

Datebook



SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFCHRONICLE.COM | Tuesday, June 23, 2015 | Section E ★★★★★

Turbulent music world doesn't faze composer

Terry Riley keeps smiling as he marks milestone

By Joshua Kosman

There are those who think that the world of new music is a fiercely competitive arena, with rivalries and backbiting and too many artists competing for too few opportunities. And perhaps for many people that's an accurate picture.

But you wouldn't know it from talking to Terry Riley.

The prolific and influential composer-performer turns 80 on Wednesday, a milestone that will be celebrated this weekend with a three-concert series by his longtime collaborators, the Kronos Quartet. And in addition to his artistic legacy — a long and varied creative record that includes some of the most notable works in the history of minimalism and post-minimalism — Riley must hold some kind of record as the happiest and least stress-afflicted musician now working.

He smiles *constantly*. He's generous in talking about the work of colleagues (particularly his friend La Monte Young, whose pioneering and comparatively little-known work did more than anyone's to create the world of minimalist music). He answers probing questions and stupid ones with equal kindness, and he punctuates nearly every remark and anecdote with an easy, contented chuckle.

After an hour's worth of conversation during one of his visits to San Francisco recently, I could practically feel my blood pressure lowering. Everything seemed right with the world.

Some of that may be the effect of a bucolic lifestyle. Since 1974, he and his wife have lived on a ranch in Grass
Riley continues on E2



Peter Earl McCollough / Special to The Chronicle

Prolific and influential composer-performer Terry Riley relaxes in a garden at the Kabuki Hotel in San Francisco. He'll celebrate his 80th birthday with a concert series this week.

SEEN By Tony Bravo

Tab Hunter leaves 'em swooning

Even decades after retiring from Hollywood, there are some stars who still retain that magic it factor that makes fans halt in their tracks.

"Is that Tab Hunter?" Jane Young gasps, rounding the corner at the Macy's Men's Store in Union Square and coming across the '50s matinee idol in the midst of a fan event for his new documentary, "Tab Hunter Confidential."

"He's held up wonderfully," Young says of the star of "Damn Yankees" and "Battle Cry," with the hint of a giggle. "I loved his movies when I was a teenager." When told that Hunter's new documentary tells the story of his journey, not just as an actor but as a gay man in repressive
Seen continues on E3



Loren Elliott / The Chronicle

Tab Hunter arrives for the screening of his film.

DATE LINES

Today's picks

Allen Stone: Inspired by Stevie Wonder and Donny Hathaway, the young soul singer with the oversize glasses offers a taste of his Capitol Records debut, "Radius." 8 p.m. Tues., June 23. The Chapel. www.thechapelsf.com



Jason Henry / Special to The Chronicle

Two Women: Anna Caterina Antonacci stars in the world premiere production of Marco Tutino's opera about life in war-time Italy. 7:30 p.m. Tues., June 23. War Memorial Opera House. www.sfopera.com

Love and Information: Caryl Churchill's dizzying kaleidoscope of short playlets about how we communicate continues as the Strand Theater opener. 7:30 p.m.

WATCH BOX

What's on tonight

"Inside Amy Schumer" moves to its new time slot of 10 p.m. on **Comedy Central**.

The gifted **Natasha Leggero** has co-created a new show for **Comedy Central** with **Riki Lindhome** called "Another Period," premiering at 10:30 p.m. It's a spoof of reality shows like "Keeping Up With the Kardashians."
— David Wiegand

DAVID WIEGAND *Television*

Vigilante hacker crusades against porn, greed

Evil is all around us, but sometimes it takes a person with special skills to see it.

USA's new drama, "Mr. Robot," premiering Wednesday, June 24, is about a social misfit with those necessary skills, and watching him put them to use makes the new drama one of the summer's most promising shows.

