**Program Notes for VSO Concert – Stravinsky and Glass, December 4, 2026**
**Stravinsky – Dumbarton Oaks; Philip Glass – Violin Concerto No. 1; Stravinsky – The Firebird**

**By Jonathan Berkowitz**

**IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882–1971)**

Born in Saint Petersburg, Stravinsky's musical talents did not become fully evident until his early 20s, when he began to create truly revolutionary works. Above all else, he was an experimentalist, continually reinventing and exploring new musical languages throughout his long career.

Although Stravinsky's parents paid for his piano lessons, he learned much of the basics of harmony and counterpoint on his own. Not especially dedicated to music at first, he followed his mother's wishes and attended law school. It took him some time to mature and find his true métier.

The first turning point in his musical life came when he met the son of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov at university and, later, the father himself. Upon seeing Stravinsky's first attempts at composition, Rimsky-Korsakov advised him to continue with law but agreed to look at any future compositions. It took several years of effort before Stravinsky produced anything that his mentor judged suitable for performance.

His early works barely captured public attention. But by 1908, he was working on an opera, the orchestral *Scherzo fantastique*, and a small tone poem called *Feu d'artifice* (*Fireworks*). The latter two were first performed in 1909. Sergei Diaghilev, one of the greatest "talent scouts" of the century, was in the audience and he was impressed. Soon he commissioned Stravinsky to orchestrate a Chopin nocturne and waltz for the Ballets Russes production of *Les Sylphides,* which premiered in Paris in 1909. Stravinsky's career was truly launched.

Diaghilev then asked Stravinsky to compose a completely new work for the Ballets Russes' 1910 season. The result was *L'Oiseau de feu* (*The Firebird*), the work that established Stravinsky as one of the most exciting young composers in Europe. He went to Paris and, at only 28, rapidly achieved international fame.

A year later came *Petrushka*, another remarkable collaboration with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Performed in Paris with the great Vaslav Nijinsky in the title role, it combined vivid theatrical action with brilliantly illustrative music. Its rhythmic vitality, biting orchestral colours, and striking use of simultaneous tonalities further established Stravinsky as a musical revolutionary.

His third great ballet was *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*). First performed in 1913, it created one of the most notorious scandals in the history of music. Harold Schonberg wrote, "Hardly anybody in the audience was prepared for a score of such dissonance and ferocity, such complexity and such rhythmic oddity. Nobody connected with the production had the faintest idea that the music would provoke a visceral reaction." But acceptance did come. In 1940, the score was featured in the memorable Disney film *Fantasia*, where many people first encountered the piece.

These compositions made Stravinsky a star and one of the leading figures of musical modernism. But they were only the beginning of the strange, serpentine path of his career. The musical styles of great composers such as Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Beethoven certainly developed over time, yet

we have a good chance of recognizing a work by any one of them. With Stravinsky, that can be much more difficult.

His music underwent radical changes as he moved from youth to old age. He turned away from enormous orchestral scores toward smaller ensembles and leaner, more precise writing. He moved from ballets steeped in Russian colour and folklore to a more severe and highly disciplined style. From roughly 1920 to 1950, his principal approach was neoclassicism, in which he borrowed forms and techniques from earlier music and transformed them into something unmistakably modern. Then came another remarkable change: late in life, he surprised many by embracing twelve-tone methods and serialism.

Yet through all these transformations, certain fingerprints remained unmistakably Stravinskian, most notably his extraordinary treatment of rhythm. Few composers did more to change the way musicians and listeners thought about metre, accent, and musical pulse. Even when he borrowed techniques from Bach, Mozart, or Schoenberg, the result somehow sounded like Stravinsky.

His geographical identity changed almost as dramatically as his musical language. He left Russia before the Revolution and spent much of the rest of his life in Western Europe and the United States. He became a French citizen in 1934 and an American in 1945.

All Stravinsky's phases reveal the same remarkably inventive musical mind. Regardless of style or label, his personality shines through. William Runyan wrote, "His lean, abstract, reductive musical mind grabbed techniques from the past, and created stunning original music with them. And, it must be said, the casual listener, without guidance, would oft times find it hard, indeed, to sense the old, as it informed the new."

Stravinsky's music is generally anti-sentimental and anti-Romantic. He emphasized music as form, structure, rhythm, and organization rather than as direct emotional confession. He once famously wrote that music was "essentially powerless to express anything at all," although that provocative statement has been interpreted and debated ever since. His reported remark "Composers combine notes. That is all" captures something of the same aesthetic outlook.

