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Published in:
Music and Its Narrative Potential

DOI:
[10.30965/9783846767726_007](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846767726_007)

Publication date:
2024

Document Version:
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Van Nerom, C. (2024). Narrativity in Minimalist Operas by Philip Glass: Impact of the Source Text and of Postminimalist Composition Strategies. In C. Van Nerom, A. Peeters, & B. Bouckaert (Eds.), *Music and Its Narrative Potential* (pp. 123-142). Brill Fink. https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846767726_007

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Narrativity in Minimalist Operas by Philip Glass

Impact of the Source Text and of Postminimalist Composition Strategies

Carolien Van Nerom

Abstract

In its early days, minimalist music was met with reviews that were either positive or outright negative. A recurring observation in the initial reception of these kinds of musical pieces is that they appear to be “non-narrative”. Since its emergence into the classical music scene, however, minimalist music has evolved and has been received in different ways. This chapter is a contribution to an ongoing debate that foregrounds minimalist music’s degrees of narrativity. Specifically, the degree of narrativity is gauged in two operas by Philip Glass: one that is based on a straightforward literary source text (fairy tale *The Juniper Tree*), and one that is based on a more complex literary source text (postcolonial allegory *Waiting for the Barbarians*). While both operas exhibit markers of narrativity that induce listeners to look for further indications of narrativity, there is a remarkable difference in degree between the two. Two reasons come to the fore in this analysis. (1) The more complex the literary source text is, the lower the degree of narrativity of the Glass opera. Complexity of the source text depends, amongst other things, on adherence to mental schemas of narrative, or on the gravity of themes. (2) Glass’ increased use of postminimalist strategies of composition leads to a higher degree of narrativity. Amongst others, this chapter highlights the following techniques: return to traditional and more recognizable classical style identifiers (e.g., tonality or melodic development), and quotations of existing classical styles.

1 Introduction

The narrative potential of music has been explored by several researchers in recent years. This is part of an increasing interest since the 1970s in the application of narrative models to media other than literary works. In the field of music studies, most narrative analyses still almost exclusively focus on

* Research for this contribution was made possible with funding from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).

classical compositions from the 18th and 19th century.¹ Perhaps these compositions are more readily perceived as a narrative because they have a highly recognizable style. They are composed within a framework of references that over time grew familiar to Western culture at large (see McAuley et al. 519; Hellmuth Margulis 245).² As John Richardson and Susanna Välimäki put it: Classical and Romantic compositions have become “musical vernacular” with a recognizability that allows for and facilitates extra-musical references (222). Contemporary music can still lack such a framework or familiarity that mitigates the narrative potential of a musical composition.

Minimalist music, for example, with its heydays in the 1960s, was often labeled “non-narrative” in the past (see e.g., Evans; Gann; Pasler; Waters). The case studies in this chapter, however, reveal the narrative potential of contemporary minimalist operas by American composer Philip Glass. Since the start of his composition career, his works have become increasingly popular and researched. In general, minimalist music has increasingly been interpreted as broadly referential and specifically narrative. Rebecca Leydon, for example, distinguishes different musical tropes in minimalist music that express an experienced affect. Jann Pasler considers elements of narrative in minimalist music that do not “function as they would in a [traditional] narrative” (40). In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*, several chapters are dedicated fully or partly to the narrative potential of minimalist music. Most notably, John Pymm explores the narrativity of Steve Reich’s music. He says that “there is a widely held view that minimalist music is non-narrative and has little or no interest in the telling of stories”. However, this is an “*a priori* assumption of non-narrativity [that] tends to gloss over works that might inconveniently suggest an element of story” (Pymm 280). If such compositions are not conventional narratives, then at least they can convey stories to some degree. *Inconveniently* is an apt description as it best reflects minimalism’s tendency to frustrate narrative readings of music. It also conveys the continuing need for frameworks to understand minimalist music in a narrative way – such frameworks that existing traditions such as the Romantic or Classical traditions have historically built up.

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- 1 With notable exceptions from authors included in this book, e.g., Pwyll ap Siôn (see chapter 12), or Pymm (see chapter 13), as well as other authors discussed further in this chapter, e.g., Evans, or Pasler.
 - 2 Pasler implies something similar when she mentions that the tendency to listen to music in a narrative way is heightened when a listener has a “culturally engrained ability to apprehend how such [narrative] structures normally behave” (36). In other words, the musical strategies used to evoke narrativity are more easily perceived as narrative when they are culturally engrained or recognizable.

