15 Minimalist opera

ARVED ASHBY

Emerging from and ultimately belonging to the stage, minimalist music is an offshoot of avant-garde New York theatre. The style has been traditionally associated with American pop culture and African and south Asian music, but just as important are the early minimalist composers' connections with the innovative theatrical figures of downtown Manhattan in the 1960s. Indeed, musical minimalism and American theatre served to define each other at critical points in both their histories.

Before the 1970s, the signal innovations in American music and theatre certainly did not take place in the opera houses. But the minimalists have shown an extraordinary creative interest in music drama and other large-scale theatrical endeavours. The story of this operatic renovation really begins in the late 1950s and 1960s, when Philip Glass and fellow opera composer Meredith Monk were students in New York. The theatres of lower Manhattan were seething with revolutionary change at that time. Pioneering among non-narrative collaboratives in the city was the Living Theatre, founded in 1947 by anarchist free spirits Julian Beck and Judith Malina.

By Glass's own description, he had grown up with the 'progressive theatre' of Brecht, Genet, Pinter and Beckett rather than the traditional 'narrative, commercial' theatre of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. 'The kinds of theater which spin familiar stories, moralizing, sometimes satirizing, occasionally comforting us about our lives, have never meant much to me. What has always stirred me is theater that challenges one's ideas of society, one's notions of order' (Glass 1987, 4). The greatest impact on his 'notions of order' came from the Living Theatre, which first exposed him to the style of marathon *tableaux-vivants* that would later be called 'the theater of images' when taken up by Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and Lee Breuer. Glass remembers a decisive 1964 encounter with the Living Theatre's *Frankenstein* as 'the first theater work I had seen that so radically extended the accepted sense of theater time' (6–7). The *Frankenstein* productions comprised three to

 This chapter is dedicated to Jeremy Tambling

five hours of fractured, de-centred and sometimes frantic stage action, beginning with a full half-hour of silence as the players tried to levitate a young girl on stage (Biner 1972, 123).

Whether by coincidence or not, Glass penned the first music that he acknowledges less than a year after seeing *Frankenstein*: this was incidental music for two saxophones to accompany Beckett's *Play* as staged by the Mabou Mines Theatre, the progressive group Glass himself was intimately involved with from its beginnings in the mid-1960s. As it began here, Glass's mature minimalist style was as radical an extension of 'the accepted sense of time' as anything the Living Theatre was doing. In the composer's own estimation, his music eschews 'colloquial time', which he describes as 'the time that we normally live in.' He continues: 'one of the first things that people perceive in my music is extended time, or loss of time, or no sense of time whatever. All that narrative structure of the Beethoven concerto is gone from my music' (Kostelanetz 1997, 164, 171).

While Glass approached opera through his work in the so-called theater of images, Meredith Monk came to opera from a rather different direction. Her roots are in the Fluxus movement and the Events and Happenings of the 1960s – and specifically the Judson Dance Theater, a Greenwich Village fixture since 1962. Monk's Fluxus background can be seen in the playfulness, whimsy and utopianism of much of her work, characteristics that can now seem old-fashioned. But Monk also came to reject some basic tenets of Judson's experimental theatre: as one might expect of a composer of self-declared 'operas', she is a story-teller at heart, and also interested in specific characters and characterizations. Perhaps paradoxically, she is also a kind of neo-structuralist who takes great care over the dramatic shape of her presentations. Either Monk retains the traditional Aristotelian idea of form as having a beginning, a middle and an end; or she works up a schema, a dramatic shape, of her own.