Eliot (Rami Malek) is a young security tech with a company called Allsafe whose clients pay heavily to protect them from hackers. On the side, Eliot is a vigilante hacker who believes the world should be a better place. He gets the goods on seemingly upstand-



Mr. Robot: Dramatic series. 10 p.m. Wednesday, June 24, on USA.

ing citizens who run child porn sites and engineers their arrest, but in his heart of hearts, he really wants to bring down multinational corporations that he believes are going to destroy the planet unless their unbridled greed is checked.

Much of the pilot is focused on Eliot doing just that, but we also get to know a lot about him in the process. He leads a highly regimented life, including limiting himself to just enough
Wiegand continues on E6



Peter Kramer / USA

Rami Malek is Eliot, a security tech. On the side, he's a vigilante hacker who hopes to bring down a global company.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Renowned composer celebrates milestone

Riley from page E1

Valley, in the Sierra foothills in Nevada County, where he devotes himself to a combination of musical and agrarian pursuits.

“One reason I like gardening,” he said, “is that I get a lot of ideas when I’m watering plants or pulling weeds. Musical ideas start going through my head, I’ll be hearing things, and sometimes I’ll have to wash my hands and run into the house and write it down.

“I’m very connected to lizards and animal and plant life. I feel like I learn thorough their motions. A lizard will get on a rock and do something, and I’ll think, ‘There’s music there!’”

So yes, Riley is an old-school hippie — he embraces the term with his usual amused contentment — and much of the sunny openness implied by that term shows up in his music, which has changed and evolved with winning fluency over the decades.

Drawn to experimentalism

He began as a neo-classicist, writing short pieces in imitation of Milhaud and Poulenc, as well as a jazz pianist. Then Young, whom he met at UC Berkeley in the ’50s, drew him into the world of experimentalism — a chapter that led to the 1964 creation of “In C,” the masterpiece of structured freedom that remains his best-known work. Throughout the late 1960s and ’70s, Riley immersed himself in musical improvisation, producing such groundbreaking albums as “Rainbow in Curved Air” but not writing anything down. (“During that decade, you won’t find any notes from me,” he says, “but a lot of music.”) He also became an adept at Indian music, studying with

Kronos Quartet: Terry Riley Festival, 7:30 p.m. Fri-Sat, June 26-27; 7 p.m. Sun., June 28. SFJazz Center, 201 Franklin St., San Francisco. \$25-\$65, (866) 920-5299, www.sfjazz.org.

the Indian singer Pandit Pran Nath.

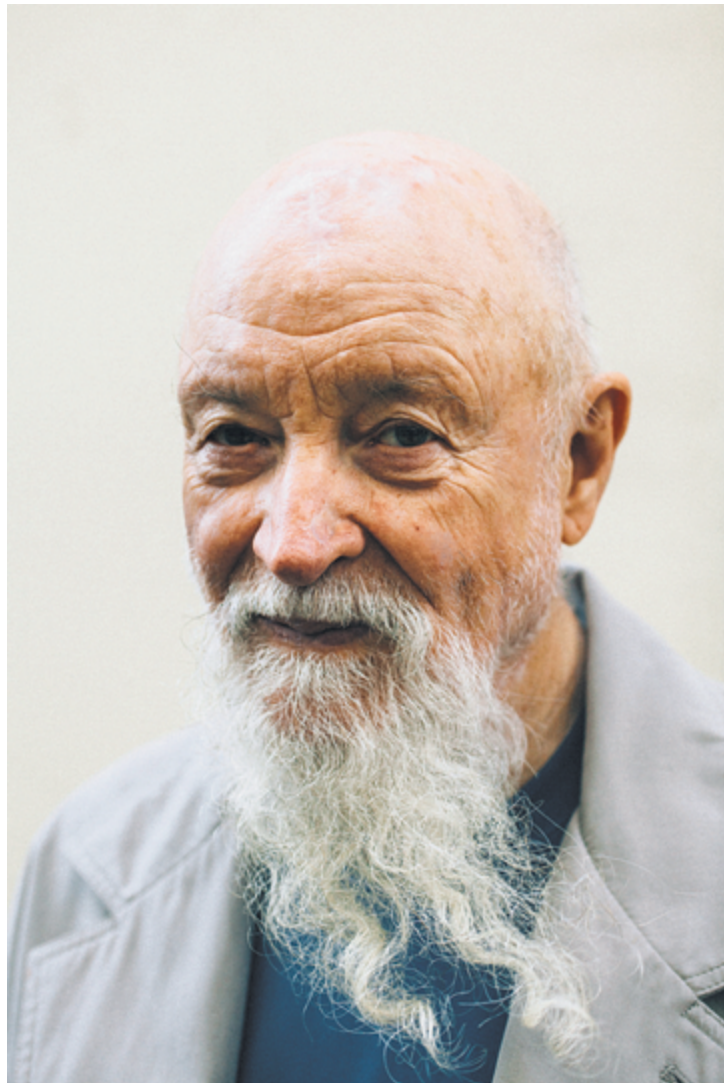
Perhaps his most long-standing commitment has been to his collaboration with Kronos, for which he has written more than a dozen quartets. It was the group’s founder and artistic director, David Harrington, who put Riley back on the path of notating music.

