

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

King Lear Overture

Philip Glass

Philip Glass remains the most popularly recognized of the minimalist composers who came of age in the late 1960s. At that time, the mainstream of concert music adhered to some take or another on serialism, a highly structured manipulation of tones to achieve a rigorous, often mathematical, balance. General audiences were feeling baffled and alienated, and the divide between the intellectual aspirations of composers and the interests of a large body of listeners was growing wider.

Minimalism reduced music to the bare essentials, and although it was tightly controlled, as was academic serialism, its composers reveled in doing much with little. Early minimalist works might typically involve pulsating rhythmic and / or melodic repetitions that transformed gradually over a long expanse through incremental changes in sustained sounds; or, alternatively, their individual sounds might be sustained far longer than the ear was accustomed to. In either case, the effect could be at once static and energized, the sounds vivid and eminently apprehensible. Some listeners complained that minimalism was too easy; yet, in the context of serial complexity, it was refreshing to the ear, as cleansing to the sonic psyche as a spoonful of sorbet between courses of intricately spiced dishes.

Glass had graduated from the University of Chicago and The Juilliard School. His teachers included Vincent Persichetti, Darius Milhaud, and William Bergsma, and in the early 1960s he spent two years studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, where he also worked with the sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar. He was obviously well schooled in traditional methods of composition, but, buoyed by sounds he encountered while traveling in India and

Africa, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the minimalist aesthetic, principally unveiling new works through his own group, the Philip Glass Ensemble — seven musicians playing keyboards and wind instruments, with electronic mixing and amplification. Even at that time Glass was not enamored of the term “minimalist.” His website biography says that he “preferred to speak of himself as a composer of ‘music with repetitive structures,’ ” and that “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.”

Many of the composer’s works display a large-scale conception, such as his 11 symphonies, a dozen concertos for various instruments, eight string quartets, and his operas — established classics such as *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, *Akhmaten*, and *The Voyage* (which The Metropolitan Opera unveiled in 1992), as well as the more recent *Appomattox*, *Kepler*, *The Perfect American*, and *Spuren der Verirrten (The Lost)*. A particularly successful niche of his catalogue is devoted to film scores, of which he has now composed more than 150, including those for *The Thin Blue Line*, *The Truman Show*, and *The Hours*, in addition to the *Qatsi* trilogy directed by Godfrey Reggio: *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Powaqqatsi*, and *Naqoyqatsi*. He has been much honored for his

In Short

Born: January 31, 1937, in Baltimore, Maryland

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 2019

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 10 minutes

achievements, with awards including membership in the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (as Chevalier) and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Praemium Imperiale of Japan, the National Medal of Arts, and the Glenn Gould Prize. In 2018 he was recognized with a Kennedy Center Honor.

Glass has been deeply involved in multi-disciplinary collaborations and has created many scores to accompany theater pieces. Among his most recent was the hour-long score for Sam Gold's production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (with Glenda Jackson in the title role), which was presented on Broadway earlier this year; a string quartet performed Glass's incidental music onstage, interacting among the other performers.

His *King Lear Overture*, which receives its premiere in these concerts, was born of a parallel conception. Glass writes:

The *King Lear Overture* was conceived after the extended time I spent with the play in its Broadway presentation this last year. However, it is musically a completely new version of this subject matter. Were it to become an actual opera, the new thematic material for this new work is actually contained in this *Overture*.

Instrumentation: two flutes and two piccolos, two oboes, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, woodblock, castanets, anvil, shaker, suspended cymbal, tambourine, tom-toms, snare drum, tenor drum, bass drum, orchestra bells, xylophone, vibraphone, two harps, piano, celesta, and strings.

Lear on the Lyric Stage



Philip Glass created music for the recent Broadway staging of *King Lear*

Should Philip Glass compose a *King Lear* opera he would be adding to a long list of operatic Shakespeare. Among hundreds of other settings, The Bard has provided the stuff for such classics as Rossini's *Otello*; Berlioz's *Béatrice et Bénédict* (after *Much Ado About Nothing*); Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*; Verdi's *Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*; and Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Rape of Lucretia*.

Although *King Lear* is the most eye-popping of Shakespeare's tragedies, it has proved recalcitrant to opera composers. *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* lists only 15 settings, mostly by obscure composers, from Victor Séméladis's *Cordélia* in 1854 through Darijan Božič's *Kralj Lear* in 1986. (The work also inspired a few instrumental works, most prominently Berlioz's "grand Overture," *Le Roi Lear*, and also a couple of rarely visited movements by Debussy; Shostakovich wrote music for both a 1941 stage production and a 1970 film of the play — with different scores for each.) Verdi grappled with *Re Lear* over many years but found it intractable. He envisioned "a great baritone for the part of *Re Lear*," but every time he proposed the piece to an opera house he

gave up in despair over casting the other roles. The only operatic version to gain repertoire status has been Aribert Reimann's *Lear*, written for the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, premiered in 1978, and revived a number of times since then.