

# 21ST CENTURY MUSIC

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NOVEMBER 2012

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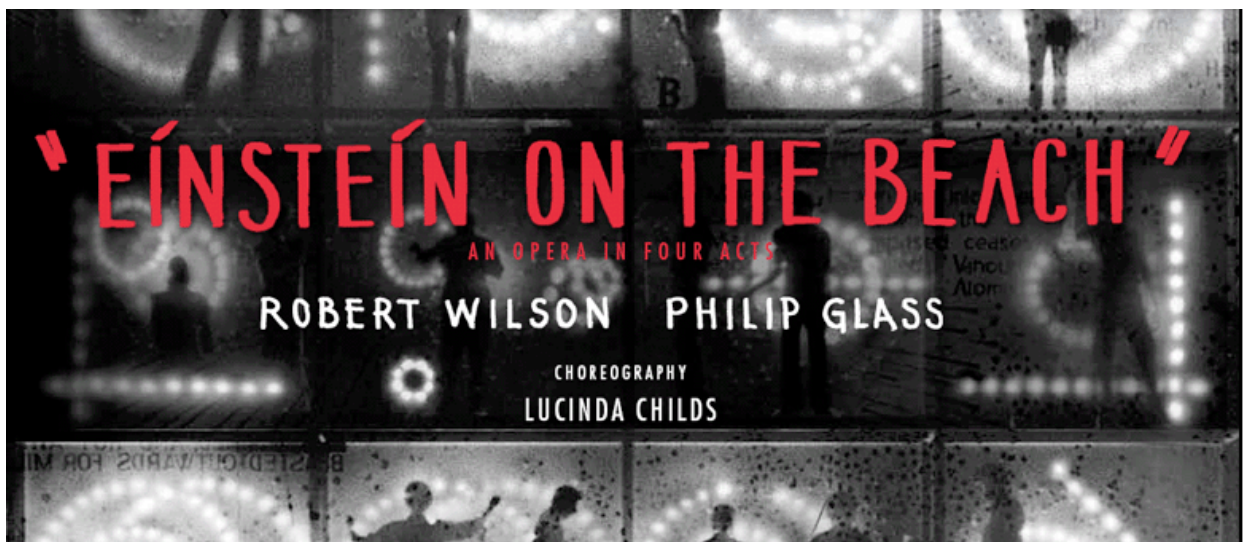
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# Einstein on the Beach at 37

MARK ALBURGER

In 1973, the Philip Glass Ensemble performed at the Festival d'Automne in Paris, run by Michel Guy, who would later commission Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, created with Robert Wilson.

Glass first saw Wilson's work that year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in one of the all-night performances of *The Life and Times of Josef Stalin*. In the spring of 1974, the two artists decided to meet every Thursday for lunch, whenever they were both in New York, at an almost deserted, small restaurant on Sullivan Street. Later they were occasionally joined by Christopher Knowles, a 14-year-old poet with some neurological impairment, who would eventually contribute texts to the project. Wilson, always interested in famous historical figures, proposed Charlie's Chaplin as the major character of a large joint project, or, alternately Adolf Hitler. Glass countered with Mahatma Gandhi, later the portrait subject of *Satyagraha*. It was Wilson's further suggestion of Albert Einstein that provided joint inspiration, as the scientist had been one of the composer's heroes in childhood.

The Wilson title in its original form was *Einstein on the Beach on Wall Street*, which Glass liked, and was never discussed again. Somewhere along the line the moniker was shortened, although the composer recalls not when or why.

While neither artist had read the 1956 novel or seen the film, the opera is connected to Nevil Shute's work in an indirect manner.

The libretto was jointly conceived and created by Glass and Wilson, with an overall dramatic shape cast well before the music was written.

Since Einstein had been an amateur violinist, it was Glass's notion that the character should be playing the violin somewhere between the musicians and the group of dancers and singers. Both artists began, and sometimes ended discussions with the question, "Is Einstein here?" Sometimes he was, sometimes he wasn't...

