

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 19 February 2025
7.30pm

Maki Namekawa piano

Philip Glass (b.1937)

Etude No. 3

Etude No. 7

Etude No. 11

Etude No. 18

Etude No. 20

Piano Sonata *UK première*

Interval

Distant Figure *UK première*

From *Mishima* arranged by Michael Riesman
UK première

*Opening • November 25: Morning •
Award Montage • Runaway Horses*



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By his own account, **Philip Glass** did not start piano lessons until he was 15 - too late for him to acquire a virtuoso technique. He was an able enough pianist to take a place in his own ensemble in his 30s, but when, in his mid-50s, he felt the need to go out as a soloist, he had to brush up his skills. This he did in an unusual way, by composing études for himself. On hearing about this, his longstanding friend and musical associate Dennis Russell Davies immediately put forward a commission for the first six works. Ten were completed by 1994, and Glass recorded the collection in 2003, noting at the time that these ten represented a first book, with a second collection, also of ten, to follow.

Etude No. 3 is a study, in sustained energy, and in consistency of approach for each of three kinds of material: heavily syncopated and agitated at first; leaner, the hands two octaves apart; and rolling in a characteristic harmonic curve. Any of these may be followed by any of the others, in pairings that proceed through the five-minute piece with changes all the time. Exhaustion is written into the ending.

More than twice as long, Etude No. 7 is based on a single image, presented in progressively differing forms, each coming round a second time. The image is of nine bars (four plus four plus one); then it is of eight. Then the whole process, of 16 iterations in total, begins to repeat. At some point it will have to grind to a halt.

By the time he was working on his second book, which he finished in 2012, Glass was no longer going on the road and was free to compose beyond the limitations of his own hands - productive as those limitations had proved. Upping the ante in terms of technique went along with increasing the music's variety and formal complexity. Now that two pieces from the first book have introduced us to the Glass piano in its prime state, three of the later études can take us further, to where circles within circles have morphed into more intricately interwoven designs.

Some basic features, though, are retained: the duplication of small segments by immediate repetition; the similarity of segments, through whatever transformations; and the setting in motion of some great machinery of harmony and rhythm that eventually runs down. The first piece from the second book, Etude No. 11, exemplifies all this, with some startling crashes of one kind of movement into another, through its duration of around seven minutes.

Similar in length, Etude No. 18 begins with the left hand circling through arpeggios in the manner of many pieces from the classical piano repertory but soon finds its way into regular Glass territory, where the references are rather to bar pianists and people surging through hymns, perhaps in an empty church. There is a wholesale repeat before the end.

Etude No. 20 opens with a surprise: arpeggios rise and fall in empty space, without the regular oscillations so

characteristic of this composer. The oscillations duly come, and the repeats, and the similarly unfolding melodies and motifs, which at this slow tempo and unassertive volume might suggest ripples blown by the wind on a calm lake. Those introductory bars come back to signal the end is near.

Close to Glass and his music for two decades, Maki Namekawa made the first complete recording of the études and is the dedicatee of his Piano Sonata of 2019. She and the composer worked together intensively before the sonata's première, concerned with 'discovering what the piece itself is', as Glass put it. 'Musical material is bouncing in between movements and we had to find what needs to happen to put the piece together. What seems like a bunch of funny things at first become parts that pull the piece together.'

The work is traditional in its length (close on 30 minutes) and its three-movement form, fast-slow-fast, but of course not in its contents and organisation. As for these, the first movement thoroughly displays the heterogeneity of which Glass speaks. It begins as if a harmonised song strain is being twisted and turned against a running bass, then jumps to something else. So it continues, except that we soon become aware how the song, and its chords, and its bass are all over the place—including the mysterious place where they end up.

The slow movement begins by finding a new song. After the hands have dipped together into the bass, a middle section begins with a short repeat of the song and new fluctuating material. The song returns remade, hesitant, then flowing as it was.

Arpeggios in semiquavers bring brilliance to much of the finale, which also knows joy and comedy.

Distant Figure, which dates from 2017, has the alternative title of 'Passacaglia', and that is what it is: a sequence of variations on a repeating 12-bar bass. Its mood of stillness, to be troubled by rushes of excitement, is set by a short introduction, and it is with this music, rotating, that the piece comes to rest.

Before Glass began writing so much piano music, pianists were well supplied by his right-hand man Michael Riesman with arrangements drawn from film scores. Namekawa ends her programme with four movements from the score for Paul Schrader's *Mishima* (1984), in which scenes from the writer's last day are interleaved with others from his novels. The two-minute 'Opening' prefaces a march for his final morning, when, backed by his followers, he delivered a speech calling for a return to autocracy and tradition. 'Award Montage' is another Glassian sea of tranquillity with an undertow. 'Runaway Horses', composed for a scene from the novel of the same name, provides an exhilarating conclusion.

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