

Terry Riley and The Gift....That Keeps On Giving

The topic is “The Gift” of Minimalism, but before I say anything else I’d like to show a few portraits of people who were involved in the concert and recording premieres of *In C*, as they appear today:

[Photo show of such as Oliveros, Sender/Maginnis, Subotnick, Behrman, Gibson, etc.,
culminating in Riley]

I’ve shown these pictures to bring home the face of a revolution. A livelier, more open and intelligent bunch of septuagenarians I can’t imagine. Indeed, as I look at them now, they all seem still so very *young* to me. These incredibly sharp, whimsical, unbitter souls have followed their own muse, and waited for history to catch up. For me they’re an inspiration, and a model to aspire towards as we all continue our inevitable march deeper into time and the endgame of our lives.

In early 1963, Terry Riley was living in Paris, making a living as a jazz and ragtime pianist traveling from one US army base to another...or taking off for a few weeks to southern Spain and northern Africa to listen to Arab music and smoke *kief*...or joining a traveling circus and accompanying acrobats and sword-swallowers. Anyway, as I started to say, while living in Paris, Riley was approached by an old Bay Area friend, the director and impresario Ken Dewey, to make the music for a multimedia theater project titled *The Gift*. Riley immediately warmed to the task, especially when he found out that the jazz trumpeter Chet Baker, an idol of his and just released from Lucca after serving a sentence for drug possession, would be involved. Riley quickly conceived to use Baker and his combo’s playing for an experimental soundtrack. And he, having already made a number of pioneering tape pieces involving echo and overdubbing (above all *Mescaline Mix*), made a stunning discovery as he began to sketch the piece. Thanks to access to the French national radio studios, he collaborated with some of the engineers there. In the process, he found that by threading tape through two successive tape recorders, one could record a sound on the first, the second would play it back at a time interval determined by the distance between the two, and the first would then record *that* playback. And so on, in a recursive loop that would

continue until the connection from #1 to #2 was cut. The piece was called *Music for The Gift*, and here's its second movements, about two minutes long:

[mvt. #2 from *The Gift* is played]

This sort of delay-texture is by now so familiar to us that we barely notice it. Yet remember this was 1963. There was almost nothing like it at the time, and certainly nothing as visible. Riley himself has said this piece was critical in two ways: it was his first "orchestral" work, even though it was written for the tape medium, and it was the last step necessary to unlock the secret of repetition and the manipulation of modules he perfected in *In C*.

So if *In C* is one of the founding documents of American musical minimalism, it came about because Riley was given a "gift", one that came from an intersection of his eclectic musical interests and upbringing, the development of technology, and being in the right place at the right moment. And in turn minimalism has given a series of gifts back to music, gifts that have nourished, revived, and transformed the development of new music, and whose nature are perhaps only starting to become apparent as we now plunge into *this* century. Minimalism has been credited with re-introducing into musical practice pulse, repetition, consonance, triadic harmony, modality, trance and ritual...and on and on. And all of those points are valid, but to stop there suggests that a set of technical and stylistic markers, most of them present in older musics, were reaffirmed, and now music could get back to its more traditional roots. It makes minimalism a kind of aesthetic stalking horse that preceded a more valid and conservative "return to sense". Yes, devices like extremely slow harmonic motion could be acknowledged as radical, but they also could be seen as reactive excesses that would pass after the first phase of the movement. This approach makes minimalism essentially a reactive project, one that slew big bad Modernism and gave us a new, more user-friendly form of Romanticism. There *is* some truth to this, and one need look no further than the music of John Adams to see the result...I'm not being snide or critical either, because I admire his music greatly, and think it's a grand body of work. He's fulfilled this "reclamation" agenda for minimalism brilliantly. But if minimalism has any legacy, any gift more significant than merely "giving us back" traditional musical practice after a century's bout of temporary insanity, then we need to shift our perspective and look from other angles to find what is truly innovative therein, and what it can give us to help generate a genuinely new musical

practice for this century. And not too surprisingly, I see *In C* as one of the most important harbingers and models for that practice.

