

## The Cocteau Trilogy / Philip Glass - A conversation with avec Katia and Marielle Labèque

*When did the music of Philip Glass come into your life?*

KL: It all began with an invitation from Igor Toronyi-Lalic to play at his festival of minimalist music at Kings Place in London. We knew that in 2008 Philip Glass composed *Four Movements for Two Pianos*, but discovering this score for two pianos came as great surprise, because it really is an extraordinary work! Playing it is particularly complex because of its rhythmic superpositions, its shifts. Little by little we assimilated this language, and we recorded *Four Movements* in 2013 for our album *Minimalist Dream House*. Philip Glass heard our version and liked it very much. It was our first incursion into his music, but we only met him back in 2015 in Los Angeles, when we were rehearsing the premiere of the *Double Concerto for Two Pianos* that he composed for us.

*And you had never come across his music before-?*

KL: Never! You have to remember we began our career playing Messiaen, Berio, Ligeti, Boulez... We could really identify with that sphere of influence in contemporary music in Europe. Even so, it was thanks to Luciano Berio that we discovered Gershwin, and that took us to Bernstein; but the repetitive movement in America was foreign to us for a long time. We never dismissed Glass's music; we simply came to it late. But we loved it as soon as we made the discovery... Love at first sight.

*You've explored the whole movement for Minimalist Dream House, and you've played a great number of pieces by minimalist composers. Yet it was Glass whom imposed a lasting place in your repertoire. Why was that?*

ML: Most of all, his music suits us. I feel great when we play it, and we can feel the attention the audience pays to it immediately, not to mention its reaction. It hasn't always been easy to fit Glass into concert programmes, because there are music institutions and promoters who are wary, or traditionalists who don't want it. But every time we insist on having a piece by Glass in our recitals, that's the one that brings the room to its feet!

KL: There's an inexplicable magic in Glass. Beginning with just a few notes, very simple material, his music unfolds emotions that are unexpected, Glass carries us away somewhere else. The music can have delicacy in a minimalist motif, and there are also spectacular flights of lyricism.

ML: You have to say that the *Cocteau Trilogy* is romantic music too. Themes like *Miroir* or *Promenade dans le jardin*, from *La Belle et la Bête*, are magnificent, and their musical developments bring changes of character. We perform some thirty pieces in this programme, and we have to find a specific colour for each one. Certain pieces contain reminiscences of Schubert, in others Ravel; we pass from very serious atmospheres to very light moments, and we have to find the exact character for each piece as well as different levels of sound.

KL: His feel for dynamics, and the choice of pianistic colours, are links that Glass has with French music. The years he spent in Paris studying with Nadia Boulanger instilled the French

style in him. And that can be heard naturally when he composes pieces based on Cocteau. In these three operas, how can you not think of Ravel, given that power of expression he obtains with such an economy of means? And yet the music really is Philip Glass: this *Cocteau Trilogy* resembles him. The French colour's there, but this music... it's his own.

*Some musicians think that Glass's music shouldn't be performed, but simply played according to the composer's indications in the score.*

KL: I don't think that today Glass appreciates a controlled or metrical approach. He still encourages performers to make his scores their own, and he gives them total freedom. When we gave his *Double Concerto* in New York, at the concert to celebrate his 80th birthday, he played for us backstage. I'll never forget how romantic his playing was: filled with rubato, accelerando and retenu... And it was splendid, so different to the way in which his music is sometimes played.

ML: With Glass you are always on the edge. You have to perform freely, but without losing the pulse of the rhythm. And to obtain that freedom which is so difficult to have with two pianos, you have to rehearse a great deal, naturally, but sometimes you have to move away from the score in order to be able to come back to it, and do that until it becomes organic.

*Apart from the scores, how did you dive back into the universe of Cocteau to prepare these versions?*

ML: Watching the three Cocteau films again helped me enormously. The visual universe is extraordinary, and a great inspiration for your playing.

KL: When we play the three Suites, it's impossible not have the films' aesthetics in your head. There's the marvellous, gothic atmosphere in *La Belle et la Bête*, with the castles, the chandeliers held by human hands; and his *Orphée* is different to the legend as everything turns out to be no more than a dream. *Les Enfants Terribles* stands out for its dramatic tension.

*The Philharmonie in Paris invited you to turn this Trilogy into a concert scenography, with lighting effects and fragrances. Why did you find their proposal so attractive?*

KL: A concert always has to be a spectacle. It's very inspiring to be able to work with Cyril Teste, Nina Chalot and Francis Kurkdjian, which is the opportunity that Olivier Mantei gave us for the Philharmonie. Their contributions, as dramatists, scenographers and perfumers, brought in other dimensions; at the same time they enlightened and nurtured not only the performance but also the audience. I've always liked to see creativity in others; they bring us ideas and visions that we wouldn't have thought of. It's teamwork.

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