Further spoken texts by Samuel M. Johnson and Lucinda Childs were incorporated, with the sung libretto of numbers and fixed-do solfège syllables reflecting the composer's study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

*Einstein on the Beach* was written for the Philip Glass Ensemble (three woodwinds [doubling saxophones, flute, and bass clarinet], two electric organs, and one solo soprano voice), solo violin, vocal soloists (soprano [from PGE] and tenor), and chorus (16 voices SATB). The original Tomato recording featured small (vocal quartet) and large choruses (14 singers) -- a distinction not observed in the 1994 Elektra Nonesuch version. The "naive" (i.e. non-operatic, non-vibrato) tones of the vocalists were amplified, as were the fresh, raw, synthetic sounds of the instrumentalists.

Glass's work, intended to be the official Bicentennial gift of France to America ("The U.S. . . . sent us a flag. Can you believe it? A flag. And that was that"), was written from spring through fall of 1975, at a rapid Mozartean pace. The scenes were written in order, with the exception of the connective "Knee Plays", composed at the conclusion. Most of the music was composed between 1 and 4am in Glass's garage.

Despite the humble studio, Glass and Wilson both had impressive organizational networks, and rehearsals began five-days-a-week, increasing to six as the winter wore on. The three-hour practices allowed equal intervals for music, dance, and staging.

The four month period barely allowed for the memorization of the almost five-hour work, a duration not revealed to the singers until well into the rehearsal process, for fear of mutiny. Taking a cue from tablaist Alla Rakha, Glass began each practice at the beginning, reviewing previously learned material, the proceeding incrementally onward.

As in Glass's earlier minimalist works, additive and cyclic structures play central roles, to which are added cadential formulae developed in *Another Look at Harmony*.

The three main musical/visual references of TRAIN, TRIAL, and SPACESHIP are scattered about rationally among the four acts and five connecting KNEE PLAYS of the opera, each growing and changing. Two DANCES played symmetrically at the beginning of Act II and end of Act III serve as equidistant pillars, with further referential interconnection.

The four-hour forty-minute intermissionless work, beginning even before the arrival of the audience, is an episodic, non-narrative piece. Indeed, the composer asserted in 1987 that, "after more than fifty performances of Einstein, I have never seen the entire work straight through without interruption, though many people constantly assure me that they have, as it were, taken it as a 'whole.'"

After a year of preparation, *Einstein on the Beach* had its premiere at the Avignon Festival, France, on July 25, 1975, conducted by Michael Riesman, with violinist Bob Brown. A program note advised that the audience could leave and return at will.

*Einstein* caused a sensation in its first performances, and subsequent ones in Venice, Belgrade, Brussels, Paris, Hamburg, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam, before the first American performance at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York on November 21, 1976. Sellout audiences loathed or loved it, and some had sequential reactions. The Times assigned its theatre critics Clive Barnes and Mel Gusnow to cover the event.

Despite the success du scandale, Glass returned to driving a taxi, as he had during most of the decade thus far. Shortly after the Met premiere, a society woman got into his cab and, seeing his name and picture displayed (as required by New York law), announced, "Young man, do you realize you have the same name as a very famous composer?"

The artistic collaborators, who bankrolled *Einstein*, lost about \$100,000 on the production. Later Glass would be able to let other people do the producing, and get a composer's royalty.

*Einstein on the Beach* was revived in December 1984 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, with staging by Harvey Lichtenstein. As in the premiere, Lucinda Childs, Robert Wilson pupil Sheryl S. Sutton, and Samuel M. Johnson portrayed the primary characters. Video documentation, which appeared on public television subtitled as *The Changing Image of Opera*, provided a model for future interpretations, including Achim Freyer's Stuttgart State Opera production in 1988 (following the director's 1984 premiere of *Akhnaten*) in an abstract style, with new spoken texts from the early 20th century, at the Stuttgart State Opera. This version was also conducted by Michael Riesman. Freyer also went on to mount all three "portrait" operas (*Einstein*, *Satyagraha*, *Akhnaten*) on three consecutive nights in January of 1990.

A 1992 revival included the participation of Wilson, Glass and Childs at McCarter Theater, Princeton University, and subsequently went to Frankfurt, Melbourne, Barcelona, Madrid, Tokyo, Brooklyn

The team that had organized an abortive New York City Opera production in 2009 put together another effort to remount the work in 2011, and, after a month of rehearsals overseen by Glass, Wilson and Childs, the first performance in 20 years took place on January 20, 2012, in the Power Center, at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, with two additional performances directly following.

