

Departing From Recipe

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Philip Glass: What critic could keep up with the amount of music he writes?

photo: Lincoln Center Festival 2001

It is an article of faith among us new-music types that music should appeal to large audiences, and not only to experts and cognoscenti. We get a little offended, though, when composers take that too literally. We've never quite forgiven Cornelius Cardew for writing dippy political songs in the '70s to satisfy his Marxist agenda, and I'm not sure we'll ever forgive Philip Glass for adhering to the instantly recognizable trademark style that he does. We want to hear vernacular influences and broad appeal, but also originality, progress, and aural challenges that not everyone will get at first hearing. We're probably a little hypocritical.

And so Lincoln Center's bash for Philip Glass as featured composer this year elicited some of the usual perplexed head-shaking from musicians leaving the concerts. Three things seem undeniable: (1) Early in his career, Glass wrote some of the century's most influential music, stuff that has probably seeped into more musical brains than anyone will readily admit. (2) The guy's no dummy, but one of the most articulate, commonsensical, and practical artists anyone's ever met. (3) He's written dozens of hours of uninspired-sounding music that anyone who knows his idiom could have written for him. Fact 3 is difficult to reconcile with facts 1 and 2. What's less often acknowledged is that, amid all the reams of three-against-two and G minor-F-E-flat-D chord progressions, clichés rendered painful by lifelong repetition, he continues to occasionally turn out amazing, advanced, original pieces of music.

And so on one hand we have operas like his *White Raven*, which I walked out of at intermission, taking with me the envy of some of my less delinquent critical colleagues. I pride myself on having ears of steel, but I couldn't take it another minute. Those 12/8 patterns would start rolling along, and the dotted eighth-note beats would get going over the steady eighth-note pulse, and I could hear what was coming for too many measures ahead, like those bad sitcoms so formalized that you can anticipate each line of dialogue the first time you see them. Such works convince me I could write my own Glass opera, right down to the plinking octaves in the xylophone and the frisson of rhythmic excitement in the tambourines. Key lime pie couldn't have a more explicit recipe.

And yet for a totally opposite experience, there was the concert of "Shorts," premieres of brief film scores, played by Glass's ensemble: the most consistently impressive evening of his music I've heard since at least *The Voyage* (1992), and probably *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). His score to Peter Greenaway's *The Man in the Bath* was replete with Glassian moments, but bristled with unexpected dynamic contrasts, rhythmic shifts of gear, and types of melody I hadn't heard him use before. *Passage*, for a Shurin Neshat film, was less dramatic, but full of ominous sampled voices, and made use of long, irregular rhythmic cycles using only a few pitches—a fertile technique Glass pioneered in *The Voyage*, but that I hadn't heard him develop in works since. (I suppose I should comment on the films. They were highly visual.) Here was Glass still using elements of his vocabulary that the most tone-deaf listener could identify by now, and yet blasting them into smithereens to make a wild kind of formal collage new to his work, as far as I know.

But then, what critic could keep up with the amount of music the man writes? (Take a look at his Web page, www.uni-paderborn.de/pg/glass.html, for the more than four-dozen concerts he's got this season, many of them premieres.) *Prolific* is too weak a word. Ten percent of his output may be great, and that 10 percent by itself is more than many composers write. As for the *White Ravens*, perhaps I, as an aficionado, am not the audience for that piece; perhaps the audience was the man behind me who said cheerfully at intermission, "Well, at least it's not atonal." And as a new-music expert, I am programmed to applaud those who do not write for the experts. I can stand walking out on the recipe pieces as long as, every few years, Glass shows me that, in his sixties, he's still capable of exciting new breakthroughs.

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