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For City's Maestro, Life Is a Beach

In the Midst of a Whirlwind Year, Philip Glass Envisions a Bright Future

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By [ANDY BATTAGLIA](#)

Midway through his 76th year, which has been—and will continue to be—packed with concerts and tributes of all kinds, Philip Glass is having fun, though he'd prefer to spend less time in the clouds. Since his 75th birthday in January kicked off a gala season, the iconic composer has presented work both new and old around the world, most of all in his hometown of New York.



Enlarge Image
Estela Silva/European Pressphoto Agency
Philip Glass spends the week at ISSUE Project Room in Brooklyn.

Highlights so far have included the U.S. premiere of his Symphony No. 9 at Carnegie Hall and a five-hour presentation of his early-'70s cycle "Music in Twelve Parts" at the Park Avenue Armory. This week, through Friday, Mr. Glass is performing an intimate series of concerts at Issue Project Room in Brooklyn, with collaborators including Laurie Anderson and Stephin Merritt of the Magnetic Fields. Next Wednesday, he'll lead a free concert by the 44-year-old Philip Glass Ensemble

in Rockefeller Park as part of the River to River Festival. It all leads to BAM's much-anticipated September presentation of his classic 1976 opera, "Einstein on the Beach," as part of its Next Wave Festival.

In the midst of all that, Mr. Glass paused to talk with the Journal about retrospective listening, the passions of youth and how bad times make for good art.

It's been a big year for you so far. How are you feeling here near the middle?

It's been a busy time, but I can't complain. The "Einstein on the Beach" production [presented so far in Europe and Canada] has turned out to be extraordinarily well-done. I've gotten to do concerts with my ensemble and with the Kronos Quartet. When things calm down it'll be a little bit better, but I've enjoyed most of it, actually. The only hard part is taking airplanes. I don't have any cure for flying, except for taking a boat or a train.

It must be exhausting.

I've not been too tired. I find that the work I do seems to be able to rejuvenate and renew

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itself in some way. I don't find I need a lot of sleep right now. This is what I like to do.

How has it been to revisit your old work retrospectively? Have you heard anything new in it?

It's different now. For example, "Music in Twelve Parts" we're playing extremely well now. That was always a very difficult piece. It always ran a little bit past the capacities of our playing at the time. But we play it fairly easily now. That means that the whole experience of it has changed. It doesn't seem so physically challenging anymore, so it becomes about a musical and interpretive experience rather than an endurance feat. That has been true for all the pieces really.

You've been appearing in different kinds of venues all around New York. Do you still feel like you commune with the city?

I'm playing a lot! [Laughs.] I play all over: the Metropolitan Opera, Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Museum, little avant-garde places. I'll play almost anywhere now. I have a wide range of things I like to do and like bouncing around between them. I walk around the city all the time still. Walking around New York is a real sport.

There have been major shifts in recent years involving different ways of contextualizing classical music in New York. Does it remind you of when you started out downtown in the '70s?

In that regard it does. There are a lot of experimental things going on where we don't know where things are going to land. People are resolved to work with what they're passionate about without thinking about what it's going to do for their careers. In the '70s and '80s, we didn't have careers. We had day jobs, and then we did our own work. I find that spirit is very much in place right now.

What is your impression of artists coming up?

There's a younger generation of dancers, musicians and poets who are very involved with developing their own creative energy and their own visions. Making a living at it has always been difficult, and it's particularly difficult right now. But that hasn't kept people from throwing their energies into these endeavors. This is a very good time, actually. It's curious that often that when society is in dire straits, when there's lots of tension and contradiction and anger, the arts seem to flourish. Why is that?

The return of "Einstein on the Beach" to New York will be a big event this fall. How have performances elsewhere gone?

The young people who are performing it bring a lot of training to it. Years ago we got our training by doing the piece—the piece was our training. Now people come to the piece and they already have it. So there are some superb performances. Not flawless—it's hard for a piece to be flawless with the kind of sustained depth that it has. But audiences have been completely taken with it. It just leaps off the stage. It's much more sophisticated than when we began work on it over 30 years ago.

A version of this article appeared June 14, 2012, on page A26 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: For City's Maestro, Life Is a Beach.

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