

From Raga to Rag: On Terry Riley's Stylistic Synthesis

It seems particularly timely and appropriate to be writing about Terry Riley in 2005, the year of his seventieth birthday, when a spirit of festive celebration fills the air. A free spirit, maverick *par excellence*, creator of a personal compositional style that has spawned entire generations of epigones, he certainly deserves these sumptuous celebrations. Terry Riley is the kind of intellectual who embodies the best aspects of the American pioneer spirit, the positive and uncorrupted image of America (and California, in particular) that still holds abroad: an America free from the weight of European tradition, a privileged space where a fusion of Western and Eastern cultural trends can be produced. (After all, this has always been the supreme paradox of American art: The more diverse and multiethnic the result, the more it appears quintessentially "American.")

For more than forty years Riley's music has engaged us, relentlessly developing in intensity and enlarging its scope, its author courageously exploring ever-new styles and compositional devices and smelting them into a unique syncretic synthesis. The styles Terry Riley adopts are like entries in a journal: each one the witness of a particular moment of his life, be it recent or one lost in time. These styles are like documents, trails that the passing of years has scratched in the catalogue of his works.

Because every style that Riley embraces can be associated with a specific phase of his career, listening to his music allows us to travel across space and time, while simultaneously experiencing various steps along his personal and intellectual journey. As such, it might be necessary to reexamine some passages within Riley's biography, in particular those moments that can provide a context for a fuller understanding of the pieces presented here.

When in 1955 the twenty-year-old Riley began his studies in composition at San Francisco State University, ragtime was certainly not part of the curriculum. And it was not until 1960, while studying composition at the University of California at Berkeley, that he decided to take a job as a ragtime pianist at the Gold Street Saloon in San Francisco's Barbary Coast. In the early Sixties, the Saloon in Gold Street was a consciously retro business where you could still experience the flavors of a bygone golden era. Riley performed there regularly, entertaining the audience with highlights from the whole honky-tonk musical handbook: blues, ragtime, jazz.

From 1960 to 1962 Riley was able to support himself (and pay college tuition) by performing regularly at the Gold Street Saloon, at the same time learning how to actually play honky tonk and ragtime from Wally Rose, a musician who Riley still remembers as a "wonderful ragtime and Dixieland pianist."¹ This training ended up being particularly useful. It is in fact well known that circa 1963 he earned a living in Europe playing the piano in American Air Force base nightclubs, and that until the late Sixties he could still be heard performing in piano bars.

Once we recognize the presence of African-American music in Terry Riley's formation, it is natural to think that Riley's openly acknowledged interest in jazz was what led him to begin playing the saxophone, certainly a key instrument of the jazz repertoire. It seems fair to assume that the long relationship that Riley established with the saxophone as a performer and composer can be linked with his openly professed admiration for the music and performances of two of the most acclaimed jazz saxophonists: Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane. It was after an inspiring Rollins performance that Riley, as we shall see, first wrote *Tread on the Trail*, and it was under Coltrane's spell that Riley chose to play the soprano saxophone, an instrument that had acquired a large popularity thanks to Coltrane.

The first among Terry Riley's works that employ the saxophone as a means of exploration is 1965's *Dorian Reeds*. In this work Riley duplicates, delays, and overlays a series of musical phrases performed on the saxophone through the effect machine he himself created: the time-lag, looping, and phasing accumulator. This kind of sound mirroring—think of reality observed through a multifaceted prism—granted polyphonic possibilities normally denied to an instrument such as the saxophone, which normally can produce only one musical line at a time.

The famous 1969 *Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band*—a sort of dark alter ego of *A Rainbow in Curved Air*—is a further step in the process of exploring the possible transformations and manipulations of the sound of the saxophone. In *Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band*, an obvious continuation and re-contextualization of the experience of *Dorian Reeds*, the soprano saxophone played by Riley and processed throughout a series of delays routinely occupies the center of the musical stage.

¹ From a personal e-mail sent by Terry Riley to Luciano Chessa on August 15, 2005.

These are only the first and most famous examples of the saxophone's presence in Terry Riley's music. But we would have to wait until the late Eighties to find Terry Riley's first work for saxophone ensemble. Written in 1987 for the Rova saxophone quartet and inspired by the eighth-century Ulster heroic tale "The Tain Bo Cuailnge" (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), the fifty minutes of *Chanting the Light of Foresight* exist as the direct precedent to Riley's works for saxophone quartet of the late Nineties.

