

First Light Muhly & Glass
Pekka Kuusisto Norwegian
Chamber Orchestra





FIRST LIGHT

Nico Muhly (b. 1981)

**Shrink (Concerto for Violin and Strings)
(world premiere recording)**

1	I. Ninths	8. 08
2	II. Sixths	8. 12
3	III. Turns	6. 05

Philip Glass (b. 1937)

4	The Orchard (from The Screens) (Pekka Kuusisto , violin, Nico Muhly , piano)	7. 27
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String Quartet No. 3, "Mishima"
(arr. for string orchestra by Pekka Kuusisto)

5	I. 1957: Award Montage	4. 37
6	II. November 25: Ichigaya	1. 10
7	III. Grandmother and Kimitake	4. 06
8	IV. 1962: Body Building	1. 46
9	V. Blood Oath	3. 06
10	VI. Mishima - Closing	3. 07

Total playing time: 47. 51

Pekka Kuusisto, violin and director

Nico Muhly, piano

Norwegian Chamber Orchestra

Violin I

Sara Övinge (leader)
Johanne Haugland
Bjarne Magnus Jensen
Madelene Berg
Hanna Kallestad

Violin II

Liv Hilde Klokk-Bryhn
Atle Sponberg
Sara Chen
Nhi Phuong Do

Viola

Ida Klokk-Bryhn
Hanne Skjelbred
Aine Suzuki
Marthe Husum

Cello

Audun Sandvik
Torun Stavseng
Inga Byrkjeland

Double bass

Katrine Øigaard Sonstad



My consort with Nico Muhly began around 2010, with his substantial work for tenor, violin and strings titled *Impossible Things*. I had previously become aware of his reputation as a creator with an extraordinary touch, and was really quite excited to work with him. The experience was inspiring, moving and joyous, and we've enjoyed a steady flow of adventures since. The arrival of *Shrink* in late 2019 was the culmination of this decade of music and mischief.

Philip Glass had been present in our interactions since the beginning. He and Nico go way back as colleagues, whereas I've been merely an admirer and occasional resident of Philip's music. My musical education did not include works by American composers, and while I've since made my own explorations, Nico has in many ways functioned as my guide to New World music, past and present.

Against this background, coupling *Shrink* with a new orchestration of Philip Glass' *Mishima* quartet seems appropriate. *Mishima*, in my opinion, hosts some of the finest sets of elements and proportions Philip has developed. Its developments still strike me as both surprising and reassuring, and match my fondness for the Glass language at every turn. I've thought about translating it for string orchestra for some years now, and I'm hopeful this version of the work will join its slimmer older brother in the repertoire.

Shrink, Nico's ferocious concerto for violin and strings, will remain an important part of my life for as long as I can stretch my fingers to its demands. Discovering and learning it during the final months of 2019 was a period of high excitement, as my hopes of what it might contain were all fulfilled. I'd like to thank and congratulate Nico for writing a concerto that not only is a creative



Nico Muhly & Pekka Kuusisto

peak for him, but also manages to present both an embrace and a challenge for the players.

The pandemic-era, long distance recording of Philip Glass' *The Orchard* is an expression of gratitude to Philip on behalf of myself and Nico, and to the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra for their stellar work with us. They took complete ownership of *Shrink* at its European premiere in early March 2020, just one night before the pandemic shut Oslo down. Being able to record with them in October of the same year was a ray of light during a most agonizing autumn.

I'm beyond happy to begin my recording relationship with the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra with this release.

- Pekka Kuusisto

Restless and Curious Ears

Philip Glass is probably the most influential composer alive, an artist whose boundary crossing stretches far beyond the aesthetic. He stands with one foot in the world of commercial music and its hunger for the new, and one in the domain of institutional orchestral, operatic and chamber music that thrives on tradition. He works in dance, film and installation while writing symphonies, operas and string quartets. He is influenced as much by the music of the European baroque as by Indian ragas and American rock. In the most telling sign of its significance, his signature sound has been imitated more than any other from a classical composer of the postwar period.

Glass was raised in Baltimore, the son of a record store proprietor. After time at the Juilliard School in New York, he found his way to studying in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, who instructed a raft of great twentieth-century musicians including

Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, Astor Piazzolla and Quincy Jones. In Paris, Glass reacted strongly against the prevailing avant-garde, as personified by Pierre Boulez and his concert society *Le Domaine Musical*. Glass's music went in the opposite direction. Melody, consonance, and the looping repetition of simple harmonic progressions would underpin his work from the 1960s and has done ever since.

