

Theme and performance in *Symphony No. 5* by Philip Glass

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Abstract: *Of Philip Glass's twelve symphonies - perhaps the most popular minimalist composer after John Cage – it is the choral Fifth, entitled "Requiem, Bardo, Nirmanakaya", composed in the years of full maturity (the first performance took place in 1994), that mostly impresses through its grand design, display of instruments and human voices, soloists and four choral ensembles may be considered a version of the theocratic scenario that projects the history of mankind in the order of the divine, characteristic of the premodern age. Glass's originality consists in the overlapping of several mythical structures - Swedish, biblical, Buddhist, Islamic, Sufi, etc. - in accordance with the holistic epistemology of the contemporary era. Despite the Buddhist references in the title, the narrative is modelled on the biblical archetype, from the genesis of the universe to the Last Judgment and it ends with the vision of a future humanity bonded in brotherhood, peace and compassion.*

Key-words: *minimalism, intertextuality, spirituality, the new aesthetics, Buddhist aesthetics*

1. Introduction

The Fifth Symphony does not have a singular position in Glass's creation; it resumes his earlier and characteristically postmodern practices, such as intertextuality (see "Metamorphosis", inspired by Kafka's homonymous story) or the creation of "transhistorical parties" to illustrate a human role-model of universal relevance. In *Satyagraha*, for instance, he defends the humanist ideal in religion, politics, and art by associating the symbolic figure of the pacifist politician Mahatma Gandhi with geographically disparate novelist Tolstoy, the poet Rabindranath Tagore, and the pastor Martin Luther King. Glass is the most striking case of postmodern search of alliances among all the artists (the period term itself being borrowed by all the arts

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from architecture), be they writers (from Seneca to Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Becket, Jean Genet, Allen Ginsberg, John Maxwell Coetzee, or Doris Lessing), stage directors (his work benefited by the innovations of experimental theatres in post-war America, such as Mabou Mines), movie theatres and filmmakers (Jean Cocteau, among others), or the leads of conceptual and minimalist fine arts (Sol LeWitt, Nancy Graves and many others).

Glass is thus a symptomatic instance of the renewed interest in syncretism characteristic of ages disposing of huge resources of spirituality. Glass has often been blamed for the homogeneity of this vocal-symphonic work, the monotony, the similarity that exists between various and quite distinct moments of this universal drama of redemption, such as the ninth and eleventh movements, Death and Paradise. In this essay, we are arguing that these presumed drawbacks are actually ingenious devices and perfectly justified within the meaning structure of the entire score, our approach being supported by musicologist and record producer Rob Cowan:

But the music simply isn't varied enough to reflect the enormous differences in meaning, spirit and stylistic complexion that are so powerfully spelt out in the texts. One reads with interest and with Glass as background, much as one blends into the aura of a religious ritual. Maybe that was the intention. (Cowan 2001, web, August 2020)

The title announces a dirge on the past (let the past be set at rest), and two Buddhist notions naming the present and the future: Bardo designates the present as a transitory state, a passage from past to future time, whereas Nirmanakaya is the name of the third body of incarnated Buddha. According to the Trikāya doctrine, Buddha has three bodies: the Dharma body of the ultimate, pure being itself, which is emptiness," the *Sambhogakāya* body, which is the divine embodiment of Buddha, and the *Nirmāṇakāya* body of incarnated Buddha. Glass chose this last form, of an enlightened humanity, partaking of the divine through initiation and ritual, through esoteric lore rather than the transcendental realm of some particular religion. Adherence to the Buddhist doctrine implies the composer's allegiance to Buddhist aesthetics as well, which is not concerned with sensuous beauty but with moral virtue and spiritual enlightenment. Glassworks (*that is*, works by Glass – a compound word coined by Glass himself – but the phrase could also mean works made of glass, transparent, reflecting images and light) is a strong argument in our extended inquiry into the grounds of the spiritual turn in contemporary music.

2. The Buddhist Aesthetics of Philip Glass

By turning to mythical lore for structuring devices, Philip Glass does not line up with some esoteric coterie, on the contrary, he proves to have been correct in his anticipation of what Tim Hodgkinson considers to be "the new aesthetic paradigm of our time" (Hodgkinson 2016, 45). Significantly enough, the author of *Music and the Myth of Wholeness: Toward a New Aesthetic Paradigm* started working at this hypothesis from a revelation he had in India in the summer of 1967 while reading books from the Theosophical Library. His attention was caught by some thought pictures in which language was represented by a horizontal line and spirituality by a vertical one. As a John Coltrane fan, he felt then that music did "bear in some way upon the organization of art", that it could "lift people out of where they are," and that it "governed a network of relationships between the accidents and the histories of a life and a mind developing and testing its thought in relation to it." (Hodgkinson 2016, 4)

