

## The Symphony in the Twenty-First Century

Philip Glass' latest symphony, his eleventh, received its premiere at Carnegie Hall in New York City on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017, the very day of the composer's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. The piece was performed by one of the three orchestras that had commissioned it, the Bruckner Orchestra Linz, under the direction of long-term Glass collaborator Dennis Russel Davies. Davies is, in fact, cited as the sole motivation behind the composer's decision to work in the genre,<sup>1</sup> and had been involved in the commissioning of all but one of the previous ten symphonies. Symphony No. 11, then, marks the latest entry in a catalogue of works borne of what appears to have been a highly stimulating collaborative relationship for both men, and, with a twelfth entry due for its premiere in early 2019,<sup>2</sup> it seems clear that there is a demand for this music and that the composer continues to be able to meet it. To say that Glass is a composer who divides opinion is no understatement, and the absence of any academic engagement with this latest symphony is perhaps indicative of the long-established consensus on his status—that of a composer long since past the point of artistic relevance.<sup>3</sup> Still, as it continues to be possible to term this music 'successful' under certain parameters, consideration of its value may offer a perspective on the role of the artist in a postmodern, neoliberal, plural society that may be of some interest to those for whom these topics are matters of concern.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Robin, "Philip Glass Celebrates His 80th Birthday With an 11th Symphony". New York Times, 27th January 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/arts/interview-philip-glass-celebrates-his-80th-birthday-with-an-11th-symphony.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Adams and Glass, Friday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2019", Event Advertisement, LA Philharmonic, <https://www.laphil.com/events/performances/212/2019-01-11/adams-glass>.

<sup>3</sup> A list of reviews of Symphony No. 11 can be found in appendix 1, where the reader may note the conspicuous absence of entries from academic publications.

It is perhaps all too easy to describe Glass' recent compositional style as postmodern. Many of the works he has produced since at least the 1980s are notable for their overt blending of elements of so-called 'high' and 'low' culture—his symphonies numbers one and four, which use the Brian Eno-produced David Bowie albums *Low* and *"Heroes"* respectively as their source material, for example—and are often composed in collaboration with artists from genres and disciplines that are remote enough for the resulting artwork to be considered crossover, polystylistic or, indeed, postmodern. As such, Glass has managed the curious feat of becoming a composer simultaneously able to maintain a profile amongst popular audiences whilst still managing regularly to appear in concert halls programmes. These elementary descriptions do little to answer some of the more pressing questions raised by Symphony No. 11, however. In the era in which the supposed cessations of ideas of historical progress, grand narratives and a proposed universal aesthetic are talking points, attempting value judgements of music is necessarily challenging. The wealth of literature on postmodern theory that is available can, however, go some way in providing context to a piece that exhibits many of its traits. This assignment will attempt a historical assessment of Symphony No. 11, and seek to understand Glass' compositional choices as a product of his education, experience and interests.

Perhaps the first thing one notices about Symphony No. 11 is its structure: set in three movements, the second of which could plausibly be termed a 'slow' movement, its format is cut from the cloth of the archetypal symphonic work. The instrumentation, too, is conservative, although an augmented percussion section accommodates scoring that

has been identified as one of the work's strengths.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the first performance of the piece, Glass described his intentions behind it:

With Symphony No.11 I was [hoping] that with the experiments that began in Symphony No.8 onwards, [...] there appears to be a search for a language [sic]. With No.11, [...] I had arrived at a new musical plateau where I could write a piece which reflected a coherent musical and emotional expression.<sup>5</sup>

This symphony, then, and the three that precede it, may be considered somewhat pedagogical in nature, serving to allow the composer opportunity to continue his experimentations in the development of a coherent, idiomatic instrumental musical language. In this respect, the piece may be considered as part of a lineage of works that includes much of the works for the Philip Glass Ensemble, each of which was composed, to some degree, with such an objective in mind. It is in a series of pieces titled *Another Look at Harmony* (1975–77) in particular that the composer began explicitly to address issues of harmony and harmonic progression in his work following the culmination of his experiments with rhythmic and additive processes in *Music in Twelve Parts* (1971–74).<sup>6</sup> The discoveries made here would play a central role in the composition of Glass' next major work, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), which features a long-range harmonic scheme more developed than that of *Music in Twelve Parts*, and have been present to some degree in much of the music he has written since then.

Glass describes the ambition for his compositional technique around this time as a 'reconciliation of harmonic movement and rhythmic cycle', the 'integration of rhythmic

---

<sup>4</sup> Pamela Nash, "Polished Glass: A Return to Form with the Eleventh Symphony in UK Premiere", *Bachtrack*, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017. Available at: <https://bachtrack.com/review-glass-scriabin-petrenko-rlpo-liverpool-september-2017>.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Guerin, "New Interview with Philip Glass by Richard Guerin in Advance of the Premiere of His New Symphony", *Glass Notes*, Philipglass.com, 14th December 2016, <https://philipglass.com/glassnotes/glass-notes-new-interview-with-philip-glass-in-advance-of-the-the-premiere-of-his-new-symphony>.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Page, "Music in Twelve Parts (1993)", in *Writings on Glass: Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (London: University of California Press, 1997), 101.

