

Concert 4

March 11, 2017

Movement 3 from Symphony No. 3—Phillip Glass

Gustav Mahler famously observed, “A symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything.” On the whole this is manifestly not true of Glass’s symphonies, but in a very useful sense it seems to apply to the man, himself. If a composer may play the rôle of America’s foremost public intellectual in the arts, there is arguably no stronger candidate than Phillip Glass. For the past half century or so, he has helped shape much of the direction of new and innovative music with his unique approach to composition, his thoughtful and deep exploration of aesthetic principles, and his prolific interaction with leading artists the world over in cinema, the theatre, the visual arts, poetry, dance, and of course, music. Both adored and “reviled,” he has been drawn to the expressive possibilities, and potential for commentary and meaning, in almost every modern artistic genre, technique, and vocabulary. And so, in this pursuit, he has interacted with an astounding number of the “movers and shakers” of contemporary art. Some of those important in his life’s circle: Chuck Close, Richard Serra, Brian Eno, Peter Sellars, Leonard Cohen, David Bowie, Paul Simon, members of the “Talking Heads,” Mick Jagger, Alan Ginsberg, Jerome Robbins, Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, and Stephen Colbert—to mention only a few. Whew! His list of compositions is formidable: over a dozen operas and as many chamber operas and theatre pieces, seven string quartets, ten symphonies, countless solo keyboard works, almost fifty film scores, and a multiplicity of others works in almost every other musical genre.

The inevitable questions, of course, are: What does his music sound like? Does he have a unified, recognizable style? What has influenced his work? There are no simple answers, but there are clear directions in his thought and work. He plunges deep into new ways of understanding the world, the personal inner imagination, and innovative ways of conceiving sound to express—or not to express—the interface between the human mind and experience. Much of his music is founded upon repeated elements, and there is not doubt of the “atmospheric” nature of his style. Suffice to say, much of his work challenges convention and presents difficulties with traditional folks who follow the arts. In point of fact, much of his music is conceivably incomprehensible to many in today’s concert-going public. In simple (simplistic?) terms: he is the darling of New York intellectuals, and much of his work does not “play in Peoria.” That being said, there is in his music something to offer almost anyone who is willing to listen with “new ears,” and who finds the right piece among the many different ways his compositions sound. Those sounds may include his epochal opera, *Einstein on the Beach*; the theatre piece, *Hydrogen Jukebox*, with a libretto by Ginsberg; *Dracula* for string quartet (for the 1931 film); and electronic instruments, somewhat traditional concertos, and vocal music to texts by Carl Sandburg, Maurice Sendak, or Mick Jagger. It truly is a challenge to neatly put his style in a box. A few observations may be made, however.

He enjoyed a top-notch traditional music education under the likes of Vincent Persichetti, Nadia Boulanger, and Darius Milhaud. He early on was attracted to modernists such as Webern, Boulez, Stockhausen, and Berio. But his encounter with the radical French cinema of Godard and Truffaut, Samuel Beckett’s plays, and contemporary visual art moved him on in different directions. While his favorite composer is still Franz Schubert, he identifies the repetitive patterns of classical Indian music and the conception of time in Beckett’s plays as of consequential influence upon him. His early work was lumped in with the “minimalist”

movement—appropriately so—wherein constant repetition and variation of small musical “cells” was the strikingly new and economical style. Since the 1970s he has moved on into a variety of innovative styles.

His Symphony No. 3 (from 1995) was composed during a time of focus on that genre—Symphony No. 2 even drawing upon the music of Honegger and Milhaud and other mainstream composers as inspiration. No. 3 was written for nineteen instruments, treated as soloists in a chamber-like fashion, with plenty of traditional elements that, frankly, serve as a rather smooth and painless entre to the music of this challenging composer. In this particular instance his peripatetic eye is looking back in time for a device to structure what is clearly a new sound. This deliberate invocation of the past is the foundation of the third movement: it clearly is a *chaconne*, a favorite unifying device of composers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Repetition is a favorite device of “minimalist” composers, and a *chaconne* yields coherence by simply establishing a series of chords that is continuously repeated from beginning to end. A related technique is repeating a bass line in a similar fashion, a technique that almost everyone may remember from the Pachelbel Canon—ubiquitous at weddings, today.

