellectual complexity of modernism, Nyman is performing a variation on an ideological use of Mozart that has countless precedents. This ideological use is patently based on an understanding of Mozart's style not as an idiosyncratic performance of the tonal grammar in its specific historical moment (and thus in

this sense characterised by a relative grammatical simplification if intended as increasing stylisation in harmonic functionality and phrasing), but as a 'universal', 'natural' mode of expression that can be used by Nyman as an argument against what he believes to be the abstruse, artificial intellectualism of total serialism, as it was raised at the turn of the century as an antidote to the complexity and emotional exaggeration of expressionism, or by the anti-Wagnerians as the 'true nature of musical art against [Wagner's] "unnatural", deceptive technique'.³⁴

In the post-tonal practice, the ideological use of this idealised Mozart took 17
historically two forms: that of using Mozart as a 'weapon against the seemingly radical surface of new music *per se*'³⁵ or as the model of inspiration for a specific school of contemporary composition, as happened during the neoclassical debate. Nyman's appropriation of Mozart shows both tendencies.

On the one hand, in his aggressiveness towards modernism, in his generalised 18
re-embrace of 'pulse' and 'tonality', and in his evocation of Mozart's 'effortlessness', Nyman shows a collusion with a reactionary cultivation of Mozart to the detriment of a renewal of the materials of contemporary music. In this sense, Nyman's appropriation provides an example of Botstein's argument of a linkage between the postmodern popularisation of Mozart and the marginalisation of new music.³⁶

On the other hand, however, *In Re Don Giovanni* cannot be totally assimilated 19
to such aesthetics of reaction. As details of Nyman's palimpsest suggest, Mozart's text is not used as a static object of cult, a sample of 'classical perfection', but as a sophisticated material that well suits the minimalist interest in the primary blocks of tonality and in basic processes of pattern perception, and thus can function as an inspiration for new compositional solutions.

Final layer: the sophisticated simplicity of Leporello's 'additive' line

In the second (bb.17-32) and third (bb.33-48) repetition of Mozart's opening, 20
Nyman establishes the textural and rhythmic frame in which Leporello's line, played by a solo trombone, can finally fall into place.

Without interferences of any sort, Leporello's line is transformed: against the 21
pulsating regularity of the gradually established textural and rhythmic frame, the rhythmic-metric subtleties of the declamatory line stand out sharply, its modular nature is thus highlighted and reinterpreted in minimalist terms. This 'reinterpretation' is obtained by revealing a curious stylistic convergence between the structure of Leporello's line and one of the characteristic technical devices of minimalism: the additive rhythmic process intensively used by Philip Glass in his early minimalist pieces. As Nyman notes:

The essence of Glass's music is [...] contained in a rhythmic piece called 1+1 (1968). This is for a single player who taps rhythms on an amplified table or other surface; what he taps is derived from two tiny rhythmic figures which he can repeat and combine in any way he likes. All Glass's ensemble pieces are based on this additive rhythm process which is

applied to the melodic lines which provide the continuity of the music, in an unending flow of regular quavers.³⁷

Fig.2 shows bb.1-7 of Leporello's line text read through the technique of additive process. 22



Fig.2: Mozart, Madamina il Catalogo e' Questo (from Don Giovanni) bb.1-7 of Leporello's declamatory line read in additive terms. ■

At the same time, in *In Re Don Giovanni*, this additive process evokes a second characteristic technical device of minimalism: the progressive metric shifting epitomised by Steve Reich's phase processes. Reich's clearest presentation of these processes is arguably found in *Clapping Music*, where the metric relationship between two identical rhythmic patterns progressively shifts as the second performer shortens his pattern of a quaver every twelve repetitions. The musical and aesthetic significance of these processes lies in the achievement of complex patterns of inner stresses and metric subtleties through the most economical and systematic means. The rhythmic-metric subtlety of Leporello's line is suitable to be read in these terms: as the basic motivic unit undergoes rhythmic addition, it shifts its metric position within the 4/4 frame, and, most importantly, it shifts its position in respect to the two fixed patterns of the violins and celli in which it is embedded, resulting in a variety of metric relationships between the patterns (fig.3).



Fig.3 Mozart, Madamina, il Catalogo e' Questo (from Don Giovanni) bb.1-7, rhythmic reduction showing the shifting alignment between Leporello's additive ■

line and the regular rotation of the arpeggio rhythmic-motif.

Although the additive and phase process is rigorously sustained for just bb.1-7, the additive quality of Leporello's line extends to bar 10, creating a modular structure that increases from 3 to 5, 7 and 11 crotchets length. 23

By reading these details of Mozart's text through the constructivism of minimalist processes, Nyman plays on shifting the significance of these sixteen bars. From 'a subtle and exquisitely calculated piece of rhetoric'³⁸, Leporello's aria becomes a matter of perception of design: of foreground/background figures, of additive processes, of shifting metric relationships. 24

Cage's famous distinction between an 'old music... which has to do with *conceptions* and their *communication*, and [...] new music which has nothing to do with communication of concepts, only to do with *perception*'³⁹ seems then indicative of the deep aesthetic shift taking place through Nyman's very limited intervention in the piece. The link between minimalism and perception⁴⁰ is in fact at the basis of the aesthetic 'literalism' of minimalism: since the process is meant to embody 'itself without any mediation', 'no longer [...] referring to something outside itself'⁴¹ the *perception* of the process becomes the bottom line of aesthetic appreciation.⁴² 25

In Re Don Giovanni, by creating the ironic illusion that the musical relationships of Mozart's text are process-determined, makes Mozart's text compatible with such aesthetic requirements. The disappearance of Leporello's voice is of course a step towards this illusion, not just because it eradicates textual, 'extramusical' references, but also because, by removing the level of continuity provided by the verbal dimension of Leporello's melody, it enables a modular interpretation of its relationships, which in turn is necessary to create the impression that these are process-determined. 26

The emphasis on perception has another important implication. In experimental music, perceptual subtlety is presented as the counterpart of a reduction in grammatical complexity: the claim of minimalism is to shift the focus away from the abstract, intellectual complexity of fixed musical relationships towards the perceptual, audible subtleties arising from the processing of simple musical material. As the simple shapes of minimal art and sculpture are meant to reintroduce sensitivity to detail by creating a subtle dialogue between a clearly projected gestalt and minor displacements and disturbances,⁴³ so analogously, in minimal music, the reduction of information to basic textural and harmonic elements is supposed to create a situation in which any change and irregularity of the ongoing pattern will be audible and significant. 27

It is in this context that Nyman's verbal praise and musical appropriation of this 'simple bit' of Mozart's aria can be most profitably situated. Mozart's 'simplicity', from a minimalist perspective, is not the indicator of 'classical perfection' but the source of fine nuances and the basis for the appreciation of discrete irregularities in patterning and phrasing. In this way the appropriation of Mozart's language meets Nyman's purpose to problematise the notion of overt complexity and advocate a fresh interest in the potential subtlety of simplicity in 28

new music.

By means of highlighting the ('authentic') rhetorical subtleties of Mozart's declamatory line and by reading them through the (deliberately 'inauthentic') minimalist concern with process, perception, and literalism, Mozart's text becomes a resource for the articulation of new musical meaning.⁴⁴ The *buffo* humour of the original text is thus renewed in the ironic 'confusion' of Mozart for a minimalist, and the piece is invested with a new cultural significance, becoming 'about' a problematisation of the Great Divide and of the notion of intellectual complexity, the main aesthetic and technical criteria through which the Divide is sustained by the modernist discourse. 29

The critical potential of this reinterpretation of Mozart's stylistic codes is, however, inextricably tied to the programmatic and affirmative aspects of Nyman's appropriation. Nyman's motivations are clear: 'spreading' Mozart's pulse, harmony and 'effortlessness' across intellectual compartments, he creates a space in which stylistic and cultural hierarchies are flattened, and his music can emerge, 'almost magically', as he says (above). 30

The affirmative dangers of this operation can be noticed by looking at the effect that it has on the image of Mozart. Mozart, I have argued, can function as pivot between high and low culture because of his permeation of the whole cultural spectrum. This permeation creates the impression that we are in front of a sole phenomenon, a Mozart who, thanks to his mythical universality, brings together, 'democratically', high and low, flattening their distinction, whereas in fact Mozart can permeate the cultural spectrum precisely because of his ability to *change* function and identity according to the specific cultural network and intellectual compartment in which he is integrated. 31

In Re Don Giovanni's flattening of high and low categories then necessarily rests on the affirmation of the popularised image of a 'universal Mozart' as a positive image. This means reducing the multi-faceted complexity and sophistication of Mozart's music and image to its lowest common denominator, which is to say to stylistic indicators of 'simplicity' and 'effortlessness', elected for their collusion with Nyman's personal agenda. 32

The Poignancy of *Trysting Fields* (1988)

'Trysting Fields'... puts under a microscope... Mozart's 'affective' deployment of the accented appoggiatura which partly accounts for the poignancy of this movement – a poignancy which I deliberately allowed to reach into my soundtrack.

Michael Nyman⁴⁵

Trysting Fields (1988)⁴⁶, palimpsest on the second movement of Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* K364 for violin and viola, seems based on an ambiguity: Nyman's total reliance on Mozart's text and materials could be seen at the same time as a way of distancing himself from expressive responsibilities, and of insinuating expressivity, by means of 'deliberately allowing' Mozart's 33

‘poignancy’, as Nyman says, into the score.

