

James McVinnie Ensemble: Glassworks

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 100 minutes including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Chris P. Thompson *True Stories & Rational Numbers*

1. Anna
2. Professor H
3. Sirens
4. Five 'Til
5. Splitting

Philip Glass *Music in Fifths*

Philip Glass *Glassworks*

1. Opening
2. Floe
3. Island
4. Rubric
5. Façades
6. Closing

Even if you think you haven't heard any Philip Glass, you've probably heard Philip Glass. That's because, according to James McVinnie, the composer's influence surrounds us, writes Ariane Todes.

McVinnie says: 'His style has permeated absolutely every echelon of film and TV music. You listen to anything on television and it sounds like Glass. But the thing about Glass is that although he is much imitated, he is never bettered – he's the gold standard.'

For McVinnie, the Glass effect is deeply personal: 'Everything changed for me after seeing *Einstein on the Beach*. What I thought about music was turned on its head and inside out. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and hearing – an opera without a storyline being utterly compelling. That was an extraordinary moment for me, and many people have said the same thing.'

This alchemy happens in Glass's instrumental music, as well as his opera. McVinnie explains: 'As with a Samuel Beckett play, the audience is left to complete the work themselves, rather than there being a traditional narrative. The way in is to listen to the changes. These happen so quickly that the brain tries to find a regular pattern but can't, which is what holds one's attention.'

Music in Fifths, from 1969, characterises Glass's early period. McVinnie describes the work: 'There are very few constituent parts. The piece is built up with a set of parallel fifths that go up and down. You wouldn't think that these sparse ingredients would be able to sustain your attention, but it's mesmeric – a deep listening experience.'

Glass writes *Music in Fifths* as cells of material to be repeated freely. McVinnie explains: 'These pieces can last as long as you want them to and can expand and contract to whatever time frame you have. The music is essentially about repetition, but it's also about change within that repetition. No two sequences of music are ever the same. It's a bit like treading water – you may not be moving anywhere, but you're constantly in motion. This non-determinate character is different from anything else in Western Classical music – it shares some similarities, including the mechanics of how it works, with Indian Classical music.'

As director, McVinnie decides when to move between the cells, so how does he know when? He says: 'It's a kind of sixth sense. We allow ourselves to get into the groove of each cell for a couple of minutes and we just know when it's time to move on. If there's something particularly cool about one of the figurations, I might let it continue, or if it's a shorter cell, we might play that more to make it last longer. It's also about reading the atmosphere in the room.'

barbican

Of the next piece on the programme, Glass himself wrote: 'Glassworks was intended to introduce my music to a more general audience than had been familiar with it up to then.' Back in the pioneer days of portable music, it was the first album to be mixed specially for the Walkman cassette player. McVinnie says: 'It ventures into a pop aesthetic in terms of how music is released and disseminated through popular culture. It's very recognisably Glass. He hadn't started writing for mainstream films at that point, but you can hear those ideas.'

The six-movement work was originally written as a studio album for the Glass Ensemble, but McVinnie has arranged it for tonight's forces: four keyboards, vocalist, flautist and two instrumentalists who play both saxophone and clarinet. McVinnie compares that flexibility to Renaissance vocal polyphony. He explains: 'A verse anthem by Orlando Gibbons might have two singers singing the text with the other lines provided by a consort of viols, but if you have six singers, four of them could sing the viol music. Glass's music has that kind of interchangeability. It doesn't rely on a specific, stipulated instrument – it's more malleable from a sound perspective.'

Alongside these now classic 20th-century works, the Ensemble gives the world premiere performance of *True Stories & Rational Numbers*, written in 2019 and recorded in 2020 by his friend, New York-based Chris P. Thompson, who was for many years a percussionist in groups including *Alarm Will Sound*, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble.

The nine movements explore the sound qualities of different systems of tuning musical notes. We may look at piano keys and see each one as a singular, objective note, but in fact, most of them are some form of choice. Scientific laws set out how note pitches depend on the length of the vibrating string but as you go through the harmonic series, the pitches start to get out of whack with each other. In order for them to sound pleasing, they have to be tuned, and there are various ways to do that, including equal temperament and just intonation.

McVinnie explains: 'We have this weird compromise of equal temperament on our pianos where every note is in tune, but every note is also out of tune. With just intonation the intervals are tuned at a different rate to produce sounds that are much purer. Then there is a kind of compromise where you sacrifice some intervals that sound much less in tune. Chris has written these pieces that shift tuning as they are being played. The keyboards retune themselves so you get an amazing purity of sound in some places, and at other times there are dissonances that sound extraordinary.'

What does McVinnie hope the audience will come away with? He says: 'I hope that everyone will have a great time and be as exhilarated as we will be on the stage.'

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Performers

James McVinnie keyboard & music direction

Eliza McCarthy keyboard

Siwan Rhys keyboard

Hugh Rowlands keyboard

Victoria Couper vocalist

Zinajda Kodrič flute

Nicki Hutchins saxophone/clarinet

Jon Shenoy saxophone/clarinet

Produced by the Barbican

By arrangement with LittleBig International Booking

Thanks to Soniccuture for the use of the Hammersmith piano library in this live performance

Animation for 'Professor H' & 'Sirens' from *True Stories & Rational Numbers* by Amanda Bonaiuto

Animation for 'Anna' & 'Five 'Til' by *Chris Thompson*



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