

Gibson stakes out a small but verdant territory more satisfying than the concrete landscapes of many more ambitious minimalist oeuvres.
— Kyle Gann

Composer, multi-instrumentalist, and graphic artist Jon Gibson (b. Los Angeles, 1940) had quite diverse interests from an early age. As a child he was preoccupied, even obsessed, with art, spending countless hours in his room painting and drawing. Throughout his education he took art classes, including drafting, and considered pursuing art as a career. His mother, herself a musician, essentially forced the young Gibson to play music as a way to get him out of his room. He started with the drums (too loud for mom) and later the saxophone. A passion for jazz ensued from his teenage years that eventually extended to other forms of improvisation. Studying classical music in college, he took a wide variety of music courses and was exposed to a much larger musical world, including avant-garde, experimental, and non-Western musics.

In addition to the improvisatory New Music Ensemble, a composers' and performers' group from the University of California, Davis, Gibson was a member of an improvising ensemble assembled by friend Steve Reich, who had not yet composed any works that might be considered minimalist. Musicologist Ross Cole writes: "In 1963, Reich made the decision that he would perform in all his future instrumental pieces, as it seemed that 'a healthy musical situation would only result when the functions of composer and performer were united.' The first step he took in this direction was to form a free improvisation ensemble. Members of the group—including Jon Gibson (clarinet), George Rey (violin), Gwen Watson (cello), Paul Breslin (bass), Tom Constanten (keyboard)—met 'at least once a week for about six months' to rehearse. Late in 1963, finding that the ensemble needed some kind of framework in order to grow beyond 'spur of the moment reactions,' Reich produced three *Pitch Charts* that functioned as loose harmonic guidelines for group improvisation: 'everybody played the same note—free timbre, free attack, free rhythm. Then everybody played two or three notes, basically building up to the full twelve notes.' Gibson suggests that these pieces were [probably] influenced by another group Reich had seen him perform with, the New Music Ensemble in which members [including Gibson, as well as Larry Austin, Stanley Lunetta, and Richard Swift], contributed their own [compositions and] 'pitch charts' alongside others by Karlheinz Stockhausen and Cornelius Cardew; he remembers Reich being 'rather taken by some of the pieces.' With their 'jazzlike chords,' Reich's guidelines were thus 'a rather typical kind of pitch chart piece going around in those days.'"¹

Like Cage, Gibson was conflicted about his career path and, like the elder composer, he felt he had to choose between music and art. As Gibson says, over the course of years, "music slowly took over" and he finally chose music as his profession. Ultimately, again like Cage, he made art an important part of his life and oeuvre. Gibson states, "Art remains to this day."

Gibson is probably best known as a founding member of the Philip Glass Ensemble. The member with the longest tenure in Glass's ensemble, he first performed with Glass in 1968. Gibson also holds the unique distinction of having performed with Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and La Monte Young (as a member of the Theatre of Eternal Music), in addition to Glass, the four composers widely regarded as the founding fathers of minimal music. Both Glass and Reich have dedicated works to Gibson, who gave them their premiere performances: *Gradus* (1968, originally titled *^ for Jon Gibson*) by Glass, and *Reed Phase* (1966) for soprano saxophone and tape by Reich, his first to employ phasing in a live-performance piece. Gibson also performed in

¹1. Ross Cole, "Fun, Yes, but Music?" Steve Reich and the San Francisco Bay Area's Cultural Nexus, 1962–65," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6, no. 3 (2012): 330–31.

the premieres of Riley's *In C* (1964), Reich's *Drumming* (1971), and many of Glass's compositions, including *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). He even recorded with "outsider" composer Moondog (a.k.a. Louis Hardin), in sessions that also included Reich and Glass.

Gibson is one of the less frequently mentioned pioneering composers of minimal music, along with Charlemagne Palestine, Terry Jennings, and Dennis Johnson, among others. And while much of his music may be considered minimalist, Gibson's oeuvre is diverse in terms of style and performance media. Though much of his output comprises works that he can perform as a soloist, his repertoire spans *musique concrète* collages to vocal music, small ensemble pieces and orchestral works to music theater and opera.

