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‘Eighty Trips Around the Sun: Music by and for Terry Riley’ by Sarah Cahill Review

Pianist Sarah Cahill offers a belated 80th birthday celebration for the composer that challenges conceptions about Minimalism.

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Pianist Sarah Cahill PHOTO: GEORGE MATTINGLY

If any composer defies the stylistic descriptions that critics and historians assign as a necessary shorthand, it's Terry Riley. Usually, the word "Minimalist" is reflexively applied to him, and not entirely without reason: "In C" (1964) and "A Rainbow in Curved Air" (1968), works with gradually unfolding structures and repetitive, burbling figures, introduced Mr. Riley, who was born in 1935, to an international audience when Columbia Masterworks released them on LP, and were among the founding blasts of Minimalism. Unlike most of his colleagues exploring similar techniques, Mr. Riley never distanced himself from the Minimalist label, and he periodically turns up as a guest keyboardist in revivals of "In C."

But Mr. Riley's pre-"In C" music, and much of what he has composed since the mid-1980s—a body of work well-documented in Mr. Riley's own recordings as a pianist, and on recordings by the Kronos Quartet and the pianists Gloria Cheng and Sarah Cahill—is so far from Mr. Riley's brand of Minimalism that a listener unfamiliar with them would be unlikely to guess that Mr. Riley composed

them. Some are pure jazz; others draw fuel from traditional Latin forms, or from the early decades of the 20th century, with hints of Impressionism and post-tonal steeliness jostling for primacy.

Ms. Cahill's recent four-CD collection, "Eighty Trips Around the Sun: Music by and for Terry Riley" (Irritable Hedgehog), a belated 80th birthday celebration for the composer, who reached that milestone in 2015, is a forceful challenge to the Minimalist label. Ms. Cahill offers fluid interpretations of works from Mr. Riley's copious solo piano output, as well as four-hand piano pieces, which she and Regina Myers play with impressive unity and an ear for Mr. Riley's chameleon-like style morphing. The final two discs are devoted to tribute works, composed for Mr. Riley by eight composers—among them, Pauline Oliveros, Christine Southworth, Keeril Makan and Gyan Riley, the composer's son.

Listeners may be surprised by Ms. Cahill's opening works, the early "Two Pieces" (1958-59), a pair of student flirtations with 12-tone techniques, etched in quick alternations of dark and bright hues, sprightliness and muscularity. They are outliers in Mr. Riley's catalog, but he is not averse to an acerbic musical language. "Misha's Bear Dance," "Waltz for Charismas" and "Jaztine," all from 1994, capture his penchant for a Bartok-like spikiness, with clustered harmonies and off-kilter rhythms. What those works share, that dissonant music often lacks, is subtle humor—a playfulness and warmth that undercut the tartness of the language.

"Fandango on the Heaven Ladder" and the gently wistful "Simone's Lullaby" both explore Mr. Riley's fascination with the harmonic gauziness of Impressionism, and the fandango, along with "Cinco de Mayo" and "Tango Doble Ladiado," embrace Latin rhythms filtered through, and altered by, Mr. Riley's free-ranging sensibilities. And "Be Kind to One Another" (2008, revised 2014), a work composed for Ms. Cahill, tells us something about his passion for jazz—he is a freewheeling improviser—by gradually transforming a sweet, gracefully ornamented melody, at first couched in a late-Romantic salon style, into several varieties of ragtime and stride.

Minimalism is represented by only a single selection, Ms. Cahill's own combined edition of "Keyboard Studies Nos. 1 & 2" (1965) with elements from each study superimposed (at Mr. Riley's suggestion).

Of the tribute pieces, the most ambitious and gripping is Oliveros's 39-minute "A Trilling Piece for Terry," for piano and live electronics (overseen by the composer Samuel Adams), although apart from its opening, quasi-Minimalist figuration, it reflects Oliveros's aesthetic range (from meditative to thunderingly chaotic) more fully than Mr. Riley's. The same can be said of Mr. Adams's own quietly alluring "Shade Studies," which explores the way the piano's tone and electronic sine waves intersect. Other composers approach their homages more traditionally. Some play off specific pieces of Mr. Riley's. Mr. Makan's "Before C" is meant as a prelude to "In C," and Elena Ruehr's "In C Too" weaves the repeating pulse of "In C" into an attractive chord progression. Others—most notably Gyan Riley's "Poppy Infinite," with its modal themes, jazzy expansions and Impressionistic harmonies, and Dylan Mattingly's "Y E A R," with its ragtime and Latin paraphrases, its tactile textures and big dynamic contrasts—offer a refracted look at the stylistic *mélange* that Ms. Cahill and Ms. Meyers explore in Mr. Riley's works. If you still think of Mr. Riley in terms of "In C," here's an opportunity to catch up.