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The Music of Phil Glass

Few people in this country are, as yet, familiar with the music of Phil Glass. His name is associated with three other American composers (La Monte Young, Terry Riley and Steve Reich) who have concerned themselves primarily with sound-continuums which evolve gradually, often over long periods of time. The work of Riley and Reich is, by now, fairly well-known over here owing to easily available recordings and, in the case of Reich, tours with his group. The compositions of La Monte Young are at least known by repute, if not actually heard.

The distinguishing feature common to the music of all four composers is repetitiveness - many of their works contain little or no variance of pitch, speed, volume or timbre. The listener is invited to explore the quality of a slowly-changing sound and to focus with microscopic awareness on different aspects of it. For many, such intense concentration has induced mental states which have been likened to hypnosis, meditative trance, drug-influenced euphoria or even spiritual ecstacy. However, Young is probably the only composer for whom these psychological effects are a principal interest. Significantly, his music is devoid of pulse, being based upon combinations of drones. Much of Riley's music, on the other hand, consists of fast, continuous improvisatory patterns. Reich has explored the different ways in which a single rhythm can be set up against itself, and Glass uses rhythmic figures which increase or decrease in length as the piece progresses.

Glass was born on 31 January 1937, studied at the University of Chicago and later at the Juilliard School of Music. He won a Fulbright Scholarship to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, where he lived from 1964-6. By this time he was a prolific composer with about 20 published works to his credit - all these 'early' works have now been discarded.

A major turning-point occurred in the spring of 1966 when he was working with Ravi Shankar in Paris. Taking down his music from dictation, Glass was attracted to its cyclical rhythmic organisation, a concept different from anything he had encountered during his many years of study of Western techniques. Returning to New York early in 1967, he pursued this interest by studying tabla with Alla Rakha. By the end of 1968, he had established an ensemble of amplified instruments of mixed timbre for which he has composed most of his music.

All Glass's ensemble pieces are based on a structural system which may conveniently be termed 'additive process'. A simple melodic figure is established by being repeated a number of times at a fast speed. At a signal from the composer, all players proceed simultaneously to the next figure which is a rhythmic extension of the first, a process which is continued throughout the piece. Very rarely are new pitches introduced into the figure. There are usually between 30 and 80 melodic figures during the course of which a process of rhythmic subtraction may also occur and new voices may be introduced. Instrumentation is not indicated: Glass's group usually consists of two or three electric organs, saxophones and flutes. Instruments such as trumpet, cello and electric piano have also been used.

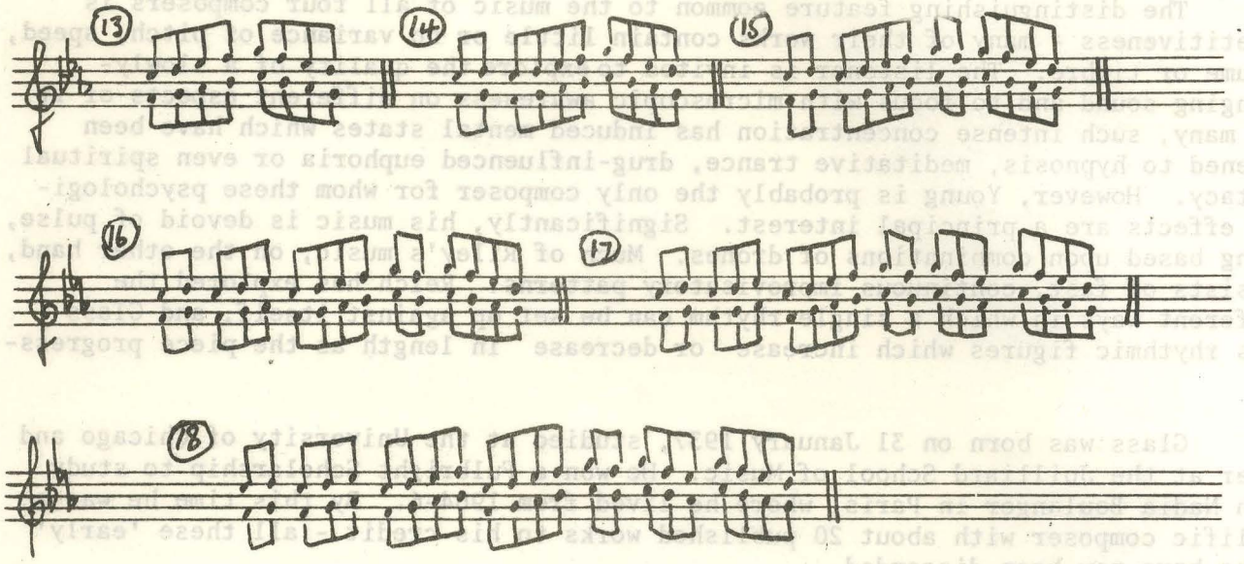
The first piece to use additive process was 1 + 1 (1968) for one performer tapping on an amplified table-top. This is realised by combining two rhythmic units (♬ and ♪) in continuous arithmetical progressions prepared by the performer. This concept was a development from Glass's study with Alla Rakha, when he spent some time learning a piece consisting entirely of regroupings of three rhythmic elements.

