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BURS

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### Phillip Glass: A Never-Ending Circular Staircase

He may be one of the greatest composers that you've never heard of, but Philip Glass has had a powerful and universal impact on theatre. His many works have contributed to the growth and development of theatre by changing some of the more traditional styles of theatre and adding more modern and magical nuances. He can be described as a philosophical realist; a down to earth person, who works extremely hard and has experienced major success. However, he has stated in an interview that "I decided long ago that I was my own best spokesman, and I made it a point then and there to talk with anybody. I'm rather proud of the fact that I've spent as much time talking with reporters from high school newspapers as I have talking with *Time* magazine" (Kostelanetz 10). This paper will examine his own writing experiences and methods by which he sees the world, how he relays it back in tonic rhythmic methods, and how this method communicates how Glass sees the world of theatre and the impact that he has made.

Glass's work covered many different mediums. He first became famous with his 1976 portrait opera trilogy, *Einstein on the Beach*, a collaboration with dramatic trailblazer, Robert Wilson. An early masterpiece close to five hours in length, it toured Europe and was performed at the Metropolitan Opera House (Kostelanetz 6). Glass talks about how he formulated the idea of using Einstein in an opera:

Science has been a hobby of mine all my life. I took a college course in mathematics but realized I didn't have the aptitude for science. But it gave me an

appreciation for the skills of the scientist. I see scientists as poets, who interpret the world using mathematics. Their visions are personal. Einstein said he would see and understand something, and then figure out the mathematics. Scientists themselves say that there is an aesthetic element to what they do. I see the world as an event, a beautiful unfolding of natural laws. So, aesthetics are not confined to artists. Whether you attribute all this to a divine being, as Kepler and Galileo did, or to laws of nature, it doesn't matter. (Ball 40)

It is not your typical opera. It presents Albert Einstein as an icon, purely as a historical figure, in the absence of a storyline attached to his image. While they did incorporate symbols from Einstein's life within the opera's scenery, characters, and music, they intentionally chose not to give the opera a specific plot. This was followed by *Satyagraha* (1980), an operatic portrayal of the life of Gandhi. His final opera in the trilogy was *Akhnaten* (1984), based on the life and religious convictions of the pharaoh Akhenaten. Although Glass had a penchant for theatrical work, some of his highest accolades were achieved with film scores. His score for Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997), the films *The Hours* (2002) and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006), all earned him Academy Award nominations. His score for *The Truman Show* (1998) won a Golden Globe Award. His many achievements boosted his reputation as a skilled composer, and he was often chosen to create music for different occasions and notable performers. For instance, he wrote the music for the torch-lighting ceremony at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Glass was categorically "among the most innovative and influential composers of the 20th century." (Cramer 508) His fusions of Western and world musics were among the earliest and most successful global experiments of their kind. (Ankeny and Monger)

Glass was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on January 31, 1937. His father owned a record shop and his father would bring home many modern composers such as Bartok, Hindemith or other albums that did not sell. Glass was exposed to many chamber music pieces as they failed to move as well as the symphonic pieces. Glass was eight years old when he started playing his instrument, the flute. He was somewhat of a child prodigy and an excellent student and was accepted to the University of Chicago at age fifteen. He majored in philosophy but spent most of his time on the piano. Glass was a philosopher trapped in a composer's body. After graduation he spent four years at Juilliard. After Juilliard, he spent a two-year period in Paris under the training of the famed Nadia Boulanger. Glass's work became most prevalent while working with Ravi Shankar and Allah Rakha on transcribing Indian music. The experience inspired him to "begin structuring music by rhythmic phrases instead of by notation, forcing him to reject the 12-tone idiom of purist classical composition as well as traditional elements including harmony, melody, and tempo." (Ankeny and Monger)