Harold Schonberg commented, "Where Beethoven, Schubert, or even Bach appear to appeal to all listeners on all levels, Stravinsky does not have that universal quality. Stravinsky will end up living more on what he did to music rather than for what his music did to the majority of his listeners."

Whether or not one agrees with Schonberg's prediction, Stravinsky's influence is undeniable. Few composers changed direction so dramatically, so often, or so successfully. The Russian revolutionary who created *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring* became the cool neoclassicist of the middle years and, finally, an elderly modernist exploring serialism. What connects these seemingly different composers is an extraordinary rhythmic imagination, intellectual curiosity, and lifelong determination never to stand still.

**Concerto in E-flat, *Dumbarton Oaks* – Igor Stravinsky (1938)**

***Orchestration:*** *flute, clarinet, bassoon, 2 horns, 3 violins, 3 violas, 2 cellos, 2 double basses*

Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks* is uniquely revolutionary: neoclassical and neo-Baroque, yet unmistakably 20th-century in sound.

The Concerto was commissioned in 1937 by the wealthy American diplomat and art collector Robert Woods Bliss and his wife, Mildred, to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. Their magnificent Washington, D.C., estate, Dumbarton Oaks, was a centre for art, scholarship, gardens, and intimate musical gatherings. It also hosted a conference in 1944 that helped lay the groundwork for the founding of the United Nations. Stravinsky visited the estate and admired its celebrated formal gardens, which may have influenced the Concerto's elegant proportions.

Stravinsky began work on the piece near Geneva during an extraordinarily difficult period. His wife and two daughters were suffering from tuberculosis; one daughter was dying, and Stravinsky himself would soon require treatment. Against this grim background, he produced one of his brightest and most cheerful compositions. He described it as his "little concerto in the style of the Brandenburgs." Stravinsky was too ill to attend the private premiere at Dumbarton Oaks on May 8, 1938; the distinguished composer, conductor, and teacher Nadia Boulanger conducted in his place. Stravinsky conducted the first public performance in Paris a month later.

The reference to Bach's Brandenburg Concertos is the key to understanding the work. Stravinsky had burst onto the musical scene with three revolutionary ballets for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes: *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and, most famously, *The Rite of Spring*. Those scores employed huge orchestras, brilliant colours, Russian folk influences, irregular rhythms, and, in *The Rite of Spring*, an almost unprecedented rhythmic violence. After World War I, Stravinsky entered his Neoclassical period. Instead of asking what music might become, he began asking what could be rediscovered in its past. Baroque and Classical forms, counterpoint, balance, clarity, and smaller ensembles replaced the gigantic orchestras and extravagant colours of his Russian ballets.

But Neoclassicism did not mean imitation. Think of Stravinsky taking Bach's musical machinery apart, examining how it works, and then reassembling it with 20th-century components. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos continually pass musical ideas among small groups of instruments. Stravinsky does the same. There is no featured soloist in *Dumbarton Oaks*. Instead, flute, clarinet, bassoon, horns, and individual strings continually step forward and retreat into the ensemble. The result resembles an animated conversation among a group of highly articulate people. In this chamber orchestra of 15 instruments, all are treated as quasi-soloists in the manner of a concerto grosso. The three movements are played without pauses between them.

The opening movement—***Tempo giusto***—immediately reveals the Bach connection through rapid notes tossed among different instruments, short motifs combined contrapuntally, and a resemblance to Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto. Stravinsky's reply to critics who accused him of borrowing from Bach was that he doubted the great composer would have objected, since he himself liked to borrow. For the curious listener, the opening theme of the Third Brandenburg can be detected in the viola part in the opening measure and becomes more apparent as the music proceeds.

But beneath the 18th-century surface is something quite unlike Bach. Accents fall in unexpected places. Phrases seem to acquire an extra beat—or lose one. Harmonies suddenly acquire distinctly Stravinskian "wrong notes." Musical fragments appear, disappear, and reappear in different instruments.

A detailed analysis is not needed. Instead, follow the musical idea rather than any single instrument. A motif may begin in a violin, jump to a woodwind, be interrupted by another instrument, and then return somewhere unexpected. The joy comes from the conversation.

The middle movement—***Allegretto***—provides contrast. More relaxed in tempo and lighter in texture, it makes the instrumental combinations easier to follow. Small groups emerge from the ensemble and exchange lyrical fragments. Listen particularly to the instrumental colour. Because the orchestra is so small, every entrance matters. A bassoon, clarinet, horn, or solo string can suddenly change the entire character of the sound.