It was in India that Glass absorbed influences that bore upon his subsequent kind of composition. The new direction in music demanded a new kind of approach, and that is what Ryan Scott Ebricht did when he turned to music, more precisely to the Department of Music at the University in California for a doctoral degree in ... philosophy. In his thesis, *Echoes of the Avant-Garde in American Minimalist Opera*, defended in 2014, he amply documented, among others, the portrait-opera dedicated by Glass to Gandhi: *Satyagraha* (1980). In 1978, he says, Glass went to India on a Rockefeller grant, where he attended performances of the Kathakali Kalamandalum theatre in the province of Kerala. This is a theatre whose representations of episodes from the *Mahabharata* are realized through dancing, singing and acting in the absence of words. Glass was enthusiastic about the performance which gave him a suspended sense of time, that is, removing him from calendric time and connecting him to the order of atemporal meanings and values. (Ebricht 2014, 60, accessed august 2020)

The exit from historical time is achieved first of all through narrative structure characteristic of mythic traditions. The twelve movements of *Symphony no 5* display indeed similarities of tempo and melodic patterns which suggest the analogies among the twelve spikes of the Buddhist Wheel of Life (Figure 1). The picture of existence is cyclic, passing, as it does in the Glass fifth symphony through life, birth, death, rebirth and suffering. The only difference that makes sense is escape from this Wheel of rebirth, and the path to liberation is shown by that third body or emanation of Buddha to which mortals can ascend through meditation called Nirmanakaya. This is Buddha's hypostasis that Glass has chosen as the end point of his human saga, as humans cannot join God's realm as they do in other

religions. The sense of time is also abolished through disconnected long tones (the typically minimalist device), repetition of modules, which may be multiplied through variations, the ascending-descending chords, through the extension of a syllable along a whole musical phrase so that language becomes meaningless, or the repetition of the same phrase by some instrument, so that others or some voice can take a rest.



Fig. 1. *The Wheel of Life*
(Buddhist mandala)

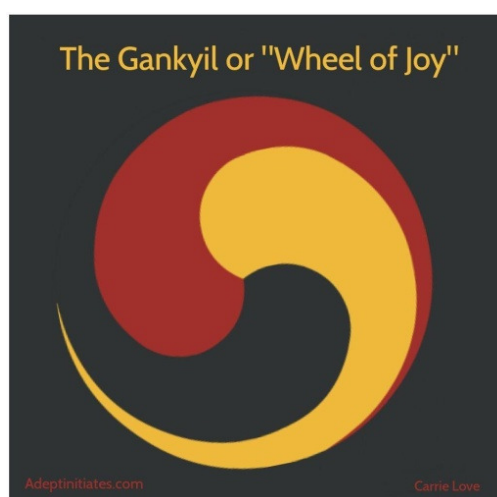


Fig. 2. *The Gankyil*
(The Wheel of Joy)

The Buddhist world picture is best served by minimalist music especially in **Gankyil**, the mind (Figure 2), whose essence is emptiness, luminosity, the state of enlightenment but also a potentiality which affects sentient beings. It is similar to the receptacle in Plato's *Timaeus* (another narrative about the genesis of the universe), an original fabric, formless itself, but which shapes all forms, all patterns in earthly life according to the element, out of the four ones (air, water, earth, fire) which acts upon it. The Gankyil, as the picture suggests, is this state of enlightenment which remains in itself, which does not go out into division, differentiations, onto the Wheel of Life. The polarity of heaven and hell is paralleled in Buddhist doctrine by the opposition between the Wheel of Life and the Gankyil (The Wheel of Joy), between the suffering of Life and the serenity and peace of joy, which are also set in polarity in Glass' Symphony.

Buddhist aesthetics, according to Hazari Prasad, is inseparable from ethics, it is not a matter of beauty but of living a holy life. The primary aesthetic concept at the heart of Buddhist culture is the aspiration of leading a holy life. In Buddhism, beauty is not for beauty's sake. It has been viewed as an incentive for those who aspire to the holy life. Buddhist concept of leading a holy life. In Buddhism, beauty is not for beauty's sake. It has been viewed as an incentive for those who aspire to the holy life. Buddhist concept of aesthetic is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. According to Buddhism, the cultivation of the right attitude to aesthetic is very important (Prasad 2011, 3). Buddhism is a quietist doctrine. It encourages withdrawal, not progress in the historical world. All the tenses of the verb **to be** are used, things should be accepted as they are - as they were and they will be. In the Glass symphony, the initial Requiem addresses a past put at rest, the middle Bardo shows the present to be nothing substantial and enduring but a rite of passage, and the future as return to an unfathomable origin of originary luminescence, which had better never been forsaken (*Nirmanakaya*).

