

Seeing Through Glass



photo/Jack Mitchell

PHILIP GLASS ENSEMBLE at Pick-Staiger Hall October 18, 1985

By Kyle Gann

The tremendous power of the music of Philip Glass, exhibited once again the other night at Northwestern University's Pick-Staiger Hall, flows from two sources. One of these sources I am old-fashioned enough to wholeheartedly admire. The other I am old-fashioned enough to consider suspect.

The first source is the psychic energy of the performance.

An intercultural comparison: The Hopi Butterfly Dance is a daylong performance of complex and varied music and dance, containing intricacies of rhythm and

intonation that we whites would often be at a loss to notate. To prepare for the dance, an entire village, every member ages 3 through 70, rehearses every night for six months. In this exhaustive preparation an incredible amount of psychic energy is built up, which is then released in the final performance. It's an awe-inspiring sight—200 people dancing and singing for hours on end, with not one misstep, not one false entrance.

The Philip Glass Ensemble is the only white music group I know of in America that consistently puts that same intensity of preparation into a performance. The psychic energy released by seven people playing fiendishly rapid music continuously for half an hour or more, without one perceptible missed

note and in perfect rhythmic unison, is overwhelming no matter what one's opinion is of the music played. In America this psychic energy has a vicious and deadly enemy: the musicians' union. I was recently told that one CSO member summed up the orchestra's attitude toward new music this way: "If we can't sight-read it, it's not worth playing." Six months' rehearsal time for a single piece? The union leaders would have a cat. Three hours tops (it's in the contract). That's why no orchestra in America is capable of projecting one tenth of the psychic energy that Glass's ensemble can on a bad night. You can't get more out of a performance than the musicians put into it. That ensemble is a unique experience, and its energy resonates visibly through any audience. As Glass insisted in his lecture the night before, it's a performing music—a tribal music, in fact. No recording can capture more than a fragment of it.

The other power source? Electricity. I've said it before: there is something about the bare fact of amplification that invests music with an authority not inherent in the material. One famous quotation should never be forgotten: "Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany"—Adolf Hitler. Not that I'm a John Bircher who yells pinko every time he sees a hippie with an electric guitar. But play an extremely common chord progression on the piano—I IV V I, for example: it sounds threadbare and vulnerable, like a college freshman's first theory assignment. Play the same progression on electric guitars cranked up to 105 decibels: it suddenly has power, authority, it is critically unassailable. To the listener, the

amplifier acknowledges no physical limitations. Do I advocate a return to lutes and mandolins? No. The question to be asked is, Is the amplification supplemental to the power of the music amplified, or does that power consist of the amplification itself? Do we grant the music authority in spontaneous reaction to its merits, or are we compelled to accept its authority?

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It seems worth asking what effect Glass's music would have without the amplification. He's provided us with at least one textbook example, the little piano piece that opens the *Glassworks* album: a tawdry, unimaginative little affair, four 4/4 measures repeated four times, with two slightly contrasting sections of similar length and construction—and this whole repeated thrice. Deprived of the rumbling, ear-assaulting bass that sound engineer Kurt Munkacsi inevitably emphasizes in the ensemble's sound, the piece is delicate, vulnerable; suddenly one thinks of it not as a dazzling sonic experience, but as a simple piano piece comparable to other works of similar length and instrumentation—the Chopin preludes, the Brahms intermezzi, the Satie sarabandes—and it does not bear up well under the comparison. Glass's second opera, *Satyagraha*, scored as it is for (mostly) acoustic instruments, suffers somewhat

from this same lack of authority in comparison with the far more compelling (and electronic) *Einstein on the Beach* (the recording of *Satyagraha* is heavily processed to compensate for this deficiency). And I hear ear-witness reports that the excerpts from *Akhmatov* (his most recent opera) sounded much more convincing played by Glass's electronic ensemble at this concert than they did played by an orchestra at the New York premiere.

The upshot of the foregoing, somewhat contradictory assessment is that, as a social phenomenon, Glass's music is formidable; as a technical phenomenon, even more so; but as a musical phenomenon, it is problematic and difficult to evaluate, simply because this aspect of the experience is so overshadowed by the other two. Certainly it exerts a hold on an audience's attention that little new music can match, but that in itself is no guarantee of the quality of the work. *Three's Company* can hold the attention just as well as *Masterpiece Theatre*—sometimes better. To many Americans, that in itself is proof enough that *Three's Company* is a better show, but such a judgment ignores the quality of the attention elicited in favor of the quantity. The very internal structure of Glass's music, the constantly repeating short phrases, is inextricably wedded to the fact of the amplification, the visceral stimulus, because Glass, like Baby in Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives*, certainly

... has learned that short ideas repeated
Massage the brain.

Is Glass's music more than a massage?