There is a detached elegance here. Stravinsky admired 18th-century music partly because its forms could convey emotion without the huge gestures of 19th-century Romanticism. The music smiles rather than embraces.

The finale—***Con moto***—restores the contrapuntal energy of the opening movement. It begins with a march-like idea in the horns, cellos, and basses. Again, musical fragments race among the instruments. Bach's counterpoint meets Stravinsky's obsession with rhythm, producing music that seems simultaneously ancient and modern. There is even a brief fugue-like passage.

Listen for the rhythmic games. While the underlying pulse remains steady, accents continually shift around it. Your foot may know where the beat is while your ear is repeatedly persuaded otherwise. Ideas from earlier in the Concerto also return, helping to bind the three movements together. The ending is characteristically concise. Stravinsky does not build toward an enormous Romantic climax; when the argument is finished, the music simply stops.

Contrasting *Dumbarton Oaks* and *The Rite of Spring* make them seem to have been written by completely different composers. Listen closely, however, and you hear Stravinsky's obsession with rhythm in both. Both continually displace accents and disrupt our expectations about where musical phrases should begin and end. Both construct music from small cells that are repeated, rearranged, shortened, extended, and superimposed.

The difference is partly one of scale. The young Stravinsky shouted these ideas through an enormous orchestra. Twenty-five years later, he could whisper them through a chamber ensemble.

That is why *Dumbarton Oaks* is much more than Stravinsky pretending to be Bach. He borrows Baroque architecture—the interplay between individual instruments and ensemble—but fills it with his own rhythmic personality. The musical clothing may belong partly to the 18th century, but the composer wearing it could only be Stravinsky.

***The Firebird* – Igor Stravinsky (1910)**

***Orchestration:*** *piccolo, 3 flutes (3rd = piccolo 2), 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets (3rd = E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, 3 bassoons (3rd = contrabassoon 2), contrabassoon, 4 horns (3rd and 4th = Wagner tubas), 3 trumpets (+ offstage trumpet), 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, bells, cymbals, glockenspiel, tam-tam, tambourine, triangle, xylophone), 2 harps, piano, celesta, and strings*

Every ballet needs a story. *The Firebird*, based on old Russian folklore, concerns the downfall of the powerful, immortal Kashchei at the hands of Prince Ivan, with the help of a rare and magical Firebird. The bird's beautiful feathers flicker like flames.

The story has both mortal and supernatural elements, which Stravinsky distinguishes through characteristic harmonies and musical motifs. He called this system "leit-harmony." The idea owes much to a similar device used by his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov in his operas. Diatonic music generally represents the mortal world, while more chromatic and unusual harmonies evoke the supernatural. The result creates the dazzling, mysterious atmosphere that permeates the ballet.

Kashchei's characteristic harmony, which Stravinsky described in terms of "magic thirds," is constructed from shifting intervals that include the tritone. For centuries, the tritone acquired a reputation as the "devil's interval" because of its unstable and unsettling sound. Here it helps create an atmosphere of menace and foreboding. The Firebird's music has its own distinctive harmonic and melodic fingerprint, including rapidly shifting chromatic figures that shimmer and reverse direction, creating an appropriately lustrous, sparkling effect.

*The Firebird* can be a little startling for a first-time listener, partly because of what Stravinsky called "metrical irregularity." We are accustomed to the pulse and accents behaving predictably; Stravinsky repeatedly unsettles those expectations. The score is also filled with unusual orchestral techniques. Stravinsky later recalled that in composing *The Firebird*, he was determined to outdo Rimsky-Korsakov in orchestral brilliance.

Here are some of the techniques:

- **Sul ponticello** instructs string players to bow near the bridge of the instrument, producing an eerie, glassy, metallic sound.
- **Col legno** means that string players strike the strings with the wooden stick of the bow rather than using the bow hair in the usual way.
- **Flautando** produces a delicate, airy, flute-like sound, usually by bowing lightly over or near the fingerboard.
- **Glissando** has musicians glide or slide continuously from one note to another.
- **Flutter-tonguing** in wind instruments has the player rapidly flutter the tongue, producing a trembling or growling sound.

With all the intriguing musical ideas in *The Firebird*, the best approach may be the simplest: immerse yourself in the experience. Listen to how Stravinsky makes an enormous orchestra shimmer, glow, threaten, dance, and finally blaze with colour.

