

CHARLES SCHMIDT

Night Music, 2014
Oil on Canvas 39 x 50 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RCA O'NEAL

Really Meeting Philip Glass: Musings upon a Days and Nights Concert

When I was fifteen I was given an assignment in my ninth grade English class to select three individuals from all of history and society with whom I would like to meet. I believe I selected Socrates, Democritus, and, as I remember stating at the time, “the minimalist composer Philip Glass.” Some years before I had discovered my mother’s copy of *Satyagraha* (Glass’s second opera) and felt utterly swept away by it. I suppose there was a bit of nostalgia mixed in, since I had beautiful and mysterious memories from my early childhood—when we still lived in San Francisco—of my mother listening to *Einstein on the Beach* and *Satyagraha* as we drove down the Embarcadero. At the age of twelve or so I found these cassette tapes—antiquated even then—and took to listening to them on our stereo system, turned up to full volume, whenever I was forced to vacuum the living room or partake in other housework. Looking back at it now I am not entirely certain as to why I added Glass to that list. The first two, being philosophers, were, I believe, natural choices for a meeting, given that when one meets one is supposed to talk, and talking is the ideal purview of the philosopher. At the time, my reason for choosing Glass was less clear to me, though of this fact I was unaware. Recently I was given cause to reassess this choice.

The occasion was one of the annual performances in which Glass takes part at the Days and Nights Festival at the Henry Miller Library in Big Sur. Due to the to the difficulty of the roads and the lack of parking, the festival offers a wine reception in Carmel prior to a shuttle ride to the library. In order to encourage people to arrive punctually, so that the shuttles are not delayed, it was announced that everyone would be entered into a raffle as they arrived, the prize being a signed copy of Glass’s autobiography. Due to traffic and general ineptitude, my mother and I arrived at the reception at the exact moment that the organizer arrived at the ticket booth to collect the little square wooden tray which contained the stubs for the raffle. The attendant ripped out two tickets and placed them at the top of the pile; a stroke of luck, given that we had arrived five minutes after the raffle was supposed to have ended. Therefore the situation was such that we had two tickets in a small raffle which was to be to be drawn from this very same small and flat tray, which, furthermore, had the effect of ensuring that the tickets were not sufficiently mixed together.

As the man carried off the little pile of tickets it suddenly struck me that I had a very good chance of winning, which I found rather shocking, as all of my childhood experiences with raffles had involved disappointment, fury, and lost allowance money. The organizer attempted to mix the tickets up, but the flat and small nature of the tray made this a task requiring more than a cursory attempt at randomization, and indeed, I believe that my assessment was proved to be accurate, as I, who had arrived last, was awarded Glass's book, *Words Without Music*. In that moment the title of the book made me laugh, though later in the evening it would lead to a moment of cynical speculation on my part. My mother told me that she took my winning as a positive sign with regards to my future as a composer; I worried that it was simply more proof that the world is unfair. As sunset neared, we were conducted away from Carmel and down the coast, thus affording us a most excellent view of the cliffs and the sea illuminated by the soft, pastel light of evening.

The concert was held outdoors in what one might term the yard in front of the tiny shack which houses the bookstore at the library. I took my seat with a certain amount of trepidation. You see, my first experience of Glass live had been a performance that he gave at the San Francisco Symphony Hall along with some electronic experimental group when I was fifteen or sixteen. The experience had been rather traumatic for me; I found myself bored to a painful degree and repulsed by what one supposed to be "music." I had expected the resplendent glory of a *Satyagraha* or *Koyaanisqatsi* and instead I was met with something which might be described as the electronic equivalent of banging on a can, with a heavy dose of monotony. It was with this in mind that I remarked to an old English teacher of mine who had never before listened to Glass, and who also happened to be at the Days and Nights concert, that I hoped she would not find her first experience of Glass too boring. The first half of the concert was a collaboration between Glass, a number of classical musicians including the harpist Lavinia Meijer, and an African kora player by the name of Foday Musa Suso. When they struck the first chord I breathed a sigh of relief. This was not to be a concert perverted by those who believe that the act of creating art, being a virtuous thing, thereby justifies the art which is created. In other words, I—we—would not

