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Interview with Philip Glass

When Philip Glass was in Britain last year to play Music in Twelve Parts with his ensemble on a Contemporary Music Network tour sponsored by the Arts Council, we took the opportunity of talking to him in a restaurant just opposite Chalk Farm tube station in London before the last concert of the tour at the Round House on Sunday November 23, 1975. The muzak in the restaurant and other distractions have presented us with a few problems in transcribing the tape. So the extracts from our conversation which follow are not intended to represent a complete and well-documented logical survey, more an informal discussion moving swiftly from topic to topic just as anyone might have had with the composer over a meal. For those who want a more complete summary of Glass's musical development, there's Dave Smith's article in Contact 11 (Summer 1975), pp. 27-33. What follows is intended to supplement this article with information about some of the composer's less familiar early process works and his most recent compositions.

DS I've seen lists of your early pieces – I mean the early process pieces that postdate your very early activities – some of which we know nothing about at all. For instance, there's one called *Piece in the Shape of a Square*, isn't there?

PG In 1967, the year before my ensemble really got going, I wrote duets and solos. I was trying to work with amplified instruments, but individually. The pieces were based on cyclic principles, but in a very different way from my later work, not nearly so sophisticated. That was before I had the idea of additive process. It's funny, it's such a simple idea, but believe it or not I just hadn't thought of it then. Actually it was the result of a year or two's work: I looked back and thought of simplifying all the processes I had used into that one idea. You'd recognise the pieces as my music, but the instrumentation is different and the structure's just not as clear. A lot of them used a visual idea. So, for example, in the *Piece in the Shape of a Square* I made a big square about twelve feet by twelve feet and pinned up the music around it. There was music on the inside of the square and on the outside, and Jon Gibson and I played it, walking round in opposite directions and coming back to the beginning. Then I did a solo piece called *Strung Out* in which I also had to move around. It was a nice idea, good for one or two concerts. And the music worked. I still like *Strung Out:* the solo pieces tended to be more durable than the duets. All the pieces are very 'formative', but there's some good material there: you must hear them some time. These were all written in 1967 and 68. And then came a piece called *Two Pages* which became the first ensemble piece.

DS That's a unison piece, isn't it?

PG Yes, I just got all my friends together and played it. And that's how we started the ensemble.

DS How about *Music in Eight Parts?* We tend to think of 'parts' in relation to part-writing, so we imagine eight strands rather than eight sections.

PG That's exactly how it was. *Music in Eight Parts* was actually for eight contrapuntal parts. The piece begins in unison and with each successive note the number of parts increases. As it goes on, you get eventually to a twelve-note figure and the piece comes to sound like an accordion: it keeps opening up and closing. That's what I meant by 'parts' there. And then when several years later I wrote the first part of *Music in Twelve Parts* I wrote twelve contrapuntal parts. We played it at a concert in 1971, and afterwards someone in the audience asked me when I was going to write the other 'parts'. I realised that they meant 'parts' in the sense of sections. And that's where I got the idea for the whole piece. At first I tried to keep the idea of twelve contrapuntal parts throughout, but it broke down right away. It seemed like a useless encumberance. So once I'd decided that I meant 'parts' in terms of sections I abandoned the idea of twelve-part counterpoint. But of course Part 1 uses twelve contrapuntal parts in any case, so the title works in all possible ways.

DS Was *Music in Contrary Motion* the first piece in which you tried writing in anything but similar motion?

PG My reasons for writing pieces were often very strange, as in the case of *Music in Twelve Parts. Two Pages,* you remember, is in unison. Someone asked me if I was attempting to trace the progress of musical history and if, therefore, my next piece would follow on logically and be in fifths. So I wrote *Music in Fifths.* That was all in parallel motion, so I obviously had to do one in contrary motion next. And after *Music in Contrary Motion* came its opposite again, *Music in Similar Motion.* It was a very easy going thing. In 1969 nobody knew me or cared much what I wrote, so I could make any jokes I liked.

KP Can you now?

PG I think so, actually. There are some jokes in *Music in Twelve Parts* that no-one has really caught on to.

DS The number of voices seems to increase with each piece you write.

PG Well, the ensemble is more stable now, and for economic reasons apart from anything else it's about the right size.

DS Do you ever find writing for your own group restrictive in any way?

PG Well, I have of course written vocal pieces and so on which don't use the same forces. I once wrote a piece for nine voices in which I defined a rhythmic phrase by the use of repeated syllables, building up a continuous rhythmic structure out of this material. But basically, you see, the reason why the group began in the first place was that no-one else would play the music. So it wasn't a restriction, it was the only way I could get my works played. And since a lot of my works have therefore been written for the group, my music now fits it very well. I'm writing for people, I'm not just writing parts any more. I may have lost the habit of writing abstract music; I suppose I could do it, but I'm not inclined to. Sometimes the reasons for composing the way I do are extramusical, which I don't think is a unique situation: baroque composers dealt with it all the time. I don't feel too restricted. I've had this medium at my disposal for eight years and it's gotten to be such a good instrument; we play so well together now.

