

Philip Glass, Maximalist?

THE MUSIC OF PHILIP GLASS IS ALMOST UNIVERSALLY referred to as “minimalist.” But after reading his autobiography, *Words Without Music*,¹ it may now be necessary to distinguish between the minimalist music and the maximalist composer. We can see this need right away in a typically ambivalent critical overview of Glass’s accomplishments written by Tom Service for *The Guardian* back in 2012: Glass is “arguably the most influential composer across the whole range of the musical world,” which he then goes on to delineate (though it came as a pretty surprising claim to me). Yet he begins his assessment of Glass with some savage characterizations of his symphonies as “windily grandiose bombast, mind-numbing note-spinning . . . pseudo-symphonic rhetoric, souped-up orchestration . . . overdosed on synthetic musical implants.” Other musical works and genres don’t fare much better. But by the end of his critical essay, he has softened his assessment considerably with a number of concessions and honorifics. Some of Glass’s compositions are even singled out for praise. “Can any of us even imagine a musical world without Philip Glass?” This is the Philip Glass crux.

For so-called classical music lovers, however, it is relatively easy *not* to imagine such a world nor to experience it, given the rarity of Glass’s compositions to appear on the programs of symphony orchestras or chamber music groups. In the past fifteen years alone, I have attended more than two hundred fifty chamber music concerts given by the world’s major players, with only one of them, by the Kronos Quartet, featuring a Glass quartet. And I liked it well enough to buy their CD collection of four. But the Kronos has had a special relationship with Glass over the years and routinely plays his works. As I prepared to write about Glass’s remarkable new autobiography, *Words Without Music*, I heard a few of his symphonic works for the first time, even then only on recordings rather than live public performance. But “heard” is probably a more accurate word than “listened to,” with so far only the Violin Concerto #1 (especially its first movement), the Third Symphony, and the first act of *Satyagraha* able to rouse me out of a certain torpidity into relative enthusiasm.

Glass’s nonplussing book sheds light on these contradictory receptions of his music, but even to use that word is too limited and contributes to the various category errors that place his works on some people’s radar while evading others’. The biggest error is to think of Glass as

¹ WORDS WITHOUT MUSIC: A Memoir, by *Philip Glass*. Liveright. \$29.95.

principally a “composer of classical music.” But avoiding that error is not made easy by preposterous remarks about Glass’s music, such as what Sudip Bose reports in his *Washington Post* review (April 17, 2015): “According to the conductor Dennis Russell Davies, no composer since Beethoven has done more to invigorate the symphonic literature, with the exception of Gustav Mahler and Dmitri Shostakovich. Such a statement might once have invited hostility and derision. But, for the most part, not anymore.” Davies, a good friend and frequent conductor of Glass’s music, does not do him any favors with such injudicious hype. If you can get past these puzzling and contradictory evaluations, a different scenario comes into view, a scenario effectively conveyed by *Words Without Music*. Perhaps the most contested term used to describe Glass is “minimalist.” He writes of being asked over the course of his career, “If you’re not a minimalist, what are you?” “I’m a theater composer,” is his reply, or at least one of the many offered as his book evolves. In reality, there are multiple shades of minimalism, from his eminently listenable violin concerto to a sizable percent of his oeuvre often described as excruciating.

What, after all is minimalism anyhow? To some degree it is a staple component of most music, from archaic chants to modern symphonies (and the backbone of today’s pop music). It entails a certain amount of repetition of a few measures or phrases (sometimes described as “sequences” or “ostinati”). Though it can be traced back into music history almost indefinitely, from my personal range of experience the first prelude of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* is the archetype (revered by almost everyone) and the second prelude is almost as repetitious (and marvelous). There’s Vivaldi, Scarlatti, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky, Orff, Golijov and many others. Bruckner? For years I have thought of his last three symphonies as exemplary of minimalist techniques achieving sublime ecstatic peaks. So I was not surprised to read that Glass was a Bruckner fan from the time of his listening sessions in the 1950s with musical friends as they “undertook a superserious study of recordings of Bruckner and Mahler,” who were being rediscovered at that time. Much later, in 2002, when he heard the Bruckner House Orchestra in Linz play some of his own symphonies conducted by Dennis Russell Davies, “to my surprise,” he writes, “The Bruckner Orchestra played these compositions better than American orchestras. Somehow, Bruckner’s sound had gotten lodged in my psyche. I had taken those [Bruckner] pieces and digested them whole, and they had remained in my memory.”

