Phil Glass

*In his article "THE FUTURE OF MUSIC" JOHN CAGE describes your work as follows : "Though the doors will always remain open for the musical expression of personal feelings, what will more and more come through is the expression of the pleasures of conviviality. And beyond that a non-intentional expressivity: a being together of sounds and people." How do you relate this quote to your music?*

Well, I think it has more to do with his music than mine or anything. So, I think it's interesting that JOHN thought about it that way. I think I know what this is about, where this comes from. During every year I make a series of concerts downtown, usually in a large studio. But since the beginning of my work with the ensemble that I formed has always been...It's really in a part of New York where people lived in loft buildings, you know, and did rehearsals there. And since that in a way was the origin of my audience..... I'm talking about eight or nine or ten years ago..... I've always ah kept an attachment to that. So that every year I do a series of concerts in the places that I rehearse and work in.

Now, JOHN comes to almost, it's amazing how many concerts a year he goes to. He goes to new music concerts all the time. And I think that actually what JOHN is talking about there is a very particular situation. He came to a Sunday afternoon concert at my loft where it's almost really an audience that has ah been my audience from the beginning.

*This is one side of what is called the "pleasure of conviviality".*

Sure, these are people who always know each other.

*But I see this concept realized in your music. This being together of the musicians radiates a kind of homogeneity.*

Well, there's that too. I didn't think he meant that in that quote, but this is another issue. We're talking now about the ensemble and the fact that I'm very attached to working with this group now. And many of them I've been working with, like JOHN GIBSON, since 1967. You know, we're getting into eight or nine years, you know, of working together. DICKY LANDRY also about that length of time. Most people have been in the group I think five or six years. So that ah I'm very attached to this group of people. I work with them. We're very close actually, you know, I mean ah.....And because when we travel we make most of our living, we spend a lot of time together. And I think it's something I would miss very much.

*Ya, this homogeneity on the one side comes out of playing with people that you know and like. But on the other side doesn't the music itself radiate a kind of community feeling ?*

My music required a very close working together. In fact to learn a piece generally takes about three months. Because ah the music is so intricately interwoven. But ah even if one person is away, ah the smallest part of an eighth note, it ah destroys the feeling of it.

We discovered also that ah in the course of a piece the tempo is always changing. But, it changes as a group. I'm not conducting. It's just that in the course of time we arrived at a collective feeling of ah the shift of the tempo of the piece. And those are very rarely discussed.

*does there exist like an internal signal structure to initiate these shiftings?*

No. Yes, I conduct, you know, by nodding my head to indicate where we are in the music. But, ah no, as far as the shifting of tempo, if you listen to it for that, if you're not paying attention, no one ever notices that. But that is actually the same way that a good string quartet after twenty or thirty years you know, they were playing perfectly together. And we've been together about eight years. Even so, we're arriving at a very, it's very much that kind of style of ensemble playing, of real close chamber music playing.

*How much are the people bounded, and how much have they freedom to play?*

Well I, at this point it's hard for me to say. Ah, in fact the music is all written down to begin with. But there are some pieces where I allow ah, you know this MUSIC WITH CHANGING PARTS. In that piece there was free composition on selected notes. It wasn't really free. It was a very limited kind of improvisation within the structure of the piece. That was an experiment that I did. And on that piece, I'm doing it from time to time and using that as a technique. Generally everything is written down.

HOWEVER, sometimes I'm playing, and I'll notice that DICKY is playing the same part but maybe a fourth above. And I'll listen to it, and if it's nice, we'll leave it in. Or sometimes MICHAEL will say to me...This is the piano player...He'll say, "Well, you know, I think my left hand, I can just move it down a fifth." And so people are able to make changes.

But since the thing that holds the piece together is the rhythmic structure, and as long as what is happening is harmonically consistent, ah it's possible for players to even to participate on that level you see. But we're talking about a very limited kind of ah, it's limited in the sense that it doesn't really change the character and style of the piece. But it does allow people to add certain things to it.

*And the process of composition grows too in contact with the musicians?*

ring ring ring ring I'm sorry.

Hello. Yes. Hi. Okay. So I'll go there. Then I can have a little more time here. Then I'll be there at a quarter of twelve. Well, I'll be there at 11:30 then.