Of course there have been some changes of personnel, and in the early days we used to have people sitting in for one concert quite regularly. Anthony Braxton, Frederic Rzewski, Richard Teitelbaum, James Tenney, Barbara Benari and Steve Reich are among those who have been involved, some much more than for just one concert. Some of them just wanted the experience of playing the music, and it was fun for us to have someone else in for a while. We haven't done this for about three years now, because in the end it turned out to be too difficult. It was something of an experiment, anyway. The first time we played Part 1 of *Music in Twelve Parts* we had five keyboards and four wind. That was too many. It's really chamber music and that requires very close playing. Even the sextet we have now is, considered in those terms, a lot of people.

Around 1969 and 1970 there was a lot of experimentation and exchange of ideas going on, and, for instance, I played with Steve Reich for a while, in his *Four Log Drums* and *Four Organs*. Jon Gibson was very close to the whole movement; he'd been involved with Terry Riley from 1964 and he's played with all four of us – Riley, LaMonte Young, Steve Reich and me. We saw each other all the time. There was very little in the way of concerts going on and there was nothing else to do. Two or three nights a week we'd be together pooling all this music. In a way it was a very generative period, but by 1971 it wasn't possible to do that any more. You can't believe how difficult it was when we started. No-one was interested in the music except the art people.

DS Did you ever have anything to do with the Fluxus movement?

PG No, I didn't. I don't think Steve Reich did either, but La Monte Young did.

DS I feel that some of the original ideas came from Fluxus.

PG Surely, surely. We had to find an audience, and since the musical people were ignoring us, we ignored them. We simply began to look for a whole new audience, and we found it first in the art world. We played in galleries. And a hundred people came to our first concert. That's a lot for a first concert of this sort, and it's the smallest I've ever had in New York. Those people formed the basis of our audience for the future. It was the only way to start: the only other thing to do would have been to throw it all in. Of course in England I'm only just getting an audience now. I really haven't played here very much, and my music is still something of an unknown quantity.

KP You came four or five years ago, didn't you?

PG Yes, we played in a couple of art colleges.

KP I don't think many people knew about it, did they?

PG No. It wasn't actually part of our original tour at all; we just came here on the way home.

KP But you weren't doing so many concerts then, anyway.

PG Not so many. That was in 1971.

KP What did you play here then?

PG We played *Music in Similar Motion* and *Music with Changing Parts.*

DS Do you still play pieces like *Music in Similar Motion?*

PG We haven't played that piece in about a year. But we're liable to do it again. We usually do a series of concerts every winter in New York in a big studio that seats about four or five hundred people. There's one downtown that we get free and we produce a concert ourselves.

KP Do you still play much in art galleries?

PG Not so much: they're too small. But we continued to up till a year or two ago.

DS I seem to remember you've said that you don't play *Music in Fifths* any more.

PG Well, no . . .

DS Why is that?

PG It's a very hard piece . . . Actually, I think we did it last year, using just one organ and two winds. The old pieces sound so different to me now. I'm really thinking about the pieces that are being done at the moment.

The problems of playing the music have changed now we play in bigger halls. If we get anywhere over five or six hundred people tonight it'll make a big difference to the sound from when the hall was empty at the rehearsal. It's totally different for each hall. There's so much detail in the music and we have to be able to hear it very accurately. Amplified music is a special problem. A lot of halls are built for acoustical instruments, and somewhere that's perfect for acoustical instruments can be just terrible for amplified instruments. Especially, for instance, places that string quartets like, very live places. Those can really kill us.

KP How was the Arts Centre in York? It's very small.

PG York was OK. The best for sound was Birmingham. It was in a converted BBC studio: a really good, clean sound.

DS What about Carlisle Cathedral?

PG It was nice. That was the one I was afraid of. In York we only used two speakers and to fill that space was no trick at all. In the Round House we're trying to present the music so that it's really omnidirectional and very well mixed in the hall. It's not always possible to do that, but it's part of our 'aesthetic'.

DS You're playing Parts 1, 2, 3, 7 and 8 of *Music in Twelve Parts* tonight. How often do you play all twelve?

PG We've done it three times so far, in New York, Paris and Houston. In that case we play three parts at one sitting, starting at 6 pm. So we play till 7 pm, then take a short break, then play till 8.15. Then we take a dinner break and start again around an hour and a half later – that means Part 7 starts around 9.45. We take another short break and start playing Part 10 at 11 pm, finishing Part 12 at midnight.

KP So the average length of a part is 20 minutes.