Gibson has a track record of composing for modern and post-modern dance. He was married to the late choreographer and dancer Nancy Topf, for whom he composed. Among other choreographers who have commissioned Gibson to compose music for their dance companies are Merce Cunningham, Simone Forti, Margaret Jenkins, Elaine Summers, Elisabetta Vittoni, and Nina Winthrop, in addition to Lucinda Childs, who commissioned *Relative Calm*. In some of the works, visual elements, including videos and slides were provided by Gibson in addition to his music.²

Like so many of the early minimalists, Gibson has a strong affinity for the arts of his generation, but perhaps even more than most of his contemporaries. He has collaborated with some of the most important artists of his generation in numerous disciplines: dance, theater, opera, film, video, photography, the visual arts, and more. Additionally, Gibson is himself a graphic artist. His visual artwork has been exhibited and published internationally. His graphic designs are related to, indeed, frequently based upon the compositional structures found in his music. One work in particular, *30s* (1970), has been realized in three different media: as a musical composition, and under the title *Interval (30.9 A)*, as a piece of graphic art, as well as a video with music and graphics (separate from the graphic artwork), made in collaboration with video artist Vitalis in 1985. Another piece, *Melody III* (1975) for tape and slide projections containing graphic images that are based on the musical structure, was also published as an artist's book under the title *Melody III Book II*.

Form and content were strongly linked with the minimalists and many other artists of their generation. The gradually unfolding processes (content) of much minimalism yielded its structure (form) and it was often the case that the relationship between form and content was perceptible, audibly. Much the same could be said of minimal art, conceptual art, structural film, and the like.

For Gibson, the process that dictates form in a number of his works, whether musical or visual, is one of permutation. He discovered that the permutational structures or processes he employed in some of his compositions paralleled those of change ringing, a genre of music that dates back to the early 17th century. Originally played on tower bells in English cathedrals, a sequence of pitches—typically a descending scale or scale fragment—is rung, followed by a series of "changes." The changes permute the scale passage in a regular and logical fashion. A simple example of changes is found in the following number sequence:

1 2 3 4, 2 1 4 3, 2 4 1 3, 4 2 3 1, 4 3 2 1

²2. Edward Strickland, "Gibson, Jon," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxformusiconline.com/article/grove/music/42724>.

Such structures are found in several of Gibson's compositions, including the *Criss X Cross* series (1979) and *Call* (1978), as well as some of his graphic art, including *Plain Hunt* (1977). Gibson indicates that "in *Relative Calm* [the first movement, not the entire composition] the melodies come out of change ringing processes, as do [those of] *Extensions*. *Q-Music* is also permutation based, basically playing with one-, two-, and four-part harmonies being traded around on a basic melody."

Relative Calm, choreographed by Lucinda Childs with decor by Robert Wilson, received its world premiere by the Lucinda Childs Dance Company at Théâtre National de Strasbourg in Strasbourg, France on November 26, 1981 and its U.S. premiere as part of "The Next Wave" series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on December 18, 1981. The world premiere was performed with pre-recorded tape (the current recording was made for such performances), but the New York premiere featured a small ensemble comprising Gibson, keyboards and soprano saxophone; Larry Karush, keyboards; Joseph Kubera, keyboards; Bill Moersch, vibraphone; Ned Sublette, guitar; Richard Teitelbaum, synthesizer; and David Van Tieghem, percussion.

