

By Kyle Gann

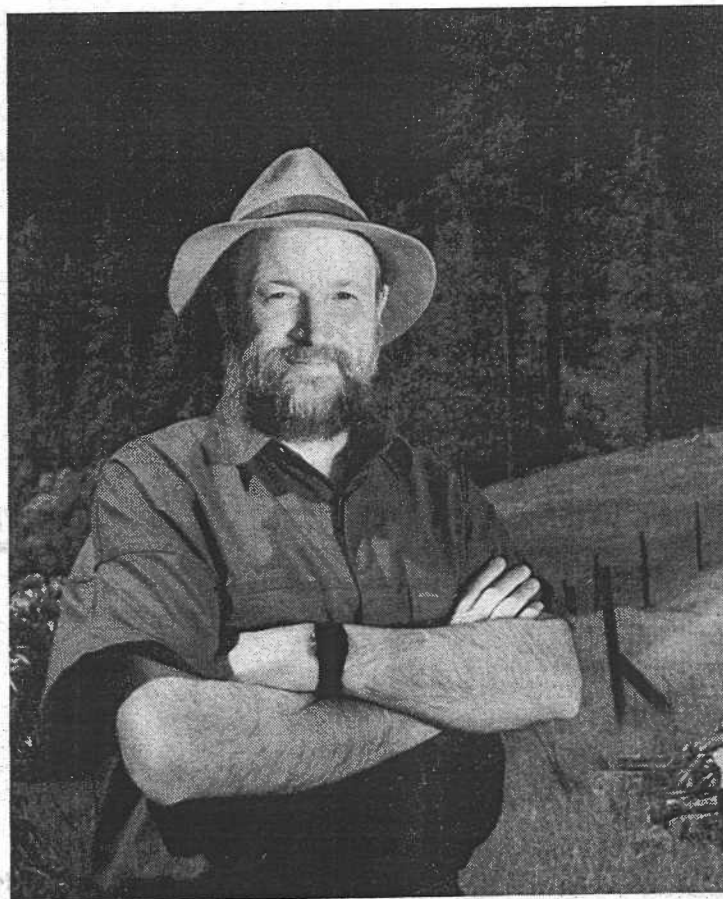
A brand-new Yamaha grand piano with a MIDI output has just arrived at the Sri Moonshine Ranch, out in the hills, elevation 2000 feet, three hours from San Francisco toward Lake Tahoe. Terry Riley says, "It's the first good piano I've ever gotten." That's an amazing statement coming from one of the world's foremost keyboard improvisers, equally at home in ragtime, jazz, rock, Indian, classical, and minimalist idioms. First thing he's going to do is retune it to an exotic, Arabic-sounding mode, so he can record his Piano Quintet with the Kronos Quartet. But before he gets that chance, he's coming to New York (see article's end for details).

He's not coming alone. For the first time, Riley, 54, has put together a large ensemble to play his own music. Called Khayal (Urdu for *imagination*), the group's a cross between a jazz band and a world music outfit, which grew out of the 25th anniversary performance in San Francisco of Riley's 1964 classic, *In C*. The singers—Molly Holm, Mihr'un'issa Douglass, Shabda Owens—come from classical Indian and jazz backgrounds. The instrumentalists are similarly split, with jazz players joined by Jaron Lanier on ethnic instruments including bagpipes, and possibly sitarist Krishna Bhatt. As usual, Riley is breaking ground; the tunes are pop songs "played almost like art songs," he says, based on texts he's written over the years, in a singing technique "somewhere between Indian and jazz."

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Terry Riley

A Revolution in 53 Melodies



SIXTH STREET STUDIO

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wind—that Riley's emergence in the American record industry preceded Young's by 18 years. Columbia issued *In C* in October of '68. (In high school I taped the piece off Dallas's WRR-FM radio.

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were hearing about La Monte. Certainly he was a big inspiration for me, especially the stuff he did with his early group, with Tony Conrad and John Cale. I think La Monte's creation of a form from just scalic elements—just scales or patterns, like you find in the East—was a forerunner for all the forms I worked with during that period. It inspired the formal element in my music. From me it filtered down to other composers, because I was recorded first.

"I've always admired Young's one-pointed approach. Very few people can work that way. It points to what music is striving for in a basic, elemental way. Many of the rest of us have tried to do it through other means, to get into that deep feeling. He's a very deep soul." Riley may be too, but he can't stay in one place like Young. The friendship's still intact, but Riley's wandered from the primeval tone to many stylistically distant points. Starting out in cool, nonmodulating, modal improv, by 1971 Riley made a minimalist-flavored rock disc with John Cale, *Church of Anthrax*. The '70s records include stunning, jazzy scores for European films, Alexander Whitelaw's *Le Secret de la vie* and Joel Santoni's *Les Yeux fermes*—good luck finding them in used-record stores.