Glass has much to say throughout his book about his own composing techniques. In preparation for what appears to have been his first public concert of his own music in New York City in the late 1960s, he phoned a former Juilliard classmate to recruit her as one of his combo of players. (The Philip Glass Ensemble, a small group of electronic and acoustic instrumentalists, including Glass, had not yet been formed, though they were destined to function for many years.) When they

rehearsed his latest compositions together, Glass assumed her husband must have thought him insane because she would bring home music “that probably sounded like the needle was stuck in the groove—that’s what people used to say.” But to hold people’s interest, he claimed, his procedure in those days entailed repetition and change. “Actually, it never repeated all the time, for if it had, it would have been unlistenable. What made it listenable were precisely the changes.” Still, he reports, a composer acquaintance described the method of his music as “take a C-major chord and just play it over and over again, that’s what Philip Glass does.” Many of today’s listeners, even after fifty years of his ever-expanding oeuvre, make the same charge. But, “that’s exactly what I *don’t* do,” Glass replies. “In order to make it listenable, you had to change the face of the music . . . so that the ear could never be sure of what it was going to hear.” Given the vastness of this musical corpus, there is in fact more variety to be found than the casual listener is likely to discern, as I have learned from all of the music I have been listening to in preparation for this overview. Still, most of his music is immediately recognizable after just a few seconds because of the constrictions of the style, which can be punishing.

During his years as a student at Juilliard, he composed a string trio according to all the rules of serialism, which was then the rage, at least among academics and the avant-garde, but no one ever played it except himself. “I could play all the parts and I could hear them [as he read from the score] without knowing what I was hearing.” One couldn’t even hear the melody, he felt, if there even was one. Twelve tone left him cold, and he quickly gave it up. For classical listeners who are not specialist Glassian aficionados, however, even the body of “listenable” works looks to be fairly small, not because one can’t make head or tail of it, but because it is only too clear what is going on, despite subtle changes to keep the listener on his toes. As for the quasi-operatic genres of Glass’s music (which he preferred to speak of as music theater rather than opera), I have never been able to get far at all in the recorded versions of *Einstein on the Beach* despite several tries, probably because this work, far removed from opera, is a sui generis spectacle only to be experienced live. My experience with *Satyagraha* is different. I have listened to it in toto four times now: in the mid-1980s it was broadcast live from the Chicago Lyric Opera, and I recorded it, hearing both the actual transmission and the recording shortly afterwards. Less than two years ago, I attended the Met Opera’s high definition screening of their new production, found the first half engaging (an evasive word, I concede) but was jumping out of my skin during the last hour or so of maddening repetition. And now, after reading *Words Without Music*, instead of rehearsing my old tape from Lyric Opera, I discovered that a giant chunk of the Glass corpus is available for free on YouTube, including a few complete operas. So this time around, my latest listen to *Satyagraha* enables me to say that its first act is beautiful and powerful, starting with a single male voice to which others are gradually added

until a full chorus is formed for a massive conclusion. As for the rest of the opera, I was numbed once again, but this time, safely at home, I could down some wine to help me to stick it out to the very last repeated phrase.

Since I have barely scratched the surface of the book under review, and since part of this deficiency derives from the flabbergasting variety and richness of its 400 pages, I have found it an impossible task to offer more than a quick tour of a production that is likely to become a classic account of twentieth-century Western culture of the arts in addition to a personal history of the composer. Moreover, though the book on its surface is roughly chronological, it is also recursively punctuated by references to Glass's musical works, his travels, his major personal and professional influences, his family, his failures and his successes. A tangled web of autobiographical evolution, almost contrapuntally unsuited to linear narration, and sometimes disorienting.

Philip and his brother Marty began to work in their father Ben's record store around the time they were ten and eleven. "My father was self-taught, but he ended up having a very refined and rich knowledge of classical, chamber, and contemporary music." Philip, born in 1937, would often listen with him until midnight and became familiar with much of the store's stock, which in those early days were 78 rpms. He began to order records for the store even without his father's permission, one time ordering four sets of Schoenberg's complete string quartets, to his father's great shock. "Are you trying to put me out of business?" he asked.