1 + 1 was followed by Two Pages (1969) which is restricted to one melodic

line throughout. Glass's subsequent works are written in two or more parts which, although played rhythmically in unison, move in parallel, contrary or similar motion in relation to each other. The titles of these works indicate a growing interest in texture: Music in Fifths, Music in Contrary Motion, Music in Eight Parts, Music in Similar Motion. In these later works, he became far more interested in the phenomenon of the sounds he was creating rather than the structures he was using.

Music in Fifths (1969) is written in two parts which move in parellel fifths throughout (in Glass's own recording the parts are doubled an octave lower). The first twelve figures are played only twice each and serve as an introduction to the main body of the work. Bars 13 to 35 grow gradually from an eight-note figure to a 210-note figure. At first they grow simply:

Example 1. Phil Glass: Music in Fifths

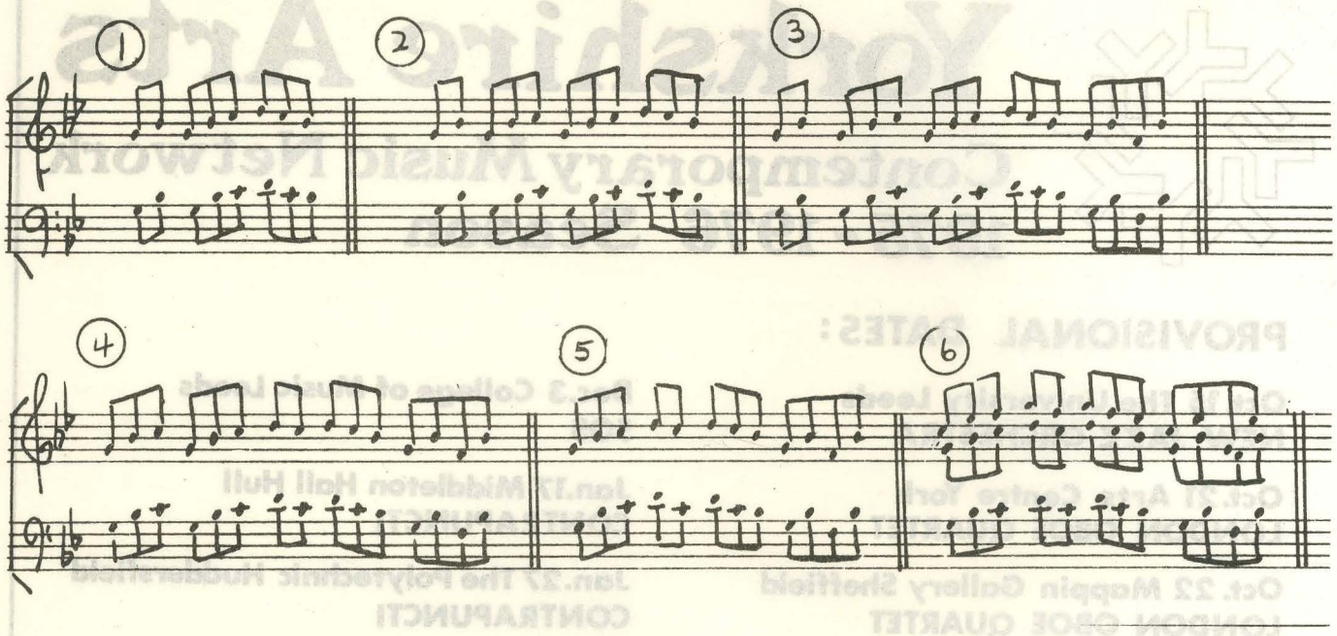


The scale-like figure of bar 13 (4+4) is extended by adding the first two notes of each group of four; then the first three notes as well; then the first four notes, and so on. At first the changes occur alternately in either the ascending or descending part of the figure. From bar 19 onwards the changes appear in both so that the second half of the bar is always an inversion of the first half. As the melodic figures become longer, notes are added in groups of six, seven and eight (these, incidentally, form the material of the introduction). In the later stages, longer groups are added, keeping the changes perceptible to the listener.

Like all of Glass's music, Music in Fifths is written out in continuous quavers. However, the appearance of the lowest and highest points of melodic figures may be heard as an irregular rhythm standing out from the continuum. The bare perfect fifths give the piece a stark, relentless and aggressive quality: "like a freight train" as Reich once aptly remarked. In comparison, Music in Similar Motion (1969) sounds much richer and gentler, although it seems rhythmically more accentuated. The principal reason for this is that it is written in four parts, one part being doubled in another octave to make a fifth. Whereas only an additive process is employed in Music in Fifths, a subtractive process also appears here. The individual figures never approach the length of those at the end of Music in Fifths, most of them consisting of between four and 41 beats.

The work is in four sections. Two parts are heard at the outset, an octave apart. Later, other parts are added: in bar 6 a treble part, in bar 12 a bass part and in bar 24 another (higher) treble part. Musically, these have the effect of creating varying modal centres - around G, C or E flat. Although figures gradually lengthen and then shorten, no two bars are ever the same. The simple foundation of the work can be discerned in the first few bars:

Example 2. Phil Glass: Music in Similar Motion



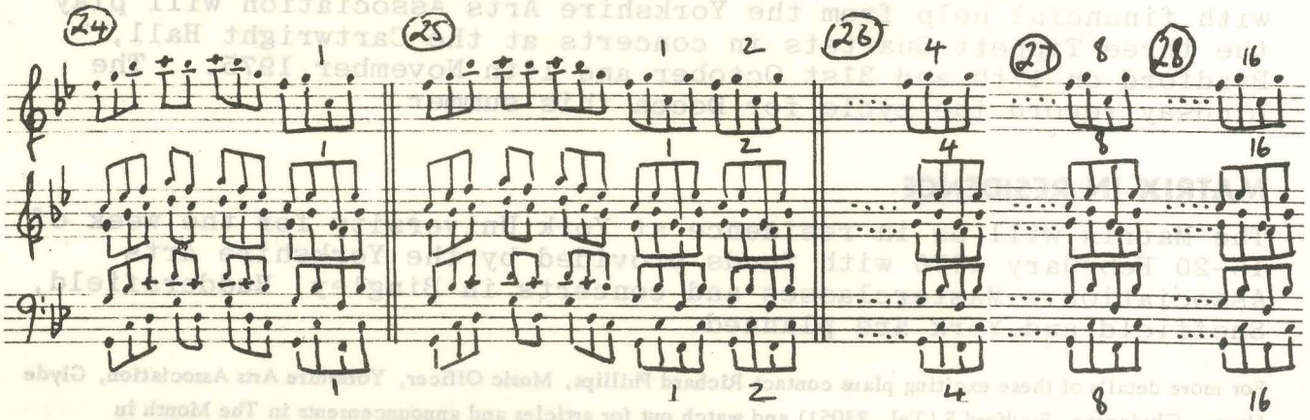
In bars 2 and 4 respectively, an ascending and a descending group of notes is added. In bars 4 and 5 an ascending group is subtracted.

In Section 2 (bars 6-11), and early in Section 3 (bars 12-15), ascending and descending groups are added respectively. The remainder of Section 3 is devoted to subtraction, firstly with regard to the ascending groups and then the descending ones, until a twelve-beat figure is reached in bar 23.

The increased rhythmic effect mentioned above is due to two other factors. Although the general melodic outline is still scale-like in character, the absence of A's gives the G's unusual prominence. The independent group of four notes (introduced in bar 3) which remains unchanged until the last section, adds a certain 'snap' to the end of each figure. These seemingly insignificant features assume importance in repetitive music.