Riley nearly disappeared from public view in the late '70s due, he says, to his teaching responsibilities at Mills College from 1971 to 1981. In 1970 he first visited India, where he and Young began studying with Pandit Pran Nath, and by the early '80s Riley felt confident enough to perform ragas in public. His next soundtrack, *No Man's Land*, added Bhatt's tabla and sitar to Riley's clean-focussed jazz riffs. A major piano cycle, *The Harp of New Albion*, turned improvisation toward an almost impressionist experiment in modulating just intonation.

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In C is Riley's earliest major work—made from 53 melodic fragments that may be repeated for any length of time—and it's still Riley's warhorse. It's been played by a Canadian rock band, on 18 marimbas in Mexico, and was recently recorded by a Shanghai orchestra using indigenous instruments and intonation. Reifying history, one could say that "new music" was conceived in 1957—the year La Monte Young subverted 12-tone method by stretching each note out to 20 seconds or more—and born in 1964 with *In C*'s premiere. Several writers have called that debut a turning point as dramatic as (and opposite in significance to) the

1912 *Le Sacre du Printemps* scandal, not because of the audience's reaction, but because of that of the performers. Its cast of then unknowns included Pauline Oliveros, Steve Reich, Morton Subotnick, Jon Gibson, Phil Winsor, and Ramon Sender, who all later carried the influence into their own diverse musics. *In C*'s subtitle could be "A Revolution in 53 Melodies."

Riley credits Young (who's four months younger) with leading him to a modal, nondevelopmental idiom, and it was only through mishap—literally a change in the

wind—that Riley's emergence in the American record industry preceded Young's by 18 years. Columbia issued *In C* in October of '68. (In high school I taped the piece off Dallas's WRR-FM radio. It gave me a headache, but I couldn't stop listening to it, and it drove me to criticism.) Columbia planned a Young release concurrent with *In C*, Young and Marian Zazeela singing in response to the resonance of the ocean at Westhampton Beach. Then, the day they tried to record, a gale ruined the sound of both singing and ocean. Young wanted to retape,

Columbia's producer wanted to save money by dubbing a new ocean recording beneath Young's voice, and the disagreement killed the project. As the winds of fate had it, Riley became a cult figure on the pop periphery, while Young stayed in the shadows until his 1987 Gramavision recording of *The Well-Tuned Piano*.

Nevertheless, there's no Riley-Young rivalry, unlike the bitterness between other innovator pairs like Boulez-Stockhausen, Reich-Glass, Chatham-Branca. "My music," Riley admits, "got a wide acceptance before people

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condemned enough to perform ragas in public. His next soundtrack, *No Man's Land*, added Bhatt's tabla and sitar to Riley's clean-focused jazz riffs. A major piano cycle, *The Harp of New Albion*, turned improvisation toward an almost impressionist experiment in modulating just intonation.

Then David Harrington of Kronos began bugging Riley to write for the string quartet, and Riley eventually responded with an amazing series of quartets, beginning with *Cadenza on the Night Plain* and extending most recently to a justly tuned Piano Quintet and *Salome Dances for Peace*. These pieces are the core of a new, more classical phase: multi-movement works, rarely static, moving from motive to

Dorlan Reeds (Mass Art, 1966): Early minimalism. Only 1000 copies made and half of them sent to Scandinavia. You'll never find it.

In C (Columbia, 1968): Unremitting; 53 phrases played over a repeated pulse in the top two C's on the piano. Rather harsh performance by the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts at SUNY at Buffalo. New Albion will soon issue another recording, which Riley prefers, with players from the work's 25th-anniversary concert in San Francisco.

A Rainbow in Curved Air (Columbia, 1969): Bouncy, psychedelic electronics, one of Riley's most popular albums. "Manhattan became a meadow in which unfortunates from the Bowery were allowed to live out their fantasies in the sunshine and were cured." The flipside's "Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band" is lovely but darker, more like "serious" '60s electronics.

Church of Anthrax (CBS, 1971): With John Cale, this varies from hot jazz jamming to a rocked-up version of Riley's sax improv, with one haunting, Beatles-ish vocal. Harks back more than any other record to Cale's static improvs with La Monte Young.

Persian Surgery Dervishes (Shanti, 1972): Smooth, two-record set of live modal improvisations, with tape delay in Los Angeles and Paris.

An Annotated Discography

Happy Ending (WEA Filipacchi Music, 1972): Music composed for the film *Les Yeux fermes* and, on the flipside, a piece called *Journey From the Death of a Friend*, this is the best source for Riley's elegant soprano sax lines, electronically echoed.

Lifespan (Stip, 1975): Original soundtrack of Alexander Whitelaw's film *Le Secret de la vie*, containing Riley's most easy-listening music and catchiest tunes. Mellow soprano sax over organ.

Shri Camel (Columbia, 1980): Like the "dervish" records, but tighter. The purest and most concise of Riley's keyboard solos, his improvisation-with-delay method honed down to four well-wrought vignettes.

Descending Moonshine Dervishes (Kuckuck, 1982): Like *Persian Surgery*, laid-back improv over ostinatos and rhythmic cycles. It was recorded in 1975.

