



THE HOLY LIFTOFF

TERRY RILEY
CLAIRE CHASE / JACK QUARTET
SAMUEL CLAY BIRMAHER

Terry Riley's *Holy Liff*

An essay by Jenny Judge

Each time Claire Chase commissions a new work for the Density project, there comes a point where the composer sends her a draft score. These documents are often produced by music notation software: standard-sized PDFs, in black and white. Each note-head a uniform size, each stem a uniform length. Each staff lining up precisely with the paper margins.

Not in Terry Riley's case. The first written draft of *The Holy Liff* was a series of full-color drawings on paper, made by Riley at his home in Japan. These drawings feature hand-written notation, across multiple pages, of *The Holy Liff Chorale* — the four-part flute chorus that opens the piece — with a host of joyous little cartoon characters turning somersaults in the uneven margins. An angel in a cowboy hat does a backflip over the tempo marking. On the fourth page, a robed monk and three civilians are being blasted into space by a radiant, friendly-looking Earth. And on page two, another angel in a tank top floats over the music, smoking a cigar and towing a halo behind him that looks remarkably like a deep-fried onion ring.

"They're musical cartoons," said Riley when I asked him recently about the drawings. "But they're meant to be played as music." Of course, the cartoon figures can't themselves be played — not in a literal sense, at least. When I asked him what their role is, Riley explained that the hand-drawn figures are there to encourage the performer to take a certain attitude toward the music, and toward Riley himself. "One of the things that I think happens in the drawings is that I'm conveying a kind of openness," Riley said. "And there's humor in this music, too. There's seriousness, and there's humor. So, if the performer gets to see the drawings, he kind of gets the idea about what kind of person I am, what kind of music I want this to be. How I want it to sound."

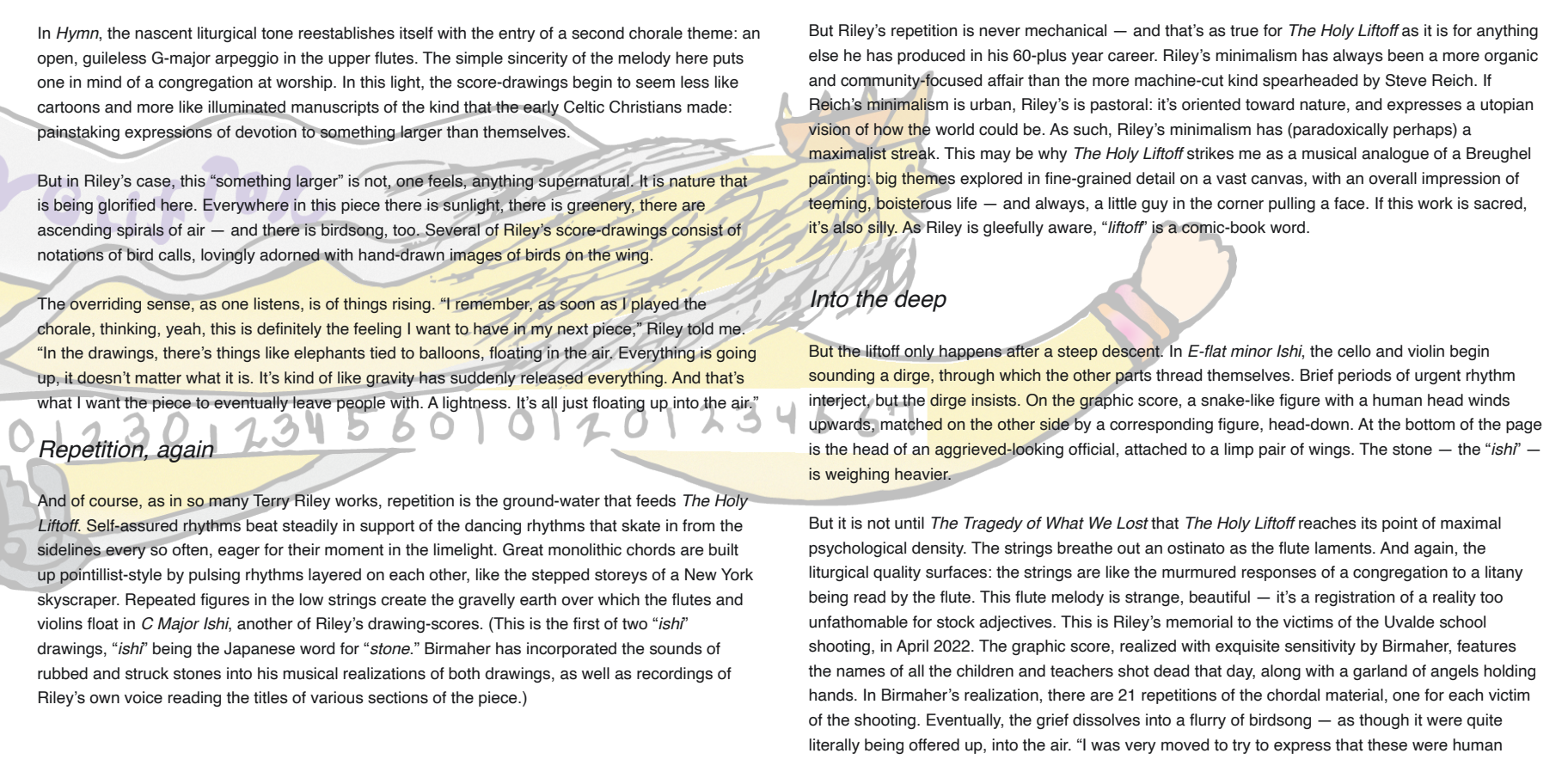
But the musical cartoons aren't just a way of getting the performer into the right frame of mind. Having initially improvised the opening chorale at the piano, Riley found that writing it down in the form of a drawing was itself a creative stimulus. "It really spiked my imagination, with the drawings," he said. "What could happen after the chorale? It was pointing somewhere. So I made a lot of