and harmonic cycle music into one coherent system'.<sup>7</sup> Example One shows an extract of *Einstein*, featuring what the composer identifies as the most prominent theme of the opera.<sup>8</sup> Here, a sequence of chords explicitly articulate a harmonic progression which, although not tonal, has properties that can be exploited to provide tension and resolution, and is augmented and diminished according to a process of rhythmic alteration. The progression largely moves parsimoniously, with each chord sharing some kind of semitonal relationship with its preceding one. The exception is with the leap to the penultimate chord, at which point E-major tonality is firmly established and a perfect cadence follows. Examining the passage as a whole as a tonal progression, however, one

**Example One: *Einstein on the Beach*, "Train" Figure 59A**

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a scene from Philip Glass's opera *Einstein on the Beach*, titled "Train" (Figure 59A). The score is arranged in a system with seven staves. From top to bottom, the staves are labeled: Picc. (Piccolo), S. Sax. (Soprano Saxophone), T. Sax. (Tenor Saxophone), S. (Soprano), A. (Alto), Org. 1 (Organ 1), and Org. 2 (Organ 2). The vocal parts (S. and A.) have lyrics written below them: 'Fa', 'Mi', 'Re', 'Mi' for the Soprano and 'Sua Do', 'Do', 'Si' for the Alto. The organ parts (Org. 1 and Org. 2) provide a complex harmonic accompaniment. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and a 4/4 time signature. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Glass, *Words Without Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 288–289.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Glass, "Notes: Einstein on the Beach" *Performing Arts Journal* 2, no. 3 (Winter 1978): 68.

finds a certain sense of ambiguity, and Glass identifies this as its key feature:

What makes the formula [...] useful is, of course, the way in which the IVb (Bbb) becomes IV (A) of the new key, thereby making the phrase resolve a half-step lower [which] provides the leading tone for the original i (f). As it is a formula which invites repetition, it is particularly suited to my kind of musical thinking.<sup>9</sup>

This progression is one of several 'themes' that appear throughout the opera, and serves structural functions beyond its self-contained repeatability.<sup>10</sup> Where the F minor/E major theme does appear, the rhythmic alterations that it is subjected to serve to further manipulate its ambiguity by placing emphasis on different chords within the progression, resulting in either the F-minor or E-major tonalities increasing in prominence (Example Two). This 'theme', then, is bound inextricably with the rhythmic design of the work, and provides a wealth of structural possibilities.

Over 40 years later, the parsimonious movement of chords which was prominent in the construction of works such as this continues to play a conspicuous role in Glass' music. The opening movement of Symphony No. 11 provides a clear example of the way in which these progressions are articulated: as Example Three shows, adjacent chords in the harmonic progression between figures five and seven feature both common notes and semitonal relations. Movement here happens not according to traditional tonic-dominant relations, but by stepwise motion through species of chords that serve either to increase or resolve tension. Whilst the progression certainly tends toward a G-minor tonality, it has several moments of arrival into D major, once more leaving a degree of ambiguity about which, if any, key the movement is in. As with the IVb chord in the *Einstein* example, the chords based on E flat here serve as a pivot point between two

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 331.

tonalities—first due to their tonal relations to G minor, and second by their chromatic relation to the D major tonic chord. Glass himself has described the work as ‘polytonal’:

With the Eleventh, I’m looking for resolution of ideas a polytonal and polyrhythmic language [...] Not only would a piece be in two keys at once, but one couldn’t be even sure that they were in different keys.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst the harmonic progression of this passage may appear to be based in conventional tonality, examination of the musical thinking behind its construction reveals this not to be entirely the case. The tonality here is stifled somewhat, and the momentum which Glass composes into the music prevents it from ever settling on a particular key centre.

Rhythm, too, is deployed to serve structural purposes, with changes in time signature creating new rhythmic phrases that mark the ends to what might be called passages or sections.

**Example Two: *Einstein on the Beach*, “Train” Figures 59C, D and E.**

The image displays three systems of musical notation, each labeled with a letter and a measure count: C X3, D X3, and E X3. Each system consists of two staves, with the upper staff in treble clef and the lower staff in bass clef. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'p' (piano). The key signature is not explicitly stated but appears to be G minor based on the context of the text. The music is characterized by its complex, non-repeating rhythmic patterns and chromatic movement.

**Example Three:** Chord progression of Symphony No. 11, Mvt. 1, Figures 5–7.

The first passage shows voicings of chords as they appear in the score and are respelled in the second. Colours indicate semitonal relations, and crosses notes retained from preceding chord.

**Transcription**

The transcription shows three figures of chord progressions. Figure 5 consists of two measures: the first measure has a G major chord (G, B, D) in the treble and a G major chord (G, B, D) in the bass; the second measure has a G major chord (G, B, D) in the treble and a G major chord (G, B, D) in the bass. Figure 6 consists of two measures: the first measure has a G major chord (G, B, D) in the treble and a G major chord (G, B, D) in the bass; the second measure has a G major chord (G, B, D) in the treble and a G major chord (G, B, D) in the bass. Figure 7 consists of two measures: the first measure has a G major chord (G, B, D) in the treble and a G major chord (G, B, D) in the bass; the second measure has a G major chord (G, B, D) in the treble and a G major chord (G, B, D) in the bass.