Central to Glass's idea of the art of music is the postmodernist idea that the essence of a piece is found in the listener's reaction to it. Glass invited a different sort of listening from his audience by keeping rhythm, harmony, volume and instrumentation relatively consistent. His music is often based on repetition and the clear exploration of patterns, even if that exploration has complex results. Those qualities made him a central figure of the so-called 'Minimalist' movement, which grew in America in the latter half of the twentieth century. Glass prefers not to

describe himself as a minimalist, insisting he is 'a theatre composer' even when his music is not theatrical by definition. Rock and pop music had a significant influence on the clear shapes, structures and harmonic progressions of Glass's works. But the true revelation came when he started to work with the sitar player Ravi Shankar, transcribing Indian music into western notation. Glass saw that Indian musical structures were built using an additive process: single beats would be linked together to create long rhythmic cycles free from the bar lines that tether western music's rhythmic cycles. The technique became one of the backbones of the Glass sound.

For all its strictness and clarity, Glass music has proved itself amorphous when it comes to context. His work in opera, film, symphony and string quartet have frequently spilled over into one another. One of his most reprised film scores is that for *Koyaanisqatsi*, an experimental picture



directed by Godfrey Reggio that combines footage of urban and rural landscapes to suggest what Reggio has described as ‘life out of balance.’

Shortly after Glass scored the film with such memorable and visually umbilical music, he was approached by Paul Schrader. The director asked Glass to consider scoring an upcoming picture concerning the life and works of the Japanese novelist and self-styled samurai Yukio Mishima. In addition to his vivid and scented writings, Mishima formed his own dissident militia whose failed 1970 coup attempt led to his own ‘seppuku’ (ritual suicide by disemboweling). In November 1983, Glass was performing with his own ensemble in Tokyo while Schrader was shooting the film in the same city. ‘I was able to be on location several times,’ recalls Glass in his autobiography *Words Without Music*. He also met with the production designer Eiko Ishioko, whose visual imagery for the project struck Glass with its beauty.

Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters would become the first studio film Glass scored and was completed in 1985. As outlined by Glass, the music was not intended as mere decoration but designed to underpin and even amplify the structure of the film, in much the same way the ‘unified’ composition of sound and image would define the film’s expression. That structure was laid out clearly by Schrader, in three threads. One plots the last day in Mishima’s life while a second depicts his early life and journey to creativity. A third dramatizes elements of the writer’s novels, suggesting a synergy with the real-life events of the present.

Glass rendered the fictional aspects of the film via sumptuous, lyrical symphony orchestra but chose to score the biographical elements of Mishima’s life — shot in black and white by Schrader — for a more introspective string quartet. At the film’s climax, the states of autobiography and fiction mingle. ‘Mishima receives a



profound revelation about his work and his life,' writes Glass; 'the string quartet music now takes on the orchestral colours of the music associated with the novels, and leads him to the confrontation that is about to take place at the army base [the coup]. His life and the stories he has told have merged and will culminate in his seppuku.'

All along, Glass felt the string quartet sections of the piece might form a stand-alone work, which duly became his String Quartet No 3. The music corresponds to the biographical events depicted in the film, but is entirely non-narrative – detached images of Mishima's character and resolve more than depictions of events. The first movement consists of the minor key progressions and alternations of duple/triple time typical of the composer. The brief second movement occupies the same tonal space but at a lower energy level. The third movement hints at something more expressionistic, with unusually ambiguous

harmonies progressing from the exhortations that open. The fourth movement, another brief slow movement, originally accompanied footage of Mishima training with weights; perhaps this is the nearest the music comes to narrative, with its disciplined and almost ritualistic four-beat gait and its cumulative strength. The pivotal fifth movement builds in intensity but ends unresolved, with the sixth forming an epilogue. All six movements are heard here in Pekka Kuusisto's arrangement for string orchestra.

In the middle of the 2000s, Philip Glass employed a young assistant who would go on to be a central voice in post-Minimalist American music. Nico Muhly was born in Vermont to an artistic family, with a painter mother and a documentary maker father. He sang in the choir of Grace Episcopal Church in Providence, studied English at Columbia University and pursued postgraduate studies at the Juilliard

School, where his teachers were John Corigliano and Christopher Rouse. As an assistant to Glass, Muhly helped arrange instrumental parts to the composer's music for the film *The Hours*.

