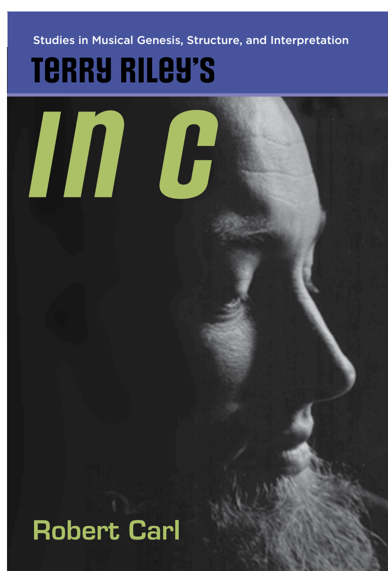
BOOK reviews

ROBERT CARL
TERRY RILEY'S *IN C*

Oxford University Press, 2010

By Mark Zuckerman



Terry Riley's *In C* (1964) is widely regarded as the seminal work in the minimalist canon. Its score is lean: one page of music and about a page and a half of performance advice. The music is a sequence of 53 modules: numbered linear fragments ranging in scope from a single note to an extended phrase (there's exactly one of these, Module 35); most are short, oscillating sixteenth note patterns.

In C is an ensemble piece for an unspecified number of instruments of unspecified type. The composer recommends a group of about 35 players, but smaller or larger groups are acceptable. (The first performances, at the San Francisco Tape Music Center in November, 1964, involved 13 players.) The tempo is also unspecified, but the performers are directed to use the same one throughout. To keep everyone together, an ensemble can use a piano or a mallet percussion instrument as an eighth note metronome on high C's. There are few other constraints. Each ensemble member plays through the entire sequence of modules in order, but may start the next module at any time and repeat each module *ad libitum*, making an effort to interlock with modules played by others while being careful not to get too far behind or ahead. Once everyone has reached the final module, the ensemble *crescendos* and *diminuendos* a few times before members drop out, one at a time.

There are no dynamic markings, articulations, or phrase marks. These are determined during performance, through the interaction of the players. None of the modules demands any virtuosity, but an effective performance requires the kind of musical sensitivity you'd expect at a good jam session. Since *In C* envisions a limitless set of performances – indeed, it is extremely unlikely any performance is repeatable, except with a recording – its performance practice is as important as its score.

Although a rendition at a moderate tempo of all 53 modules played end to end without repetitions lasts under 5 minutes, a typical *In C* performance lasts about 45 minutes to an hour or more. Changes occur very slowly – almost imperceptibly – producing an effect admirers find unpretentiously hypnotic and detractors find simplistically mind-numbing.

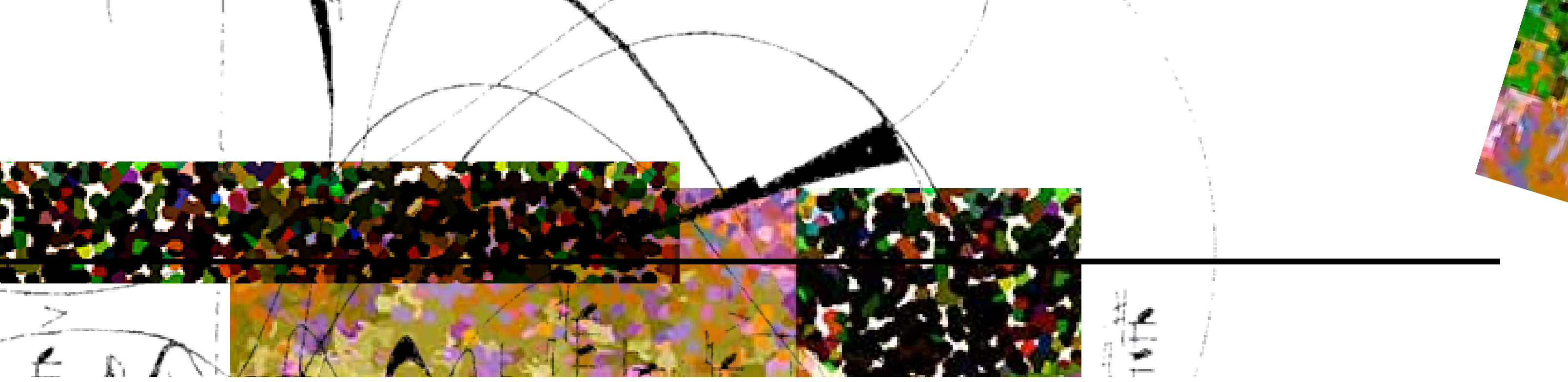
In C has become immensely popular all over the world and, as the herald of a new musical genre, has had a profound influence on composers and music critics. But does it belong in the same company with musical monuments like Beethoven's Op. 109 Piano Sonata, *"Appassionata"* Sonata, and *Diabelli Variations*? Or with Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, Debussy's *Ibéria*, Mahler's *Fourth Symphony*, and Strauss's *Elektra*? Should it and Vaughn Williams's Ninth Symphony together represent the significant music from the second half of the Twentieth Century? Malcom Gillies, editor of The Oxford University Press series *Studies in Musical Genesis, Structure, and Interpretation*, believes so, with composer Robert Carl's ambitious, elegantly written book in the series, *Terry Riley's In C*, making the case.