**Simplified**

The simplified transcription shows the chord progression from Figure 5. The first measure has a G major chord (G, B, D) in the treble and a G major chord (G, B, D) in the bass. The second measure has a G major chord (G, B, D) in the treble and a G major chord (G, B, D) in the bass. Colored dots indicate semitonal relations: red for G, blue for B, green for D. Crosses indicate notes retained from the preceding chord: red for G, blue for B, green for D.

There is something akin here to what Jonathan Kramer describes as a tendency in postmodern music to ‘refer to tonality, even if [it does not] fully accept tonality’;<sup>12</sup> or, more broadly, a desire to return to the areas of music that were previously deemed off-limits under Modernism. A statement made by Glass in 2003 perhaps leaves little doubt of his intentions:

People mistakenly think that pieces are new- or old-fashioned because they use tonality or don't use tonality [...] We fully explored tonality and atonality by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, obviously. Tonality itself was no longer an issue.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Kramer, *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Listening* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 132.

<sup>13</sup> Nancia D'Alimonte, “Philip Interview No. 3”, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Music*, 10, no. 11 (2003): 2.

The past and its relation to the present is a topic that many postmodern artworks seek to address. The beginning of the postmodern age in music, insofar as one can be identified, coincided with emerging references to the musical past in composers' works—slowly, at first, but later unashamedly enough that forms and materials of bygone traditions could convincingly form the basis of entire works.<sup>14</sup> Tonality, as one of the Western musical tradition's most indispensable features, has understandably been cause for much reflection and exploration amongst composers over the past half century, whether through music that refers to works of the tradition through direct quotation, or, as in this case, through compositional systems that seek alternatives to or renewed control over it. Glass' efforts in this domain represent one amongst myriad attempts at establishing a relationship with it fit for a postmodern composer.

It is at this point, however, that many critics of Glass' music begin to take issue with his compositional style. Whilst tonality has naturally been a topic for attention in much postmodern music, Jonathan Kramer notes elsewhere that mere references to it alone do not necessarily mean that an artwork qualifies for this description. He notes, in fact, that where music acts only in opposition to Modernism, through regression to pre-Modernist aesthetics and techniques or suspicion of Modernist ideology, the term *antimodernist* is more applicable, which differs from postmodernism in a number of important ways.<sup>15</sup> Hal Foster, elaborating on the distinction in his own terms, defines a 'postmodernism of resistance', which is 'concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition [...], with a critique of origins, not a return them'.<sup>16</sup> Resistant, that is, to both Modernist authoritarianism and to the temptation toward a reactionary embrace of

---

<sup>14</sup> Keith Potter, "The Current Musical Scene", in *Modern Times*, ed. Robert P. Morgan (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 360–361.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Kramer, "The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism", in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface", in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1983), x.



tradition and nostalgia, or a music in which ‘the use of traditional sonorities, gestures, structures and procedures is tantamount to a re-embracing of earlier styles’.<sup>17</sup> From the brief overview I have undertaken of Symphony No. 11 so far, it can be seen that many of its features are indeed redolent of what may be termed a traditional symphony.

Gesturally, the opening movement functions somewhat akin to a piece of Romanticism, with a teleological structure that at least one commenter has (however problematically) used the term ‘sonata form’ loosely to describe.<sup>18</sup> Following a brief sequence of interplay between two woodwind instruments from Figure 22, a tutti section begins at Figure 24 in which the harmonic progression shown in Example Three is reasserted and elaborated upon.<sup>19</sup> This development concludes with a crescendo and densely-layered rhythmic texture in which the two established key areas are overlaid to produce a large-scale dissonance, leaving the listener with no doubt that a climactic point in the movement has been reached. It is examples such as this that have led writers such as Jonathan W. Bernard to offer the description of some of Glass’ music (reluctantly, it seems) as a ‘caricature of Romanticism’, due to his attraction to ‘bombast and the banal effect of big build-ups’.<sup>20</sup> The third movement develops this structure even further, with tension-laden material that drives toward the piece’s final statement spanning the final five minutes of its eleven-and-a-half-minute length. Whilst Glass identifies his goal for the piece as the admirable pursuit of an idiomatic musical language, for some, it seems that he is sufficiently reliant on generic structures of the past, without development of them, to render this goal superfluous. The temptation to conclude, therefore, that this movement

---

<sup>17</sup> Kramer, “Nature and Origins”, 13.

<sup>18</sup> George Grella, “At Philip Glass’s 80th Birthday Party, Audience Gift is his Joyous Symphony No. 11”, *New York Classical Review*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2017. Available at: <http://newyorkclassicalreview.com/2017/02/at-philip-glass-80th-birthday-party-audience-gift-is-his-joyous-symphony-no-11/>

<sup>19</sup> Figure 22 begins at 6:41 in the Orange Mountain Music recording, and Figure 24 at 7:20.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan W. Bernard, “Minimalism, Postminimalism, and the Resurgence of Tonality in Recent American Music”, *American Music* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 116.

amounts to an antimodernist re-embracing of the past, or an exercise in nostalgia and pastiche, is undeniable.

