



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE



ELDER CONSERVATORIUM OF MUSIC

CONCERT SERIES 2020

Lunchtime Concert
Through Glass, Darkly

Stephen Whittington *piano*

Friday 7 August, 1:10pm

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PROGRAM

The Piano Etudes of Philip Glass

Etude No. 5

Etude No. 4

Etude No. 7

Etude No. 9

Etude No. 12

Etude No. 16

Etude No. 20

I've been playing the music of Philip Glass for more than forty years. During that time his music has moved from the fringes to the mainstream of contemporary classical music. After playing a concert in Elder Hall around 1979, a distinguished professor of musicology angrily told me: "You have infected Adelaide with the virus of minimalism!" That accusation has a curious resonance in these pandemic-afflicted times – was I a superspreader of a dangerous new kind of music? Things have changed: Glass's operas, instrumental music and film scores have secured his reputation as a major figure in the contemporary musical world and an icon of popular culture as well.

In the 1980s The Philip Glass Ensemble toured Australia for the first time. Since orchestras and professional ensembles were mostly unwilling to play his music, Glass put together his own group of very fine musicians to perform it. I wrote the program notes for the tour, in which I advised listeners to put aside their usual expectations – the first inflammatory sentence was "Forget Beethoven!" The point, expressed with the stridency of youth, was that this music offers a different listening experience, a 'slow burn' that accumulates over time through patterns of repetition, and slowly evolving textures, rhythms and harmonies. The repetitive aspect of the music was problematic for some people, and perhaps still is if your only reference point is the classical tradition; but some of the most profound experiences of human beings – such as ritual actions of culture and religion, and personal acts of meditation and spiritual practice – are founded on repetition.

The irony is that Philip Glass had the most orthodox musical education. He isn't the product of New York's 'downtown' bohemian counterculture – he graduated from that 'uptown' bastion of classical music, the Juilliard School, with a master's degree in composition, and followed that with years of study at the 'finishing school' of the formidable pedagogue Nadia Boulanger in Paris, like Aaron Copland and many other composers before him. During the tour I asked Glass what he thought was his particular contribution to music and he said: "It's the way harmony and rhythm are combined." Glass has a very personal harmonic language which is built on the solid foundation of those years spent with Nadia Boulanger doing tedious exercises in harmony and voice leading. Added to that is a concept of rhythm which was inspired initially by classical Indian music and in particular by Ravi Shankar, whom Glass got to know in Paris. The transcultural aspect of his music is very much a product of the modern era.

The twenty Piano Etudes that Philip Glass composed were composed between 1991 and 2013. He began writing them as exercises to improve his own piano playing, but eventually they expanded to become a very substantial group of Etudes that takes several hours to perform in its entirety. I've chosen seven of them for this concert, lasting about one hour. The selection and the order in which I have placed them make a cycle describing an overall emotional trajectory that is varied and powerful. The music is sometimes sombre, anxious, energetic, tranquil - ending on a tone that is both luminous and resigned.

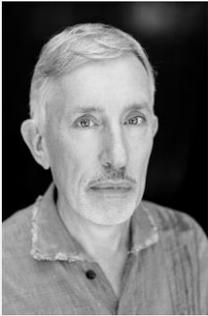
Stephen Whittington, 2020

Philip Glass was born in 1937 and grew up in Baltimore. He studied at the University of Chicago, the Juilliard School and in Aspen with Darius Milhaud. Finding himself dissatisfied with much of what then passed for modern music, he moved to Europe, where he studied with the legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger (who also taught Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson and Quincy Jones) and worked closely with the sitar virtuoso and composer Ravi Shankar. He returned to New York in 1967 and formed the Philip Glass Ensemble – seven musicians playing keyboards and a variety of woodwinds, amplified and fed through a mixer.

The new musical style that Glass was evolving was eventually dubbed “minimalism.” Glass himself never liked the term and preferred to speak of himself as a composer of “music with repetitive structures.” Much of his early work was based on the extended reiteration of brief, elegant melodic fragments that wove in and out of an aural tapestry. Or, to put it another way, it immersed a listener in a sort of sonic weather that twists, turns, surrounds and develops.

The operas – “Einstein on the Beach,” “Satyagraha,” “Akhnaten,” and “The Voyage,” among many others – play throughout the world’s leading houses, and rarely to an empty seat. Glass has written music for experimental theatre and for Academy Award-winning motion pictures such as “The Hours” and Martin Scorsese’s “Kundun,” while “Koyaanisqatsi,” his initial filmic landscape with Godfrey Reggio and the Philip Glass Ensemble, may be the most radical and influential mating of sound and vision since “Fantasia.” His associations, personal and professional, with leading rock, pop and world music artists date back to the 1960s, including the beginning of his collaborative relationship with artist Robert Wilson. Indeed, Glass is the first composer to win a wide, multi-generational audience in the opera house, the concert hall, the dance world, in film and in popular music – simultaneously.

There has been nothing “minimalist” about his output. In the past 25 years, Glass has composed more than twenty five operas, large and small; twelve symphonies; three piano concertos and concertos for violin, piano, timpani, and saxophone quartet and orchestra; soundtracks to films ranging from new scores for the stylized classics of Jean Cocteau to Errol Morris’s documentary about former defense secretary Robert McNamara; string quartets; a growing body of work for solo piano and organ. He has collaborated with Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, Yo-Yo Ma, and Doris Lessing, among many others. He presents lectures, workshops, and solo keyboard performances around the world, and continues to appear regularly with the Philip Glass Ensemble.



Stephen Whittington (b.1953) is a composer, pianist, writer and music critic. Born in Adelaide, he studied piano with Clemens Leske Sr. at the Elder Conservatorium of Music. He is head of Sonic Arts at the Elder Conservatorium of Music and teaches composition, music theory and sonic arts. As a pianist he enjoys an international reputation as an interpreter of the music of Erik Satie, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and many contemporary composers. *The Wire* magazine (London) listed his performance of *Triadic Memories* by Morton Feldman as one of *60 Performances That Shook the World* over the last 40 years. He has

performed at Festivals in Australia and Europe (Vienna, Montpellier, Annecy) and given recitals in the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, North America and China. His interest in the relationship between music and other art forms has led to the creation of a series of multimedia performances, including *The Last Meeting of the Satie Society* at the Adelaide Festival in March 2000, *Mad Dogs and Surrealists* (2005) at the Art Gallery of South Australia, and *The Music of Light* at the 2013 Adelaide International Film Festival.

Stephen's string quartet *Windmill* has been frequently performed and has been described as 'the classic work of Australian musical minimalism.' His string quartet *...from a thatched hut*, commissioned by furniture designer Khai Liew, was premiered in August 2010. A 4-CD set *Journey to the Surface of the Earth* with Domenico di Clario (piano) and Stephen Whittington (piano, prepared piano, toy piano, gong) was released in 2010. *Music for Airport Furniture*, for string quartet, was premiered in September 2011. Recordings of his string quartets have been released by the Cold Blue label (Los Angeles) to widespread critical acclaim. In September 2012 he directed *John Cage Day*, a 10-hour long performance which included his own performance of ASLSP (As SLow aS Possible) on the Elder Hall organ, lasting 8 hours.

Stephen has also worked with computer-controlled sound and video installations, including *Hallett Cove - One Million Years*, a project commissioned by the City of Marion for the Hallett Cove Community Centre (2015). The project uses continuously evolving video footage (shot with high-speed camera) and sound controlled by uniquely designed software, exploring the geological landscape of the local environment.

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