Its blurred boundary between structure and interpretation makes *In C* an intriguing addition to such a series. Given the nature of the music and the sparse public record of its first realizations, any serious attempt to fulfill the Oxford series mission would involve extending the frontiers of conventional scholarship and musical analysis. Blazing such a trail requires courage, dedication, and no small amount of work. For the most part, Carl rises to the challenge. His treatise is a labor of love: the result of prodigious effort and wholehearted veneration.

To build a history of Terry Riley's development and process, and to reconstruct the circumstances of *In C*'s public introduction, Carl interviewed not only Riley, but also a number of his friends and acquaintances, including many of the participants in the 1964 premiere performances and in the first recording, released on Columbia Records in 1968. He studied and analyzed the pieces Riley composed leading up to *In C*. He analyzed by ear 15 recordings of *In C*, including an in-depth analysis of the 1968 premiere recording.

There is a great deal to admire in the outcome. The bulk of the book focuses on Riley's development as a composer and on *In C* itself, and this is where the book is strongest.

The chapter on *Terry Riley's Life and Art* before *In C* succinctly explores Riley's musical biography, tracing the development of Riley's musical thinking and identifying influential people and circumstances. The narrative is illustrated frequently with reminiscences by Riley and his friends. We get a picture of Riley's musical personality – a gifted



natural musician with ability on a number of instruments and eagerness to learn from and collaborate with teachers and colleagues whom he respected, regardless of their point of view. One of these was La Monte Young, whom Riley met while pursuing a master's degree at UC Berkeley and whose influence on Riley was pervasive: from exposing him to modern jazz (particularly John Coltrane), Asian music, and Young's own musical aesthetic to introducing him to marijuana and peyote. Riley went to France in 1962, earning his living playing ragtime and jazz piano. Although he spent most of his time in Paris – where he became absorbed in the expatriate Beat culture – his gigs took him all over Western Europe and northern Africa, where he encountered music from non-Western cultures.

Interspersed through the narrative are brief analyses of Riley's music from the late 1950's and early 1960's that map his progress as a composer and identify common elements of his practice. There is a fascination with pedal tones, a gradual reliance on diatonic modes, and a refining of some "modernist" practices. There are conventionally-notated pieces, improvisatory pieces, and pieces using magnetic tape technology: sound-on-sound and loopback.

Thus Carl effectively sets the stage for the *In C* world premiere, to which he devotes a chapter. In a flash of inspiration almost Mozartian in character, Riley composed *In C* over a 24-hour period after returning to San Francisco in early 1964 when his source of income dried up in Europe. The premiere in November was the second half of a program devoted to Riley's music. The group Riley assembled to perform *In C* included close friends and collaborators, many of whom went on to significant careers as composers and performers. Riley was also a pianist in the ensemble, and although he supervised the preparation and performance, there were contributions from the other players. Perhaps the greatest of these, attributed to composer Steve Reich (coincidentally, Riley's neighbor), was the metronomic pulse – often cited as a basic feature of minimalist music – which was added during rehearsal as a practical means of keeping everyone together. Carl relates a number of colorful anecdotes surrounding the rehearsals and the performances, and quotes the entire glowing review from the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

The historical narrative is resumed in a later chapter on the 1968 Columbia Records recording, which brought *In C* to national prominence. In the interim, Riley had moved to New York City and had taken up the saxophone. At the time, Columbia Records was looking for new and unusual music for its catalog, and, serendipitously, a young composer on leave from his day job as a producer for Columbia came across Riley and his music and so made the match. Columbia Records was major league: it provided experienced, professional, sympathetic musicians; almost six months' rehearsal; and state-of-the-art eight-track recording technology, allowing Riley to overdub recording sessions. Columbia also provided eye-catching cover art and sophisticated marketing. Riley supervised the recording and played soprano saxophone in the ensemble. The release was an instant success, remained in print for the life span of LP records, and remains in print after being reissued on CD.