But before I explore these regions, I need to make a brief and personal detour. Indeed, a sort of confession. When I first encountered minimalism, it was in the early 70s, when I was an undergraduate. I wasn't a music major, but I was aching to enter in that world, and was making a fairly tempestuous transition to get there. I was in love with the music of Ives, Ruggles and other American Ultramodernists, and at the time the increasing complexity of composers such as Elliott Carter [*boos and hisses can emerge from the audience at this point*] seemed the natural outgrowth of that tradition. So minimalism was perplexing and indeed threatening. It seemed too *easy*, anti-intellectual (or maybe not intellectual enough), and yes rather druggy. It scared me a little. I picked up a copy of the LP of *In C* around 1974, and dutifully listened. And indeed, it became more intriguing to me when, while playing it on vacation at home, my father came into room to demand, "Turn down that crap!" As I said, it suddenly became more interesting. But still it felt alien, and alienating.

I've changed of course over time, as we all do. My relation to minimalism is now a happy one, where the beauties of this repertoire are evident. Part of this is simply the balm of historical distance, which mutes the power of controversies to wound us. Part of it is just a greater maturity of a human who's accepted more of his strengths and weaknesses. But perhaps the biggest part is the influence of the young, in this case my students. *They* see minimalism as a natural element in the musical landscape, a historical style and technical toolbox, and have no idea what the big fuss was about. And as we'll see in a bit, they also have a handle on surprising facets of the legacy.

So I've taken a moment to lay this out as a case study. Its subject--me--is a composer who isn't by any stretch classed as a minimalist (and if any of you ever take the opportunity to listen to my music, though it draws on a wide range of practices and aesthetics, you'll probably agree with that assessment). But over time I've come to understand in a visceral way what minimalism has bequeathed to all of us, and I've learned immeasurably from it as an artist. Perhaps a composer like myself, far in some ways from the movement, but critically open, and of another generation (transitional--after the "classic" phase but still close enough to understand many issues viscerally, unlike the current youngest creative generation) may be able to offer fresh insights.

Detour complete, we're back on the main route. So then, what *are* these broader "Gifts" of Minimalism? There are a host of such, each one of you can name many (probably an infinite list),

and to try to narrow this *will* inevitably be an oversimplification. Nevertheless, I'll stick my neck out. I see four: **Flow, Layering, Sensuality, and Openness.**

The first two are by far the most obvious, and connect most to the standard catalogue of attributes for the movement. **Flow** suggests the way that music moves through time. Is it continuous or discontinuous? There is no doubt that by the mid-20th century, the most visible forms of contemporary concert music in the classical tradition had a rhythmic template that emphasized disruption, contrast, even spasm. At the beginning of the century, it had a deep and true rationale--the exploration of the sub- and unconscious realms unearthed by the new psychology, a climate that fostered the extraordinary aesthetic discoveries of Expressionism. (And there was also the embrace of what was called the "primitive" cultures outside of the West, or of folk culture outside of Western high art, which opened up alternative, irregular pulsating fields.) But by the time music in America had reached the 1950s and 60s, much of the original context had been lost for these expressive tropes. We weren't in Europe, it wasn't the end of a Silver Age, and despite all the best attempts of American intellectuals and artists, people just weren't as neurotic as Vienna on the eve of World War I. The most visible music from about 1950 on came to be about "gesture", but that meant that everything of interest tended to be on the surface. (Or at least everything audible; the structures of serialism tried to create a broader and deeper architecture analogous to tonality, but the fate of that project is by now all too apparent.)

Minimalism's response was obvious. Pulse returned. Pattern returned. Repetition returned. Repeated patterns became motives, leading either to more traditional-sounding results, or they created a new and more radical sort of "wallpaper" that suggested the abstract decorative arts of non-Western cultures. But no matter what the approach, in minimalist music we learned to *breathe* again. Music, which had become cramped, demanding a level of moment-to-moment concentration that was exhausting even for the committed acolyte, reaffirmed timescales more attuned to natural human rhythms of attention and information processing. Of course, "classic" minimalism, the initial response to the modernist/expressionist template, was itself a counterreaction that at times created temporal expanses so vast as to suggest an entirely different, previously unknown way of listening and processing, one that put off many otherwise open listeners at the start. Indeed, there were many pieces from this period and approach---we're going to hear several during this conference--that in fact expanded to such lengths that an entirely new concept of *scale* entered into the temporal dimension of Western music. When pieces moved into durations of hours, a curious

paradox emerged. On the one hand, to listen, one had to give up expectation, one had to go into the moment. By dropping teleology, any sound that one encountered became a world unto itself, fresh and new. Yet at the same time, placed in this immense context, these sounds *also* evoked a trope of infinitude. One lived in the time of the moment, but also the time of eternity. The local and the global now coexisted, but in a remarkable state where the middleground had disappeared. As in some meditative practices, a creative paradox was concretely embodied.

