

Getting Inside in C.

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In this third article, I turn to a piece of music which presents new challenges for memorisation and performance.

In C by Terry Riley was composed in 1964 for an unspecified number of unspecified instruments. It consists of 53 snippets (cells) of music. They are seemingly unrelated but a number do share some DNA. They range from embryonic utterances to grand statements with one notably lengthy discourse. In C is not played as it is written on the page but according to a few simple rules of engagement. In summary these include starting and finishing ad libitum, playing each cell as many times as you wish, in any octave, and even playing cells at double or half speed. No more than four cells should cover the first and last in the ensemble at any one time. It may be performed by a choir, a brass quintet, symphony orchestra or world music collective with equal effect.

One significant characteristic of In C, particularly from the point of view of memorisation, is the transfer of power from the score to the performer. After centuries during which composers had sought to encode and prescribe every detail and nuance of performance on the page (which all require memorising), Terry Riley strips out all but the most essential features, plotting a simple path from beginning to end. The performers are thus granted the kind of artistic freedom seldom seen (in the Western classical tradition at least) since music was first written down.

Many of the cells are distinctive and not everyone is expected to play every cell which represents a “get out of jail free” card for when the memory fails. Yet there are new challenges. The cells are not contiguous; that is, there is not always a logical progression from one cell to the next and they are not intended to be played without a break (though, you’ve guessed it, they can be). This denies us the crucial tool of linking musical ideas or phrases together to make a whole argument. In C therefore has elements of chance and spontaneity which are usually characteristics best avoided when memorising music.

This article considers three approaches for memorising In C.

1. Analysis

Straight forward analysis of the score is always a good starting point. No prior knowledge is necessary and, unlike a performance of In C which is never the same, the memorisation process can benefit from a selection of indisputable facts.

my top 20 facts include a mixture of harmonic, rhythmic and temporal analysis:

1. Cells 1 and 2 are unique in including a grace note.
2. Cells 2-5 are all in 2/4, the longest period without an implied change of time.
3. Cells 3-5 are the only cells in which only quavers appear.
4. The piece is punctuated by several cells of extended notes, some on C and some on G: Cells 6 and 30 are both held Cs. Cells 8 and 48 are held Gs and Fs, though in slightly different durations.
5. Cells 14 and 42 consist of four semibreve notes starting on C.
6. Cell 29 has three dotted minims in an ascending pattern while cell 45 has three crotchets in a descending pattern.
7. Many cells are repeated twice, even three times: Cell 10 returns as cell 41, and then in a modified version as cell 53 to close out the piece. Cell 11 is heard again as cell 36 and is again modified as cell 49. It is heard upside down as cell 41.
8. Thinking purely rhythmically, the six semiquaver pattern is heard four times in 53 cells, more than any other.
9. Cells 16 to 18 are patterns of semiquavers but start on G, B and E respectively, making up an E minor triad.
10. Cells 18 to 21 are alternately semiquaver patterns and single notes making a neat group of four cells.
11. Cells 20 and 22-26 imply a move to E minor and seem to belong together.
12. Cells 22 to 26 constitute a mini pattern in themselves and are quite unrelated to anything else in the piece.
13. Cell 35 is double the length of any other at 32 crotchet beats.
14. Cells 10, 33, 37, 50, 52 and 53 are all just half a beat and made up of two semiquavers.
15. Cells 36 to 38 are repeated in sequence as cells 49 to 51, though modified with B flats.
16. Cell 45 is unique in using only crotchets.
17. Cells 49 to 53 use only semiquavers but with different implied metres.

18. The only accidentals to appear in the piece are F sharp and B flat.

19. Cells 3, 4, 7 and 19 start with a rest.

20. Cells 6, 7 and 30 consist of only C's of different durations.

Not all of these facts will offer equal enlightenment to everyone and there are doubtless others that may be deduced through further analysis. In any case, remembering the trivia may be more difficult than remembering the score and introduce inaccuracies. However, focussing on a handful of facts that can act as landmarks may prove enough for some, and the very act of engaging with the score in such detail can itself assist greatly.

2. Structure.

Minimalist music often seems void of structure. In reality this is rarely the case. It is more likely that the contrast between sections and ideas are, well, minimal. If learning each cell was easy, linking them together was more challenging because there seemed to be no purpose to their order. In a flash of inspiration (and muddled musicology), I considered overlaying In C with Sonata-form.

Sonata-Form is about as far removed from Terry Riley's world as the blues is from Bach, but this reading can throw up some useful markers that are otherwise missed. My plan of In C now looked like this:

- Cells 1-5: Introduction
- Cells 6-8: First subject
- Cells 9-14: Second subject
- Cell 15: Arrival at dominant
- Cells 16-21: Reprise of some rhythmic motives (modulation towards relative minor of the dominant)
- Cells 22-26: Development
- Cells 27-28: Bridge
- Cells 29-30: Recapitulation
- Cells 31-34: Modified second subject
- Cell 35: Modified passage maintaining tonic
- Cells 36-41: Further iterations of the second subject
- Cells 42-44: Variants of material found in the introduction, first and second subjects all re-establishing the return to C.
- Cells 45-53: Extended coda.

There are obvious problems with this reading, not least the fact that the piece has no subject and there are only loosely implied tonal centres and modulations away from C. In any case, any tonality suggested on the page may be blurred. Neither did Riley think in such terms. However, taking the first subject as both establishing the tonal centre of C, and containing generally longer notes, and the second subject as exploring other tonal centers and containing semiquavers, the approach is viable.