This chapter is a contribution to the ongoing reflection on minimalist music's capacity to convey a story. In general, it explores narrativity in Glass operas based on novels. Through Glass operas, I consider the limits of narrativity in music. Minimalist music particularly obscures narrative triggers chiefly because of three of its characteristics: intense repetition of musical materials such as rhythm, motifs, or harmonic successions; little variety; and a refusal to subscribe to existing Western traditions. Still, a degree of narrativity exudes from the music and I focus here on two factors that influence the degree of narrativity in Glass' operatic music in two case studies with different degrees of narrativity.

The first element that impacts the relative degree of the opera music is the complexity of the source text of the opera. In this chapter, I consider *The Juniper Tree* (first performed in 1985) based on a fairy tale by the brothers Grimm and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (first performed in 2005) based on a postcolonial allegory by J.M. Coetzee.³ *The Juniper Tree* tells the story of a boy whose stepmother decides to kill him out of jealousy. From his bones, the boy is resurrected as a bird who seeks revenge on his stepmother. After the stepmother is eliminated, the bird turns back into his boy form and lives happily ever after with his family. This story that follows a straightforward narrative scheme leads to music with a higher degree of narrativity than the story of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which is more complex by comparison. Coetzee's allegory thematizes discrimination owing to a colonial context. The novel and the opera both convey the tale of the Magistrate who goes on a personal journey. He transforms from a supporter and partaker of the existing colonial hierarchy into a (self-)critical person who questions the validity of the colonial rulers' intentions and methods.

The second aspect that leads to differences in the degree of narrativity, is the extent to which Glass employs postminimalist features. In her chapter on operas by Glass and Louis Andriessen, Novak notes that it is mainly the incorporation of existing musical language (e.g. tonality) and the weakening of minimalism's rigid repetition process that makes postminimalist music more "open to narrative systems" (131). Tristian Evans also notes that minimalist and postminimalist works composed after 1976 can be understood as narratives

3 For my analysis, I based myself on audio recordings of live performances of the operas as well as on the scores. The recording I used for *The Juniper Tree* is by The Juniper Tree Opera Orchestra conducted by Richard Pittmann (2009) and the one I used for *Waiting for the Barbarians* is by the Philharmonisches Orchester Erfurt and the Opernchor des Theaters Erfurt conducted by Dennis Russell Davies (2008). While *The Juniper Tree* is an opera composed by two composers, Glass and Robert Moran, I only considered the scenes composed by Glass.

more readily due to a higher frequency in recurrence of thematic materials (128). These observations also apply to the case studies in this chapter. *The Juniper Tree* subscribes to postminimalism more than *Waiting for the Barbarians* does, which leads to the former having a higher degree of narrativity.⁴ Additionally, I consider the role of auditive memory that plays a part in the difference in degree of narrativity in Glass' opera music. Before turning to the case studies, I first expand on narrativity as I understand it.

2 About Narrativity

Most theories of narrative are firmly rooted in literary traditions. This is not surprising since narratology has a long history of taking literary narratives as examples. While such models have proven useful in the discussion of a musical narrative, it is important to acknowledge that these are what Byron Almén calls “descendant”.⁵ A descendant model “presupposes a conceptual priority for literary narrative” (Almén 12). In my opinion, taking such models as a general definition of narrative creates two important problems. Either certain texts or even entire media are too quickly dismissed as having no ability to express a narrative, or the discussion of narrative in different media is reduced to one particular aspect of it. I provide two examples to illustrate the two problems before suggesting a more conducive way of speaking about music's capacity to evoke narrative through the concept of narrativity.

Carolyn Abbate dismisses music's capacity to evoke narrative entirely in her book *Unsung Voices*. In it, she clearly adheres to a model of narrative that is based on literary texts. According to her, a reference to past time is a prerequisite for the expression of a narrative because it creates a “temporal-moral distance” that the receiver needs in order to envelop him- or herself in the story (Abbate 52). The use of past time signals to the audience or reader that there is diegesis in the form of a narrator (Abbate 23). The use of grammatical past time is indeed restricted to verbal media, ruling out music as a potential medium for expressing narrative. However, there are two fallacies in Abbate's definition of

4 Robert F. Waters, in his recent book *The Stage Works of Philip Glass* also notes the difference in how both operas are generally received. For example, he says about *Waiting for the Barbarians* that listeners found it to “lack [...] teleological focus and emotional contrast” due to its high “degree of repetition” (Waters 186).

