

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Parkin, Michael. 1988. 'High and Dry on the Beach'. *Contact*, 33. pp. 23-24. ISSN 0308-5066.

thinking, from the early 1960s, through the operatic trilogy to his recent collaborations in the song cycle, *Songs from Liquid Days*, with popular American songwriters such as David Byrne, Paul Simon and Suzanne Vega. Instead the book pulls and tugs at important threads in the Glass aesthetic without ever coming to grips with them, leaving the reader with a series of impressions rather than with any clear understanding.

The book is full of grand opening statements, classic one-liners guaranteed to whet the reader's appetite for the ensuing 'clear line of thought'. Thus Glass on serialism: 'to me it was the music of the past, passing itself off as the music of the present'; Glass on twentieth-century music in general: 'the great majority of music . . . has been in the tonal tradition'; Glass on the theatre of Chekhov, O'Neill and Miller: 'this kind of theater never interested me much . . . The kinds of theater which spin familiar stories, moralising, sometimes satirising, occasionally comforting us about our lives, has never meant much to me. What has always stirred me is theater that challenges one's ideas of society, one's notions of order'. Unfortunately, the expectant reader is nearly always left frustrated as the tide of Glass's own narrative sweeps on down the beach, leaving all those prickly statements high, dry and undeveloped.

*Opera on the Beach* opens with a chapter headed 'Apprenticeship of sorts' in which Glass talks about his early musical training, first in New York at the Juilliard School, and then, as a Fulbright scholar, in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. Theatre and Indian music are identified as the seminal experiences of this period and are discussed at some length. Glass writes about the non-narrative 'new theater' ensembles working in New York in the 1960s, ensembles such as the Living Theater and Joe Chaikin's Open Theater. Glass seems to have accepted without question that this was *the* new theatre to challenge 'one's ideas of society, one's notions of order'. In other words, for Glass, social/political anarchy is equated with nothing more meaningful than restless sixties alternativism. It is clear that this 'new theater', and perhaps especially its notions of collectivist creation and of a new extended type of theatrical time, were a source of inspiration for Glass. They were all working 'towards a similar goal' he writes. But I suspect the nature of that goal remains a mystery to him, as does the real nature of the inspiration he derived from these experiences.

What this book reveals is a lack of any real awareness of history or context. There seems to be little or no conscious insight into important currents of contemporary thinking, although sometimes Glass does seem, paradoxically, to be able to tap them intuitively. This lack of awareness is particularly apparent when Glass describes his first contact with Indian music. In 1966, while he was still in Paris, he was asked to collaborate with Ravi Shankar on Conrad Rook's film *Chappaqua*, transcribing and notating Shankar's music for the French musicians who would be recording the soundtrack. He writes, 'The problem came when I placed the bar-lines in the music as we normally do in Western music. This created unwanted accents . . . The whole thing was very unnerving'. At a moment like this one gets the impression that Glass's musical education must have taken place on a different planet! He continues: 'I saw then what any first year student in a world-music course (which did not exist in 1966) would have learned in his first semester. Indian music was organised in large rhythmic cycles'. Yet

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Michael Parkin

## High and dry on the beach

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Philip Glass and Robert T. Jones, *Opera on the Beach* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), £17.50

Philip Glass the composer is a master of collaboration: anyone who has survived and flourished in the theatre for almost 20 years must have impressive credentials in cooperation. However, there is a difference between a collaboration and a committee: a collaboration can produce a *Marriage of Figaro* or (not quite in the same breath) an *Einstein on the Beach*; at best a committee is capable of a Government White Paper. I suspect that Philip Glass's book, *Opera on the Beach* (subtitled, 'On His New World of Music Theatre') is not so much a collaboration between Glass and his editor, Robert T. Jones, as an exercise in writing by committee, the committee consisting of any members of the Glass household – encamped for the summer in Nova Scotia – who could be coaxed into reading the manuscript.

In his introduction, Jones says that he constantly argued for 'more details . . . more colour, more humour'. Ironically, Glass wanted a tight structure and a 'clear line of thought'. More on the clear line of thought in a moment; as for detail, colour and humour, while the book sometimes degenerates into little more than a list of names – virtually a Who's Who of the New York alternative arts scene – its strength lies in its fund of anecdotes, in its ability to entertain, as a good political diary can also inform and entertain. But the book fails in the crucial task of providing the reader with a clear pathway through Glass's artistic

Glass need not have looked to the East for precedents or explanations: the bar-line is a relatively recent invention, as any first year student of Western musical history ought to have been able to tell him, even in 1966, and by 1966 the avant-garde, both in Europe and across the Atlantic, had been successfully circumventing the tyranny of the bar-line for at least sixteen years. As for large rhythmic cycles, Glass must have been as unaware of the isorhythmic techniques of medieval European music as he was ignorant of Messiaen!

When he comes to grips with his own music, we are again confronted with what is either tantalising understatement or alarming naivety. *Opera on the Beach* has at its centre chapters on each of *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha* and *Akhmaten*, the operatic trilogy for which Glass has coined the term 'portrait operas'. Little is said about earlier works, but even during the discussion of the large-scale operatic works, Glass and Jones have adopted a formula whereby consideration of the music is relegated to a few pages. These pages are sandwiched, on one side by lengthy descriptions of the collaborative conception of the opera and of its eventual staging, on the other side by the complete libretto for the opera, so that out of 166 pages on the trilogy a mere 20 deal directly with the music. As a result, the mechanistic processes such as the use of additive rhythms and the superimposition of varying rhythmic units to produce larger cycles, which are at the heart of Glass's compositional technique, are described but never adequately discussed. Furthermore, Steve Reich and Terry Riley appear once and twice, respectively, and then only in passing references: the sense of community and fellowship that Glass acknowledges so warmly in the world of progressive theatre was evidently not extended to composers working in the same musical area.

Glass either avoids or is unaware of the aesthetic issues underlying the use of 'process' and of the arguments for or against mechanistic techniques, as opposed to the organic/reactive use of process. In this he is at odds with those composers, particularly in Europe perhaps, who, in moving away from purely mechanistic procedures and mindless repetition, have developed processes that interact with other processes or with their moment-to-moment musical environment. In the work of these composers there has been a reaffirmation of the values of invention and imagination, albeit within a mechanistically derived framework; I suspect that, for Glass and the new wave of American 'minimalists', 'process' is now merely equated with the use of cycles of repetition. In the same way, the simple, yet effective diatonic material that Reich, for example, feeds through his elaborate compositional systems to make his process audible, has for Glass and his successors become a mere gestural tool. 'Minimalism' has become the populist language of post-modern music; what for Reich remains a means with which to achieve complex musical objects has for the others become the object itself.