

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dancers on a Grid: Musical Minimalism Arrives at New York City Ballet in 1983

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Abstract

On May 12, 1983, New York City Ballet became the first major ballet company to perform a work to minimalist music: Jerome Robbins's *Glass Pieces*, titled after its score by Philip Glass. The premiere came at a turning point for both minimalism and ballet. The dance world was reeling in the wake of the death of choreographer George Balanchine. Simultaneously, minimalist music was in the process of moving from countercultural avant-garde venues to wealthy, high-status institutions. Although previously minimalist music had helped postmodern choreographers create works that celebrated everyday movement and equality among dancers, for Robbins minimalist music conjured a sense of urban propulsion. In each of the ballet's first two sections, Robbins choreographed to Glass's music in two ways simultaneously: A group from the corps de ballet used the egalitarian techniques from postmodern dance to create a modern urban backdrop, while another group of soloists used virtuosic techniques from modernist ballet. This allowed audiences to shift their focus at any given moment between the anonymity of the corps and the heroic subjectivity of the soloists. In the third section of *Glass Pieces*, Robbins staged a virtuosic group dance for the corps de ballet, using Glass's exoticist music for *Akhnaten* to create an escape from the relentless modernity of the first two sections. Altogether, I argue that *Glass Pieces* is one of the earliest works of contemporary ballet and an important step in minimalist music's transition from its earlier heyday as a music representing countercultural egalitarianism to one representing the modern city.

On May 12, 1983, New York City Ballet (NYCB) premiered Jerome Robbins's *Glass Pieces*, titled after its score by Philip Glass. The work was the first by a major ballet company to feature minimalist music. Its pulsing rhythms, cool performance demeanor, and grid-paper backdrop seemed to set out a bold new path for NYCB, which was reeling from the death of company founder George Balanchine. For decades, both NYCB and American ballet writ large had been dominated by Balanchine's modernist style, grounded in his collaborations with composers such as Igor Stravinsky.¹ In choreographing Glass's music, Robbins not only hitched the company's wagon to a newly minted musical star, but he also established a way of making ballet for this post-Balanchine era. Although Robbins's choice of Glass maintained the centrality of contemporary music to the NYCB aesthetic, the shift from modernism to minimalism signaled a new direction for the ballet.

Most importantly, the change in music necessitated a profound shift in dealing with both time and subjectivity onstage. This happened on very small time scales, as the relentless pulse bound the dance to a machine-like pace, but it also happened on larger time scales, since minimalist music eschewed classical forms and thematic development. To deal with this new style of music, Robbins turned to

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¹Stephanie Jordan, *Stravinsky Dances: Re-Visions across a Century* (Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd., 2007), 158–256; Charles M. Joseph, *Stravinsky and Balanchine: A Journey of Invention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 1–5, 350–52; James Steichen, *Balanchine and Kirstein's American Enterprise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–4.

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the work of New York City's postmodern choreographers. In doing so, he created what I argue is one of the earliest works of contemporary ballet, a genre that has recently been labeled and explored in dance studies by Jill Nunes Jensen and Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel. This period of ballet dates from the early 1980s onward and is, in their words, "rooted in and resistant to tradition."² Jensen and Farrugia-Kriel argue that it is difficult to define contemporary ballet aesthetically, in part because ballet has become global. I agree that contemporary ballet is multifaceted, but I believe that some trends can be identified, especially within a defined set of geopolitical boundaries. I argue that music holds one of the keys to understanding the stylistic shifts in North American and European ballet over the past 40 years. Many contemporary ballets in the United States, Canada, and Western and Central Europe are staged to minimalist or postminimalist music. Concerns around time and subjectivity, which arose first in *Glass Pieces*, are central to the genre today.³

Glass Pieces also represents an early step on the surprising path that minimalist music took during the 1980s. Prior to the mid-1970s, minimalist music, like postmodern dance, was confined to small, avant-garde or visual-art venues and was associated with the U.S. counterculture. In the late 1970s, wealthy, high-status artistic institutions began staging works by minimalist composers, especially Glass and Steve Reich.⁴ These high-status institutions, however, did not hold the same artistic and political philosophies as the minimalist composers working in loft spaces in the Village. Along with the move to Lincoln Center came a resignification of what postmodern artistic techniques could mean. Whereas previously minimalist music had helped postmodern choreographers create works that celebrated everyday movement and equality among dancers, for Robbins and other artists of the 1980s minimalist music created a sense of urban propulsion.⁵ Robbins was not the first person to make this connection. Geoffrey Reggio's environmentalist film *Koyaanisqatsi* had done so a year previously.⁶ Nevertheless, *Glass Pieces* reaffirmed the new ties between minimalism and the modern city. In the process, it established a way of hearing minimalist music that worked for the ballet.

In order to examine this transitional moment in ballet and minimalist music, I have combined archival research with interviews and analysis. In the archive, I have relied on Robbins's papers, including his written analysis of Glass's music. I also interviewed a number of the original cast members, including the work's lead soloists, Maria Calegari and Bart Cook. In addition to being a dancer, Cook was Robbins's longtime repetiteur for *Glass Pieces* and thus had insights into the choreographic process and the difficulties of staging the work. I have combined these sources with an analysis of *Glass Pieces*, particularly paying attention to the ways in which the choreography responds to elements in the music.

