

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

# A big bash for a Minimalist

Composer Terry Riley turns 80 with a flurry of tributes, including a festival thrown by Kronos Quartet.

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SAN FRANCISCO — Terry Riley turned 80 on June 24, and not unexpectedly, the honors for the mastermind of musical Minimalism have been hardly minimal. London, Amsterdam and Paris have been taking particular note of the milestone. New York radio station WQXR offered a 24-hour Riley marathon to celebrate the occasion.

But the big birthday bash needed to be in the Bay Area, where Riley — who was born and who still lives in the Sierras — went to school and premiered his groundbreaking “In C” in 1964. It is also where he formed his most significant musical associations.

The closest relationship is with Kronos Quartet. He has written 27 string quartets for Kronos over the last 35 years, and the ensemble held a three-day Terry Riley Festival at SF Jazz that began the night after his birthday with a variety of tributes.

Among them was a certificate of honor from San Francisco Mayor Edwin M. Lee praising the composer as an appropriate representative for “a global center of innovation.” The California Arts Council offered a birthday proclamation using similar language.

Sporting a shaved head, a Mr. Natural long white beard and a snappy, formal full-length black Indian coat, Riley looked like a cross between a diplomat and beatific sage with a twinkle in his eye. “I don’t know what I did to deserve all this,” he said to the audience at SF Jazz.

I could have told him. So could everyone else in the room.

So too could have Yoko Ono and Pete Townshend. Kronos premiered Ono’s astral birthday present to Riley, “To Match the Sky,” along with a pulsating new string quartet arrangement of the Who’s “Baba O’Riley.”

For the last half century, Riley has been a presence like no other on the musical scene. His appeal crosses cultures and generations. Among those who participated in the Kronos festival or composed pieces for Riley were drummer Greg Saunier of the rock band Deerhoof, postmodern dancer and choreographer Anna Halprin, veteran beat poet Michael McClure, Indian tabla player Zakir Hussain and Chinese *pipa* star Wu Man.

Yet Riley’s incredulity was understandable in one way. The language of those proclamations likened the composer to a start-up, as though he were a college dropout who’d come up with a great new idea that had untold marketing potential. Riley’s greatness is precisely the opposite. He has always remained apart from the mainstream musical community, pursuing — and passing on to receptive listeners — his musical bliss.

However much the pulsing short fragments of “In C” proved a starting point for the first generation of Minimalists, it served Riley as a vehicle for reclaiming traditional tonal harmony, a beat and tart melodic gestures.

Despite his knack for getting lost in repetitive cycles, Riley has become our most devoted musical fundamentalist. The long-standing traditions of improvisation, bebop, northern Indian vocal music, Renaissance choral music, Bach and French Impressionism are all now employed as part of his vast musical universe.

Still, even Riley’s open mind once had its limits. When Kronos’ founder, violinist David Harrington, told Riley in 1979, “I hear quartets in your music,” the composer insisted he had left the world of formal composition and musical no-



JAMES M. BROWN Terry Riley Archival

**TERRY RILEY** was an early champion of Kronos Quartet, in 1983. He’s been collaborating with the string ensemble for 35 years.



EVAN NEFF

**KRONOS QUARTET** — David Harrington, left, John Sherba, Hank Dutt and Sunny Yang — performs with Chinese *pipa* star Wu Man, center, during the Terry Riley Festival at SF Jazz on Friday.

tation behind and had been concentrating on keyboard improvisation and raga singing for the last decade. Riley, on the faculty at Mills College, had helped the ensemble obtain a residency on the Oakland campus, and Harrington persisted in attempting to cajole Riley into writing a string quartet.

Convinced that Riley would eventually come around, Harrington announced a Kronos concert with a Riley premiere. “I didn’t have any choice except to write something,” he said, laughing on the second day of the festival.

“Sunrise of the Planetary Dream Collector” turned out to be wonderful. Riley based it on his hit 1969 solo recording, “A Rainbow in Curved Air,” and employed melodic modules, as he had with “In C.” He continued to gingerly approach the medium in his second-string quartet based on a catchy tune he used for improvisation, and “G Song” proved another delight.

Quartets then started to flow out of Riley. Working closely with Kronos to mold the sound and structures he wanted during rehearsals, he felt he hadn’t given up the oral musical traditions he had become attached to. Yet he still had to work things out on paper, and this use of left brain and right brain together was what turned him into a complete composer.

