

# Philip Glass on controlling your output and getting paid for what you make

September 29, 2021 - Philip Glass, who got his first job at 15, worked as a taxi driver until he was 42. He turns 80 in January. Shortly after our discussion about online streaming and subscription services, Glass made his Orange Mountain Music catalogue available on Apple Music.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2791 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Culture](#), [Independence](#), [Beginnings](#).

Let's talk about authors. We're talking from the point of view of the composer, the creator of the work—or of the person who's the author. You have to start with that. Without that there's nothing to talk about.

In music, composers have the option of being the owners of our work. I think this is true for books and for painting, for everything. We can forfeit that option, or someone can buy it from us. I'm the publisher of my work, unless I give it to somebody else. In other words, ownership comes from authorship.

There's a direct link there. The author is the owner, unless he gives it away to someone, and then that person becomes the publisher. The composer himself can be the publisher, and that's what I've chosen to do, as have many people in the pop music world: David Bowie, The Beatles... It's a famous story about their early publishing skirmishes until McCartney ended up owning a lot of it.

I've done some scores that were bought outright by big Hollywood movies. They bought me out because they paid me enough. It was very simple. From their point of view, they preferred to own everything.

We're talking about who owns the music, to put it crudely. Then that person can do whatever they want with it. They want to stream it, they want to give it to the world if that's what they want. There are people that do want to do that and I respect that. "I want my music to belong to the world and I'm going to give it away." That's great. Maybe they have parents that take care of them. I don't know where they get their money from. Maybe they rob banks or maybe they just work as janitors or taxi cab drivers and they just want to share their work with the world. Then it's something that we can honor.

My personal position was that I had wonderful parents. Really wonderful people. But my mother was a school teacher. My father had a small record shop in Baltimore. They had no money to support my career. I began working early. You're too young to know this, but when you get your first Social Security check, you get a list of every place you've worked since you began working. It's fantastic! I discovered that I was working from the time I was 15 and putting money into the Social Security system from that age onward. I thought it was much later. No, I was actually paying money that early.

The point is that I spent most of my life supporting myself. And I own the music. I never gave it away. I am the publisher of everything I've written except for a handful of film scores that the big studios paid. I said, "Yeah, you can own it. You can have it, but you have to pay for it." They did pay for it. They were not gifts.

One of the interesting things that happened. I was with Godfrey Reggio years ago, in maybe in 1983 or 1984. He took *Koyaanisqatsi* to a film festival in Russia. He took the film to Russia and he began playing it in what they called film clubs. I said, "Godfrey, what did they pay you?" He said, "Well, they didn't pay me anything." I said, "Really?" I said, "Well what's that about?" He said, "Art belongs to the people."

In one sense, we don't care about the art belonging to the people anymore. But in another way, we do. I'm not sure about this, but I think that on YouTube, they'll play anything. But if you are the owner of something, and you ask them to take it down, they'll take it down. Their position is that art belongs to the people.

On the other hand, the revenue from the advertising that's done with your art belongs to them. *[laughs]* If you get to make the rules, you can make the rules the way you want, right? That's how this all remains.

My feeling is is that there's another way that we've been doing it, which is that we do the music with iTunes. People can download music and they can pay for it. It's not a lot of money.

If you buy a record, if you get a disc, a CD, that's something else. Some people want to have a box of symphonies by me, for example, that's published by a company like Orange Mountain Music, which is also me. You can do that and it doesn't even cost that much money, but no one's going to give it to you free at the supermarket or anything like that.

Sometimes we make arrangements, like with the opening night of *Einstein on the Beach* at the Champs-Élysées Theater in Paris. That night was streamed, and it was streamed for about a month. We've offered it like that, because we wanted people to see the work. It was a beautiful thing. The month is over. The streaming stopped. Now if you want to buy it you can, so we've also allowed a window, so to speak, for certain features to be streamed, but that's not the rule with the way we work.

The producer may make it interesting for us to cooperate with them on the streaming process like that, and we will, and I have done that. In principle, I don't necessarily do it. Whether people buy it or not, what do I care? I hope they buy it, I hope they like it.

When my father had a record shop, we didn't let people steal the records. My brother and I were supposed to watch people when they came in and make sure they didn't put the records into their raincoats, and they did. I'm talking about the big 12" LPs. They would put it in their pants and then walk out the door. We were taught as kids in Baltimore that they weren't allowed to do that. How's that for a point of view?

Let's say that you subscribe to Apple, or something, and you're paying some money. The question is what happens with that money. Does any of that money find its way into the pocket of the man or woman who made that piece? Just follow the money—like they say in the movies. Just follow the money. See where it goes. If none of the money goes back to the person who made it, then I don't think that's a good idea.

I think subscription seems to be an excellent idea. Okay, let me pay \$40, \$50, \$60 a month and let me pick whatever I want. Good, good, good. But what happens with the \$40, \$50, \$60? Who gets that? Is that divided among the authors of the music? That's a question you have to ask them. I don't know the answer to that question.

I will not participate in subscriptions where I'm not represented. Why would I do that? In my father's record store, why would I say, "Okay, I'll tell you what. I'm gonna close my eyes and I'll count to 30 and you take anything you want and when I open my eyes just don't be in the store." We didn't play that game in Baltimore. We were told to watch the records.

By the way, there are other parts of that story that I don't need to tell right now. My father didn't necessarily call the police when he caught people, but that person never came back.

The idea of streaming needs to be expanded to talking about where the money goes. Of course, there's advertising that goes all over it. You can even pay at a rate where you don't get the advertisements. If you don't want to see that stuff. It costs a little bit more.

My question is always, "Where is the author? Where is he in the transaction?" He's got to be somewhere in that line of where the money goes. If he isn't there, then we're back to Russia saying, "Art belongs to the people." Good idea, but who's going to feed the artist?

