

American Record Guide July/August 2009

Riley's In C Expanding the Mind at Carnegie

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Back in 1964 a stoned honky-tonk pianist named Terry Riley was riding a bus through San Francisco on his way to a gig, when some passing sounds caught his ear. The next day he sat down and wrote out the entire score for *In C*, like dictation from some cosmic muse, and what Joan La Barbara called a “classic minimalist anthem” was born.

In the 45 years since 20 instrumentalists premiered the work at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, countless musicians have encountered and been changed by the work—as students, performers, or listeners. On April 24 Carnegie Hall celebrated this groundbreaking event with a joy-filled performance under the aegis of the Kronos Quartet and Terry Riley.

The event was curated by Kronos founder and violinist David Harrington in a process that sounded like assembling the guest list for a large and complicated dinner party. The roster included original *In C* players Jon Gibson, Stuart Dempster, Katrina Krinsky, Morton Subotnik, and Riley himself, along with California contemporaries like Philip Glass and singer Joan La Barbara. Among the participants born well after the piece were the young new music groups So Percussion, Quartet New Generation (a German recorder consort), Koto Vortex, and members of the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble and the Young People's Chorus of New York City.

Non-Western virtuosos like Wu Man on pipa, Yang Yi on guzheng, and Aaron Shaw on Uilleann pipes (in homage to Riley's recent interest in his Irish roots) added an exotic touch not in the original scoring. Filling out the expert ranks were new music stalwarts like pianist Kathleen Supove, Osvaldo Golijov, Evan Ziporyn, Scott Johnson—the instrument hardly mattered: this was a new music gig where everyone wanted to participate.

45 years make a difference: the *In C* that unfolded on Carnegie's main stage was a very different piece from the San Francisco original. With over 70 musicians instead of 20, several of them non-Western virtuoso artists and musicians grounded in musical vocabularies that were just being born in the 1960s, Riley's original road map—a single page consisting of 53 melodic fragments centered around the tonal center of C—tracked a different route in 2009.

In C was an influence on minimalist composers like John Adams, Philip Glass (another performer), and Steve Reich, but Riley's piece gives the performers—and demands from them—more control than the precisely scored compositions of his successors. In one of several fascinating performer interviews on the Kronos Facebook page, So Percussion's Jason Treuting describes the process as Riley controlling the arc of the piece while giving performers the “freedom to find their voice”.

The Kronos Quartet sat front and center, flanked on one side by the Quartet New Generation with their organ pipe-like Paezold bass recorders and on the other by toy piano doyenne Margaret Leng Tan. Two groups of vocalists, some solo singers and members of the Young Peoples Chorus of New York, filled in the front of the stage. Behind these were groups of musicians playing winds, plucked and bowed strings, keyboards, percussion, and a motley assortment of Theremin, accordion, claviola, conch shells, didgeridoos, and oddments described in the playbill as “little”, “original”, and “neglected” instruments.

Pianist Katrina Krinsky reprised her original part as “the pulse”—the infamous repeated octave Cs that stabilize the ensemble, reinforced by the members of So Percussion on marimbas, teacups, and whatever else came to hand. In the center of it all sat Riley himself, a benign guru in a Tibetan cap with his white beard and white jacket at a white Korg keyboard. Dennis Russell Davies was designated “Flight Pattern Coordinator”.

Those familiar with the piece expected to hear the immediate, insistent plink-plink of the pulse's repeated octave, but the performance began almost imperceptibly with a quiet bass drone, laying down a primeval rumble like the opening of some post-modern *Rheingold*. Master Indian raga singer Ustad Mashkoor Ali Khan led off with a solo improvisation, and as it grew in ecstasy the drone swelled into a pulsing foundation.

A projection of the score onto the rear wall of the stage gave attendees a chance to follow



along, but the best approach was to adopt an alert but relaxed mode of listening. It was far more interesting to watch the intense concentration of the musicians, the vocalists counting and listening hard, the women of the Quartet New Generation puffing away at their plywood organ pipes, So Percussion malleting away.

At intervals Davies strolled calmly among the musicians holding a cue card or sig-

naling intensity or section changes with his hands. Sound swelled and ebbed, the pulse took on different meters, solos were passed around like extended jazz riffs. The steady pulse was like a heartbeat, stabilizing the controlled chaos and giving the ear a reference point. The effect was hypnotic but had enough variety to hold the attention—I spotted only three walk-outs downstairs.

It must be said that Stern Auditorium was not the ideal venue: the hall's vibrancy made mush of subtle details in a piece that is about nuance and player interaction. The singers (who were amplified) and the more delicate instruments were all but indistinguishable from my seat in the rear orchestra section, and louder sections had audience members covering their ears. That said, it was easy to feel the energy and community onstage—the musicians looked like they were having a lot of fun.

Sometime after the 100-minute mark, Davies moved to center stage to urge the band to a crescendo that crested and then faded into silence before the audience broke into cheers. The best way of experiencing *In C* must surely be with an instrument in hand, but the 10-minute standing ovation that exploded from the rapt listeners made it obvious that the audience had played along in spirit.