The real meat and potatoes of the book are in the analyses of *In C*: the *Analysis* chapter, which contains an abstract analysis, and the *Analysis* section in the chapter on the Columbia recording. Carl borrows terms from microbiology in calling these "endogenous" and "exogenous," respectively; i.e., "from within" and "from outside." In Carl's usage, the endogenous analysis deals with the structural elements contributed exclusively by the composer, while exogenous analyses incorporate interpretive and improvisational choices by the performers. Ideally, we keep the endogenous analysis in mind as we experience a performance or recording – that is, as we perform an exogenous analysis in real time.

It's a brave dichotomy as applied to this kind of music, calling for a mixture of innovative analytic criteria and creative yet (hopefully) careful use of traditional concepts and terminology. The purpose of any musical analysis should be to provide a plausible, if not convincing, accounting that encourages paying closer attention. In this, Carl achieves a qualified success.

The endogenous analysis introduces structural elements of *In C* in a progression requiring increased degrees of discrimination and attention. Each of these elements is in a layer that can be experienced independently, but becomes more vivid if added with the other layers in the order presented. "Pacing" is explored in two layers – "harmonic density" and "rhythmic materials" – each depicted in a chart of the modules' relative information content with a description of the musical shapes they illustrate. "Motivic transformation" is a valuable discussion of how the modules interrelate that overheats – more to burnish *In C* than to illuminate it – by asserting a profound connection to well-formed notions of motivic development in Beethoven and Brahms (sort of like claiming *In C* and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony are alike in their being "*In C*"). "The significance of Module 35" draws special attention to by far the longest and most melodic module – one that emerges in performance, even in the midst of competing modules, because of its character and because it contains the highest notes in the piece – as a way of recognizing large-scale symmetries in *In C*'s structure. "Harmonic analysis" primarily discusses the succession of diatonic modes indicated by the score and perceivable in performance, even with module overlap. Except for its single overreach, the endogenous analysis is remarkably illuminating and generally reasonable, even accommodating the kind of variation that can occur in performance.

The exogenous analysis in the chapter on the premiere recording required a considerable amount of effort – it charts the first entrance and last exit of every module – but isn't as illuminating as the endogenous analysis. Its important conclusions are that the performers lingered over harmonic ambiguities at

transition points and that Riley (who supervised the recording) "shows a taste for gradual, carefully controlled pacing, which causes the work to morph almost imperceptibly from one state to another (p. 93)." The balance of the chapter consists of quotes from and comments on three reviews of the recording, including one from *Glamour* – an indication of the success of Columbia's marketing. An analytical discography of 14 other recordings of *In C* is in the Appendix.

The final chapter discusses *In C*'s legacy, with remarks by the participants in the premiere performances and recording, comments by composers and musicians from the generation following Riley's, and a summary of the performance/recording practice following the premieres. It ends with a section of Carl's own musings on *In C*, a prerogative well-earned by the hefty work leading up to it. However, he concludes with a bizarre speculation reminiscent of Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s apocalyptic science fiction novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. The imagined situation is the aftermath of the collapse of civilization as we know it, with humanity returning to a primitive state – but, strangely, retaining the ability to read music. In Carl's words (p.109):

> But if the score to *In C* survived, … it is perhaps the one piece of "art music" that any group could gather to play. Standard instruments are not even necessary… In short it would be a seed from which a new creative tradition could grow. It's hard to think of any other work that could serve this purpose so neatly, fully, inclusively.

It's tempting to forgive this rhetorical excess, in view of the importance of the book and the effort spent writing it. This is not, after all, the claim made by some advocates that minimalism has revived musical culture from the apocalypse of modernism. But it does place *In C* on a pedestal of such a height that it may distort the view below.

This could explain problems in the first chapter, which purports to define *In C*'s historical context. Carl posits four characteristics one or more of which "new music" in the 1960's "was assumed" to share: research, formalism, experiment, and information density. Leaving aside that, in Carl's estimation, George Crumb and Milton Babbitt share the first characteristic – possibly the first and only time these two composers have been considered in any way similar – and that it misconstrues what both Crumb and Babbitt are about, none of these categories sounds very appealing musically; we might well wonder why anyone aspired to be a composer in those days. This view posits a group of "assumers" who had the power to determine what music was properly "new," a genteel version of the wearisome revisionist trope, run out all too often by minimalist and neoromantic partisans alike, that "modernism" exercised hegemony during this period to their heroes' detriment. Here, it comes off as a straw man set up to enhance the revolutionary stature of *In C*.