²It should be noted that contemporary ballet is distinct from the broader term contemporary dance, which could be wide enough to include contemporary ballet but is more likely to be applied to what I have here called postmodern dance and to the other inheritors of modern dance. In an earlier project, Nunes Jensen and Farrugia-Kriel noted that practitioners tend to define contemporary ballet through its juxtapositions with classical ballet. Dance critic Wendy Perron published interviews with various choreographers in 2014 attempting to define the genre as well. Jill Nunes Jensen and Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel, "Introduction," in *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet*, eds. Jill Nunes Jensen and Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 3; Jill Nunes Jensen and Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel, "A Word from the Guest Editors," in *Conversations across the Field of Dance Studies: Network of Pointes*, eds. Jill Nunes Jensen and Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel (Society of Dance History Scholars volume XXXV, 2015), 4; Wendy Perron, "What Exactly is Contemporary Ballet?" *Dance Magazine*, August 31, 2014, https://www.dancemagazine.com/what_exactly_is_contemporary_ballet/.

³At the end of the article, I give some statistics on the prevalence of minimalist and postminimalist music in ballet.

⁴Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 160–64, 195–98, 285–86, 303–4; Wendy Perron, *The Grand Union Accidental Anarchists of Downtown Dance, 1970–1976* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2020), 48–74; Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn, eds. *Rethinking Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3–4.

⁵Dean Suzuki, "Minimalism in the Time-Based Arts: Dance, Film, and Video," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*, eds. Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll ap Siôn (Farnham, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 109–17; Leah G. Weinberg, "Heavenly Bodies: The Integral Role of Dance in *Einstein on the Beach*," in *Einstein on the Beach: Opera Beyond Drama*, eds. Jelena Novak and John Richardson (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 151–63; Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 144–45; Perron, *The Grand Union*, 321; Lauren DiGiulio, "Disrupting the Grid: Lucinda Childs's Scores for Silent Dances," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 42, no. 2 (May 2020): 21–22.

⁶Rebecca M. Doran Eaton, "Marking Minimalism: Minimal Music as a Sign of Machines and Mathematics in Multimedia," *Music and the Moving Image* 7, no. 1 (March 2014): 6–10.

The Crisis at NYCB

Glass Pieces was, in part, a reaction to the passing of George Balanchine, whose death left an immense power vacuum at NYCB. Robbins began working on the ballet in late 1982 when Balanchine was ill and debuted it only a few weeks after his death on April 30, 1983. During these months, there was concern inside and outside the company about the future of ballet. Balanchine's obituary in the *Washington Post* remarked that "For many of those immersed in the dance world in recent decades, the idea of ballet without George Balanchine has seemed inconceivable."⁷ Cook said that, at the time, NYCB "sort of felt abandoned," and Calegari echoed that the company was "lost."⁸ Much of the responsibility for the organization's future fell to Robbins, who had been one of NYCB's leading choreographers since the 1960s. At the same time, there was a power struggle behind the scenes, as debate raged among board members and the company's administrative director over who would succeed Balanchine. Robbins was one serious candidate, but his rival was Peter Martins, the golden-haired principal dancer whom Balanchine had started to mentor in his final years.⁹

Robbins began his career as a ballet and musical theater dancer during the 1930s and 1940s. His breakout success as a choreographer came with the 1944 *Fancy Free*, to music by Leonard Bernstein, about three sailors on leave in New York City during World War II. Later that same year Bernstein and Robbins expanded the short ballet into the Broadway hit *On the Town*. The theme of modern life in New York City remained central to Robbins's work in both ballet and musical theater for the next decade and a half. This period culminated in 1957 with the musical *West Side Story* and a year later with the ballet *New York Export: Opus Jazz*. His work at NYCB during the later 1960s and 1970s, however, took a turn for the classical. Many of his most successful ballets for the company were abstract works choreographed to the music of J.S. Bach and Frédéric Chopin.¹⁰

Glass Pieces thus represented a return to the themes of Robbins's earlier career but not necessarily a return to its artistic techniques. Instead, Robbins took inspiration from the city's Downtown artistic scene, where Glass had emerged as a major figure in the 1970s.¹¹ Prior to 1976, Glass was considered an avant-garde composer of moderate success. He wrote most of his music for his namesake Philip Glass Ensemble, which performed concerts in small venues like the FilmMakers' Cinémathèque, the Public Theater, Queen's College, and the New School. In 1976, Glass created the opera *Einstein on the Beach* in collaboration with Robert Wilson, and it succeeded beyond all expectations. He followed up this work with two related operas on biographical subjects, *Satyagraha* (1980) and *Akhmaten* (1983).¹² In 1982, the composer released his namesake album *Glassworks*, which sold almost 200,000 copies in 5 years. In the same year, he also garnered attention for *Koyaanisqatsi*.¹³

⁷Alan M. Kriegsmann, "Ballet Choreographer Balanchine Dies at 79," *Washington Post*, May 1, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/05/01/ballet-choreographer-balanchine-dies-at-79/935c71b9-691b-4ab0-8208-f2da54ec961/>.