Later in his career, Stravinsky created three concert suites from *The Firebird*, allowing the ballet music to be successfully enjoyed in the concert hall. The 1919 suite became the most frequently performed. It is much shorter than the complete ballet and calls for a considerably smaller orchestra. Stravinsky conducted *The Firebird* music many times throughout his career, and the later suites also gave him greater control over performances and publication of music from the ballet.

*The Firebird* was the work that transformed the 28-year-old Stravinsky from a little-known Russian composer into an international sensation. Yet, viewed from the perspective of *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*, it is both an ending and a beginning. Its glittering orchestration owes an enormous debt to Rimsky-Korsakov and the Russian tradition, while its rhythmic energy, unusual harmonies, and astonishing orchestral imagination point toward a musical world Stravinsky would soon make entirely his own.

Stravinsky's career was on fire, and the young composer was about to take flight.

**PHILIP GLASS (b. 1937)**

Philip Glass is part of a generation of American composers who challenged the complexity and abstraction that dominated much of mid-20$^{th}$-century concert music. For most of his career, he has been called a minimalist, a label he accepts reluctantly, partly because it is so limiting. Whatever we call his music, few living composers have created such an instantly recognizable musical language or exerted such influence beyond the concert hall.

Born in Baltimore in 1937, Glass received a broad musical education partly because his father owned a record store and brought home records that did not sell. Precociously musical, Glass studied flute at the Peabody Conservatory, entered the University of Chicago at 15, and later studied composition at the Juilliard School. But he had yet to discover his own musical personality.

That began to happen in Paris, where he studied from 1964 to 1966 with the legendary teacher Nadia Boulanger, whose other American pupils had included Aaron Copland. Boulanger gave him rigorous training in harmony and counterpoint. At the same time, Glass was hired to transcribe some of Ravi Shankar's music for a film score. He became fascinated by the way Indian musicians constructed large rhythmic structures from small units and organized rhythm according to principles quite different from those of Western music.

Back in New York, Glass rejected many of his previous compositions and began developing a radically simplified musical language based on repetition, steady pulse, arpeggios, slowly changing harmonies, and the gradual addition and subtraction of notes. In 1968, he founded the Philip Glass Ensemble to perform music that conventional orchestras initially showed little interest in playing. To support himself financially, he worked as a plumber and taxi driver. A passenger who recognized his name is reported to have exclaimed, "But you're Philip Glass! What are you doing driving a cab?"

Glass's breakthrough came in 1976 with the opera *Einstein on the Beach*. Lasting nearly five hours, with no conventional plot and no traditional intermission, the opera announced that something genuinely new had arrived. Works such as *Satyagraha* and *Akhnaten* followed, establishing Glass as one of the major figures in contemporary opera.

His catalogue eventually expanded astonishingly: symphonies, concertos, chamber music, piano music, operas, dance works, film scores, and music for television and other media. His score for *Koyaanisqatsi* demonstrated how powerfully his repetitive structures could interact with moving images, while his music for *Kundun*, *The Hours*, and *Notes on a Scandal* brought his distinctive sound to huge audiences and earned him three Academy Award nominations for Best Original Score. He even appeared in the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, portraying a keyboard player. His remarkably diverse collaborators have included Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, David Bowie, and Yo-Yo Ma.

The familiar expression about whether the glass is half full or half empty does not apply to this Glass. Reactions to his music are rarely neutral. Admirers find its repetition riveting and hypnotic; detractors find it monotonous. Glass himself has recalled the hostility his music sometimes encountered during the 1970s, when audience members occasionally shouted, argued, or even threw things during performances. Today, music once considered radically unconventional has become part of the sound world of contemporary concert music, opera, dance, and film. It will be fascinating to see how Glass's music will be viewed a few decades from now.

Glass absorbed Bach and Schubert, Indian music, modernism, theatre, rock, and electronic amplification, yet emerged sounding like nobody but himself. Hear only a few measures—the pulsing rhythm, circling arpeggios, repeated patterns, and slowly shifting harmony—and chances are you will recognize the composer. There may be no better definition of an original musical voice.

In 2026, at the age of 89, Glass completed his Symphony No. 15, *Lincoln*. Imagine what Beethoven might have produced if he had lived that long. The VSO's performance of the Violin Concerto No. 1, written in memory of Ben Glass, Philip's late father, is part of the celebrations leading up to the composer's 90th birthday on January 31, 2027.

For a composer whose music depends so much on repetition, Philip Glass has spent remarkably little of his career repeating himself. His unmistakable musical fingerprints have remained, but the range of forms, genres, collaborators, and audiences he has explored is extraordinary. Nearly half a century after *Einstein on the Beach* made him famous, the once-radical outsider has become one of the most distinctive musical voices of our time.