It begins with three celli and four violas, with a pulsing syncopation. With each repetition of the winsome chord progression new voices are added, with slightly new materials, yielding layers of ideas and motives. As the end approaches, a solo violin plaintively soars out above the texture, passing the melody on successively to others. But, ultimately, the gentle, insistent, undulating layers of ideas in this “sea” of strings subsumes everything, and the movement quietly ends. While Glass has composed much, and in radically differing styles from this work—this brief moment is eloquent testimony to the composer’s vast original imagination. Like a modern painting that is nothing more than a field of one homogenous color, Glass’ piece forces you to contemplate more closely simplicities that in other, more conventional settings, would be passed over by the reductive mind.

Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart is largely responsible for the creation of the modern piano concerto, composing them primarily for himself to support his career as a performer. His spending habits consistently placed him in financial difficulties, and since he usually desperately needed to concertize, concertos were a natural solution. He composed some twenty-seven of them, starting about 1767. Although his operas generally are perceived to exceed his piano concertos in musical genius, and historical significance, no other genre of his is so consistently high in quality and maturity.

While the concerto—employing a variety of solo instruments, or groups of solo instruments—had been a staple of concerts for over a hundred years by Mozart’s time, it was the advent of the piano by the late eighteenth century that enabled the genre to reach its highest expressive possibilities. Only the sonority and tonal weight of the piano really provides for an equal partner to the orchestra, and thus a foundation for the dramatic interplay between solo and accompaniment that is basic to the genre. Mozart’s contribution, other than his consummate musical genius, of course, was to “beef up” the rôle of the orchestra from one of simple accompaniment to that of co-protagonist in the musical drama. He also established a clear succession of sections in the form of the first movement. But, history aside, the relevant fact is that the piano concerto was the medium of the composer’s strongest and most personal

expression—they all manifestly spring directly from his deepest feelings. His compositional facility in the genre is well known—he often performed them at the première with no written out solo part, with the ink on the orchestral parts hardly dry.

This concerto is one of only two that are in minor keys (this being the first) and was composed in 1785 during a remarkable period during which he wrote eleven piano concertos in two years! This work is a dark and wondrous one, and is surely among those compositions that later inspired commentators to speak of Mozart's "romanticism." Labels are tricky, but it's clear that the work's chiaroscuro nature plays a significant rôle in that perception. Moreover, two of his greatest works, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* would appear during the next two years, and their mastery and unparalleled sense of drama are cut from the same cloth as this concerto. It seems to me that especially the shadowy profundity of *Don Giovanni* is presaged here.

The first movement, as usual, is a meaty one. The syncopated, pulsing strings create a mood right out of Italian opera, setting the stage for the solo part as a melancholy rumination that, even in the second idea—usually brighter in mood—still seems a bit somber. After the piano cadenza, the movement rather just fades away. The following slow movement is a "romanza," a term that Mozart used only a few times, and here the ambiguity of the term seems clearer in Mozart's mind, for here we encounter musical beauty and lyricism at the fullness of the composer's powers. The dominating mood and idea are interrupted twice for the necessary contrast: the first is couched in the same lyrical tone as the main idea. But after a return of the latter, the second contrasting section is a heavy weight diversion of menacing, tumultuous thoughts far removed from the world of tranquility of the beginning. It's in the key of g minor—a special key for the composer, and one that he consistently reserved for his most *serioso* moments, so be warned. It's a substantial exploration of an alternative world from that of the first, but finally a brief modulation returns us home, ending quietly.