In these early pages dealing with his young manhood, Glass refers to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, which about two years ago I read, or attempted to read. Unfortunately it was more than fifty years too late. Whatever the qualities causing that book to become a cultural sensation in the late 1950s and beyond, and however much it may have introduced new qualities and themes into literature, life, and the sensibility of the time, today its road adventures with a band of mostly uninteresting or repellent characters comes off as tiresome and vacuous. When Glass won a \$750 student prize during his years at Juilliard, he used the cash to buy a BMW motorcycle, which at first got him around NYC. Not long after, he made two six-thousand-mile round trips on it between NYC and San Francisco with various musical friends. What *he* has to say about his road adventures underscores the vast difference between Glass and Kerouac:

On the Road by Jack Kerouac had just been published, in 1957, and we all had read it and no doubt were inspired to make the journey ourselves. You got a sense of the vastness of the country from the extreme distances you had to travel. The *huge* lacunae—hours and hours of empty landscapes—and the power and the beauty of the American landscape were what we were involved with, much more than the kind of people that Kerouac was writing about. His book is

full of interesting characters but that's not what happened for us. We weren't interested in having those kinds of experiences, we were out and abroad in America, consuming the country visually and experientially by driving through it.

Almost directly after this revealing passage, we learn that he was also reading all the novels of Hesse, the writings of John Cage, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Paul Bowles. "These were all staples of the beat generation poets and readers, and activists. And, in their own way, they were also deeply connected to the music world of the time." He read Sartre, Camus, Beckett, and enormous amounts of "literature." In later life Beckett became a good friend for whose plays Glass repeatedly provided music.

Glass's education has been extensive, varied, and lifelong. Born in Baltimore, he easily infiltrated Peabody Conservatory before he was even a teenager, mainly because he wanted to be a flute player and was able to receive tutoring there. He moved on to the University of Chicago for a number of years until graduation and then back to New York for the degree at Juilliard. Later he won a Fulbright to France that had to be temporarily put aside while he was taught composition in Paris by the demonic Nadia Boulanger in order to alleviate the self-doubts about his limited knowledge and to broaden and refine his composing skills. But he was tutored, in the deepest ways, all his life, whether by the jazz clubs of Chicago or the explorations in Europe, India, Tibet, even learning Tibetan, meeting and befriending musicians such as Ravi Shankar, hiking to remote Himalayan sites where he talked with villagers and succumbed to the sympathetic vibrations of Buddhism. "From my first visit, in January 1967, the month and year of my thirtieth birthday, I began, through Tomo Geshe Rimpoche [a monk], a relationship with another lineage of work that continues to this day." Returning to India and environs about twenty times over a period of thirty-five years, "I knew that only by planning many short trips would I be able to develop my professional and family life in New York and, at the same time, cultivate my connection to India in general, Indian music especially, and, above all, my connection to the culture and tradition that Geshe Rimpoche represented in his own person." *Satyagraha* was perhaps the largest offshoot among many of these India years.

Though I don't have access to today's high-tech data-mining techniques, my less reliable internal computer keeps telling me that references to *Einstein on the Beach* are perhaps more frequently sprinkled throughout the text than any others. Obiter dicta about the genesis, preparations, composing, piecemeal tryouts, and the staging (which has been done for many of his works by Robert Wilson), finally issue in a dedicated chapter. There we learn that Glass's first meeting with Wilson took place in 1973 with a fast developing friendship and the first planting of the seeds of *Einstein*. "Part of our music rehearsals were [*sic*] given over to

teaching and memorizing the music by our chorus of twelve singers (six women and six men). Only a few of them could actually read music, so learning the music and memorizing it happened at the same time.” The evolution of the complete work is a long story, so that it seems almost ludicrous to segue right into this unclassifiable spectacle’s welcome by the Metropolitan Opera for an implausible production in 1976 as a Sunday “Special Event.” This had to be a radical landmark event in Glass’s life. The auditorium of 4,000 was sold out and an emergency ad hoc second performance was given a week later. What followed was a European tour of seven cities with thirty-three performances. As for the Met Opera experience, after a smashing success involving this audience of about 8,000 people in the course of a week, Glass and Wilson were informed by their advisor (responsible for a precursor European tour that had brought *Einstein* to the attention of the Met Opera) that the entire tour and New York opera event had left them with a loss of \$100,000! During most of Glass’s life so far, he had been a virtual pauper. “To address it, we began by selling everything we could—drawings, music scores, equipment, the works. Some of our artist friends held an auction to raise money to help, but the *Einstein* debt dragged on for years.”