What happens, is that the artists are in a position where they can no longer live on their work. They have to worry about that. They need to become performers. That's another kind of work we do. I go out and play music. The big boom in performances is partly because of streaming, isn't it? We know, for example, that there are big rock and roll bands that will give their records away free. You just have to buy the ticket to the concert. The cost of the record is rather small compared to the price of the ticket. It's shifted around a little bit; they're still paying, but they're paying at the box office rather than at the record store. The money still will find its way.

Then you have to be the kind of person who goes out and plays, and some people don't. There are some very good composers that have never played in public. I'm not one of them, because I'm not that good of a composer. I have been out playing music since I was 12 years old. That's what we did. I didn't get paid that much, but at least I did get paid. Eventually I was able to make a living on it. Whether I sold the records or not, I could make a living by playing.

Five Essential Philip Glass Pieces by [William Robin](#), a musicologist who teaches at the [University of Maryland](#).

[Two Pages](#) (1968) Relentlessly stark, this early masterwork explores additive rhythm, a technique derived from Glass' work with Indian musicians including Ravi Shankar, in which musical phrases elastically expand and contract.

*Einstein on the Beach* (1976), "[Knee Play III](#)" A revolutionary collaboration with director Robert Wilson that sold out the Metropolitan Opera when it premiered in 1976, *Einstein on the Beach* reimagined opera as abstract, enigmatic, and deeply engaged with the interdisciplinary artistic community of downtown New York. Glass' music here represented the peak of his experimental phase, as in the mesmerizing "Knee Play III," one of opera's hauntingly quizzical interludes.

*Satyagraha* (1979), [Act III: Part 3](#) There is perhaps no more startling shift in Glass's music than the move from the austere timbre of the PhilipGlass Ensemble's Farfisa organs to the lush textures of the symphony orchestra. *Satyagraha*, Glass' first work written for traditional operatic voices and full orchestra, represents a major turning point in his style. Sanskrit for "truth force," *Satyagraha* also embodies the composer's commitment to social justice: during an Occupy Wall Street demonstration outside the Metropolitan Opera in 2011, he joined the protesters and recited the opera's closing lines.

[Koyaanisqatsi](#) (1982) Glass is most widely recognized today for his work as a film composer, a thirty-four year career that began with *Koyaanisqatsi*, a collaboration with director Godfrey Reggio. Though by now its style has been copied in dozens of commercials, in 1982 Glass's meditative score and Reggio's time-lapse imagery represented a trenchant and powerful critique.

*Symphony No. 9* (2011), [first movement](#) Since the 1980s, Glass has engaged deeply with the traditional genres of symphony and string quartet. The *Symphony No. 9* has an expansive heft worthy of the 19th century Romantic composer Anton Bruckner, one of Glass' models; his latest, *Symphony No. 11*, will have its premiere at Carnegie Hall on his 80th birthday in January.

It still leaves the question what happens to that woman or a man who, for whatever reason, is not able to go out and play their music? They can't earn the money to perform with it. The only way they're going to earn it is through the way people use it.

That's another way, there are licenses that go to movies, that go to picture companies, and all kinds of places-fashion shows, football intermissions. I've had people take my music wanting to use it for big NBA events and so forth. I get paid as the owner of the copyright. That doesn't have anything to do with streaming. That has to do with a commerce that works in a different way.

It's never been easy for painters, or writers, or poets to make a living. One of the reasons is that we, I mean a big "We," deny them an income for their work. As a society we do. Yet, these are the same people who supposedly we can't live without. It's curious, isn't it? But people get inventive about how to make a living. We have collectively closed off important sources of income to composers. At the same time, composers have been inventive in finding ways of making money from their music. The survivor is surviving-but not everybody is a survivor.

I remember that event years ago with the movie clubs in Russia. At the time, that that was happening, I was probably still driving a taxi cab in New York. Which I did until I was 42, or so. Meanwhile, there were people all over Russia watching a movie with my music in it and I was getting nothing. Can you imagine what I think of the Communist system? I didn't think it was very good. We should honor people by paying for the work that we are enjoying.

On some level, I think subscribing is a good way. That's a system that could work. It's a question of how the income is shared. I'm not against sharing money. There are all kinds of people involved in productions and people get paid for all kinds of things, but it should include the author.

How come the author is the last one that gets paid? It's completely absurd. Am I taking an extreme position when I think that the authors and painters that they should be somewhere in the distribution of the income? Is that a crazy idea?

My own company, Orange Mountain Music, is putting out the original *Candyman* album as an LP. I said to the guys, "Who the hell is buying this?" They said, "Oh, a lot of people. They want LPs." There's that, too. It's a rather complex situation. Some people don't care about it, other people want the object.

We're talking about a rather complex picture, in terms of a marketplace. If you had to make a map of that marketplace, it would look like a map of Paris, or Tokyo. The map would be a very complex map. Where you can't find yourself. That's not so bad.

It's a complex society. We have with attitudes that are formed not only by age group, but by economic background, or ethnic background. There are all kinds of influences. We can't make a simple description of what's happening. It's a rather complicated one.

But, in the end, that's probably what's going to save us. It's complicated to describe the typical musical consumer. There are enough people on the planet, all doing it in different ways, so that somehow you're going to make a living off of it.

When I was a kid, we sold so many Elvis Presley records, you can't believe it. We got these RCA records. We never even got them out of the box, we handed them over the counter. People were standing in line to buy these records. They made a fortune. You know what? They deserved it.

But maybe these memories are mere nostalgia, and we should just give it up! *[laughs]* Give it up already! But you don't give up, because it's real.

#### Name

Philip Glass

#### Vocation

Composer

#### Fact

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Photo: Andreas Bitesnich