⁸Bart Cook and Maria Calegari, interview with author, September 17, 2020, via Zoom.

⁹Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 459–65; Amanda Vaill, *Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 482–84.

¹⁰Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins*, 14–52, 84–92, 265–301, 381–88; Vaill, *Somewhere*, 45–65, 99–103, 274–96, 404–22.

¹¹Robbins had turned to the Downtown scene once before, for his 1972 *Watermill*, which was inspired by Japanese Noh Theater, possibly in part filtered through the work of Robert Wilson. *Watermill* thus took a very different approach to the New York Downtown scene from *Glass Pieces* and was choreographed to a commissioned score by Japanese composer Teiji Ito. The piece was booed on opening night and received very mixed reviews from critics. It is also worth noting that *Glass Pieces* was not Robbins's only ballet of the 1983 season. During those months Robbins also set *I'm Old Fashioned* to music from a Fred Astaire film arranged by Hershey Kay, a longtime collaborator for NYCB. This work is a set of variations on both a musical and choreographic theme. In its own way, this work also updated Balanchine's legacy by using theme-and-variations form, a device that he had favored. Like the minimalist music that Robbins turned to in *Glass Pieces*, big band jazz music also became prominent on NYCB programs in the 1980s and 1990s, though it has become a markedly less popular choice since 2000. Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins*, 398–402; Vaill, *Somewhere*, 423–27, 487.

¹²Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 284–86, 303–4; Novak and Richardson, eds., *Einstein on the Beach*, xxv–xxxii; John Richardson, *Singing Archeology: Philip Glass's Akhnaten* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 1–5.

¹³Rebecca M. Doran Eaton, "Minimalist Music and Postminimalist Music in Multimedia: From the Avant-Garde to the Blockbuster Film," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*, eds. Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll ap Siôn (Farnham, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 187–88.

Robbins was well aware of Glass's newfound fame and had for a while been interested in his music. Robbins was friends with Wilson—they were both theater directors—and thus was present for the first, “friends only” performance of *Einstein on the Beach*. Indeed, Robbins was even involved in bringing the work to the Metropolitan Opera House following its European tour, and he likely saw *Satyagraha* twice: In the Netherlands for its premiere run and in the popular 1981 production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.¹⁴ In addition, Robbins regularly attended performances in the Downtown dance scene, where some choreographers used minimalist composition in their works.¹⁵ In 1979, he donated \$500 to help fund *Dance*, a collaboration between Glass, postmodern choreographer Lucinda Childs, and visual artist Sol Lewitt.¹⁶ For all the composer's fame, though, the impetus for the collaboration actually came from Glass, who invited Robbins to direct the American premiere of *Akhmaten*.¹⁷ The two artists met a number of times to discuss the production, but Balanchine's death and the succession problems at NYCB left Robbins without the time to direct an opera.¹⁸ As a result, he turned down the opportunity but decided to use a selection of *Akhmaten* for a new ballet.

Time and Subjectivity in Ballet and Postmodern Dance

The opening of *Glass Pieces* places the ballet in a highly abstracted New York City. An organ and woodwinds play rapid alternating eighth-note runs and triplet arpeggios. In these opening seconds, Glass's music already challenges the traditional style of NYCB choreography as developed by Balanchine. Balanchine created most of his works either to modernist scores by composers such as Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith or to nineteenth-century scores by composers such as Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Johannes Brahms. Music's greatest role in this aesthetic was to regulate time. Balanchine relied on music to provide a clear pulse to unify his dancers, to suggest interesting rhythms, and to give large-scale formal structure to his works. This last point is particularly important because he favored abstract ballets. In Balanchine's works, musical form takes the place of narrative as a way of organizing the viewer's experience. As Balanchine himself put it, “Music puts a time corset on the dance.”¹⁹

Because the music structures time in Balanchine's works, it also gives his abstract choreography a sense of subjectivity. As musicologists Naomi Cumming, Scott Burnham, and Susan McClary have argued, instrumental works can create a sense of character. Time is fundamental to this process. As a musical theme is altered and recollected over the course of the work and as it confronts other musical elements, these changes help create the sense that the theme is a musical person.²⁰ Balanchine's approach to dance–music relationships physicalizes this process. In his choreography, the tight interweaving of choreographic and musical form means that dancers often embody the work's musical

¹⁴Philip Glass, *Words without Music: A Memoir* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2015), 293, 298; Letter sent from Margaret Wood, on behalf of Philip Glass, inviting Jerome Robbins to production of *Satyagraha* in the Netherlands, August 12, 1980, (S) *MGZMD 130, box 508, folder 16, Jerome Robbins Papers, New York Public Library; *Satyagraha* program, (S) *MGZMD 130, box 508, folder 16, Jerome Robbins Papers, New York Public Library. On *Satyagraha*: Sasha Metcalf, “Funding ‘Opera for the 80s and Beyond’: The Role of Impresarios in Creating a New American Repertoire,” *American Music* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 13–15.

¹⁵Bart Cook, interview with author, September 17, 2020, via Zoom.

