



Sengai, the renowned Japanese Zen-master made innumerable small paintings for his visitors. Consider his famous frog who says: “If one could get wisdom by contemplative sitting (*zazen*), I should be very wise indeed.” In a few simple brush strokes he questioned rituals and at the same time shows the holiness of a modest frog.

Perhaps the frog observes beams of light shining through whooshing tree leaves. Or perhaps he is listening to raindrops as Iannis Xenakis did, counting them, finding the mathematical rules they observe and making music out of them? Leaves, raindrops, grass, ants 1... everything can become music.

Less can be more. Arguments do not get more convincing by using more words or by shouting, and a woman does not get more beautiful by hanging lots of jewellery around her. Art forms that make their statements with a minimum of means carry a strong attraction, especially in music. And minimalism is far from a 20th-century invention. Here’s some of my favourite pieces of “minimalist” music.

In the Swiss Alps before nightfall, herdsmen sing a traditional prayer that probably dates from the Stone Age, to protect themselves and their cattle from illness and accidents. The magic works as far as the sounds can carry, that’s why they use a wooden milk funnel as an amplifying device.

Eight hundred years ago the Notre Dame school of Paris sounded minimalistic and radically modern. Listen to *Viderunt omnes* by Perotinus.

Or take this traditional music of the Csangos, a Catholic and Hungarian-speaking minority in Moldova and Romania. They may be poor and their instruments modest, but what expressive joy and conviction!

After these preliminaries comes the father of modern minimalism: Erik Satie. This famously eccentric composer did away with all the romantic pomposity of the 19th century and was an inspiration for Debussy, Ravel and John Cage amongst others. His *Gnossienne No 1*, composed around 1890, has become a new-age icon. Reinbert de Leeuw's playing is like contemplating the most hidden place in a garden, where the dust of time becomes a poem.

For me the most outstanding and radical composer of recent times – Galina Ustvolskaja – published only some two dozen works and destroyed the rest, an act which in itself is a form of minimalism. Isolated in the USSR, she wrote the most extreme music, limiting herself to the minimum of musical material and instrumentation, but achieving the maximum of spiritual strength. Her music comes “as is” out of nothing or from deep and primordial sources. She renounces any artificial elaboration. I often think only a woman could become this kind of medium. A man would immediately try to understand, analyse, systematise, “count the legs” of his creature. Ustvolskaja did nothing of the sort.

Here is her *Composition No 2 “Dies irae”* (1972/3): You see the wooden box that looks like a coffin. This is an instrument of her own invention. In Orthodox Christian countries the closing of the coffin over the body of a beloved relative is a ritual: the hard sound of hitting the coffin nails becomes the memory of a cruel farewell. Throughout her music she is saying – “I give all my soul, all my heart” – and you will do so as well, either as an interpreter or as a listener. Whether you like it or not, your brain will be in serious danger of exploding, and many other pieces of music will suddenly seem an unnecessary waste of time and paper. Of course the piece was banned in her home country after its first performance.

Morton Feldman's *For John Cage* uses very few notes, but, at over an hour, is pure and hypnotic. Try it with closed eyes.

John Adams's early work was seen as being representative of American minimalist music. When playing the second movement of his violin concerto *Chaconne: Body Through Which the Dream Flows* I feel as if I am looking at myself as a half-dead body in an intensive care unit, hearing the beeps of the respirator and seeing an infinite film of past memories.

A great composer who condenses his material to the extreme is the Hungarian György Kurtág, a severe teacher and pianist (in duo with his wife Martha). Some of his compositions last only for seconds. Essence of essence. Listen to his one-minute piece *Quarrel*. And do not miss the couple playing Bach.

How about even fewer notes? Ligeti spoke of his *Musica Ricercata II* for piano as “A knife in Stalin's heart”. Only three notes, it's threatening, unforgettable. Stanley Kubrick used it for the most scary and symbolic moments of his last movie *Eyes Wide Shut*.

The eccentric Italian Giacinto Scelsi loved to use just one note, for example in his *Quattro Pezzi su una Nota*, exploring the universe of timbre and colour.

John Cage, the American apostle of minimalism and Zen-philosopher of music, went even further with his a cheeky no-rules approach. Watch his close associate David Tudor play his revolutionary piece *4'33"*.

In a world suffocating from growth, overconsumption and pollution, minimalism is more than just an aesthetic principle, it may be the principle and hope of survival.