And this capacity to enfold simultaneously two such different realities suggests Gift #2, **Layering**. This may seem a little contradictory, because in the visual arts, in particular painting, the term Minimalism suggested flatness, the refusal of a painting to be anything other than a two-dimensional field on which color and light played out their lives (something that was ironically emerging in the later works of such Abstract Expressionists as Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt). But in music, as we've just seen, Minimalism--unlike serialism---created a field of action in which different things could be heard simultaneously, *really* heard. Those very things could be very different, coming from different aesthetic-technical stances. LaMonte Young's *Trio* could be heard as steady drones, but also a glacially unfolding tone-row; Steve Reich's phasing could be an intricate hocketing clockwork counterpoint in the present moment, *and* the cycling of materials against one another over long timespans; Phil Glass's blur of notes could be an unvarying soundmass, but also the surface of huge tonal movements with Brucknerian pacing. And of course Riley's *In C* could be simultaneously heard as a jangling carnival texture; a tidal progression through various modes and harmonic centers, against a steady C drone; and a "flexible canon" of tightly defined and developed motives. The interplay between Concept and Artifact, Process and Product, so important to the emergence of Conceptual Art, is obviously at play here, but there's also layering--or we might better say *multiplicity* at play here. (Note the non-hierarchical tone of that term.) And--a very important point--that multiplicity is *concrete, audible*, embodied in the notes themselves. Extra-musical rationales (timelessness, trance, non-Western, etc), even if evoked, were never necessary for the music to have a real, palpable effect. There's a fundamental honesty at work: *what you get is what you hear*.

And with such sonic realism and honesty comes Gift #3, **Sensuality**. Let's not dismiss Modernism totally here; there was in its best works a great bracing energy, athleticism, and searing intensity. And there are masterpieces of this 20th century aesthetic that *will* survive. But for the vast majority of pieces written under its influence, I think it's fair to say that the listening experience

could not be described as “pleasant”. Indeed most Modernist composers were repelled by that term, which they saw as dishonest to the *zeitgeist*. Thus, your “typical” modernist work was at the least phenomenologically *abrasive*.

Now it’s true that some of the earliest works of Minimalism were austere and streamlined in the extreme. But they were never ugly. If they were reductive, it was in the pursuit of purity. But Beauty, so long suspect in the modernist viewpoint, made a comeback with Minimalism. Not for nothing was one of the leading record labels named Lovely Music. Pulsating masses of sound, where overtones, difference tones, phantom tones began to emerge from seemingly simple textures was a type of magic, a conjuring of sonic spirits from the aether. This could be laid-back and hypnotic, or it could be rambunctiously athletic. For me, *In C* seems to encapsulate both of these qualities. On the one hand there’s a “gamelanian” timelessness about it (even though at the time he wrote it, Riley had not yet heard a note of Indonesian music). On the other, there’s a sense of unbridled joy, a childlike, leaping ecstasy that can be harnessed any which way by the players and their choices. I can tell you after years of living with the piece, there are moments that bring tears to my eyes, their arrival having been so anticipated, the pacing in certain performances so right and inevitable. (And then in others, with completely different performer decisions, they can be pleurably surprising, despite our knowing that their appearance is imminent). This pleasure principle only seems to be increasing. As you listen to successive recordings and performances of *In C*, culminating in the huge 45th anniversary birthday bash this last April in Carnegie Hall, there seems to be a mounting understanding of how much sheer *fun* is embodied in the piece. Pleasure, beauty, fun. Obviously the 20th century had to be *really* bad in order to force us to give these up for so long.

And that brings us to Gift #4, **Openness**. This would seem but an extension of previous items, if we interpreted the term as vastness, on the sort of geographic scale often referenced when we talk of American music. But I’m talking about a different sort of “open”, and it’s that aspect I mentioned earlier, to which my students have clued me in.