drawings that weren't necessarily related to the chorale, but were triggered by having written it." In addition to these drawings, Riley started writing fully through-composed sections for an open scoring of eight instruments. He began to send all this material to Chase, who sent back multi-tracked flute recordings, to which Riley responded with more material. Meanwhile, Chase engaged New York composer Samuel Clay Birmaher to develop and arrange Riley's musical cartoons for an eight-part flute chorus and string quartet. In this manner, bit by bit, *The Holy Liff* came together. In its current form, the piece is a collage of Riley's drawings (as realized, developed and orchestrated by Birmaher) interspersed with Riley's through-composed material, which was itself created in collaboration with Chase.

The piece has taken a village to make. And that's exactly how Riley likes it to be. Of Chase and Birmaher, Riley said, "They have skills that I don't have. I couldn't for instance tell Claire how to play a phrase, because she knows the flute infinitely better than I do. I trust her to find the heart of the message in the music, and I know that she always will. And Sam, too — he seemed to get right away what I was doing. The way he manifested the arrangements from the eight-part score was totally simpatico with what I was thinking. It just worked so well. Everybody is doing what they do best."

Up in the air

The Holy Liff begins with *The Holy Liff Chorale*: the section that Riley first notated in cartoon form. It's a dreamy, roundabout ascent for four flutes in close harmony that initially feels less like a four-part texture than a single voice refracted into four beams of light. As the parts begin to find their independence from each other, the chorale takes on the aspect of a hymn. This impression is strengthened by the resemblance borne by the blend of flutes to the timbre of a church organ, a likeness made even more vivid with the entry of a pedal note on low flutes — but then the scene changes, the strings take over the chorale material, and we are immediately in more insistent, secular territory. "There are a lot of passages in this piece where there's a change in landscape, and you're suddenly in a different place," Riley told me. "There's no particular continuity, except it feels like it's always moving somewhere."



In *Hymn*, the nascent liturgical tone reestablishes itself with the entry of a second chorale theme: an open, guileless G-major arpeggio in the upper flutes. The simple sincerity of the melody here puts one in mind of a congregation at worship. In this light, the score-drawings begin to seem less like cartoons and more like illuminated manuscripts of the kind that the early Celtic Christians made: painstaking expressions of devotion to something larger than themselves.

But in Riley's case, this "something larger" is not, one feels, anything supernatural. It is nature that is being glorified here. Everywhere in this piece there is sunlight, there is greenery, there are ascending spirals of air — and there is birdsong, too. Several of Riley's score-drawings consist of notations of bird calls, lovingly adorned with hand-drawn images of birds on the wing.

The overriding sense, as one listens, is of things rising. "I remember, as soon as I played the chorale, thinking, yeah, this is definitely the feeling I want to have in my next piece," Riley told me. "In the drawings, there's things like elephants tied to balloons, floating in the air. Everything is going up, it doesn't matter what it is. It's kind of like gravity has suddenly released everything. And that's what I want the piece to eventually leave people with. A lightness. It's all just floating up into the air."

Repetition, again

And of course, as in so many Terry Riley works, repetition is the ground-water that feeds *The Holy Liff*. Self-assured rhythms beat steadily in support of the dancing rhythms that skate in from the sidelines every so often, eager for their moment in the limelight. Great monolithic chords are built up pointillist-style by pulsing rhythms layered on each other, like the stepped storeys of a New York skyscraper. Repeated figures in the low strings create the gravelly earth over which the flutes and violins float in *C Major Ishi*, another of Riley's drawing-scores. (This is the first of two "*ishi*" drawings, "*ishi*" being the Japanese word for "stone." Birmaher has incorporated the sounds of rubbed and struck stones into his musical realizations of both drawings, as well as recordings of Riley's own voice reading the titles of various sections of the piece.)