These criticisms perhaps illustrate a problem that composers of the twenty-first century face—that of determining what, exactly, they are supposed to be doing in the absence of a consistent ideology.<sup>21</sup> In the age of the supposed end of grand narratives, or indeed of history itself, consensus on what merits a successful composition—or even a bad one—is elusive.<sup>22</sup> The compositional style that gave birth to Symphony No. 11 is one forged over the course of three-quarters of a century, and one that its architect considered an appropriate response to the musical climate he inherited. Glass elaborated on this point recently:

One of the questions that we as composers and artists often ask ourselves is: 'What does what we do have to do with the world that we're living in?' Because if you're working in experimental music, which I was, it wasn't at all clear that anybody really cared what you did.<sup>23</sup>

As a young man, Glass was faced, variously, with: a multitude of music from a variety of genres and practices as the son of a record shop owner; instruction in the music of the Second Viennese School as a teenager at the University of Chicago; encounters with both Darmstadt composers and established American musicians as a student at Juilliard; a thoroughly conservative drilling in harmony and counterpoint in Paris with Nadia Boulanger in Paris; and the highly plural and thriving artistic community of 1960s

---

<sup>21</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster, 115.

<sup>22</sup> Derek B. Scott, "Postmodernism and Music", *The Routledge Companion to Music*, ed. Stuart Sim (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 124–125; Potter, "Current Musical Scene", 384–385.

<sup>23</sup> Music Sales Classical, "Composing Myself: Philip Glass", interview with Philip Glass, 13:31, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2015, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=uqJ10fkzmv4>: 6:53.

Downtown New York.<sup>24</sup> With such a dissonant set of experiences, a composer might rightly wonder which musical avenue is the appropriate one to pursue next. Would it have been possible to continue working under the most radical Modernist idiom, for example, after experiencing first-hand a musical scene in which artists as diverse as John Cage, Miles Davis and John Coltrane were active and offering challenging music?<sup>25</sup>

Such a crisis of legitimation is one of example of the problems caused by the collapse of metanarratives. Glass speaks often of his own frustration with the authoritarianism of his predecessors, describing in an interview, for instance, ‘slightly mad’ Darmstadt composers who ‘survived on shock effect’ present amongst the Juilliard faculty during his time there, and elucidating his own view of the history of twentieth-century art music:

[When] I was coming of age, [tonal and twelve-tone] schools competed for dominance. [...] For a while, it appeared that that the twelve-tone school had prevailed. However, almost any young man or woman now writing music in the new millennium has embraced an openness and tolerance [...] that make those earlier battles seem [...] ill-conceived.<sup>26</sup>

With the dissonance successfully emancipated and consensus on total serialism’s future becoming fractured by the 1960s,<sup>27</sup> quotation, pluralism and traditionalism had begun to appear in music, and with it a multitude of schools of thought that made the idea of determining a single successor to Modernism moot. Whether Modernism is taken to comprise a period spanning the late-nineteenth century to the early-to-mid twentieth,<sup>28</sup> the late sixteenth to the late twentieth,<sup>29</sup> or something in between, what seems clear

---

<sup>24</sup> William Duckworth, *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 322–330.

<sup>25</sup> Glass, *Words Without Music*, 80–81.

<sup>26</sup> Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 326; Glass, *Words Without Music*, 66–67.

<sup>27</sup> Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 398.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Jencks, *What is Post-modernism*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Academy Editions, 1996), 8.

<sup>29</sup> Julian Johnson, *Out of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

with the benefit of hindsight is that by the 1950s disillusionment with the avant-garde's hostility toward the past had begun to take hold, and composers of the 1960s faced a startling array of choices about what to let into their music.<sup>30</sup> Whilst many composers of the post-war period were content to operate outside of popular culture, the marketplace and even of society itself,<sup>31</sup> for some of those of the succeeding generation, the perceived social irrelevance of Modernism meant that a longing to once again re-join society came to be a determining factor in many artistic decisions.<sup>32</sup> Despite Milton Babbitt's infamous article "Who Cares if you Listen?" appearing in 1958, a decade later the term 'global village' had been coined and entered popular lexicon, cementing the idea of an impending globalised world in the public consciousness.<sup>33</sup> For Glass, music without direct social function, composed 'for people who weren't born yet',<sup>34</sup> was not a worthwhile pursuit under such circumstances:

We saw the role of the artist in a much more traditional way—the artist being part of the culture that he lives in. We saw that happening to our friends [in popular music], and we asked why they were having all the fun!<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, the success throughout the century of crossover projects between so-called 'high' and 'low' traditions had shown that there was an appetite for art music amongst popular audiences, and that it was possible for such projects to be both profitable and artistically rewarding.<sup>36</sup> The influence of vernacular traditions on Glass' early ensemble works has been well documented—the instrumentation of the Philip

---

<sup>30</sup> Potter, "Current Musical Scene", 349, 361.

<sup>31</sup> Andy Hamilton, "Adorno", in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, ed. Theodore Gracyk and Andrew Kania (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 397–400.

<sup>32</sup> Kramer, "Nature and Origins", 22.

<sup>33</sup> Milton Babbitt, "The Composer as Specialist", in *The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt*, ed. Stephen Peles (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003), 48–54; Marshall McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (London: Bantam Books, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> D'Alimonte, "Philip Interview", 2.

