

# New Music Reblog

## April 29, 2009

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### In C At Carnegie: Part II

1. Joyful, joyous, exuberant, ebullient, ecstatic, euphoric, radiant, rhapsodic, rapturous, festive, celebratory, dynamic, cinematic, complex, elaborate, demanding, involved, intricate, accessible, simple, unadorned, uncluttered, unpretentious, propulsive, driving, forceful, impulsive, powerful, brutish, savage, swarming, thronging, dense, thick, condensed, concentrated, sparse, spare, scattered, gentle, tender, delicate, serene, sweet, lyrical, expressive, subjective, objective, brutal, booming, vernacular, unsparing, moving. And complete.

2. 53 adjectives. And then a 54th. We always add one extra to remember what was left stranded without notation: the 8th note pulse, the incessant, unforgiving C, that, since its introduction by Steve Reich, has now taken on the quality of a familiar tune, whose entrance always provokes applause and anticipation. The 45th Anniversary version of *In C* at Carnegie Hall opened *sans* pulse, heightening suspense, but launched, instead, into an elaborate sustained improvisation *on* C by classical Indian singer Ustad Mashkoor Ali Khan, soaring high over a rumbling bass of didjeridus, a double bass (Saskia Lane), a contrabass clarinet (Alexander Kollias), a contrabassoon (Katherine Chapman), a bass flute (Nicole Frazee), a growling bass clarinet (played with uncommon verve by Evan Ziporyn) and various other noise makers. This sustained crescendo of pure melody, led in turn to *the* most cinematic and heart-rending entrance of the C-pulse that I have ever heard: it was order patterning its way out of chaos; it was pure rhythm emerging from the depths of song.

3. Music is pattern-making. And minimalism is pattern-making unadorned, uncluttered by any other consideration besides listening to a pattern unfold and interact with other patterns in time.

4. The 45th Anniversary version was "conducted". No, there was no beating of time, instead Dennis Russell Davies acted, as described in the program notes, as "Flight Pattern Coordinator". His role was the provision of sign posts, literally - he walked around the stage at key points in the work's unfolding with numbered cards, ensuring that everyone's journey through all 53 cells would coincide with certain choice arrivals. This allowed for a more subtle and detailed orchestration of *In C's* sonic geography, which was certainly welcome in this version, with its collection of a veritable who's who of new music.

5. *In C's* subtlety is not found in its dynamic control or in its orchestration. An indeterminate work however is strangely more organic than a determined one, organic in the sense that the work's dynamics swell and ebb like an organism inhaling and exhaling. There is a certain naturalness and purposefulness, not to mention spontaneity, in the work's rate of change, whether in dynamics or in its thinning/ thickening of textures. No *subito* dynamics are possible (none are required). No orchestrated acceleration. No *Bolero*-like fussiness in its structuring of number of events per unit time. *In C* always reinvents itself because it is as close as one can get to a notated *becoming*: the 53 cells are not summaries of an architectural plan, but are snap-shots of a work already in progress, perpetually sounding.

6. In the 45th Anniversary version, individual players and groups had their chance to shine, like little cadenzas or solos in a jam session. Everyone stood out, but I have to single out the subtle and stunning improvisation by So Percussion, such captivating playing that even the musicians on stage stopped what they were doing and turned to listen to them.

7. Margaret's solo, amplified of course, consisted of a delicate play between her toy piano, toy glockenspiel and the Kronos Quartet. There was a delicacy to their collective sound that was unbearably beautiful.

**8. The members of the Young People's Chorus of New York City along with new music regulars Joan La Barbara, Sidney Chen, Alfred Shabda Owens, Judith Sherman, and Michael Harrison sang lyrics specifically written by Riley himself, mostly phonemes rather than actual words. Their solo turn was striking and just as memorable as the others.**

9. When amplification is used, it allows for a different kind of instrumentation. Pairing bass flute (the bass flute solo occurred at cell 48) with brass ensemble is only imaginable with amplification. But what a sound! Almost, dare I say it, Mahleresque.

10. Speaking of European influences, I swear I heard some Sibelius in there somewhere, especially in the slower sustained cells (specifically cell 35, the longest of all 53 - are the retrograde numbers pure coincidence? Or intentional? But also cells 14, 29, 42 and 48). The 45th Anniversary version made the most of these moments, playing up their lyricism, their sheer lushness of sound, their inevitable symphonic opulence. If the European symphony evolved from concrete sound to abstract form, then the American symphony returns it to its etymological roots, a *sounding-together*. *In C* is an acknowledged masterpiece, but remains the great unacknowledged American symphony, a symphony in perpetual search of an orchestration, constantly new, constantly searching, constantly reinventing itself.

**11. This reinvention is an acknowledged virtue of the work. And bearing this in mind, David Harrington made sure to include young musicians as well, whether musicians from the Young People's Chorus of New York or from the GVSU New Music Ensemble, because reinvention is impossible without the vitality and the involvement of its youth.**

12. Sounds that stood out to my ears: the Koto ensemble *Koto Vortex*, Michael Hearst on bass melodica, and Jeanna Velonis on accordion. I'm always including the melodica in every symphonic work I write from now on, because then the question is posed: who plays it (the woodwind section or the keyboard section)? And how do you ensure its audition? If taste is memory, ditto sound, and a melodica has a wheezing (the perfect descriptive word) quality to it, like a boy with runny nose, or an old man, a strange merging of then and later. I am nostalgic for a past (and a future) that may not even be my own.

13. How do you end a piece like *In C*? With the pulse deserted by everyone, left churning away all alone (does it end softly? or abruptly?)? Or, as in the 45th Anniversary version, a dissipation, a scattering of notes down the aisles, just the timbre of a piano and a toy piano lingering till the very end. And then the echo, the residual sound, the walls of Carnegie Hall holding on to its final resonance.

14. Applause occurred only at the end. But not before a significant pause of undisturbed silence after so much sound, allowing the reverberation to recede into the shadows. I would have applauded after the initial entrance of the pulse, and after So Percussion's solo turn, but saving it for the end allowed for an explosion of approval.

15. Carnegie Hall was packed. Terry Riley was cheered with whoops and whistles. The ovation was deafening and well-deserved. Who is *In C's* audience? Young (and old). Enthusiastic. Informed. Well-coiffed. Snappy dressers. Whoever you are, you made the evening memorable. Music listens to itself through its listeners. And I look forward to seeing you again, listening to *you* listening again, soon.

(For pictures, head over to **Feast of Music** - [http://www.feastofmusic.com/feast\\_of\\_music/2009/04/in-c.html](http://www.feastofmusic.com/feast_of_music/2009/04/in-c.html).)