Transcription of the Coda Session with Philip Glass at The Phillips Collection, October 2, 2011

Caroline Mousset, Director of Music: Philip, first of all, thank you for putting us under your spell for an hour. Hearing your music for piano gives us a glimpse into the intricacies of your work at an elemental level. You have in recent years been performing much more solo piano music. After working with groups and ensembles for most of your career, what motivates you at this time to be performing as a soloist?

Philip Glass: One of the things that developed for me as a composer was, I began playing with an ensemble, maybe, in 1969, so it's been a long time ago, about 40 years ago.

Mousset: Isn't it 1967?

Glass: Maybe in '67, that's right! (*laughter*) Okay, so 45 years, quite a while ago. By doing that, I slowly began to understand the role of the interpreter, which, as a composer, I was kind of blinded to for a long time. In fact, composers who don't play in front of people never really understand what the interpreter brings to the music. What happened after years of playing, because I began playing, and it was partly to make a living, and that's also how I do make a living— I don't teach at a music school, and in our country, it's a wonderful country and I love being here more than any place else, but we don't support the arts in the way that...

Mousset: We should?

Glass: Well, you know, no one supports them any more, to be truthful, they just don't any more. There have been a lot of economic problems and the arts suffer right away from that. But because of that, playing became very important for me, so that motivated me also to play in that way. But then I really began to understand that the interpreter brings something to the music, which is different than the composer.

In fact, before these life experiences that have been going on for a long time, I used to think, "Oh, the composer is important and the performer is okay, but it's not a big deal." But now I actually think it's a huge deal. In fact, very recently, just two or three days ago, a young violinist played a piece of mine and he— well anyone is younger than me (*laughter*)! He was playing a new partita I wrote for him. And afterwards someone said to me, "Oh, it's wonderful, all the sounds you found in the violin," and I said, "You know, I didn't find the sounds, the violinist found the sounds."

I was just in Cincinnati yesterday and they were playing some music of mine at the orchestra. They were talking about how wonderful the music sounds. And I said, "You know, without a really good orchestra, you never would have heard the piece." So there's that kind of dependency, but there's also what the performer brings to it, in terms of what they hear.

You know, playing music is about hearing music. In the same way that painting is about seeing, and dancing is about moving, poetry is about speaking, and music is ultimately about listening.

And what you learn—oddly enough, it takes a lifetime to learn these things; you don't learn them right away, some people do, and then maybe they get a head start on the rest of us—this idea that what you hear molds how you play. And when I'm playing, I am listening. I'm listening in a way in which I never would as a composer.

Mousset: Not many musicians can do that.

Glass: Well, the good ones can. I heard that Glenn Gould had given his first concert here?

Mousset: Right, in 1955.

Glass: And I'm playing in the same room? My God! Well, you know, that it's true that I used to come here as a kid. When I say "kid," I mean 17 or 18. We used to find someone in Baltimore who could drive us. We thought Washington was so far away. Oh, this was in the 1950s, we thought it was very far away, and we would come over here and look at the paintings.

It's great to see all the paintings still here. You know, they say, "Art is long and life is short," and when you come back 40 years later and the paintings still look good, you know, it's a wonderful thing. And I was thinking all week, I wanted to say before, that coming and playing here, this is one of the places I first heard music. I heard it at the Baltimore Symphony and I would come here to the Phillips gallery—this was in my teens. And it never occurred to me that I would someday play here, and it was actually a big deal.

Mousset: Well, we should have invited you a long time ago!

Glass: You can invite me back, you know.

Mousset: Well, I might!

Mousset: There's a unique lyrical quality in many of the pieces you played this afternoon, one that reminds me quite clearly of Schubert. Do you find that the intimacy of the solo piano draws out different melodic ideas than those found in your compositions for ensemble?