Reading what Riley wrote about the compositional process adopted for *Chanting the Light of Foresight* provides us with a privileged view of his workshop:

Although extremely difficult to accomplish, I wanted to have part of the quartet's movements in "resonant intonation" with pure intervals combining in the saxophones' radiant timbres. After composing the music I made a tape on the Prophet 5 synthesizer of the tuning so that the players could match the intervals in their rehearsals. Rova has taken this challenge seriously. The result is sounds that I have not heard previously coming from saxophones and is right in the tradition of Rova cutting an alternate groove in contemporary music. When we originally conceived of the project we wanted to leave room for lots of improvisation. This not only takes place in the "Pipes of Medb" and "Medb's Blues" but in addition Rova created the Battle Music section, which is one of my favorites and points to their strong compositional abilities.²

Through this testimony, we immediately realize that the working process described here is derived from his collaboration with the Kronos Quartet, an association that more than any other deeply affected Terry Riley's compositional career from the early Eighties until now. This working together, based on exploring many levels of improvisation, and an openness to the ensemble's involvement in the pre-compositional (and sometimes even compositional) process as well as the exploration of new tunings, most definitely set the standard for Riley's future collaboration with other ensembles. With the pieces written for the Kronos Quartet (the relationship started in 1980 with *G-Song*) Terry Riley found a perfect synthesis between a more rigorous writing technique (probably an heirloom of the early UC Berkeley years) and its antithesis as represented in the improvisational work, mainly on a keyboard, that constituted the core of Riley's output in the Seventies.

The collaboration with the Kronos Quartet marked Riley's return to musical notation. But this return was in no way a reactionary operation, nor a nostalgic one. After a pause that lasted for more than a decade, Riley resumed the act of musical notation with a renewed compositional approach, one that incorporated all the extra-notational musical experiences he had encountered throughout the Seventies, a compositional approach that encompassed the research undertaken by him on tuning systems, improvisational techniques, and especially the experience of an entire decade devoted to the thorough study of Indian classical music.

Another important phase of Terry Riley's musical career began in the year 1970, when La Monte Young introduced him to Pandit Pran Nath. This famous meeting would change Riley's musical direction. Formally initiated as a disciple of Pran Nath in May, Riley left for India in September to pursue the study of Indian classical music. Although returning to the United States after six months of training, Riley remained a disciple of Pandit Pran Nath until the latter's death in 1996. This musical and spiritual relationship was destined to leave permanent trails in Riley's music after *A Rainbow in Curved Air* (1969).

It is interesting to note that two of the most significant musical influences on Riley's style—blues/jazz, and Indian classical music—share relevant common features: modal structures and improvisatory practices intended as careful treatment of a set of more or less strict, codified rules. By emphasizing common ground (in music as he would also do in world politics), Riley reconciles different cultures within the same inventive fusing process.

² From Riley's liner notes to the New Albion Records CD *Chanting the Light of Foresight* (NA 064). Reprinted by permission.

Uncle Jard (1998) for saxophone quartet, voice, piano, and harpsichord. Commissioned by the ARTE Quartett. Premiered on March 26, 1999, in Liestal, Switzerland, by Terry Riley and the ARTE Quartett.

Uncle Jard offers an example of what has just been suggested. In this piece, Indian classical music and blues/jazz elements co-exist in a stylistically coherent whole: ragtime and raga have never been so closely intertwined. The pitch collection that Riley has chosen for this piece is mostly derived from a scale that features a lowered third and a raised fourth. Common to all parts of the piece, this scale provides large-scale unity despite exterior differences in mood and/or style.

The piece is divided into three parts. While in the first and second parts the texture of the saxophone ensemble is enriched by the voice and keyboard (in the recording both are performed by Riley himself), in the third part the voice is not featured. In the contemplative-meditative first part, the Indian modality of Riley's singing unfolds over the austere drone-like tapestry of the saxophones, occasionally punctuated by the solemnity of a harpsichord sound that is distinct from the function and mood of airy playfulness that we find in *A Rainbow in Curved Air's* multicolored keyboard virtuosity. The three colors (Riley's voice, harpsichord, and saxophone ensemble) create a uniquely evocative blend.

The second part contains a more articulated structure, wherein Riley gradually introduces a different sound world. Characterized by a 7/4 meter, this part begins with a musical phrase based on the piece's pitch collection played in quarter notes by the soprano saxophone. This phrase employs the same register and pitches from the last bars of the first part, which creates a strong sense of continuity.