Kate Moran and Helga Davis appeared in the Childs and Sutton roles, and violinist Jennifer Koh played the role of Einstein in the preview and alternated with Antoine Silverman the performances.

The tour schedule followed as:

March 16

Opéra et Orchestre National de Montpellier Languedoc-Roussillon, Opera Berlioz Le Corum, Montpellier, France. Through March 18.

March 24

Teatro Valli, Reggio Emilia, Italy. Repeated March 25.

May 4

Barbican Theatre, London, United Kingdom. Through May 13.

June 8

Toronto Festival of Arts and Creativity, Sony Centre for the Performing Arts, Toronto, CA. Through June 10.

September 14

Brooklyn Academy of Music Opera House, Brooklyn, NY. Through September 23.

October 26

Cal Performances University of California, Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, CA. Through October 28

With upcoming performances including:

November 9

The National Institute of Fine Arts, Teatro del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, Mexico. Through November 11.

January 5, 2013

De Nederlandse Opera / The Amsterdam Music Theatre, Het Muziektheater. Amsterdam, Netherlands. Through January 12

March 8

Hong Kong Arts Festival, Hong Kong Cultural Centre Grand Theatre, Hong Kong, China. Through March 10

Two recordings have been issued. The first, *Einstein on the Beach*, as performed by the Philip Glass Ensemble, conducted by Michael Riesman, with Paul Zukovsky violin (Tomato, 1979), has become somewhat of a collector's item since its reissue by CBS Masterworks / Sony Classical. Due to the threat of a lawsuit, CBS was obliged to change Robert Palmer's original liner notes.

Lucinda Childs, Sheryl Sutton, Paul Mann, and Samuel M. Johnson perform the opera's texts, with Iris Hiskey taking the soprano solo role. This original recording was held to 160 minutes in order to fit onto four LP's, and utilizes "paired overdubbings," where alternate measures are recorded on alternated tracks and then mixed together for a continuous sound. Engineer Kurt Munkacsi and Glass first made use of this technique in *Northstar* (1977)

The second, *Einstein on the Beach*, performed by the Philip Glass Ensemble, conducted by Michael Riesman, with Gregory Fulkerson, violin, Elektra-Nonesuch (1993), is a radical departure from the first album's radical departure. Its duration is 190 minutes, thanks to compact disc technology. Michael Riesman conducted both recordings. Childs and Sutton repeated their roles, while Jasper McGruder replaced the late Mr. Johnson's role, and Jeremy Montemarano voiced "The Boy". Most of the participants in the Nonesuch recording had performed in *Einstein on the Beach* during its 1992 world tour.

A 77-minute "highlights" CD from the 1984 Brooklyn Academy of Music performances, accompanied by a DVD documentary, was released by Philip Glass's personal label Orange Mountain Music in early September 2012, and a complete recording, 217 minutes long, was released as a download from the iTunes Store.





# Calendar

November 9

Jerry Kuderna in Berkeley, The Bay Area, and Beyond. Ross Bauer's Hither and Yon (from Birthday Bagatelles), Martin Boykan's A Little Star Looks Down On Me, Robert Helps's Three Etudes for the Left Hand, Roger Sessions's Five Pieces for Piano, Herb Bielawa's Now, Mark Alburger's Shuffle, Allan Crossman's Rondo a la Pollock, Ann Callaway's Etheria, Alden Jenks's The Tears of Gilles de Riaz, and Peter Josheff's In the Meadow. Old First Church, San Francisco, CA.

November 10

Student-Alumni Composer Recital, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.





# Chronicle

September 4

Cage100. The Stone, New York, NY. "For a composer who was a true rebel, a pioneering American maverick, John Cage was frequently celebrated in programs and festivals at the world's most prestigious concert halls. The festival, organized as part of a longer series by the composer Miguel Frasconi, opened . . . with a performance of . . . Cheap Imitation, a piece written in 1969 for solo piano, but played here in a new arrangement by Mr. Frasconi for eight toy pianos. . . . With its just-the-basics ambience, the Stone was an ideal place to hear the Noisy Toy Piano Orchestra, an ensemble that includes heroes of New York's contemporary-music scene like Stephen Gosling and Kathleen Supové, play the gently tinkling sounds of this 40-minute Cage piece" [By Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times, 9/6/12].