**Violin Concerto No. 1 – Philip Glass (1987)**

***Orchestration:*** *2 flutes (1st = piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, E-flat clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (wood block, triangle, cymbals, snare drum, bass drum), strings, and solo violin*

Glass's Violin Concerto No. 1 serves as an ideal introduction to his musical language by bringing together two seemingly contradictory worlds: the centuries-old tradition of the virtuoso violin concerto and the repetitive, process-oriented language associated with American minimalism.

It was commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra and premiered at Carnegie Hall on April 5, 1987, with Paul Zukofsky as soloist and Dennis Russell Davies conducting. Glass was 50 years old and had already composed a substantial body of work, much of it theatrical. This Concerto was his first full-scale non-theatrical orchestral composition. The original plan was for a five-movement work, later abandoned in favour of the traditional three-movement format, due to the length of the first two movements.

Glass explained that he wrote the work with his late father, Ben, who had died 16 years earlier, very much in mind:

"I wrote the piece in 1987 thinking, let me write a piece that my father would have liked [...] A very smart nice man who had no education in music whatsoever, but the kind of person who fills up concert halls. [...] It's popular, it's supposed to be—it's for my Dad."

What is minimalism in music? It doesn't refer to music that is necessarily simple, sparse, quiet, or easy to perform. It can be remarkably busy and rhythmically intricate. Rather, it describes an approach that uses a relatively small amount of musical material—short motifs, repeated patterns, steady pulses, and relatively simple harmonies—and transforms that material gradually over time. For a fuller explanation, see the companion section, "More Than the Minimum About Minimalism."

Minimalism can be a misleading term for Glass's work. The quantity of sound in the *Violin Concerto No. 1* is certainly not minimal. The minimalism lies in the materials and the method. Think of a kaleidoscope, in which a small number of coloured pieces are repeatedly rearranged to produce many different patterns. Glass does something similar with notes. This helps produce the hypnotic quality often associated with his music. Once the ear becomes accustomed to the repetition, it begins noticing extraordinarily small things. Repetition makes tiny changes more perceptible.

The opening of the ***First Movement*** gives us Glass' method in miniature. It announces, "Here is the mechanism," rather than "Here is the theme." The orchestra establishes short, pulsing chords that recur throughout the movement, slightly altered each time. Then the violin enters with rapid arpeggiated figures—chords broken into flowing patterns. John Henken memorably described the agile, energetic solo writing as a kind of "punk Vivaldi." Unlike a traditional concerto in which orchestra and soloist present and develop themes, here we hear pulse plus pattern: repetition, slight alteration, accumulation, and increasing intensity.

Begin by following the solo violin. Notice that its pattern initially occupies a fairly limited range. Gradually, it expands upward and downward. The basic idea has not changed dramatically, but it covers more territory. Now stop following the violin's rapid notes and listen instead to the orchestra playing changing chords beneath them. The foreground appears to remain the same while the background changes. The same violin figuration can suddenly feel different because its harmonic surroundings have changed.

Next, listen to the changing rhythm. The pulse sounds regular, but it isn't as straightforward as it seems. Analogous to watching scenery from a moving train, the landscape changes, but the train

keeps moving forward. Unlike much traditional music, one phrase doesn't necessarily stop to make way for the next, but gradually becomes something else.

The violin is simultaneously an individual voice and another moving component within Glass' enormous musical machine. The percussion adds an insistent rhythmic energy often reminiscent of the drums of 1970s symphonic rock. The movement ends with a sudden shift into quietness, preparing the listener for the serene opening of the second movement.

The ***Second Movement*** presents Glass's minimalist language in one of its purest forms. A repeating bass pattern lies at its heart, rather like a passacaglia or chaconne, over which the rest of the music unfolds. A melody appears above it as additional layers accumulate. Eventually the violin enters high above this slowly revolving mechanism.

Listen for the sensation of two simultaneous musical clocks. In the bass, time moves in cycles; for the violin, time seems almost to stand still. The violin sustains high notes above the repeating bass. This is part of the movement's hypnotic effect, and a fundamentally different way of experiencing musical time.

As the layers accumulate, the music grows toward a broad climax. Then the process reverses and layers begin disappearing. The path is: simple, accumulating, dense, climax, subtracting, simple. The materials may be minimal, but the emotional effect certainly is not. The violin soaring above the endlessly descending bass can sound intensely melancholy.