Glass: Well, that's curious about Schubert, because we have the same birthday, so that means I have territorial rights on anything he wrote (*laughter*). So, if I want to steal a little Schubert, who's going to say I can't? But the other thing is that he wasn't a professional pianist. He became a fairly good pianist—he must have been if you listen to the pieces. He wasn't a Liszt or a Chopin, but his pieces take tremendous attention to play.

And the last piece I played, actually there's a lot of Schubertian harmony in it; the chord progressions are right out of that. In fact, when I wrote it, I got worried that I actually had stolen from him! So I consulted with my friends who play a lot of Schubert and said, "Look, have you ever heard that piece before?" And they said, "No" (*laughter).* I said, "Are you sure? Are you sure?" I was afraid, I thought, I've got the copyright, but that doesn't mean much if somebody wrote it 200 years before me!" (*laughter*)

But one of the things that I discovered over the course of writing music for a long time is that I'm attracted by the agelessness that music can have. So it doesn't necessarily sound like modern music or old music or new music.

Mousset: Timeless.

Glass: It doesn't matter, because as human beings, the mind and the hearts are the same, really and truly. There are stylistic changes and we can see it in this museum, even. Here, you can look at the paintings and see amazingly modern things. When we were walking around before, I wanted to see the...

Mousset: The Rothkos?

Glass: I wanted to see the Rothkos, because I remembered seeing them when I was a kid. Now, seeing those Rothkos in the early 1960s, that was an astonishing thing. And now they seem very comfortable on the walls here, but they don't seem to have any particular age. I think that the thing we discover, when you talk about lyricism, that's always in music isn't it? It's in Stravinsky, it's in Bartók, it's in Stockhausen, believe it or not. It is.

Mousset: People had to find the lyricism in Stravinsky.

Glass: Sometimes you find it much later. I didn't like Stockhausen in the 1970s; I like him much better now.

Mousset: He grows on you.

Glass: Well, he's not around any more to fight with, anyway.

Mousset: I often think of your music as a series of ideas and notional thoughts set in motion against each other. This is evident in your larger scale works, *Einstein on the Beach,* for example, but how do you approach the ideas of cyclical and repetitive motion in your piano pieces, which are much shorter than some of your other music?

Glass: Well, very often the pieces are studies, in a certain way. We talk about melody, harmony, and rhythm being the three basic things in music. In these pieces, there are a lot of places where we are hearing threes against twos, and fours against sixes, and so forth. So I will take a rhythmic idea and against that I will put a harmonic development, and they will overlap in interesting ways. It's partly a way of taking things apart and then putting them back together again.

Mousset: Starting with the rhythm?

Glass: Well, it can start with the rhythm; it can also start with the pitch. One way of working with harmony, besides being tonal and atonal, there are ways of thinking in bitonal ways and polytonal ways.

Where, in some of these pieces, you might not be aware of it, but you are actually hearing a piece in different keys at the same time and the reason it sounds different to you is because your ear is telling you—sometimes it will tell you it's in B-flat, and sometimes it will tell you it's in D-flat. You don't have to understand that analytically, because music carries with it an emotional message, which makes the analytic part of it interesting, but not essential.

So I'm saying that when we hear these things, our ears are our best guides. Anyone who comes to watch your music concert in the afternoon when there's actually a football game going on, or something else, that means that they really like music, right? Is that right? (*laughter*) Anyway, so I don't have to tell this audience what it means to listen to music because...

Mousset: It's like telling someone how to feel.

Glass: Exactly, and I do the same thing to my own music, I listen to it. Very often I can hear pieces almost as if I hadn't written them.

Mousset: Experiencing them for the first time?

Glass: Yes, sometimes like that. It's not so easy.

Mousset: Thank you.

Mousset: The effect of your piano music is often described, rightly or wrongly, as hypnotic. However, I'm sure that as a performer, it's anything but, and requires great concentration and a strong sense of control and restraint. Has the act of the performance ever changed your understanding of your work?

Glass: I think it changes it all the time. What we want in our performances is, first of all, to bring to it a very firm technical command of the instrument, then a complete knowledge and memory of the music. And then when we have a complete mastery of the music, then a kind of spontaneity can appear.