The last movement opens vigorously, with a "rocketing" rising arpeggio as the identifier, and its constant return guides us through this serious, driving affair. To be sure, there are some contrasting lighter moments, but they don't detain us long in this catapulting, serious drive to the end. The last statement of the main idea punches right into the piano cadenza. And then . . . a happy little tune surprisingly quickly takes us to the finish line, banishing all of the "storm and stress" through which Mozart has taken us. After all is said and done, it's easy to see why Beethoven admired and performed this composition.

Serenade, op. 7 in E^b—Richard Strauss

As long as there have been garden *soirées*, outdoor wedding receptions, and patio cocktail parties, there have been ample opportunities for casual entertainment by small instrumental ensembles. A "serenade," of course, has its origin as solo song of dedication, sung outdoors, and often accompanied by the singer on a guitar, lute, or other similar instrument. And, indeed, that musical imagery lived on for centuries in various light instrumental pieces that carried the title. By the middle of the eighteenth century, most especially in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Bohemia, instrumental ensemble entertainment at social, outdoor affairs by groups of less than a dozen players became all the rage, and we are fortunate, today, to have many of these works by the leading composers of the day. They were called by various names, including "*Feldpartita*," "divertimento," "cassation," and, of course, serenades. Both Haydn and Mozart contributed dozens of them.

While serenades are written variously for strings alone, winds alone, or a combination thereof, the wind serenade occupies a distinctive position in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Winds were especially useful for outdoor music—the origin of military bands lies in the same tradition. The specific instrumentation of wind serenades (and the early military bands) was not rigid, but usually consisted in the smaller groups of pairs of oboes (or clarinets), horns, and bassoons, and in the larger groups, pairs of all the woodwinds, and perhaps the addition of more horns, as well. Trombones and trumpets were not included, since those instruments came from other, more limited traditions, and had a small, or non-existent rôle in the orchestral music of the times. Outstanding are the three wind serenades by Mozart, one of which is a masterpiece, the *Grand Partita* in B^b—probably the greatest “band” piece ever. In addition to Mozart’s stellar wind works, Dvořák contributed a particularly charming one. Other composers, such as Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner, Mendelssohn, and von Weber composed small works for winds alone, and even Gounod produced a particularly ingratiating one. Finally, Stravinsky’s *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* set the high mark of the twentieth century.

Given the Austrian predominance in the genre, it is not surprising, at all, that one of the first successful works of the young Richard Strauss was his *Serenade*, op. 7. While serenades were often cast in a series of relatively short movements (often as many as ten, or so), in straightforward forms, the teenaged Strauss chose to compose his in a single movement, and in a rather abbreviated version of the familiar sonata form. The composer soon followed this work with one in the form of a suite in several movements, and two later full-blown, four-movement symphonies for winds, a few years before his death in the late nineteen-forties. But, this first one is the most performed and beloved.

It was completed in 1882, when the composer was eighteen years old, and met with great success. Its warm, romantic colors and tight formal construction are ample indication of the genius that was to come—especially in the *Lieder*, tone poems, and operas that established Strauss in the highest echelon of late-Romantic (and yet, progressive, modern) composers.

It begins with a rich, leisurely passage in the woodwinds alone, soon joined by the horns and bassoons, but it doesn’t take long before the second theme, a pulsating, more animated affair appears. That is explored a bit more thoroughly before the solo horn announces the final theme of the exposition, and this section closes gently. The solo oboe begins the development with the second theme, the opening theme saved for a while, as the pulsating second one is put through its paces. A big climax, marked by fat horns and bassoons and descending woodwinds and horns tells us that the recap is here, and after a judicious, but abbreviated reexamination of the main ideas, the serenade ends ever so quietly—the solo flute serenely and gradually ascending to the end.

