

## AROUND TOWN

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OF all my CDs, the one I listen to most often, and by far, is Philip Glass' *Glassworks*, released in its original form in 1982. It provides a bridge between my own classical interests and the more popular enthusiasms of most of my friends. And this, I think, is Glass' main claim to fame, that he has built on his classical education at New York's Juilliard School of Music to create a style almost entirely his own that has won millions of followers. He may owe a lot to Johann Sebastian Bach and other Baroque composers, but he has become a kind of savior, reinvigorating a tradition that the abstract modernists were busy condemning to a tiny following, and then quite possibly to eventual oblivion, and opening it up instead to vast audiences.

Indeed, it's unclear whether he's really a classical composer at all, or an immensely versatile popular artist. But what do such definitions matter? Glass is in many ways a unique phenomenon, striding across landscapes and scattering his glittering sounds down onto a grateful and often adoring public.

He's been hugely productive, like the 18th-century composers themselves, writing operas, film music, themed albums, items in classical format (such as his highly acclaimed 2001 *Concerto for Cello*), and performing his creations with his own lineup, just like a pop idol — or, looked at from another perspective, like Mozart, who delighted in playing his recently-completed piano concertos.

It's been hard to keep up with Glass, and my own experience has been of hearing him emerge unexpectedly, shooting a new production skyward like a surfacing whale — the opera *Satyagraha* in 1990, the film music for *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* in 1998, and more recently his sumptuous music for the 2006 Cate Blanchett and Judi Dench film *Notes on a Scandal*, for which he received his third Academy Award nomination. But there's been an enormous amount more.

Glass's *Book of Longing* is a setting of 22 poems by Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen. It features four vocalists and seven instrumentalists, including Glass himself on keyboard. In addition, Cohen's artwork from his published poem-and-song collection of the same name will be screened, and use will also be made of his pre-recorded voice.

This isn't a new work — it premiered in Canada in June 2007. But it has subsequently toured widely, and its emergence this weekend here in Taipei, with Glass in person leading the instrumentalists, is a major event, and should easily sell out for its two performances.

Glass and Cohen have a lot in common. Each is of Jewish/Eastern European ancestry, each is in his early 70s, each is deeply interested in Buddhism, and each is a composer.

"There's not a lot of polyphonic writing in the ensemble because that would have destroyed the ability to hear the words," Glass told John Rockwell on the occasion of the work's premiere.

"One of the hallmarks of the whole singer-

songwriter, folk, rock era was to replace a kind of ornate expressivity in the way people sang with a kind of natural declamatory [style of singing]," he said then.

Cohen added that Glass' version of *Book of Longing* was characterized by a way of singing that wasn't cabaret, wasn't opera, and wasn't West End or Broadway. "I'd call it classic," Cohen observed laconically.

Glass first saw the poems almost a decade ago, he said, and thought they were a mixture of ballads, love poems, what he called "Dharma poems" and rhymes or lyrics. He subsequently framed a stage work in five cycles, each containing one representative poem of each type, with instrumental solos interspersed that were independent of the five main cycles.

"I was deeply interested in how Philip would treat these lyrics. It was as simple as that," said Cohen. "I gave [him] a book and he presented me with this really stunning evening of theater ... It wasn't really a collaboration. It was a kind of ... collision, and something very beautiful has emerged that I think is better than both of us."

In theory it shouldn't have worked, he said. It was like the bumblebee — aerodynamically it shouldn't be able to fly at all, but it can, and does.

Glass, too, was clearly pleased with the outcome, saying that Cohen wasn't just a poet, but a poet who understood the human voice.

"What you get," he added, "the gift of age, along with fatigue and disease and all the other things ... the great gift ... is the technique and knowledge of how things can work together."

"To be fully human is to be both in the world of the senses and to be in the world of the imagination at the same time."

Tickets for this weekend's performances, then, should be seized with both hands. Will it be like hearing Mozart or Bach in person, or like attending a pop concert by a widely-loved veteran performer? It's not important. It's the great Philip Glass, and he's here in person in Taiwan. That's what really matters.

## PERFORMANCE NOTES:

**WHAT:** Book of Longing  
**WHEN:** Tomorrow and Sunday at 7:30pm  
**WHERE:** National Concert Hall (國家音樂廳), Taipei City  
**TICKETS:** Available at [www.artsticket.com.tw](http://www.artsticket.com.tw), tel: (02) 3393-9888. For tomorrow seats for NT\$1,200 and NT\$2,000 are still available, for Sunday seats for NT\$1,200, NT\$1,600 and NT\$2,000 are still available

SHATTERPROOF  
GLASS

Composer Philip Glass brings Leonard Cohen's 'Book of Longing' to life in two performances this weekend at the National Concert Hall

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
 CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