¹⁶List of Contributions to Dance for Benefit Program, Westbeth Open Rehearsal, June 2, 1979, Centre National de La Danse, Fond Lucinda Childs, 21 CHIL 33/967.

¹⁷Jowitz, *Jerome Robbins*, 463; Letter and book summary, Philip Glass to Jerome Robbins, November 24, 1986, (S) *MGZMD 130, box 508, folder 16, Jerome Robbins Papers, New York Public Library.

¹⁸Vaill, *Somewhere*, 484–85.

¹⁹Stephanie Jordan, “Music Puts a Time Corset on the Dance,” *Dance Chronicle* 16, no. 3 (1993): 295; Stephanie Jordan, *Moving Music: Dialogues with Music in Twentieth-Century Ballet* (London: Dance Books, Ltd., 2000), 3–73, 143–150; Joseph, *Stravinsky and Balanchine*, 2–3. Other choreographers developed similar techniques at the same time as Balanchine, including Fyodor Lopukhov and Leonid Massine. Steichen, *Balanchine and Kirstein's American Enterprise*, 57–60; Elizabeth Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s*, trans. Lynn Visson, ed. and with additional translation by Sally Baner (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 266–77.

²⁰Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 197–240; Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), xvi–xvii, 25–27, 29–30; Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 67–79.

themes.²¹ Robbins also used this type of organization on and off in his works. From the first movement of his 1975 ballet *In G Major* to Maurice Ravel's Piano Concerto in G, for example, appearances of the slower second theme are associated with either one of the two solo dancers dressed in white.

Minimalist music provides a serious challenge to this way of organizing time and subjectivity in dance. The music changes only gradually, with long periods of stasis. There is little or no emphasis on thematic development. Sometimes there is no melody at all.²² Relatedly, theorists have argued that minimalism avoids the type of subjectivity found in earlier modernist music. Keith Potter, for example, considers two of the fundamental traits of musical minimalism to be "the avoidance of previous notions of musical expression, in particular of music being in some sense about the composers themselves" and "the reconsideration of [...] narrativity."²³ Wim Mertens writes that minimalist music avoids teleology and thus narrative.²⁴

Although minimalist music's model of time and subjectivity contrasted sharply with the musical techniques harnessed by Balanchine, it dovetailed well with the methods used by postmodern choreographers. Postmodern dance, as defined by Sally Banes, was a genre of concert dance created in the 1960s and 1970s by a network of artists working around the Judson Dance Theater in New York. Banes tends to define the genre more through artistic networks than philosophy or style, but in general the postmodern choreographers were interested in egalitarianism, natural movement, and self-reflexive theatricality. One of the major goals of postmodern choreographers was to democratize dance by using ordinary movement and avoiding solo roles or virtuosity.²⁵ Yvonne Rainer, who was the major theorist of the movement, wrote an essay in 1965 in which she set out an aesthetic for, as she called it, "minimalist" dance. The cornerstone of the essay is a chart juxtaposing those aspects of traditional dance that postmodern choreographers could abandon and a series of techniques that they could use as substitutions. Rainer argues for the elimination of the "hierarchical relationship of parts," along with "character," "development and climax," and "the virtuosic feat." In their place, she argues for such techniques as "simplicity," "human scale," "equality of parts," and "neutral performance."²⁶

Postmodern choreographers rebelled against the close relationships between music and choreography in both ballet and modern dance. For some of them, music was a concern because it could lead to a sense of subjectivity, theatricality, or hierarchy, which they actively avoided in their works. Many drew from the ideas of choreographer Merce Cunningham, who avoided purposefully arranging simultaneities between his dance and its music. Indeed, in some of his mature works with partner and composer John Cage, each artist created his respective half only to an agreed-upon temporal duration, without any reference to the other's work. Any moment-by-moment interactions between music

²¹Balanchine's methods also draw on techniques from nineteenth-century opera and ballet, in which significant characters are associated with developing leitmotifs. Thomas S. Grey, "Leitmotif, Temporality, and Musical Design in the *Ring*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 93–97; Roland John Wiley, *Tchaikovsky's Ballets: Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, Nutcracker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 74–79, 113–20.

²²In their writings, Reich and Glass exaggerated the degree to which their music was impassive and unchanging, and theorists such as Richard Cohn have demonstrated that this repertoire does engage in melodic and rhythmic change over time. But the basic premise, that minimalist composers and their audiences believed that minimalist music was less invested in thematic development, remains true. Mariusz Kozak, "Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's *Violin Phase* and the Experience of Time, or Why Does Process Music Work?" *Music Theory Online* 27, no. 2 (June 2021) 2.1–2.7; Richard Cohn, "Transpositional Combination of Beat-Class Sets in Steve Reich's Phase-Shifting Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 168–70; Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983), 16–17, 88.

²³Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 6.

²⁴Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 16–17.

²⁵Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 18; Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre, 1962–1964* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), xi–xviii, 85–86; Jose L. Reynoso, "Democracy's Body, Neoliberalism's Body: The Ambivalent Search for Egalitarianism within the Contemporary Post/Modern Dance Tradition," *Dance Research Journal* 51 (April 2019): 49–51.