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Sometimes. But my inescapable impression from this concert was that the most satisfying music in terms of content was also the oldest, the excerpts from *Einstein on the Beach*. Glass had astutely picked out the most exciting sections from this manifestly uneven work: the "Building" and (as encore) "Spaceship" sequences from the fourth act. The former of these consists of pulsating, irregular arpeggiations of a single chord on the four synthesizers, atmospherically surrounded with sustained tones and graced with a joyously free tenor sax solo by Richard Peck—a marvelous effect in contrast to the usual rigidity of Glass's music. "Spaceship" is even stranger: an odd progression of five chords, its arpeggios so asymmetrically arranged that one can never quite get used to the weirdly halting bass line no matter how many times it is repeated. This is wild, crazy music, unpredictable and hilariously impertinent. The crazy group cadenza in "Spaceship," a hair-raising cascade of up-and-down chromatic scales just before the final chorus, sounds as if the ensemble has lost control and run amok in inexplicable unison.

Next to these whirlwinds, how tame, how timid sound the more recent works. Take the third act of *The Photographer*, essentially a series of seventh chords arpeggiated up and down. The following "melody": C for 8 beats, D for 6, and E for 2, total 16 beats, is repeated, over and over. Though you've never heard the music before, you can hum along quite fluently. Oops: surprise! An arpeg-

gio that previously went up now goes down! How dramatic. The rate of pattern change seems designed to keep barely one step ahead of boredom, a gentle arm prodding you each time the brain begins to nod off. But while the changes in rhythmic configuration may be mildly and pleasantly jarring, they seem arbitrary, quantitative, and without cumulative effect. Occasionally there are sudden, major changes of texture, but even these leave no trace as the music jauntily continues. And sometimes the attempt to play against expectations is abandoned altogether. It took little imagination or musical acuity to hear right away, in the Prelude from *Civil War*, that the B-flat was going to be forever resolving down to A-flat.

Music from *Akhnaten* was actually a little livelier. The funeral music, in particular, was energized by some nervous and hard-pounding drum patterns (taped, not live), as well as irregular little flurries of activity in the flute and saxophones—catchy, unpredictable, and quite fetching. "The City/Dance" from that opera was less rhythmically intriguing, but it was colored by an occasional superimposition of harmonies, a dissonance made the more effective in Glass's music by both its repetition and infrequency.

Considering the amount of internal repetition in each piece, though, it is surprising to what extent Glass repeats his formulas from one piece to the next: the alternation of a major triad with its relative minor, the constant sawing of the one-octave arpeggios, and—most recognizably—the sudden ensemble cutoff at full speed. This last is the most necessary, because if one or two instruments continued playing alone, the music would suddenly sound vulnerable, and the music's impervious, ampli-

fied, macho surface would collapse. (Perhaps this is *the* music for the Reagan/Rambo era.) In the visual arts, artists who have achieved superstar status have often felt pressured to repeat the same elements in each painting, to fashion a trademark rather than develop a style, to be constantly and immediately recognizable for the benefit of their status-seeking and cash-providing patrons. Outside of academia, which tends to enforce a universally anonymous style, musicians had heretofore largely been spared such pressure.

Of course, surrounded by this audience, I felt quite alone in my critical musings. For most of Glass's admirers, I suspect that he could just as well repeat phrases from "Pop Goes the Weasel" over and over; it is the *sound* of the music that sweeps the enchanted minds before it, the rumbling bass that drowns out the day's cares and vibrates the bodies into a state of nervous relaxation, the repetitions that lull the timid, pattern-seeking brains into a momentary womblike security. No matter that the changes seem arbitrary (that's part of the macho surface) or that Glass's material runs out long before his pieces do; for those satisfied with a quick sound-bath and a fast, hard-pounding ear-and-brain massage, the amplification, the beat, the tempo, and the repetitions are more than enough.

But for those who, poor relics, feel that greatness in music has something to do with content, with what Ives called "substance," that part of the music that not only delights during the performance but endears itself via the imagination in the cold light of the following morning; who find the formal and emotional perception elicited by music more stimulating than the purely physical and visceral—Glass's music provides, aptly enough, minimal nourishment.



Robert Ashley

ATLANTA
Goodman Theatre
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By Kyle Gann

It's so difficult to restructure time for us Americans. The Balinese Shadow Play lasts from afternoon to dawn, and a musical performance of the Papago Indians requires four evenings. But Americans have very short units of time measurement, which are so well ingrained as to be second nature: the commercial, the sitcom, the coffee break, the lunch hour. It is with a noble sense of patience and duty that we indulge

Bruckner or Mahler with as much as 100 minutes of our time. (One hundred minutes! Can't anything important be said in ten?)