Ah, the question again was ah about, oh, how the music was written. Well, actually I go to the rehearsals, the first rehearsals with the piece all written. Now sometimes we make changes, but basically the piece is finished. Rehearsal period is not really working out material at all. But, we may work out certain DETAILS like transitions maybe.

ringggg I'm sorry.

Hello. Yes. Well, tell him to read.....Okay,

yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. I'm having a talk now with someone . Okay, thanks.

The problem we're talking about the ah..... However, when I am composing the piece, since I know the people, I often write the parts exactly for them. I know which people are where. In other words, often when I write the parts, I write it by the name of the person and not by the name of the instrument. So, like JOHN'S part, it doesn't say soprano saxophone. So I know. I tend to write FOR him specifically. Or for JOAN LaBARBARA. I know her voice quality. So when I'm writing the piece, I'm thinking in fact of this group and no other group.

*One actually can feel that in listening to the music. Like I would ascribe this feeling a certain tribal character.*

Oh, yeah?

*Did you then study non-western cultures to form your language?*

Well, at an earlier period in my life I did, yes. But ah mostly ah I had a lot of contact with Indian music in one point in my life.....which of course is a very sophisticated and evolved musical culture. But again, you have an ensemble situation, small. It's really chamber music. I mean, ah, it's something where you have generally three, four, five, six people playing together. So I wouldn't say that was so much a model for my music. But it was something that I responded to, because it was something that I myself was interested in.

*So you brought a certain homogeneous corpus of musicians together?*

Yeah. But actually, Walter, one of the reasons it really happened was because at the beginning, when I was doing this music in '66 and '67, the fact was that no one would play the music. And so, in order to find people to play the music, I found ah the most sympathetic musicians to work with. And once I had them, I was, once I found a group of people who were willing and happy to play the music, I was not inclined to change that group. Because now I can find players quite easily. But in the 1960's ah the nucleus of players that I had were practically the only people that really wanted to play the music. You know, now it's quite different.

*Do you remember your original motivation to write these kinds of repetitious pattern music?*

Hm. Well, that was again ah quite a while ago, in '66. And I was living in Paris at the time. And at that point I was twenty-eight or twenty-nine or thirty. And at this point my background was very traditional. I had begun music when I was eight with playing the flute, and beginning playing piano later, and composing when I was in my teens. So I went to music school full time when I was nineteen and stayed 'til I was twenty-four. And again I studied with NADJA BOULANGER from twenty-six to twenty-eight..... So ah, at that point I had maybe twenty years,

you know? I have been playing and reading and writing music for twenty years, more or less. At that point my involvement in music was very traditional. And I had received all the degrees, you know, like the Masters degree from Julliard, diplomas and so forth, fellowships and so. forth. I have in fact published about twenty pieces. At the age of twenty-one, I think, I began publishing music, a more traditional kind. So, at the point when I was twenty-eight or twenty-nine I had behind me already a very strong traditional background.

And really what happened was that I became thoroughly sick of it.....you know? And I didn't want to write the music any more. And it seemed to me that.....Looking at the music it seemed to me that it was mostly imitative, on the models of the teachers I had studied with. I think consciously of finding a music that had no, not even one element of the music that I had studied. The only music that I knew at that time.....(and I didn't know very well)..... were the non-western musics, you know, like Indian music. I had heard some Moroccan music. I had been to Morocco a number of times. And I had some experience of the Islamic music and African music. So I knew that there were other ways of making music that had nothing to do with my own education.

And, the way the repetition came in, it's hard for me exactly at this point. I think I came upon it mostly by accident. I know this is curious, because I've talked to other people in this area, and they had the same experience, that they also came by accident almost to this. But, the thing about accidents is that accidents happen to everyone. It's a question of whether you recognize the accident as being potential or not.

*So, you developed your language through self-experience?*

I was very much at the time, very much alone..... When I was living in Paris I had no contact with any other musicians. I know ALLA RAKHA. But the Indian music developed so clearly along different lines. It could be important in inspiration, but they didn't offer new models for my music. Because the instruments were too different. The raga system demanded a kind of PERCEPTION OF INTONATION, which I'm not particularly gifted at. Someone like LA MONTE, who works for intonation in a very precise way, could be attracted to that. But for me personally, my strong point was not that kind of precise hearing to hear MICROINTERVALS.