'I am not, like Glass, a theater composer', Steve Reich has said. 'I don't carry the theater around inside me' (Schwarz 1996, 103). Reich is indeed one of today's great constructivists, caring for formal process to such an extent that the only drama to be found in his music is structure-born. Or is it? We tend to forget the performance-art elements in Reich's decisive early work. *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) was his first example of the 'process music' by which he became famous. Playing two tapes of a Pentecostal preacher on cheap equipment, Reich heard one running slightly slower. In the phasing that resulted, he discovered 'an extraordinary form of musical structure ... It was a seamless, uninterrupted musical process' (Reich 2002, 20). As if to verify the performance-art aspect to the tape pieces, Reich turned immediately afterwards to conceptual works showing the influence of Fluxus, Cage and LaMonte Young. His *Pendulum*

Music (1967) was process music posing as performance art, or perhaps the other way around: four performers released individual microphones suspended above speakers, letting them swing back and forth until the feedback became constant from all four sources. Typically for Reich, the piece is outwardly technical-structural but at its basis theatrical-didactic.

The process might sound mechanistic, but in the 1960s Reich was utilizing 'phasing' repetition as much for psychological and emotional effect as for structural unity. In his own words, his early tape pieces represent 'a very rigid process, and it's precisely the impersonality of that process that invites this very engaged psychological reaction' (Reich 2002, 21). Also striking is the fact that Reich took as his ultimate goal a kind of realist experience that resembles Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Insistent repetition of recognizable speech enables the composer to retain the emotional power of the locution 'while intensifying its melody *and* meaning through repetition and rhythm' (20). In short, tape allowed Reich a concentrated form of theatre – and much the same can be said of his later use of sampling in *Different Trains* (1988), *The Cave* (1992) and *Three Tales* (2002).

John Adams, the youngest of these four composers, is not a minimalist strictly speaking, and was not privy to the downtown theatrical innovations of the 1950s and 1960s. His operas are relevant here because they show how Glass's and Monk's downtown remakings of opera were eventually brought back uptown, into the opera house proper. Adams also helped tie off the historical narrative of minimalist opera by demonstrating the latterday transformation of vernacular theatre through media. Sometimes called 'CNN operas', Adams's stage works show the way video and television have come to appropriate and supplant notions of theatre and theatricality: a shift in aesthetics and perception has been subsumed by a change of medium. The kind of wholesale theatrical innovation offered by the Living Theatre is no longer possible in today's monolithic situation of video-induced sensory and aesthetic saturation. Walter Benjamin could well have been foreseeing video culture when he spoke of 'the work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction' (1968, 241).

Minimalism, repetition, theatre

Minimalism is distinguished by repetition, and repetition is innately poetic in that it disrupts signification and literal meaning; it moves music from a system of signs to a world of symbols. For what is each individual statement of a repeated musical figure: an authentic expression

of the moment or a simple replication of that which was just heard, hiding behind the fact of repetition? ('Because repetition differs in kind from representation', writes Gilles Deleuze (1994, 18), 'the repeated cannot be represented: rather, it must always be signified, masked by what signifies it, itself masking what it signifies'.) Repetition defines minimalism and late twentieth-century performance art alike, transforming both institutionalized musical idioms and everyday action into theatre: when Michael Nyman wrote *In Re Don Giovanni* (1977) by setting up internal repetitions within Mozart's 'Catalogue Aria', common practice became music about music; when Northern Irish performance artist André Stitt repeatedly and bit by bit chipped off the enamel surface of a cast iron bathtub, a plumbing renovation became theatre. In both instances, repetition served to disconnect the action from evident reason and rationality: Deleuze refers to 'an inverse relation between repetition and consciousness, repetition and remembering, repetition and recognition . . .' (1994, 14).

Minimalism represented a kind of scorched-earth approach to aesthetics: the minimalist composers' rejection of Darmstadt modernism was the strongest generational rebuff in music history, and the most specifically contradictory. Minimalism's radically new proportion between small-scale detail and background event (as described in more detail below) can be heard as a wholesale rejection of modernism's distillation and concentration of local, small-scale event. Schoenberg and Darmstadt had also placed highest priority on avoiding literal repetition of pitch, motive and phrase. The alliances that modernists like Boulez and Stockhausen formed with John Cage in the 1950s might seem self-contradictory, but make sense in that the two parties considered repetition a common enemy: the former because it betokened a lack of thought, and the latter because it was symptomatic of *too much* thinking. The minimalists, on the other hand, foregrounded repetition in an attempt to annihilate ambiguity. Repetition in psychoanalytic terms is a symptom of the failure to integrate traumatic experience – and so repetition would seem to emblematize the anxiety of influence between minimalism and modernism. If we take the Lacanian view that all art is neurotic, we could say musical minimalism put the symptom of repetition compulsion in the foreground whereas modernism denied it.