3. Narrative structure

This score for chorus and orchestra ensemble is structured in twelve movements in which various mythical scripts overlap:

1. BEFORE THE CREATION
2. CREATION OF THE COSMOS
3. CREATION OF SENTIENT BEINGS
4. CREATION OF HUMAN BEINGS
5. JOY AND LOVE
6. EVIL AND IGNORANCE
7. SUFFERING
8. COMPASSION
9. DEATH
10. JUDGMENT AND APOCALYPSE
11. PARADISE
12. DEDICATION

The text of the first movement is woven out of quotes thematically linked. The symphony opens with the interrogation of a sceptical mind into the mystery of the emergence of the universe and of gods themselves out of that initial One – a luminous void, emptiness. Vedic mythology associates life with desire: as long as the mind desires for various things, it will be doomed to suffering, one of the

images on the Wheel of Life is the human being represented with a huge belly and a small mouth, meaning that appetite is huge but satisfaction is never enough. To this Hymn of Creation which Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophic Society in the West, translated towards the end of the nineteenth century into a modern, western idiom, Glass added excerpts from the biblical Genesis, the Quran, a Hawaiian chant of creation and a Zuni creation story.

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The human voices are grouped according to age, gender and symbolic value. A children's quire can first be heard, intoning unison of long notes, followed by a women's choir and then a mixed one. Finally a male choir breaks in singing the Vedic Hymn with emphasis on the word "desire", supposed to be lying at the basis of the universe, born out of the One's desire or thirst of union with himself. The Buddhist triune (Buddha's three bodies) is the correlative of the biblical trinity. Creation continues with animals and afterward's man and woman whose paradise story is told in the words of the Song of Songs. The story of disobedience and fall has Iblis, the Islamic Satan, as protagonist, whose pride determines him to refuse to bow before Adam on account of his humble origin from clay. Humans themselves fall on account of their vices (greed, desire, and ignorance). Redemption of fallen mankind is achieved through the compassion of Śāntideva (meaning "god of peace"), an Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist philosopher-monk, known as the author of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, where he teaches the good life of the ideal person set up as a model by the Buddhist doctrine whereas the New Testament speaks of the first Adam and the new, redeemed, Adam. It is not Christ's suffering and crucifixion or some miracle that save man from outside, but man's own effort to journey from ignorance to knowledge, so that he himself and not through some Saviour might he become a Buddha. Instead of the tragical story of the crucifixion, the central panel of the Christian drama of salvation, there is a

moral castigation of vicious man who is rendered responsible for the fall. The quote about the end of suffering and final enlightenment is from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*:

And fear not the Lord of Death. Your body is the nature of emptiness, you need not be afraid. Emptiness cannot injure emptiness. That is the emptiness of your true nature, before which your mind shines clearly and lucidly, and at which you feel awe, emptiness by nature luminous, luminous light inseparable from emptiness. (X. JUDGEMENT AND APOCALYPSE/ Symphony No. 5)

In a review of the symphony, an anonymous musicologist assesses negatively the fact that “the symphonic dimension is suggested more by scale than musical content, although there are symmetrical elements (the last movement reflects the first)” (*Gramophone* 2001, web, august 2020). If the author’s personal narrative of Genesis is mainly articulated according to the Vedic mythical tradition, then it is only natural that the last part, of return to the blissful emptiness of the beginning, should sound similar to the first.

4. Sound and Meaning

Philip Glass has been included in the category of composers- interpreters who were famous in the nineteenth century (Beethoven, Liszt, Paganini, Gustav Mahler...). The combination of choral music and symphonic ensemble reminds one of a prestigious precedent thematising genesis, the birth of the universe: Joseph Haydn’s *The Creation (Schöpfung)*, an Oratorio (Figure 3).

The main building blocks are modules of music that are repeated, and sometimes there is an addition, a variation (*additive variations*). The pitch content is limited to few pitches, long tones, and the texture is often monophonic, unison of duple and triple groupings. The invariably ascending-descending pattern of the chords, similar to the tide which advances and withdraws filling the same space all along, breaks the progressive timeline, plunging into the familiar atemporality of minimalist music.

The return to classical and neoclassical melodic structures - merged into a score in which they are “minimalized” (i.e., treated in minimalist style, retrieved from previous sources and inserted into a timeless composition of repetitive structures) raises problems of interpretation that oscillate between melodic seduction and formal sobriety.

Uriel (Tenor). Recitativo.

Und Gott sah das
And God saw the

Licht, daß es gut war; und Gott schied das Licht von der Finsternis.
Light, that it was good; and God di-vi-ded the Light from the dark-ness.

Str.-Orch.

