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## Listening to 'In C,' a 1960s Icon

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The 1960s didn't do much for classical music in America, or at least they didn't change the major concert halls. Musicians didn't grow long hair, and the same familiar masterworks went on being played.

But outside the mainstream, a classical-music counterculture did develop, and its own founding masterwork was a piece by Terry Riley called "In C," premiered in San Francisco (where else?), in 1964. This is music that seems to have the ideals of the '60s in its DNA.

And that's because Mr. Riley didn't simply write everything down, and then ask musicians to play exactly what he wrote. Instead, he imagined a cooperative piece. Working quickly, flying on instinct, he wrote out 53 short phrases, all more or less in the key of C.

And that's all there is. Musicians -- any number of them, playing any instruments -- can join together and perform the piece. One taps out a quick, unending pulse (of course on C). The others play the 53 phrases, in order, but at their own pace, repeating each phrase many times, if they like, completely on their own, though Mr. Riley does suggest they stop sometimes, to hear what everybody else is doing. When everyone gets to the end, the piece is over.

And the results? Just magical. All kinds of musicians have played this piece -- new music experts, Baroque music specialists, rock musicians, you name it. And they tend to sound delighted, as if they've found something that brings out both their *joie de vivre* and their love of good, hard work.

In each performance, the phrases combine in new and different ways, making sounds that no one could have predicted. But the order of the phrases creates musical knots for the players to untie, when all at once a familiar chord gets tangled by a new, emerging dissonance. Excitement sometimes mounts and everyone gets louder. Or else the music suddenly subsides and the sound grows quietly transparent.

And last week there was a performance unlike any other. This was a celebration of the 45th anniversary of "In C," played by more than 70 people, at what might be classical music's most famous mainstream venue, Carnegie Hall. And what diversity filled the stage! Front and center were the four members of the Kronos Quartet, whose first violinist, David Harrington, had

organized the festivities. In the middle sat Mr. Riley, resplendent in his big white beard.

Mixed among the performers were members of the Young People's Chorus of New York City, wearing clothes of many colors, the composers Philip Glass and Osvaldo Golijov, and an ensemble of koto players from Japan. Scattered through them all were a few veterans of the 1964 premiere, and also of the lively first recording, made in 1968. (It's just been reissued on SONY/BMG, though the most joyful recorded version might be the one released in 2001 by the Bang on a Can All-Stars plus friends, on the Cantaloupe label.)

At first I thought the pulse was heavy, and the texture muddled. I'd see people playing, but I couldn't hear them. But then I simply listened to the sound, and stopped caring about how I thought "In C" should be organized. The sound was large. It enveloped me. **It moved as it if were a living being, shifting, changing, falling away to let me hear (just for instance) the piping of four recorders, played by the members of Quartet New Generation, a recorder ensemble that specializes in challenging new repertoire.**

I got lost in this sound. I didn't want it to end, and it kept on delighting me for the full length of the piece, which on this festive anniversary was close to two hours. This was one of the happiest evenings of my long life in music, a celebration not only of "In C" and everything that stemmed from it -- including minimalism and today's alternative classical music scene -- but of life itself.

Even the audience was fascinating. Distinct individuals, hundreds of them, of all ages, each one plausibly an artist, the kind of person who could absorb the cooperative spirit of "In C" and carry it forward into something new (as the older ones among this crowd may have already done).

I went home delighted, as I hope Mr. Riley did. Not that the world had changed. Concert halls continue to present the same old masterworks for audiences that surely include many of the same people who came to concerts back in 1964. (The classical music audience was younger then, and renewed itself by drawing in new cohorts of people in their 20s and their 30s). But Terry Riley and "In C" had come in triumph to Carnegie Hall, and the winds of change that started blowing 45 years ago had now grown stronger.