September 5

100th birthday of John Cage.

New York Chamber Music Festival: John Cage at 1001. Symphony Space, New York, NY. "The . . . concert began with Dawn at Stony Point, New York, a sound recording from 1974 . . . [which] consists of quiet sounds from cars whistling by in the distance, ambient street noise, crickets and chirping birds. 'Everything we do is music,' Cage often said, a central tenet of his philosophy. . . . Four percussionists from the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra (Charles Barbour, Robert Knopper, Duncan Patton and Gregory Zuber) sauntered one at a time onto the stage and took a seat on two couches. . . . Then they segued smoothly into Cage's Living Room Music. This 1940 piece has intricately notated, quite sophisticated rhythmic patterns, played here by the percussionists tapping small sticks on cups, glasses, household objects, magazines, cardboard, whatever. In one section, Story, the players spoke a line from Gertrude Stein ('Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around'), breaking it into rhythmic fragments, repeated words and syllables ('ti ti ti ti'), essentially using Stein as a prototype of rap. The performance was exhilarating and sweet. And the living-room setting was perfect. There was another arresting percussion piece, Third Construction from 1941. And for a performance of Branches (1976), the four Met players were joined by several more percussionists, stationed throughout the hall, including the balconies, to create a 'surround sound' of delicate, restless, rippling percussion music. The program ended with a rare performance of The City Wears a Slouch Hat, a 30-minute radio play from 1942 with a text by Kenneth Patchen, a patchwork of snippets and stories from urban life. The play describes people wandering rainy city streets, ducking under awnings, being held up by robbers and telling tragic personal tales (that may be made up) to strangers. Morris Robinson performed a role called the Voice; Karen Beardsley Peters was Woman; Jon Burklund was Man, MC, Second and Third Voices. The text is full of aural references to street noise, telephones, ocean waves, falling rain and more.

Cage backs the text with a varied and rhapsodic score of sound effects, played here by six percussionists. Of special interest was a short work from Cage's early 20's, when he was exploring his own kind of music for 12 tones: the Sonata for Two Voices (1933), played by the violinist Cornelius Dufallo and the cellist Wendy Sutter. This skittish piece is the work of a young composer grappling with the modernist currents of his time. Yet even writing in this more formal language, Cage's quirky mind and rhythmic inventiveness come through. The piece suggests another path he might have taken. Thankfully, he found his own way" [Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times, 9/6/12].

September 6

Twelve in 12. Trinity Wall Street, New York, NY. "The season opened . . . with the first in a series of four midday concerts . . . celebrating the Pulitzer Prize-winning composers of the last dozen years. . . . The bookends . . . were half-hour pieces: Steven Stucky's Sonate en Forme de Préludes, for oboe, French horn and harpsichord, and Paul Moravec's Tempest Fantasy, for violin, cello, clarinet and piano. The Stucky, despite the seeming formality of its title, reads more like an extended fantasy, and its seven movements are more fancifully titled: Night Music, Jugglers, Fireworks, and the like. The Moravec, on the other hand, with movement titles like Ariel, Prospero, and Fantasia, is more classically scaled and plotted in its five-movement structure. Neither is particularly advanced in idiom. In Mr. Stucky's sonata the harpsichord (played by Eric Dudley) lays the groundwork, from the tentative, softly rising figures of the opening to the churning Glassian arpeggios of the fireworks finale. The oboe (Christa Robinson) layers on plaintive melodies, with the horn (Kate Sheeran) sounding calls around them. The works in the Trinity series are not the ones that took the prizes, the lone exception being Mr. Moravec's Tempest Fantasy, which won in 2004. This is indeed a well-wrought creation, heavily influenced by Gershwin in its jazz-leaning harmonies and its plain-spoken lyricism but with a voice of its own. Geoffrey Burleson thrived on a piano part that becomes at times almost concertolike. The third composer, Zhou Long, was represented by Dhyana, a piece half the length of those two but in some ways more eloquent. The title denotes a Buddhist concept, 'cultivation of thought,' and Mr. Long takes his scoring (as many have) from that of Schoenberg's epochal Pierrot Lunaire . . . . With those instruments Mr. Long often emulates the qualities of Chinese instruments in a colorful work whose pointillistic, mostly nonlinear textures rivet the attention through understatement. Dialoghi, also by Mr. Stucky, is a short piece for solo cello written for Elinor Frey, who spoke about it and played it. Based on conversations between Mr. Stucky and Ms. Frey, it spots variations on a six-note motif derived from the name Elinor through a texture of virtuosic filigree.

