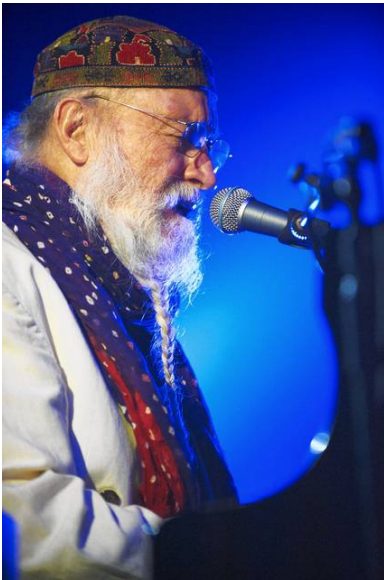


WALL STREET JOURNAL

Singing Happy Birthday to Musical Minimalist Terry Riley

Kronos Quartet and other musicians came together to celebrate composer Terry Riley's 80th birthday at SFJAZZ Center.

By BRETT CAMPBELL
July 6, 2015 6:02 p.m. ET
San Francisco



Terry Riley performing in 2011. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Kronos Quartet closed June 26's opening concert of its three-day celebration of composer Terry Riley's 80th birthday with the work that began its 36-year collaboration with him, "Sunrise of the Planetary Dream Collector." Tabla master Zakir Hussain joined the four musicians on stage at SFJAZZ Center's Miner Auditorium; then, after a few minutes, pipa virtuoso Wu Man strolled on stage, picked up her instrument and began plucking, gradually followed by other performers who had collaborated with Mr. Riley and/or Kronos—even the venerable dancer/choreographer Anna Halprin, whose dance studio provided the launch pad for Mr. Riley's pioneering minimalist experiments in the early 1960s. The house lights gradually rose as 19 musicians played on stage or in the seats, and the audience swayed along to the gradually evolving patterns and hypnotic groove that pulsates through most of the music Mr. Riley has written over the past four decades—everyone, especially Mr. Riley, beaming beatifically.

Such communitarian collaborations fuel Mr. Riley's gentle yet prodigious energy. His partnership with Kronos has spawned 27 commissions (and counting), which the group has collected on a new boxed CD set. Mr. Riley was teaching at Oakland's Mills College in 1979 when Kronos

violinist David Harrington, a Mills colleague, implored him to write string quartets. “What excited me about Kronos is that they didn’t just play the notes,” the white-bearded Mr. Riley recalled in a preconcert talk with Mr. Harrington at SFJAZZ. He admired their eagerness to expand on his ideas. “They created something from what I wrote that really excited me.”

Mr. Harrington says that to play Mr. Riley’s jazz- and Indian-influenced music the group had to learn to listen in new ways to tuning and rhythmic nuances, and often to eschew the vibrato that has been string players’ primary expressive technique for centuries. “He’s been inspired by so many forms of music that the idea of him being labeled as a minimalist has always seemed really bizarre to me,” Mr. Harrington says of Mr. Riley. “The essence of so many limbs from the tree of music enters into his imagination and then forms new limbs.”

After launching musical minimalism with his landmark 1964 work “In C,” Mr. Riley’s subsequent intricate trippy keyboard explorations influenced not only Steve Reich, who played in the original performance, but also generations of pop musicians—most famously, The Who’s Pete Townshend, who used Mr. Riley’s ideas (and name) in 1971’s classic “Baba O’Riley.” On Friday night, Kronos reclaimed “Baba” with the world premiere of a spiffy new string quartet arrangement by Jacob Garchik. However, Kronos’s new version of “A Rainbow in Curved Air,” the 1969 improvised keyboard and percussion work that most influenced Mr. Townshend and other rock musicians (including current star Dan Deacon), with Kronos’s strings augmented by the guitar and percussion of the Bay Area duo the Living Earth Show, ultimately failed to pack the punch (or the pulse) of the original.

As the ’60s drew to a close, Mr. Riley plunged into the deep study of Indian vocal music that he has continued to this day and which strongly inflects most of his music, and left New York for Europe, India and then the inspirational natural surroundings of his native California, where he has lived on a ranch in the Sierra Nevada for the past four decades. “When you’re in nature, you start noticing all kinds of movements,” he said in an interview. “I feel like I’m internalizing them and learning their rhythms the way I’d learn a tabla rhythm.”

On the afternoon of June 27, the piano duo ZOFO played music from their new album of Mr. Riley’s music, including the premiere of the jovial “Praying Mantis Rag,” inspired by the presence of those insects on his ranch. Here and in his own performances on that night’s program, Mr. Riley showed his jazzy roots in barrelhouse piano that made his brand of minimalism swing more than any other.

This being Kronos, even a celebration for a master demanded new music—including Polish composer Aleksander Kościów’s spirited “Oberek for Terry Riley,” based on Polish folk-dance rhythms; a sparkling new work by Mr. Riley’s son Gyan that featured both father and son among the performers; and a new “instruction piece” by Yoko Ono, who along with Mr. Riley was involved in New York’s early ’60s Fluxus movement.

Mr. Riley remains a formidable improvising keyboardist, as he demonstrated in engaging performances with Kronos and other collaborators. Also on June 27, Ms. Wu joined him and the quartet for their most recent collaboration, “Crazy World” (2015)—one of many protesting war, in this case the U.S. invasion of Iraq. To close its birthday party (one of several tributes to Mr. Riley happening around the world this year) on June 28, the group played his epic two-hour, five-quartet cycle “Salome Dances for Peace,” demonstrating the fiercely committed musicianship that has characterized their long and fruitful collaboration with him.

This month, Mr. Riley heads to London for a residency at the Barbican Centre, and October finds him in New York for still another celebration. He's completing a number of unfinished works, including a full opera score of his music-theater piece "The Saint Adolf Ring," based on the life of the outsider 19th-century Swiss artist Adolf Wölfli. And, of course, Kronos will always be there. "Ever since we first met in 1979, I've always felt like life is best when Terry's writing a new piece for Kronos," Mr. Harrington says. "We're already talking about the next piece."

Mr. Campbell writes about West Coast performing arts for the Journal.