PG About that, yes. It makes a very nice evening. You'd be surprised, those evenings go by very quickly. Because the music changes so much. It's almost the only way to hear what the piece is about; it really is one piece of music, it turns out. I wasn't quite sure about that when I wrote it.

KP You composed it over a long period, didn't you? And you were playing the early parts before you'd finished writing the last ones.

PG Yes. As soon as I got the first four parts ready we began performing, and as I wrote new parts the programmes changed. I began composing the piece in the spring of 1971 and finished in the spring of 1974. The first concert of the whole piece was in the spring of 1974 in New York. That was the first time we got to hear it complete.

KP It would be very good to do it in the Round House. There's the right atmosphere and a bar and a restaurant . . .

PG Well, we'll be in Europe again next summer and fall, perhaps we can come over and do it, if we can find a sponsor. When the conditions are right I'll do it.

KP In your programme notes for the performances of *Music in Twelve Parts* there was no mention of Part 8. Could you tell us something about that?

PG It's based on the diminution of a long, held figure against a regular pattern. It has to do with the principles of cyclic music combined with augmentation and diminution.

KP Like Part 2.

PG It's similar to Part 2, but done in a different way. Then half way through, Part 8 breaks into a completely different kind of music. The earlier parts tend to be monothematic. Parts 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 all tend to be one kind of music all the way through. In Parts 7, 8 and 9 the music gets more broken up into sections. Part 2 was composed at the same time as these parts, and that's why there's a break in that too. Part 8 changes right in the middle; Part 2 changes a lot two-thirds of the way in. Parts 10, 11 and 12 are monothematic once again.

KP Do 9/10 and 11/12 work as pairs? You played them without a break in York.

PG Part 1 goes straight into Part 2. There's a break of two eighth-notes between Parts 2 and 3, but there's a rhythmic identity between the two. There's another break between Parts 3 and 4. Then after that the parts tie all the way through. So we can do 7/8, 8/9 or 9/10 and so on. On a tour like this it's really helpful, because if you do eight concerts in a row you go crazy with the programming just trying to do something different. You don't want to play the same music every night. The piece is big enough to enable us to make different programmes everywhere. One night we did Parts 4/5 and 6/7, another night we did 5/6 and 10/11. One nice programme is 1/2 and 11/12. We did that in Birmingham.

KP Could you explain a little more about the interaction between the idea of augmentation and diminution and the cyclic principles at work in *Music in Twelve Parts*?

PG I'll give you a specific example. In Part 5 there's a regular cycle of six eighth-notes that occurs in the left hand of the second organ. Then against that I have different rhythmic values. For example, you can obviously have quarter-notes: three of those fit into one cycle. You can also have dotted quarter-notes: two of those fit one cycle. Then you can have half-notes: three of those will fit into two cycles of six eighth-notes. All these rhythmic groupings have to fit the cycle. So in Part 5 I begin with groupings that fit two or three cycles, then four, three and two, and by the end you get cycles of eight, cycles of six, then four, three, two, three, four, six, expanding and contracting until you're back at the beginning. You get a very long rhythmic figure resulting from this. Since this example only uses two pitches for the melody, it's very clear what's going on. That's the way I use augmentation and diminution within a rhythmic cycle. Unless you work within the cycle there's no trick to it. The fun of it is getting the patterns to fit into the rhythmic cycle.

KP In your earlier pieces, such as *Music in Fifths*, you were just expanding a melodic figure without this use of cycles, weren't you? In that case there's no limit to what you can put in and how far you can go.

PG Yes, that's right. But when I began writing *Music in Twelve Parts*, I saw there was this other way of doing it. It put more restrictions on me, but it somehow made it spicier. I complicated the idea of the additive process by forcing it to fit into a cyclic process. The example I've just given is only one way of doing it. To give another instance: in Part 2 there's a figure of twelve eighth-notes that fits against a double cycle of six. With these notes I just take them all and double the values. So the first time you hear them in eighth-notes, later on in quarter-notes and eighths and then in dotted quarters and so on. At the same time I've divided the cycle of six so that you feel it very strongly in 6/8 rather than 3/4. Within that you have three against two happening in one part and the doubling of the values of the melodic figure in the other parts.

DS So you can fix on either one or the other.

PG Yes, you can relate the melody either to the dotted quarter-notes or the quarters at any one time. The best thing is to hear it all ways at once: that's the most fun. That's when you really start moving with it: you hear threes against twos and against that a double augmentation and a triple augmentation and so on. Parts 2, 5, 6 and 8 are based on this problem of combining devices of augmentation and diminution within a fixed rhythmic cycle.

DS Have you ever thought of using the rhythms by themselves in this kind of way?