Before the concert *Sleep Talking*, from Ornette Coleman's album *Sound Grammar*, which won the Pulitzer in 2007, was piped in -- a welcome introduction, with its riffs on Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which will be a running theme of the cultural season with the approach of the 100th anniversary of its premiere in May 1913" [James R. Oestreich, *The New York Times*, 9/6/12].

#### September 7

Long Beach Opera presents the U.S. premiere of Gavin Bryars's *The Paper Nautilus*. Long Beach, CA. "By chance, Bryars happens to be a British minimalist composer who performed a complete [Erik Satie] *Vexations* in London in 1970 with one other pianist, and he credits that with influencing what became his own enthrallingly repetitive, meditative musical style" [Mark Swed, *Los Angeles Times*, 9/11/12].

Jacaranda presents Cage 100: Erik Satie's *Vexations*. Miles Memorial Playhouse, Santa Monica, CA. c. 24 hours through September 8. "When it comes to Erik Satie's *Vexations*, I have thus far been a grazer. On the several opportunities I have had to experience a performance of the work, which entails repeating the same page of mystically unstable music 840 times, a 24-hour proposition give or take a couple of hours depending upon tempo choices, I have always (perhaps conveniently) had obligations keeping me from a full performance of it. That was the case again for a performance . . . that began [September 7] at 7 and concluded [the next day at] 6:56 p.m. Thirty-two pianists were employed, each occupying the piano bench for about 45 minutes. . . . According to John Cage, who organized the first notable performance of the work in New York in 1963, 70 years after Satie wrote it in Paris, the world is different before and after a performance of *Vexations*. It teaches you, Cage discovered, the difference between a concept and an experience. A somewhat dazed [director Patrick] Scott confirmed that notion when I asked him about it a few minutes after the final chord sounded, and others in the *Vexations* endurance club have said as much. Performances are maybe more common than you would imagine. An hour before the Santa Monica one ended, another had begun in Berkeley. We guard our time jealously, but Cage organized the *Vexations* marathon (12 pianists -- one was John Cale from the Velvet Underground -- played in that early performance and the *New York Times* sent a tag team of critics, one of whom was drafted to perform) with the alarming proposition that we should not. 'Why are we so stingy,' he asked, 'about time? What, for heaven's sake, is so precious about a half hour, an hour, an hour and a half?' Giving up ownership of time, Cage asserted, opens us to new experience. Satie gives little indication of how *Vexations* should be played, and the pianists I heard during my three visits were varied. Mark Menzies on [the] morning [of September 8] was very slow and uninflected. Mark Alan Hilt [later in the day] gave a different personality to each repetition, making a drama of the work. But somehow that made little difference. *Vexations* has the capacity to create the sensation of well-being, the awareness of continuity of time as a physical flowing substance.

#### September 8

Cage 100: John Cage's *The Perilous Night* and the first live public performance of *The Ten Thousand Things*. Santa Monica Bay Woman's Club, Santa Monica, CA. "[This venue is] where the composer had given his first concert in the early '30s. After a talk by Eric Smigel about the process through which Cage began the removal of his ego from his music, Aron Kallay performed *The Perilous Night* for prepared piano, a 1944 work of roiling expression written during the dark war years and when Cage's marriage was coming unraveled. . . . *The Ten Thousand Things* [consists of] five solo pieces with impossible time lengths as titles (such as 26'1.1449" for a string player) are written in graphic notation meant to keep performers open to the possibility of new discoveries. Cage allows for performing all simultaneously, which apparently had never been done before live (they've been recorded), although a short one 59½" for a string player) fell through the cracks. The performers -- pianists Vicki Ray and Kallay, bassist Tom Peters, percussionist William Winant and reciter John Schneider were exquisite. Every sound sounded considered, alive, worthy of our wonder.