Glass's increasing fascination with non-Western musics inspired him to travel across North Africa and India, finally returning to New York in 1967. There he began to develop his characteristically minimalist compositional style, his music consisting of hypnotically repetitious circular rhythms. He created his work in the highly, artistic, city of New York but his work was met with great resistance from the traditional institutions, and to survive he was forced to work as a plumber and, later, as a cab driver. In the early '70s, he formed "The Philip Glass Ensemble, a seven-piece group composed of woodwinds, a variety of keyboards, and amplified voices; their music found its initial home in art galleries but later moved into underground rock clubs." (Kostelanetz 6). From this he began to have a cult following and then he became widespread when *Einstein on the Beach* was performed. With this piece, Glass returned to classical Western

harmonic elements with its dramatic rhythmic and melodic shifts being the piece's most startling feature. Concurrently, he was attracting significant attention from mainstream audiences as a result of the album *North Star*, a collection of shorter pieces that he performed in rock venues and even at Carnegie Hall. After these successes, Glass focused primarily on theatrical projects, and in 1980 he presented *Satyagraha*, an operatic portrayal of the life of Gandhi, and in 1984, *Akhnaten*, which examined the myth of the Egyptian pharaoh. From his journeys and work in the 1960s and 1970s, Glass laid down the base for a new-modern age not only in music, but for theatre as well.

While remaining best known for his theatrical productions, Glass also enjoyed a successful career as a recording artist. In 1981, he signed an exclusive composer's contract with the CBS Masterworks label. A year later, he issued *Glassworks*, a highly successful instrumental collection of orchestral and ensemble performances. In 1982, he released *The Photographer*, including a track with lyrics by David Byrne and in that same year, teamed with former Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek. Another album in 1985, *Songs from Liquid Days*, featured lyrics from musical stars including Paul Simon, Laurie Anderson, and Suzanne Vega, and became Glass' best-selling work to date. His collaborations have branched out into various popular musical and mainstream, big-budget cinema, as on his 2015 soundtrack collaboration with composer Marco Beltrami for Marvel's *Fantastic Four* film. (Kostelanetz 338-339) What Andy Warhol did for art, Glass accomplished for classical music, which he showed could be commercially successful if it borrowed mass-media methods. His music has certainly given pleasure to many listeners, and as a composer of liberation, he has freed both himself and his audiences to hear new and wonderful sounds.

Philip Glass is a relativistic composer. Meaning there is no universal, objective truth but rather each point of view has its own truth. He uses a mode of intellectual development in his composing that reflects on multiple perspectives and determines the most apt fit in his pieces. Often times he is called minimalistic. (Ball 40) With *Einstein* and his other operas, however, they are not always accepted by their scores alone, at least not at first. His music is nearly always a music of mood and evocation. It is music that begs for visual complement. (Swed 578) An article in *Musical Quarterly* speaks to some of these structures as "Glass remarks that his early music had a uniformity of texture that precluded any sense of, in his words, dramatic structure. He began to think of texture as a structural idea- move toward the dramatic structure that would become ever more central to his post minimalist concerns, and certainly a paradoxical statement in light of his observation that *Music in Twelve Parts* represented a music freed of dramatic structure." (Haskins 515) That is to say the scores often operate outside of themselves. Glass describes his work in terms that suggest just the opposite. The music is placed outside the usual time scale, substituting a non-narrative and extended time sense in its place. It may happen that some listeners, missing the usual musical structures by which they are used to orient themselves, may experience some initial difficulties in actually perceiving the music. However, when it becomes apparent that nothing "happens in the usual sense, but that, instead, the gradual accretion of musical material can and does serve as the basis of the listener's attention, then he can perhaps discover another mode of listening-one in which neither memory nor anticipation (the usual psychological devices of programmatic music, whether Baroque, Classical, Romantic or Modernistic) have a place in sustaining the texture, quality or reality of the musical experience." (Nordlinger 46) Glass's style described as minimalist is more than meets the eye. Glass talks about his style:

I had been able to articulate an idea of rhythmic structure in a continuous way, I found that I had another problem, which was that the writing out of all this music simply was too tedious, and, in a certain way, it was also too tedious to perform. And that led to the idea of additive process, where I then looked for a more systematic way of developing rhythmic structure through variation, and I hit on the idea of addition. I used repeating figures to make the process more clear [sic] as well as to reduce the notational difficulties. Yeah, my scores at that time ... you know, there aren't real scores at all, they're just parts. I never wrote scores out. Even *Music in Twelve Parts* never had a score; *Einstein* doesn't have a score. Even now, when I write ensemble pieces, I don't write scores. I only began writing scores when I was working with opera houses and conductors, and they needed to have a score. I'm much more in that tradition of the baroque composers who wrote pieces out and handed them out and people played them.

(Nordlinger 47)

Glass, very much like Shakespeare was said to have done, would write out the individual parts and hand them to players, rather than create a giant score for everyone to follow.

