

Music of our time: Washington Chorus offers monumental Glass symphony



By **Anne Midgette** Classical music critic/The Classical Beat November 14, 2016

Quick. Name a symphony that lasts an hour and 40 minutes, written for a huge orchestra, five vocal soloists, and full adult and children's choruses, that sets out to tell the story of everything in our lives and our world. Sounds like Mahler, right? Except the one that the Washington Chorus presented at the Kennedy Center on Sunday afternoon wasn't by Mahler: It was the Fifth Symphony of Philip Glass.

You probably haven't heard the Fifth Symphony live. Most American orchestras wouldn't gamble on playing an evening-length contemporary work, particularly not one by Glass, who remains one of this country's best known, most performed and least appreciated composers. To his detractors, some of his musical hallmarks — Those repeating arpeggiated figures! That declaimed, chantlike text setting! — yield work that is superficial or boring.

But there was nothing boring about the Fifth Symphony — quite the opposite. It is true that Glass doesn't play by the standard classical-music rules. He builds drama and event through layerings of rhythms and textures, sustaining a full chorus on a bed of dark low strings, or punctuating tutti orchestral lines with little fillips of solo wind. In effect, this redefines what the concert hall has come to accept as "dramatic" music, or even as "narrative" music, because Glass is certainly telling a musical story; he's just arriving at his thundering climaxes in a different way so that you are borne to them on relentless, driving rhythms rather than through melodic lines and polyphonic progressions. The climaxes, and the sense of motion, are still there, and he knows how to steer a narrative arc with the best of them. On Sunday, the symphony flew by, and not until the last of its 12 movements came to a close did I realize how long I had been there.

There's nothing subtle about Glass's program. He draws on a wide range of religious texts — the Bible, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Rig Veda, Native American legends and many others — in a tripartite work devoted to the past (stories of creation), the present (exegeses on "Love and Joy," "Evil and Ignorance," "Suffering" and "Compassion") and the future (death and the afterlife). If you tried to take on this kind of material in a conventional operatic musical vocabulary, it might be ludicrous; but Glass's propulsive style, with text setting that remains austere even when the music is richest, confers an air of ritual and

moves so quickly it never grows maudlin. The music is often affecting and even openly illustrative: a huge ecstatic climax toward the end of the “Love and Joy” section, or fragmenting into bits of percussion in “Evil and Ignorance.”

The piece has an ideal conductor in Julian Wachner, the Washington Chorus’s colorful, talented music director. A composer himself, he’s a strong advocate for contemporary music, and his flair for the dramatic and large-scale bore fruit here, yielding some fine work from the chorus and the girls of the Washington National Cathedral choir in a long evening with a lot of text and very high writing for the sopranos (a Glass trademark). The five soloists also did fine work, especially the baritone Stephen Salters, who had the biggest role and sang with authority, and the soprano Heather Buck, who brought color and grace to her punishingly high vocal lines. The bass, David Cushing, had a fine, warm, deep color to his voice but was unclear, at the start, about some of his pitches. Glass’s text setting is weakest when he’s writing for small groups of voices; he too often tends to use voices as if they were instruments, and in quartets and quintets this led to a kind of rough sameness of delivery.

This piece doesn’t give all classical fans what they want, but it has a lot to offer fans of music in general and is intoxicating in its pace and scale. I would far rather spend my afternoon with a strong performance of an unfamiliar work than with another Verdi Requiem (much as I love the Requiem). And while it is more powerful than moving, despite the beauty of its texts and some of its music, it built to a touching conclusion in the final movement, called “Dedication of Merit,” which opens with the lines “May I be a protector for those without one/And a lamp for those desiring light.” It’s a naive and lovely evocation of the power of art — backed up by an affirming work.

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