This seeming paradox, I will argue, has its foundations in the experimental tradition, and it allowed Nyman to preserve the impersonal attitude of minimalism and at the same time to reveal and broaden the expressive potentials hiding behind that impersonal attitude. After tracing and delineating this ‘masked’ re-introduction of expressivity, I will propose two different hypothesis for the interpretation of *Trysting Fields*: in a first scenario, Nyman relies on Mozart’s culturally ingrained stylistic codes in order to recuperate a shared language within which expressive directedness can be reclaimed; according to scenario number two, Nyman’s reliance on Mozart’s stylistic gestures, rather than proposing a restorative solution to the loss of a common practice, expresses the impossibility of regaining that expressive directedness. Via analysis of *Trysting Fields* I will discuss how Nyman’s appropriation of Mozart presents both the affirmative dangers and critical potentials that scenarios number one and two respectively imply. 34

Mozart’s text as a gradual process

The whole material of *Trysting Fields* is based on Mozart’s *Andante*, more specifically, on its accented appoggiaturas: 35

When I started analysing the musical structure of the slow movement I noticed that Mozart consistently used two decorative tricks of which the first – accented appoggiaturas – provides the complete substance of *Trysting Fields*. Basically I ‘sampled’ each of these appoggiaturas ... repeated it three times...and moved on to the next one so that a totally new harmonic/melodic continuity is created which is so familiarly Mozartian but yet which self-evidently is not.⁴⁷

The composition’s total reliance on a pre-existing text poses, in a particularly severe way, the general problem of dealing with the overt, surface presence of historical material in contemporary music, which is to say the problem of considering this overt presence in its own terms rather than pitching it against models of confrontation with the past which are deemed ‘deeper’ in that they suit our interpretative and analytical concern with the unveiling of subcutaneous structural relationships and influences.

Rather than dismissing it at the outset as ‘too facile’ or ‘parasitical’, Nyman’s overt reliance on Mozart’s text can be discussed in relation to the problematisation of the authorial subject radically posed by Cage and permeating the experimental tradition as a whole. Cage, equating authorial subjectivity with the composer’s control of musical relationships, from the fifties onwards employed chance procedures to refuse the traditional function of the ‘work’ as a means of self-expression and embrace an ideal of authorial impersonality. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this aspect of the Cage experience. To Nyman, the concern with impersonality seems to be *the* thread uniting the experimental tradition, to the point that at some stage he proposes to call the experimental aesthetic ‘New Objectivity’. The experimental composer, Nyman argues, ‘no longer feels the necessity of consciously 36

influencing the creative process at every moment'.⁴⁸ Quoting Michael Parson, he argues that

[...] whatever structural concerns, whatever iconography, whatever seeming contradictions between one 'movement' and another, there remains this consistency: that composers 'treat sound not as material to be ordered and put into meaningful symbolic forms as a medium for human expression, but as something autonomous and impersonal'.⁴⁹

Methodologically, the 'objectivity' of the experimental tradition lies in the determination of a variety of procedures and systems which allow the composer to distance himself from the materials. If at one extreme of a spectrum of procedures we place Cage, his chance-based methods, and the radical unfixing of relationships, on the other side, Nyman suggests, we should place minimalism, with its reliance on systems and processes which, as Reich famously postulated in his manifesto 'Music as a Gradual Process', once set in motion, determine 'automatically' the moment to moment unfolding of relations and the scale of the piece.⁵⁰ Nyman places himself on Reich's side of the spectrum:

Cage's music... then, is just one extreme of the New Simplicity, where all musical events, devoid of intentional relationships, are of equal importance. The opposite extreme, represented in America by the music of Terry Riley, Reich, Glass, Young, and Jon Gibson, and in England by Gavin Bryars, John White, Christopher Hobbs, and myself, is closely related conceptually, methodologically, and structurally to Cage, even when its purposes and methods appear to contradict this relation.⁵¹

However, by calling the aesthetic attitude of the experimental tradition 'objective', Nyman risks obliterating the dialectical tension between objectivity *and* authorship which is intrinsic to the problem of compositional control and crucial to understand his own reliance on Mozart's music. This tension at the core of the experimental tradition is clearly articulated by Morton Feldman:

The question continually on my mind all these years is: to what degree does one give up control, and still keep the last vestige where one can call the work one's own? Everyone must find his own answer here...⁵²

When read as Nyman's personal answer to the question of compositional control in the terms posed by the experimental tradition, the overt reliance on Mozart's text can be understood in its methodological and aesthetic relevance: the pre-existing text substitutes the role played by the 'impersonal' processes of minimal music. Nyman's control is largely limited to the *choice* of the hypotext and the definition of the procedures through which it will be processed (Fig.4). Then, as with the gradual processes of minimal music, the unfolding of Mozart's text through these procedures determines, with a few exceptions that I will consider later, every moment-to-moment detail and overall scale of the hypertext.

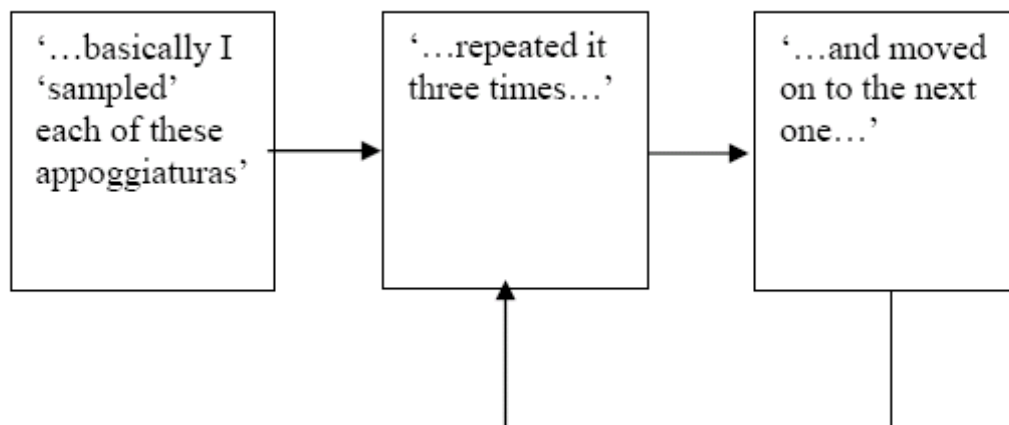


Fig.4: Nyman, *Trysting Fields*, 'impersonal' processing of Mozart's K364, ii. ■

Mozart's materials as both 'primary' and 'already-written'

In *Trysting Fields*, by dropping a large part of his authorial responsibility through the reliance on relationships mapped out by a pre-existing text, Nyman opens up a theoretical framework in which minimalism and explicit intertextuality are combined to generate a particular species of 'impersonality'. 37

The alliance of minimalism and intertextuality is peculiar and apparently contradictory. The typical materials of minimalism stand in opposition to the very notion of intertextuality in that they are meant to be objects of supposed neutrality, primary structures which are impersonal, anti-historical, de-actorial, aiming at the total omission of the semantic level⁵³ and at neutralisation of any reference to previous experiences.⁵⁴ On the other hand, although seemingly irreconcilable in their materials, minimalism and intertextuality converge in a problematisation of the authorial subject: whereas minimalism attempts to neutralise the authorial subject by avoiding traces of human presence in the material and in its processing, explicit intertextuality characteristically problematises the authorial subject by dissolving its identity in the 'already-written'. 38

Mozart's materials, through Nyman's operations, satisfy the requirements of both minimalism and intertextuality. Fig.5 shows the status of the materials of *Trysting Fields* as placed somewhere between the 'already-written', historically-situated, semantically charged intertextual source, and relatively a-historical 'archetypical patterns', basic eighteenth-century melodic and harmonic models which are so culturally ingrained and common that they can be considered to stand as relatively neutral building blocks of the tonal language.⁵⁵ In relation with the intertextual source, *Trysting Fields*' materials are reduced and incomplete; in relation with the archetypical patterns, they are *embellished* and incomplete. These two seemingly irreconcilable conditions, as reduced intertextual source or as embellished primitive building structures, are simultaneously embodied by *Trysting Fields*' materials. 39



Fig.5: Trysting Fields' materials between 'already written' and 'archetypical structures'. Fig.5(a): Mozart, K364,ii, bb.9-16, piano reduction; Fig.5(b): Nyman, Trysting Fields, b.1 and b.4, piano reduction; Fig.5(c): 'changing note archetype' 1-7-2-1.

