

CLASSICAL

Classical review: Ives Ensemble; Philip Glass Ensemble; BBC Philharmonic

An ear-cleansing new violin concerto trumps a numbing evening of Philip Glass

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Pioneering but browbeating: Philip Glass

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Modern music's diversity can be a touch bewildering. I experienced three substantial samples across a week in London and Manchester, and couldn't but feel the approaches to discourse were indeed many miles apart. At the Purcell Room, the Ives Ensemble, from Holland, presented an evening of mostly recent music by Richard Rijnvos (b1964). Then came the Philip Glass Ensemble at the Barbican, with a single early work by him, *Music with Changing Parts* (1970), making an unbroken 90-minute concert.

And at Bridgewater Hall, in Manchester, the BBC Philharmonic under Ben Gernon unveiled a specially commissioned Violin Concerto by Philip Grange (b1956), with Carolin Widmann a brilliant soloist: an otherwise classical programme that began with Stravinsky's symphonic poem *Song of the Nightingale* and ended with Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No 1* (*Winter Daydreams*). It was almost startling in this context to be sitting through such a mellifluous, wonderful symphony, as if the end of a difficult journey, but there had been stimulus along the way.

Rijnvos's three works, very distinct, attested an ingenious musical mind. *Riflesso sul tasto*, for three players (2007), and *Riflesso sulla spazio*, for seven players (2019), are respectively the first and latest of his series of constructive "reflections" on 20th-century classics. The first, 14 minutes long, is a commentary on Stockhausen's *Refrain* (1959) and deploys the same tintinnabulatory trio of vibraphone/glockenspiel, celesta and piano to felicitous, vigorous effect. The second was a 40-minute, darker, rather minimalist study on Schoenberg's *Op 29 Suite* for clarinets, strings and piano — an unusual septet scoring, now endowed with a completely new character.



Ben Gernon led the BBC Philharmonic at Bridgewater Hall
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In between was a still more minimalist reflection, not part of the so-titled series, called *Das Wohlpräparierte Klavier* (2018): an 18-minute accompaniment, for five players, to Adam Barker-Mill's video of the ensemble's pianist-founder, John Snijders, laboriously "preparing" a piano with nuts and bolts for a performance of John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*.

We were in truly experimental territory here, the music consisting somewhat nebulously of tones and overtones drawn from the letter-pitches of Cage's name. It served as a preparation, too, for the strange blend of the cerebral and the undifferentiated that is Glass's *Music with Changing Parts*, the titular changes notwithstanding.

Well, that work does have its gear changes, or "module" changes, when we shift harmonic ground with a positive lurch, but it is the relentlessly repeated, amplified figuration, with an intricacy at first iridescent, but steadily becoming deafening and browbeating, that marks out the work.

Glass himself couldn't be present for this revisiting of his pioneering, if slightly neglected, score, but his note explained how he has recast it to embrace vocal and brass choirs; and, with the participation of the Tiffin Chorus and the London Contemporary Orchestra, and the two conductors, Michael Riesman and Valérie Sainte-Agathe, standing side by side, the latter as flamboyant as the former was discreet, the performance ensured a good, sensory and ultimately mind-numbing time for all.

To encounter Grange's concerto three days later was quite gloriously ear-cleansing. For him, the idea of discourse is palpably an idea of lucidity and bar-to-bar cogency. He eschews generalised effects, though at the same time this score realises, as indicated in his note, Elias Canetti-ish preoccupations with the individual and the crowd, and what goes on for good or ill between them.

In the opening part of his single-span (25-minute) concerto, the soloist is first among equals, a reticent leader of orchestral forces rather than a voice speaking out. The mass movements exemplified by the tutti are variously inspired, the note revealed, by bees, starlings, locusts and bats, but it would be hard or impossible to pinpoint the creatures if one hadn't been told. In a slow, arresting central section, the soloist is more prominent, but reabsorbed by fast, "statistical" — and always interesting — music thereafter. A strikingly positioned quasi-cadenza near the end suggests the soloist is winning out, but Grange's allocation to her of the last and unaccompanied word — a still small voice — was as moving as it was unexpected. It seemed the lone triumph of unbiddable discourse.