

Philip Glass: From Glassworks to Glassfest

With his latest opera and a retrospective of his work travelling the country, the world's best known classical composer tells Jessica Duchen why he's still touring and performing at 77

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If any composer has changed our world, it is Philip Glass. You know his music even if you don't think you do: those purling textures, repetitive patterns and slowly evolving harmonies became hallmarks of the "minimalist" style. Glass distanced himself from that term long ago; but beyond it, the hypnotic, meditative, melancholy atmosphere of his language has likewise become ubiquitous. His music's impact upon modern culture – whether in film, TV, stage or concert hall – is immeasurable.

Now 77, Glass is still hard at work, not only composing, but also performing. This week, Bristol's top concert venues present Glassfest, a weekend of talks, performances and film devoted to his work. Glass himself is at the piano, playing his own music in a retrospective programme with his long-established Philip Glass Ensemble, which then tours to Manchester, Basingstoke and Cambridge. Meanwhile, Music Theatre Wales is on the road with his latest opera, *The Trial*.

"I started my ensemble when I came back from studying in Europe in the late Sixties, because nobody else would play the music," Glass reminisces. "I called some friends I went to school with and we put a group together." But that was more than 40 years ago. Today his music is everywhere. Why would the best-recognised classical composer on the planet still undertake the arduous process of touring? "Let's not forget, one of the great joys of being a musician is playing music," he says.

Partly, too, he does it because he can. Glass attributes his good health, musical and physical, to yoga, which he has practised since his twenties. "Look, I'm 77," he exclaims. "I'm still playing music. I tour, I practise. I don't have any choice. I still have to. Because of yoga I've had a long, healthy,

active life – without even going into the other benefits, which help to control stress, tension, anxiety and all the maledictions of contemporary life. It's a practical way of living. I doubt that you can consider working into your nineties if you haven't done it. My best yoga teacher died recently aged 120."

Did he just say "considering working into your nineties"? "Music has now been declared free," Glass remarks, with the merest hint of acid. "It's been very hard for musicians, so mostly people are playing again." In 2007 he collaborated with Leonard Cohen on *The Book of Longing*: "He's older than me and he's out playing again. That guy stands up and does a three-hour concert. I think he's 80.

"For future composers," Glass adds, "the money will be in performing and in the way music is used commercially. I know some young composers who write music for video games. It makes them enough money that they have time to write their art music. Sometimes people ask me how they can get into that, and I say: you have to know your harmony and counterpoint really well. If you have no problem with the basics of music, you can work quickly." Glass credits his own rigorous training for his prolific output – which includes 10 symphonies, 28 operas and chamber operas, shedloads of concertos, chamber music, theatre music, choral works and piano pieces, around 30 original film scores, and a torrent of collaborations with the great and good of the literary, dance, pop and film worlds, among them Allen Ginsberg, Mick Jagger, Jerome Robbins and Doris Lessing.

His intense work ethic is deeply ingrained, not least because it took him so long to begin making a living out of music. After studying in Paris with the doyenne of composition professors, Nadia Boulanger, as well as working for and with the great Indian musician Ravi Shankar, he found himself in New York in the late 1960s with a young family (he has been married four times). To bolster their finances while trying to make headway in composition, he took a succession of jobs, including plumbing and taxi driving; he started his ensemble and in what time remained he delved with near obsession into the study of Gandhi in India, which eventually led him to compose his opera *Satyagraha*.

Only after its success was he able to devote himself entirely to music. "I was 41 by then," he says. "Even the year before I had no idea that later I wouldn't be working at a day job. My cab licence came up for renewal – and I renewed it. I had no confidence that I would be able to make a living." He also decided to be his own publisher: "Otherwise I wouldn't get the income. At the beginning I made most of my living playing and I wasn't going to give the material to somebody else," he points out. "If you want to have a retrospective concert then you have to hire my group. That's still true today."

One of Glass's most quoted comments is: "When society becomes unhinged, the arts get really good." Now this is truer than ever, he suggests. "Today the arts are getting really good!" he laughs. "There's an idealism in the people under 30 that I haven't seen in decades. No one's thinking about careers or money; they're just trying to make work, writing music and playing concerts in

small places. That was how it was when I was beginning in the Sixties. It's a vocation, a calling, and they have a passion for it that I haven't seen in a while. I do think when the ship of state is sinking, the ship of art is going up."

The joy of creating his own art has never left him. "I write very fast," he says, "but to invent a language you need time. You need time to work out what you're hearing. Sometimes you can hear things, but you don't know how to write them down. That's when you know you're really working: when you don't know how to do it. That's the best time. And that can still happen."

The label "minimalism" belonged to music he wrote decades ago, Glass emphasises, before his ground-breaking early opera *Einstein on the Beach*, first performed in 1976. Some early pieces feature in the Glass Ensemble's forthcoming tour, but its spectrum of works is impressive. "What's interesting is that now I can take a repertoire, a library of music that's been building up over 40 years and we can shape a programme," Glass says. "There'll be music from three or four different decades. It does all sound like me, but it doesn't all sound like minimalism. Some of those old pieces are still very playable – *The Photographer*, or *Einstein* – but there'll be more recent pieces and some of the film music. People often think I've written 50 or 60 film scores," he adds, "but actually it's about 30."

It is easy to overestimate the amount Glass has written for the movies because his music has become so ubiquitous; and when he compares his work to that of other creators, he looks less to niche spheres of contemporary music than to colleagues and collaborators in pop and related areas. "I'm not having the Paul Simon or Lou Reed kind of sales," he remarks. "The people in the pop music world I know make a lot more than I do – I've usually been two decimal points away from them. If I sold 1,000 records, they'd sell 100,000 and if they sold five million I could maybe sell 50,000 and that would be a lot. The first time I sold a record and got 1,000 sales, that was astonishing – I think it was *Glassworks*, which was a really popular piece."

But with the increasing problem of cheap internet streaming or, worse, free access, which is damaging incomes across the musical world, he is keen to hand on his hard-won practical view to younger composers. "When I have young assistants who write, I'm making sure they know how to take care of the music, because you don't know when you're going to get your hit," he says. "There was the Beatles' first album which sold for a ridiculously low amount of money, but mostly in the pop music world they're more smart about that. In the world of art music, concert music and opera a lot of the voices are still not willing to think about the business part of it.

"I've encouraged my colleagues to own the publishing, not just to give it away. Some of them, instead of doing it themselves, have asked me to be their publisher. And I say: no, that's not the idea – you be the publisher. Sometimes I've taken on their music because I wanted to make sure it was being taken care of; I knew who they were and I wanted it to work out for them."

Verdi, he points out, died a very wealthy man. "Of course he was a great composer," he adds, "and he didn't own the rights, his publisher Ricordi did.

But it is possible to hang on to your rights in concert music and opera.”

Verdi also made it to the ripe old age of 87; and Glass, blooming with health and yoga-inspired energy, clearly has every intention of keeping up the pace. He may give Verdi a run for his money yet.

Bristol Glassfest and Philip Glass Ensemble: Retrospective, St George's and Colston Hall Bristol (0845 40 24 001; 0844 887 1500) 6 to 10 November; Ensemble tour continues to 14 November; Music Theatre Wales tours 'The Trial' until 10 November (thetrial.musictheatrewales.org.uk)