Deleuze was writing about repetition at just about the same time that Reich, Glass and Terry Riley were writing within it. In his book *Difference and Repetition* (published in 1968), Deleuze works to flesh out Western philosophy's faulty conception of repetition by finessing it into two types:

> one which concerns only the overall, abstract effect, and the other which concerns the acting cause. One is a static repetition, the other is dynamic . . .

> One refers back to a single concept, which leaves only an external difference between the ordinary instances of a figure; the other is the repetition of an internal difference which it incorporates in each of its moments, and carries from one distinctive point to another. (Deleuze 1994, 20)

This is the crux of the matter for minimalist composers, who – as practitioners of an art 'with no past tense', to borrow Carolyn Abbate's description (Abbate 1991, 52) – dare to encompass Deleuze's dichotomy in its most provocative form. Minimalism also confronts another problem that Deleuze describes, namely the difficulty of grasping the exact relationship between the now, the once-now, and the soon-to-be-now: 'We cannot wait, the moment must be simultaneously present and past, present and yet to come, in order for it to pass (and to pass for the sake of other moments). The present must coexist with itself as past and yet to come' (Deleuze 1983, 48). Confronting these dilemmas, minimalist form provocatively straddles structure and *style mécanique*. A minimalist composition is like a machine, in that it compels us to ask: when is repetition a positive, organic element – a triumph of reason, an acknowledgment of certainty and similarity – and when does it betoken mechanical imposition, a refusal to let the musical moment pass?

To phrase this duality specifically in musical terms: when Glass decides on a twenty-fold repetition of a nine-note phrase in *Einstein on the Beach*, to what extent does this become an inspirational passage – a whim, a capricious 'freezing' of the compositional software – and to what extent a heavily, dogmatically pre-cogitated compositional move? With the Darmstadt modernism that Glass rejected so strongly, choosing a tone row or row-class represented a pre-compositional decision that set the agenda for the piece – the music serving to realize the latent and inherent musical possibilities embodied in the row. This is perhaps equivalent to Deleuze's idea of static repetition, though the infinitely variable ways that the row actually comes to be heard in the composition amount to dynamic repetition. From either perspective, the row tends to retreat from immediate audibility. But with the modules and additive rhythms of *Einstein on the Beach*, say, repetition becomes a local event – and the overall consequence of repetition exactly equivalent, no more and no less, to the cumulative effect of local repetition.

In his essay 'The Automatic Message' (1933), surrealist André Breton discerned a similar duality in the practice of 'automatic writing' (*l'écriture automatique*). The question he raised also demands to be asked of the minimalist styles of Glass, Reich, Monk, Adams and Nyman: to what extent is this art automatic and habitual, and to what extent does it *mimic* the automatic and habitual? (Breton 1999, 125–43.) How much of this music is mindless and how much of it is mindful – not to use the

words in a judgmental-aesthetic way? 'The head is the organ of exchange', Deleuze writes, 'but the heart is the amorous organ of repetition. (It is true that repetition also concerns the head, but precisely because it is its terror paradox)' (1994, 2). Breton praises the demystifying aspect of automatic writing as it urges quantity over 'quality', both within the work itself and in the way it recognizes no real difference between 'professional' and public writing. There are obvious analogies here with minimalism and minimalist expansion of musical dimensions, not to mention the arguments of those who have disparaged the style.