5 See e.g. Tarasti, who applies Proppian functions and semiotic theory by Greimas to musical narrative in several of his analyses (e.g., “Après un Rêve”; “Beethoven's Waldstein”); and Halliwell or Maus, who both use a specific concept of the narrator that is based on literary analysis.

narrative. Firstly, a narrator or the sense of diegesis might be accomplished through other techniques than the use of past time. Within the medium of the novel, past time might be frequently used in specific genres to create certain narrative levels, but it is not a feature that is typical of all genres. For example, fairy tales specifically use past time, as exemplified in the stock phrase “once upon a time, there was ...”. Contrastively, stream-of-consciousness novels use grammatical experiment rather than past time to present a window into the mind of a certain character. What is more, such novels more often use present tense or no conjugated verbs at all to enhance the feeling of tapping into a “real-time” flow of thoughts. Secondly, in more recent intermedial conceptions of narrative, the explicit presence of a narrator is no longer considered as a prerequisite for the evocation of a story. This has been demonstrated both specifically in music (see Maus) and in intermedial considerations of narrative (see Jahn; Ryan, *Narrative Across Media*; Ryan, “Narrativity”; Wolf).

Even in more nuanced stances towards music’s potential to evoke a story, the literary text and language are often considered as the ideal means of conveying a narrative. For example, Peter Rabinowitz allows that music is narrative in specific cases, but still adheres to the idea that a narrator or the sense of different narrative levels is essential to express a narrative. He offers the example of Bizet’s *Carmen* to illustrate that a form of narratorship is possible in music, especially in opera (Rabinowitz, “Singing for Myself”). The character Carmen creates different narrative levels because she is a professional singer. She thus inhabits both the opera level, where singing is a specific trait of the medium; and the narrative level, where she sings as a character to her fellow characters. By singing to other characters, she highlights the opera’s different narrative levels that are mediated by different agents. While she is singing on the narrative level, she is a character focalizing and representing herself. She points out other negotiating agents expressing the story – e.g., an unnamed extradiegetic narrator – when she sings to the audience. Rabinowitz thus implies that different narrative levels need to be made explicit by a device such as focalization or even a narrating instance. I agree that clear demarcations of narrative levels can be indicative of the *storyness* of a text to the reader, but focalization and the explicit presence of a narrator are not the only possible ways of doing so. By focusing on the *necessity* of an explicit focalization and the clear presence of a narrator, a narrative interpretation of many other musical compositions is inevitably disregarded.

Rabinowitz concludes elsewhere that music is “not technically ‘narrative’” (“John Adams” 84). While I do not presume to make such conclusions about *all* music, I accept that music is not the most straightforward medium for expressing a narrative. Language (and the novel by extension) has a referentiality that

music does not. Verbal media offer the most clear-cut way to tell a story (see Bernaerts 69; Ryan, *Narrative Across Media* 10; 13). Still, some musical compositions are narrative or evidence at least a certain degree of narrative elements that invite a listener to interpret the music in a narrative way. Definitions of narrative that hold on to the novel as its foremost example are clearly problematic. I am following Marie-Laure Ryan's lead here, who considers the question of whether a text is narrative or not, to be a purely theoretical one that only narratologists might ask themselves ("Narrativity" 316). It is not a question rooted in actual considerations of texts. Therefore, I favor the term narrativity over narrative. Narrativity is a continuum that cannot be captured as a dichotomy where a text is considered as either narrative or non-narrative.

Narrativity lies on the nexus between the *text* and its perceivable narrative triggers themselves and the human *mind* that constructs a narrative. It reflects the double loop that is activated when a narrative is expressed and received: First, a mental schema of narrative in the reader or listener is triggered by actual elements in the text. Once such a schema of narrative is activated, a reader or listener is inclined to look for further narrative features in the text to validate their mental schema of narrative or to interpret aspects of the text in a narrative way. The narrative triggers considered in this chapter are those widely considered as the most prevalent elements of narrative and narrative analysis across media by scholars such as Ryan (*Narrative Across Media*), Jan-Noël Thon, and David Herman. They can be grouped under the denominations plot, characters, and setting. The difference between narrative and narrativity is that the former includes or excludes texts based on full membership to a set of characteristics, while narrativity is scalar and is a "fuzzy set allowing different degrees of membership" (Ryan, "Semantics, Pragmatics, and Narrativity" 193).

Additionally, the sense of experientiality is an important trigger considered in this chapter. In her book *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, Monika Fludernik considers experientiality as the primary element for a text to be considered as a narrative. Because the triggering of a narrative schema is a profoundly human act, the sense of perceiving or experiencing subsumes other narrative elements such as plot, characters and setting. For example, if a text presents only a succession of events (plot) without expressing that these events are experienced, Fludernik would argue that it is non-narrative or "zero-degree narrativity" (328–9). The examples of narrative musical pieces in Glass below will also show that it is this experientiality – a sense of human perception, motivation, feeling, or consciousness – that informs all elements of plot, character, and setting and that profoundly triggers a narrative understanding of the music.