For Americans are, possibly more than any other people who ever lived, left-brain dominated. It is the left brain, after all, that keeps track of time and the sequencing of events. The left brain is everything Americans value: analytic, rational, verbal, numerical, linear—in a word, *practical*, that ultimate American virtue. The right brain, on the other hand, is holistic, intuitive, synthetic, nonverbal—form perceiving. And music, the aural delineation of form, is essentially a right-brain activity. (Evidence is copious; there are left-brain-damaged patients, for example, who can sing but not speak.) What has happened historically in the perception of music in Euramerican white culture is that the left brain has assimilated more and more music into its domain, through verbal classification and analysis. Take the complexity of a Beethoven symphony, separate it out into exposition, development, first and second themes, modulation, dominant preparation, etc. and it ceases to be a holistically pleasurable right-brain experience and becomes an instructive and easily understood (if boring) left-brain experience. (For fuller discussion of this fascinating topic than I can provide here, read Betty Edwards's *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* and/or the 5th and 15th chapters of Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicomeral Mind*—both classics.)

Thus one way to define the avant-garde of the last two centuries is by its attempt to defuse the left brain and engage the recessive right brain. This means finding new, ever-more-complex harmonies, different tone colors, new forms and systems that the left brain has not yet learned

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ONE OF THE
EXCITING

My Sister's Shoes

Yoga

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how to classify. Unable to deal with information it has not yet verbally and rationally assimilated, the left brain grows impatient; it either gives up and allows the right brain to take over, or angrily interferes with attention. Every avant-garde work, then, encounters on first hearing receptive right-brain listeners who find it stimulating (the minority in this country), and angry left-brain listeners who find it irrational and formless—which is precisely the point. (The left brains of highly trained composers, of course, can assimilate and classify much more than those of a lay audience, which is a major reason for the new music/audience gap—composers like to write what stimulates their own right brains.) When people say today that the avant-garde is dead, one thing they mean is that the left brain has assimilated and categorized every possibility, and nothing can get past it to the right brain. And seen in this way, the death of the avant-garde does seem like the death of art itself. How are we to again engage the right brain?

So the virtuoso composer today is the one who can find something to throw at an audience that their left brains can't catch, that they can't immediately verbalize and rationalize. (Needless to say, Beethoven hasn't bypassed anybody's left brain for decades, which is why all these left-brain, businesslike, practical types are more than happy to tolerate him.) For a while, the repetitions of Philip Glass's music caught the left brain delightfully off guard; its increasing simplicity, though, was such that it was quickly assimilated, and now only a child could find it riveting. Since the 60s, only two composers have emerged as consistently amazing virtuosos of the right brain: those irrational, intuitive troublemakers John Cage and Robert Ashley. No matter how far one goes in understanding and explaining the previous work of

these men, both have the capacity for continually confounding all expectations with a new piece. This virtuosity was exhibited once again a few weeks ago in Chicago when the intrepid Museum of Contemporary Art presented, at the Goodman Theatre, Robert Ashley's new opera *Atalanta (Acts of God)*—a virtual hymn to the right brain, an experience so diffuse, complex, and multilayered that the rational mind is at a loss to divide it up, attach verbal concepts, linearize it, give reasons.

Of course, it is the explicit job of the critic to do just that—to transform a right-brain experience like music (across the corpus callosum) into left-brain verbal terms. The utter intransigence of *Atalanta* in the face of this never-easy process makes the present review a very difficult one to write, which is why it has taken me so long (in terms of both paragraphs and weeks) to get around to trying to explain why I found *Atalanta* exquisitely beautiful.

First of all, how to describe the work... Sans intermission, it lasted two and a half hours (a mere bagatelle by nonwhite standards). It took place on a stage. Mostly. A character in the audience (stage designer Lawrence Brickman, it turned out) fiddled with a long scarf, climbed a ladder, and walked down front occasionally to stare at the other characters to an extent that one finally concluded he was part of the piece. To each side of the stage was a group of four video monitors. During interludes, each set in a group played the same videotape, images rotated in a square: hands, parts of faces, and other almost-distinguishable objects.

Episodes one and three (though temporal boundaries were slightly vague) were similarly staged. The music was provided by prerecorded tape, and by "Blue" Gene Tyranny and Big Black, who, clothed in purple and turquoise quasi-Arabic costume, stood on either side of the stage and improvised on synthesizer and drum respectively. Jacqueline Humbert sat center stage on a slanted platform, at first wearing a bird mask; as she removed it, it

became clear that she was none other than Atalanta, the ancient Greek princess who could outrun any man. Ashley himself, dressed in a silver suit from tie to shoes, wandered on- and offstage casually soliloquizing; while offstage, his voice often came over the loudspeakers. At various times tenor Thomas Buckner came on to face stage right and sing an exhaustingly strident recitative; a style that few could have achieved gracefully, but which Buckner made urgent, interesting, and entirely natural. From time to time Humbert would languidly echo or anticipate Buckner's phrases. Meanwhile, Carlo Quartucci and Carla Tato moved slowly in a silent *tableau vivant*.