So, for a number of reasons Indian music was a point of inspiration, but could not really be a working model for me. Except in the rhythmic structure, where I found that's where I could get the strongest ideas from. And for a while I worked with ALLA RAKHA. I studied with him. And I learned a lot from him about rhythmic structure, and additive structure, which I've talked about in other articles and so forth. So the whole idea of additive structure that I developed in my music really came from the rhythmic structure of Indian music. But my music sounds so DIFFERENT from Indian music.

*Could you describe more your building up of this additive structure and your use of it in your music?*

Well, basically, what I noticed about western music was that for the most part western music takes units of time and divides them. You know, so like to take an example, like there's a whole note. You divide it in half, you get a half note. And you divide it again, and you get a quarter note. And you divide them again, you get eighth notes. And in fact measures are things that are a measure of music, like a 4/4 measure

or a 6/8 measure, a length of time which you divide. Well, with Indian music what I discovered was that they take a much longer unit, and they work from adding from the smaller units. So that it's the opposite really.

*Ya.*

I got upon the idea of writing in small figures that would be repeated, and then move on to the next figure. So that a piece of my music is really the sum of all the small, individual melodic units added together. Right.

So that when I write out the score, then there'd be forty figures, sixty figures, eighty figures. Now each figure is related to the next figure, at least in that early music, by the addition or subtraction of one musical unit. So that there would be a figure that had five eighth notes in it. And then the next figure would have six, the next would have seven, the next would have eight. Very, very simple.

At the beginning I used this very very simple, completely ah systematic approach. But what I found was that the feeling would change very much between the feeling of five, the feeling of six, the feeling of seven. And so that what I worked with as a composer was. finding musical figures for the units that would work within that additive structure in the most musical way possible. And that's what you hear with MUSIC WITH CHANGING PARTS.

Then later, in my later music I began working with cyclic structures. That is, I would take an additive structure and put that within a recurring larger cycle of notes. For example, if you take a figure of nine, you know if you take let's say if you add together, if you have an ongoing figure of nine happening. And you have an additive figure that goes 4 + 3 + 2, that also comes out to nine. So, then if you do it like having three figures 4, 3, 2, which is related in the additive way that I was fond of doing, fitting into a larger structure of nine...Then there are other ways of doing that. I'm giving the most simple example. But you can then take larger units, like a cycle of eighteen, and then start working with 6+6+6+5+4+5+4+5+4+3+2+1+2+1.

And it'll ALL add up to a larger structure of eighteen. So later in MUSIC IN TWELVE PARTS, I became very interested in the mathematics of cyclic music. And I combined the area of cyclic music with additive structure. And the origin of that music really came from my observation and study of the rhythmic structure of Indian music.

*Besides using instruments are you also using voice?*

Yes.

*Do you use the voice to imitate instruments or to represent it as it is?*

Well, really I use voice as a sound quality, in the same way that each of us has a quality of their own. So, in a way I don't use a voice for itself any more than I use the instrument for itself. Because by the time I take the instruments, and we put them through an equalizer sound system mixer, I at that point, the blend of the instruments'..... It's not really possible to think, "Well, this is a flute, and this is a saxophone." I think what we're hearing is made up of the components. And in that sense the voice is one of the components. Then over the years I've had certain instruments I've tried. We had a cello once, we played with trumpet once, with violin once, with so many instruments which you don't see now in a group have come through the group. And every time that would happen, the reason I originally would have someone play with us was because I liked the musician, and I liked the person. And I said, "Well, why don't you bring your trumpet down, and we'll see what it sounds like?" And usually what would happen is that we would take the same music, and by changing instrumentation, we would change SOMEWHAT the color of the total effect. And it was possible, we found, to integrate all different kinds of instruments, without actually changing the musical character.

*But the idea of the final color is like having the colors melted together to a new color, where the individual instruments are not recognized. Is this true?*

For me the sense of the music is really a total organic thing, of which each instrument is a contributing part. And for the acoustical reasons there are all kinds of byproducts of the instruments playing together, that make that happen, that make other things happen that we're not even hearing. So that there are overtones, difference tones that are happening, that are contributing to the total effect. And it's not assignable to one instrument, because it's a combination of instruments. So that more and more the total sound really is more than the sum of the players.

Because we're talking about phenomena that happen with high, with music of high amplification, with very clean, high amplification. So there will be certain acoustical byproducts, that will be perceivable by us, but not assignable to any particular player. So that really we can't talk about one instrument, though we can talk about each instrument making a definite contribution in terms of the color

*Do you use harmony to color the structure, or do you use it as a structure in itself?*

(Police squad car passing.)