By discussing these narrative triggers in Glass' operas *The Juniper Tree* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I show which factors increase or decrease the level of narrativity. As mentioned before, I focus on two parameters that are specifically pertinent to Glass operas in the following order: (1) the make-up and complexity of the source text of the opera; and (2) the use of minimalist or postminimalist composition techniques, which in turn have a different effect on the recognizability of musical elements as narrative triggers.

3 Complexity of the Source Text and the Degree of Narrativity of Glass' Music

Opera has a distinct bond with narrative to the point where people come to expect a narrative from an opera performance (see Lindenberger 63) – even more so when an opera is based on a literary work. With Glass operas based on literary works, however, that narrative potential of the opera is frequently hindered. Reviews of *Waiting for the Barbarians* indicate that its music has a lower degree of narrativity than *The Juniper Tree*. For example, one reviewer mentions the lack of plot as *Waiting for the Barbarians'* greatest weakness (Sealey par. 6). Others mention the underdeveloped characters that lack motivations for their actions (Ashley par. 4; Smith par. 7). This is in stark contrast to *The Juniper Tree*, where reviewers clearly identify plot elements in the music (Downey par. 5). The latter also features “dramatic” and “beautifully lyrical” musical pieces that are tied to specific characters such as the Stepmother and the Son respectively (Kozinn par. 4).

In part, this difference in degree of narrativity has its basis in the complexity of the operas' respective literary source texts. The complexity of the novel is understood here as the degree to which a story adheres to the mental schema of a story. This schema can include expectations in terms of the three triggers discussed above: plot, characters and setting. There is a clear difference in the way that the narratives of *The Juniper Tree* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* adhere to or suggest a narrative schema. On the one hand, *The Juniper Tree* meets the expectations of a basic story entirely: there are key actions in the plot that push the story forward, the characters are clearly described and have designated roles (e.g. good-versus-evil), and the setting is familiar to the real world, but includes magic. Moreover, the fairy tale as a genre follows a distinctive path or schema that meets the readers' expectations every time. The plot of *The Juniper Tree* goes from a harmonious setting to then introduce a disturbance that sets the main character off in pursuit of a solution.

On the other hand, *Waiting for the Barbarians* does not create such defined genre expectations and is less specific in its expression of plot, characters, and setting. It has a plot that does not lift off as *The Juniper Tree* does because its actions do not necessarily create clear highlights in plot progression. For example, the Barbarians never show up at the borders of the colony. While that is exactly the point of the story – namely that the Barbarians are not real, just a materialized fear of “the other” – the effect on the plot is that it seems to not progress. Only two of the novel’s characters are mentally developed. Rather, characters are purposely underdeveloped. For example, they do not have a name. Coetzee implements a nameless I-narrator, a magistrate, who continuously refers to the other main character as “the girl” rather than name her.⁶ While the setting is defined as a colonial settlement, not much detail is afforded to its description. The abstract nature of the characters in Coetzee’s novel is deliberate. The narrative is an allegory that focuses on the metaphorical content and moral rather than on the story itself. Plot progression, for example, is less urgent so that the focus falls on the personal ruminations and mental development of the main character the Magistrate. Thus, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is also more complex on a thematical level than *The Juniper Tree*. Via an abstract character’s mental journey and complex metaphors, Coetzee thematizes postcolonial issues and fear of the other.

The complexity of these source novels has its effect on the degree of narrativity of the opera music: *The Juniper Tree* has a higher degree of narrativity than *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In terms of characters, *The Juniper Tree* features a very distinctive trigger in the form of the music sung by the Son who turns into the Juniper Bird. Much unlike the musical textures featured in other scenes of *The Juniper Tree*, Act 1 features a beautiful melody for the Juniper Bird. This melodic line stands out within the opera, but also in Glass’ entire oeuvre. Glass’ early minimalist music rarely features similar melodic lines, but instead the musical material features mostly short motifs and repetitions thereof. Because this melody contrasts with what came before within the opera as well as defies expectations created by Glass through his existing minimalist oeuvre, this melody becomes marked and stands out as a narrative trigger.

