

CALENDAR

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MUSIC REVIEW

A transcendental improvisation

At MicroFest, Terry Riley finds cultural common ground in the enthralling 'Baghdad Highway.'

By MARK SWED
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Music for most people in the West, and for billions of others around an ever more musically homogenized globe, sounds the way it does because the piano is tuned the way it is. The system, called equal temperament and standardized in the 18th century, is an engineering feat that allows keyboard instruments to play in all keys.

But the intervals are not mathematically pure, and for the last half century, tonally venturesome composers have been investigating older tunings or inventing new ones using microtones, the pitches that might best be described as falling between the cracks of the piano keys.

Equal temperament is so ingrained that the adaptation of any other tuning system is by its very nature anti-establishment.

And it is hardly a surprise to find at this year's MicroFest, the annual Los Angeles festival of microtonal music, an occasional work with a political theme that opposes our government's policies.

As a part of MicroFest 2003, Terry Riley appeared Friday night at Pierce College in a solo

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recital at which he premiered "Baghdad Highway."

In his program notes, Riley describes it as a vigil "intended to put a prayer shield over the country of Iraq to protect its innocent peoples from harm."

Most Americans do not trust artists to offer them workable political solutions, and it is unimaginable that the average voter would select the gentle, avuncular 67-year-old maverick California composer and improvising pianist, with his shaved head and long white beard, as their model of a statesman.

But on a purely musical level, Riley is an inspired negotiator. "Baghdad Highway," which was performed on a Korg synthesizer tuned to the "just intonation" system common in Baroque music before Bach, is a spiritually enthralling effort to find cultural common ground.

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achieving new solutions.

Seated at his synthesizer, Riley, who has a virtuoso keyboard technique, appeared like a shaman calling on the music to create new powers of healing.

Riley remains best-known as the composer who brought Minimalism into vogue in the 1960s, and then went on to apply principals of classical Indian music, jazz and much else to works for keyboard, ensembles and particularly the Kronos Quartet.

But Riley's development has been unusual. Rather than evolving from one style to the next, he adds techniques as new layers to his always expanding musical universe.

The phase patterns from his '60s days are still there, as is the Coltrane influence, but like a magnet, he draws from all he hears.

This was particularly evident Friday, because the concert began with the screening of an affectionate new documentary, "Terry Riley's Musical Rainbow," by Cecilia Miniucchi, an Italian filmmaker who lives in Los Angeles.

The best line in it came from

the Who's Pete Townshend, who said that the only thing minimal about Riley's music is the limitation of the audience.

In "Baghdad Highway," Riley's challenge was to stretch the ear, and with it the political imagination.

He might take a Middle Eastern-sounding melodic fragment and develop it into a powerful dance, or use its shards to create interlocking repeated, ecstatically shimmering patterns. Comfortable jazz riffs coexist with Riley's own Indian-style singing.

He played with the Korg's ability to create washes of electronic sound, the microtonal chords producing stunning resonances. He also merrily bopped along with the synthesizer's rhythm machine.

It was hard to know exactly what in this hour-long musical odyssey was composed in advance and what was improvised.

Riley starts from a clearly worked out melody or sequence of chords and sees where that leads him, as he brings in associations from everywhere.

His fingers are phenomenal and seem to have minds of their own, setting up mesmerizingly complex, intertwining rhythmic patterns.

But the larger effect of "Baghdad Highway" was cumulative.

As one loses a sense of time, as more and more musical styles begin to coalesce into a transcendental whole, a sympathetic listener can begin to feel that anything is possible, even the elusive universal peace that is the main theme of all his work.