

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

‘Words Without Music,’ by Philip Glass

By KYLE GANN JUNE 5, 2015

Given that all the events of a long, rich and full artistic life can scarcely be squeezed into a moderate-size book, how does one choose, at age 78, what to put into a memoir and what to leave out? The Promethean composer Philip Glass provokes this question in his lively and colorful new book, “Words Without Music,” in which he offers stories from his life in varyingly detailed magnification. Whatever you think of him as a composer — self-imitator or icon of postmodern symphony and opera — Glass is one of the most articulate composers around. Insight and practical common sense pervade his new book, and reading it reminded me of hearing him speak: He’s ever thoughtful and loquacious, but he doesn’t answer any questions he doesn’t want to.

In one early emblematic story, young Philip is bullied for playing the flute. His older brother sets up a fight between Philip and his tormentor — which Glass wins handily. “I wasn’t especially brave,” he writes, “and I didn’t like fights, but I felt that I had been corralled into it. The kid could have been six feet tall and I still would have beaten him, it didn’t matter. After that, no one bothered me about the flute.”

It’s part of a pattern: Glass came from a “struggling middle-class family”; was discouraged from pursuing a career in music; studied with the formidable music teacher Nadia Boulanger; worked day jobs, some grueling, until he was 41; but in his telling, he never saw a challenge that he couldn’t lick. “I have a wonderful gene — the I-don’t-care-what-you-think gene,” he writes.

The “making” of a composer is the real subject of “Words Without Music.” Glass outlines his years before the successes of his operas “Satyagraha” (1980) and

“Akhnaten” (1983) in loving detail; his life and work since then — including his film scores for Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Errol Morris and others — is skimmed through, with all-too-quick descriptions of the remarkable (and mostly nonfamous) people he has known.

One struggles to imagine how any human could have kept his schedule in the late '50s and early '60s: composing from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., loading trucks in the evenings, practicing piano several hours a day, attending classes, taking music and yoga lessons, going to movies and art exhibitions with friends, driving a motorcycle cross-country. Side stories feature cameos by figures one might not associate with Glass. He shared an apartment with the blind composer Moondog, who dressed as a Viking and played his compositions on the streets of Midtown Manhattan. And he recounts inventing the “Hardart,” a keyboard of toy instruments, for the fictional P. D. Q. Bach’s Concerto for Horn and Hardart, written by his Juilliard chum Peter Schickele — and making it a transposing instrument in the key of E so Schickele would have an added challenge.

No fewer than three chapters are devoted to a 1966 trip Glass and his wife at the time, the theater director JoAnne Akalaitis, made to Nepal to study with masters of Tibetan meditation. But we never find out what spiritual needs, beyond a kind of fervent curiosity, drove him to all that trouble and self-discipline. He refers in passing to nine years he spent in psychoanalysis after his father died — without delving into the issues he was looking to resolve. And his conclusion to a long digression on his Buddhist practice leaves us hanging: “It’s hard to say what I have learned from all this, but I have noticed a certain ease I have begun to experience in my daily life. This extends not only to living but to the subject of dying as well. More than that I am unable to say.”

Those most interested in the music will find that the memoir repeats some stories and material from his 1987 book “Music by Philip Glass,” though Glass seems to have mellowed: His rival composer Steve Reich receives some due encomiums; Pierre Boulez is no longer a purveyor of “crazy, creepy” music; the term minimalism is not totally avoided. While one might have wished for more talk on aesthetics, there are gems explaining the influences of such far-flung figures as John Coltrane (extensions of harmony leading to a sense of bitonality) or Anton Bruckner (painting

in time on a large canvas). Occasionally he alludes to what he was trying to achieve in the gradual changes of his early music: “When you get to that level of attention, two things happen: One, the structure (form) and the content become identical; two, the listener experiences an emotional buoyancy. Once we let go of the narrative and allow ourselves to enter the flow of the music, the buoyancy that we experience is both addictive and attractive and attains a high emotional level.”

Glass complains that “the disappointment felt by some die-hard fans” after “Einstein on the Beach,” his great success of 1976, “has more to do with their - unfulfilled expectations than with what I was actually doing.” Fair enough. And yet he devotes a detailed chapter to “Einstein” while only summing up his 10 symphonies and not mentioning at least half of his 25 other operas. He may not care what we think, but he dwells on the music he feels people remain most interested in.

With a composer’s sense of form, Glass returns, in the final pages, to his youth, the subject that elicits his most evocative writing, and to his father, a former Marine and one of the book’s most vivid characters. He attributes some of his phenomenal abilities of visualization and imaginative organization to his father’s insistence that they play “mental chess” (chess without pieces or a board). Working as the classical buyer in the family record store, he rashly ordered four copies of the complete Schoenberg string quartets; when the last set finally sold seven years later, his old man wasn’t impressed: “I can sell anything if I have enough time.” Charged with watching for shoplifters, Glass quit turning them in because his father would take them outside and beat them “senseless.” Despite his toughness, Ben Glass sounds like a father any artist could envy having: One who sent his son into the world with few material advantages but a psychic inheritance equal to any emergency.

WORDS WITHOUT MUSIC

A Memoir

By Philip Glass

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Kyle Gann’s most recent book is “Robert Ashley.” He teaches at Bard College.

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