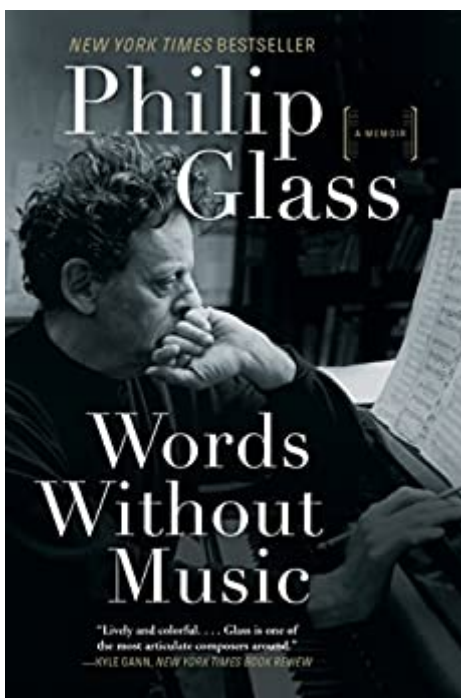


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# Words Without Music: A Memoir



## Synopsis

New York Times Bestseller "Reads the way Mr. Glass's compositions sound at their best: propulsive, with a surreptitious emotional undertow." —Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim, New York Times Philip Glass has, almost single-handedly, crafted the dominant sound of late-twentieth-century classical music. Yet in *Words Without Music*, his critically acclaimed memoir, he creates an entirely new and unexpected voice, that of a born storyteller and an acutely insightful chronicler, whose behind-the-scenes recollections allow readers to experience those moments of creative fusion when life so magically merged with art. From his childhood in Baltimore to his student days in Chicago and at Juilliard, to his first journey to Paris and a life-changing trip to India, Glass movingly recalls his early mentors, while reconstructing the places that helped shape his creative consciousness. Whether describing working as an unlicensed plumber in gritty 1970s New York or composing *Satyagraha*, Glass breaks across genres and re-creates, here in words, the thrill that results from artistic creation. *Words Without Music* ultimately affirms the power of music to change the world.

## Book Information

File Size: 5265 KB

Print Length: 447 pages

Publisher: Liveright; 1 edition (April 6, 2015)

Publication Date: April 6, 2015

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00OKUX36Y

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #219,833 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #41

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Classical #76

in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Classical #320 in Kindle Store > Kindle

eBooks > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Composers & Musicians

## Customer Reviews

Philip Glass is probably my favorite 20th Century composer, and for good reason: He is able to take simple musical ideas, put them in a myriad of combinations, and ultimately produce something transcendent. You can really get lost in his compositions, no matter the format. It was with great anticipation that I bought the book and now having finished it, I feel like it was an enlightening experience. As a memoir it goes into the usual routine of recounting one's childhood, upbringing, and early years, but it doesn't stick to that (tried-and-true, but occasionally stale) formula. It does go chronologically, but it separates his life into various threads that he carries throughout the entire book and manages to tie together in very interesting ways, not unlike his music. Perhaps my favorite part, and which gave me a deeper understanding of his process and why his music is the way it is, was the section(s) he devotes to his time in India. This period of his life informed his style in a way that continues to this day, while also opening it up to the global influences that come later. His story is one of introspection, creating art, and collaboration; and this book certainly deepened my appreciation for his music. More than anything, though, is my desire to expand my horizons and check out some of his music that I haven't yet tried, e.g., his operas (although I have seen *Kepler*). From a reading perspective, he has a very approachable prose style and somehow manages to wrangle the many parts of his life into a cohesive whole that I found fascinating. There's also a poetic closing chapter which departs from the previously organizational structure for something like stream-of-consciousness, linked by repetition of a paragraph that is kind of like a mantra. People who enjoy reading this type of book should give this a read, but most importantly people who like Philip Glass' music (or music in general) should buy this immediately.

Yes, this is a love story -almost a fairy tale of an era, never to be seen again; everything was aligned for this unique period in the development of the arts we are now living and experiencing; and it will keep evolving. In fifty years hence, those who are interested will witness the continuing impact such a creative force has on us, and see it as unique again because of the collision of the people, the circumstances and the force of imaginative talent.; it's that we don't see it when it's happening. Philip's story gave a tender face to just one of the genius' who was in this maelstrom of ideas and creativity, making music with great struggle and determination. *Words Without Music* is a fascinating memoir on many levels. Certainly his personal history from Baltimore to Chicago, Paris, and New York. As a composer he was immersed in theater, dance, opera, cinema, and conducting ensembles and symphonies. Oh, if we could at least live three lifetimes to appreciate the value of such a creative journey and, while I'm dreaming, appreciate it in the making.

I find Glass's music superior to his somewhat workmanlike prose, but I found this to be an enjoyable book. No one can honestly claim that Glass is not dedicated to his art. Attracted to music from an early age, he studied for years, at Julliard, in Paris with Nadia Boulange, with Ravi Shankar, with Buddhist gurus, and finally achieved success and a living wage in his early 40's, replacing his odd jobs and artist poverty. My introduction to Glass the composer was singing in the chorus for a Seattle Opera production of Satyagraha. In sanskrit with constantly changing unusual rhythms, it is a challenge to sing, but very rewarding. In his book, Glass says that any musical performance has three elements, the composer, the performers, and the audience. Glass does not write background music. Even his film scores demand attention.

What is interesting about this uneven autobiography about today's superstar classical composer is that it is not just about his then avant-garde music but rather the entire avant-garde world of art, theater, dance, music, and their combinations in Europe and American during the experimental 1960s and 1970s. Glass says that he is foremost a theatrical composer, and his life has developed within and around all these related arts. His atypical operas -- and he has now 25 -- are fundamentally "performance art" with music; and as cinema is a derivative of live theater, his many soundtracks further the connection. His chums are artists, as Richard Serra and Chuck Close, and beginning from his days at Julliard, his pieces have been used in dance. While John Adams depended on conservatory teaching to survive, Glass had a large variety of part-time jobs, from steel plant crane operating to taxi cab driving, from furniture moving to plumbing. Perhaps the most worthwhile details in the book are his experience in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, the advanced instructor of so many noted composers, whose arduous training techniques developed in Glass a new way to regard music; the least valuable details were his method of preparing galvanized plumbing pipe. His interaction with Ravi Shankar on the film Chappaqua and especially with tabla master Allah Rakha in the structure of Hindustani rhythms, tals, laid the groundwork for Glass's trademark style, where small changes and variations in modal process are emphasized over harmony and counterpoint. Einstein on The Beach was the revolutionary work that brought Glass into the spotlight and how it was developed and presented is well described. Yet it took many more years, commissions, and projects, such as the wordless documentary Koyaanisqatsi, before Glass was firmly established as a major composer. The book also sketches Glass's spiritual development with Hindustani yoga, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and meditation techniques, and Taoist movements, and his eventual realization that composing/being music is itself the spiritual vehicle. Of course, family information and relationships are fully provided as well as his many friendships. The

struggle of an artist is well presented in this book; it just happens to be about Philip Glass.

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