“I was teaching at Mills College,” he recalled, “and they sent in an audition tape which was just fantastic. They were in Seattle at the time. I said, ‘Let’s bring these guys down here.’”

“And soon afterward, David asked if I’d written anything for string quartet. He said, ‘I hear quartets in your music.’ I hadn’t, but the next thing I knew they had scheduled a concert in San Francisco and put my name on the program! So I had to write something for it.”

Riley’s California roots run deep. He was born in rural Colfax (Placer County), grew up in nearby Redding, and came to the Bay Area in hopes of studying piano at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music with Adolph Baller. That didn’t work out quite as planned — not least because he flunked his entrance audition after overimbibing the night before.

“I’d been the hot guy in Redding, the hick in the sticks. But then I got to San Francisco and there were people like William Corbett-Jones who could play circles around me. So I figured I’d better look for another career, and I shifted my focus



Peter Earl McCollough / Special to The Chronicle

Terry Riley marks his 80th birthday with a three-concert series by his longtime collaborators the Kronos Quartet.

to composition.

“Also, I didn’t have the nerves of steel you need for classical music. It takes a special kind of person to do that, and I’d get too nervous. But I found that if I was playing my own music, I didn’t get nervous — because if I made a mistake, who’s going to know?”

Instead of the Conservatory, Riley wound up at San Francisco State University, where

his classmates included such prominent experimentalists as Pauline Oliveros and Loren Rush. After a brief sojourn in Europe, he returned to the Bay Area, and at the San Francisco Tape Music Center unveiled “In C.”

That piece, a collection of 53 short melodic cells playable by any combination of instruments or voices, remains his most famous achievement. Ask him about it, and he’ll tell you

he’s perfectly happy to have “In C” be the headline on any summary of his life and career.

“I think it was a brilliant idea, and I didn’t even have to work for it. It just came to me. I mean, I was trying to come up with a brilliant idea, but all the things I was doing didn’t pan out.

“Then in 1964, I was playing ragtime piano at the Gold Street Saloon, and one night I was riding the bus to work and I just heard the piece. I ran home and wrote it down. Even the title was just handed to me.”

Artistic, financial rewards

The benefits of the piece have been both artistic and financial, Riley says.

“When I get royalties, ‘In C’ is the one carrying all the weight. It’s given me the opportunity to live my life in the country. I’m not rich, but that piece has allowed me to live without working in a grocery store.”

As he hits turns 80, Riley has been inundated with honors, celebrations and festivities. The Conservatory, which wouldn’t let him into its halls six decades ago, just gave him an honorary degree. When we spoke, he’d just returned from a weeklong festival of his music in Amsterdam.

“I got to do one night that was all traditional Indian music, which I’d never gotten to do in a big concert hall. One of the things I’ve enjoyed most at my age is when people just let you do what you want to do.”

And then Riley’s face crinkles into — what else? — a happy grin.

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