An introduction to Glass-ical music

The sound in the small concert hall is almost deafening. On the cramped stage three saxophonists, two keyboard players, and a singer are hard at work producing a dense mosaic of repeated figures, sounding not unlike a stuck record. One of the keyboard players appears to be signalling changes in the music with nods of his head, but the changes are difficult, if not impossible to detect. The piece ends abruptly, as if a switch had been thrown, and the young audience bursts into thunderous applause.

This scene, which describes almost any new music performance, actually occurred at a concert of "serious" music by the Philip Glass Ensemble, one of the foremost exponents of musical minimalism. Glass — along with contemporaries Steve Reich and Terry Riley — is responsible for bringing minimalism to the attention of the general listening public, popularizing it to the point where it has influenced classical and new wave composers alike. Brian Enzo, David Byrne, David Bowie, and the German electronic ensemble Tangerine Dream all acknowledge their debt to Glass' music, and his influence continues to grow. In the course of fifteen years Glass has risen from a starving Soho cab driver to the most in-demand composer of new music.

Philip Glass began his musical career at the Hall School, where he studied traditional western compositional techniques. A Fulbright Scholarship enabled him to study in Paris, where he became interested in non-Western musical forms and worked with Indian musicians Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan. The repetitive elements of Indian music were to become the basis for Glass' unique style.

Glass anchors the flurry of keyboard figures with long, sustained notes played by woodwinds or violin. These instruments' entrances provide focal points for the listener to hold in the sea of shimmering keyboard textures. In a free concert Tuesday at 8pm in Kresge Auditorium, the ensemble's reputation will be further enhanced by the performance of Glass' latest work, Einstein on the Beach.

None of his preceding works could have prepared the public for Glass' epic four-hour opera Einstein on the Beach. Glass' time-distorting music seems perfectly well-suited to Einstein's theories, which serve as the centerpiece of a massive stage production by director Robert Wilson. Einstein is Glass' most complex work, incorporating convoluted rhythmic figures, a demanding solo violin part, spoken and sung texts, and considerable harmonic movement. The opera, performed at New York's Metropolitan Opera, became a cult classic; the concluding "Spaceship/Cadence" section has become a staple of new music performance, actually occurring at a concert of "serious" music by the Abramowitz Lecture Series, will consist of selections from Glass's Glassworks.

Glassworks makes a much smoother transition into classical structures than Einstein, with inspired use of conventional orchestration and Glass' first solo piano piece. The electronic ensemble is still very much present with its usual dense, dynamic style, but is mollified by inclusion of a full string section. The resulting hybrid yields lush, meditative pieces with the distinctive Glass trademarks.

The Photographer, Glass' new music-theater piece about pioneering photographer Eadweard Muybridge, continues in the classical vein. The all-keyboard version incorporates more melodic movement, particularly in the brass. What is most surprising about the work, however, is the inclusion of an actual song, "A Gentleman's Honor," written in collaboration with David Byrne. The song version acts as an introduction to the play, while the instrumental version serves as a clear-cut bid for popularity. The all-keyboard version incorporates a rhythm machine — it's there if you listen closely — and a melody suggestive of songs written by British technopopsters OMD. Hardly a sellout, "A Gentleman's Honor" suggests what can be done by applying Glass' techniques to pop music.

A string of commissions extending to 1987 guarantees we will hear much more of Philip Glass in the future. For the present, the MIT community will have a chance to hear the Philip Glass Ensemble in a free concert Tuesday at 8pm in Kresge Auditorium. The performance, sponsored by the Abramowitz Lecture Series, will consist of selections from The Photograph, Glassworks, and a recent soundtrack for the movie The Photographer.

Tuesday's performance offers a rare opportunity to hear one of the current masters of contemporary music.