The regularity of the quarter-note pattern is soon interrupted by syncopated accents by the rest of the ensemble, which prepare a change of atmosphere that is soon confirmed by the entrance of the piano. This section leads to a piano solo break *ad libitum* that has a characteristic honky-tonk feel, in which Riley seems deliberately to allude to the Gold Street Saloon years at the beginning of his career. As if excited by the piano swing, the saxophones pick up the piano chord progression with swing subdivisions, laying the groundwork for the entrance of the voice. Accompanied by piano and the saxophone ensemble, with a smoky voice Riley sings his ominous blues:

*Uncle Jard said to do it
Did he?
Did he did
Or did he did not?*

*Do you think that we've been bad?
Well, I tell you we've been totally had.
Do you think we make it up?
Well, ol' Jard he's been drinking from the Devil's cup.*

*Uncle Jard said to do it
Did he?
Did he did
Or did he did not?*

*Do you think we tell a lie?
Well, we'd rather lie ourselves than to die.
And life and love's a mystery
Of its deep and darkest secrets Jard holds the key.*

*Uncle Jard said to do it
Did he?
Did he did
Or did he did not?*

*Angels dancing on a pin
Taught old Jard how to take the world on a spin
In his bright and shiny car
He knows how to drive but he never goes far*

Uncle Jard said to do it (etc).³

A Mingus-like section with a build-up in volume and intensity (“wailing” is written in the score) leads to the third part. Here the piece returns to the even 4/4 meter of the opening, but the spirit is different. A regular subdivision of “straight” sixteenth-notes moves like a *perpetuum mobile* from one instrument to the next, often times interrupted by syncopated phrases and sparkling piano passages. The music possesses a sense of rondo-like urgency that finds rest only in the darker closing measures, which bring the listener back to the austerity of the first part.

Assassin Reverie (2001) for saxophone quartet and tape. Commissioned by the ARTE Quartett. Premiered on June 16, 2001, in Basel by the ARTE Quartett and Beat Kappeler.

Assassin Reverie is a piece in a single movement, but structured in three different sections differentiated by sound material and stage direction. Composed to be staged in a “theatrical context,” as Riley himself writes in the performance notes printed in the score, the piece requires the quartet of players to appear onstage all dressed in the same color from head to toe, be it white, black, yellow, green, etc., and wearing matching hats.

Since this visual aspect is obviously lost in the audio recording, it seems worthwhile to describe it. Red lights fill the stage as the piece opens on a free lyrical gesture of the unaccompanied soprano saxophone, soon doubled by the alto. The soprano and alto saxophone begin an articulated dialogue that employs hints of canonic imitation. The tenor saxophone joins in, canonically imitating the soprano part.

The opening elegiac mood of this first section is soon contradicted by ascending gestures of triplets that progressively conquer a higher and higher instrumental range. Among these gestures we can find the ascending phrases of the soprano saxophone in measures 19–23 and 36–38 of the score. The latter of the two is bolder as the soprano saxophone rushes in an unaccompanied ascending cadenza that drops with the painful cry of pitch-bending once the top note is reached.

With the ascending phrase of the tenor and alto saxophones in measures 62–63, a new episode begins (*con moto*) in which the parallel soprano and bass saxophones’ arabesque-like melody unfolds over the syncopated motion of the alto and tenor saxophones. The exchange among the instruments becomes more intricate, the episode growing in intensity as it moves toward the climax of the first section: the striking ascent of the four saxophones’ chromatic cluster (bars 94–99). Supremely prepared by the triple-forte saxophone climax and by stage directions that require the red lights of the hall to be suddenly shut off, the audio track starts to play.

Together with the entrance of an already extremely aggressive audio track—gunshots and helicopter sounds are heard throughout it—a strobe light emerges from the darkness to accompany the next session. Here Riley does not assign written parts to the saxophones, but only indicates a rigorous order of entrance (*sol*, *tutti*, *duets*, etc.), and associates different passages of the tape to a series of melodic phrases and pitch materials that can be freely used by the four musicians. The saxophone parts are meant to be instinctive, improvised reactions to the horror created by the sounds heard on the tape. In this broad dramatic section, the performers are invited to move “about the stage,” as Riley requests in the score, “often mimicking the gunfire and violence of the audio track.”

Cued by the audio track at the end of the second section, the saxophonists move back to their music stands. A blue stage light is turned on while the strobe light is turned off. During the slow fading of the tape, the saxophone quartet plays the closing section of the piece. This moving section recapitulates, together with melodic elements, the elegiac tone of the opening.

³ Text transcribed from the present recording by Luciano Chessa and Troy Boyd, and corrected by Terry Riley.

Tread on the Trail (1965) for ensemble. Premiered in the summer of 1965 in San Francisco at the San Francisco Tape Center. (Version for 12 saxophones by the ARTE Quartett)

Although it was premiered in the summer of 1965 in a concert at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, it is only recently that *Tread on the Trail* has begun receiving steady attention from performers. The reason for this can be attributed to Riley himself. Unsatisfied with the premiere, Riley left the score in a drawer for thirty-five years. Upon his invitation to Moscow in 2000 for a performance, he decided to bring the piece along and to produce a revised version of it.