I’m speaking of openness as the capacity of accept music coming simultaneously from radically different practices, in particular those which attempt to fix the musical event in advance with as much precision as possible, and those which trust to conditions embodied in the moment of performance (intuition, chance, environment). In its simplest form, it can be boiled down to notated vs. improvised music. And, I’ve discovered that for my students, one of the most

prominent markers of a new, 21st century practice is an acceptance of improvisation as a natural part of the traditional composer's toolkit. It's interesting to me that while both jazz and indeterminate/aleatoric, Cageian music are interesting and useful to them, what seems to engage them the most is something different yet again. It tends to be openness that is algorithmically structured. "Generative music" is a term I'm hearing from them a lot, and it works from the premise of a few basic rules being chosen and put into relation with one another, without a certain idea of the result. The rules tend to be strict, often simple, but the results can be quite extravagant and unanticipated. (In the visual realm, one of my favorite manifestations is the computer-generated drawings in Stephen Wolfram's *A New Kind of Science*.) The result doesn't have to be High Complexist either; a good deal of Enoesque ambient music can result, as well as very strange and groovy techno riffs. There are a number of programs out there that tap into this practice (Max/MSP is the one I'm most familiar with, but hardly the only one), and in fact this *does* seem to be evidence of that other great contemporary sea-change, the technological revolution that now rocks our world every week. The musical product of this approach seems to have connections to chaos theory; to the way genetic evolution selects through constant accidental mutation that paradoxically leads to seemingly "planned" results; and to theories of developing consciousness in artificial intelligence.

You may laugh, but this is where I see *In C* exerting its greatest potential future influence. In my book I speak of it ultimately as a piece of *software*. By that I mean that the piece--embodied in its precisely calibrated score of one page, 53 modules--is a network of data (the motives) and rules (the "intuitive-canonic" structure) set into action. In the course of the piece, every single note and rhythm will be pre-determined by the information in the score. But of course the flow, shape, texture, duration, poetry, and drama of the work will only emerge as the players follow the rules, by listening to one another, in real time, collectively, carefully, creatively. It's a model of how strict structure and serendipity can co-exist.

Not that Terry Riley was thinking all this when he heard the piece in his head that fateful spring night in 1964, as he was taking the bus home to Potrero Hill from the Gold Street Saloon, after a long night of ragtime piano playing. But like many, many things embodied in his art and life, he was onto something ahead of the game. He's of course not the only such one. To take just one example, the phasing one hears in Reich's early works, when the two instruments start to move apart, sounds genuinely chaotic for a brief span before the new precise rhythmic texture

kicks in, yet it comes out of a completely strict, deterministic process. Interestingly enough, two composers closely associated with the premiere recording of *In C*, David Behrman (the producer) and David Rosenboom (who played viola) have been some of the most important explorers of this realm between the raw and the cooked, using the computer from very early on as a partner in the creative process. But *In C*, even though it uses no high technology, is one of the first truly successful examples of a fruitful creative paradox. It shows on the one hand how an artist can exert precise control in a realm outside of realtime, a realm of abstract structure and recognizable personal stamp that is clearly identified with each iteration. Yet on the other, it *relinquishes* that control to allow all who take it up (“composer” included) to explore her/his intimate, personal musical space; a region of play, accident, and instinct; a world embodied in the *now*.

If anything is fundamental to the American musical tradition, it’s this “opening up” to the moment. We hear it in so many of our greatest composers from the origins of our concert tradition--Ives, Ellington, Cage, Mingus, Gershwin, Monk. Minimalism, despite its initial critique as being soulless and mechanistic, in fact is another step in this progress of embracing a world that cannot be totally dominated, accepting our place in it, engaging in a dance with it. As such, I suspect it’s the first time since the Florentine Camerata that we’ve had a truly seismic shift in musical aesthetics, and one of whose implications we yet have no clear idea. (I mean, listening to Monteverdi around 1610, would you really have been able to imagine the sound of Mahler?) Perhaps it even holds the key to how the extraordinary abstract and architectural advances of Modernism will find new and fresh life as well. Whatever the case it’s the first time the shift has come from this side of the Atlantic--indeed, I should correct myself, because the true origins of the shift are on the Pacific Coast. This is something that those of us as Americans can take a little pride in...but we’d better not get too self-congratulatory, it’s a gift given without strings to the world, out of our hands. It’s reflecting and reverberating throughout and between cultures, coming back to us in surprising new forms, going globally viral as we speak.

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