

PRESENTMUSIC



The Holy Liftoff

with **CLAIRE CHASE**, flute

MILWAUKEE
ART MUSEUM

OCT 31 | 2024



Composed by:
Terry Riley

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Artistic Director: Eric Segnitz
Conductor, Artistic Advisor: David Bloom

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TERRY RILEY'S

The Holy Liff

Claire Chase - flute, curator

Realized by **SAMUEL CLAY BIRMAHER**

The Holy Liff is the 12th cycle of **Claire Chase's** 24-year commissioning project Density 2036, and was co-commissioned by Stanford Live, Tippet Rise, The Kitchen, and Density Arts, with the support of CAP UCLA.

OCTOBER 31, 2024 | 7:30 PM CT
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MILWAUKEE, WI

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Conductor, Artistic Advisor: David Bloom

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CLAIRE CHASE

Flutes

MUSICIANS

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Violin

Erin Pipal

Viola

Marty Butorac

Sound

David Vartanian

Livestream and Sound

Ji-Yeon Lee

Violin

Adrien Zitoun

Cello

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ABOUT THE MUSIC

Terry Riley's Holy Ltoff

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 stave lining up precisely with the paper margins.

Not in Terry Riley's case. The first written draft of *The Holy Ltoff* 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 Ltoff 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 'Ltoff 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 eight-part flute chorus and string quartet. In this manner, bit by bit, *The Holy Ltoff* 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.'

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Up in the air

The Holy Liftoff begins with the ‘Holy Liftoff 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.’

The nascent liturgical tone reestablishes itself at around 7 minutes in with the entry of a second chorale theme. This one features an open G major arpeggio in the upper flutes, beautifully guileless in its simplicity. It is at this point in the piece that I am put most irresistibly in mind of a congregation gathered to express, in song, their collective sense of what matters most. 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.’

**To read more of
Jenny Judge’s essay,**



ABOUT THE MUSIC

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ABOUT THE ARTIST



CLAIRE CHASE

Claire Chase, described by *The New York Times* recently as “the North Star of her instrument’s ever-expanding universe,” is a musician, interdisciplinary artist, and educator. Passionately dedicated to the creation of new ecosystems for the music of our time, Chase has given the world premieres of hundreds of new works by a new generation of artists, and in 2013 launched the 24-year commissioning project Density 2036. Now in its 12th year, Density 2036 reimagines the solo flute literature over a quarter-century through commissions, performances, recordings, education and an accessible archive at densityarts.org.

Chase co-founded the International Contemporary Ensemble in 2001, was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2012, and in 2017 was awarded the Avery Fisher Prize from Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. A dedicated teacher, she is currently Professor of the Practice of Music at Harvard University’s Department of Music, and a Creative Associate at The Juilliard School. Chase served as the Richard and Barbara Debs Creative Chair at Carnegie Hall for the 2022-23 season, and will serve as Music Director for the 2025 Ojai Music Festival. She lives in Brooklyn.

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Terry Riley

Composer and performer Terry Riley is one of the founders of music's Minimalist movement. His early works, notably *In C* (1964), pioneered a form in Western music based on structured interlocking repetitive patterns. The influence of Riley's hypnotic, multi-layered, polymetric, brightly orchestrated Eastern-flavored improvisations and compositions is heard across the span of contemporary and popular music.

Performers who have commissioned and/or played his works include: Kronos Quartet, Rova Saxophone Quartet, ARTE Quartet, Array Music, Zeitgeist, Steven Scott Bowed Piano Ensemble, John Zorn, Sarah Cahill, California E.A.R. Unit, guitarist David Tanenbaum, electric violinist Tracy Silverman, drummer George Marsh, bassist Bill Douglass, the Assad brothers, cello octet Conjunto Ibérico, Crash Ensemble, Abel Steinberg-Winant Trio, pianists Werner Bartschi and Gloria Cheng, Calder Quartet, Arditti Quartet, Amati Quartet, Alter Ego, Sounds Bazaar, Paul Drescher, singer Amelia Cuni, Bang-on-a-Can All Stars, and guitarist Gyan Riley.

Samuel Clay Birmaher

Samuel Clay Birmaher (rhymes with "here and there") is a composer living in New York City. He was raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and studied music at Cornell University. His music tells stories about internal and external worlds, using familiar musical elements to create undefined symbols. In addition to composing, he has written prose for NewMusicBox and Mode Records, and performed conceptual music as a member of Gemini Society. Recent projects include a realization of *The Holy Liftoff*, a new work by Terry Riley, for Claire Chase.

PRESENT MUSIC

Make a New Music Project Possible!



RECORDING



Present Music is currently embarking on our most ambitious undertaking in 43-year history: a 26-movement cycle titled **"26 Little Deaths" by Carla Kihlstedt**, inspired by Edward Gorey's iconic "Gashlycrumb Tinies". Scheduled for completion in October, this project features Ms. Kihlstedt as a performer alongside 13 musicians. Anticipated for release in early 2025 on Cantaloupe Label it coincides with the Gorey Centennial, promising significant cultural impact.

RECORDING



We are proud to present a composer portrait of **Raven Chacon**, the esteemed Native American composer and 2022 Pulitzer Prize recipient for his work "Voiceless Mass", commissioned and premiered by Present Music. This upcoming recording, slated for completion in 2024 and release in mid-2025, includes two other substantial compositions by Chacon, further enhancing our artistic legacy

RECORDING



We have completed a recording of a commissioned work by composer **Paul Wiancko**, cellist of the Kronos Quartet. Planned additions to our discography include works commissioned from **Andy Akiho** and **Viet Cuong**, alongside a collaborative project with nationally-known choir **The Crossing**, featuring a new commission from **Christopher Cerrone**. This eclectic mix showcases Present Music's innovative spirit and recent artistic achievements

These forthcoming recordings not only expand Present Music's national footprint but also expand its extensive 15-album discography, which spans decades of creative excellence with 20,000 printed CDs. Each project underscores our commitment to fostering contemporary music, enriching cultural discourse, and engaging diverse audiences across the country.

Gifts at any level up to \$25,000 per recording would be greatly appreciated.
Your support fuels our vision and makes a meaningful impact!

To learn more about our special project and funding opportunities please contact:
Dan Petry, Development Strategist 414-581-4972 / dpetry@presentmusic.org

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

WE'RE GOING TO 2025 BIG EARS FESTIVAL!



We'll be celebrating the CD release of **Carla Kihlstedt's epic, *26 Little Deaths*** and the Edward Gorey Centennial, as well as performing brand new commissions from **Andy Akiho** and PM favorite **Kamran Ince**.

YOU'RE INVITED!

Are you interested in joining us for an exciting trip to Knoxville? If so, we'd love to hear from you! Be sure to check out their website for an incredible 4-day lineup of captivating performances.



www.bigearsfestival.org

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