be assaulted by the atonal and amelodic pretensions of a younger generation for whom half the art was persuading people to allow them to perform music on electric guitars and MacBooks in the Symphony Hall. No, this performance on the twenty-fifth of September, 2015, was a different experience entirely: there is a certain quality inherent to kora music, to African music generally—a warmness, a lack of the sharpness and tension, which typically drives European compositions. Glass, however, almost seems to derive his music out of that edge, that tension, so the fusion of the two schools felt both new and striking; one might call it minimalism with a major chord. I did not however, find this fusion to be totally satisfying. With five to six musicians onstage (depending upon the movement) much of the music became clamorous and hard to follow; it is ironic that Glass should have been undone by complexity. Ultimately I feel that the collaboration lacked the acuity of focus which defines any great performance, such as the solo given by Suso himself near the end of the first half. Such focus was also evident in the duet between Suso and Meijer, which was interesting but not particularly singular. (Incidentally the claim was made that this was the first instance of a collaboration between an African harpist and one of the European school, a claim which I have reason to suspect to be untrue.)

It was in the second half of the performance during which the music really came alive. Lavinia Meijer performed the second movement from *Metamorphosis* on the harp, and I was struck by how effective it was with that instrumentation, since the normal way I tease my mother about her choice of instrument is by saying "plunkity-plunk" ... However, the sharp immediacy with which the harp string is plucked gave a keen brightness to *Metamorphosis*, a piece which can be made muddy and ponderous on the piano if one is not careful. The ensemble then performed an excellent composition called *Mishima* together; however it was the final two pieces which made the night.

If it was my deep-seated and partly unconscious desire for another *Einstein* or *Akhenaten* that had led to my displeasure at the performance I attended when I was fifteen, then such disappointment was to be made up for by *Snowden* and *Footnote to Howl*, which one might refer to as spoken word opera. Personally I felt that the two pieces should have really been considered one, and indeed that

was how they felt when they were performed. They consisted of a monologue on the nature of modern society and surveillance, delivered by the poet Jerry Quickly and jazz singer Danny Freyer to music by Glass. The piece was affecting and well constructed, only I found myself thinking in my composer-like way that I wished the music had been louder and more central. One of the beautiful things about *Einstein on the Beach* is the way in which the spoken words and the music are one; in *Snowden* I could not help but feel that there was music, and words being spoken over it. Of course, such a melding of music and spoken word might hurt the ego of a poet—in *Einstein on the Beach* understanding and paying attention to all the words was not at all the point. I suppose what I wish for *Snowden* is that it could be worked on further so as to achieve that perfect harmony where voice and music join together to form that unified and stronger sound, which Laurie Anderson is such an expert at creating.

I had planned the moments after the concert ended carefully in my mind. I remembered the assignment from my ninth grade English class and I thought that I would remark that at the time, my chances of meeting any of them—Socrates, Democritus, Glass—seemed equally remote, yet I was now surprised to learn that this was not the case. Neither when I was fifteen nor now am I a person for whom celebrity carries much import. The assignment had been difficult for me, in fact, because the thought of speaking to someone who I would not really know simply made me feel anxious. Picking philosophers was an easy solution to the problem, since I would speak to them in order to learn. As I walked the few short steps to the stage where Glass remained, putting away his music, I anxiously wondered why on Earth I had picked him. One answer immediately appeared to me: my adolescent self had worried that all the other students would pick celebrities who were alive, and probably musicians, and that furthermore, my rattling off of philosophers whom I admired was merely a cop-out. That is to say, I selected Glass so as to add a drop of normalcy to my list of people I would like to meet. As I stood before the stage, trying to draw his attention, I realized that my fifteen-year-old self had not considered what I would actually say, and that my twenty-four-year-old self had only considered talking about my fifteen-year-old self. This realization produced a sudden deficit in my reserves