But Riley's repetition is never mechanical — and that's as true for *The Holy Liff* as it is for anything else he has produced in his 60-plus year career. Riley's minimalism has always been a more organic and community-focused affair than the more machine-cut kind spearheaded by Steve Reich. If Reich's minimalism is urban, Riley's is pastoral: it's oriented toward nature, and expresses a utopian vision of how the world could be. As such, Riley's minimalism has (paradoxically perhaps) a maximalist streak. This may be why *The Holy Liff* strikes me as a musical analogue of a Breughel painting: big themes explored in fine-grained detail on a vast canvas, with an overall impression of teeming, boisterous life — and always, a little guy in the corner pulling a face. If this work is sacred, it's also silly. As Riley is gleefully aware, "*liff*" is a comic-book word.

Into the deep

But the liff only happens after a steep descent. In *E-flat minor Ishi*, the cello and violin begin sounding a dirge, through which the other parts thread themselves. Brief periods of urgent rhythm interject, but the dirge insists. On the graphic score, a snake-like figure with a human head winds upwards, matched on the other side by a corresponding figure, head-down. At the bottom of the page is the head of an aggrieved-looking official, attached to a limp pair of wings. The stone — the "*ishi*" — is weighing heavier.

But it is not until *The Tragedy of What We Lost* that *The Holy Liff* reaches its point of maximal psychological density. The strings breathe out an ostinato as the flute laments. And again, the liturgical quality surfaces: the strings are like the murmured responses of a congregation to a litany being read by the flute. This flute melody is strange, beautiful — it's a registration of a reality too unfathomable for stock adjectives. This is Riley's memorial to the victims of the Uvalde school shooting, in April 2022. The graphic score, realized with exquisite sensitivity by Birmaher, features the names of all the children and teachers shot dead that day, along with a garland of angels holding hands. In Birmaher's realization, there are 21 repetitions of the chordal material, one for each victim of the shooting. Eventually, the grief dissolves into a flurry of birdsong — as though it were quite literally being offered up, into the air. "I was very moved to try to express that these were human

lives, that these children had so much potential,” Riley told me. “What happens with these things is that they get lost in the news. The next year, there’s worse news than before. But I didn’t want them to be forgotten. It’s just another example of something so needless, so senseless that happens to us as we live out our lives. So I felt that this should be another thing going up in the air. And being recognised for what it was. A lost opportunity for all those children to live a life.”

Everything is going up

Riley is well aware that he’s nearing the end of his own life. “I’m eighty-eight,” he told me. “I’m very acutely aware that it’s the end period of my life now. And I feel like whatever I’ve learned, I want to share. It may not be anything too profound, or anything. But still, I feel like this piece sums up a lot of things I’ve worked for.” When I asked him to elaborate on this, he said, “Well, it’s allowed me to collaborate with other great artists. And it contains the freedom of writing that I’ve wanted to achieve my whole life. At times I’ve written pieces that are written note for note, all the way out. But those have been the most confining kinds of activities for me. I didn’t feel totally free. Because I saw that there were many ways of expressing the phrases that I was putting down on paper as though they were some kind of codified law. So, in this part of my life, I want to stay true to that feeling. That people are intelligent enough, and sensitive enough, to look at my work and know how to make a beautiful representation of it. It doesn’t have to be my idea. It just has to light their fire.”