It is also possible to suppose that the immense popularity of *In C* might have upstaged it. Written right after *In C*, *Tread on the Trail* is in fact based on similar construction principles. The music in both pieces is a *ludus*, a game in which Riley re-injects into Western music a new-found vitality. Through a free exploration of the score, musical performance recovers here its true essence as a playful collective ritual.

But *Tread on the Trail* is not a lesser son (it has its own chops). While Riley does not care to disguise the similarity between the two pieces, at the same time he rightly points to the one particular feature that is peculiar to *Tread on the Trail*: what he calls the “funky-jazz feeling.” Unlike *In C*, *Tread on the Trail* in fact “swings,” the sixteenth-note swing being specifically requested—as it will be in the second part of *Uncle Jard*—in the score.

As a result, this piece creates a perfect marriage between new music and jazz, something that might have sounded even more utopian in 1965. This was obviously deliberate since the work was already dedicated in 1965 to the jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins, whom Riley saw performing right before starting to compose the piece. In a 2002 radio interview with Folke Rabe, Riley remembers Rollins’s concert:

I went to see Sonny play in 1965, just shortly before I wrote this piece, and he came out from New York with four or five musicians, but didn’t give them any music. It was an interesting night, because he just sat up on the stage, and he would start improvising something with his horn, and he would kind of glance at the musicians and expect them to interact with the music he was playing. It resulted in a really—I thought—very interesting night of music, because you could sense the anticipation and the kind of bewilderment, even, on some of the musicians’ part, about how they were supposed to interact, but it resulted in some really interesting music.⁴

The score is made up of five lines of music, labeled from A to D. Each line contains thirteen bars of forty-four beats plus a two-beat tag. As in *In C*, the musicians go through the lines of music, performing each line sometimes in unison and sometimes canonically and eventually overlapping lines. The 2000 revision adds a series of optional drones, which accompany every line when it is performed as is, before the canonic process starts. Furthermore, this revision adds a line (in the score called D2) as a variant of the D1 line. Both innovations provide the piece with a richer texture and a broader variety of color.

The piece is written for an open instrumental ensemble. Although the 1965 premiere was performed by a big band made up of players from San Francisco State University, right from the dedication to Mr. “Tenor Madness,” the saxophone is in the forefront, albeit understatedly, as the instrumental source of the inspiration. The version presented here is an arrangement based on the 2000 revision, quite appropriately scored by the ARTE Quartett for twelve saxophones. Throughout this version, the drones are performed rhythmically to provide, as does the “pulse” of *In C*, the backdrop of a steady beat for the syncopations and swing to be more easily enjoyed.

—*Luciano Chessa*

Luciano Chessa is a composer, musicologist, and musical saw player.

⁴ A transcription of the interview can be found at <http://home.swipnet.se/sonoloco16/learning/trail.html>.

Composer's note

The first work of mine that I heard the ARTE Quartett play convinced me that they were a group that approached their performance of new music with seriousness and commitment. The music was *Chanting the Light of Foresight*, which presents a saxophone quartet with many difficult challenges, technically as well as stylistically.

Afterwards, the members of ARTE asked me to write some music specifically for them. *Uncle Jard* and *Assassin Reverie* were the result. The *Uncle Jard* project was an extension of a piece that I had written for my band, the Terry Riley All Stars. The All Stars version involves a lot of improvisation based on a one-page chart. When I wrote the version for ARTE, I took the opportunity to write a piece with more polyphonic intricacy suitable for their classically-trained techniques. I also wrote myself into the piece as keyboardist and vocalist. Through many rehearsals and performances of *Uncle Jard*, we arrived at a form that has a nicely balanced shape that has more or less equal parts of improvisation and through-composed sections.

My twin grandchildren, Misha and Simone, when they were around five or six years old, had two imaginary playmates—MissiGono, who was a mysterious woman who had the ability to die and come back to life, and Uncle Jard. I have written pieces on both of these characters. Uncle Jard was their scapegoat. Whenever they got into mischief, they would say “Uncle Jard said to do it.” I would like to thank them for their significant contribution that served to jumpstart this music.

Assassin Reverie is a result of living in the post-9/11 world, where we see rampant terrorism committed by guerrilla fighters and insurgents and even more devastating acts of terrorism committed by the power-mad leaders of the so-called free world. I wanted to create a theatrical piece that expressed some of the meanings of both words in the title. Brutality and beauty holding hands. A twenty-first-century world where assassins dream all around us.