The truth, however prosaic, is far more interesting and more revealing of *In C*'s relation to the musical world of the time. The 1960's were years of great musical diversity (in the pre-politically correct sense). Witness the wide-ranging catalog of nearly 150 pieces recorded in the decade before *In C*'s premiere by the Louisville Symphony Orchestra, perhaps the greatest performance outlet ever for American music: everything from Elliott Carter to Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco to Carlos Chavez to Chou, Wen-chung to Aaron Copland to Henry Cowell to Paul Creston – to name just the composers in the C's. The avant-garde during this period was particularly varied, with composers much closer to Riley than modernists in approach and aesthetic, like Earle Brown and Morton Feldman. It would be interesting to see an investigation of how *In C* compared to these, and to, say, Conlon Nancarrow.

This diversity was spurred by advances in technology, as significant in their day as the cell phone and Internet are today in increasing the ability to capture and preserve ephemera, enlarging the number of creators and consumers of music, and expanding access among consumers and creators. The growing availability of reel-to-reel magnetic tape equipment made it possible to share recordings and provided a new means to make music. Performances could now more easily be preserved, pressed onto phonograph records, and played over the radio. The commercial introduction in 1948 of long-playing (LP) records, the improvements in audio technology to meet the demand for "high fidelity" in the 1950's, the introduction of commercial stereophonic recordings in 1957, and the development of inexpensive, high-quality, portable audio equipment using transistors starting in the late 1950's resulted in an explosion of, and hunger for, all kinds of music – classical, jazz, folk, rock, and genres never heard before and some never heard since – from mainstream to exotic. Popular interest was particularly directed to music at the edges that blurred boundaries. The Swingle Singers' jazz-inspired *Bach's Greatest Hits* won a Grammy in 1963; Wendy Carlos' Moog Synthesizer realization, *Switched-On Bach*, released by Columbia Records in 1968, was a huge hit.

All this had a profound effect on the complexion of classical music and especially on who became a classical composer. The increased presence of popular music genres and the expansion of college and university music departments enabled and encouraged a widening of what was studied as "music" and attracted a more varied group of music students. This led to crossover, as musicians from jazz, rock, and world music joined the ranks of concert music composers.

However revolutionary its content and impact, *In C* was a product of its time, squarely in the midst of the artistic, social, and practical effects of the contemporary advances in technology. University-trained, jazz-performing Terry Riley was influenced by exotic recorded music, and his experience with magnetic tape directly informed his composition of *In C*. Most important, though, was the slipstream of LP production and marketing in the late 1960's that put *In C* on phonograph turntables in living rooms, bedrooms, and dorm

rooms around the world. Perhaps *In C* would have caught on without the 1968 Columbia recording, but its good timing makes that speculation unnecessary. As with so many musical success stories, *In C*'s triumph took both genius and luck.

The crossover effect worked in both directions. Most of the early minimalists – Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, in particular – played their own work with ensembles of loyal musicians well versed in the music. This bears a closer resemblance to rock bands, who adopted the singer/songwriter model from folk music, than to classical music ensembles.

But all this may work better as topics for other books, ones that would build upon the ground-breaking foundation laid in Robert Carl's *Terry Riley's In C*. We should hope for this book's success and for others like it to follow, perhaps even as additions to the Oxford *Studies in Musical Genesis, Structure, and Interpretation* that fill some obvious voids in its catalog of music from the past century. ▮▮

LAST ISSUE'S PUZZLE:

Thanks to all of you who sent solutions to the limerick contest. The winner is Daniel Guss, who earned a prize of $100 cash for his winning entry:

There was a composer named Cage
Who was known as a musical sage.
With 4'33"
His motive, you see
Was the ultimate uncluttered page.

There was a composer named Ives
Who led two disparate lives.
He composed with endurance,
While selling insurance,
And dreaming of fours against fives.

A composer we call Takemitsu
Came from the land of jiu-jitsu.
His music is slow,
Rarely fortissimo,
Like the bark of a faraway Shih Tzu.

The influx of important news and commentary about the contemporary music scene did not allow us to run a puzzle in this issue. We will resume our full Puzzle Page feature in the next issue.

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