Songs for the Ten Voices of the Two Prophets (Kuckuck, 1982): That's *Prophet* as in the synthesizer brand. A mutual friend once told me, "We try to encourage Terry not to sing," and the rough-hewn vocals make this one of the less ingratiating albums. Scintillating synth work, singing style half-Indian, half-Bob Dylan-before-his-morning-coffee.

No Man's Land (Plainisphere, 1984): Krishna Bhatt's tabla and sitar add more driving energy than usual to Riley's modal jazz.

Cadenza on the Night Plain and Other String Quartets (Gramavision, 1985): Riley's first disc with the Kronos Quartet, this is his pleasantest chamber music and best title, cyclic rhythm and raga melody refreshingly applied to strings. Parts recapture the energy of *In C*, others introduce a rhetorical style new to Western music. Includes one arrangement from *Lifespan*.

The Harp of New Albion (Celestial Harmonies, 1986): The piano is tuned to C-sharp just intonation, but "The Orchestra of Tao" is in A-sharp, "Ascending Whale Dreams" in B-sharp, "The Magic Knot Waltz" in D. Result: every piece has a differently colored tonality, and the inspired playing blurs between Debussy and ragtime. Great disc for experiencing alternate tunings.

Salome Dances for Peace (Nonesuch, 1989): Introverted, brooding work performed by the Kronos Quartet, near-Eastern as to mode, elegant in its small glissandos, formally complex and wide-ranging. A difficult piece to carry individual impressions from, but texturally absorbing.

In C (Celestial Harmonies, 1989): Odd but delightful rush-through on Chinese instruments with non-Western tuning, melodies out of order. Also nice minimalist-inspired pieces by David Mingyue Liang.

—K.G.

motive and texture to texture with a sense of spiritual journey. Now Riley's writing a seven-movement orchestra piece for Leonard Slatkin to perform with the St. Louis Symphony, similar in style, he says, to *Salome*.

Having successfully juggled an undefinable career among pop and classical, jazz and Asian, worlds, Riley is more sanguine than many composers about new music's continued underground status, about the fact that official honors like the Pulitzer Prize and Grauwmyer Awards still go to conservative atonalists like Mel Powell and Joan Tower. Part of *In C's* significance is that it granted American music a new starting point after the wartime arrival of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Hindemith on these shores suffocated the native experimental scene of the '30s. "A lot of the music in

America," Riley notes, "that looks for its inspiration in world music, or jazz, or folk music, or even just natural sound, tends to be suspected of not being a highly elevated enough art form by the establishment that's come out of European culture, where it's considered that you have to have a certain X, Y, plus Z to make a form work.

"Although a lot of these composers incorporate Western ideals into their music, there seems to be a definite philosophical viewpoint which separates one kind of composer from the other. The people who are closer to the ideals I'm interested in are jazz musicians, musicians who play a lot through their feelings, rather than make a form modeled on certain, what I'd call pretensions. I've always admired jazz. I feel it's a very real way to work. Unfortunately, the

audiences and places to perform for jazz have given musicians a difficult path, having to play in clubs."

If anything points *Salome* back toward Europe, it's the highly motivic texture in a multi-movement form, though the modes are still clearly Eastern. Only a few years ago Morton Feldman theorized that multi-movement form was the one musical idea that was really dead in the late 20th century. "What I would consider dead," Riley responds, "would be repeating myself, getting stuck in a place where I was just churning out pieces in a style. I feel like each thing I do should be something I haven't worked with before. In that sense my model is the Beatles of the '60s, which I felt was a real high point in Western art. That's what I want to do now, create a music out of all the materials I

have available.

"Pieces like *Rainbow* made from one motive—I don't feel compelled to do anything like that recently. That's not to say I don't like it. I guess we don't know the reasons why we do things. I always seem to be gaining one audience and losing another every time I write a new work. People say to me, 'I liked the last thing you did, but I don't like what you're doing now.' It's like Miles Davis, a lot of people wonder what he's doing. I'm sure no musicians are able to control what they do. We don't have that much free will. We get interested in things, we keep trying to satisfy our souls and our desire to liberate ourselves through certain kinds of ideas. It's not something where you're in control; it happens to us.

"As you're working on a piece an idea will come and you say,

'Where did this come from?' You trust it. It might seem silly or not relevant to what you're doing, then suddenly its meaning becomes apparent. That's the exciting thing. We don't have anything else in our life that's quite like that. So if you think you're in control [Riley laughs incredulously, gazing at the California hills for an answer], the game's over."

Riley's concerts, part of the fourth annual Bang on a Can Festival, will be performed May 11 at eight and 10, at RAPP Arts Center, 220 East 4th Street. At the 10 o'clock show Khayal will be joined by the Kronos Quartet for a performance of "In C." In addition, Kronos will give the New York premiere of Riley's two-hour quartet "Salome Dances for Peace" May 12 at 8 in Alice Tully Hall.

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