²⁶Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi-Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*," in *Works 1961–73*, ed. Kasper Koenig (Halifax, NS and New York, 1974), 63, quoted in Suzuki, "Minimalism in the Time-Based Arts," 112.

and dance were then the result of chance.²⁷ Many postmodern choreographers followed in Cunningham's footsteps, some going even further to push music out of their works, particularly as an organizing force. Several choreographers, including Childs, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Douglass Dunn, staged works to partial or complete silence. Others used spoken language as a soundtrack.²⁸ Still others treated all music as interchangeable. For example, sometimes these choreographers would buy a stack of records and allow the stagehands to pick out which record to play—or even whether there would be music at all.²⁹ At one point Rainer even, perhaps jokingly, called herself an “unabashed music hater.”³⁰

For those postmodern choreographers who wanted to use music more actively but who had similar concerns about subjectivity, minimalist composition provided a solution. For example, almost all of Childs' dance works of the 1970s were staged to silence. Her decision to collaborate with Glass and LeWitt for their 1979 *Dance*, and thus to use music and a backdrop at all, was considered a surprising return to theatricality and grandeur. Even *Dance*, however, still complied with the major tenets of Rainer's “minimalist” philosophy, aided in part by the minimalist nature of its score. Glass's music for *Dance* lacks thematic development, and Childs's dancers avoid expression and subjectivity. Every single dancer, male or female, performs the same step vocabulary and no dancer is singled out over the others.³¹ In this work, as well as in her 1984 “Field Dances” for *Einstein on the Beach*, Childs uses organizational techniques similar to those of Glass but not always aligned temporally, so that the dance and musical phrases can match up in very large-scale structures but on a moment-to-moment level move in and out of sync with one another.³² Other postmodern choreographers, including Laura Dean and Meredith Monk, composed their own minimalist scores to match their style of movement.³³

Postmodern Techniques Meet Ballet in *Glass Pieces*

Unlike the postmodern choreographers who inspired him, Robbins did not use minimalist music to create an egalitarian practice. Instead, he seems to have seen the techniques of postmodern dance as a symbol of the modern city. In *Glass Pieces* he interprets the everyday movement from postmodern dance as a sign of contemporary life. Postmodern dance, with its egalitarian ordinariness, is generally given to the corps de ballet. Their movement becomes a background to highlight the virtuosity and expressivity of the soloists. Minimalist music is used to suggest modernity and urbanism rather than democratization. Robbins also ties his dance steps to Glass's music in ways that suggested individual, even heroic, subjectivity.

Glass Pieces is divided into three sections. Within each one, Robbins stages a different relationship between the groups of dancers—corps and soloists—and the music's time schemes (see Table 1).³⁴ In the first section, choreographed to “Rubric” from the album *Glassworks*, the corps uses the techniques of postmodern dance to act as everyday New Yorkers. In front of a graph-paper backdrop, the dancers

²⁷Daniel M. Callahan, “The Gay Divorce of Music and Dance: Choreomusicality and the Early Works of Cage-Cunningham,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 2 (2018): 508–13.

²⁸Sally Banes, “Dancing [with/to/before/on/in/over/after/against/away from/without] the Music: Vicissitudes of Collaboration in the American Postmodern Choreography,” in *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 310–326. Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 30, 82, 190; DiGiulio, “Disrupting the Grid,” 21.

²⁹Perron, *The Grand Union*, 104–6.

³⁰Yvonne Rainer, *Yvonne Rainer: Work 1961–73* (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York: New York University Press, 1974), 111, quoted in Perron, *The Grand Union*, 105.

³¹Film of *Dance*, Centre National de La Danse, Fond Lucinda Childs, 14 CHIL 973.

³²DiGiulio, “Disrupting the Grid,” 21–22; Weinberg, “Heavenly Bodies,” 151–67; “A Look at Lucinda Childs/Philip Glass/Sol LeWitt's Dance,” June 8, 2011, YouTube video, 1:06–1:34, <https://youtu.be/CByoefokGrA>.

³³Elliot Gordon Mercer, “Conceptual Systems: The Dances, Music, and Drawings of Laura Dean,” *Dance Research Journal* 52, no. 3 (December 2020): 27–28. Banes, “Dancing [with/to/before/on/in/over/after/against/away from/without] the Music,” 318, 320.

³⁴These “sections” are movements as in a piece of classical music, but in order to avoid confusion with the dual meaning of the word “movement,” I have chosen to use “section” throughout this article.