Such a multitude of events in Glass’s life fills these overflowing pages, that before even sitting down at the computer, I felt I was about to enter into a hopeless enterprise, like trying to compress infinity into a grain of sand. An adequate summary or overview would have turned out almost as long as the book itself. Critical information has had to be left out at almost every turn. The subjects and events that I have neglected (little mention of his parents, none at all of his four wives, his children, his music theory, etc.) rival anything I have reported. To support this claim, let me retrieve a theme running through the entire book but which I have so far left out:

From his arrival in New York in 1957 until the commission by the Netherlands Opera for *Satyagraha* in 1978, Glass always needed to have “a day job.” Each of them went on for years, starting with work in a steel mill, followed by lifting and loading for a trucking company, a job as a novice plumber that resulted in growing expertise, work for a construction company, and starting up a small, totally amateur business as a moving company. Extended periods of taxi driving (“A lot of *Einstein on the Beach* was written at night after driving a cab”) were finally becoming dangerous in the New York of the seventies, so that by the time of the Netherlands commission, he decided he would be able to stop driving taxis altogether. This has already produced an iconic joke destined to pop up in every review. When he had occasion to refer to his years of taxi driving to Martin Scorsese during exchanges about music he was writing for one of Scorsese’s films, he was asked, “Wait a second, have you seen *Taxi Driver*?”

“No, I didn’t see *Taxi Driver*.”

“You didn’t see *Taxi Driver*?”

“Marty, I was a taxi driver. During the time when you were making that film, I was out driving a hundred miles a night in New York City. On

my night off, the last thing I was going to do was see a movie called *Taxi Driver*.”

By far the most time, effort, and professional life spent by Glass in his middle years was devoted to the activities connected with the Glass Ensemble, a mostly electronic combo giving concerts and performing accompaniment music to a wide variety of media, particularly the immense extravaganza of *Einstein on the Beach*. Glass also wrote scores for dance companies, for theater plays, for films ranging from music for *The Hours* (based on Michael Cunningham’s novel) to three Hopi-inspired films such as *Koyannisqatsi* and a film about Stephen Hawking, and many more. Writing “classical music” was a small percentage of this feverish activity. “Once you get into the world of theater and you’re referencing all its elements—movement, image, texts, and music—unexpected things can take place.” This was the music world that issued from his excursions to the Himalayas, Mexico, South America, Europe, India and more. Multimedia theater and film, in the most general sense, was his milieu.

When a critic such as Tom Service, with whom I started this overview, writes that Glass is “arguably the most influential composer across the whole range of the musical world,” it’s really the “whole range” phrase that is of special import. Who are all these listeners, viewers, fans who form the bulk of this “whole range”? Insofar as “pure” abstract music is involved (e.g., a symphony), Glass’s “classical music” is not very prepossessing, and the audience for it is small—but the popular culture audience is large. “Classical music” is a fairly unique listening mode distinct from all other Western musical modes. Except perhaps for opera, it mainly lacks the spectacle, referentiality, and the immediate, unreflective, bodily enjoyment of musicals, rock-concerts, and TV sensations such as *American Idol* and *Britain’s Got Talent*, whose untutored vast audience begins wildly cheering when an obscure, amateur, matronly English soprano, unused to public life, nervously appears in front of them and hits a very high note that, say, Joyce DiDonato probably hits every day while brushing her teeth or doing the laundry. The unknown woman then becomes a world-famous singer who makes big bucks from immense sales of recordings and is taken over by the media, made over as glamorous as the raw materials will allow. I need to say that I liked her and thought she had a pleasing voice and demeanor. She was a sweetie. But a superstar with brilliant skills? To master the familiar classical repertoire, attentiveness, repeated listenings, absence from distractions, and intentional focus are required. Knowledge helps. Most Broadway and film musicals are rewardingly enjoyable on first untutored experience. But Glass’s classical endeavors do not usually bear much rehearing, except perhaps as “earworms.”² The distinction between “popular” and “classical” may not be total—nor is it trivial either, if you are trying to account for the “total range.”

² The online Urban Dictionary defines earworm as “A song that sticks in your mind, and will not leave no matter how much you try. The best way to get rid of an earworm is to replace it with another.” Many of Glass’s compositions give earworms a rolling start.

Complex formal *structures* are a characteristic of much, if not most, so-called classical music, and it takes lots of time even to hear them, figure out what's going on, internalize them, and get increasing pleasure from complexities that may require many careful hearings beyond toe tapping to a beat. Bach's large-scale *St. Matthew Passion* or his small-scale *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* for harpsichord, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* or his innovative odd-numbered symphonies, Wagner's operas, Mahler's and Bruckner's symphonies, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Bartók, Vaughan Williams, Poulenc, and even the amazing first movement of Lou Harrison's 1985 piano concerto: there's nothing "classical" I have encountered so far in Glass to compare with music of this caliber.