Episode two was quite different: a fast-paced computer-controlled slide show, patterned slickly and a little parodistically after the genre of the industrial training film. There were many rural scenes, dams and rivers, some of which related to the anecdotes being told via Ashley's voice-over; printed texts that echoed and anticipated the phrases being said; and stills from an interview with Ashley, in which he both seriously and comically described the aims and ideas of *Atalanta*: "*Atalanta (Acts of God)* is very much ahead of its time"; "*Atalanta* is a visionary work"; "Are you sure the author intended the work for television?" Though the pacing of this episode was fast and frenetic, its demands on the attention were so much more conventional by American standards (almost TV-like) that it seemed like a relaxing interlude, almost a contrasting slow movement, between the more demanding outer episodes. This was the episode during which none of the audience left.

Even this extremely partial sketch should suggest that Ashley's strategy for defusing, as I put it, the left brain's rationalizing mechanisms—information overload—is not, in itself, new. But *Atalanta* was in no way reminiscent of the info-overload pieces of the 60s; those were slapdash affairs, whose attempt at "cosmic consciousness" depended on the fact that their diverse components were randomly assembled.

Though references to it are oblique and tangents frequent, there was a definite center to *Atalanta*, a complex of images presented in a fashion similar to cubism's multiplicity of perspectives, but expanded to the nth degree by the imposition of verbal and visual, linear and fragmented, past and future—something about the approaches to life of the three main characters, Max, Willard, and Bud, and about words and music being not the information-communicating devices we think they are, but a subconscious and necessary ritual. This center was omnipresent, but it couldn't be pieced together from bits of logic; it had to be intuited, and even for this the viewer must occasionally wait as patiently as a naturalist waiting for a rare species of lizard to show itself. Lacking this intuition, after a few minutes of incomprehension the left brain says, "Come on, this is nonsense," and during episode one quite a few angry left hemispheres floated out of the hall dragging entire bodies along behind them.

But for the right brains that stayed, there was much in *Atalanta* to revel in: the immovable mellowness of "Blue" Gene Tyranny's modal improv, the lazy, languorous, colorful visuals, sonorous drones, unending streams of words, the meanings of which eventually seemed secondary to their sound, and above all the easy, midwestern twang of Ashley's voice; for despite *Atalanta*'s Californian laidbackness and New York slickness, there is a casual, grass-roots, Illinoisian ignobility to Ashley's work that Chicagoans could, one would think, easily learn to appreciate and love.

And complexity aside, one of the delightful aspects of *Atalanta* was the bones that Ashley threw to the left brain—just enough to keep it satisfied. There were abundant mental rest stops, like the little choruses that periodically broke up the main monologue, full of homey aphorisms about life and love ("Only had one heart you broke it in two and/Now there's nothing you can ever do"). There were moments of comedy, like the singing, very realistic Statue of Liberty (played by Ashley's son Sam), and the entracte

in which an Italian couple had an argument while Ashley explained, via loudspeaker, what they were *really* saying to each other.

More significantly, there were road signs pointing the way to the heart of the piece (pardon my metaphors, I just got back from a vacation): in episode one, for instance, just as the plurality of voices (including some on tape) was becoming tiresome to try to follow, Ashley's voice boomed out loud and clear the question, "Who could speak if every word had meaning?" And a few minutes later, "That's why we have to keep on talking, and that's why listening is so unimportant." For besides the sensory stimulation of *Atalanta*, there is an epistemology at work here, one that takes real everyday conversation—the type that takes place at bus stops, over breakfast, and in bed at night—more seriously than the atypical utterances with which we state our philosophical and critical "truths." If "natural language" philosophy arose in reaction to the logical positivists, Ashley has created a "natural-language music" counter to the analytical atomism of our academic composers, and it comes closer to capturing the essence of real life than the philosophy of John Wisdom and his ilk seems inclined to attempt. Perhaps, if we are to incorporate a balance between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, music will have to take up where philosophy leaves off.

So yes, Virginia, there is still an avant-garde. New music today is such a morass of obligatory clichés and befuddled thinking that it had been a long, long time since I had heard a piece so truly demanding of the listener, much less one capable of giving so much in return, as *Atalanta*. As Ashley almost shouted in episode three, "I think that this possibility, as we say, is dangerous, somewhere over the heads of the audience." For many, he was correct. But, for those willing to lie back and drown unresisting in this colorful, confusing, drawling, soothing media barrage, *Atalanta* was arguably the most thrilling, ear-opening music theater these 1980s have yet produced.