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## Minimalist Music's Liquid Architecture

*An interdisciplinary performance of Terry Riley's 'In C' at the RISD Museum.*



Composer Michael Harrison conducting the RISD students at the 'In C' performance. Photo: Jo Sittenfeld/RISD

**By Stuart Isacoff**

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**PROVIDENCE** — Terry Riley's "In C," a work for a large ensemble of no specific instruments, begins with a musical hiccup—a grace note, hit and released as fast as possible—that leaps from "Do," the first note of the scale upward to "Mi," the third, forming a repeating two-note figure that generates the music's heartbeat. Played in unison by all the musicians, it sets in motion a pulse that ticks away like a cosmic metronome for nearly an hour as the group—35 is the composer's suggested number—unfurls a catalog of 52

additional melodic and rhythmic fragments, or “modules” that ride atop. As musicians move from one to the next at their own discretion, the separate musical strands, short, long, lyrical or jazzily angular, all anchored by the insistent rhythm, alternately link together, chase one another, or collide like particles in a cloud chamber.

The result is hypnotic, infinitely textured, and strangely alluring. The San Francisco Chronicle gushed after its 1964 premiere that, “At times you feel you have never done anything all your life long but listen to this music and as if that is all there is or ever will be.” Little wonder it is considered a classic—the standard bearer for “Minimalist” music of the twentieth century.

It was also the focus of a recent project at the Rhode Island School of Design, where a group of nearly 40 architecture students took on the task of becoming that performing ensemble.

Architecture students? Interdisciplinarity is a popular buzzword on many campuses, but in most cases it remains a mere slogan. Here was a shining model for other schools—a collaboration initiated by Laura Briggs, head of the architecture department, that brought together architect David Gersten and microtonal composer Michael Harrison for a course called “Outside the Guidelines.” Mr. Harrison used raga, music theory and sound technology, and Mr. Gersten, drawings, essays, film and construction to explore space and design from multiple perspectives.

Their choice of Terry Riley’s piece was ideal. Goethe called architecture “frozen music.” “In C” perfectly illustrates Goethe’s corollary: “Music is liquid architecture.” On December 9, the students presented this work, along with multi-media projections and mime, before an audience of some 70 patrons in the RISD Museum’s Grand Gallery, a large room whose four walls are covered with paintings from the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pulling it off was a serious challenge requiring discipline, a willingness to take risks, and real grit. The result was simply exhilarating.

It prompted students like Huizhong Sun and Marco Aguirre to remind me about the architectural concepts of simultaneity and interpenetration, and of “transparency”: the concurrent perception of different spatial locations or overlapping planes. The simplest example would be a glass wall that allows viewers to perceive objects on the other side. Ms. Sun pointed to “In C” as an example of “phenomenal transparency,” in which the overlapping layers that together create an opaque wall still leave visual gaps. (An architectural example, she says, was the 1929 German pavilion for the Barcelona Expo, a structure made of vertical slabs.) “An opaque wall with gaps” perfectly describes the aural experience of the densely textured “In C.”

Since they were not instrumentalists, Mr. Harrison’s students earnestly sang the musical modules, using lyrics that Mr. Riley wrote for the Young People’s Chorus of New York City. Several musicians from outside the school also helped bring it off. I volunteered to play piano and was joined at the keyboard by student Carl Zirbel, who served as timekeeper by bravely beating out insistent C’s at the highest end of the instrument. Mr. Harrison brought his tamboura and conducted one choir. There were local string players—3 violins and a viola—and several composers, including Mr. Harrison’s assistant, Sam Torres of the

Manhattan School of Music, who played soprano saxophone while conducting a second choir; Eric Nathan from nearby Brown University, who played trumpet; and Molly Joyce from Yale University, who performed on a toy glockenspiel.

The aim of the presenters was to create a “conversation” with the artworks on display. So during the performance Mr. Gersten’s students roamed the Grand Gallery and mimicked the postures of the figures in various paintings (and sometimes the musicians). It made aesthetic sense: Though they were highlighting individual details, collectively these separate elements unified to form a greater canvas, much as do the 53 musical modules in Mr. Riley’s composition.

Performing “In C” was a tricky business. I listened intently for markers on the music’s roadmap, catching and reinforcing phrases like, “Barang barang barang,” and “Baten dootee dootee,” which emerged from the din like the glow of a lighthouse on a foggy sea. The ensemble veered from time to time toward chaos. But just when things seemed to be going off the rails, a choir or instrumentalist would assert a particular pattern, and we would be back on track.

As we ended in unison with another simple two-note figure that softly dissolved into silence, the sense of accomplishment was tangible. The RISD students were deservedly proud.

*Mr. Isacoff is at work on a book about Van Cliburn’s triumph at the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow.*