I used keys almost as an emotional color In other words a key would be for me a feeling. And I would write a piece in a certain key because it produced a certain, very complete psychological feeling. Even though if I may not be able to describe in words the feeling, it was immediately perceivable to anyone who heard it. So, I don't like to use words like, well this heavy or sad or happy. These are stupid words to use to describe music, But in recent years now I'm now working with color in a direct way that

I formally worked with rhythm. And so now I'm using harmony in a structural way. And that's a complicated subject.

It's really the content of the newer music that I'm doing now. The last piece I'm working on was called ANOTHER LOOK AT HARMONY. And in it what I was doing was trying to think of harmony as a structural device.

*Could you shortly describe that?*

Yes, the idea was that ah.....Just a minute, I

want to get a match..... Formerly the music had been written in harmonic plateaus that were fairly constant for me, twenty minutes, sometimes as much as forty minutes, and ah MUSIC WITH CHANGING PARTS that was almost sixty-six to sixty-eight minutes. And in concert that could be even longer.

And then I began using modulation, even in MUSIC WITH CHANGING PARTS, which is a piece from 1970, there's a modulation towards the end of the piece, after about forty minutes all that happens is that the key signatures is in three flats. And what happened is that the A-flat became natural. So that I had a feeling of becoming some kind of a major key. So really you could describe it also as still a minor key. But ANYWAY, it produced a very dramatic effect in the music.

Then, when I was writing MUSIC IN TWELVE PARTS, each part was related. The meaning of each part, which I think of as a scene, in the way that two walls come together in a building. So there was a place where the two places meet-And that's the edge where they come together. I was always very careful to make that harmonic relationship a very strong one.

When I started putting these parts together, I saw that that was the most interesting way to go directly to emphasize the change of the harmonic plateau. Then, after I had done that through ten parts of MUSIC IN TWELVE PARTS, in the eleventh part I saw that the device itself could become the subject of a part. So Part Eleven became a series of modulations. And simply there would be the same figure going through a series of keys, which you know,from one point of view was completely traditional. But in the context of MY music, it was revolutionary.

But at Part Eleven, at that point when you hear the piece as a whole piece..... It's a four-hour piece...At that point you're entering the piece at the third hour. So at that point the universe of the piece is established. And its own history is established. And you don't think about the tradition anymore. And I really feel free in that sense. I feel so free from musical history that I feel that I can use it again. And this is in a sense what I'm doing.

Now,  I was trying next to make it as really as strong a structural element as rhythm has been in my music. ANOTHER LOOK AT HARMONY did this in two ways. It was written in two parts. What I did in the First Part of ANOTHER LOOK AT HARMONY was that I took certain rhythmic figures. And I was then thinking about cyclic music, additive music and all the kinds of techniques I had developed over a period of seven or eight years. And I assigned really one, the first (This was the first way that I did it.) I assigned it to a certain rhythmic process, a certain key.

Car honking starts.

The piece moves through a series of keys, and it comes to another key. The key seems to generate a different rhythmic process. It was the first time I tried to integrate harmonic structures with rhythmic structures. Like by letting the key relationship be identified with the rhythmic process. So that in the course of the piece.... you have a series of harmonic plateaus, each one generating its own rhythmic structure. Then this was in a sense ah the first attempt. I think it was one solution to the problem.

The next part, Part Two of that, I did something. I took a quite different approach. I took a very traditional harmonic progression. And I then I repeated it and used each repetition of the sequence. It was really a cadence. And I used each repetition of the cadence to become the subject of a different rhythmic expansion. Actually I could play it for you. So, in a way (turns to the organ) the most, the quintessence of harmonic music is in cadence for me..... IN CADENCE!  It's the great subject of eighteenth and nineteenth century music.....

Car honking stops.

You know. So I took a cadence which was developed along very traditional lines, and I used it within the process of my own music. And what happens is ah is very curious because..... I'll play it for you first, and then you can tell me what happens.....because it's more interesting that way. It's the very end of ANOTHER LOOK AT HARMONY.

PHIL GLASS plays the organ for about five minutes.

Do you see what I was doing? You hear it very clearly in the bassline. I'm taking the cadence, and I'm applying arithmetic expansion to it. And the bassline gets longer and longer and longer.