#### September 9

Cage 100. John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*. Annenberg Community Beach House, Santa Monica, CA. Adam Tendler presented Cage's hour-long [masterpiece] for prepared piano . . . . He wrote the *Sonatas and Interludes* in the late '40s at the time he discovered a manuscript of the neglected *Vexations* and began in this luminous score the process of stripping predetermined expression from his music in the search for tranquillity. An exuberantly expressive pianist, Tendler vividly displayed his enthusiasm for every phrase by attempting to stop and start time at will" [Mark Swed, *Los Angeles Times*, 9/11/12].

#### September 10

Composer-harpist Zeena Parkins's *Spellbeamed: Fixexploded; Fixabolished*, with the JACK Quartet and members of the Ne(x)works Ensemble. Roulette, New York, NY. "Parkins said that she had long had the recurring image of her harp as a patient. So . . . [she] treated the instrument as exactly that. A harp lay on its side on a table. Wearing surgical gloves and acting, the program said, as the 'guide,' Ms. Parkins handed various implements -- from a bundle of horsehair to a glass shard -- to Shayna Dunkelman, the 'researcher,' who used them on the harp, eliciting a variety of sounds alternately harsh, whispery and liquid. All the while the veteran vocalist Joan La Barbara read from *Unpacking My Library*, Walter Benjamin's classic essay about collecting books, her voice distorted and deepened to the point of unintelligibility. Even after this opening sequence ended, Benjamin remained the spirit overlooking *Spellbeamed*, which shared a central concern of his work: the challenges and possibilities of translation.

As Ms. Parkins said during the question-and-answer session, if traditional notated music arises from assigning meaning to 'dots on five lines,' why not see if, and how, it could arise from other things? So she asked the players to respond to objects and projected images, to transcribe spoken descriptions of objects and then, somehow, perform those written texts as a score. Spellbeamed, though intricately planned, felt refreshingly spontaneous, with exciting tension between the notated passages and the improvised ones (To the credit of the conductor, Ted Hearne, it flowed smoothly between the two). As disarmingly everyday images -- an old box of paper clips, a shoe, a bus -- passed by on a screen, Ms. La Barbara responded with her classic sounds: keens, creaks and warbles. She was joined by Ms. Parkins and Shelley Burgon on two harps and Christopher McIntyre on trombone in almost mystical growls. While the opening of Spellbeamed made it very literal, treating the harp as an object of experimentation is nothing new for Ms. Parkins, part of a generation of performers who exposed new horizons for the instrument far beyond its genteel reputation. Bringing in amplification and electronic effects, she made the harp shriek, hiss and dissolve in reverb. The sound world of the new work was attractive but less revolutionary: a noirish mix of sometimes Wagnerian sweep (with beef provided by Mr. McIntyre's trombone) and dissonant spikiness, with memorable moments of nearly silent murmurs in the strings. Its conceptual underpinnings were the more intriguing aspect, an apt tribute, so close to the 100th anniversary of John Cage's birth, to his similar broadenings of what a score can mean" [Zachary Woolfe, *The New York Times*, 9/12/12].

September 11

Erik Jekabson String-tet in *Anti-Mass. Freight and Salvage*, Berkeley, CA.

Los Angeles Philharmonic in George Gershwin's *Cuban Overture*, Aaron Copland's *Lincoln Portrait* and *Billy the Kid Suite*, music from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (arranged by David Newman). Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles, CA. "Billy the Kid provided surprising context to the evening. Copland celebrates the American spirit but also uses the Wild West as a lens through which to examine the complexities of patriotism. He makes the celebration of Billy's killing both entertaining and unsettling. Copland reveals how Billy and Lincoln, one operating outside of the law and one trying to make law, embodied something essentially American. They both died at the hands of those who disapproved of what they stood for" [Mark Swed, *The New York Times*, 9/12/12].

American Contemporary Music Ensemble in Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, *Triple Quartet*, and *WTC 9/11* (2010). Le Poisson Rouge, New York, NY. "In it, as in an earlier watershed string quartet, *Different Trains* (1988), Mr. Reich bases his melodies on recorded voices: here, those of Norad air traffic controllers and New York firefighters caught during the attacks; of friends and family members recalling being near the World Trade Center that morning; and of volunteers who sat with the remains, observing the Jewish ritual of *shmira*.