Reading Fig.5 top-down, which is to say from the original to the processed intertextual source, Nyman's text appears as a 'reduction' of Mozart's materials in a sense analogous to the 'smoothing over the details of execution' through which minimalist artists would try to keep the surfaces of their works in unworked states.⁵⁶ In minimalist art this procedure would be 'aimed in part at achieving an impersonal quality, avoiding the depiction of personality that most minimalist artists felt had become entirely too explicit'.⁵⁷ In *Trysting Fields*, via reduction of the melodic elaboration of the *Andante*, the aesthetic individuality of the materials is faded: Mozart's 'already-written' materials, reduced to incomplete and barely adorned frames of archetypical harmonic progressions, tend towards the abstract level of primary structures.⁵⁸

On the other hand, reading the graph from bottom-up, which is to say from the minimal, abstract 'changing note archetype' towards a reintroduction of the details of Mozart's surface, Nyman's operation can be conceptualised as one of 'restoration' of those traces of historical and actorial presence that minimalist art consciously tries to reject from its material and processes. In the words of James Pierce:

The Minimalist insistence on anonymity and the conscious rejection of skill for its own sake intensifies, rather than weakens, the expression of pure Mind. ... Minimalists are fully aware of the capabilities of art and the broad range of skill and expression revealed during its 'melancholy process' over the centuries. Their conscious rejection of complexity and emotionalism, then, becomes a positive expressive act.⁵⁹

Because of the 'conscious rejection' of these traces of expression, minimalist art and music can be argued to 'negatively affirm' these traces, which remain present in the work through their felt *absence*, as it were. Nyman, by incorporating Mozart's appoggiatura in the minimal materials of *Trysting Fields*,

makes visible one of those traces of gesture and expressivity usually latent in minimalist processes.

Mozart as a 'mask'

The particular species of impersonality generated by Nyman's fusion of minimalism and intertextuality in *Trysting Fields* can, then, be said to contain the seeds of its own corruption: however 'impersonal' the process might be, the already-written material it uses to achieve this impersonality shows traces of gestures which are unavoidably referential and charged with expressive content. 41

Signs of this 'contaminated impersonality' can be argued in previous situations of the experimental tradition significantly related to Nyman's practice, in particular in Cage's use of 'banal sounds' and in the British found-object tradition's use of 'the classics'. Cage's adoption of tonally-sounding chords which were implicitly forbidden by the post-serial compositional practice, which he termed 'banal sounds', had the effect of incorporating familiar materials in indeterminate and improvisatory performances. Although Cage strongly refused to consider the value of these materials to be in their referential or symbolic qualities, the emergence of these qualities could not *really* be refused, and would remain a potential by-product of chance procedures. 42

The potential of combining an objective attitude with the use of familiar materials comes more clearly in focus in the systems of the British found-object tradition.⁶⁰ Commenting on this combination Nyman deems that: 43

[these] systems are 'another way of making the music objective, so that, not being used to express anything, the musical material is free to be expressive as sound', then [...] musical modular structures [...] do not necessarily preclude lyricism, and [...] constructivism is not automatically synonymous with severity.⁶¹

I believe this comment is crucial to understanding Nyman's own use of Mozart in *Trysting Fields*. Nyman is essentially stating that the appropriation of a historical model can allow the composer to achieve expressiveness while avoiding expressive intent: theoretically, the piece can remain impersonal in its objective constructivism, and at the same time be lyrical and 'poignant' by incorporating, almost as a by-product, the expressivity attached to the already-written material subjected to the process – in the case of *Trysting Fields*, Mozart's appoggiaturas.

Presenting the expressiveness of the piece as by-product of the processed materials (accepted, accounted for, even deliberately provoked, but ultimately a secondary effect of constructive procedures) is significant for its consistency with the minimalist 'passivity', that attitude of 'watching things happen'⁶² found most clearly in the minimalists' interest in the *psychoacoustic* by-products of their 'impersonal' processes. Just as these resulting patterns, at first accepted as acoustic by-products, were gradually made explicit and played a crucial role in the stylistic and aesthetic expansion of American minimal music,⁶³ so the expressivity of Mozart's text allows Nyman a reintroduction of expressive 44

material in minimalism while salvaging the ideal of impersonality central to its aesthetic and to the experimental tradition as a whole.

This use of Mozart as a 'mask' creates what could be described as an 'expressivity of the second degree': the affective gesture, in this case Mozart's appoggiatura, is bracketed and re-articulated. For Eco this strategy is characteristic of the postmodern answer to the intimidating presence of the 'already-written': 45

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, 'I love you madly,' because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.' At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence.⁶⁴

Paraphrasing Eco, we would say that Nyman, at the beginning of *Trysting Fields*, faced with the impossibility of positively writing a 'poignant appoggiatura', because he knows that we know that he knows that appoggiaturas are expressive gestures of a collapsed common practice, decides that a valuable solution to this impasse is that of re-writing Mozart's poignant appoggiatura.

To be sure, when translated in musical terms, the programmatic motivations and expressive results of Nyman's rewriting appear to be much more ambiguous than those of Eco's love-declaration. Two main interpretative hypotheses can be made: that the re-use of Mozart's gesture in 'inverted commas' is merely an expedient for the restoration of an anachronistic vocabulary through which Nyman can conveniently bypass the problem of expressivity generated by the absence of a contemporary common practice; or that Nyman's procedure implies a critical reinterpretation of the historical gesture which expresses the impossibility of an innocent return to it. 46

Appoggiaturas of first or second degree

Nyman's suggestion that within the impersonal process sound can be expressive 'as such' means, in the case of *Trysting Fields*, that Mozart's accented appoggiaturas are supposed to carry in the new context, together with their material presence, the expressive poignancy with which they were invested in their original context. On this basis, Mozart's expressive codes would seem to provide a vocabulary of shared, stable gestures that could serve the contemporary composer not just to regain the expressive powers lost in the collapse of the tonal common practice, but also to restore this expressiveness and lyricism without falling prey to his own subjectivity, just relying on some intrinsic expressivity of the 'bracketed' historical gesture. 47

This formulation rests on the principle that individual signs, of any sign system, have an intrinsic, stable meaning, regardless of their context, a principle long 48

contested by structuralists and semioticians alike. Seen from this point of view, Nyman's use of Mozart's appoggiatura seems grounded on the fallacious theoretical basis of 'using a musical object' as Alastair Williams puts it, 'to provide semantic content despite the absence of the context that provided that content'.⁶⁵

In music, this 'semiotic fallacy' is sustained by two related illusions: the illusion of the aesthetic stability of a composition through time, illusion generated by the survival and canonisation not just of a certain historical repertoire but also of the way we have *learned* to respond to such repertoire; and the illusory 'natural' status of tonality, in fact 'second nature', i.e. a system of conventions so culturally ingrained to become virtually invisible. 49

Mozart's mythology, as that of any composer who embodies the persistence of a venerated tradition, strongly rests on and sustains these illusions. Ironically, the specific *historical* position of Mozart's genius seems to have made his grammar and syntax particularly suitable to retrospective, *a-historical* readings of it as a 'natural' mode of expression that transcends time and space.⁶⁶ From the perspective of the combined expressive-stylistic expansion of tonality quickening through the nineteenth and twentieth century, it has been plausible to perceive Mozart's modes of expression as 'immediate', needing, in order to be understood, 'nothing more than a natural capacity for feeling'⁶⁷, precisely because moving within stylistic boundaries that were retrospectively perceived as normative. 50

The resulting tropes of 'naturalness' and 'immediacy', variants on the tropes of 'universality' and 'effortlessness' that made Mozart a 'democratic' icon perfect to bridge the Great Divide in *In Re Don Giovanni*, make Mozart the perfect mask for a sought return to expressive directedness. The step from asserting Mozart's immediacy of expression to investing Mozart's gestures with intrinsic expressive powers is indeed considerably small. It is by making this step that Nyman comes close to promoting, through the illusion of the intrinsic, stable meaning of Mozart's appoggiaturas, a restoration of tonality and of its traditional expressive apparatus. 51

Affirming that this stability is illusory does not however mean excluding the possibility that the extrapolation and re-use of Mozart's gestures has an expressive potential: in fact it is precisely the impossibility of such stability that, ensuring a renewal of the meaning of the sampled appoggiatura, allows it new expressive possibilities. 52

In the very moment that Mozart's appoggiatura is sampled, its significance is irremediably altered. Fig.6 focuses on the first of the *Andante's* appoggiaturas. The c-b motion, in Mozart's text, functions as the *solo's* expressive displacement of the *tutti's* line. It emphasises the tail of the melodic antecedent. It indulges on a dissonance that softens the squareness of the *tutti* enunciation. When sampled and reiterated in b.1-3 (N), the c-b motion, estranged from its contextual origins, stands as a micro-melody in its own. Because the accented dissonance is immediately reiterated, the consonant resolution loses its larger syntactic role, and is basically reduced to the status of an upbeat to the next 53

dissonance, a lower neighbour note to an unresolved, insistent accented dissonance.⁶⁸



Fig.6: Changing significance of the appoggiatura through its sampling and reiteration. Fig.6(a): Mozart, K364,ii, bb.1-2 and bb.8-9, piano reduction. Appoggiatura in b.9 as expressive delay of the b natural heard in b.2; fig 6(b): Nyman, Trysting Fields, bb.1-3, piano reduction. Appoggiatura as a sustained dissonance temporarily relaxed by the upbeat consonance.

