

# Heart of Glass

## Philip Glass, darkly

If one person had to be singled out as a Renaissance Man of modern music, my vote would go to Philip Glass.

Over the past 10 years, this colourful, oft-controversial figure has created a body of work the encompasses dance, theatre, opera, film, avant-garde and popular music; work substantial and innovative enough to earn him accolades in each field.

New Zealand audiences will soon be able to witness Philip Glass in action for the first time, at Wellington's International Festival of the Arts. *Rip It Up* tracked him down in a New York recording studio the day before

he flew off to the Southern summer in NZ and Australia.

"I'm playing a new work at the Adelaide Festival, a dance-theatre piece call *A Descent Into The Maelstrom* (taken from a short story by Edgar Allan Poe), but at the other performances (including Wellington) I'll play a sample of repertoire with the Ensemble."

And it is quite a repertoire from which he can select; film scores to *Mishima* and *Koyaanisqatsi*, operas *Einstein On The Beach* and *Satyagraha*, the score to a music-theatre piece *The Photographer*, a composition specially written for the torch-lighting ceremonies of the 1984 Olympic Games, and such albums of original, electronic-rooted compositions as *North Star*, *Glass-*



*works* and *Music In Twelve Parts*.

Glass acknowledges that the diversity of his work "is conscious. I often pick up projects that I've never done before, simply because I like to do a lot of different things."

While he selects and sheds musical skins seemingly at will, Glass has developed a signature style, one that has had a major influence on popular music. Although he now rejects the term, Glass and fellow composers Steve Reich and Terry Riley are known as the pioneers of minimalism, a musical process that stressed repetition and rejected the dictates of serial and non-tonal, aleatoric music.

In layman's language, the result is hypnotic, almost trance-like music that drives many to distraction. A six-year-old of my acquaintance reacted to *Glassworks* by yelling "the needle is stuck" — as good a way as any of explaining the repetitive feel of minimalism.

Eastern music had a profound impact on minimalism and it was no coincidence that Glass worked with Ravi Shankar in the 60s. In turn, the principles of minimalism have entered the pop mainstream via the works of such writers as Brian Eno, Robert Fripp and Laurie Anderson. You can bet your copies of *Big Science* and *No Pussyfooting* that these composers are thoroughly familiar with Philip Glass.

Glass, in fact, has ventured into the left field of pop music through the production and arrangement of material for such New York bands as Polyrock (whose albums are superb examples of minimalism) and the Raybeats.

"I've also done arrangements for Paul Simon and I'm now making a record with a young Irishman, Pierce Turner, who I think is a terrific songwriter."

"I don't have much to do with the pop field really, but I do want to make pop records every other year. I have a lot of friends who make a living in that area."

Another Glass work in progress will surely further boost his profile in popular music. *Songs From Liquid Days* is a song cycle to feature lyrics from the likes of Laurie Anderson, Paul Simon, David Byrne and Suzanne Vega, and the voices of singers including Linda Ronstadt and the Roches.

The title comes courtesy of David Byrne: "It had the feeling of how the songs flowed into each other, as if each song were a day and the liquidity was the flow of songs from one to the other. The end of one becomes the introduction to the next," Glass explained recently.

Somehow the composer has found time to write a new opera based on futuristic novelist Doris Lessing's *The Making Of The Representative For Planet 8*, with a scheduled premiere in Holland later this year, as well as his first book, on opera-theatre.

Such opportunities must be the source of envy from his peers.

"I suppose I can fairly well do what I want in one way, but not in others, for instance, I want to do a film on the fall of the House Of Rus-

sia, and I want to make an opera film, but those sums of money just aren't available to me. I'd also like to do a recording of *Akhaten* (another recent opera), but that will be a long, complicated process."

One reason for Glass' success is his talent for self-promotion; he even appeared in a high-profile ad for Cutty Sark Whisky.

"Yes, of course that is conscious," he laughs. "It is a lot of work doing all the press, but I think it is very important for a composer to make his work known."

"I was afraid that, like most of my contemporaries, that could very well happen when I was dead — and I didn't want that to happen! I take the press very seriously, but that doesn't mean I get good reviews all the time."

Certainly not. Glass' career seems constantly shrouded in controversy, with academics and critics divided over the merit of his work. "A pop music for intellectuals," sneered conservative critic Samuel Lipman, while the *New York Times* claimed the composer's work "lacks even the sophistication to raise it into the class of the primitive."

"I'd prefer it if everyone loved my work and left it at that, but that's not the way it happens," shrugs Glass.

Contemporary classical and avant-garde music is subject to feuds and rivalries every bit as bitter as those in pop. In one famous case, John Cage was widely quoted (mis-quoted, says Philip) as branding young New York composer Glenn Branca a "musical fascist" for his massed electric guitar cacophonies.

"John doesn't even like my music very much, but we've gotten along well over the years. And, yes, I am a Branca fan," is Glass's comment.

The composer has a very sane approach to critical axe-grinders.

"If I think there is something I'm not going to like (voice is lowered to a conspiratorial whisper), I'm not going to read it. What do you think of that?!"

"I am 49 and I've been in this business for a while. If I can help it, I'm not going to read an article that'll upset me. Why get mad at someone you won't be able to talk to anyway?"

Not that Glass should be viewed as a fragile, over-sensitive artist. Anyone that can survive as a cab driver in the madness of Manhattan needs an armour-plated hide — and that was his other occupation right up to the late 70s; writing radical operas not being the most secure way of paying the rent.

Glass has tired a little of all the publicity given his former double life.

"If you go to New York City, the guy waiting on your table is probably an actor and your cab driver a writer or painter. It is very common, as we don't support our artists on a long-term basis in this country."

Don't expect cab driving to play a big part in Philip Glass' future.

"I'm surprised at how much work I have behind me already, but I see most of it as still ahead."

**Kerry Doole**

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