Table 1. Summary of Robbins's approach to pulse and long-form development in the three sections of *Glass Pieces*

	Soloists	Corps
Section one	On pulse Development over time	Mostly disregard pulse (until end) Little development until end
Section two	Too slow to emphasize pulse Development	On pulse Little development
Section three	–	On pulse Development

**Figure 1.** NYCB dancers in the opening section of *Glass Pieces*. Photographer: Paul Kolnik. Used with permission.

walk haphazardly across the stage. They are dressed in costumes designed by Ben Benson to evoke a combination of practice outfits and low-key streetwear (Figure 1).³⁵ The corps follow Rainer's plan, rejecting a hierarchical relationship of parts, phrasing, and development, and substituting everyday movement, neutral performance, equality of parts, and uninterrupted movement. They interact very little with the Glass score, and not at all with its pulse. Robbins instructed the dancers to look like commuters in Grand Central Station at rush hour.³⁶ In my interviews with the original cast, a number of dancers agreed that the experience onstage mimicked the experience of living in New York. In original cast member Jock Soto's words, "It's Times Square, it's the subway, people flying... and all the three thousand people that come to the theater, they're doing the same thing, walking quickly to get to a

³⁵For choreographic analysis, I combine experiences viewing the ballet live, in archival recordings at the New York Public Library, and in archival footage of rehearsal, and listening to one recording. See "Archive Sources" in the References section for a complete listing.

³⁶Heléne Alexopoulos, interview with author, September 1, 2020, via Zoom; Carole Divet, interview with author, September 4, 2020, via Zoom.

performance.”³⁷ Fellow original cast member Deborah Wingert emphasized how much Robbins instructed them move ever faster and faster; in fact, the dancers felt so harried that they joked that Robbins was telling them, “Don’t rush—leave later and get there earlier.”³⁸

Nevertheless, these are not Robbins’s only dancers. The soloists use the music in a more traditionally balletic way, with their steps timed to the pulse and individual movements matched to specific gestures in the music. About 40 seconds in, a woman in a metallic yellow unitard leaps onstage, her arms stretched up in a V as she bends her knees deeply. Robbins described the figure as “a steel angel from outer space.”³⁹ Only a few beats later, a man joins her and the two perform a virtuosic duet through the dispersing crowd. They stride forward in deep lunges over sections of music with rising eighth-note patterns, the lines in the music matching the dancers’ forward momentum. To the orchestra’s swirling triplet arpeggios, the dancers perform tight turns, the circular motion mimicking constant upward and downward patterns in the score. Over the course of “Rubric,” as the soloists return, they are joined gradually by two other pairs. In each subsequent section, the soloists build on the movements of the previous ones, creating a sense of thematic development in the gestures.

On a larger formal scale as well, Robbins matches Glass’s work, again drawing on the techniques of modernist ballet. In order to keep track of the score, Robbins created diagrams of the music’s form on graph paper, primarily focusing on changes in the texture.⁴⁰ Each box in the grid represents one half note, approximately one count of the music in dancers’ terms. The diagram is structured so that each row has two sets of counts, usually adding up to four bars per row.⁴¹ Each box is filled with a graphic pattern representing the musical texture being played at that moment. As an example, eighth notes grouped into rising slurred pairs are represented by an ascending dotted line. A wavy line represents a swirling triplet texture. This presumably allowed Robbins to keep the counts and their associated textures in mind, and it reveals some interesting patterns in the music, as when Glass plays with a back and forth between eighth notes and triplets at rehearsals six and seven (Figure 2).

Altogether, Robbins’s graph illustrates the large-scale form of the music as a repeating verse–chorus structure. The choreographer labeled the 32-measure section of music starting at rehearsal three with the word “chorus” and did not diagram its returns in the same level of detail. These chorus sections are characterized by triplet patterns in the organ and woodwinds, underneath which a pair of French horns play long two-note intervals. The long notes of the French horns create the sensation that this is possibly a melody, though if so, it is a very simple melody. Another phantom melody, almost the same as the horns, can be heard in the flute and organ parts. These phantom melodies are subjective, and they depend on the listener to pluck them out of the shifting textures.⁴² I hear them strongly, however, in multiple different performances, and given that Robbins labeled these with the word “chorus,” I imagine that he heard something similar.

In the dance, the corps de ballet perform these choruses, whereas the verse sections are performed by the soloists. Over the course of “Rubric,” the corps moves closer and closer to the style of the soloists by adding more movement timed to the pulse of the music. In the second chorus, the corps

³⁷Jock Soto, interview with author, September 1, 2020, via Zoom.

³⁸Deborah Wingert, interview with author, August 27, 2020, via Facetime.

³⁹Heléne Alexopoulos, interview with author, September 1, 2020, via Zoom.

⁴⁰“Rubric” notes, (S) *MGZMD 182, box 43 folder 11, Jerome Robbins Personal Papers, New York Public Library.

⁴¹Dancers and choreographers usually talk about musical meter in terms of “counts,” sets of pulses that correspond either to the music’s meter or hypermeter, whichever is the easiest pulse to move the body to. Counting out the music helps dancers keep in time and breaking the music into sets of counts helps them memorize the choreography. Counts are often grouped in sets of eights, though when the music does not have a four-by-four hypermetrical structure, counts can be grouped in other units, including sixes and sevens, as they are sometimes in Robbins’s graphs of *Glass Pieces*.

⁴²Kristen Wallentinsen has published on audience propensity to pick out different melodies from the textures of minimalist music, focusing on the works of Steve Reich. Kristen Wallentinsen, “Fuzzy Family Ties: New Methods for Measuring Familial Similarity between Contours of Variable Cardinality,” *Journal of Music Theory* 66, no. 1 (April 2022): 93–128. Scherzinger discusses a similar experience in Steve Reich’s music, a technique that he argues Reich took from south, east, and central African instrumental music. Martin Scherzinger, “Afro-Electric Counterpoint,” in *Rethinking Reich*, eds. Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyl ap Siôn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 263–65.