Choreographer and dancer Lucinda Childs is perhaps best known as one of the collaborators in Glass's and Robert Wilson's monumental ground-breaking opera, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), participating as a dancer/performer and choreographer, but also providing some text for the libretto which she read during the performance. Like Glass and Wilson, Childs's choreographic style, featuring repetitive movements and gestures, can be categorized as minimalist. Childs's choreographic style has been described by critic John Howell as "patterns performed in rigorous repetition to a steady-pulse beat that can seem, at times, compulsive, even monomaniacal. . . . Childs's work is made of moving maps—arcs, circles, wedges, diagonals that she herself has called 'permutational sequences.'" In her review of *Relative Calm*, New York Times critic Anna Kisselgoff writes: "[Childs] is a leader among those who construct 'pattern dances' with phrases that are repeated." Though the term minimalist is not often applied by dance scholars and critics to Childs's style, nor the choreography of Laura Dean, Trisha Brown, and other like-minded choreographers (dance scholars frequently use the term post-modern instead), clearly Howell's and Kisselgoff's descriptions apply to much minimal music, including Gibson's.

After *Einstein*, Childs collaborated with Glass again, along with conceptual artist Sol LeWitt, on a piece simply titled *Dance* (1979). Gibson was a performer in both *Einstein* and *Dance*, so it was almost inevitable that Childs would encounter Gibson's music; their mutual interest in dance and their shared aesthetic led to the commissioning of Gibson's score for *Relative Calm*.

The minimalist aesthetic of *Relative Calm* is clear from the outset of the piece. According to the original program notes, the performance begins as the audience enters the theater with a "Prologue" in which members of the dance company are "seated on stage facing downstage at specific intervals along the length of the diagonal [a favorite element for Childs] which divides the space. . . . Sustained tones, consisting of elements found in the music for Section I ["Relative Calm"] are played for the duration of the Prologue." (Note: music from the "Prologue," essentially the long, sustained chords from "Relative Calm" and not regarded as a composition, *per se*, by Gibson, is not included on this CD). This gesture is shared in *Einstein on the Beach*, which similarly begins with some of the performers on stage and music being played as audience members arrive. While the drone-based music of the "Prologue" is not necessarily typical of Gibson's style, it certainly falls neatly under the rubric of minimalism. Indeed, there are several pieces by Gibson that incorporate drones, including "Extensions II," a variant of "Extensions"

While some of the compositional structures, systems, and permutations employed by Gibson map directly onto graphic and other visual realizations, as in *30s/Interval (30.9 A)*, it is important to note that not all do, as is the case in “Return.” The melodic structure of “Return” is based on, but not identical to, the number sequence and permutations of the “Numerical Realization.” While “Return” does not have a 12-note melody—its length is different and there are other minor alterations—the ever-increasing repetitions of the number 12 in each subsequent line and also a change ringing-like numerical permutation map onto repetitions of chords at the end of each harmonic progression and permutations of the melody (e.g. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12; 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 12 1; 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 12 12 1 2, etc.). The cover image is a variant of “Return” generated by similar sequences and permutations.

The rich, extended tertian and added note harmonies in “Return,” and to a lesser extent “Q-Music,” could be a manifestation of Gibson’s lifelong love of jazz. The synthesizer timbres and rock-based riff/ostinato are akin to those of Glass’s *Glassworks* (1982), particularly “Rubric,” but also *so* much contemporaneous rock, pop, and soul music of the 1980s.

—Dean Suzuki

Dean Suzuki, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Music History at San Francisco State University. He produces and hosts “Discreet Music,” an eclectic experimental music program on KPFA-FM (www.kpfa.org) in Berkeley, CA. He also writes scholarly musical articles, criticism, and reviews.

Jon Gibson (b. 1940) is a New York City–based composer, multi-wind instrumentalist and visual artist who has been a part of the new-music scene for over four decades. During this time his creative output has included music for solo instruments, various ensembles, dance, music theater, film, and opera.

In addition to the artists mentioned in the liner notes, Gibson has also performed and collaborated with a host of other musicians, choreographers, and artists, including Harold Budd, Peter D’Agostino, David Behrman, JoAnne Akalaitis, Miriam Seidel, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Thomas Buckner, Petr Kotik, and Christian Wolff. He has been a member of the Philip Glass Ensemble since its beginnings. Gibson is also involved in an ongoing collaboration with the Nina Winthrop and Dancers Dance Company, composing and performing the music for more than seven dance productions over a period of twenty years.