The piece is intensely personal: Mr. Reich had an apartment just blocks from ground zero. Out of town on the morning of the attacks, he was in contact with his son's family in the apartment. The confusion, agony and unresolved questions in the piece bear witness in startling, uncomfortable ways. For some listeners, including me, the piece is nearly unbearable. . . . [A] couple seated near me exited abruptly midway through the work, never to return. Mr. Reich composed *WTC 9/11*, like *Different Trains* and his *Triple Quartet* (1998), for the Kronos Quartet, which has performed the works together in a single concert. ACME played all three pieces in chronological sequence for its concert, which was broadcast live on the Internet by NPR Classical and the Web-radio station Q2. NPR has posted a recording of the concert. The approach proved illuminating, not least for providing a view of *WTC 9/11* not predicated exclusively on horror and anguish. Hearing the piece after its precursors, you could discern how it refined and extended the speech-melody technique Mr. Reich first used in *Different Trains*, and how its grating dissonances and keening melodies resembled those of Mr. Reich's abstract *Triple Quartet*. At the work's end a portentous silence filled the room for long moments before rapt applause ensued. Four ACME members -- Caroline Shaw and Ben Russell, violinists; Nadia Sirota, violist; Clarice Jensen, cellist -- opened the concert with a superb account of *Different Trains*. In the *Triple Quartet* and *WTC 9/11* the same four players remained the center of attention as others played lines usually provided by a recorded accompaniment. Mostly the additional players maintained supporting roles, thickening harmonies and providing propulsive rhythms, as the primary quartet handled melodies. But here too were moments of fresh perspective, as when Anna Elashvili, a violinist, elegantly echoed lines played by Ms. Shaw during the middle movement of the *Triple Quartet*. The conductor Donato Cabrera coordinated ensemble performances efficiently, and Richie Clarke, a sound engineer, maintained lucid balances throughout" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 9/12/12].

September 14

Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*. Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, NY. "Some works of art become mythical, either because they are so important or because few people actually know them. *Einstein on the Beach*, the . . . intermissionless four-and-a-half-hour opera by Robert Wilson and Philip Glass, qualifies on both counts. . . . Questions abound: Will a classic from the past, especially one full of timebound pop-culture references, look dated today? Will its eccentricities of pacing and form seem more or less convincing than they once were? And for those of us who loved the work in its previous incarnations, to what extent will these recast Brooklyn performances test the strength of our nostalgia? Even the creators and some of the performers have been newly encountering the work since preparations for the current tour began late last year. Mr. Glass and the choreographer Lucinda Childs, another key collaborator, had never actually seen the piece before, since both previously performed in it. *Einstein on the Beach* represents the apex of the early work of Mr. Glass and Mr. Wilson, and it played a crucial role in their careers.

Mr. Glass has become perhaps the most prolific and popular of all contemporary composers, with a particular passion for opera; the success of *Einstein* led European impresarios to commission him to write operas as the term is more conventionally understood, starting with *Satyagraha* in the Netherlands in 1979. Mr. Wilson was already beginning to transcend SoHo amateurism. Einstein sealed his transition into a world-wandering director and designer who would mix riveting original works with highly stylized, controversial -- but, in many quarters, much admired -- stagings of classic operas and plays (On the side Mr. Wilson acts, designs furniture, makes remarkable video art, collects artifacts from all over the world and oversees his ever more ambitious Watermill Center on Long Island). Beyond the careers of its creators, Einstein was perhaps the proudest product of the extraordinary Lower Manhattan performing-arts scene in the 1970s. Its dreamy, painterly beauty; its mystical longueurs; its hypnotic music; its allusions to the brilliance and danger of Einstein's work without ever quite stooping to the mere telling of a story: all spoke to a generation that still exerts a powerful hold on American, and global, vanguard arts. Einstein was called an opera because Mr. Wilson liked to call all his big pieces (*The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, *Deafman Glance*, and others) operas. It was scored not for an orchestra but for the Philip Glass Ensemble [and] chorus . . . [A] passel of SoHo artist-denizens both sang and danced, the singers dancing roughly and the dancers singing roughly. . . . [Lucinda] Childs and Sheryl Sutton and a few others told elliptical stories and acted out slow-motion tableaux (Patty Hearst holding her rifle, the young Einstein and his wife on a train's caboose platform). That it didn't mean anything, or so it seemed, infuriated some people (the critic John Simon dismissed Mr. Wilson's previous work as a gay pothead bad joke) and thrilled others. At a news conference in Avignon, France, where Einstein was first performed, Mr. Wilson answered questions with bird squawks. Einstein was commissioned by Michel Guy and the Avignon Festival and had its first five performances there. It went on a wildly admired six-city European tour and washed ashore in America on November 22 and 29 at a sold-out Metropolitan Opera House. This was hardly because the Met was foresighted enough to present it. It merely deigned to rent the house on two Sunday nights when it would otherwise have been dark. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Glass gained prestige (or notoriety) but lost a cataclysmic amount of money. Mr. Wilson went deep into debt, and Mr. Glass was back driving a cab soon after taking his curtain calls at the Met. In 1984 Harvey Lichtenstein and the Brooklyn Academy produced a revival. It was meant to tour but never did. There was another revival in 1992, again in Brooklyn, and this time in six European cities but nowhere else in the United States. Linda Brumbach, who manages Mr. Glass, finally put together an ambitious itinerary for 2012. The tour was cast and initially rehearsed at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in Manhattan, then had full-stage rehearsals and three preview performances in Ann Arbor, Mich., early this year. The tour proper began in Montpellier, France, in March and proceeded to Reggio Emilia, Italy; London; and Toronto. After Brooklyn come Berkeley, Calif.; Mexico City; Amsterdam; and Hong Kong.