(a)

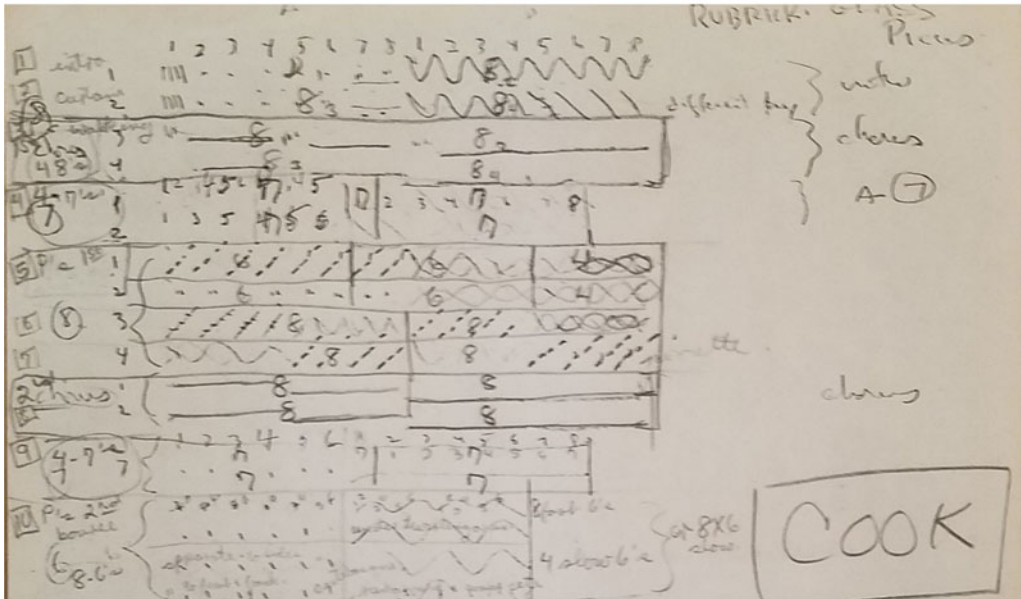
Figure 2(a) shows the musical score for rehearsals 6 and 7 of Philip Glass's "Rubric." The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Saxophone (Sax.), Trumpet (T. Sax.), Horn (Hn.), and Organ (Org.). The second system includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Saxophone (Sax.), Trumpet (T. Sax.), Horn (Hn.), and Organ (Org.). The Organ part is marked with "lucio" and "basso". The score includes rehearsal numbers 6 and 7 in squares at the beginning of the first and second systems, respectively. There are "x4" markings above the Organ staff in the first system and above the Flute, Saxophone, and Trumpet staves in the second system.

Figure 2(b) shows the musical score for rehearsals 6 and 7 of Jerome Robbins's "Rubric." The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Saxophone (Sax.), Trumpet (T. Sax.), Horn (Hn.), and Organ (Org.). The second system includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Saxophone (Sax.), Trumpet (T. Sax.), Horn (Hn.), and Organ (Org.). The Organ part is marked with "lucio" and "basso". The score includes rehearsal numbers 6 and 7 in squares at the beginning of the first and second systems, respectively. There are "x4" markings above the Organ staff in the first system and above the Flute, Saxophone, and Trumpet staves in the second system.

Figure 2. Jerome Robbins's diagram of "Rubric." (a) Philip Glass, "Rubric," rehearsals six and seven. (b) Jerome Robbins's diagram of "Rubric," copy provided by Bart Cook. (c) Close up of Robbins's diagram, rehearsals six and seven, copied by author for clarity. The far left numbers in squares indicate rehearsal numbers in the score. The circled eight refers to the grouping of counts for the section, as do the other eights distributed over the diagram. The free-standing 3 and 4 refer to the third and fourth set of counts for this block of choreography. (a) and (b) are from the personal collection of Bart Cook. Used with permission.

performs a sudden unison turn in the middle of their hectic commute. Later they do a stutter step. When the musical chorus appears for the final time, it is expanded to forty-eight bars, tripling its length. In this conclusion, the corps dancers give up their unmetered walking for metered choreography. The soloists first perform a series of movements and then groups of the corps perform the same steps in canon. By merging the commuters into the more balletic style, Robbins reinforces the sense of formal closure at the end of the section and hints that his allegiance lies with the structural principles of ballet over those of postmodern dance.

(b)



(c)

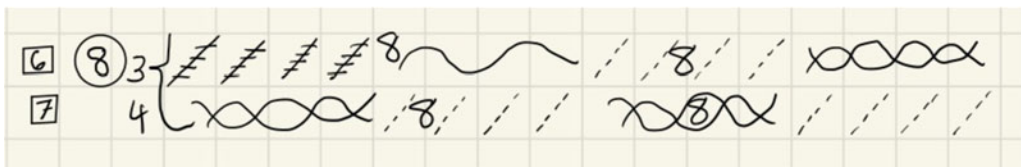


Figure 2. Continued.