The introduction of F sharp in cell 14 is a turning point if not a true modulation and the loan G in bar 15, while not a typically grand conclusion to the first section, does nevertheless feel like a milestone in performance.

The system falls down slightly here as one might expect the first subject to be restated at this point, instead of which, we see, if anything, a modified sequence of the second subject (semiquavers). There is an inevitable feeling of E minor through what might be the development section, at least on the page if not in performance. Here, it is the quavers of the introduction that are expanded and built up into swirling patterns with displaced beats of dotted crotchets.

The triumphant recapitulation of the first subject is another key landmark in cell 29. Further variants of the second subject are offered, leading into cell 35. This cell is over double the length of any other and is both rhythmically and tonally interesting. At a push, one could say that it recycles elements of both the first and second subject, and that the F natural is an important bridge, keeping the tonality pointed towards the final climax in C.

The return of a clearly defined C in cell 42 with long semibreves is a triumphant conclusion. No sooner have we arrived, however, than the ceaseless progress of the piece takes us onto yet another sequence of the second subject. The inclusion of B flats implies further modulation and perhaps a move away from C to be continued in a further, undefined temporal existence... Maybe, maybe not.

Musicologically suspect? Probably. Helpful? Possibly, especially if you are familiar with Sonata-form. It may just provide a useful roadmap onto which cells can be plotted during the learning

progress. It does, at least, offer a reading where most cells have a function.

3. Associations.

This is the idea of developing the above analysis beyond what can be deduced from the score to include ideas and associations that are personal to you. In this regard, it may be the most helpful approach of all three. For the same reason, it is the approach least helpful for me to describe as my associations are personal to me. Here are just a few of my own:

1. Cell 6: nice round number with long note. First real statement of the tonic note after which the piece was named.
2. Cell 8: Number 8 in Braille is written as a G in Braille music and this cell has a G dotted semibreve. The F is held for 8 beats. Ditto 48. Neatly here, the G is held for 4 beats, so 4 and 8.
3. Cell 11 is in a different meter (3/8 as opposed to 4/4 or 2/4) and 11 is an odd number.
4. Cell 13 reminds me of my birthday (the 13th) when I tried archery which made a “piquing” noise which might be written as the anticipatory semiquaver tied to the dotted minim.
5. Cells 16 and 46 include the number 6 which, to my synesthetic brain is the same colour as the note G in these two cells.
6. Cells 27 and 28 rang a distant motor-racing bell for me. During the late 1980s the Ferrari cars in Formula 1 were numbered 27 and 28. The pattern of semiquavers, both starting on E, in cells 27 and 28 remind me of the prancing horse logo of Ferrari. As a clincher, the F in Ferrari is the same Braille dot pattern as the note E. Instantly unforgettable!
7. Cell 29 has the number 9 in it. The three notes in this cell have three beats each, adding up to 9.
8. Cell 30 is a nice round number and signifies a landing back at the C. Again, synaesthetically, 3 and 30 share the same shade of yellow for me.
9. Cell 42 reminds me of the majestic pedal notes under the stream of semiquavers of Vidor’s Toccata. A wonderful grounding moment in the piece and a grand finale. It coincides with the final return to C after the extended build up from cell 36.
10. Back to braille, the number 5 and musical note D are the same dot pattern so cell 45 with two D crotchets stands out.

This stage marks a transition from objective to subjective, conscious to subconscious and voluntary to involuntary. We cannot change our first associations and it is quite difficult to manufacture an association artificially. Having said that, after a period of isolated study of In C, I found it invaluable to finally share ideas with colleagues ahead of my first performance.

From paper to performance

Learning the cells is only one aspect of In C. The freedom afforded to each musician means that no two performances are the same. One may feel at times pulled along by an irresistible tidal current, willingly or otherwise, and at times like the reconnaissance party, charting new territory. It may be, for example, that one player is playing a cell that divides into crotchet beats against another which divide into dotted crotchet beats. Cells 11 and 12 are a good example. Cell 42 was described above as being a triumphant return to C after an extended perfect cadence. On paper, it certainly looks that way, but in reality, the F and B of cell 40 could work against this, blurring the effect of the C. The pattern from cells 22 to 26 looks on paper to imply a compound time. In reality, performers enter in canon, add accents and stresses in different places and offer up varying articulation. The effect can be a mesmerising swirl of sound, infinitely peaking and troughing.

Just as the harmonies implied may be blurred, or occasionally come into sharp focus, so the texture of the performance may vary. At one moment, there may be a terrifying crescendo and at other moments, there may be absolute silence apart from the ever-present gong and a semiquaver G every four beats.

Final thoughts

In the context of memorisation, In C presents some challenges: It cannot be practised meaningfully beforehand and cannot be reproduced. Rather like life itself, it is a constant series of chance encounters, random occurrences and beautiful moments, none of which can be rewound and played again. This means there are no audio clues, no fixed musical gestures, and, of course, no harmonic, melodic or textural landmarks.

On the other hand, there are some aspects of performance that offer some welcome assistance: Wait long enough, and someone, somewhere will present the audio clue of which cell comes next.

Neither is every performer expected to play every cell. There are infinite points at which one can re-enter the discussion, unlike a complex fugue where one momentary lapse of concentration can interrupt the whole discourse.

I hope the above three approaches offer some ways to get inside In C.

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