Glass has been writing pieces, at least from the past twenty years, that indicate that minimalism has come a long way. First of all, nothing scored for 130 players can be called minimalist. Also, while his operas, dance, theater, chamber music, and film scores bear trademark rolled chords, piano passages, and brilliant harmonies, the sizes and swells here were more like maximum sound. When listening to recent Glass, it is like looking at fine art. Stand in front of a painting, reflect it, pass through, but perhaps choose to move back for another look. That's not possible in music. Music is always moving as you process it. With a painter, minimal

“is applied to an artist who employs only one idea, but the composer employs a great many ideas or variations. It is the degree of contrast between that, that is minimal.” (Glass 115) My own opinion, as a musician, is that he slowly steps in with progressing repetitive rhythms, which perhaps musically, may not be what we consider complicated and complex. It isn’t. A child could learn the notes. What happens is you start to listen to it and become almost hypnotized. His work is vaulting in the sense that at first, it touches your ears like the start of some small talk and builds up into a narrative that propels you into a full-blown discussion. It’s almost as if it has lyrics. Most of life is rolling and repetitive. We were created to start, stop, repeat, as well as rest and regroup. It feels as if Glass gets in our heads and plays out our daily lives. His deliberate repetitive compositional style is familiar enough to have been parodied on the animated television shows, *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, further showing he is more prevalent than we assume.

Glass has much to say about his own composing techniques. Often, he is challenged by the outsider’s simple classification of his style, claiming he does things as taking a simple C-major chord and playing it over and over. He talks about keeping people’s interests by using needed repetition and variation and states “that’s exactly what I don’t do. 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.” (Terry 67) Glass seems never to have considered becoming a pop musician. His goal, rather, was to forge a brand-new “classical” style that would serve as a musical counterpart to the paintings of such visual artists as Robert Rauschenberg and Frank Stella. Ironically, it was not a composer but an unconventional playwright, Samuel Beckett, who served as his main source of inspiration. For him, traditional classical music “was also a storytelling art, one that uses tonal harmony to articulate and propel large-scale narratives that unfold over time. Glass



aspired to write music that would be similar in effect to Beckett's, *Waiting for Godot*, in which scene follows scene in a way that bears no resemblance to the tightly wrought plot of a conventional play." (Cramer 508) Glass's music raises the question of what is music for? Is music a means to an end, or the end in itself? Does the listener use it in order to induce an ecstatic state of consciousness, or engage with it as you might engage with theatre of the absurd or other abstracts forms of art. Most listeners opt for engagement with purpose over freedom to emoter randomly. It is necessary to remember that they are both valid goals of art, just as the narrative-based organization of Western classical music is neither innately natural nor historically inevitable. One assertion is that Glass's music fails to structure time in a profoundly meaningful way. He seems to build roads and highways musically that have no clear off-exits or destinations. We look at a painting, even a complex and crowded canvas like Jackson Pollock's "Lavender Mist," and then move on. Not so with a piece of music, with which we must spend a period of time fixed in advance by the composer. If it is not sufficiently eventful to hold our attention throughout that time, then it is not successful—and that is where some believe Glass falls short. To borrow a meteorological metaphor, Glass's non-narrative music is "like a cloudless day, one can only contemplate it for so long without wanting to go inside and read a book." (Kostelanetz 48)

Art exists to be discussed, debated, and broken down. That's why it occurs, so we can contest it, and share opinions while it helps keep our impending doom at bay. It is difficult to examine a work during this time and criticize it against an earlier period, such as the classical period. In a discussion of Mozart vs Glass, who wouldn't prefer Mozart. However, as Mozart fit his time period, so does Glass in our new modern age. Music tends to speak as the culture speaks for that specific time period. Humans have always been mostly the same, they have just used

different sounds and styles to express themselves. Glass has added history, philosophy, and musicality to the world of theatre in new and exciting ways. He has demonstrated that by adding storytelling to his music in the form of phrasing and structure, he allows the listener to journey with him, to follow the music's narrative. This is his main impact on theatre, to pursue the storytelling art in a modern, non-traditionalist fashion. People are always driven to something. How they choose to allow themselves to be driven - greed, empathy, good, or evil, it is always an emotional connection. They are calmed, soothed, or driven when there is a music score to go along with their lives. Glass has provided distinctive and moving pieces for us to be driven along those lives. Postmodern music's most renowned and high-profile proponent, his innumerable orchestral works, operas, film scores, and dance pieces proved essential to the development of ambient and new age sounds.

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