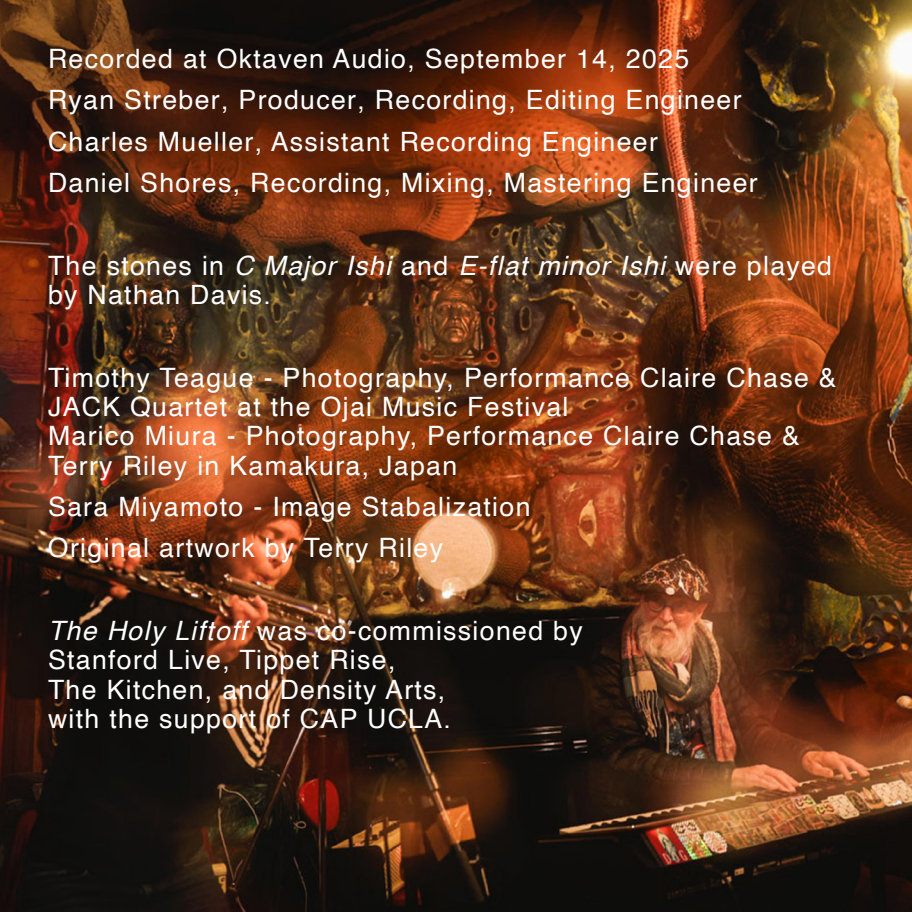
Riley’s mood isn’t entirely valedictory, though. He’s bubbling with new ideas. And *The Holy Liff* itself is far from over. “When Claire starts performing this in public, it’ll take on a new life,” said Riley. “Each performance is probably going to be quite different, because of the kind of musician she is, and the kind of work it is. With her as a leader, I feel really good, because she understands it so well. She’ll be able to see the next step. So, I want to keep going.” Riley intends to keep sending Chase drawings. “I’ve made some she hasn’t seen yet,” he said. “It’s going to be a large opus, a large work that’s going to keep going on. It’s not going to have a real ending, it’s going to be open-ended. Who knows where it will go when Claire starts performing it.”

“So everything will keep going up, and up,” I say. “Forever!” Riley is smiling. “Yeah. I don’t see where I can go from there...” We both laugh. “I’m going to lift off too, in the not too distant future,” he says. “I’m looking forward to that!” Riley is holding his phone for our Zoom call, and when he laughs, his image goes briefly askew. I see his yellow beanie against the ceiling tiles of the old house he’s staying in, and the sky of Kyoto through the window behind him. He shows me his surroundings, explaining how hard it can be to remember that, in these old Japanese houses, what look like interior walls are often in fact made of paper. “It’s almost a non-existent material,” he says. “I’m always leaning on it, I put my hand out and I go right through the paper.” He laughs. “In my own house, I’ve broken several shoji screens.” We talk about Kyoto’s temples, and how they have a similar air of weightlessness. “They make these curves in the wood, they look like they’re wings of birds. And they’re huge, huge buildings. But they look light. Like they could just take off.” This is all going up, too, we agree, in the liftoff. Up in the air.

Trusting the darkness

For all his vivid imagination, Terry Riley is no fantasist. He sees the world as it is. And he sees death very much as the end. “I think music should express that philosophy. In the end, we die, and everything we’ve learned and all the skills we’ve learned just go, you know. I think all art has to educate us to this — this dark fact.”

In his program note for *The Holy Liff* – handwritten, of course – Riley thanks Chase for “allowing me to plunge ahead with my ideas with the headlamps off, trusting what is out there in the darkness.” I’ve been very struck by that image, and I tell him so. “Well,” he says, “what I meant by that was, if we really know what we’re doing we’re not doing it right. We should plunge ahead in our work knowing that we don’t know where it’s going. If we know where it’s going, then why do it? It’s already manifested. So, what it is for me is to find new ways to do things, and let the work educate me as it goes along, about what to do. Let the music tell me what to do with it.”



Recorded at Oktaven Audio, September 14, 2025
Ryan Streber, Producer, Recording, Editing Engineer
Charles Mueller, Assistant Recording Engineer
Daniel Shores, Recording, Mixing, Mastering Engineer

The stones in *C Major Ishi* and *E-flat minor Ishi* were played by Nathan Davis.

Timothy Teague - Photography, Performance Claire Chase & JACK Quartet at the Ojai Music Festival

Marico Miura - Photography, Performance Claire Chase & Terry Riley in Kamakura, Japan

Sara Miyamoto - Image Stabilization

Original artwork by Terry Riley

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