Muhly's music has sprawled as widely across genres as that of his one-time mentor, perhaps even more so. He has written sacred choral music, unclassified works with commercial nous and collaborated with pop icons including Björk. In between, he has written music for dance, film and the concert stage and worked extensively as an arranger. Glass himself has referred to his one-time assistant's 'curious ear' and 'restless listening.'

Muhly's musical toolbox, however, is far bigger than Glass's. In his works, the influence of American minimalism blends with that of the English choral tradition, a French emphasis on beauty of colour and texture and a sense of the long breathed and ethereal that can occasionally sound

like a refraction of György Ligeti. The 'ear' referred to by Glass extends as much to rhythm, too – an advancing of Minimalism's ingratiating loops and gentle ragging to take in full asymmetry and a rhythmic counterpoint that can generate deep mysteriousness as well as front-footed verve. Muhly has spoken of the power of music from the English renaissance and its ability to 'precipitate an unexpected effect anywhere from grief to ecstasy'. A good amount of his music does the same.

Shrink, a concerto for violin and string orchestra, was commissioned by an international consortium of chamber orchestras including the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, and written in 2019 with the Finnish violinist Pekka Kuusisto in mind and as dedicatee. Kuusisto, Artistic Director of the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra from 2021, gave the world premiere of the piece with the ACO Collective in Melbourne in December 2019.



The concerto literally ‘shrinks’ as it proceeds, each of its three movements concerned with intervals of decreasing size and bound by an apparently tighter realm of expression. ‘The overall structure suggests an intensifying focus on these small building-blocks, a process which is reflected in the speed of each movement,’ writes Muhly in his own programme note.

The first movement ‘obsesses’ over the interval of a ninth, a gap of just over an octave associated with homelessness and displacement, famously used to those ends in the aria ‘What harbour shelters peace?’ from Benjamin Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes*. Muhly’s solo violin is sometimes cut loose from the ensemble but seems always to want back in, its chopped-up fragments of something resembling a Romantic concerto’s cadenza longing for home, while block chords move like tectonic plates below the orchestra’s busy pizzicatos. The union that is eventually formed with a rush of kinetic motion becomes luminous and tender.



Muhly's second movement is concerned with the interval of the sixth. The composer describes it as 'slow and taut, with a looped sequence of chords whose character becomes increasingly thick and heavy.' But it starts out luminous and ethereal before windswept grace notes begin a process of rhythmic dissipation that emphasize the music's multiple planes of velocity. The anchor-like chords from the first movement return, trying to weigh the soloist's (and concertmaster's) free-spirited, impassioned patterning down, but hardly able to.

Muhly describes his last movement as 'fast, nervous, and scattered, with occasional giant unisons coming in and out of focus'. The basis is 'a tiny set of anxious intervals between unisons and fourths.' The soloist starts out moto-perpetuo against long-held notes from the orchestra that eventually dissolve into upward-curling glissandi. After a tiny cadenza, the soloist is back on the

same frenetic flight path that leads to an abrupt, skidding landing.

Four years after the premiere of *Mishima* in 1985, Jean Genet's play *The Screens* was staged at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, in a production by JoAnne Akalaitis. Glass had been asked to contribute music, and turned once more to Foday Musa Suso, the Gambian musician and composer with whom he had collaborated on Reggio's film *Powaqqatsi* in 1988. They wrote music for *The Screens* together and started to collaborate on an expanding musical portfolio of the same name. They would also tour and perform

it together, Glass at the piano and Suso playing a kora — a West African instrument of 21 strings. 'He did the African parts, I did the European parts, although he also played in my parts and I played in his,' recalls Glass in *Words Without Music*. The movement 'The Orchard' sits almost entirely in one key, the string instrument chanting at different registers over an anchoring piano. The performance included here was recorded at a distance — standard practice in 2020 — by Pekka Kuusisto and Nico Muhly on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

Andrew Mellor

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Shrink by Nico Muhly

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For "The Orchard", Nico Muhly was recorded by James Yost at Reservoir, NY, while Pekka Kuusisto was recorded by Miikka Huttunen at Sonic Pump, Helsinki.

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