Symphony No. 1 in C Major, op. 21—Ludwig van Beethoven

When Beethoven began work on his first symphony he had been a resident of Vienna for seven years, and was enjoying a growing reputation as a composer. He had already composed the first ten sonatas for piano, including the *Pathétique*. Other important completed works were the first two piano concertos and some of the op. 18 string quartets. His instrumental ensemble works included the wind Octet in E^b and the Septet in E^b for winds and strings, but no symphonies. Haydn had returned in triumph from London in 1795 from his second trip to that city, flush with the success of his second set of six symphonies of the “London” symphonies. Collectively these twelve symphonies by Haydn constitute the last word in defining classical

style in the genre (Mozart had died four years earlier). These masterpieces evidently stimulated Beethoven to work on his own first essay in the genre, but after much work, it was abandoned. It took three years, but Beethoven finally decided to begin anew, starting work in a new and different effort in 1799. It was completed in 1800, and given its première in April of that year. Beethoven was an artist who stood astride the transition from the classic to the romantic period, and it is understandable that his first attempts would be somewhat derivative. And this symphony is clearly the successor to the model of Haydn. The great scholar, Donald Tovey, characterized Beethoven's first essay in the genre as a "farewell to the eighteenth century." That, it clearly is, for although it certainly bears the mark of Beethoven, it has little of the monumentality first heard in the third symphony, for example. It is a light-hearted work, and carries some subtle examples of Beethoven's sense of humor. On the other hand, although Haydn may have been peering over Beethoven's shoulder, Beethoven pushed ahead in his progressive traits. His harmonic adventuresomeness is present from the very first chord, and is salted throughout the work. The scoring for winds is so pervasive—a trait that became much more common later—that an early critic complained that the symphony sounded more like band music than orchestral. Beethoven's well-known proclivity for really "working through" his material is right here. In many ways the mature Beethoven lurks beneath the surface of this first symphony in its subtle details, notwithstanding its general similarity to the style of the two earlier giants of the period.

There's been a lot of spilt ink over the startling first few chords of the slow introduction to the first movement. All that really matters is that Beethoven delighted in starting the work with a short little deception as to the real key, and it should delight us, as well. The mood is eloquent, noble—all the things that we hear right through the last symphony. The faster, main movement starts with a bustling simple motif, soon followed by the woodwinds taking the second theme, a smooth descending idea. This is a short exposition, and an important bass line under the oboe soon heralds its end. After the repeat, Beethoven does what he does so well, working creatively with these three ideas, but this too, doesn't last long, and a recap with a significant coda (another solid characteristic of the Beethoven to come) tops it off.

The second movement "walks" along graciously with a rather coy theme—beginning somewhat like a little fugue—that is soon followed by another one. Light timpani strokes take us to the end of the section. After the repeat, Beethoven briefly explores a few darker moments in a throbbing rhythm, and then we're back home with the opening material, suitably varied with moving accompaniment. After recapitulating the ground of the opening section, the movement—featuring the winds--gradually fades away in the best Beethoven manner.

Remember, Haydn was still alive and kicking at this time, so the third movement, Beethoven calls a "minuet," in the traditional way. But, it really is a quite vibrant scherzo in the manner for which the composer soon began famous—some may even hear intimations of the scherzo of Symphony No. 3, "Eroica" here. The short first section, ends with some of the composer's well-known rhythmic displacements that add to the drive forward. The middle section—always a nice contrast—traditionally features the winds, and they glide along smoothly, with rippling strings beneath. This too, doesn't last long, and a repeat of the first section ensues.

The beginning of the last movement is nothing if not wry. A loud chord is followed by three soft little notes, which grow into a lengthening scale with each repetition. After seven bars of this quiet teasing, the scale zips up into the main theme, a simple little idea. As a matter of fact, the whole movement is built around easy to recognize short ideas, all crafted into a unified whole that reminds us again of the craftsmanship of a composer who was a master of "economy

of means.” Beethoven always averred that he didn’t learn anything from the few composition lessons that he had from Haydn. That may be, but it is manifestly clear that the younger man had listened and learned enormously from the music of his elder in this charming, vivacious romp of a last movement.

--Wm. E. Runyan

© 2016 William E. Runyan