It should be borne in mind that when the ear has accustomed itself to a pattern, it comes as something of a surprise to hear one small element change. The more extreme and unexpected of these changes (for instance, the sudden adding of the bass part) can have a shattering effect. Another shock technique lies in delaying the expected. At the beginning of the final section of Music in Similar Motion, the four-note group becomes more prominent by increasing the number of its repetitions within a bar.

Example 3. Phil Glass: Music in Similar Motion



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SOS

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March 17 The University York
MANTRA

All these concerts except 23 February, are promoted with funds provided by the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Yorkshire Arts Association. 23 February is made possible through the generosity of the Goethe Institute.

PIERROT LUNAIRE TOUR

The Yorkshire Arts Association is organising a tour to take in Bradford, Hull, Leeds, Manchester and Halifax in November 1975. Alexander Goehr will conduct the Aulos Ensemble and Enid Hartle will perform Pierrot Lunaire.

TIPPETT QUARTET CYCLE

The Lindsay String Quartet, in residence at Sheffield University with financial help from the Yorkshire Arts Association will play the three Tippett Quartets in concerts at the Cartwright Hall, Bradford on 17th and 31st October and 14th November 1975. The Lindsay record the cycle for Decca this summer.

MATRIX IN RESIDENCE

The Matrix will be in residence at York University for the week of 16-20 February 1976 with funds provided by the Yorkshire Arts Association. Masterclasses and concerts in Bingley, Huddersfield, Sheffield and York are planned.

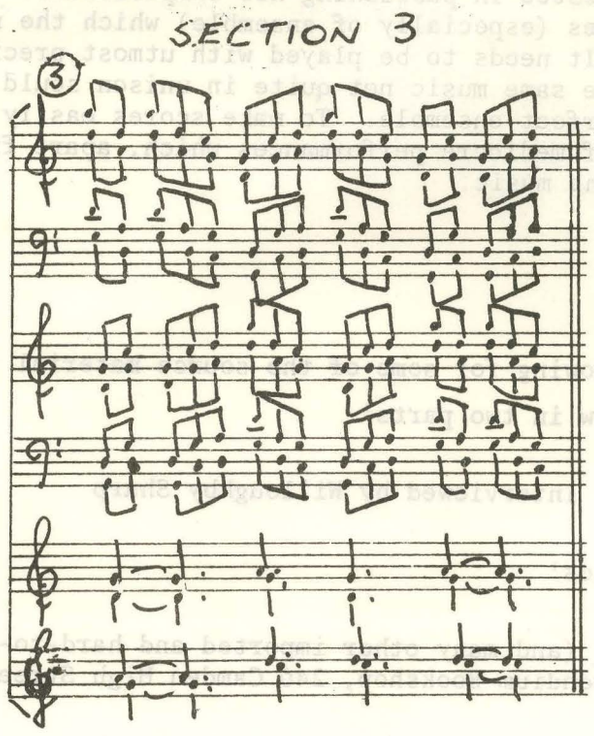
For more details of these exciting plans contact Richard Phillips, Music Officer, Yorkshire Arts Association, Glyde House, Glydegate, Bradford 5 (Tel. 23051) and watch out for articles and announcements in The Month in Yorkshire.

The repeated melodic crests become less and less frequent until they eventually disappear in bar 30. From here to the end, the four-note figure is extended to a six, eight, 16 and finally a 32-note figure. Unlike the rest of the piece, the rhythm is here organised in groups of two and four and therefore seems less irregular. Since the music in this section is at its most dense and most static, psychoacoustical effects (such as the appearance of drones, overtones and the illusion of voices singing) are at their stongest.

It was during the rehearsals of Music in Similar Motion that Glass became fully aware of these psychoacoustical effects. In Music with Changing Parts (1970) he indicated sections where players are free to contribute unspecified sustained notes either by playing or singing. Rhythmically he had no wish to advance on the ground covered in earlier works - the first half only uses figures which consist of groups of two or four notes. But at certain points (called 'changing figures') the players are free to switch to another part, thus giving the music a continual textural and timbral development. Not surprisingly the duration of the piece (1¼ hours) is considerably longer than that of either Music in Fifths or Music in Similar Motion (about 20 minutes each). Completely different sets of notes are introduced at times; some are quite dissonant, but the sound is less hard-edged than in the earlier pieces due to the presence of six independent parts.

