

Chapter 4

The Compositional Language Of Early Live-Looping Music, and How It Departed From Music Of That Time.

Compositional Language –Riley and the Time-Lag Accumulator.

The Time-Lag Accumulator was crucial to Terry Riley's musical language. It gave him the freedom to perform and compose music in a way which was previously impossible. Riley has never seen himself as a traditional composer who sits down at a desk and writes music, Riley is much more a performer who composes music. His performance based approach to writing music was clearly one of the driving forces behind his extensive use of the Time-Lag Accumulator system. It was the Time-Lag-Accumulator alongside the work of La Monte Young that lead Riley's music to become obsessed with repetition.

Tape delay clearly influenced the way Riley thought about repetition and its aesthetic results. From the cut up and layered phrases of *Music For The Gift* Riley discovered how carefully constructed modal phrases layered upon each other could produce truly beautiful results. This gave him the inspiration for writing the seminal work *In C* which has all the characteristics of *Music For The Gift* but with live musicians taking the place of Time-Lag Accumulation. After *In C* Riley's work became more and more about pushing the boundaries of repetition and its use in live performance.

The Time-lag Accumulator allowed Riley the freedom to create counterpoint with a solo instrument layering phrases in an ensemble effect. This is perhaps best heard on his 1968 recording *Poppy No Good and The Phantom Band* where Riley's soprano saxophone is layered time and time again to create huge washes of sound. Riley also made full use of the two separate tracks of the Time-lag Accumulator to control the interaction between two layers of accompaniment. Riley used this feature to seamlessly fade phrases out of the music whilst bringing new material in giving compositions like *Dorian Reed* a wonderful seamlessly evolving structure. When I asked Terry Riley about the role he felt the Time-Lag Accumulator occupied in his performances he replied "A most central one as it supplied the polyphonic richness against which could surround the audience in a cyclic and swirling universe of sound."¹

The use of Live-Looping to create layers of sound also has a crucial psychological effect on the performer that makes it quite different to playing with an ensemble. It makes the player instantly listen back to themselves examining all the details of their expression, this kind of aural reflection causes the player to react to the subtle imperfections in timing and pitching of the material. This gives an entirely different effect to the soloist/accompanist scenario where each player will vary their performance even when looping repetitive phrases. Also in Live-Looping the performer is layering only one performer's personality, this differs in effect to that of an ensemble which combines different performer's individual voices.

Another significant characteristic of Riley's work that differed from that of other experimental composers of the time was the reintroduction of a pulse into music. This

¹ Terry Riley via private email, 12/3/2003

was what gave Riley's music such great crossover potential. Riley stated the importance of the pulse as providing a constant from which one could get "as far out as you want"². This pulse as in a lot of Jazz and eastern music gave Riley the constant he needed to take his music into extremes of improvisation without ever losing the overall character of the music.

Riley, Cage and The European Tradition

In chapter two I talked about the high modernist influence of John Cage that so engulfed the avant-garde music world. I also looked at some of the musical language of Musique Concrete. I now would like to relate these two things to early live-looping music.

Cage

Cage studied with Schoenberg and the influence of Serialism and its modernist ideals characterised his music. Some of his chance music bears an aesthetic surface strikingly similar to that of the serially composed music to which it is so adamantly opposed. The work of Riley and indeed that of other Minimalist composers differs from that of Cage (and other experimental composers who relied on complex systems of chance to remove their own deliberate actions from their compositions) in the audibility of the process behind the music. In Cage's work the chance processes he used are there to deliberately obscure any sense of a perceivable structure or organisation, where as in Riley's work the process is the most visible part of the composition.

² Terry Riley via private email, 12/3/2003

Cage tried to move on from Serialism and the European style of composition, however it could be argued that it was Minimalism through the work of Riley alongside other composers such as La Monte Young that truly broke away from this genre of modernist composition. Minimalism replaced the high modernist ideal of ever increasingly complex compositions and complex thought processes with a much more simplistic approach. The music of the Minimalists is characterised by a return to conventional harmony and reinstatement of the pulse back into experimental music. When one looks at the language and motivation of the music that came before Terry Riley's Time-lag Accumulator compositions it becomes clear just how revolutionary they were. This was true American experimental music that had finally broken away from the European tradition. This was a symbolic change in the direction of experimental music that would go on to be described as part of the movement of post-modernism.

There are however similarities between the music of the Minimalists and the music of Cage. Cage created the idea of music as a surface for the audience to look into, the most extreme example of this was his piece *4'33"*. This idea of a surface is one of the strongest characteristics of Minimalist music. The idea that once the music has started the listener is presented with a wash of sound as opposed to being lead through a piece via peaks and troughs. It seems unlikely that Minimalism could have found this aesthetic were it not for the work of Cage.

It also seems poignant that the music took on a free improvisatory element, this fitted well with the social climate in the East Coast of America at that time. The Hippy movement with its emphasis on freedom, self-expression, and getting high was intrinsically linked to the character of Riley's music. He adopted a modal approach to his

music unlike that of Cage and the Serialist's saying it didn't interfere with the state of consciousness he achieved when using marijuana. Cage's music was often characterised by elaborate systems of presenting chance to remove the composer's intent, whereas Riley's music through improvisation gradually displayed an increasing desire to get closer to the essence of himself. Eventually culminating in a break from performance to study full time with Prada Nath.

The Concrete influence

In chapter three I put forward the argument for the evolution of tape delay from the continuous experimentation with the medium of tape that began with Musique Concrete. Although some of Riley's early Time-Lag pieces e.g. *She Moves Me* owed a lot to the compositional language of Musique Concrete, eventually a new language began to emerge. By the time Riley had begun Keyboard studies in 1964 his integration of technology into performance was completely different to the use of tape technology in Musique Concrete. A Concrete composer would typically spend huge amounts of time editing their tape loops into their chosen form, by 1964 Riley felt this "is more like composing, which I never enjoyed – sitting at a desk and writing music. That's why I put my music down on a tiny sheet of paper and spend all my time playing"³. Riley had abandoned the complex tape editing and assembling of sounds that characterised his earlier work in favour of processing his live instrument improvisations with the Time-Lag Accumulator. By doing this Riley succeeded in creating a whole new method for music

³ P145 Nyman, Michael. *Experimental Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1974)

composition that was no longer simply reliant on the precedent of Musique Concrete. It was here that Terry Riley can be said to have created Live-Looping with the idea that a performer can accompany themselves in live performance through the use of delay.