

Nate Vander Pol

Amy Kavanaugh

MUSC 243

6/16/26

Abstract for *In C*

In C is a fascinating piece, and it is reflected as such in the essay *In C: A Modern Analysis*. It discusses how *In C* deals with minimalism and staying together as an ensemble, while still allowing players to wander through the piece and not be perfectly in sync with each other. It will elaborate on minimalism as a style of composition, briefly discussing the structure of post-modern music, and highlighting how *In C* fits within the style of minimalism. It explains briefly how Terry Riley, the composer of *In C*, used drones to effectively distort the audiences perception of time, and force them to pay more attention to the individual musicians playing the piece. Lastly, it will briefly cover how *In C* fits when placed against other pieces of music composed in the same time frame.

Keywords: minimalism, ametric, post-modern

Nate Vander Pol

Amy Kavanaugh

MUSC 243

6/16/26

In C: A Modern Analysis

In C was a piece written by Terry Riley in 1960, one of the first minimalist pieces to be written. It is a unique piece written in the post modern era, an era of composition after the 1940s where most classical composition techniques were discarded. This era was when minimalism was beginning to become prominent. It consists of 53 prewritten measures, played for random durations and out of sync with the other players in your ensemble. It provokes many questions, such as how exactly the song fit within the definition of minimalism, how does the piece compare to other minimalist pieces, are there any parts where the players should line up within the piece, and is there a set beginning, middle, or end?

To answer the question of how this piece fits within the style of minimalism, we first need to discuss minimalism as a style of music. According to Masterclass.com, minimalism is a style of music that “relies on repetition, subtle rhythmic changes, and selective harmonic dissonance that resolves over the course of a movement.” It also includes specific composition characteristics, such as repeating a phrase and changing it

gradually, non-traditional phrasing, a mix of classical instruments and technology, additive rhythms, and drones.

All of these characteristics can be found in *In C*, but not always in the score itself, instead in the composition of the groups performing the piece. For example, the amount of times a phrase is repeated during the performance of *In C* is entirely up to the performers. The score gives no time markings, and even the paragraph of explanation gives only a vague suggestion, stating “There is no fixed rule as to the number of repetitions a pattern may have, however, since performances normally average between 45 minutes and an hour and a half, it can be assumed that one would repeat each pattern from somewhere between 45 seconds and a minute and a half or longer.” It also demonstrates gradual rhythm modulation, which is where a rhythm starts simple and gradually is modified as it progresses. For example, in Figure 1, we can see measures 1 through 5 as a gradual modulation of measure 1, with it modulating from quarter note E4 to eighth note E4, F4, and a quarter note E4. It then modulates to an eighth rest, followed by eighth notes on E4, F4, and E4. Next it uses the same rhythm, but modulates the pitches to E4, F4, and G4 on the last eighth note. Finally, it modulates using the same pitches, only shifting them half a beat forward.

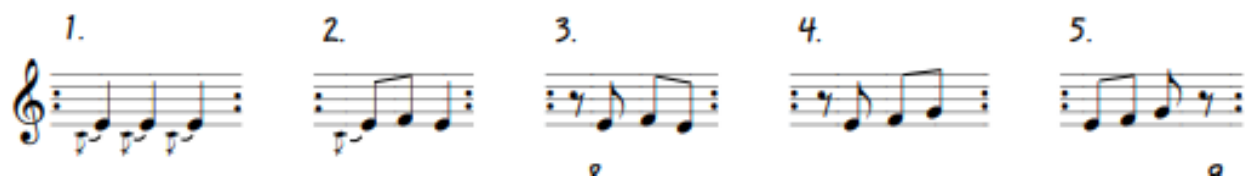


Fig. 1: Measures 1-5 of *In C*

The rest of the characteristics described come from how the performers themselves play the piece. The additive rhythms come from how the piece was originally written. Each musician has full control over how many times they repeat a phrase, when they move on to the next phrase, when to stop playing altogether and listen to the group, and even their octave. (Carl, Robert) Performers are not locked to all playing one specific pattern together. They are encouraged to drift from each other rhythmically, but are suggested to stay within 2 or 3 patterns of each other. Terry Riley wrote these patterns in such a way that the patterns overlap harmonically, forming transitions that can be recognized as the players move through the piece. (Parviainen, Tero) This is also an example of nontraditional phrasing, as the patterns formed can cause some very strange breaks and pauses. The group composition is entirely determined by the group playing it, and their specific instruments. The drones are partially written in the score. In places like measure 6, measure 30, and measure 48, the measures repeat whole notes, forming the base qualities of drones. (Fig. 2)

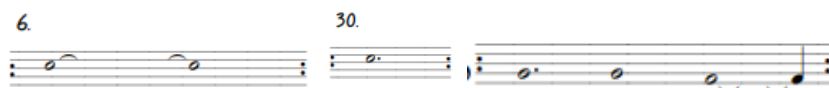


Fig 2: various drone-like measures from In C

There is also an optional drone of C5, played by a mallet percussion or piano player over the entire piece. While not strictly necessary, it has become one of the defining features of most In C performances. This drone also has the quality of distorting with the audience's perception of time. Riley was the first person to effectively use technology as a

method of distorting time, by splicing, cutting, and looping tapes together. Using these methods, he effectively distorts the listener's perception of time.

There aren't many pieces that can compare to *In C*, between its strange score, odd rhythmic patterns, and strangely tonal sound. The closest thing I could think of was a composition by a classmate of Rileys named La Monte Young. His piece was titled *Trio for Strings* and starts with a C sharp for approximately 4 minutes before continuing at an extremely slow pace for around an hour.

There actually are a couple spots where the piece is supposed to line up, mainly the end of the piece. Quoting the score, "The group should aim to merge into a unison at least once or twice during the performance." It then suggests that if the group merges too much during the piece, performers should try shifting their alignment back an eighth or quarter note. Later in the text it also says: "IN C is ended this way: when each performer has arrived at figure #53, he or she stays on it until the entire ensemble has arrived there. The group then makes a large crescendo and diminuendo a few times and each player drops out as he or she wishes." These accurately demonstrate how the group still needs to stay in tune with each other, despite not playing in the exact same spot.

This mix of unstructured freedom and defined parameters lends itself to another main trait of post-modern music overall, which is having an unconventional or often a very loose structure. All pieces of classical music, jazz, etc. are written in a very specific traditional way, with very little flexibility in the writing of scores. Post-modern music doesn't share that trait. Often, like with *In C*, scores will be nothing more than individual measures,

written with repeats so the musicians can repeat as much as they like. In certain styles, the convention of writing on musical staves is even done away with, and the score is purely a paragraph detailing specific steps to perform the piece.

In C is a fascinating piece that effectively utilizes all the main characteristics of minimalism. It weaves the randomness that is common among most post-tonal music with a mild form of the harmonic structure common to more classical pieces. Finally, it specializes in letting the individual musicians wander throughout the piece, but doesn't let them wander too far from each other.

Theory 6 Bibliography

Carl, Robert. "Terry Riley's in C." New Music USA, April 14, 2022.

<https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/terry-rileys-in-c/>.

"Minimal Music Guide: Sounds and History of Minimalist Music - 2026." MasterClass.

Accessed June 11, 2026. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/minimalism-music-guide>.

Parviainen, Tero. "Terry Riley's in C." Tero Parviainen. Accessed June 11, 2026.

<https://teropa.info/blog/2017/01/23/terry-rileys-in-c.html>.