

Philip Glass

The Moment Recaptured

BY KYLE GANN

Every concert you go to brings a Morton Feldman quote to mind. This one is from a 1982 interview: "If I were going into the musical world today, it would be like 1946 in New York. Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Schoenberg might change. The Schoenberg might be Boulez, and the Stravinsky might be Philip Glass."

Philip Glass remains an important composer not because he's achieved star status, or because he skips across the pop/classical boundary like a frisky springbok, nor yet because he's created an instantly recognizable style. It's because his music, even (or especially) when it abandons considerations of taste or compositional integrity, never fails to ask difficult questions. The glory of his early work—I'm talking *real* early, Chatham Square days—was the idea of *audible form*, which challenged the serialist hegemony without jeopardizing its objectivist mindset (one that few composers still are unwilling to relinquish). The enigma of his recent work, which has cost him support among the cognoscenti, is that the direction of his questioning is, in formal respects, antipodal to those early ideas.

The two works that opened Glass's November 21 concert at Avery Fisher Hall were—as though "the interesting" were a category that still interested Glass—the most interesting new music I had heard from him in a long time. (I'll ignore, for now, the pandering *Songs from Liquid Days*, which here received their concert premier.) Both "Dance No. 9" from *In the Upper Room* and *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, if they marked no new depar-

ture, showed an increasingly overt concern with collage technique, abutting contrasting sections of music with a lively disregard for continuity. Sometimes the change involved an abrupt shifting of metrical gears, sometimes not; some textures came back, others remained one-shot motives. What intrigued me was that Glass has abandoned the quasi-song forms of his other recent music (*The Photographer*, *CIVIL warS*) in favor of raising arbitrariness to an art form. From the listener's point of view, there was no reason the sections could not have been ordered differently or transposed from one piece to the other.

Nothing could be further from *Music in Fifths* or even *Einstein*. By gradually shifting his emphasis from linear process to the construction of mosaic surfaces, Glass has replaced transparency with opacity, listener access with a series of blank, mute barriers. The illusion of participation has given way to the reality of exclusion. Art only pretends to bring us together through communal experience; the truth is, in the specter of otherness that the art object presents, we meet only ourselves. If this is indeed Glass's current

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thinking, then those who, like myself, once complained that he had lost himself can be reassured that he has, in actuality, found himself. We misunderstood from the beginning.

It's easy to find precedents for Glass's *modus operandi*: in the classic nonsequiturs of the Thomson/Stein operas, in



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Stravinsky's shifting, alternating panels from *Le Sacre* to the *Symphony of Psalms*, in Satie's cut-and-paste technique in *Relache*. In fact, improbably enough, Glass's harmony in *A Descent into the Maelstrom* reminded me unmistakably of Brahms. They share the tendencies to resolve a chord and then retract the resolution, to use an adjacent tonality ornamentally, to use enharmonic intervals (say, a diminished third) to imply an unstated pitch. If further correspondence were needed, only note that Brahms's favorite rhythmic device—hemiola (two against three)—constitutes, in its extensions, the bulk of Glass's rhythmic vocabulary, within which it serves to create pockets of static equilibrium.

What I'm hinting at in these farfetched comparisons is a divisive phenomenon in Western music (and indeed, Western thought) that has endured more perva-

sively than we often realize. On one side are composers—Stravinsky, Glass—whose music admits, or is even bewitched by, what I call the recapturability of the moment. For such composers the irrevocable forward motion of time is the illusion, while harmonic resolution and rhythmic development endanger music's essential timelessness. Arbitrariness and repetition are means of canceling out the idea of logical progression. On the other side is the necessary foil—Wagner, Schoenberg, Boulez—for whom each moment is unique and unreproducible, and theoretically implies only one possible continuation. For these composers, literal repetition, because it denies the forward progression of time, entails out-

right falsehood. The dilemma whether one can step twice in the same river has racked Western philosophy since Heraclitus and Parmenides, and has risen to consciousness within composition over a course of centuries. In Glass and Boulez (or Wuorinen, if you prefer) our musical culture is playing out the old Brahms/Wagner argument on a level of parodic exaggeration. Only John Cage (and perhaps, less sincerely, Boulez's aleatoric music), by allowing both arbitrariness and the uniqueness of the moment, has come anywhere near a synthesis, and no one quite knows what to do with it.

What surprises me is that, earlier in Glass's career, back in the days of unidirectional process and repetitions, I had associated him with the wrong camp. It's taken me a lot of concerts and recordings to realize how great that mistake was. I wonder if Glass made the same mistake. ■

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