— Terry Riley, August 2005

Terry Riley (born 1935) is considered to be one of the founding fathers of the Minimalist movement. His landmark composition, *In C*, established Minimalism as a vital force in contemporary music and his work continues to be a major influence today. His career, spanning five decades, far from being confined to the minimalist category, has always crossed boundaries and been marked by its effortless transformations and morphing from one stratum of thought to another. Highly developed elements of Indian music, jazz, and African and Middle Eastern music are intricately interwoven into much of his work.

A gifted pianist, singer, and improviser, he has performed worldwide since 1955. He is a senior disciple of the late legendary North Indian vocalist Pandit Pran Nath, and has appeared in numerous concerts as the Master's accompanist both on tabla and vocals. He has received numerous awards, including a John Simon Guggenheim award, a Gerbode Foundation grant, and two NEA grants. He has written compositions for chamber, orchestral, jazz, rock, and world music ensembles. Most notable is his twenty-five-year association with the Kronos Quartet, for which he has produced fifteen major works, including thirteen string quartets and *The Sands*, a concerto for string quartet and orchestra.

Riley's list of collaborators includes La Monte Young, Chet Baker, John Cale, Don Cherry, Krishna Bhatt, Stefano Scodanibbio, the Kronos Quartet, the artist Bruce Conner, and poet Michael McClure. The *London Times* listed Terry as one of the “1000 Makers of the 20th Century.” For further information, please visit www.terryriley.com.

The **ARTE Quartett** was founded in 1993 by saxophonists Beat Hofstetter, Sascha Armbruster, Andrea Formenti and Beat Kappeler. The musicians have a classical background yet they are stylistically open-minded, as demonstrated by their intense cooperation with musicians and composers of various styles. The ARTE Quartett is mainly committed to contemporary music and its various aspects. Since the foundation of the quartet, ARTE has collaborated closely with many composers, which has permitted the group to be involved in the actual compositional process. ARTE has premiered a large number of commissions. Part of the concept is a clearly structured and well-reasoned programming as well as working repeatedly on larger projects. During past years ARTE's projects have included concerts with Terry Riley, Tim Berne, Urs Leimgruber, Fred Frith, Pierre Favre, Nick Didkovsky, Nik Bärtsch, Lucas Niggli, and Nadir Vassena. The quartet tours regularly and plays in various festivals and concert series and has recorded a wide number of new pieces with various national broadcast companies.

www.arte-quartett.com

Beat Hofstetter, soprano saxophone, was born in Laufen, Switzerland. He studied saxophone and conducting at the Conservatory in Basel, Northwestern University in Chicago (Master of Music), and the Hochschule für Musik in Karlsruhe, Germany. He has conducted various ensembles and orchestras. He has also won various grants and competitions in Switzerland. He teaches at the Hochschule für Musik in Basel and Musikhochschule Lucerne.

Sascha Armbruster, alto saxophone, was born in Lahr, Germany. He studied saxophone in Basel with Iwan Roth and Marcus Weiss. He won the “Premier Prix à l’unanimité” at the Conservatoire Supérieur National de Paris with Claude Delangle and has won various competitions. He performs regularly as a chamber musician and with various orchestras throughout Europe. He teaches at the Musikhochschule Lucerne. www.saschaarmbruster.com

Andrea Formenti, tenor saxophone, was born in Balerna, Switzerland. He studied saxophone and received his Soloist Diploma in the class of Iwan Roth at the Conservatory in Basel. He has won various grants and competitions. He is a member of Ensemble Oggi Musica in Lugano.

Beat Kappeler, baritone saxophone, was born in Reinach, Switzerland. He received his Diploma for saxophone in the class of Iwan Roth at the Conservatory in Basel. He received his Concert Diploma for Saxophone at the Musikhochschule Zürich in the class of Marcus Weiss. He has studied electronic music and performs with various chamber ensembles and orchestras.

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Terry Riley

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TERRY RILEY (b. 1935)
& ARTE QUARTETT
ASSASSIN REVERIE
80558-2

Uncle Jarda (1998)

1. Part 1 5:17
2. Part 2 8:36
3. Part 3 5:32

ARTE Quartett: Beat Hofstetter, soprano saxophone; Sascha Armbruster, alto saxophone; Andrea Formenti, tenor saxophone; Beat Kappeler, baritone saxophone; Terry Riley, vocals, piano and harpsichord

4. *Assassin Reverie* (2001) 18:43

for saxophone quartet and tape

ARTE Quartett; Beat Kappeler, sound design and effects

5. *Tread on the Trail* (1965) 9:56

version for 12 saxophones by the ARTE Quartett

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