<sup>35</sup> Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 337.

<sup>36</sup> Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 473–475.

Glass Ensemble, for example, was transparently reminiscent of that of many so-called art-rock bands of the 1960s, and the simplified tonality and pulsing rhythms of its early works were accessible to the audiences of such music.<sup>37</sup> Glass has made no secret of his desire to retain these audiences, using the term ‘populism’ proudly to describe his music:

Basically, I always have been a popular composer [...] The point is that we're talking about populism, [...] my music is always directed at the public and it never occurred to me that there was anything wrong with that.<sup>38</sup>

Glass’ solution the problem he posed above seems to have been a compositional style and value system that acted to cure the perceived isolation, elitism and dead-ends of the Modernism that he was exposed to as a young man, finding purpose through doing away with the idea that engagement with society at large was something to be avoided. The cultural relativism that postmodernists are known for holds a central role in his music, and he is well-known for his enthusiasm for collaboration and exploration of non-Western musical traditions. In Glass’ world, the boundary between ‘high and ‘low’ is sufficiently porous to allow him to pass between the two with little to no effort, as evidenced by the lengthy and varied list of collaborators that feature amongst his catalogue of works. That this music is accessible to a general listening public, adaptable to all manner of occasions—whether Hollywood film scores or the opera house—and measurably successful and impactful in terms of sales, attendance and influence, is virtuous when judged according to the composer’s principles. Criticisms of the Glass’ symphonies, then, as derivative, uninteresting or even ‘dauntingly banal’,<sup>39</sup> do little to deter them from

---

<sup>37</sup> Rob Haskins, “Another Look at Philip Glass: Aspects of Harmony and Formal Design in Early Works and *Einstein on the Beach*”. *Journal of Experimental Music Studies*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2005. Available at: [http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk/emc/Jems\\_files/Haskinsglass3.pdf](http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk/emc/Jems_files/Haskinsglass3.pdf), 2.

<sup>38</sup> D’Alimonte, “Philip Interview”, 2–3.

<sup>39</sup> Jeremy Grimshaw, “High, ‘Low’, and Plastic Arts: Philip Glass and the Symphony in the Age of Postproduction”, *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (Autumn, 2002), 475.

being written, as the qualities that critics seem to find fault with are the same ones for which he is ready to receive praise.

Having delved into a little of Glass' history, several problems regarding Symphony No. 11 are apparent. Despite the assertion, quoted previously, that tonality and atonality had been fully explored by the middle of the twentieth century, many of the issues that Modernist composers sought address about the music of their predecessors—namely a 'profound distrust of the popular'<sup>40</sup>—continue to be relevant, and Glass seems content to let these issues go unexamined. Perhaps the most significant question one may ask about the piece is whether it is even at all possible to write a symphony in the twenty-first century, and what such a piece might mean in the wider context of the genre. Given that the symphonic form developed during the common-practice era, and examples are typically structurally inextricable from tonality its tonic-dominant relations, those from beyond this era first face the problem of defining what, exactly, a symphony is. Encountering this question in 2003, Glass produced a thoroughly postmodern solution:

A symphony is a container, [...] [the] label alerts programmers that such a piece has a certain level of ambition in terms of content, length, and form. [...] A tradition is brought to mind that takes itself fairly seriously in terms of intention.

This allusion-based approach is one that acknowledges the symphony's historical implications, allowing the composer to benefit from the weight that the term carries for his own purposes. Theodor Adorno pointed to the 'ineliminably historical' nature of form as grounds for caution when approaching those that are inherited, noting that all material carries with it its origins in social practices which cannot be easily ignored for

---

<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Cook, *Music Imagination and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 178.

the sake of convenience.<sup>41</sup> It is this same fact, however, that attracts postmodernists to such forms—their historical nature provides grounds for examination of the present's relationship with the past, concerned, as postmodernists are, with the 'reconfiguration of traditional objects'.<sup>42</sup> That the resulting symphony may share too few or too many of the traits of a common-practice era symphony, or not resemble one at all, is a potential example of the irony and contradiction that postmodernists are known to exploit.<sup>43</sup> The choice to adapt one of the most prestigious forms of the Western-musical tradition as a pedagogical space within which to develop a personalised breed of popular-culture infused tonality may also not be lost on some observers. Glass' first foray into the genre, 1992's *Low Symphony*, took this provocativeness to its most extreme, by overtly challenging the distinctions between high, low, past and present through the use of material drawn directly from the world of popular music. There can be little doubt of the ironic employment of the term 'symphony' here: an almost heretic act of suggesting some kind of equivalency between David Bowie's music and the symphony genre.

Glass undermines the potential provocativeness of his later symphonies, however, in the same interview: 'Basically, I don't believe that there is such a thing as history [...] It is an absurd idea; it simply doesn't exist; it is something we make up'.<sup>44</sup> This apparent desire to benefit from the associations of history, whilst seemingly being in denial of its existence, leaves the exact ambitions of *Symphony No. 11* unclear. Jeremy Grimshaw notes the changes in the manner in which the term 'symphony' is employed by the time of Glass' *Symphony No. 6*:

Even Richard Taruskin [...] joins other critics in legitimately treating Glass as a composer of symphonies. [...] This terminological connection has already proven strong enough [...]