In the meantime, Kronos had to get used to a new way of playing

that went beyond merely interpreting a score. Harrington said at the festival that Riley’s dislike of vibrato in particular is what he credits with creating the Kronos sound.

Five years after “Sunrise,” Riley had become so engrossed in the string quartet that he’d begun work on a cycle of five quartets lasting two hours in performance. Originally intended as a dance score, “Salome Dances for Peace” is loosely narrative music following a scenario about the biblical princess who, in a quest for universal harmony, returns to Earth, undergoes spiritualist rituals, overcomes war demons and seduces Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan.

“Sunrise” and “Salome” served as rapturous bookends for Kronos’ festival. “Sunrise,” which is never the same twice because of its indefinite structure and which can be extended as long as the performers like, was the climax of the Friday night birthday tribute and full of surprises. Hussain added a percussive beat with his tabla, and more than a dozen other special guests joined in on a range of instruments from the West and East.

At one point, Halprin, who turns 95 this month, came out and danced directly for Riley, as though a miraculous later-day Salome, and decades seemed to fall away from both her and the composer.

“After this, I don’t think Kronos can ever perform ‘Sunrise’ again,”

Harrington said after the concert about one of the group’s staples.

“Salome,” on the other hand, is so demanding that Kronos has played it complete only a few times and had not attempted it in 20 years. The marathon Sunday performance that ended the festival was a revelation. The 50-year-old Riley had poured everything he knew into an exuberant, shamanistic score full of dazzling intricacies and trippy side trips.

The intense performance was also a rite of passage for cellist Sunny Yang, who joined Kronos two years ago and who, less than half the age of the others, has brought new life into the ensemble. Another Salome, Yang was an unflappable anchor hardly seeming to break a sweat while Harrington, violinist John Sherba and violist Hank Dutt were drained but had, at least until the final pages, maintained incredible intensity.

A three-day festival could offer only a hint of the relationship that developed between Riley and Kronos over the next 30 years, one unique between composer and ensemble in music history. Like Beethoven and Bartók, Riley has used the medium to explore his deepest emotions. When Kronos went through a series of tragedies in the ’90s, three members of the group losing children or a partner, Riley wrote profound quartet music in remembrance.

In 2004, he helped Kronos through the final stages of its healing process with “The Cusp of Magic,” a work for strings and *pipa* that takes delight in new life.

Riley’s quartets have been fewer and smaller over the last decade but no less resourceful. “Transylvanian Horn Courtship” uses strange old Romanian string instruments to which a resonating horn is attached. “Another Secret eQuation” is for quartet and children’s choir. During the Saturday concert, Kronos played Riley’s latest work, “Crazy World,” for which the ensemble was joined by Riley’s son, guitarist Gyan Riley, and during which the composer himself sang an anti-war song.

Many composers have been doing their own tributes to Riley. A week before the Kronos festival, pianist Sarah Cahill gave a recital in Oakland of works by such composers as Pauline Oliveros and Samuel Carl Adams that she’d commissioned in Riley’s honor. Kronos asked half a dozen composers to listen to as much Riley as they could get their hands on and write brief responses. One was a heavenly minute by Joan Jeanrenaud, Kronos’ cellist from 1978 to 1999.

Father and son, on keyboard and guitar, joined Kronos for the premiere of Gyan Riley’s gently lyric “the first pancake,” dedicated to his mother, Ann. But those were just the qualities I missed in an attempt to update “A Rainbow in Curved Air” by Kronos and the electric guitar-percussion duo the Living Earth Show.

What the birthday year has unfortunately not garnered is many new recordings. Nonesuch Records has released a five-CD box set that gathers all the Kronos Riley recordings and that includes a superb essay by Gregory Dubinsky.

The birthday offering of the four-hand piano duo ZOFO, which was a guest of the Kronos festival, is a dazzling disc of arrangements of Riley works. Africa Express’ “In C Mali” re-imagines the classic with African musicians joined by Western stars including Brian Eno and Damon Albarn.

But Riley’s outsider status remains intact when it comes to his concertos (including one for Kronos and orchestra) and other recent orchestral works. Few are programmed this year; none has yet been recorded. What has he done to deserve that?

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