The most recent ensemble work of which I am aware is Music in Twelve Parts, an enormous work lasting about six hours. A glance at a single bar leads one to suspect that it would be difficult to pick out any one melodic strand: one is more likely to hear new patterns resulting from the combination of the parts, a phenomenon hinted at in the final section of Music in Similar Motion.

Example 4. Phil Glass: Music in Twelve Parts



It took some while before the ensemble could perform the work as a continuous whole. Before 1974, only two or three sections would be played at a time. The ensemble was due to make a six-record set of Music in Twelve Parts a few months ago.

Glass's fame, such as it is rests on these ensemble pieces. There are, however, some vocal works scored for a small number of female voices. Future plans include more vocal music and an extensive work for solo organ (two manuals and pedals) which Glass is writing for himself to play. Apparently this will be inten-

tionally left open-ended and performances will consist of excerpts.

Clearly Glass's totally determined music has more in common with Reich's than with the improvisatory continuums of La Monte Young and Terry Riley. Glass and Reich actually studied at the Juilliard School of Music at the same time. In those days they had little in common musically: Reich was writing in a free atonal idiom, whereas Glass's outlook was more conservative. Otherwise their backgrounds are different. Reich is sympathetic to the rhythmic aspects of African and Balinese music as compared with Glass's interest in Indian music. Incidentally, his music doesn't sound Indian, a criticism which is sometimes levelled against La Monte Young.

In Reich's music, instrumentation is fixed and relationships between two or more performers of the same (often percussive) instruments are explored. Of Glass's work, only 1 + 1 involves anything percussive. Apart from this work, however, instrumentation is never specified. John Lewis and I have been working with the possibility of performing some of Glass's music on two pianos. The resulting sound is, of course, very different to that of Glass's group, but a small room produces the acoustical effect that the composer would appear to be aiming at. Many of Reich's earlier pieces are involved with single modules of eight or twelve beats, whereas rhythmic alteration is fundamental to Glass's music. Reich is committed to structure, but accepts psychoacoustical effects as a by-product of his own music. Glass, as we have seen, has become less preoccupied with structure since Music in Fifths. Significantly, he envisages his music more as a 'total experience' for the listener, and therefore produces the sound as loudly and as clearly as possible (a similarity with rock music). Recorded performances are, for him, a poor substitute for the live event.

Glass is not interested in publishing his compositions. As in Reich's music, there are many difficulties (especially of ensemble) which the notes on the page don't begin to suggest. It needs to be played with utmost precision and evenness. Two performers playing the same music not quite in unison sould very different from two performers in perfect ensemble. To make scores easily available would result in a good number of mediocre performances which, apart from anything else, would be detrimental to the music.

I am indebted to the following for some of the source material for this article:

'Phil Glass - an interview in two parts'
Avalanche (Summer 1972)

'The Phil Glass Ensemble' interviewed by Willoughby Sharp
Avalanche (December 1974)

Phil Glass: 'Program Notes'
Interfunctionen 10

Avalanche, Interfunctionen (and many other imported and hard-to-get magazines) can be obtained from the Compendium Bookshop, 240 Camden High Street, LONDON NW1.

Discography

There are two recordings of Glass's group issued by Chatham Square Productions, Inc.:

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

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These are available for $5.00 and $9.00 respectively from Mary Boone, Bykert Gallery, 24 East 81st Street, NEW YORK, NY 10028, U.S.A. I experienced some difficulty in obtaining these by post: Music with Changing Parts took ten months to arrive. It's best to get a friend to collect them.

Music with Changing Parts is also available at DM 35 from Frau Ursula Wevers in Cologne. The address given in Interfunctionen (5 KÖLN 1, Roonstrasse 38) is no longer current, but at the time of going to press the new address was not to hand. Those concerned to obtain the records are advised to write to the editor of CONTACT who will hopefully be able to supply the correct address now, rather than trust the German Post Office to forward mail from the old address.

Readers in Britain will be interested to know that the Phil Glass Ensemble will be touring this country in the autumn on the Arts Council's Contemporary Music Network scheme. Further details of the John Lewis/Dave Smith duo may be obtained through the editor.