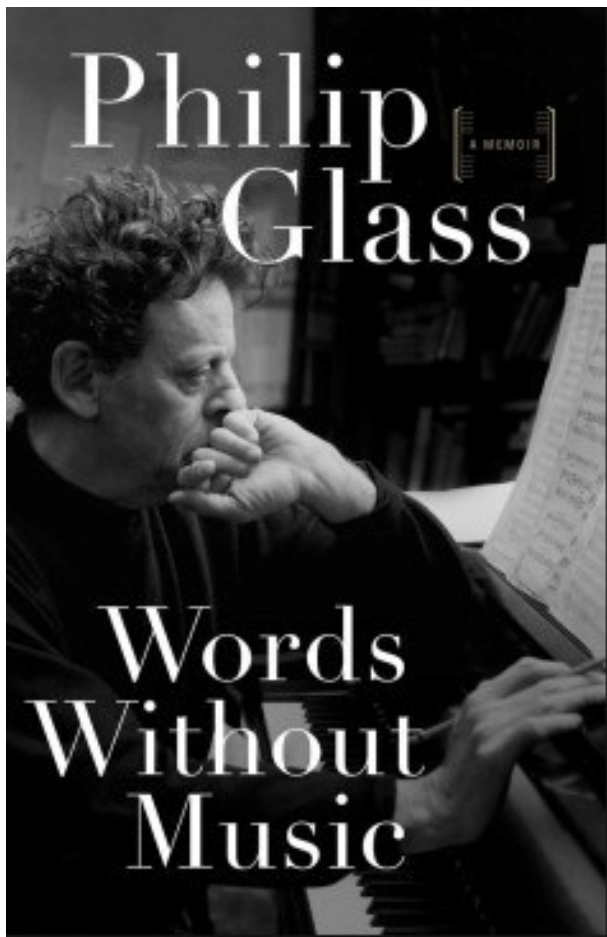


‘Words Without Music’ is personal

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“Words Without Music: A Memoir” by Philip Glass. New York: Liveright Publishing Co. (Division of W.W. Norton & Co.), 2015. 432 pages, \$29.95.

“It was very common in the 1960s for Western musicians, even composers, to be completely ignorant of global, or world, music,” Philip Glass reminisces in “Ravi Shankar,” the fifth chapter of “Words Without Music: A Memoir,” his long-awaited autobiography released this year. “It was certainly not taught in conservatories, though it was considered an interesting subject of study for musicologists – they called it ethnomusicology. Even in as prestigious a school as Juilliard there would not be more than a handful of relevant recordings.”



“When I found out I would be working with Ravi Shankar, I simply went out and bought a record of his – easy to find in Paris,” he writes. “At my first listening I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. At 29, I was completely ignorant of any non-Western music. Over the next decade I spent a lot of time studying and experimenting with the ideas, new to me, that I learned during the time with Ravi.”

To be completely honest, I was aware of a few of the contributions of Philip Glass – indeed, many of us have been exposed to his music for most of our lives – but I did not know much about his life before reading this book, which was sent to me unsolicited for review. But in case you haven’t noticed, my interest when it comes to reading is rather eclectic. I have my preferences (as we all do), but I am always open to learning more about the lives of those who have had a profound impact on our culture. Glass definitely falls into this category.

“Words Without Music” is a highly personal and seductively fascinating account spanning almost eight decades. The volume consists of 22 chapters arranged

in three major sections. The style roughly follows that of most biographies; Glass presents a chronological description of the events that most influenced his long career. He glosses over a few episodes while spending considerable time on others, which gives some insight into what he considers truly important as he looks back through the years.

It was mesmerizing to hear Glass explain his creative process; those with a background in the musical concepts he describes so eloquently will no doubt have a heightened appreciation for many of the passages, such as the following gem from “Music and Film,” the 19th chapter. Here, the author is

attempting to explain how he developed part of the score for Godfrey Reggio's "Koyaanisqatsi," one of his more innovative accomplishments:

"There were some cross-rhythms, maybe some twos against threes, threes against fours, but most of it was just straight-on drumming that you hear in a marching band, except that it was like a marching band on steroids," he notes. "It was really loud and fast and that's what I put into the score, along with the shrill, strident whistles that fit in perfectly in that piece."

"Later, when I was actually making the film score, I added the voices of a children's choir to the brass and percussion already there, in order to capture the childlike energy and enthusiasm of the miners," Glass continues. "To me, they were children, and I wanted to evoke that feeling with the children's choir in the score. That became a memorable musical moment."

When he was 15, Glass studied mathematics and philosophy at the University of Chicago as part of an accelerated college program. A graduate of the Juilliard School of Music, he began his long and prolific career as a composer-in-residence with the Pittsburgh public school system. Glass has been nominated for three Golden Globe Awards and three Academy Awards for best original score; he won a Golden Globe in 1999 for his work on "The Truman Show."

He has composed hundreds of sonatas and short musical pieces, 10 symphonies, innumerable film scores and nearly a dozen boundary-pushing operas, including "Einstein on the Beach" and "Satyagraha." In many respects, his role in shaping the way in which we hear and think about music in the last 50 years is unparalleled.

Glass also collaborated with some of the greats: David Byrne, Linda Ronstadt, Paul Simon, David Bowie, Brian Eno, Patti Smith, Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Leonard Cohen and my personal favorite, Stephen Colbert.

Although I found the stories of how some of the composer's more memorable music was inspired and ultimately created intriguing, it was the little vignettes he infused throughout the narrative that really held my attention. Witness the following excerpt from "New York's East Village," the 16th chapter:

"I loved working for Richard Serra, but in my mid-30s, I wanted more time for my children and for my composing and performing," Glass explains. "I was looking for some kind of work that gave me the independence I would need, would not be physically too tiring, and would keep my hands in a 'safer' environment. So, after my long association with Richard, I began taxi driving."

"Driving a cab was never a problem for me," he adds. "I liked driving in New York, and I got to know the city very well. In the course of one night I would easily drive 100 miles: in Harlem, up to the Bronx, out to Queens, all over Brooklyn, and of course mostly in Manhattan. I never found New York boring when I was driving. I unfailingly saw the city as entertaining."

I often hear the term "prodigy" used somewhat recklessly, in the same way designations such as "genius" and "superstar" are now routinely applied to virtually anyone who manages to gain some measure of commercial success in the entertainment industry. In a simpler and more truthful time, these terms were used sparingly and only in reference to individuals whose accomplishments were undeniably head and shoulders above their contemporaries.

It is with this sense of the awe the terms "prodigy" and "genius" can legitimately be applied to Glass. He is one of those rare artists who has been able to appeal to both the avant-garde community as well as the mainstream. I recommend "Words Without Music" without reservation.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*