

# “In C”—Terry Riley (1968)

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Essay by Robert Carl (guest post)\*



*Terry Riley*

I like to call “In C” a “stealth masterpiece.” On the surface, the work is quite simple and unassuming. It’s one of those things with which a facile encounter might lead one to ask “is that all there is?” And yet, it is one of the most enduring musical pieces of the second half of the 20th century. It is the founding document in the musical movement called “minimalism,” which overturned the paradigms of postwar modernism (formal complexities, atonal pitch structures, aperiodic rhythms). It is constantly performed around the world. It is welcoming to musicians at every level: committed amateurs can render a quite creditable version of it, while adventurous professionals can give transcendent performances. It is adaptable not only to different levels of musicianship, but extremely different instrumentations and even world music traditions. It embodies musical democracy at its highest level. That openness mirrors the personality of its creator, Terry Riley.

There are two stories here. One is of the piece’s creation itself, the other of the premiere recording--the second being the connection to the Library of Congress and its National Recording Registry.

First, a quick history. Riley was a California native who always loved multiple traditions, ranging from jazz and ragtime to Indian ragas and even French neoclassicism. After a proper academic training in the Bay Area (he received his Master’s in music at UC/Berkeley), he struck out on his own as a freelance musician, including a couple of years in Europe playing piano at bars and US Army bases, and also traveling in northern Africa. He gained access to the French national radio’s electronic studios and created an electronic work (using samples of the jazz trumpeter Chet Baker) called “Music for the Gift,” which despite being all electronic, was the true progenitor of “In C.” Upon his return to San Francisco in 1964, he had one of those legendary composer experiences: he heard the piece in his head almost fully formed on a nighttime bus ride from work (playing piano at the Gold Street Saloon), and quickly sketched its structure once home--53 short modal modules.

The piece works in the simplest manner. No matter many musicians there are, all begin by playing the first module together. There is a repeated octave C in the high register, which provides a rhythmic anchor for all the players, known as The Pulse (a solution that was discovered at the last minute in rehearsal). It also gives the reference point against which all the harmonic transformations will be measured. Each performer then can repeat a module *ad lib*, but must move in sequence through all 53, with the number of repetitions still at their choice. The important thing though is that all keep *listening* to one another, hearing the emerging form and flow, and using that collective knowledge to shape the piece into a collaborative journey.

The work is one of the outstanding prototypes of structured improvisation, yet ironically every

note and rhythm is fixed. It's the movement between the modules that has such extraordinary flexibility and freedom.

The work was premiered in San Francisco in November 1964 by a group of musician friends, many of whom were to become a major composers of their generation, including Steve Reich, Pauline Oliveros, and Morton Subotnick. There would be an encore performance in May 1965, before Riley left for New York (the next stage of his peregrinations), and in that ensemble was the trombonist Stuart Dempster, who provided the link to the next phase of the story.

By 1967, Dempster was in residence as a Creative Associate at the State University of New York at Buffalo, at that time a hotbed of experimental music. He arranged for a performance of "In C" there, and it was then taken to New York for a performance at Carnegie Recital Hall. That, in turn, was heard by a young composer named David Behrman, who worked as a producer and talent scout at Columbia Records. The label, with its renowned classical division (that had issued premiere recordings of almost all the major works of Stravinsky), was on the lookout for a new music that might have crossover appeal to younger listeners. And "In C," with its persistent pulse, consonant harmonies, and jangling playfulness, seemed to fit the bill. So Behrman arranged for a recording of the work. This was revolutionary in at least two ways. First, to get the necessary richness of the piece, Riley requested three passes, that were than overlaid. The result was one of the very first "classical" works to involve multi-tracking. And second, as a gesture of breathtaking generosity, he also allowed the score to be included on the foldout interior of the LP cover. In this way he gave the piece away, a predecessor of freeware. But the karma was on his side, because then hundreds, eventually thousands, of people were able to organize performances, and guarantee the work its extended life.

I am a composer, and I don't usually write music that could be called minimalist. But I do feel that this work truly deserves to be called one of genius. The more I study it, the more impressed I become, and also the happier it makes me. There are a few works that shifted the paradigm of their age--Monteverdi's "Orfeo," Beethoven's "Eroica," Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," Coltrane's "A Love Supreme." I am sure that "In C" is in their company.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.