What I am suggesting is that the alleged 'poignancy' of *Trysting Fields* appoggiaturas, rather than 'allowed' from Mozart's text, should be considered as generated *anew* from Nyman's processing of the text. This leads to the recognition that, no matter how objectively pre-determined and restricted to the 'already-written' Nyman's process might be, it still creates a 'musical subject'⁶⁹ with *new* qualities and expressive implications.⁷⁰ In order to understand how Nyman's combination of the aesthetics of reduction of minimalism and the expressive poignancy of Mozart's text construct the musical subject of *Trysting Fields*, it will be useful to return to the idea of 'absence' in minimalism. Eero Tarasti, among his reflections on the semiotic characteristics of minimalism, remarks that:

Simplicity in music is anything but simple. Basically, music is always a dialectic between a present sound phenomenon and absent spiritual or mental structures, such as principles of cognition, significations, aesthetics. Music that is scarcely *in praesentia* may contain sophisticated references *in absentia*.⁷¹

This dialectic between *praesentia* and *absentia* becomes explicit when, as the case in *Trysting Fields*, the minimal text is the reduction of a pre-existing text: in this case, there is an explicit dialogue between the minimal text and a normative syntax 'referenced *in absentia*'.⁷² Through the procedures of fig.4, Nyman creates an intermittence of *praesentia* and *absentia* of the hypotext, whose absence can be imagined to be felt like gaps in an implicit gestalt.⁷³ Whether we assume *Trysting Fields* to be heard specifically against Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* or not, these gaps can be felt because the sampled appoggiaturas imply, in their accented dissonance, the *absence* of their melodic and harmonic preparation.⁷⁴ In the same way, the first appoggiatura refers to a beginning *in*

absentia.



Fig.7: Nyman, *Trysting Fields*, bb.1-15, piano reduction. Mozart's text referenced in *absentia*. ■

Once the process sets up this intermittence, any alteration to it gains in significance. This happens in bb.16-18(N) and 22-25(N) where, departing from the pre-determined process, and yet regulated by additive technique, *Trysting Fields* reveals, for a moment, the 'connective tissue' between two appoggiaturas. This passage brings to presence new rhythmic and melodic shapes which enrich the sparse gestural vocabulary of *Trysting Field's* musical subject. 55



Fig.8(a): Nyman, *Trysting Fields*, bb.16-19, piano reduction. Hypothetical continuation according to the formalised procedures of Fig.4. **Fig.8(b):** Nyman, *Trysting Fields* bb.16-19, piano reduction. Additive process revealing the 'connective tissue' between Mozart's accented appoggiaturas. ■

At the same time, equally important to the fact that the hypertext is 'incomplete' in relation to the original's gestalt, is the fact that this derived text is not fragmented or overtly 'agrammatical', still displaying a high degree of linear contiguity and an overall direction. Indeed, notwithstanding the interplay of *praesentia* and *absentia*, the appoggiaturas' juxtaposition generates a melodic profile and harmonic progression characterised by a high degree of homogeneity. This is due to the rationale of Nyman's processing, which has often the effect of smoothing, rather than disrupting, the linear profile of the original text, generating new points of conjoint motion both in melody and bass line by bringing next to each other corresponding terms of Mozart's sequences. 56

a)

b)

Fig.9: Nyman's processing creating linear contiguity in *Trysting fields* by juxtaposing corresponding terms of Mozart's sequences. Rectangular boxes indicate the sampled appoggiaturas extrapolated in *Trysting Fields*, their corresponding bar numbers are indicated above the score. **Fig.9a:** K364,ii, bb.8-12; **Fig.9b:** K364,ii, bb.65-71.

In relation to the form of Mozart's movement, the sampled appoggiaturas stand as the sporadic pillars of a disappeared structure, lost with the loss of the solo-tutti alternation. Still, these appoggiaturas preserve a sense of the movement's formal directionality. Fig.10 shows how Nyman, overwriting *Trysting Fields*' ending on the *Andante*'s preparation of the strong cadential return to C minor of b.91(M), capitalises on the gestural and harmonic intensification of Mozart's text in order to impart form and directionality to bb.73-99(N), where *Trysting Fields*' process breaks off.



Fig.10: *cadential intensification of Trysting Fields bb.73-99 derived from the cadential intensification of Mozart's Andante (K364, ii) in bars 79-91. Bar numbers of Trysting Fields are indicated above the score).*

This gestural-harmonic intensification and formal directionality is created by the combination of the predetermined processing (Fig.4) and of Nyman's intervention. From a gestural point of view, Nyman makes most of the return, in Mozart's score, of the high-pitched appoggiatura of b.26(M) in b.74(M), which he extends sequentially in preparation of the next sampled appoggiatura (b.78(M), bb.88-90(N)). In Trysting Fields, this appoggiatura has a strong formal role, functioning as a recapitulation of the movement's opening three bars. The return of the opening gesture, this time grounded on C minor's dominant root, prepares the piece's emphatic close. The emphasis of this close is the result of three factors: Nyman's avoidance of the appoggiatura marking the c-minor cadence in b.84(M), which would have interrupted the process of intensification; the quality of the appoggiaturas in bb.86-88(M) both for their angular, diminished nature, and for the way they imply a rhythmic compression of the sample from three to two quavers; the absence of harmonic closure at the end. In short, Nyman's appropriation of the grammar and syntax of Mozart's Andante displays the following aspects:

- The syntactical estrangement of Mozart's appoggiatura.
- The generation of an 'intermittent' syntax created by the reference in *absentia* of the appoggiaturas' harmonic and melodic preparation.
- A tendency towards bringing to *presence* what is referred to in *absence*, 'filling the gaps' in the hypertext.
- An overall harmonic/melodic process that, despite the abovementioned degree of deconstruction, increases the original's linear contiguity and preserves a sense of structural directionality.

On the one hand, the deconstructive aspects of this appropriation seem to indicate that the piece is not concerned with a direct restoration of Mozart's expressive vocabulary, but with the use of such vocabulary to produce a new expressivity, an expressivity which is rooted precisely in the impossibility to

retrieve the original's syntax in full. Accordingly, it is *because* of being sampled and extrapolated from its original context, and not *despite* it, that Mozart's appoggiaturas can still serve as an expressive gesture to Nyman, since it is through the evocation of the memory and decay of their larger contextual meaning that Nyman's appoggiaturas mean. In this sense, the hypertext presents an 'expressivity of the second degree': an expressive poignancy generated by commenting on the hypotext's poignancy.

On the other hand, the denunciation of such expressive impossibility is not matched by a critical approach to the paraphernalia of tonality as a whole. Because of the way Mozart's text is processed, *Trysting Fields*' continuity and directionality is still of a traditional kind, as are Nyman's interventions in the process, which move along lines of a conventional rhetoric. This means that, while the specific already-written materials are criticised as irretrievable, a generic tonal apparatus seems at the same time affirmed as a viable expressive force. 59

In the end there remains the impression that Nyman's simultaneous estrangement of Mozart's appoggiatura and flirtation with the rhetorical and functional paraphernalia of tonality blurs the line between using tonality to critically express its felt irretrievability and using tonality as a restorative solution to the expressive challenges posed by the absence of a contemporary common practice. 60

'Mozart and Beyond': I Am an Unusual Thing (1991)

So: all the music we have heard so far by my client Michael Nyman has been based exclusively on specific Mozart models. According to the instructions of my learned colleague Joseph Haydn what Mr. Nyman has done was merely project these models two hundred years into the future.
Beethoven's marble bust.⁷⁵

The line of defence chosen by Nyman's lawyer in *Letters, Riddles and Writs* seems suicidal. Beethoven's bust calls as witness for the defence 'the eminent nineteenth-century Swiss composer and musicologist Hans Georg Nägeli' whom, in an ironically appropriate chain of paraphrasing authorities, quotes Czerny quoting Haydn's famous recommendation that one 'must compose according to chosen models, taking the same key, time, phrase structure, number of bars and even modulations, following them strictly'. Beethoven's conclusion about Nyman's use of Mozart's 'specific models' can be fearfully anticipated. 'So' he says 'what Mr. Nyman has done was merely project these models two hundred years into the future.' 61

After this claim we would reasonably expect Haydn's marble bust to turn the defence's line to his own advantage and deliver a lethal harangue in which Nyman's practice could now be presented not just as guilty of plagiarism of Mozart, but also of arrogantly and knowingly professing a false continuity 62

between eighteenth-century common practice and the tonal trends of the twentieth-century in the face of the immense historical and cultural significance of modernism and the collapse of the tonal common practice. Instead, Mozart decides to start singing Nyman's *I Am an Unusual Thing*, and the trial is suspended.

Nyman's song, for contralto and piano, is based on material from the first 63 movement of Mozart's quartet K428 in Eb major, and from the *Andante Cantabile* of the quartet in C major K465. At the outset, *I Am an Unusual Thing* departs from the earlier palimpsests in that it refers to two distinct hypotexts and combines them with biographical material, taking as the song's text a riddle from a set that Mozart 'wrote and distributed in Vienna during the 1787 Carnival [...and joining] such riddle with a remark Mozart made about his professional prospects shortly before his death'.⁷⁶

Nyman's choice and processing of these materials reveals significant 64 departures from the motivations and modalities of his appropriation of Mozart in *In Re Don Giovanni* and *Trysting Fields*. In this final section I will discuss these divergences in relation to Nyman's progressive move away from the structural and expressive restrictions of both minimalism and explicit intertextuality.