There is talk of extending performances, maybe even into 2014, with cities like Melbourne, Australia; Los Angeles; Buenos Aires; and São Paulo, Brazil, under discussion, and perhaps Bahrain, Berlin and Paris. Mr. Wilson is sentimental about the original French commission and would love for the final performances to be at the Bastille Opera. But adding new cities is expensive. The touring company numbers 65. So how is Einstein the same, how is it different and how does it hold up? No effort has been made to update the piece; there are still plentiful references to events (the Hearst trial) and pop culture of the mid-70s. But Mr. Wilson thinks it still works well. 'I've been curious myself as to why it does,' he said recently. 'One reason is that the bones are good, the structure is good.' (Mr. Wilson is fond of skeletal metaphors; he has always called his entr'actes knee plays.) For him the alternation of lively and meditative, slow and fast scenes provides a proper sequence of contrasts. For those of us steeped in Lower Manhattan performing arts of the '70s, Einstein represented in part a grand (and it turned out, more or less final) flowering of the warmly human collegiality of that time and place. Of course there were tensions and rivalries. I can still remember the squabbles over who got credit for what. But mostly the 1976 Einstein cast was an assembly of artists, skilled in some things and amateurish in others, but with a kind of venturesome summer-camp atmosphere prevailing during the rehearsals and performances in Avignon. None of those in it knew what it was, but they began to realize soon enough that it was great. 'The first company was like the Living Theater or the Open Theater,' Mr. Glass said. 'No one had any money, but we did have that communal feeling. The theater spilled over into our personal lives. Life and art mixed together. Bob and I were just two guys in our 30/s. Later that went away. It would be surprising if those feelings were still there. This new cast feels almost honored to be in this piece.' What happened in 1984, 1992 and now 2012 has been a gradual professionalization of the company and a widening age difference between the creators and the performers. In 1984 Ms. Childs took over the choreography of the two long Field Dances from Andrew deGroat. Mr. Glass insisted on a separation of singers and dancers to get better singers, which meant a separate group of better dancers. According to both Mr. Glass and Mr. Wilson, Mr. deGroat was accustomed to the more natural, variably trained dancers of the original cast. Ms. Childs could stretch the capacities of more trained dancers, and her formal, almost intellectualized choreography seemed to suit the music and the imagery better" [John Rockwell, New York Times, 8/31/12].

September 29

New York Philharmonic, conducted by Alan Gilbert, with Daniil Trifonov, in Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. Repeated October 2. "[T]here were certainly no awkward moments during the terrific performance of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 . . . . A slender man with an exuberant stage presence, Mr. Trifonov is certainly a virtuoso with a demonstrably prizewinning technique, evident as he fluidly sailed through bravura passages, his fingers moving in a blur through rapid octaves and chords" [Vivien Schweitzer, The New York Times, 10/1/12].