PG Jon Gibson, a member of my ensemble, did a very nice piece like that. He stamps his feet, claps his hands and speaks all at the same time in different meters. Other people are working in this general area and you can't do everything!

KP Your ideas seem to change somewhat towards the end of *Music in Twelve Parts*, especially the harmonic ideas. We don't know anything that you've written since, so could you perhaps talk about this and where it has led you?

PG When I'd finished writing Part 8, I started looking at the earlier parts and became bored with the rules. There seem to be so many rules in music, and I just decided to break them all. So Part 9 became very chromatic, because there wasn't any way of putting chromatic music into the earlier parts. I thought of chromaticism in terms of ornamentation, working on the ambiguity of the sixth and seventh degrees of the minor scale.

KP When those chromatic passages come in during Part 9, it's just amazing!

PG Yes it is, isn't it? And yet somehow it does seem part of the music, it seems to grow right out of it. And in Part 11, for instance, they're just modulations really. But Parts 11 and 12 should really be heard in the context of the whole piece. Because if you've been sitting in a concert hall since 6 pm, and suddenly around 10.30 you start to hear all these modulations, the effect in the context of your listening experience is extraordinary. You don't hear the effect as modulations at all.

In my later piece, *Another Look at Harmony*, I began taking the problem of rhythmic structure and applying it to the problems of real root movement, though this is also apparent in Parts 11 and 12 of *Music in Twelve Parts*. With *Another Look at Harmony* I tried to find a structural, rather than a functional way of using harmony, in which the relationships between key centres would be based on a rhythmic structure and not on a release of tension from unstable intervals such as augmented fourths. I find that I can look at musical history in a very narrow way now. I can see all 19th century music as the resolution of the tritone. And when things get that simple, it's quite easy to step out and do what you want. Of course it horrifies the people who spend their time studying that music when you say that. But I look at it in a very simple way. It makes the idea of what you're going to deal with quite apparent then. So when I decided to get involved with harmony, I took a VI-II-IV-V-I cadence with some altered things in it, so it sounds a little bit odd. The first thing I did was to use it with an additive process. Every time each chord comes back, it has either a beat of three, four, five or six. So imagine a bass line and a figuration in the right hand; the bass line gets gradually longer. What's so curious is that you start hearing this cadence that you've heard all your life in a very different way.

I've composed another four-hour piece since *Music in Twelve Parts*. It's an opera called *Einstein on the Beach*, which I've written in collaboration with Robert Wilson. He's an artist who did the piece called *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin.*

DS The mind boggles at you writing an opera . . .

PG It was fun. I wrote it last summer.

DS Does it use similar techniques to those of your previous music? How many vocal parts are there in the opera?

PG The techniques are the same. There are no real arias or anything like that. I don't think you people would ever call it an opera. My own ensemble provides the core of the musicians, and I also have a violinist, twelve singers, four actors and four dancers. It actually lasts four and a half hours – without any breaks . . .

KP What's it about?

PG I couldn't really tell you. It's like a . . . I don't know what it's about!! Robert Wilson and I just did it together, and we tried to find out where Einstein was in the piece.

KP Did you have a libretto to work from?

PG No, I worked from drawings. The thrust of it is visual and aural, there's no story. Wilson would make a set of drawings, and I would write music for them. I'd play him the music, he'd revise the drawings, and then I'd write some more music for them and so on. A lot of the music is based on the kind of rethinking of cadential formulae that I mentioned earlier in connection with *Another Look at Harmony*. When I composed a violin solo for *Einstein*, the same VI-II-IV-V-I progression formed the basis of a chaconne, only I used very strict arithmetical processes with it. And it sounds very much like a Bach chaconne, except that it isn't! It's something both different and familiar at the same time. In general, *Music in Twelve Parts* doesn't make these kinds of references. But in the music I'm writing now, I'm using this kind of historical reference, material that's around, in a very conscious way, but at the same time unconscious of its historical weight, if you know what I mean. *Einstein* is already scheduled for performances in New York, the Opéra Comique in Paris, the Avignon Festival and Berlin.

Glass is not interested in publishing his compositions, since he believes that easy availability would result in a lot of mediocre performances. Two recordings of his ensemble have been issued by his own company Chatham Square Productions, Inc., 24 East 81st Street, New York, NY 10028, USA. They are:

Music in Fifths/Music in Similar Motion	**LP 1003**
Music with Changing Parts (double album)	**LP 1001/2**

In Britain these records are now again obtainable from Nigel Greenwood Inc. Books, 41 Sloane Gardens, London SW1; Tel. 01-730 8824. At the time we made this interview, the recording of the complete Music in Twelve Parts had not been finished. We hope to be able to advise readers as and when the records become available. Copies of Dave Smith's article 'The Music of Philip Glass' in Contact 11 are now available in photocopied form at 6p per page, i.e. £0.36 including postage.