---

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, "Adorno", 392–393.

<sup>42</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 21.

<sup>43</sup> Kramer, "Nature and Origins", 14–16.

<sup>44</sup> D'Alimonte, "Philip Interview", 3.

for the unproblematic perception by programmers and listeners of these works as symphonies.<sup>45</sup>

By the time of Symphony No. 11, the incongruity between the term and the material is no longer accentuated, and ‘symphony’ seems to be intended at face value. Glass’ commentaries on the piece largely detail the various compositional processes behind it,<sup>46</sup> and the composer’s invitation from the programme notes to ‘just go with the music, paying attention as well as you can’,<sup>47</sup> suggests that this is a work meant to be considered on literal, purely musical terms. If this wasn’t sufficient to confirm Grimshaw’s suspicions, the fact that the piece received its premiere at Carnegie Hall, the very pinnacle of the musical establishment, surely must be. At some point between *Low* and Symphony No. 11, self-awareness seems to have given way to the ‘Romantic caricature’ described by Bernard—or, possibly, postmodernism to antimodernism—and it again becomes necessary to address Adornoian concerns. Elaborating on these concerns, Hamilton notes that it is impossible to write unironically in the style of Romantic or Classical composers now, as ‘tonality has lost the meaning it had for them’.<sup>48</sup>

The distance that Glass suggests exists between his compositional practices and that of common-practice era composers is a potential solution to this issue. The simplicity of this tonality, however, negates its effectiveness: detached from the rigorous rhythmic processes present in *Einstein* and other Ensemble works, these are, ultimately, ‘extremely simple’ progressions,<sup>49</sup> and offer little that is demanding of either popular or experienced concert audiences. Similarly, although the prolonged rhythmic stases

---

<sup>45</sup> Jeremy Grimshaw, “High, ‘Low’”, 475–476.

<sup>46</sup> Guerin, “New Interview”.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Bratby, “Philip Glass: 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday”, programme notes, *Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2017, [http://liverpoolphilharmonic.cdn.prismic.io/liverpoolphilharmonic%2F8ec4fd4a-160d-4059-a449-388f32f8b17f\\_2017.09.28+philip+glass+80th+birthday+programme+notes.pdf](http://liverpoolphilharmonic.cdn.prismic.io/liverpoolphilharmonic%2F8ec4fd4a-160d-4059-a449-388f32f8b17f_2017.09.28+philip+glass+80th+birthday+programme+notes.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Hamilton, “Adorno”, 393.

<sup>49</sup> Bernard, “Minimalism”, 131.



provided by repetitions and arpeggiations in those early works is present in Symphony No. 11, here timbral and instrumental variation offsets this by simply shifting development to a parameter other than rhythm. Again, detached from the harsh instrumentation of the Philip Glass Ensemble, and in the absence of harmonic complexity, it falls to these rhythms to interest the listener, and for some, they do not always succeed in doing this. The result is a compositional style that somewhat miraculously succeeds in combining the least interesting aspects of all of popular music, Glass' own early compositional style, and large-scale concert music; an unconvincing, unviable hybrid, perhaps.<sup>50</sup>

Despite his enthusiasm for the term 'populist', and antimodernist tendencies, Glass continues to describe himself as a postmodernist. One might ask how this is possible in light of potential evidence to the contrary. The problem, it seems, is that postmodernism is often so loosely defined that it allows for many different interpretations of it to be valid simultaneously. Both Foster and Kramer go to great pains early on in their publications on the topic to make clear the difference between reactionary/anti-modernism and resistant/post-modernism, with Kramer noting that reviewers often mistakenly 'identify as postmodern any composition that was written recently but sounds as if it were not'.<sup>51</sup> Grimshaw points out that audiences are in fact more attuned to the ideas of postmodernism than one might suspect, and that composers such as Glass benefit from the perception of them as outsiders who serve as representatives for the common listener in concert halls.<sup>52</sup> Depending on how cynical one feels, it could be determined that Glass is in fact a composer who is shrewdly aware of the tastes of twenty-first-

---

<sup>50</sup> Bernard, "Minimalism", 116.

<sup>51</sup> Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface", xi-xii; Kramer, "Nature and Origins", 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> Grimshaw, "High, Low", 473.

century listeners, and matches his interests to wherever the audience is. The same author recalls that in 1987, the composer had foregone ever composing symphonic works due to a perceived lack of listener demand for them.<sup>53</sup> Having seemingly devised a means of securing such interest, within two years, this position was swiftly reversed, and by 1992, the term 'symphony' was being applied to these works. The story since then may be interpreted as one in which Glass has worked continually and skilfully to position himself further and further toward the middle, becoming increasingly inoffensive and seeking a kind of success through numbers by appealing to as many listeners as possible. The success of Symphony No. 11 may depend on audiences not thinking too hard about its historical implications and accepting with question the composer's claims of complexity, by concerning itself only with the tastes and opinions of moderates. Postmodernists are, perhaps, simply another demographic primed for commercial exploitation.