Changes in Nyman's compositional agenda are already noticeable in his choice 65 of Mozart's texts. As the New Grove succinctly puts it, in the early 1990s Nyman's music saw 'a move towards a more intimate expressivity characterised by sustained and resonant textures, ...a broader approach to melodic writing...[and] subtle shifts of mood and emphasis'.⁷⁷ The chosen fragments from Mozart's Haydn Quartets display a harmonic dynamism and chromatic richness consistent with this stylistic change.

Bars 75-100 from the first movement of K428 provide the A section of Nyman's 66 song. The choice of the freely constructed, quickly modulating, minor-mode development section of K428 shows a drastic inversion with respect to the tonic-establishing, non modulating sequence opening Leporello's major-mode aria, and a significant increase in 'dynamic contrast'⁷⁸ compared to the 'archaic', 'grave atmosphere'⁷⁹ associated to the slow movement chosen for *Trysting Fields*.

The dynamism of Mozart's developmental passage is characterised by 67 harmonic shifts unmediated by pivoting chords. The direct confrontation of minor and major modes on the same triad (due to the triad changing function from tonic minor to dominant major) and the juxtaposition of dominant sevenths of major and relative minor, generate the chromatic oppositions characterising the passage (Fig.11a). In the piano introduction of *I Am an Unusual Thing*, Nyman extends this chromatic opposition one more step, and leads the progression back to C major, making Mozart's sequence cyclical (Fig.11b).

a)

C- I VII# I F- V⁷ I V² G- V⁷ I

(B^b+ V V²)

b)

C- I VII# I F- V⁷ I V² G- V⁷ I III V⁴³ I VI

Fig.11: Nyman, *I Am an Unusual Thing*, chromatic quality of Section A.

Fig.11(a): Mozart, K428, *i*, bb.75-92 (each bar in the example corresponds to two bars in Mozart's text), chordal reduction

Fig.11(b): Nyman, *I Am an Unusual Thing*, bb.9-10, chordal reduction.

Kept within a sequential frame that is consistent with Nyman's interest in highly patterned tonal progression, this modulatory structure 'allows into' Nyman's text a chromatic range alien to the plain diatonicism of *In Re Don Giovanni* and wider than that of *Trysting Fields*.

This move situates the diachronic succession of Nyman's appropriations of Mozart in the wider context of the development of minimalism towards an increasing flirtation and eventual recuperation of aspects of tonality which it was originally set to criticise. Read in succession, these palimpsests can be taken as exemplary of the gradual shift of minimalism, in the 1980s, from a provocative embracement of emphatic diatonicism and consonance devoid of its chromatic-dissonant polar opposite, to the eventual re-establishment of the diatonic-chromatic and consonant-dissonant dialectic and the recuperation of that very idea of dramatic tension against which the minimalists had originally justified their embracement of diatonicism and consonance.⁸⁰

A third chromatic detail of Mozart's text on which Nyman focuses is the violin's descending line characterising Mozart's transition to the movement's recapitulation, in E flat major. This chromatic transition, quickly descending through G minor and F major in order to return to Eb major, is turned by Nyman into the song's climatic refrain.



Fig.12: Nyman, transformation of Mozart's transitional material in *I Am an Unusual Thing's* climatic refrain; Fig.12a: Mozart, K428, i, bb.95-101; Fig.12b: Nyman, *I Am an Unusual Thing*, bb. 32-36.

To this line, twice repeated, Nyman juxtaposes material from the *Andante Cantabile* of K465, which provides *I Am an Unusual Thing's* contrasting B section. As in the case in Nyman's selection of material from K428, it is to the dynamism of Mozart's transitional and developmental passages that Nyman's attention is now directed. Specifically, the song's B section is based on the juxtaposition of bb.13-19 and bb.57-67 (M), which in Mozart's 'slow-movement sonata-form' respectively constitute the transition from the tonic to the dominant areas, and its elaborate reprise. The transition and its reprise are joined via the modification of the V^7 of B^b major in b.57 (M) with a C minor tonic in first inversion (b.19 and b.57 (M) corresponding to bb.47-8 (N)).

As already noted on a local scale in the case of *Trysting Fields*, Nyman's operations tend to bring next to each other gestures and phrases which in Mozart's text occupy corresponding positions in phrases or formal sections. In this way what in Mozart's texts produced continuity, in Nyman's text becomes the source of contiguity. This was the case for the appoggiaturas of K364, and is here the case with the *échappée* motif of K465, whose insistence is emphasised by Nyman's 'cut and paste' of the two transitional areas. 70

Together with a sustained interest in reiteration and patterned progressions, the material forming this B section manifests Nyman's interest in an expanded harmonic palette and chromatic nuances. Mozart's passage, in the space of bb.58-67 shifts the *échappée* motif in the bass in seven different chromatic positions, the last of which supporting a German sixth whose root is used enharmonically by Nyman to lead back to the song's refrain (b.67 (M), b.57 (N)). 71

The increased interest in expressive freedom behind Nyman's choice of these materials is matched by a shift in the relative weight of process and intuition in Nyman's rewritings: from the systematic processing and complete adherence to 72

the text of '*Madamina*', to the substantially predetermined process of reduction applied to the slow movement of K364, to the non-systematic combination and superimposition of texts in *I Am an Unusual Thing*.

Nyman's 'free' interventions on Mozart's text also betray a changed approach to Mozart's syntactic continuity in respect to the earlier palimpsests. In contrast with *In Re Don Giovanni* and *Trysting Fields*, where Mozart's syntax was respectively highlighted in its metric idiosyncrasies and discontinued in the intermittence of *praesentia* and *absentia*, *I Am an Unusual Thing* increases the regularity of the chosen Mozartian fragment by neutralising the textural contrast and in particular by adding further layers of continuity through the superimposition of text and melody. 73

Indeed the different fate of the melody in these three palimpsests is indicative of the extent of Nyman's aesthetic shift. On the one hand there is the total literalism of *In Re Don Giovanni*, where Leporello's declamatory line was denied voice and words and reinterpreted as 'pure design', and there is the melody of *Trysting Fields*, reduced to incomplete harmonic archetypes. On the other hand there is the vocal line of *I Am an Unusual Thing*, superimposed on Mozart's harmonic progression, and combined with a text which is invested with metaphorical meaning. 74

I am an unusual thing. I have no soul and no body. One cannot see me but can hear me. I do not exist for me alone. Only a human being can give me life as often as he wishes. And my life is only of short duration, for I die almost at the moment I am born. And so, according to man's caprice, I may live and die untold times a day. To those who give me life I do nothing, but those on whose account I am born, I leave with painful sensations. For the short duration of my life; Of my life till I depart.

I am appointed to a situation which will afford the leisure to write music just to please myself and I feel capable of doing something worthy of the fame I've acquired. But instead I must die.

These two texts are linked to the music in a quasi-descriptive way. For a start, there is the generic association of the riddle's gloomy and uncanny tone to the music's minor-mode and chromatic juxtapositions. There are specific references based on traditional musical signifiers of death, as the chromatic descending line of the song's refrain, which is linked to the riddle's two explicit references to death (bb.32-39 (N); bb.58-60 (N)), and the tritone leap concluding the piece, in coincidence with the distressing conclusion of Mozart's letter (bb.80-82 (N)). There is the coincidence between the riddle's melody and the piano accompaniment at the moment when the 'unusual thing' describes itself as something that 'cannot be seen but can be heard' (fig.13). In brief, in what is an ironical inversion of the musical subject of *Trysting Fields*, which I have characterised as 'unable to say what Mozart could say', the explicit, dramatised subject of *I Am an Unusual Thing* is literally saying *more* than Mozart did ever say, drawing explicit links between biographical and creative materials.



Fig 13: Nyman, *I Am an Unusual Thing*, bb. 19-21. Metaphorical coincidence between Mozart as the riddle's narrator and Mozart the composer.

Given this 'confusion' of biographical and musical materials, in *I Am an Unusual Thing* the sense in which Nyman's recomposition is 'constructing' Mozart gains a literal dimension. The link between Nyman's Mozart and a musicological image of Mozart in this case can be traced beyond the level of generic tropes: Nyman's use of Mozart's carnival riddle betrays an uncanny affiliation with Maynard Solomon's psychoanalytical interpretation of 'Mozart's Zoroastran Riddles':⁸¹

In the third riddle, an uncanny sense of dissociation overcomes the narrator: 'I have no soul and no body. One cannot see me but can hear me' (we may now acknowledge the musical implications of this phrase: incorporeal, the narrator/composer exists only in the sounds which he produces.) His very being is in question: 'I do not exist for myself.' He owes his life to another: 'Only a human being can give me life, as often as he wishes'; he has a foretaste of doom: 'my life is only of short duration' and depends wholly upon 'the caprice of men.' He is overcome with guilt: 'to those who give me life I do nothing – but those on whose account I am born I leave with painful sensations for the short duration of my life...'⁸²

As William Stafford says, the picture of Mozart that emerges from Solomon's accounts is essentially a modern, psychoanalytic version of the 'Dionysian Mozart', an image which, prefigured in the emphasis that contemporaries of Mozart placed on 'the characteristic' side of his music, flourished during the nineteenth-century as a challenge to the prevailing 'sanitised' image of Mozart as a classicist.⁸³ Here Solomon essentially uses the riddle as an 'imperfect' creative product that can provide a window into Mozart's psychic conflicts, conflicts which according to the Dionysian trope described by Stafford, 'gave depth to his creative life but were ultimately destructive'.⁸⁴

The 'Dionysian Mozart' singing *I Am an Unusual Thing* seems the product of a musical dramatisation of Solomon's hermeneutical approach. Beside curious parallelisms that can be noted between Nyman's score and Solomon's interpretation (primarily the idea of the riddle's 'musical implications' and its 'foretaste of doom'⁸⁵) what concerns us about Nyman's dramatisation of this psycho-biographical picture is that it is supported by musical and aesthetic

choices which mark a significant change in the role played by Mozart in Nyman's agenda.