of prepared lines, and so my frantic mind fell upon the next logical step: why did I actually want to meet Glass? At age fifteen it is clear that I did not really care to meet him in actuality; what I cared about was his music, his work—which I can have on demand whenever I want—so an actual meeting would seem to be a superfluity. After a few moments he came up to the edge of the stage rather grudgingly and bearing a pen. Despite the fact that I am much taller than him, he towered over me and, with the stage lights behind him, proved to be a rather blinding apparition, a state of affairs that I found to be annoyingly apropos. He asked me if I wanted the book signed, and I said, "Oh no, I don't think that's really necessary." My action had brought other hopefuls to the stage and so he said, "Okay," and turned to one of the other people whom I had inflicted upon him and who proceeded to push in front of me. I stood there adrenalized and mute, feeling violated by the hipsters and their autograph books and vinyl records, which they had brought to be signed. For me, celebrity autographs have never seemed particularly interesting, beyond the knowledge that certain items, when bearing an autograph, gain in value, and so there I was surrounded by heathens for whom a bit of pen scribbled on paper had some deep emotional value, which I was utterly failing to appreciate. At the raffle, the organizer had said that Glass, upon learning that the book that I won would be given to some random stranger, replied that he would write the book out "To Whom May Be Concerned"; he did not in fact do this. My mother suggested that I ask him to write the book out to me. I replied, "That would lower the value." As I write this now, I realize that such an action might have at least caused him to learn my name, however momentarily.

The organizer noticed me standing there and informed Glass that it was I who had won the signed copy of his memoir, which they had auctioned off to encourage people to be on time. He said, "Oh," and came back up to the edge of the stage, rather awkwardly offering a hand to shake, which I rather awkwardly took, not entirely certain as to why he thought I wanted to shake his hand. I told him that I was quite pleased to meet him (a statement which I immediately regretted) because I compose. He replied, "Oh how is that going?" I sort of shrugged the question off. I suppose that I hoped that because he had wanted to

start a center for composers in Big Sur maybe he would be genuinely interested. I told him that I compose in the baroque style. He moved on to someone seeking an autograph who had been drawn back to the edge of the stage by his reappearance. In that moment I realized that what my twenty-four-year-old self wanted from a meeting with Glass was for someone to take my music seriously. I should have answered his question. I should have said, “No one will play my music.”

On the way back to Carmel we were informed that one of the pianists who would be performing with Glass on Sunday, Maki Namekawa, was on the bus. The advice of a producer whom I had met the week before in Los Angeles still resonating in my ears, I resolved to introduce myself to her and ask if I could send her one of my compositions. I spent the ride fearing that my fifteen-year-old timidity would convince me that such an interaction was ultimately rude and pointless. When she stepped off the bus, I stepped off after her, and then I introduced myself, and she gave me her email. I doubt that I shall receive a response. The producer who told me to send him some samples of my music did not respond, I suspect to teach me the very lesson he had tried to impart with his words: whether *a* person responds does not matter, it is a question of statistics. One must not be possessed of the ridiculous notion that publishers, directors, conductors actually have singularly enlightened taste. One must disabuse oneself of the fanciful and ultimately self-flattering notion that those who are published, performed, produced, conducted, directed are somehow necessarily more enlightened, more skilful, more brilliant. There is one, and only one, element of the ephemeral, the ethereal which graces momentous artistic success: Luck. And in this scientific age, that is something in which we must not believe, so what is one to do? As I said, it is a question of statistics. There are three means of winning a lottery: entering an exceedingly small lottery, submitting a multitude of tickets, and entering a multitude of lotteries. Ideally one should engage in as many of these strategies as possible, and all at once. And so it has come to pass that I have descended from the idyllic to the mundanely bourgeois, all in the course of a Glass concert. I suppose that is the nature of wanting something: the action of desire is to paint a picture of the utmost longing beauty, which somehow combines the pain

of one’s imagined destitution with the potential splendor supposed to arise out of possession; yet, the act of fulfilling desire is to descend from the ideal state into the dark, constricted, rapaciousness that is reality ... In any case, if what I had wanted were words from a composer, then I had been given a whole book of them, and for free. I have not yet read the book, but so far what meeting Glass has made me realize is that I should stop throwing my pennies away. If I save them up, I could buy a lottery ticket, or better yet, some postage stamps.

RCA O’Neal enjoys Baroque music, fencing, travel, swing dance, and Graham Greene. He has played violin since the age of four, and composes in the Baroque style.

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Ephemera, 2014
Oil on Canvas, 42.5 x 64 in



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