I'm often playing a piece and discovering that I'm pedaling it very differently, I've rearranged all the dynamics, and I'm doing it on the spot, and nobody knows it but me (*laughter*). And I'm sitting there thinking, "Oh, it goes that way, too, when do I go back to—" And I become very active in the playing, because I'm discovering something about the music while I'm listening. I think performers do that all the time. If we as performers weren't discovering the music in the presence of our listeners, I don't think it would be a very exciting performance.

Mousset: So there are fresh interpretations, it's not necessarily that you go back in and rewrite the music?

Glass: No, I don't.

Mousset: Dorothy Kosinksi *[director of The Phillips Collection]* mentioned the series of paintings by Augustus Vincent Tack that hang here in the Music Room and Duncan Phillips's description of them as representing "color music." Over your career, you've composed much music for visual and theatrical media, as well as work for film and television. How much has an appreciation for other artistic disciplines—visual arts, theater, or dance, for example—influenced you as a composer?

Glass: When we talk about theater, let's talk in a general way: We mean dance and opera and theater, and melodrama, which is spoken words with music. In all of these forms, we really only have four elements. We have image, we have text, we have movement, and we have music. Those are the four; there isn't a fifth one. It's like the earth, air, fire, and water. These are the four elements. Out of that we make theater. And when I say "theater," it can be, for example, a dance, which might not have text in it—it could—but often in dance you'll have movement, image, and music, but you won't have the text. So, it's not always there. So the different modality of theater will determine to some degree what elements are there.

Very early I was attracted to the part of the music world which was collaborative in that way, where the elements come into play. So I did a lot of work, I've done many operas and film scores and dances. I've done a few symphonies—I've done 10 symphonies, actually—but that's half as many as operas, I've done twice as many operas as symphonies. I find I'm actually most comfortable when I'm working with image or with text or with music.

That has been the way for many composers. They either become theater composers—let's say "theater" in the generic way—or they do concert music. There's a reason why Brahms didn't write a lot of operas and Verdi didn't write a lot of symphonies; they just didn't get around to it. They weren't drawn to that. A few people have done both.

If it wasn't for one conductor, Dennis Russell Davies, I wouldn't have done any symphonies. He commissioned nine out of 10 of the symphonies. I said, "Dennis, why do you keep commissioning these symphonies? I never would have written them." And he said, "I'm not going to let you be one of those opera composers who never wrote a symphony!" (*laughter*) He succeeded. This year he is premiering No. 9 and No. 10. I mean, he's tireless, he's tireless in playing them, but then he forces me to write them.

But then when I come back to writing symphonic music, which is, well, we would call it music where the subject of the music is actually the language of music. When we talk about operas, the subject of music could be a story or an image or a movement, it could be any of the other elements. But when we talk about

concert music, you want to talk about the great Bartók pieces or anything you want to talk about that's been played in this room. I think I heard Bartók in this room sometimes. That would have been very modern in those days, right?

Mousset: Absolutely.

Glass: There you're hearing the composer thinking in the language. The subject of the music is the language of music. When you are going to the opera house, the subjects of the music are the elements of theater. There's a big, big difference, and generally speaking, composers end up doing one or the other. Mozart only did six or seven operas, he didn't do that many. They happen to be all pretty great ones. Wagner didn't do very much symphonic work. We play long passages of *Parsifal*, we've made concert pieces of all of them, but he was a theater man and that's what he did.

So the predilection to do one or the other is born in the mind or the heart of the composer. The man or woman who plays, or does choreography, they will know which way they're going to go.

Then you have these pesky friends who make you write symphonies. I must say I love writing symphonies now, but if I didn't have Dennis, I wouldn't have done it. In the same way, I've written a bunch of string quartets, because they keep asking me for music, and, you know, they pay for them, and that is part of what we do. I don't do anything but play and write, so that's what it is.