Although Glass does not devote many pages to his activities of the past twenty-five years, during that time he has turned more to "classical" ventures. His website (though not kept up to date) reports on "more than twenty operas, large and small; eight symphonies (with others already on the way); two piano concertos and concertos for violin, piano, timpani, and saxophone quartet and orchestra; soundtracks to films ranging from new scores for the stylized classics of Jean Cocteau to Errol Morris's documentary about former defense secretary Robert McNamara; string quartets; a growing body of work for solo piano and organ. He has collaborated with Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, Yo-Yo Ma, and Doris Lessing, among many others." Toward the book's conclusion, he does refer to his long friendship with Doris Lessing, which resulted in two operas based on her novels, and he makes much more use of the word "opera" than in his earlier years, even referring retrospectively to his "trilogy" of *Einstein*, *Satyagraha*, and *Akhnaten* using that term. But the increased use of traditional "classical" titles and forms for his more recent works, implies more than they can actually deliver. His *Double Concerto for violin, piano and orchestra*, his various concertos for cello, for piano, for miscellaneous combinations, are highly unlikely ever to take their place in the so-called "classical repertoire." Although they may have a surface effect of reduced minimalism, the ones I have listened to consist mainly of alternations between the old plug-in-minimalist modules (refurbished with some new colorations or rhythms) and novel *for him* improvisatory-sounding interludes relatively lyric rather than Dionysian. While the minimalist sections sometimes rise to the frantic, fast, loud climaxes familiar from days of yore—as in the ferocious *tour de force* of the last movement of his second violin concerto, which doubtless receives thunderous applause (the violinist deserves it!)—the improvisatory sections are simply uninspired and boring. And in any case we've heard most of this "new" dispensation's techniques before. Glass's "classical" repertoire seems to appeal mainly to crossover pop music listeners who occasionally visit classical—and what used to be called "semi-classical"—concerts, but whose attentiveness to "difficult" music remains as limited as before. His comparatively recent Ninth Symphony, which I listened to the other day as part of my present Glassification, is

more or less a disaster, starting with a promising first movement and then turning exceptionally raucous, painful, unbearable. There is, however, a charming brief harpsichord concerto released in 2013 by Naxos as part of a CD with other such twentieth-century concertos for that instrument and a small, phantom, “West Side Chamber Orchestra” conducted by Kevin Mallon (who really exists). In all, the minimalism has been diluted and tweaked but remains unmistakable. I can imagine Glass taking his place as a niche “classical” composer whose best shorter works could occasionally be included in a symphony orchestra’s customary programs. A work such as the aforementioned harpsichord concerto would be a refreshing and delightful novelty item in a standard orchestral program.

Performances of Glass’s works seem to be more common in Europe than in the United States—and well attended. But with an upswing in his mainstream and commercial viability after *Einstein*, as a multi-skilled highbrow pop icon, he has left his days of impoverishment far behind. His work in theater, musicals, films, dance, and more nevertheless remain a major contribution to twentieth-century arts and culture.

When I try to put *Words Without Music* into some historical-autobiographical perspective, what comes to mind is Wordsworth’s *The Prelude: Growth of a Poet’s Mind*. Works of this kind are more than just personal autobiography but are records, so to speak, of a cultural era as lived by serious, hard-working, dedicated, vital, and skilled, creative minds. In place of the poet’s Lake District wanderings, Glass wandered through India, Tibet, and the Himalayas and, like Wordsworth, he kept meeting local natives whose “spiritual” aura, in this case, conjured his latent Buddhism. His first meeting with Ravi Shankar took place in Paris at age twenty-nine, an age before which, he claims, he had never heard Indian music. But the minimalist, repetitive, hypnotic rhythms of Shankar’s ragas undoubtedly made their permanent mark. Glass’s book is not a prose masterpiece like Wordsworth’s blank verse, but the writing does its job as a type of plainspoken twentieth-century urban prose vehicle. My sense is that it was “assembled,” rather than through-written in a continuous stream of composition. Different chapters have different sounds, the opening ones having a “Salingeresque” feel, as one online commentator put it. Wordsworth, in his long, winding poem traverses and re-traverses many psychological main roads and byways, circling here and there in a developmental story filled with manifold epiphanies and deflections. And so does Glass. The life, the book, and the cultural virtuosity are indisputably maximalist. If the reader is going to allow Dennis Russell Davies to make extravagant claims about Glass as a symphonist rivaling Mahler and Bruckner, then I will have to be allowed to make my own more modest ones about this multivalent book, which are celebratory enough.

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