Edition Peters. 7619

Fig. 3. Joseph Haydn, “Die Schöpfung.” Erster Teil (Rezitativ)

The combination of choral music and symphonic ensemble reminds one of a prestigious precedent thematising genesis, the birth of the universe: Joseph Haydn’s *The Creation* (*Schöpfung*), an oratorio (Figure 3).

Haydn followed the biblical script, opening his oratorio with the moment before Creation, which posed the difficult problem of representing the unrepresentable, that is, a chaotic picture through the highly organized medium of art. That was the solution, namely the shock produced by what was unfamiliar and contrary to norms in musical composition (Lowe 2013, 3).

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[...] the first sound of the piece—a C with no harmony, no dissonance, no melody—is arguably as close to the void as music of the late eighteenth century can get. This opening sound is also truly sublime. Its ominous and primordial feeling is generated by a bizarre timbre mixture in Haydn’s orchestration: brass sans horns on middle C, trumpets doubled at the octave, winds on C above and below, muted strings no higher than middle C, and a timpani roll on C underneath.⁴ Dynamically, Haydn calls for great

decrescendo on this one note, from forte to piano, while perhaps suggesting that this unearthly sound—this musical representation of the infinite nothingness of the void— existed indefinitely: this opening C enjoys the only fermata in the entire “Representation of Chaos.” (Lowe 2013, 3)

The intervention of God is expressed in a language which was charged with religious symbolism: the high and long notes, the use of the F-G-H-I notes (associated with the divine) and of the three tone, or of ascending and descending chords depending on meaning. This was called tonal painting, painting in sounds. For instance, in the passage quoted in Figure 3, the syllable *Got* is sung on a high F with appoggiatura, whereas darkness is a descending C-G with double appoggiatura.

On the contrary, Buddhist doctrine presents the moment before creation as one of complete and self-sufficient serenity. In *Symphony No 5*, Glass renders this serenity through long notes and repetitiveness (Figure 4).

3 Chorus Part

SYMPHONY #5 (CHORAL)
Prologue Philip Glass

The image shows a musical score for the Prologue of Philip Glass's Symphony No. 5, Chorus Part. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four systems of music. System 1 is marked 'J = 192' and 'Canté'. System 2 is marked 'Canté'. System 3 is marked 'Canté'. System 4 is marked 'Sert.' and 'dim.'. The music features long, sustained notes and repetitive rhythmic patterns.

Fig. 4. Philip Glass: “Symphony no. 5”
(Prologue)

Creation is the separation from this luminosity and the emergence of sentient and human beings or of gods who do not enjoy the omnipotence of the biblical god: they too die. The rising-falling chords replicate the hesitation in the speaker's mind who doubts each of his intuitions and hypothesis about what was in the beginning.

As imaged on the Wheel of Life, humanity is a sundry assembly of exemplars, there is no primordial couple, such as Adam and Eve.

This humanity is sooner archetypal. Creation will be the descent into the historical world of human beings according to age or gender. The choir of children sings in long tones and with minimal variation. Children are followed by a choir of women and then of men who start singing the word "desire" in the Vedic Hymn of Creation – desire being the cause of the emergence of existence (the One falling in love with himself). A mixed choir suggests the unity of humanity. The triune of the Buddhist body corresponds to the biblical Trinity. The syllables of the words naming light and darkness are the same note B.

A string of Cs renders the beat of the ONE who breathes by himself and is the only undifferentiated essence of being. Whereas desire leads to alienation in an otherness, the awareness of reality's delusive show is the beginning of a holy life (Prasad 2011, 3).

5. Conclusion

Interpretation, whether undertaken by a performer or a musicologist, has to take into account, not only the composer's aesthetic allegiance, but also the cultural matrix out of which a musical piece was born. Cognitive psychology has much contributed to a more accurate understanding of metaphoric language and the imaginary. Up to now, the reception of Glass has been alert to the ambitious design of his work, the brilliance of music, the big ensemble of instruments or the virtuosity of the soloists. On the other hand, certain dissatisfaction has been expressed over a presumed impoverishment of his musical material, his minimalist treatment of grand subjects. Our analysis has compared the semantic content (a mix of several myths), the aesthetic assumptions (with the ethics of a holy life prevailing over formal beauty), the range of pitches and some structural devices, reaching the conclusion that they stand in perfect harmony. The Buddhist aesthetics has found in minimalism an ideal medium of expression: the smooth, repetitive profile of the scale of pitches, associated with the profundity of the sage tradition of humanity generating thought-images of strong evocative power, awakening in the audience's imagination a sense of novelty similar to the one

imprinted on the modernists' works by borrowings from the Noh plays and the Japanese haiku tradition in the early twentieth century. We are facing the paradoxical case of a minimalist form which appeals to the audience's need for ethics and spirituality.

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