Whereas the Mozart of *In Re Don Giovanni* and *Trysting Fields* was constructed 77
around tropes such as effortlessness, universality, and simplicity, valued by
Nyman for their collusion with the aesthetic agenda of the experimental tradition,
I Am an Unusual Thing displaces that image with a rather different constellation
of aesthetic markers. The Mozart constructed here through the superimposition
of the dark and mysterious tone of the riddle and the developmental passages
of K428 and K465 is significantly distant from that of *In Re Don Giovanni* and
Trysting Fields. Whereas the language of Mozart was presented through *In Re*
Don Giovanni as constructivist and literal, and through *Trysting Field* as direct
and poignant, the language of this Mozart is meant to be cryptic, the quality of
his music ephemeral, intimate and referential.

This construction of Mozart both rests on and assists the significant changes 78
taking place in Nyman's compositional agenda: 'a Dionysian rather than
Apollonian Mozart, passionate and driven rather than rational and balanced'⁸⁶
well serves Nyman's wish to exceed the structural and expressive limitations of
minimalism and explicit intertextuality.

These limitations, in *In Re Don Giovanni* and *Trysting Fields*, kept Mozart in 79
control of Nyman's piece. By the time of this last palimpsest, Mozart's control
has significantly decreased: whereas in *In Re Don Giovanni* and in *Trysting*
Fields the unfolding of Mozart's text largely determined the relationships of the
hypertext, allowing Nyman to assume a 'distanced', 'passive', position, in *I Am*
an Unusual Thing Nyman asserts his authorship on the piece through 'positive'
interventions: altering its tempo, tampering with its texture, radically
transforming its instrumentation and genre, and, most importantly, exceeding
the original text's structural and expressive boundaries by assigning new formal
roles to Mozart's passages and by superimposing a melody which expands the
stylistic borders of Mozart's language. The 'negative' expression of *Trysting*
Fields, articulated by 'deleting' the original text, creating gaps in its original
syntax, is radically inverted in a 'positive' expression.

Although the piece is *literally* about Mozart, the 'Dionysian Mozart' that Nyman 80
constructs on stage obscures Mozart's presence in the music. In *I Am an*
Unusual Thing, Mozart, rather than a creative resource providing a gestalt of
relationships and conventions for their potential generation of new meaning, has
become a tonal basis on which Nyman can assert the new explicitly expressive
tone characterising his stylistic turn. Indeed, this stylistic turn essentially
coincides with Nyman's cessation of explicit references to pre-existing texts.

When Mozart's presence is obscured and eventually disappears from the 81
equation, with it disappear also the structural and expressive constraints posed
by the pre-existing text, spoiling Nyman's practice of those self-imposed
restrictions and self-reflexiveness which crucially distinguished the earlier
palimpsests from a purely affirmative restoration of tonality. At the same time,
the restorative attitude that surfaces when the specificity of Mozart's materials
decreases has its roots precisely in the affirmative dangers of Nyman's earlier

palimpsests, specifically to the extent that through the universalising and simplification of Mozart's stylistic codes and aesthetic markers they display a tendency to return to historical materials as a restorative solution to the cultural and expressive segregation of contemporary art music.

As a result, the affirmative dangers of Nyman's appropriations do not lie in the overt incorporation of Mozart's music. Quite the opposite, it is precisely the literal reliance on Mozart's materials that enables a reuse of the individual stylistic and aesthetic connotations of these materials for the construction of new meaning. It is when this plagiaristic explicitness is lost that the provocative relationship with Mozart's materials gives way to a neutralisation of their identity, and thus to a complicitous return to a universalised tonality deprived of technical and aesthetic specificity. 82

Notes

¹ Character in Michael Nyman, 'Letters, Riddles and Writs' in *Not Mozart*, dir. Peter Greenaway and Jeremy Nelson (Video, Academy Video CAV 026, 1991).

² Michael Nyman, Liner notes to 'Letters, Riddles and Writs'.

³ Arnold Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 344.

⁴ Exceptions to the disregard of Nyman's practice are mostly found outside Anglo-American musicology, where the critical reception to his work has been wider, although generally limited to Nyman's film music, particularly that written during his long collaboration (1976-1991) with British film director Peter Greenaway. In particular see: Guido Heldt, "'... breaking the sequence down beat by beat": Michael Nymans Musik zu den Filmen von Peter Greenaway', in *Film- und Fernsehwissenschaftliches Kolloquium, Berlin 1989*, ed. by Hans J. Wulff, Norbert Grob and Karl Prümm (Münster: MAKs Publikationen, 1990), 177-188; Jurgen Vogt, 'Zur Rolle der Filmmusik im Postmodern Kino: Die Filme Peter Greenaways und ihre Musik von Michael Nyman', *Musikpädagogische Forschungsberichte 1993*, 165-88; Cristina Cano and Paolo Poti, *Michael Nyman, Ascoltare il Cinema* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2004).

⁵ Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 203. Schwarz, in the belief that Nyman 'has been wilfully marginalised by the classical-music establishment' (*Ibid.*, 194) dedicates to the British composer what is to date the longest critical commentary appearing in Anglo-American musicology (*Ibid.*, 194-204). It is thus most significant that even as well-disposed a critic as Schwarz would find Nyman's relationship to pre-existing material so mystifying to feel the need to justify it through arguments of commercial popularity and influence on even more controversial composers and to protect Nyman's practice by remembering that 'he had an entirely respectable musical education' at RAM and King's College, in London (*Ibid.*, 194).

⁶ Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*, 344. 'Commercial opportunism' and 'cannibalisation of seventeenth and eighteenth century repertoire' are not Whittall's personal judgements but his review of common accusations directed at Nyman's practice.

⁷ Mozart's *Adagio* from K364 has a special place in Nyman's output, providing inspiration for a vast number of compositions: before providing material for *Trysting Fields* and the whole soundtrack of *Drowning By Numbers* (1988), Mozart's slow movement had provided the material for *The Woman with Three of Everything* (1979), for the soundtrack of *The Falls* (1980) again by director Peter Greenaway, and for a setting of Tristram Shandy, *I'll Stake My Cremona to a Jew's Tramp* (1982).

⁸ Nyman, quoted in Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 197.

⁹ By calling Nyman's texts 'explicitly intertextual' (Cf. Laurent Jenny, 'The Strategy of Forms', In Todorov, T. (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 34-63.) I mean to distinguish between a notion of intertextuality as the theoretical condition of any artistic text, which is to say a poststructuralist notion concerned with the irreducible *difference* of semiotic signs (thus equally concerning Mozart's and Nyman's texts), and the notion of intertextuality as 'the actual presence of one text within another' (Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1-2), which reflects the nature of Nyman's 'palimpsests'. According to the latter, structuralist, formulation exemplified by the work of

Genette, we have an intentional and explicit relationship uniting a text B, (Genette's *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (*hypotext*). The notion of *Hypertext* thus comes close to the nature of Nyman's pieces, which exist as texts of 'the second degree', as Genette would say, 'a non-original rewriting of what has already been written' (Genette, *Palimpsests*, quoted in Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 108). Despite the differences between this structuralist 'explicit' notion of intertextuality and a post-structuralist intertextuality (for a thorough distinction see Manfred Pfister, 'How Postmodern is Intertextuality', in Plett, Heinrich F. (ed.), *Intertextuality* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 207-24), the two do not necessarily have to be seen as reciprocally exclusive. As suggested by Eco, explicit intertextuality can be seen as rediscovering and thematising a theoretical condition always implicit in our reading of texts (Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, tr. W. Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 20). Accordingly, what we gain by substituting traditional musical terms of quotation, parody, or paraphrase with the terminology of intertextual theories, is a theoretical framework in which the literal and deliberate use of pre-existing material, rather than being immediately dismissed as intellectual plagiarism, can be seen as one of many possible responses to the increasing awareness of the 'already-written', and thus related to other strategies of authorial control and expression.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson synthesises the dangers of referring in an unproblematic way to the notion of postmodernism: '[...] the concept is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory. [...] For good or ill, we cannot *not* use it. But [...] every time it is used, we are under the obligation to rehearse those inner contradictions and to stage those representational inconsistencies and dilemmas: we have to work all that through every time around.' (Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), xxii).

¹¹ Among others, Jameson most strongly argues for the anti-modernist origins of postmodernism: 'postmodernisms [...] emerge as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations [...] this means that there will be as many different forms of postmodernism as there were high modernisms in place, since the former are at least initially specific and local reactions *against* those models.' (Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Foster, Hal (ed.), *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 111-125: 111-112.)

¹² See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

¹³ Cf. Foster, *Postmodern Culture*, x.