The melody itself is first played by the orchestra in Act 1 “Birdsong” before the Son also sings the same melody accompanied by the orchestra. The melody sounds simple because there are no large intervals and the harmonic development is tonal, suggesting a C major tonality. It is slurred and broad with broken

6 The only characters with names are figures of authority – Colonel Joll and Warrant Officer Mandel. However, they remain flat characters; representatives of an unjust colonial system because a reader learns nothing of their background or inner thoughts.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Birdsong" from Act 1 of Philip Glass's opera *The Juniper Tree*. The score is written for a voice part (labeled "Boy") and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line consists of a single melodic phrase with a long slur, starting on a whole note and moving to a half note. The piano accompaniment features slurred triplets in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand. The score is divided into three systems, each with a repeat sign at the end.

Figure 6.1 The Juniper Tree Act 1 “Birdsong” (Glass, *Juniper Tree* 97): The Son/the Juniper Bird’s melody (referred to in the score as “Boy Voice”) is harmoniously shaped, tonal, and broadly slurred. It is a marker of the Son’s status as a protagonist and signifies a transformative moment in the opera’s plot.

chords played in slurred triplets in the synthesizer. Because it is so broad, the musical texture does not sound like typical birdsong even though the title refers to the transformation of the boy into a bird (see Fig. 6.1). Rather, the melody points out the opposite, namely that the Son was never naturally a bird.

The melody is also a narrative trigger of plot because the timbres of the instruments used in this act lead up to a climax. The act starts off with thin orchestration of synthesizer and harp playing the slurred triplets. Subsequently, the Son’s melody is pre-empted by the strings and bassoon, after which the boy voice chimes in with the instruments. The build-up in instrumentation invites

the listener to notice the importance of the melody. When the full instrumentation in addition to the boy voice is reached, it is clear that the musical climax marks a transformative moment for the Son. Furthermore, when the Son-turned-Juniper-Bird sings, Glass adds the French horn to the timbre. The sound of the French horn is often related to nobility, or a noble-minded character. Here, it is clearly used to identify the Son as the protagonist of the story, rather than as its villain. The Son is thus firmly placed opposite the Stepmother, who mostly sings in and is accompanied by short, minimalist motifs rather than melodic lines. The instrumentation thus serves a double marker function: one of a turning point in the plot, and one of characterization.

Such triggers of narrativity are not absent from *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but they are less noticeable or marked. Not only does Glass stick more consistently to the minimalist style, the nature of Coetzee's novel also plays a part in this low degree of narrativity. The music is much like the text: an allegory. The specifics of the characters or setting remain vague in order for the moral of the story to be the focal point. Concretely, the musical elements in *Waiting for the Barbarians* that serve as narrative triggers are often more spread out over the opera than in *The Juniper Tree*, which means it takes more time to notice them and it asks more energy from the audience's memory.

For example, Glass sets apart the "real" setting of the colony and the setting of the Magistrate's dreams. These dreams have an allegorical function. They represent the Magistrate's moral growth and express metaphors for the moral of the story that revolves around postcolonial impact and "the other". In the opera, the choir is used in a specific manner to distinguish dreams from reality. In regular scenes of interaction, the choir chants in words such as "En-e-my" or "Bar-bar-i-ans" (e.g., in Act 2 Scene 3) and in these passages gives voice to a mob. Contrarily, the choir takes a central place as an integrated part of the orchestra in the dreams because no solo singers partake in the scene. Additionally, the choir has no lyrics here, which results in a unified texture rather than solos or solo groups on top of an accompanying, subservient group.

Only over the course of the entire opera does it become clear that the dreamscapes draw towards a culmination point in the fifth and final dream (which takes place in Act 2). Here too, it is Glass' orchestration, specifically the percussion section, that increases the feeling of agitation and works towards a climax. The first dream only features melodic percussion instruments – a very soft texture. Increasingly, more percussion sounds can be heard with the sharpest-sounding instruments in the final Dreamscape Five: snare drum played with wire brushes in combination with sticks and tambourine. The choir also plays its part in creating a musical peak. It becomes increasingly

fuller as the all-female voices in the first four dreams are supplemented with male voices in the final dream.⁷

The dreams' build-up as a narrative trigger is not just one that evokes a certain setting or distinguishes between real and imagined spaces. It also creates a sense of experientiality. The dreams characterize the Magistrate and express his inner struggle with the colonial forces. It is important for this build-up as a narrative trigger that it is connected to the Magistrate as the perceiver.⁸ The dreams are comparable to the *human experience* of an *aha*-moment and it is this *feltness*, this focalization by the Magistrate that makes the triggers profoundly narrative. Otherwise, it would simply evoke any setting. Instead, it is the felt humanness of these triggers, or what Fludernik calls experientiality, that would lead an audience to hear the music as a narrative.