But when people ask me, "What kind of composer are you?" and I say, "I'm actually a theater composer," that has the virtue of actually being what I do. It actually says what I do. Most of the time when you're hearing music of mine, it is connected to dance or image in some way.

Not so much the piano music. Now, the piano music is different. The piano music is what I play for myself. In fact, very little of this music is published. The only way you hear it—most of it—is when I'm playing it. I don't publish them. I don't print them. It's not available, at the moment, anyway. So, the etudes, you can find recordings, but there won't be anyone else playing them.

The piano music for me is a private affair, really. It's very personal, and playing in front of people, it's just me. I won't have a bunch of other people around helping me, which is much easier; I don't have to practice then. I had to practice all week to do this concert! It's work! It doesn't just happen! But when I play with my ensemble, six or seven people, I give them all the hard music and I take the easy parts.

Mousset: You should!

Glass: Of course! (*laughter*)

Mousset: Thank you, sir.

Question: Could you talk about the acoustics of playing in this room and did you rehearse in this room?

Glass: Well, I played this afternoon. I knew the room already. I knew the room from years ago, but, you know, these paintings I've never seen before. They weren't being exhibited when I came here in the late 50s and early 60s. They weren't around, I guess.

Dorothy Kosinski: It changes constantly; these were commissioned in 1928 for this room.

Glass: Yes, but I didn't see them. There was that El Greco...

Kosinski: The El Greco, and the Goya, and the Daumier.

Glass: And there were two Soutines in this room. I came looking for them, but that's okay. The acoustics I was familiar with already. This is an excellent size for string quartets and for piano and for any chamber music. This is actually the size it should be played in.

Mousset: (*referencing a cell phone ring tone going off*) or Scott Joplin? (*laughter*)

Glass: Well, the fact is that, when I first started going to India to hear music, there weren't any concert halls in the south of India. I played, and people who were wealthy enough to have concerts in their home would have a room about this size, and concerts would be in people's homes. Then they would feed you, by the way, so you should have a word with the people at the Phillips gallery about that (*laughter*). They took complete care of you.

But it's a real treat for the musician to play in a room like this because I know that people at the back are hearing. I know that I don't have to force any of the playing; it's all very easily available. It's unusual to find a hall this size still being actively used, to be truthful. In fact, I was so glad it was still here. I was afraid that they had knocked down a few walls and put in some speakers (*laughter*). It's a beautiful place to play.

Question: When I read the liner notes for today's performance, there was the term, "music with repetitive structures," and it wasn't one I'd seen to do with your work before. It reminded me of the mathematics that was going on at the same time you were composing a lot of the pieces: the fractals, the recursive operations, and so on. So I was wondering whether you had any contact with that scene at the same time that you were composing?

Glass: Well, not necessarily at that time, not exactly. The contact I had with the application of, let's say, arithmetic combinations to music I learned from Indian music. I didn't learn it from Western mathematics. In the early 60s, in '65 and '66, I was working as an assistant to Ravi Shankar for a while, and I studied with Alla Rakha, and I actually learned the Indian rhythmic system. I knew it.

Mousset: You were transcribing it.

Glass: I was transcribing it and then I took lessons. I was playing tabla and I was doing that not to become a performer, but because the only way to really learn how the rhythmic structure of Indian music worked was to play it. If you learned it that way, then you really knew it. And I spent years doing that.

By the time I got to *Einstein* (*Einstein on the Beach*), which would have been a good 10 or 12 years later, I had completely digested it. At that point, any combinations of nines and fours and sixes were very easy for me, and I learned a tremendous amount. I'll give you one little quick story about this: I was visiting Ravi Shankar, he has a place in California, and he was there with some of his students—I always consider myself a student of his. We were having tea, and he began playing something, and so we began to play along with him, and I said, "What tal is that?" He said, "That's 13 and a half."