Gibson’s opera, *Violet Fire*, composed in collaboration with librettist Miriam Seidel, is about the inventor Nikola Tesla. It received its world premiere at the National Theater of Belgrade, and was presented at BAM’s Next Wave Festival in October 2006. Gibson has received grants from the New York State Council for the Arts, The National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, and Meet the Composer.

His music can be heard on the New World, Superior Viaduct, Tzadik, Orange Mountain Music, New Tone, Point Music, and Lovely Music labels and he appears on recordings by Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Alvin Curran, Arthur Russell, and Robert Ashley, among others.

His visual work, which is closely related to his work in music, manifests itself in various media, including drawings, videos, books, and prints, and has been exhibited in solo and group exhibits world-wide as well as incorporated into some of Gibson's performances. Born in Los Angeles, Gibson attended San Francisco State University, where he studied with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Wayne Peterson.

Pianist **Joseph Kubera** has been a leading interpreter of contemporary music for over three decades. Recent activities include performances at New York's Tectonics Festival, at the John Cage 100th birthday celebrations in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, and a TV production for Swiss RSI Television. He has appeared at major European festivals and has worked closely with Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, Robert Ashley, and other composers. He has made definitive recordings of major Cage works, and toured widely with the Cunningham Dance Company at Cage's invitation. Mr. Kubera has been awarded grants through the National Endowment for the Arts and the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts.

David Van Tieghem is a New York composer/sound designer/percussionist. He has composed dance scores for Twyla Tharp, Elizabeth Streb, Michael Moschen, Doug Varone, and the Boston Ballet, as well as numerous film and TV scores. He has worked as a percussionist with Steve Reich, Laurie Anderson, Robert Ashley, Brian Eno, David Byrne, Arthur Russell, Talking Heads, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Michael Nyman, and Peter Gordon. He has performed his solo percussion-theater work worldwide, at Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, BAM, the Knitting Factory, the Kitchen, Town Hall, the Whitney and Guggenheim Museums, the New Music America Festivals, the Festival d'Automne in Paris, the Venice Biennale, and "David Letterman" on TV. Van Tieghem has created music and sound design for numerous Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning plays *Doubt*, *Wit*, and *How I Learned to Drive*. His video collaboration with John Sanborn, *Ear to the Ground*, is an international favorite.

<http://www.vantieghem.com>

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Criss X Cross. Tzadik TZ 8020.

The Dance. Orange Mountain Music 7007.

In Good Company. Point Music 434 873-2.

Rainforest/Brazil (He Was Not Disappointed). Included on *Full Spectrum Voice*. Lovely Music LCD 3021.

Running Commentary (Arbitrary Excerpts). Included on *Sign of the Times*. Lovely Music LCD 3022.

Two Solo Pieces. New Tone Records nt 6756 2.

Visitations I & II + Thirties. New Tone Records nt 6747 2.

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Producer: Jon Gibson

Recording engineers: Michael Riesman [*Relative Calm (Rise)*, *Q-Music (Race)*, *Return (Return)*]; Kurt Munkasci [*Extensions (Reach)*]

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JON GIBSON (b. 1940)

RELATIVE CALM

80783-2

1. *Relative Calm (Rise)* (1981) 21:26

Jon Gibson, winds, keyboards, autoharp, ambient recording; Joseph Kubera, keyboards; David Van Tieghem, percussion

2. *Q-Music (Race)* (1981) 15:51

Jon Gibson, Joseph Kubera, keyboards

3. *Extensions RC (Reach)* (1981) 16:37

Jon Gibson, soprano saxophones (overlaid)

4. *Return (Return)* (1981) 16:54

Jon Gibson, saxophone; Joseph Kubera, keyboards; David Van Tieghem, percussion

TT: 69:06

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