Such a view is unsympathetic to Glass' ethos, however. Coming from the musical climate that he did, his musical output at the very least shows adherence to a consistent set of principles—faith in the collaborative process, openness to musical traditions regardless of their supposed cultural value, and unswerving productivity. Jameson perceptively notes that, due to the numerous branches of thought that Modernism produced, there will necessarily be as many Postmodernisms as there were Modernisms, and Glass' may therefore be best understood as a direct reaction to the social isolation of total serialism.<sup>54</sup> It is entirely possible that history will show the most radical act possible during our age to be the disregard of the need to be continually innovative. Glass certainly seems to draw the ire of critics in ways that the avant-garde of the past

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 472.

<sup>54</sup> Jameson, "Consumer Culture", 112.

may have.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, it may be possible that the decision to play along with consumerism and participate in the marketplace, finding ways to subvert it from within, is the most sensible one. Jencks warned prophetically in 1986 that attempting definitions of postmodernism was difficult until it stops moving, and the same may be true of whatever hybrid of postmodernism and consumerism we have come to inhabit. With the grey area that separates postmodernism from antimodernism, however, it may be hasty to label Glass a postmodernist. Whilst some kind of displacement of or reaction to Modernism seems a common-sense precursor to post-Modernism, Symphony No. 11 leaves the question of what, exactly, it should be replaced with unresolved. The ‘maddeningly imprecise’<sup>56</sup> nature of the concept perhaps makes it exploitable by the greater power of consumerism.

---

<sup>55</sup> Simon Cummings, “Proms 2013: Philip Glass—Symphony No. 10 (UK Premiere)”, *Sagainst4*, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2013, <http://5against4.com/2013/08/02/proms-2013-philip-glass-symphony-no-10-uk-premiere>.

<sup>56</sup> Kramer, “Nature and Origins”, 13.

## Bibliography

- Babbitt, Milton. "The Composer as Specialist", in *The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt*, edited Stephen Peles, 48–54. Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Bernard, Jonathan W. "Minimalism, Postminimalism, and the Resurgence of Tonality in Recent American Music". *American Music* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 112–133.
- Bratby, Richard. "Philip Glass: 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday", programme notes for Philip Glass 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Concert, *Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2017. Available at: [http://liverpoolphilharmonic.cdn.prismic.io/liverpoolphilharmonic%2F8ec4fd4a-160d-4059-a449-388f32f8b17f\\_2017.09.28+philip+glass+80th+birthday+programme+notes.pdf](http://liverpoolphilharmonic.cdn.prismic.io/liverpoolphilharmonic%2F8ec4fd4a-160d-4059-a449-388f32f8b17f_2017.09.28+philip+glass+80th+birthday+programme+notes.pdf).
- Burstein, Keith. "In Real Terms Modern Music has Ceased to Exist", *Classical Music*, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1988, 29.
- Cohn, Richard. "Neo-Riemannian Operations, Parsimonious Trichords, and Their Tonnetz Representations", *Journal of Music Theory* 41, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 1–66.
- Cook, Nicholas. *Music Imagination and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Cummings, Simon. "Proms 2013: Philip Glass—Symphony No. 10 (UK Premiere)". *5against4*, review, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2013. <http://5against4.com/2013/08/02/proms-2013-philip-glass-symphony-no-10-uk-premiere>.
- D'Alimonte, Nancia. "Philip Interview No. 3 ('Sinfonia Classica')", *21<sup>st</sup> Century Music*, 10, no. 11 (2003): 1–4.
- Duckworth, William. *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1995.
- Foster, Hal, ed. *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 1985.
- Foster, Hal. *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. New York: New York Press, 1985.
- Glass, Philip. "Notes: Einstein on the Beach" *Performing Arts Journal* 2, no. 3 (Winter 1978): 63–70.
- Glass, Philip. *Symphony No. 11*. Bruckner Orchestra Linz, conducted by Dennis Russel Davies, Orange Mountain Music B07GW4CLZW, 9<sup>th</sup> November 2018, compact disc.
- Glass, Philip. *Words Without Music*. London: Faber & Faber, 2016.
- Glass, Philip. *Einstein on the Beach: An Opera in Four Acts*. Choreography by Robert Wilson. New York: EOS Enterprises, 1975.

- Grella, George. "At Philip Glass's 80th Birthday Party, Audience Gift is his Joyous Symphony No. 11", *New York Classical Review*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2017. Available at: <http://newyorkclassicalreview.com/2017/02/at-philip-glass-80th-birthday-party-audience-gift-is-his-joyous-symphony-no-11/> [Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> November 2018].
- Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.
- Grimshaw, Jeremy. "High, 'Low', and Plastic Arts: Philip Glass and the Symphony in the Age of Postproduction". *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 472–507.
- Guerin, Richard. "New Interview with Philip Glass by Richard Guerin in Advance of the Premiere of His New Symphony", interview by Richard Guerin, *Glass Notes*, Philipglass.com, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2016, <https://philipglass.com/glassnotes/glass-notes-new-interview-with-philip-glass-in-advance-of-the-the-premiere-of-his-new-symphony>.
- Hamilton, Andy. "Adorno", in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, edited by Theodore Gracyk and Andrew Kania, 391–402. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.
- Haskins, Rob. "Another Look at Philip Glass: Aspects of Harmony and Formal Design in Early Works and *Einstein on the Beach*". *Journal of Experimental Music Studies*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2005. Available at: [http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk/emc/Jems\\_files/Haskinsglass3.pdf](http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk/emc/Jems_files/Haskinsglass3.pdf).
- Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, 111–125. London: Pluto Press, 1985.
- Jencks, Charles. *What is Post-Modernism?* London: Academy Editions, 1996.
- Johnson, Julian. *Out of Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Ken Walton. "Conductor Dennis Russell Davies on his Passion for Philip Glass's symphonies." *The Scotsman*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2016. <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/music/conductor-dennis-russell-davies-on-his-passion-for-philip-glass-s-symphonies-1-4100598>.
- Kramer, Jonathan. "The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism", in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, edited by Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, 13–26. Abingdon: Routledge, 2002.
- Kramer, Jonathan. *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Listening*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- LA Philharmonic Orchestra. "Adams and Glass, Friday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2019", Event Advertisement, LA Philharmonic, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> December 2018. <https://www.laphil.com/events/performances/212/2019-01-11/adams-glass/>.
- Lochhead, Judith Irene, and Auner, Joseph. *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

