

# When 2+2 Isn't 4

BY KYLE GANN

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What most people don't recognize about Philip Glass's recent music—and they're free to criticize the music after the recognition, but not before—is that each movement slowly metamorphoses into something not suggested in the opening notes. In this respect it is the exact analogue of Robert Wilson's approach to theater. (In fact, have any other two collaborators ever been so exactly parallel?) The problem is, we don't perceive music the way we do visuals.

For example, at one point in the Glass- Wilson collaboration *Monsters of Grace*—called an opera but more accurately a computer-animated film accompanied by Glass's electro-acoustic ensemble—a craggy abstract surface is eventually revealed to be a gigantic human hand. It's easy to feel the ambiguity and release of that transformation. It's far more difficult, at least for our highly visual culture, to put two and two together to make five when, similarly, Glass's ambiguous harmonies slowly add up to an augmented triad. Because notes don't point to the real world, the surprising object isn't something we recognize. Instead, the undulating musical surface is so soothing that we quit listening intently, and assume the music's not going anywhere. We're not trained to listen as slowly as we can watch.

Thus, in a way, Glass can make the same complaint about audience incomprehension that Elliott Carter can: few listeners are sophisticated enough to hear what he's doing. The difference is, with Glass's music you can learn to hear it without having to analyze the score.

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Monsters of Grace, of course, had an additional PR coup going for it, bringing as it did 3-D spectacles into the avant-garde, and persuading New York's most sophisticated audience to gaze at the screen through little card board frames that did not sit easily on the glasses of the nearsighted. In Wilson's super-slo-mo aesthetic, the 3-D illusions were not often stunning. In the opening scene, a vista of a vast desert with antlike human forms moving in the distance, a giant foot finally descended in the close foreground, so Monty Python-esque that you braced for the *sppppllk* sound effect. In a river scene, a dragonfly suddenly lurched out convincingly toward the audience.

The point, as so often with Wilson, was to lull you into complacency about what you're looking at and then suddenly jar that complacency, or—alternatively—build up ambiguity until you realize you're not seeing what you think you are. By definition, such effects can't happen very often, and every 10 minutes or so they were gorgeous. The river scene foregrounded three people standing on the roof of a floating house. As they floated, a bizarre grid of tiny rectangles slowly revealed itself as city lights from sky scrapers seen through a fog, a beautifully startling moment. Watching a static scene of rural houses, we slowly realized that we were being gradually lowered through the trees in the fore ground. Untouched by any more emotive recent aesthetic, this was pure '60s minimalism, wringing beauty from sheer visual cognition.

Of course, back in the *Einstein on the Beach* days, Wilson used people to choreograph such effects, and there was an element of virtuosity in watching such gradual transformations finessed by humans. With the infinite possibilities of computer animation, virtuosity disappears, and *Monsters of Grace* was pointedly spartan in its abnegation of the more spectacular effects computer visuals can offer. Whether abstract, romantic, or pedestrian, the visuals did not seem commented upon by the lyrics, which were taken from poetry by 13th-century Persian mystic Jalaluddin Rumi, considered the original whirling dervish. Sung contemplatively by four fine vocalists—Marie Mascari, Alexandra Montano, Gregory Purnhagen, and Peter Stewart—they seemed as detached from what we were watching and hearing as the Sanskrit text of Glass's *Satyagraha*.

Having given my more general defense of Glass above, I must say I was enchanted by about five of the 13 movements. Jon Gibson's Indonesian-sounding bass flute solos in the first were a striking departure from Glass's motoric style, and meters of 11/8 and 10/8 kept the third movement, "Don't Go Back to Sleep," in a pleasantly off-balance suspension. One of the last movements began with synthesized plucked sounds in an unconventional tuning. I have always felt that alternate tunings could give minimalist textures the friction they often lack, while minimalism provides the perfect stasis in which to savor weird tunings: an inspired marriage.

For once, Glass tried it, with results that whetted the appetite for more.

The other movements, with their ubiquitous rhythmic alternation of 3 plus 3 versus 2 plus 2 plus 2, simply seemed recycled from other Glass scores. *Monsters of Grace* was a musical meal of exquisite hors d'oeuvres, tossing out something really tasty every few minutes but leaving you still hungry at evening's end. In the 22 years since *Einstein*, Wilson and Glass have come a long way in terms of sophistication and eloquent shaping of details, but the end result seems somehow lighter and less substantial. They seem to conduct their life's work just as they do their individual pieces: in slow motion.

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