4 Use of Postminimalist Features Versus Predominant Minimalism and the Degree of Narrativity of Glass' Music

So far, I have suggested that the complexity of the novel has an impact on the degree of narrativity of the music in the opera adaptation. Complex source texts have fewer clearly defined mental schemes or create fewer specific expectations. Narrative triggers in the music become less pronounced in operas with a more complex source text and consequently have a lower degree than operas with a more straightforward source text. Another feature that impacts the degree of narrativity of music is the use of postminimalist composition techniques and their higher recognizability. Using the metaphor of "language" for different composition styles, Richardson and Välimäki point out that some composition styles are "vernacular" while others are not (yet) (222). Vernaculars, such as the Romantic or Classical style, have a greater recognizability than for example contemporary styles in part because they have

7 The addition of the male voices elevates the dreams of the magistrate to a more general level. Glass' choice is possibly inspired by the novel as an allegory. It turns the Magistrate's dreams about a female barbarian girl into a moral applicable on a wider scale. The individual subject of the Magistrate's dreams becomes a metaphor for a whole people and their position in a colonial structure. Thus, the Magistrate's dreams ultimately express a general false fear of "the other" created by a colonial, corrupted system.

8 The source novel to *Waiting for the Barbarians* is evidently complex on the level of genre as well. It shows clear kinship to the allegory, but the Magistrate's central role to the story also places the novel within the tradition of the *bildungsroman*. Being set in a colony and thematizing colonialism and fear of "the other", *Waiting for the Barbarians* should also be considered as a part of the large and very diverse field of the postcolonial novel.

had the time to become symbols of a culture. Because of its “young age” and because minimalist composers went out of their way to avoid existing Western traditions in their music, minimalist music is not “vernacular” just yet. It is therefore also more difficult to understand the narrative potential of such compositions. Indeed, J. Devin McAuley et al. note that culturally embedded composition styles have a high recognizability that “drives narrative engagement with music” (519). It is this familiarity that minimalist music still lacks to a certain degree and that postminimalist compositions re-insert into minimalist music because they return to existing strategies such as tonality and particularly also “recycle other musical languages” (Novak 129).

Turning to the case studies, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is rather typically minimalist. It mostly features long repetitions of short motifs and offers little variety in harmonic development and melodic shapes. Mark Sealey puts it aptly in his review of the opera⁹: “There is little inclusion of fresh instrumental groups, of allusion to other works – inside and outside Glass’ own corpus – and no truly arresting moments that do not almost immediately dissipate in the familiar and the deflated, almost” (par. 8). I come back to the narrativity in *Waiting for the Barbarians* below, but first I contrast this consistent minimalism to *The Juniper Tree*. There, streaks of minimalist drones or repetitions are interspersed with postminimalist elements such as quotations of existing traditions and a return to tonality instead of the rather unvaried use of modes or atonality.

The Juniper Tree, for example, refers to the Classical composing style in the prologue to Act 1. A straightforward 4/4 meter is accentuated because the choir sings chords in quarter notes with no syncopated or other breaking rhythms in other voices or instruments. The tonality is clearly diatonic here. As such, this texture sounds Classical in style. The quotation is rather conspicuous and stands out – not just among the other musical textures of this opera, but also in Glass’ oeuvre in general.¹⁰ As a narrative trigger, this segment in a clear

9 Sealey’s review is of the same audio recording that I used in my analysis, namely of the premiere as performed by the *Philharmonisches Orchester Erfurt*, the *Opernchor des Theaters Erfurt*, and conducted by Dennis Russell Davies in 2005.

10 Glass is considered as one of the founders of minimalist music along with composers such as Terry Riley and La Monte Young. His early works are certainly strictly minimalist in conception. A return to more tonal and/or other existing traditions of composition is usually situated in the late 1970s (Gann, et al. 1; Gann). For Glass specifically, a style change is often seen after the popularity of *Einstein on the Beach* (Novak 129). While a distinction is often made between minimalism of the 1950s and 60s and postminimalism from the 1970s onwards, it should be clear that postminimalist compositions are firmly rooted in minimalism. Novak calls postminimalist music in opera an “applied” form of minimalist music to an existing composition form (129). In Glass’ oeuvre, minimalist techniques are

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Soprano, the middle for Child Voices, and the bottom for Piano. The Soprano part has a melodic line with lyrics: "Come here to me my hungry ones - - My". The Child Voices part has a rhythmic accompaniment of "Pa - Pa - Pa - Pa - etc." with dynamic markings of *mp*. The Piano part provides harmonic support with chords and a steady bass line, also marked with *mp*. The score includes dynamic markings of *mf* and *mp*, and a comparison sign *mf* > *mp* at the bottom.

