

**Williams College Department of Music**  
**Monday, May 11, 2009, 12:15-1:00 p.m., IN front of Chapin Hall**

# **TERRY RILEY: *In C* (1964)**

***performed by:***

Joshua Blanco '11, guitar  
Steven Bodner, alto saxophone/leader  
Leo Brown '11, violin\*  
Alex Creighton '10, xylophone^  
Melanie Dexter, violin  
Charlie Dougherty '09, bass guitar^  
Marjorie Hirsch, keyboard  
David Kechley, double bass  
Paisley Kang '12, guitar  
Daniel King '09, tenor saxophone^  
Jessica Kopcho '09, keyboard^  
Jason Leacock '10, keyboard\*

Noah Lindquist '08, keyboard^  
Mimi Lou '09, cello^  
Lauren McDonald '12, viola  
Katie Palmer '10, cello  
Rob Pasternak '11, keyboard\*  
Elise Piazza '09, Eb clarinet^  
Zachary Quay-delaVallee '09, cello\*  
Sarah Riskind '09, violin^  
Geoff Rodriguez '11, trumpet  
Erdem Sahin '11, viola\*  
Rob Silversmith '11, violin\*  
Tom Sikes '11, trumpet

Brian Simalchik '10, keyboard^  
Jacob Walls '11, trumpet\*  
Stephen Webster, '10, xaphoon  
Brad Wells, electric guitar  
Bruce Wheat, soprano saxophone  
Katie Yosua '11, flute\*

\*denotes current MUS 202 students

^denotes MUS 202 alumni

"[Listening to *In C*] may be like staring at a mirror for forty-five minutes; or it may be more like sitting at a window and watching the carnival of life go on below. It is a matter of enjoying things that happen, of being moved helplessly by an exciting performance and at the same time following each development in the performance, and somehow determining in your own head what is and isn't a development and therefore really defining for yourself whatever it is you're following.... Most of the prime components of the musical experience are expressed here, and expressed in such a basic way that one's awareness of these components is totally unimportant, unnecessary: They are there before you, for you to dig; and nobody's asking you to file them away in categories. The music is close to the nitty-gritty; you can go into it with no assumptions whatsoever and come out of it with no assumptions and still be very certain that you heard something that it was refreshing, that it was incredible, that its inability to be classified is of no importance at all. This stuff here is close enough to the basics of what music is to be listened to and appreciated with no musical background of any sort. It's kind of like not necessarily knowing if you dig ballet, but definitely liking the way the girl across the table moves her hands. No preconceptions, you just dig it. Welcome in." (Paul Williams, 1968)

Terry Riley's *In C* stands at the crossroads of the two most significant musical styles to emerge during the middle of the twentieth century, both of which were reactions against the (perceived) elitism and over-intellectualism of the then-dominant compositional trends (serialism and atonality): aleatoricism and minimalism. Aleatoric music (also called "chance music" or "indeterminate music") is music in which some element of the composition is left to chance, or some primary element of a composed work's realization is left to the determination of the its performer(s). Perhaps the most famous (or at least infamous) aleatoric piece is John Cage's 4'33," a three-movement work for solo piano in which Cage instructed the performer to create absolutely no sounds for four minutes and thirty three seconds; thus, "the music" of the piece became the sounds of "the silence" in the hall. Minimalism, on the other hand, is "a style of composition characterized by an intentionally simplified rhythmic, melodic and harmonic vocabulary" (Keith Potter, Grove's). In the classic minimalist pieces of the 1960s, practically every musical element—harmony, rhythm, dynamics, instrumentation, etc.—remains fixed or relatively static (or, if changing, moving at a glacially slow pace) for the duration of the piece; and, as K. Robert Schwarz writes in his *Minimalists*: "the chief structural technique is unceasing repetition, exhilarating to some, mind-numbing to others."

Riley claims to have conceived the entire *In C* in one evening, as he rode the bus to work [playing ragtime piano at the Gold Street Saloon in San Francisco]; when he returned home the following morning, he wrote almost the entire work in one sitting. To create this transcendent experience, though, Riley, in an inspired stroke, utilized the very notion of simplicity. The score—which combines features of aleatoricism and minimalism—consists of only 53 short melodic cells (dynamics and articulation non-specified), each player freely repeating each phrase as many times as desired before proceeding to the next, although Riley does instruct the ensemble members to attempt to remain within two or three cells of each other; however, it is also essential that a fixed and constant pulse be maintained throughout the piece (many performances include a high-pitched instrument producing a drone of repeated eighth note Cs—as Riley notes, "traditionally played by a beautiful girl"). The harmonic scope of the work is even more limited: the 53 riffs illuminate only four harmonic regions, creating what Douglas Leedy calls "a communal joyous cacophony of secular yet spiritual ecstasy." As Alfred Frankenstein wrote in his November 8, 1964 review of the premiere (entitled "Music Like None Other on Earth"): "[Riley] is bound to make a profound impression with [*In C*].... This primitivistic music goes on and on. It is formidably repetitious but harmonic changes are slowly introduced into it; there are melodic variations and contrasts of rhythm within a framework of relentless continuity, and climaxes of great sonority appear and are dissolved in the endlessness. 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, but it is altogether absorbing, exciting, and moving, too." And so it is today.

"When I'm not playing it, it's not necessarily my music; I always feel it has a lot more to do with the performer. The performer should own the music he's playing, in the sense that he feels free to shape it.... I gave a prescription of what notes to play and a direction for it, but music is either alive or dead, and the life in that music has to come from the performer. Without that, the notes are dead and they're not going to affect anybody. So [*In C*] could be a million different things, using the same notes. I formulated it, let's say that, but I can't own it; it's too abstract. We credit all these people like Bach with the great works, but those works came through them. It was like a gift to them. It came from a higher source."

(Terry Riley, in Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 1995)