Glass, Wilson and *Einstein on the Beach*

Glass's new minimalist style of the mid-1960s was clearly sympathetic to protracted, non-narrative conceptions of theatre – and likely arose under their direct influence. But it was his co-operative efforts with director Robert Wilson, beginning with *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), that allowed him to refine and personalize his repetitive musical language.

Wilson's hypnotic power largely stems from the new relationships he effects between clock time, Aristotelian stage time (time as the characters on stage might feel its passing) and body time (the viewer's own breathing and heart-rate). Time and again, Wilson's audiences say he gives them a heightened perception of time. In similar fashion, Glass's compositions alter the listener's chronological sense by engineering an entirely new relationship between foreground event and background, large-scale structure. In *Einstein on the Beach* and his other works of that era, Glass's minimalism effects a new, disproportionate distance between quickened foreground activity and slower background motion: the fast (the figuration prolonging the harmony) becomes faster, the slow (the harmonic rhythm itself, the rate of change) slower. Both Wilson and Glass effect a quickened sense of small-scale motion (actors' hand motions in Wilson's case, and the obsessive semiquaver or quaver figurations in Glass's music) while change at the broadest level slows down (Sheryl Sutton became one of Wilson's favourite players for her ability to execute, effortlessly and seamlessly, slow and agonizingly drawn-out gestures; while in *Einstein on the Beach* Glass might stay with G major, say, for a half-hour at a stretch). The common-practice repertory tends to develop a different connection between figurational rhythm and harmonic rhythm: with sonata movements, but in other forms as well, thematic areas are harmonically stable and generally see moderate or slow rhythmic activity, while transitional and developmental sections are driven by quicker figuration and harmonic rhythm.

Eschewing narrative, Wilson stages in time strata. 'There is an additive process', he says, 'with layers and zones of activities and images and time ... In [*The Life and Times of Sigmund*] *Freud*, the turtle takes 22 minutes to cross the stage; the runner takes 18 seconds, Freud 6½ minutes. The woman sits in the chair for 31 minutes' (Kostelanetz 1994, 93). Wilson's slowest layers of on-stage action can give his work a dreamlike quality. In a now-famous description, surrealist writer Louis Aragon said of *Deafman's Glance* (1971): 'it is at once life awake and the life of closed eyes, the confusion between everyday life and the life of each night, reality mingles with dream, all that's inexplicable in the life of [a] deaf man' (Aronson 2000, 48). While Wilson radically slows down rhythm at the macro level, by way of compensation he increases the amount of localized, moment-to-moment information: 'by bombarding the senses', Arthur Holmberg writes of Wilson's *CIVILwarS*, 'Wilson vouchsafes the spectator a glimpse of the sublime, an emotion the modern world has suppressed' (1996, 27). Wilson disorients the viewer by thus realigning foreground and background, but supplies no help with verbalization or body motion: a viewer cannot hope to read the body motions of Wilson's players in any usual or functional way, and words also fail as a basic chronometer. He eliminates any absolute chronological sense, and thereby forces the viewer to devise entirely new ways of orienting him- or herself with regard to time. To return to Deleuze's phrase, Wilson demonstrates ways that the moment can be 'simultaneously present and past, present and yet to come.'

Music, unfolding in real time, is the reality to Wilson's dreams. Music that has a steady tactus precludes the floating, entirely relative chronology of dreams: it supplies the sense of time that Wilson lacks. In this sense, at least, Glass's music and Wilson's drama are complementary rather than analogous worlds. Does that collusion make *Einstein on the Beach* any more or less 'operatic'? Descriptions and evaluations of their collaboration, as well as Glass's stage works with other librettists and directors, always depend on how one defines opera – or, to state it another way, which repertory operas serve as the points of reference. Before he met Glass, even before he became involved with music, Wilson called his stage works 'operas'. Glass remembers their collaboration: 'He was much more interested in *Einstein* being like a real opera than I was. Bob wanted as much singing on stage as possible and he was very pleased that there was a duet in the night train scene and an aria for the flying bed' (Shyer 1989, 220). For Franco Quadri, *Einstein on the Beach* is the first opera – a true and seamless *Gesamtkunstwerk* – produced by this director or this composer. For Quadri, Glass's music for *Einstein* is 'a river that for almost five hours is the supporting element in the undivided whole of a composition