We finally got to play it, and he began playing something else, and I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm playing nine against 13." I said, "Wait a second, stop." He said, "Well, what is two times 13 and a half? It's 27." We said, "Oh." We all said, "Oh," and the other folks were Indian guys, and they were learning from him, too. So the kind of sophistication of combining— and I eventually came to realise that, in fact, the language was built upon combinations of twos and threes.

This is an interesting thing—I actually came to realise this very recently—I was in Zurich talking with a tabla player. We were giving a talk like we are giving now, and I just suddenly realized, I said, "You know, I was just thinking of something, the rhythmic language of India is in twos and threes; it's a binary language." He said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, you know, digital language is comprised of ones and zeros, that's a binary language, too." He said, "Yes, that's right." I said, "Do you think it's possible that the reason that young people are so attracted to your rhythmic music is because they are already living in a binary world in a way that we weren't?"

Now that was in Indian music, long before we were putting ones and zeroes together to make huge strings of information. So these ideas are not necessarily Western ones. We have come to that kind of organizational system thousands of years later. It doesn't mean that we are worse at it or better at it. We are very good at binary language, too. It's kind of interesting to think that the human brain can conceive of these things in all kinds of different ways.

Now, in Africa, it's a different system, but this is a very short talk this afternoon, so let's not get into all that. But if you start looking at global music, and especially the rhythmic structure of music around the world, and then look at the arithmetic of it—not even the mathematics—just the arithmetic, and then think about where we are, and that in a way we are talking about a global culture now, where there are these similarities that are beginning to emerge now, it's extremely interesting. I mean, it's probably no accident that some of the great mathematicians were Indians, you know that. From your question, I would think you would know that.

Mousset: Thank you.

Question: I was struck listening to you play today because so many performances of your music that I've heard tend to stress the precision and the almost motorized quality, very precise and often serene, yet your playing seemed almost romantic, very passionate and dramatic.

Glass: Well, one of the reasons that I play is to let people know that I don't play it the way they play it (*laughter*). My approach is there's a lot of rubato, that means slowing down and speeding up. I change the tempo a lot, I shape it a lot. It doesn't destroy the structure at all. The structure remains intact.

I can have my left hand playing in threes, and my right hand playing in twos, and I can do a ritenuto exactly together. That's child's play, once you can do it, you can do it. When we get into large-scale pieces with orchestra, then the conductor is in charge of that, and even then— I was talking about Dennis Davies. He made a recording of Symphony No. 8 of mine recently, in which the first movement has lots of complicated patterns in it. He plays it with, I would say, the warmth and grace that he does a Bruckner symphony. In fact, he thinks I sound like Bruckner (*laughter and agreement*). His orchestra in Austria is the Bruckner house orchestra, too.

Now, when I remember seeing Stravinsky conduct—I actually got to see him do *Le Nez* at Town Hall years ago, when he was a conductor. The players, as I remember, there were Bernstein and Lukas Foss, there were four American composers there, and he was conducting in a very strict fashion. I mean, there was nothing loose about his conducting at all. He was looking towards a model of neoclassical music in that piece, as he did in many pieces. It probably was important to him to feel that the tension of the music was very regular in that way.

On the other hand, I didn't have to do that, because he did it. In my generation, I think we are free. I think every generation can be free of other people's obsessions; we have our own, whatever they may be. And the younger people are free of our obsessions, and that's kind of how life changes. You die and your obsessions die with you.

Question: I'm curious as to whether you studied piano seriously to become a pianist.

Glass: When I was at Julliard, it became my second instrument. I was a major in composition, my minor was in piano, but I began piano playing when I was much younger. I didn't do any serious practicing until I was 15. And to be truthful, I'll never catch up with the people who started when they were five and never stopped. The etudes, in fact, were originally written as pieces that, when I learned them, my playing would improve. Actually, what happened is that I became a better piano player by playing the etudes. I found that I became a much

stronger player because I was writing pieces for parts of my playing that needed attention.

Mousset: Philip, thank you so much for joining us this afternoon. *(applause)*