

Repetition, hell, and silence.

A quick Google search of 'cellists who loop' reveals one million hits - but it often feels to me that every cellist I come across these days (below a certain age) uses an off-the-shelf 'looper' - and sometimes worse - they sing along too. What is going on? Why is this? Do they think that their cello phrases are so great that we need to hear them over and over, are they compensating for a lack of engaging phrases so we need to hear them over and over, or are they just filling up the sonic space because it's so easy to do - over and over again. When this grade 1 in electronics stuff starts up, it makes me want to go to the street and commit a violent act.

I see where it fits into today's aesthetics - the ubiquitous and often vacuous droney-groney world of minimalism. The safe zone of unchallenged mediocrity - let's make all those taxing complications of the modern world vanish and settle down into the soft sanctum of belly button admiration.

My first acquaintance with minimalism occurred in a number of itinerant jobs I undertook in the years between leaving school, dropping out of university, and eventually figuring out what I was supposed to be doing with my life. They all entailed physical repetition. I give you one example.

As an employee of The Tri-ang Toy Factory, I may well have played a small part in its demise. My job was to make the dolls legs of the Sindy doll (a failed British brand in competition with the US Barbie doll). My work, after being fitted with face mask and gloves, consisted of the following: 1. shut gate and press button 2. Pick up the pair of legs that has just been jettisoned from machine and trim legs of excess plastic (minding not to burn your arms as fresh legs are stinging hot) 3. Throw legs into bin marked 'finished legs' just as the gate on the machine crashed open and a new set of molten plastic legs comes hurtling out. Any deformed legs 'must be' thrown into the reject bin. Repeat.

This was a non-union factory, so in order to take a five-minute 'smoko', you had to attract the attention of the foreman to take over your machine - not an easy task as the place was a clanging hell, and yelling for attention was as good as pissing in the wind. In the eight-hour shift, you were allowed two or three breaks. Every few weeks a man in a white coat would come and stand behind you with a stop watch and time your operational output. The reason for this, as I soon found out, was that certain employees knew how to slow their machines down - reduce noise, reduce repetition, reduce output. In our shift, there was also a bonafide crazy person who, armed with alacrity, sped his machine up - a genuine glazed eyes nut job. I couldn't tell you how many Sindy dolls legs I made, but they did disturb my dreams for some years. After several months, management took me off 'the legs' and put me onto making Zippy bats, which was an identical process. (The Zippy bat was a small plastic bat about the size of a table tennis bat to the centre of which was attached a long piece of elastic, and on the other end of which was attached a ball - the idea being that the harder you hit the ball, the harder would be the rebound, and very soon the child would miss ...and ball would hit child's face very hard. Much crying, blame, and gnashing of teeth. The new class of toy never really caught on.) There was relief when occasionally the electricity workers went on strike, and the Tri-ang factory, without warning, ground slowly to a halt - from mind-numbing noise to blissful silence and darkness in the space of fifteen seconds: a sequential expression of sonic full stop so perfectly executed. Music I have never heard since.

How to deal with minimalism. There may well be only two options. 1. Listen and go completely bonkers. 2. Pretend something unusual is taking place, a slight shift in meter or phrase length, a change in perceived pulse, etc. Our minds will fabricate change where there is little or nothing at all going on. Prisoners of conscience who have spent years in solitary confinement know that survival trick - the slightest detail made epic, magical transformation in the face of little evidence.

So please, cellists (and others who should know better), the next time you click on your looper - imagine you have been transported to hell to physically play that phrase for eternity - you must know the musician joke about hell?

All your favourite musicians are in the band, playing like there is no tomorrow (there isn't). Chorus after chorus, on and on it goes, chorus after chorus - sounds awesome, chorus after chorus. Minutes go bye, hours go bye, days go bye, weeks, months... Our new band member leans over to the next chair: 'When do we take the coda, man?' Reply: 'This is hell; we never take the coda'.

I've never been able to figure out from the various biblical and later contorted Christian texts if hell is an infinite burning inferno or the icy lake of Hieronymus Bosch death.

'Everyone gets electrocuted here' announced the concert stage manager in that very clipped tone of many Finnish people speaking English. I was performing the fence project with a dancer in her local town - a case of local girl done good (and had made it quite big on the international dance scene). Sure enough, as soon as I touched the first wire, a shock raced through my fingers and up my arm. 'It is the static' croaked my managerial expert on the properties of fence wire, 'because the atmosphere is so cold and dry. Electrocution is common experience in these parts'. So, in a performance lasting maybe thirty minutes, I was electrocuted every time I held or just touched the wire. Hundreds of times. I tried different parts of my arm to play the pitches and harmonics, but the result was the same - pain - not quite enough to stop the show, but enough repetitive spasms to ask - when will this minimalist torment end?

Apart from the odd display of drunken debauchery in Helsinki on a Friday night, Finland is the quietest place I've ever been. People don't talk. And if they do, communication exists in short, sharp utterances that can't wait to get to the end of the sentence - so silence can be resumed or enforced. In winter, that silence is held down with Nordic darkness, only interrupted by very short days.

In America in general, you can't stop people filling a space with noise and chat (especially when aided by technology); in Finland, you can't start them up. After the concert of electrocutions, and having a lot of gear to pack up, I arrived late for the after show reception. In a room, a wide circle of chairs had been arranged - maybe twenty persons were seated, and there was one chair left for me. Nobody was speaking, all were drinking. After some minutes, I thought I'd break the ice by asking my neighbour if she lived in this town. My opening gambit was met with a simple and declarative 'no', and that, with the obligatory full stop, was that. We sat and drank slowly. Somebody may have said something sometime later, but I don't remember it.

Overnight, a substantial amount of snow had fallen, and the person who was going to drive me away from this muted world to the airport was delayed. I spent some time walking around, accompanied only by the sound of my own footsteps crunching away. Every so often, I'd stop to listen - as close to windless silence as you could get, I thought. Nothing moved, nothing was heard. As we drove the several hours to the airport, I tried to engage the driver, with little result. We passed half a dozen frozen lakes, and in the middle of each one was someone sitting on a camping stool, drinking steaming coffee from a flask, and holding onto a fishing rod - the line of which was suspended through a very determined hole in the ice. There were never two or more gathered, but like a legal requirement, just one lone fisherman sat at each hole in the middle of the lake - in communion with the deep dark spirits beneath. On considering we had just come from a town where silence ruled and no one spoke, I asked my companion why they all wanted to be so alone. 'They are getting away from it all,' he said with a loud clipped air of impatience.