Figure 15.1 Four-act structure of Glass's ***Einstein on the Beach***

Knee Play
Act I scene 1: TRAIN
Act I scene 2: TRIAL

Knee Play 2
Act II scene 1: DANCE
Act II scene 2: NIGHT TRAIN

Knee Play 3
Act III scene 1: TRIAL/PRISON
Act III scene 2: DANCE 2

Knee Play 4
Act IV scene 1: BUILDING/TRAIN
Act IV scene 2: BED
Act IV scene 3: SPACESHIP

Knee Play 5

where scenic action and musical score seem to unite so perfectly that it is impossible to tell which element comes first' (Bertoni *et al.* 1998, 20).

Like Gertrude Stein before him, Wilson eschews story-telling for a theatre of the continuous present. The iconic imagery of *Einstein on the Beach* and Wilson's complete reconception of stage blocking, scale and motion – these aspects recall Stein's idea of 'landscape drama', where the temporal aspect of stage illusion was jettisoned in order to concentrate on spatiality and motion. Wilson's theatrical concept – like Beck's and Malina's Living Theatre – is also indebted to Artaud's theatre of cruelty idea where words are given, to quote the French surrealist, 'approximately the importance they have in dreams' (Artaud 1958, 96). Albert Einstein never appears on stage in *Einstein on the Beach*, thus making that opera all the more enigmatic. Appropriately for its subject, *Einstein* offers a set of icons instead of a narrative – and even these icons are fluid, capable of morphing before our very eyes into other icons. (Also, they appear as cardboard cut-outs on stage, their obvious two-dimensionality underlining all the more *Einstein*'s status as series of *tableaux-vivants* rather than an opera in the Bellinian or Verdian sense. To borrow Arnold Aronson's description of Artaud (2000, 30), Wilson's is 'a theatre of relations rather than narrative'.) Wilson refuses to interpret the stage images, but lets us surmise their importance as emblems of Einstein's discoveries: a train (he used trains as examples in explaining relativity), a clock (indicating gravity's ability to 'bend' time), a bed (ideas came to Einstein in dreams), and a stylized spaceship (Einstein's discoveries making space travel possible). Wilson and Glass began their collaborative work on *Einstein* with a list of these symbolic images and *Einstein* follows this sequence (see Figure 15.1) rather than any story line.

There are basic differences between *Einstein on the Beach* and *Satyagraha* (1980), Glass's next opera – as one would expect given Wilson's deep involvement in the first and his lack of connection with the second. Unlike *Einstein*, *Satyagraha* does present the central character as a figure who sings on stage: the opera portrays Gandhi's years in South Africa as he develops the concept of *satyagraha*, or 'truth-force', in resistance to the British. Also important to the opera-ness of *Satyagraha* is its narrative plot – the piece weaves a six-part story around Gandhi, even if the six self-standing scenes are not arranged in chronological order. Musically focused commentators, perhaps taking Bellini and *bel canto* as an exemplar for music theatre, find *Satyagraha* more operatic than *Einstein* because of its considered vocal style. *Einstein* was indeed oriented more to the chorus than to solo voices. *Satyagraha* is also more operatic in that it calls for a real pit orchestra. For *Einstein* Glass had used his own ensemble, with its basis in keyboards and amplified winds. But *Satyagraha* was commissioned by a bona fide opera company, the Netherlands Opera, and Glass calls more or less for a true opera orchestra with triple woodwind, strings and organ.