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 201. Hutcheon sees this ambidexterity as a defining feature of postmodernism and strongly argues against suppressing the arising ambiguities: 'if you ignore half of the contradiction [...] it becomes quite easy to see the postmodern as either neo-conservatively nostalgic/reactionary or radically disruptive/revolutionary' (*ibid.*, xiii).

¹⁵ Nyman, liner notes to *Michael Nyman Live* (Virgin Venture, CDVE 924, 1994), 6, featuring *In Re Don Giovanni* as opening track.

¹⁶ Nyman, in Carlo Boccadoro, *Musica Coelestis. Conversazioni con Undici Grandi della Musica d'Oggi* (Torino: Einaudi Tascabili, 1999), 46, my translation.

¹⁷ In the 1970s, while working as an editor on the repertoire of eighteenth-century music, Nyman got intensively involved as a critic with the Anglo-American experimental tradition, developing an understanding of its ramifications which he presented in his book *Cage and Beyond: Experimental Music* (1974). The book, now a standard text, essentially maps out the experimental tradition to which Nyman eventually, self-consciously, allied himself. Indeed, in the preface to the 1999 edition of *Cage and Beyond*, Nyman would call himself a 'son of experimental music', and write: 'my own career has shifted since 1976 from critic to composer, the origins of whose music can be strictly located in many of the developments I describe here – Cage, Feldman, Fluxus, minimalism, and the British found-object tradition – but which celebrates, transgresses, exaggerates and even betrays many of the principles of experimental music while remaining deeply faithful to them.' (Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xvii).

¹⁸ Nyman, quoted in Schwartz, *Minimalists*, 197.

¹⁹ Jonathan Bernard, 'the Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music', *Perspectives of New Music* Vol. 31, No.1 (1993), 86-132: 122.

²⁰ Robert Schwarz involuntarily provides an example of the extent to which the stylistic codes between Mozart and rock are here 'confused' by mistakenly attributing the pulse of *In Re Don Giovanni* to Nyman's alterations: '*In Re Don Giovanni* takes a single chord progression from Mozart's opera and

breaks it up into a series of constantly reiterated pulsations, as if the raw energy of rock had slammed into well-behaved eighteenth-century classicism.' (Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 200).

²¹ Cf. Richard Middleton, 'The Rock Revolution', in Banfield, Stephen (ed.), *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 79-106: 81.

²² Hereafter, when not specified by the context, I will indicate with a bracketed 'M' or 'N' whether bar numbers refer to Mozart's hypotexts or Nyman's hypertexts.

²³ In regards to the *discursive*, ideological construction of categories of high and low music, see Richard Middleton 'The Problem of Popular Music', in Banfield (ed.), *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain: The Twentieth Century*, 27-38: 27-9.

²⁴ Of course Habermas uses this formula for exactly opposite reasons: eminent supporter of the continuation of the modernist project, he uses the paradox of 'dominant but dead' not as a critique of modernism but in order to reject the postmodern analysis of modernism as inconsistent.

²⁵ Middleton, 'The Problem of Popular Music', 37.

²⁶ Nyman, quoted in Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 197.

²⁷ Nyman, quoted in Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 196.

²⁸ An early formulation of Mozart as a twentieth-century universal, democratic icon is presented by Guido Adler: 'Mozart succeeded in reaching the hearts and minds of experts – those schooled in music – as well as the broader popular audience. He was, in a word, an artist who realised the democratic and egalitarian potentials of art.' Guido Adler, *Mozart. Festrede bei der Mozart-Feier für die Mittelschulen Wiens*, quoted in Leon Botstein, 'Aesthetics and Ideology in the Fin-de-Siècle Mozart Revival', *Current Musicology*, Vol. 51 (1991), 5-25: 10.

²⁹ Nyman, liner notes to *Michael Nyman Live*, 6.

³⁰ For the central role played by the myth of effortlessness in Mozart's twentieth-century iconography see Jan Smaczny, 'Mozart and the Twentieth Century', in Keefe, Simon B. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 185-199.

³¹ Christoph Wolff, 'The Challenge of Blank Paper: Mozart the Composer', In Morris, James (ed.), *On Mozart* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 113-129: 114)

³² The essay, the last (published) critical essay written by Nyman, was published in 1980 but written and delivered in 1977 on the occasion of the 'New Simplicity in Contemporary Music' conference at the Aspen Institute, Berlin, June 13-16.

³³ Michael Nyman, 'Against Intellectual Complexity in Music', *October* Vol. 13 (1980), 81-89: 81.

³⁴ Botstein, 'Aesthetics and Ideology', 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21. Botstein sees this postmodern popularisation as the triumph of the late-nineteenth-century link between the cultivation of Mozart and the aesthetics of cultural reaction: 'the fin-de-siècle rediscovery of Mozart represented the use of the past by the audience not on behalf of the present but against it...The fin de siècle Mozart revival marked the beginning of a twentieth-century process of domination of the concert repertoire by the past to the exclusion of contemporary music.' (*ibid.*, 15).

³⁷ Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 149.

³⁸ Wye Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 241.

³⁹ John Cage, *Silence*, quoted in Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music* (London: Kahn and Averill, 1983), 108.

⁴⁰ For the link between the early days of minimalism and the practical research of psychoacoustic phenomena in conditions of intensive repetition and unbroken textural continuity see Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 144-157.

⁴¹ Glass, *Music By Philip Glass*, quoted in Bernard, 'the Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music', 124.

⁴² By saying that *In Re Don Giovanni* turns Mozart's musical structure into 'a matter of perception', I do not want to imply that perception *actually* becomes the bottom line of our aesthetic appreciation of the piece, but just that *In Re Don Giovanni* plays with the idea of this shift.

⁴³ The role played by implicit gestalts in the perception of minimalist sculpture is clearly exposed by Maurice Berger's description of Robert Morris' *Untitled* (1965): '[in] *Untitled*, 1965, an arrangement of four identical cubic forms, two sides of each cube were sloped in order to question the strength of the known shape – the gestalt – while at the same time making that strength even more visible by affirming the impulse to see the shape as a cube. ...the altered gestalt of *Untitled* prevents the spectator from immediately apprehending the individual shapes in the arrangement; one has to move around the piece *in time* to fully understand its nuances' (Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris*,

Minimalism and the 1960s, quoted in Bernard, 'the Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music', 109).

⁴⁴ Susan McClary makes an analogous point. In the coda of her interpretation of Mozart's K453, she argues in favour of the 'postmodernists' use of canonised materials (a term she uses to refer to Philip Glass's and John Adams's practices), on the basis that their 'recycling strategies' infuse 'classical gestures' with 'new, socially encoded meaning' (Susan McClary, 'A Musical Dialectic from the Enlightenment: Mozart's *Piano Concerto in G major*, K. 453, Movement 2', *Cultural Critique* Vol. 4 (1986), 129-169, 169). My considerations depart from McClary's position in that I regard the critical potentials of *In Re Don Giovanni* as depending on its overt reliance on a specific hypotext rather than on the generalised return to tonality to which McClary refers.

⁴⁵ Michael Nyman, liner notes to *Michael Nyman: Drowning by Numbers* (CD, Virgin Venture, CDVE 23, 1988).

⁴⁶ Discussing *Trysting Fields* as a piece of 'absolute music' is compatible with Nyman's consideration that 'non c'è una reale separazione estetica e soprattutto qualitative tra quello che scrivo per il cinema e le musiche pensate per i concerti' [there is no aesthetic or qualitative distinction between my film and concert music] (Nyman in Boccadoro, *Musica Coelestis*, 46-7, my translation), a statement matched by his frequent adaptation of soundtracks to concert pieces and vice versa. *Trysting Fields*, originally written for Greenaway's *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) was turned into a single strings movement in 1992 and then figured in 1997 as first movement of a suite for chamber orchestra based on the whole of *Drowning by Numbers* soundtrack. It is on the version first recorded in 1988 that my considerations will be based.

⁴⁷ Nyman, commentary notes to *Drowning by Numbers* (Chester Music, CH 61649, 2001).

⁴⁸ Nyman, 'Against Intellectual Complexity in Music', 88.

⁴⁹ Michael Nyman, 'Hearing/Seeing', *Studio International* Vol 192 (1976), 223-43: 223. Nyman is here quoting Michael Parson, 'The Contemporary Pianist - interview with John Tilbury'.

⁵⁰ Steve Reich, 'Music as a Gradual Process' Reprinted in Cox. C. and D. Warner *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 304-6.

⁵¹ Nyman, 'Against Intellectual Complexity in Music', 87

⁵² Morton Feldman, 'The Anxiety of Art', in Delio, T. (ed.), *The Music Of Morton Feldman* (New York: Excelsior Music Publishing Company, 1996), 205-12: 210.

⁵³ See Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Music Semiotics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 280-3.