The ***Third Movement*** reveals another aspect of minimalism: repetition becomes kinetic. The orchestra establishes a vigorous rhythmic pattern, energized by aggressive percussion, including the wood block. The music takes on an almost dance-like quality; commentators have noted a Latin American flavour. Over this, the violin launches into rapidly repeating figures.

Glass repeatedly fools our expectations. Each time you think a cadence is about to arrive, it doesn't—not yet. The rhythmic machinery keeps going. Tension is created by postponing the stopping point until something unexpected happens.

In response to violinist Paul Zukofsky's request for a slow, high ending, Glass added a substantial slow coda to the otherwise fast finale. Suddenly, the relentless machinery subsides and earlier material, particularly from the second movement, begins to return. Our perception of the familiar fast-slow-fast concerto pattern has now become more like motion–contemplation–motion–contemplation. The violin seems to float away from the orchestra.

Beneath all the minimalist technique, the Violin Concerto No. 1 is also Glass's attempt to reconcile his radically modern musical language with the traditional concerto world his father loved. Glass commented that he was consciously engaging with the history of the concerto rather than trying to reinvent it. He wasn't rejecting Mendelssohn, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius. He entered their world speaking his own language. The form says *violin concerto*. Everything else says *Philip Glass*.

**Postscript**

I asked my brother Brian, who introduced me to Glass's two violin concertos, for his thoughts. He replied that both stir deep, visceral emotions which, depending on one's mood, can bring tears of pain or tears of beauty and calm. He explained that a listener may initially experience a jumble of emotions, struggling to make sense of an unsettled feeling. Are sad thoughts and memories welling up? Or is this one of the most beautiful feelings of joy one can experience?

It can help to close one's eyes while listening and allow these emotions to flow without trying immediately to identify them. Brian describes each movement as a kind of "stream of consciousness," a search for something, but what that something may be remains for the listener to decide.

He concludes, "Let yourself go. The music stirs a range of emotions, both comforting and deeply unsettling, but this is positive, in terms of confronting one's demons."

Philip Glass's father died in a car accident. We lost our parents the same way. Brian shared these beautiful words:

"To anyone who has lost a loved one or suffered a deeply traumatic event, the second movement is both intensely sad and yet magically beautiful and accepting. This leads naturally into the third movement, which provides me, at least, with a way forward."

**More Than the Minimum About Minimalism**

What is minimalism in music? It doesn't refer to music that is necessarily simple, sparse, quiet, or easy to perform. It can be remarkably busy and rhythmically intricate. Minimalism became prominent in the United States during the 1960s and '70s, most notably in the music of composers including Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

Think of how Beethoven might take a melody and develop it: changing its key, breaking it apart, transforming it, introducing contrasting themes, and eventually bringing it back. Philip Glass does something different.

Suppose he begins with a tiny figure—let's call it **1–2–3–2**. He repeats it over and over, perhaps dozens of times. But while you are listening, he adds a note and then another, shifting the rhythmic stress: **1–2–3–2** becomes **1–2–3–4–3–2**, and then **1–2–3–4–5–4–3–2**. Another instrument enters. The underlying harmony changes. Two patterns of different lengths sound simultaneously. Eventually, you notice that the music seems dramatically different, but you can't put your finger—or your ear—on exactly when it changed. That gradual process is fundamental to Glass.

Here are six characteristics to listen for:

- ***Repetition.*** Short melodic or rhythmic cells are played over and over.
- ***Regular pulse.*** A motor-like rhythmic continuity often carries through phrase endings.
- ***Gradual transformation.*** Tiny alterations slowly turn the original musical idea into something different.

- ***Addition and subtraction.*** Patterns expand by adding notes and contract by removing them.
- ***Slow harmonic change.*** Notes may fly by while the underlying harmony remains relatively stable, creating the paradox of great surface activity combined with harmonic stillness.
- ***Layering.*** Several repeating patterns may coexist with different lengths or accents, allowing simple ingredients to produce considerable complexity.

Minimalism can therefore be a misleading term for Glass' work. A composition such as the *Violin Concerto No. 1* contains hundreds or thousands of notes, rapid arpeggios, dense textures, and powerful climaxes. The minimalism lies not in the quantity of sound but in the materials and the method.

In Beethoven, you often feel that musical events are happening. In Glass, you feel that a musical process is unfolding.

So perhaps the best one-sentence definition, particularly for Philip Glass, is this:

***Minimalism creates large musical experiences by repeatedly and gradually transforming a deliberately small amount of musical material.***