- McLuhan, Marshall. *War and Peace in the Global Village*. London: Bantam Books, 1968.
- Music Sales Classical. "Composing Myself: Philip Glass". Interview with Music Sales Classical, 13:31. 24<sup>th</sup> November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqJ10fkzmv4>.
- Nash, Pamela. "Polished Glass: A Return to Form with the Eleventh Symphony in UK Premiere", *Bachtrack*, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017. Available at: <https://bachtrack.com/review-glass-scriabin-petrenko-rlpo-liverpool-september-2017> [Accessed 6th December 2018].
- Page, Tim. "Music in Twelve Parts (1993)", in *Writings on Glass: Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 98–101. London: University of California Press, 1997.
- Potter, Keith. "The Current Musical Scene", in *Modern Times*, edited by Robert P. Morgan, 349–387. London: Macmillan Press, 1993.
- Potter, Keith. *Four Musical Minimalists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Robin, William. "Philip Glass Celebrates His 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday With an 11<sup>th</sup> Symphony". *New York Times*, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2017. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/arts/interview-philip-glass-celebrates-his-80th-birthday-with-an-11th-symphony.html>.
- Ross, Alex. *The Rest is Noise*. London: Fourth Estate, 2008.
- Schwarz, K. Robert. *Minimalists*. London: Phaidon Press, 1996.
- Scott, Derek B. "Postmodernism and Music". In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, edited by Stuart Sim, 122–132. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.
- Walters, David. "Style & Soul: Interview (1992)", in *Writings on Glass: Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 274–278. London: University of California Press, 1997.

Appendix 1

- Blumhofer, Jonathan. "Classical Music Reviews: AEQUA, Philip Glass's Symphony no. 11, and the Neave Trio plays Piazzolla". *The Arts Fuse*, 25<sup>th</sup> December 2018. Available at: <http://artsfuse.org/177783/classical-music-reviews-aequa-philip-glass-symphony-no-11-and-the-neave-trio-plays-piazzolla>.
- Getintothis. "Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Vasily Petrenko: Philip Glass Symphony No. 11". 4<sup>th</sup> October 2017. Available at: <http://www.getintothis.co.uk/2017/10/royal-liverpool-philharmonic-orchestra-vasily-petrenko-philip-glass-symphony-no-11>.
- Johnson, Christopher. "Review: Philip Glass Celebrates His Birthday with a World Premiere at Carnegie Hall". *Zeal nyc*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2017. Available at: <https://zealnyc.com/review-philip-glass-celebrates-his-birthday-with-a-world-premiere-at-carnegie-hall>.
- Konsgaard, T.A. "Philip Glass, Symphony 11, Dennis Russell Davies". *The High Arts Review*, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2018. Available at: <https://thehigharts.com/philip-glass-symphony-11-dennis-russell-davies>.
- Levine, Robert. "Glass' 11<sup>th</sup> Symphony A Rollicking Ride". *Classics Today*, date unknown. Available at: <https://www.classicstoday.com/review/glass-11th-symphony-a-rollicking-ride>.
- Matalon, Alain. "Philip Glass' excellent Eleventh Symphony given Turkish première". *Bachtrack*, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2017. Available at: <https://bachtrack.com/review-glass-symphony-11-goetzl-borosan-istanbul-philharmonic-june-2017>.
- Nash, Pamela. "Polished Glass: A Return to Form with the Eleventh Symphony in UK Premiere". *Bachtrack*, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017. Available at: <https://bachtrack.com/review-glass-scriabin-petrenko-rlpo-liverpool-september-2017> [Accessed 6th December 2018].
- Ruccia, Dan. "Live: Philip Glass's New Eleventh Symphony Makes Its Second Appearance in Chapel Hill". *Indyweek*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2017. Available at: <https://indyweek.com/music/archives/live-philip-glass-s-new-eleventh-symphony-makes-second-appearance-chapel-hill>.
- The Classic Review. "Review: Philip Glass Symphony No. 11 – Dennis Russell Davies". 24<sup>th</sup> October 2018. Available at: <https://theclassicreview.com/album-reviews/review-philip-glass-symphony-no-11-dennis-russell-davies>.