⁵⁴ Tony Craig Martin articulates the declared principles and materials of minimalism in art: 'Minimalism seeks the meaning of art in the immediate and personal experience of the viewer in the presence of a specific work. There is no reference to another previous experience (no representation), no implication of a higher level of experience (no metaphysics) no promise of a deeper intellectual experience (no metaphor). Instead minimalism presents the viewer with objects of charged neutrality; objects usually rectilinear, employing one or two materials, one or two colors, repeated identical units, factory-made or store-bought; objects that are without any hierarchy of interest, that directly engage and interact with the particular space they occupy: objects that reveal everything about themselves, but little about the artist; objects whose subject is the viewer.' (In Claudia Swan, *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism And the Baroque* (New York: Eos Music, 1997), 33). Notwithstanding fundamental material and perceptual differences between artistic media, the relationship of minimalism in music to minimalism in the plastic arts has always been strong both from a theoretical point of view (see Bernard, 'The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music', 86-7) and from the point of view of circumstantial evidence. Indeed, as for other trends within the experimental tradition, minimalism enjoyed a strong link with fine art departments in America and England, which, with their interest in happenings, pop and performance, provided the natural home for its marked anti-academic slant (see Eno in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*: xi; and Michael Nyman, 'Music in Fine Art Departments', *Studio International* Vol. 191, No.981 (1976), 282-419: 282).

⁵⁵ The notion of 'archetypes' is borrowed from Meyer's and Gjerdingen's work on musical schemata. In Meyer's words, archetypes are 'cases in which ...kinds of patterning seem, if not universal, at least archetypal within one of the major cultural traditions' (Leonard Meyer, *Explaining Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 180).

⁵⁶ Cf. Bernard 1993: 'The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music', 97.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵⁸ The 'changing-note archetype' 1-7...2-1, characterised by a bipartite AA' form, and a I-V-V-I harmonic progression is as Gjerdingen 'so basic to Western music as to be almost stylistically neutral.'

(Robert Gjerdingen, *A Classic Turn of Phrase* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 63).

⁵⁹ James Pierce, 'Design and Expression in Minimal Art', *Art International* (May 1968), 25-27: 27.

⁶⁰ The British found-object tradition was concerned with a relatively calculated 're-articulation of the classics' (Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 162) achieved by subjecting 'found' materials to a variety of processing systems, usually determined during the performance. For details of these strategies of 'dislocation', as Nyman calls them, see *Ibid.*, 157-171.

⁶¹ Nyman, 'Hearing/Seeing', 237. Nyman is here quoting Michael Parson without providing details of his reference.

⁶² Tarasti, *A Theory of Music Semiotics*, 279.

⁶³ In this regard see Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 189-192.

⁶⁴ Eco, *Postscript to In the Name of the Rose*, 67.

⁶⁵ Alastair Williams, 'Adorno and the Semantics of Modernism', *Perspectives of New Music* Vol. 37, No.2 (1999), 29-52: 40. For a convincing account of the illusory nature of intrinsic gestural meaning see also Brian Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1995), 21-28.

⁶⁶ Cfr. John Daverio, 'Mozart in the Nineteenth Century', in Keefe, Simon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 171-184: 178-9.

⁶⁷ Clara Schumann, unpublished letter to Joseph Joachim, quoted in Botstein, 'Aesthetics and Ideology', 14.

⁶⁸ In his application of semiotics to Minimalism, Tarasti considers the estranging role of repetition by drawing on the insights of the Russian Formalists. Although not dealing with a case of explicit intertextual references, it is on a generic idea of intertextuality that Tarasti bases his considerations, remarking that the 'estrangement' caused by repetition can be understood only if 'we conceive of familiar melodic figures, chosen from an intonational store and based on earlier styles, as the background for a musical semantics. Such figures', he concludes, 'are "made strange" by a surprising repetition not characteristic of the style from which the repeated element has been taken' (Tarasti, *A Theory of Music Semiotics*, 282). He then quotes Tynianov's *Treatise on Versification*, pointing out that the *quality* of this estrangement will depend, among various aspects, on the quality of the repeated gesture, in this case marked by the dissonance/consonance motion, and its formal, syntactic role, as a sign of closure.

⁶⁹ I am here referring to the notion of 'musical subject' intended as the potential of a musical text to incarnate an abstract 'actorial agency' (Tarasti, *A Theory of Music Semiotics*, 106) through syntax, gestures and timbre. The following considerations are also indebted to Naomi Cumming's and Rebecca Leydon's accounts of how subjectivities might be constructed in the circumstances of minimalism. See Naomi Cumming, 'The Horrors of Identification: Reich's *Different Trains*', *Perspectives of New Music* Vol. 35 No. 1 (1997), 129-152 and Rebecca Leydon, 'Towards a Typology of Minimalist Tropes', *Music Theory Online*, Vol. 8, No.4, 2002, <http://www.societymusictheory.org> (9 April 2005).

⁷⁰ In this regard, it is significant to see how Nyman himself implicitly refers to the expressive potentials of the most impersonal of the musical processes: Cage's chance procedures. In his introduction to Mertens's study of Minimal Music, he remarks that Adorno's analysis (on which Mertens draws with the aim of charting minimalism as the logical continuation of Schoenberg's breakdown in the dialectical European tradition) 'would be far more accurate if for "Schoenberg" one read "Cage"'. (Nyman's preface to Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music* (London: Kahn and Averill, 1983), 8). In other words, Nyman sees Cage's objectivity as the ultimate subjective statement.

⁷¹ Tarasti, *A Theory of Music Semiotics*, 277.

⁷² Tarasti's notion of a dialectic between *absentia* and *praesentia* productively overlaps with Rebecca Leydon's discussion of 'minimalist tropes'. Considering, among other examples from high and popular repertoire, Nyman's recomposition of Schumann's songs in *The Man Who Mistook Her Wife for a Hat*, Leydon articulates the notion of the pre-existing text's 'normative syntax' remaining 'present in the music like a kind of phantom limb' (Leydon, 'Towards a Typology of Minimalist Tropes')

⁷³ My use of the term *gestalt* does not imply a notion of absolute (unmediated) forms but that of historically constructed shapes and patterns that become internalised.

⁷⁴ The degree to which the dialogue between hypotext and hypertext can be claimed to be explicit or even necessary to understand the hypertext is a point of argument with a long history in the structuralist theorisation of intertextuality (see in particular Allan, *Intertextuality*: 111-113; Jenny, 'The Strategy of Forms': 38-44; Genette, *Palimpsests*, 397). In this case I am suggesting that gaps in Nyman's hypertext will be felt with different degrees of specificity according to whether we hear

Trysting Fields 'against' Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* or against a generic normative syntax. As far as the composition's original conception is concerned, *Trysting Fields* was composed in the knowledge that, in Greenaway's movie, it would have featured next to Mozart's slow movement.

⁷⁵ Character in Michael Nyman, 'Letters, Riddles and Writs'.

⁷⁶ Michael Nyman, 'Michael Nyman Songbook', liner notes to *Ute Lemper Sings Kurt Weill*. (DVD, Decca Music Group Limited, 074165-9 DH, 1992), 18.

⁷⁷ Pwyll Ap Siôn, 'Nyman, Michael', *Grove Music Online*. <http://www.grovemusic.com> (12 April 2005). The increase of lyricism is most noticeable in the vocal repertoire, good examples of which are the songs derived from *Prospero's Books* (1990), and *Six Celan Songs* (1990) written, as *I Am an Unusual Thing*, for Ute Lemper.

⁷⁸ John Irving, *Mozart, The "Haydn" Quartets* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44-5.

⁷⁹ Neal Zaslaw, 'K. 364 *Sinfonia Concertante in E-flat major*', in Neal Zaslaw and William Cowdery (eds.), *The Compleat Mozart: a Guide to the Musical Works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (New York: Norton, 1990), 147.

⁸⁰ Many commentators describe the embracement of tonal dissonance as the end of minimalism proper. Jonathan Bernard provides the general outline of this aesthetic move for what concerns the context of American music by sketching two parallel narratives, one in which minimalism gradually and 'necessarily' turns into a kind of 'new tonality', and one which emphasises a break between the original minimalist vision and a postminimalist 'step backward to tonal-sounding chords that mimic functionality without ever coming close to matching the complexity of its operations in common-practice music' (Jonathan Bernard, 'Minimalism, Postminimalism, and the Resurgence of Tonality in Recent American Music', *American Music* Vol. 21, No1 (2003), 112-133: 130-1).

⁸¹ Nyman acknowledges Solomon's copyrighted translation of the riddle as the source for the song's lyrics (Nyman, 'Michael Nyman Songbook', 46).

⁸² Maynard Solomon, 'Mozart's Zoroastran Riddles', in Feder, Stuart (ed.), *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Music* (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1990), 401-421: 418.

⁸³ See Daverio, 'Mozart in the Nineteenth Century', 176 and William Stafford, 'The Evolution of Mozartian Biography', in Keefe, Simon B. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 200-211: 207.

⁸⁴ William Stafford, 'The Evolution of Mozartian Biography', 209.

⁸⁵ The whole essay *Letters Riddles and Writs* shows an abundance of parallelisms between Nyman's visual and musical choices and Solomon's article. Visual parallelisms range from the conflation of the identities of Zoroaster and Leopold Mozart to literal illustrations of a variety of psychoanalytic images that Solomon reads in Mozart's riddles, the most striking example being the reference to 'aggressive orality and implied dangerous sexuality' provided by Amadeus (Ute Lemper) literally entering the mouth of Leopold, perfect symbol of Solomon's *vagina dentata* in its combination of the imagery of 'genital mutilation' and of death (Solomon, 'Mozart's Zoroastran Riddles, 415-6).

⁸⁶ Stafford, 'The Evolution of Mozartian Biography', 207.

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