Figure 6.2 *The Juniper Tree* Act 1 Prologue (Glass, *Juniper Tree* 4): The Wife (referred to in the score as “Soprano”) is singing together with the birds (referred to in the score as “Child Voices”). The excerpt is a reference to the Classical composition style and might be heard as a reference to Mozart’s singing characters Papageno and Papagena.

major tonality points towards a typical fairy tale plot point of a positive or at least neutral starting point. The citation might even be received in a more detailed way. The repeated notes in the melody in addition to the repeated “pa-pa-pa” remind the listener perhaps of Mozart’s famous duet for Papageno and Papagena in *The Magic Flute*. The reference is well chosen since *The Magic Flute* is also set as a magical fairy tale and Glass here aims at setting a narrative scene of the Wife interacting with the birds, which Papageno and Papagena also personify.

still very present and define even his works that are considered postminimalist. When a traditional style is referred to, it thus stands out from the overall style in which Glass composes and is clearly a quotation.

The musical score is for Act 1 Prologue of *The Juniper Tree*. It features four parts: Soprano 1, Soprano 2, Children's Voices, and Piano accompaniment. The key signature is E-flat major (one flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes Soprano 1 (marked *mp*), Soprano 2 (marked *mf*), and Piano accompaniment (marked *mf*). The lyrics for Soprano 2 are "Don't lis-ten to her - She thinks you're her ba-bies". The second system includes Children's Voices (marked *mf*), Soprano 2 (marked *mf*), and Piano accompaniment (marked *mf*). The lyrics for Children's Voices are "But she" and for Soprano 2 are "Don't lis-ten to her - She's cra-zy".

Figure 6.3 *The Juniper Tree* Act 1 Prologue (Glass, *Juniper Tree* 6): The reference to the Classical style remains, but is complemented by a dissonant note in the bassoon part (measure two and six in the example). This dissonant is a testimony to the Wife's fragile mental state.

Glass departs from the fairy tale in the subsequent bars by breaking the magical realism and referring to the Wife's mental illness. True to minimalism's negation of traditional tonalities, Glass adds a dissonant note in the bassoon part. In a texture where the tonality of E \flat major is implied, the addition of G \flat in bassoon sounds peculiar.

By choosing a dissonant note, Glass implies that something disrupts the normality of the otherwise stable starting situation of the fairy tale. The instability that the G \flat causes, upheaves the suspension of disbelief that normalizes the conversation with birds that talk and sing. From that vantage point, it becomes clear that the Wife is experiencing/focalizing here and that her conversation with the bird is a delusion. The Mama Bird (Soprano 2) also mentions that the Wife is "crazy" (Glass, *Juniper Tree* 6). The Wife is suffering from a depression due to the grief she feels for her inability to conceive a child at this point in

the scene. The dissonance she feels, is expressed through a dissonant in the otherwise tonal music.

When compared to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the transparency of the reference to another music style in *The Juniper Tree* is rather striking. Conspicuous references to other music traditions are absent from *Waiting for the Barbarians*. As a result, the opera relies largely on its minimalist devices for its degree of narrativity. What stands out are not references that contrast strongly with minimalism, but those minimal shifts that break with what comes before, i.e. a relatively long repetition of short motifs that becomes a texture a listener could be enveloped in. However, because those repetitive textures are relatively long, listeners might easily lose attention.¹¹ Changes or shifts that remain in the minimalist style are then comparatively less perceptible. These shifts serve as narrative triggers but stand out in a way that relies more heavily on the memory and attention span of the audience.

An example of such a subtle and minimal contrast is the use of a particular musical mode in the prologue to Scene 4 of Act 2 of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. From a general focus on rhythm, repetition and short motifs with little variety in terms of harmonic and melodic development, Glass shifts to the use of a distinct scale. Glass often makes use of modes throughout the opera and his oeuvre in general, but this mode stands out because of its pronounced “otherness” in comparison to Western tradition. A melody of sorts emerges, consisting of five notes that are part of a half-diminished minor scale played in oboe and clarinet. This texture, mode, and instrumentation in combination with the sound of suspended cymbal is a nod to an oriental setting. The sound of woodwinds with reeds (oboe and clarinet) particularly reminds the listener of the *duduk*, a double-reed instrument that originates from Armenia.