By the time of his third opera, *Akhnaten* (1984), Glass had largely normalized the foreground-background relationship that had made *Einstein* so revolutionary. He also eschewed additive rhythms for modular repetition, cultivating a technique closer to the static repetition described by Deleuze. Scenes and acts are smaller in proportion, and the 'landscape drama' aspect less emphasized: the longest scene of *Akhnaten*, the Pharaoh's coronation in Act I, plays for only 17 minutes. Dramaturgically speaking, the on-stage figures in *Einstein* were two-dimensional as one expects in Wilson's work. In *Akhnaten*, which tells the story of the monotheistic Egyptian pharaoh and husband to Nerfertiti, Glass returned to some of that earlier iconicity. (The composer wrote his own libretto 'in association with' Shalom Goldman, Robert Israel and Richard Riddell.) The title role is given to a countertenor, thus making that character all the more distant and perhaps exotic. Adding to the sense of pageantry rather than opera strictly defined is the extensive role of the narrating Scribe, who seems both to 'own' the narrative and stand outside it.

With his projects of the later 1980s, Glass continued to distance himself from his own progressive theatrical roots – specifically the influences of Artaud, the Living Theatre and Wilson himself. With his next opera, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1988), Glass for the first time tapped a major literary figure as his librettist: adapting one of her own stories, Doris Lessing gives words something more than 'the importance they have in dreams.' As Tim Page observes, 'marking a change from his three previous large-scale operas, Glass's main concern in *Representative* was to set the text so that the words could be understood as fully as possible' (Page, *Grove Online*). Glass showed himself even more

of a romantic, less a Wilsonian ascetic, with *The Voyage* (1992). None of his other stage works gives quite the same impression of a composer speaking and emoting through his characters – a ventriloquism that lies at the heart of opera as conventionally defined. Playwright David Henry Hwang worked from Glass's own story. The opera was commissioned to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, but the composer typically broadened the opera's subject to 'the concept of discovery'. As if further to emphasize the distance from the breakthroughs of *Einstein on the Beach*, musical repetition is often limited to two- and four-fold reiterations, nothing that would be terribly out of place in the music of Liszt or Wagner.

It is convenient to end this interim account of Glass's operatic career with *La Belle et la Bête* (1994), a unique and provocative opera 'gloss' on a pre-existing movie. The Nonesuch discs describe *Belle* as 'an opera by Philip Glass as based on the film by Jean Cocteau'. This is of course a self-contradiction, in that operas and films are by definition self-contained organisms, closed systems visually and aurally. What Glass has really done is sidestep George Auric's original music and produce an alternate soundtrack to Cocteau's 1946 film. Or one could say Glass has done the reverse of opera-loving filmmakers Ingmar Bergman and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. While they turned operas into films that go beyond simple representation of the stageworks (*The Magic Flute* and *Parsifal*), Glass took Cocteau's film and transformed it into an opera that is both parasitic to, and in a sense distinct from, the original. In any event, Glass produced a delightfully memorable and cohesive musical work in spite, or perhaps because, of appalling compositional restrictions. His soundtrack – one can hardly speak of a score in the usual sense – accompanies three-quarters of the film.

Early in his opera career he had experimented with Wilson's reformulation of stage time as it relates to real time, while in *La Belle et la Bête* Glass did the opposite and managed to overlay a narrative in operatic time with a narrative in real (or at least cinematic) time. People do not sing at the same speed they speak – but they have to in this case, and Glass's singers dispatch words just as quickly as his *Einstein* chorus had chanted numbers and solfège. *La Belle et la Bête* combines the traditionally middlebrow genre of film with the relatively highbrow history of opera, and by force of that brilliant stroke may alter permanently the course of opera as a genre. It also encourages us to go back and ponder the operatic qualities of his own film soundtracks – his score for Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) a landmark in the history of documentary scoring, the darker and more immediately expressive *Naqoyqaatsi* (2003) not far behind – and ask if any real, qualitative differences exist between an opera and a scored film. A complete rethink of opera as a genre, *La Belle et la Bête* conjoins the genres of opera and film in an entirely new way.