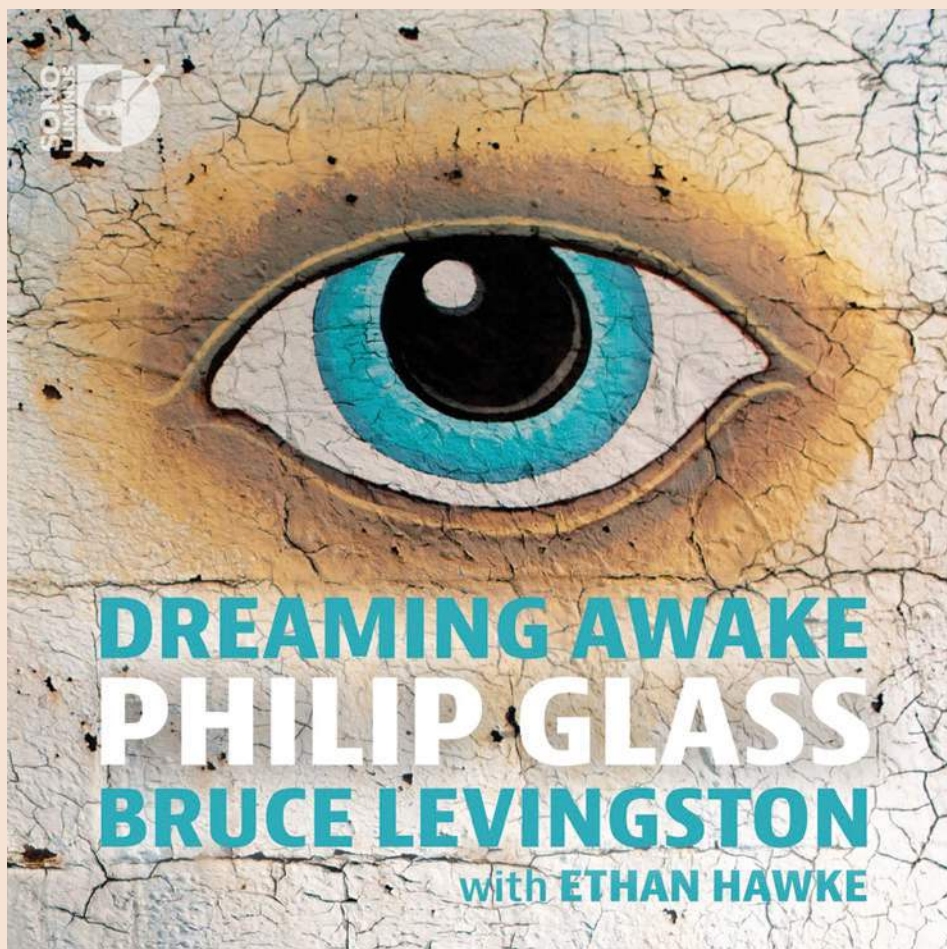


# Dreaming Awake

JULIAN MUSGRAVE DESCRIBES A FASCINATING TWO-CD RELEASE FROM PHILIP GLASS

JULIAN MUSGRAVE



## MUSIC BY PHILIP GLASS.

### **Dreaming Awake**

Bruce Levington (piano) with Ethan Hawke. Etudes #s 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17. Wichita Vortex Sutra. Dreaming Awake. The Illusionist Suite. Metamorphosis # 2.

Released by Sono Luminus DSL-92005. 2 x CD.

No composer straddles the various musical divides as widely or convincingly as Philip Glass. He is respected as much in the jazz world as in the experimental avant-garde. His operas wow the cognoscenti while his symphonies pack concert halls. Meanwhile his film music is nigh on ubiquitous. The only musical domain that has resisted the Glassian flood has been that sacred high ground reserved for the titans of western art music: Mozart, Beethoven, J S Bach *et al.* The high priests of this cult would rather die than see their citadel breached. Glass? Too shallow; too repetitive; too popular. Vulgar, vulgar, vulgar they screech, holding perfumed

handkerchiefs to patronising elitist noses.

Well, now the walls are breached and the arpeggios are flooding in. Glass' Etudes for Piano sweep all before them.

But lest these classical references put you off let's examine Glass's musical language in a bit more detail. Because anybody who likes Keith Jarrett, Art Tatum and that whole American improvisatory musical language may well take to Glass; there is a strong argument for Glass' musical roots to be grounded more firmly here than even in the western art-music tradition. Not that he sounds like either of these; nor is the music here improvised: the score can be purchased and played if wanted.

Glass sounds like Glass and that is the key to why this music has importance far beyond the musty sound world conjured up by a title called 'Etude'. A Glass film score, a Glass opera, a Glass Etude all exude a freshness and creative litheness that suggests it is being created in the moment for the moment.

But closer listening reveals the depth of

invention hidden beneath this lightness of touch. Etude #2 is probably the best known of the set and starts with Glass' trademark arpeggios, with echoes of both Bach and Beethoven. Glass makes you believe that this modest wash is interesting in its own right, so it comes as something of a shock when a shifty, unsettling bass riff joins the party at 1.09. At 2.09 a sly, upwardly mobile figure transforms the piece into a three-part fantasy of Tolkeinesque power and drama. The interesting thing about this particular Etude is that you have probably heard it already, but perhaps without realising that it is by Glass, or listening closely enough to claim its rewards for yourself.

Let's look at Etude #17. Like many Glass compositions it starts simply – in this case just two lines of crochet syncopations of claustrophobic intensity. But at 1.15 it sprouts upflowing arpeggios that open a whole new vista. This is then explored until 6.43, when Glass exposes the melody that has previously been hidden deep within the flurry of notes. It's a melody of such ineffable sweetness and emotional release that it makes one believe it is the only thing that is, and ever has been, important in the whole of creation.

This Etude bears comparison with anything from any age or genre. It is not difficult to imagine Mozart giggling insanely at its originality; Beethoven having a hissing fit because a young Prometheus has stolen his fire; and Bach taking that melody and improvising a four part fugue on it. Glass has class.

But there is more to Glass than meets the ear. All music is of its age and culture, and refracts its zeitgeist. The religious certainties of Bach, the (relative) social freedoms of Mozart, and the post-war optimism of Rogers & Hammerstein, all show up clearly in their creations. Glass refracts, with a prismatic purity, the musical colours of our age; a yearning to return to some protean ideal of what music could or should be: original joy rather than original sin. Freedom and optimism is there for sure, but all is built on the shifting sands of a very modern angst. Listen to the end of Etude #17 and weep.

The danger is that once these Etudes have taken up residence in your musical garden their darkly radiant colours may make everything else seem too pale, too subtle and too well, artlessly weedy by comparison.

They really are that good.