Again, it is the experientiality – a perception through human eyes – that emanates from this musical shift that makes it viable as a narrative trigger. The slurred nature of the melodic line and soft instrumentation do not simply denote a narrative spatial setting, but also point out who is perceiving the setting. A nostalgic feeling and sense of reverence for the Barbarians’ past speaks

11 In its early days, minimalist music was also known under alternative names such as “trans-music”, “hypnotic music”, or “meditative music” (see Gann 186; Mertens 14). These early terms reflect the idea that minimalist music has no extra-referential meaning and offers a way to escape reality and “real” time. Minimalist music invited a type of listening that does not need our full mental attention: “a more ambient, globalized kind of listening” (Gann et al. 9). However, this misconception has been refuted by several analyses; and while it is true that in short minimalist pieces a more trance-like or “chill-out” mode of listening is plausible, this is hardly the case in longer compositions such as Glass’ operas (Ibid.).

The image shows a musical score for Oboe and Clarinet parts. It consists of four staves. The top two staves are for Oboe 1-2 and Clarinet 1-2. The bottom two staves are for Oboe 1-2 and Clarinet 1-2. The music is in 3/4 time and features a melodic line with various dynamics and articulations. The first staff (Oboe 1-2) has a first ending marked '1.' and a second ending marked '2.'. The second staff (Clarinet 1-2) has a first ending marked '1.' and a second ending marked '2.'. The third staff (Oboe 1-2) has a first ending marked '1.' and a second ending marked '2.'. The fourth staff (Clarinet 1-2) has a first ending marked '1.' and a second ending marked '2.'. Dynamics include *p* (piano), *mf* (mezzo-forte), and *p* (piano). The music is characterized by a specific modal melody.

Figure 6.4 *Waiting for the Barbarians* Act 2 Scene 4 Prologue (Glass, *Barbarians* Act 2 48; percussion left out of quotation): the melodic effect here reveals the use of a specific mode that refers to oriental music. The instrumentation of oboe and clarinet is also a reference to double-reed instruments that are in popular use in oriental styles of music (e.g., Armenian music).

from the modal melody. It is the Magistrate who sees the colonial setting as an archaeological site to be treated with respect. In the following scene (Act 2 Scene 4), Colonel Joll indeed attacks the Magistrate's feelings and holds him in contempt for fraternizing with the Barbarians.

While the reference to an oriental mode and instrumentation in soft reed instruments might be a narrative trigger that sets the scene of *Waiting for the Barbarians* in the orient, it is a weaker trigger than the reference to Classical music in *The Juniper Tree*. The recognizability of the Classical style in the post-minimalist *The Juniper Tree* creates a familiarity with the music that invites narrative experience of the music more so than the modal reference in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.¹² Contrastively, *Waiting for the Barbarians* relies on its use of contrast within the minimalist style, which puts more of a burden on the listener's memory and attention span. Still, contrast, albeit minimal, is also of great importance for narrativity in music (see Hellmuth Margulis). In short, the opera music of *Waiting for the Barbarians* has narrativity, but *The Juniper Tree* – with its postminimalist attention for existing traditions in Western music – has a higher degree of narrativity by comparison.

12 See above and see McAuley et al. on the importance of “within-culture” recognizability (520).

5 Conclusion

Minimalist music has narrativity. By this I mean to say that minimalist music is capable of conveying elements that trigger the sense that a narrative is being expressed and thus incite the listener to look for other elements in the music that might further consolidate the schema of a narrative activated in their minds. In Glass' minimalist operas, the most common triggers are expressions of character(ization), setting, and plot. In all cases, however, the "feltness" or experientiality of such triggers is part and parcel of what makes these elements generate the idea that a narrative is articulated. There are different degrees of narrativity to Glass' music. *The Juniper Tree* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* are good examples of operas with a high and low degree respectively. This chapter identified two important aspects that inform this degree of narrativity.

Firstly, the complexity of the source novel has its effect on the narrativity of the music. *The Juniper Tree* is considered a more straightforward text when compared to *Waiting for the barbarians* because it adheres to a defined set of narrative schemas that create clear expectations about the narrative. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is more complex because it defies genre expectations, the focus is on the mind of the protagonist rather than on specifics of the narrative such as plot progression or character description, and it thematizes fraught issues such as postcolonialism and "the other". The more complex the source text, the lower the degree of narrativity conveyed through the music of its operatic adaptation.

Secondly, the use of postminimalist features heightens the degree of narrativity because it makes a composition more recognizable. Applied research points out that cultural familiarity with a certain music style is of great importance in understanding music as a narrative. *The Juniper Tree* features quotations of existing traditions, which is a characteristic of postminimalist music, not minimalist music. The contrast with the rest of the opera, which is deeply rooted still in the minimalist composition style, is conspicuous and creates familiarity. By comparison, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is firmly minimalist and depends on more subtle shifts that are less contrastive to the other textures of the opera. Being less immediate in the ear's perception, minimalist narrative triggers thus put a certain strain on perceptibility and memory.

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