In the second section of *Glass Pieces*, Robbins restructures the relationships between corps, soloist, and musical time. The score for this movement, the track “Façades” from *Glassworks*, is much slower paced than “Rubric.” Violas and cellos rock back and forth in triplet patterns, forming a melancholic and nonfunctional harmonic progression. Over cycles of this accompaniment, the soprano saxophones introduce a slow, yearning duet. One saxophone begins with long structural pitches and over the course of a few repetitions adds in faster runs. In the middle of the piece, the saxophones begin to interweave their melodies before fading back into slower material. Despite the somewhat increased surface motion in the middle section of the piece, the melody remains harmonically static and aching, bound by the repetitions of its initial, structural pitches.

As in “Rubric,” Robbins juxtaposes a corps of dancers using more postmodern movements against soloists who maintain balletic movement. Unlike in the first section, it is the corps that is bound to the pulse this time, while the soloists are relatively free of it. The corps de ballet appears from upstage left. The lighting, designed by Ronald Bates, is a deep blue and the corps are backlit so that they appear only in silhouette. They halfheartedly bob forward in time to the music, sometimes turning to shuffle sideways and then reorienting themselves to trudge further across the stage (Figure 3). They perform the same exact steps over and over, only changing their arm movements, which drift up at the elbow in the fourth iteration of the step sequence and then up to their shoulders on the seventh. The choreography is slightly shifted during the middle of the section to ensure that the line is always onstage, moving slowly from left to right, until the lights fade to black at the end. Throughout, they continue both to perform rigidly in time with the pulse and to exhibit a lack of individual subjectivity. Indeed, as



Figure 3. Maria Kowroski and Russell Janzen with the NYCB corps de ballet in section two of *Glass Pieces*. Photographer: Paul Kolnik. Used with permission.

silhouettes performing in unison, it is impossible to distinguish any one of them as an individual. The effect is unsettling; the women seem to be simultaneously an assembly line and its products.⁴³

The section's two soloists, on the other hand, have a much greater sense of subjectivity. Though they are still relatively passive in their facial expressions, their full faces and bodies are illuminated, and their choreography is expressive, even tender at times. Their duet is dominated by long drawn-out extensions and partnered lifts to match the long saxophone melody. The feeling of slow expansion is key to the soloists' movements in "Façades," even in moments of stillness. Calegari, the original female soloist, recalled that they exerted a great deal of effort to hold still in a dynamic manner.⁴⁴

In this section, Robbins merges postmodern dance specifically with the *ballet blanc*, a genre of nineteenth-century ballet in which the action takes place at night, often in the woods or in a dream. The dark blue lighting in "Façades" is similar to that used in the *ballet blanc*. The relationship between the soloists and corps is also the same; a central heterosexual couple is surrounded by dozens of women from the corps de ballet, whose movements echo those of the lead ballerina.⁴⁵ By merging postmodern dance with the *ballet blanc*, Robbins establishes a new meaning for the postmodern techniques of repetition and everyday movement. In postmodern dance, these techniques were strongly associated with an egalitarian and even feminist practice.⁴⁶ In "Façades" the same techniques become hierarchical, a way of differentiating the corps from the virtuosic soloists.

The need to regiment the corps dancers in "Façades" provided the inspiration for the work's grid paper backdrop. During rehearsal, the corps dancers struggled to remember their steps, which contain a number

⁴³Deborah Wingert mentioned something similar in her interview, remarking "sometimes we felt like an assembly line." Deborah Wingert, interview with author, August 27, 2020, via Facetime.

⁴⁴Maria Calegari, interview with author, September 17, 2020, via Zoom.

⁴⁵Sarah Davies Cordova, "Romantic Ballet in France: 1830–1850," in *Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. Marian Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115, 122–23. This may relate more strongly to twentieth-century impressions of nineteenth-century ballet than to nineteenth-century ballet as it really was. Marian Smith, *Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 177–78.

⁴⁶Banes, *Democracy's Body*, xi–xviii, 11–14, 85, 87, 106.

of small but noticeable changes within a highly repetitive framework. Moreover, Robbins played with multiple different versions of the step pattern during the choreographic process, and many dancers had difficulty keeping track of them. Getting it wrong could incur the choreographer's legendary rehearsal anger.⁴⁷ In order to help the corps remember their choreography, Cook made a graphical representation of their part and projected it onto the wall behind the dancers so that they could look at it during rehearsal. When Robbins saw this, he was struck by the image of the corps dancing in front of the graph paper and decided to use a similar graph pattern as the backdrop for the entire ballet.⁴⁸

As a result, the ballet takes place almost literally within a graphical representation of the music and choreography. In making this choice, Robbins followed the example of other minimalist artists, musicians, and choreographers. Childs, for example, whose work Robbins knew well, used grid paper to draft her dances. For her 1979 *Dance*, which juxtaposed a filmed and live version of the same choreography, designer Sol Le Witt projected a wide grid on the film version.⁴⁹ The grid also reflects Glass's music of the 1980s, what Kyle Gann calls "grid postminimalism," a style of postminimalism that placed "every note on a semiquaver or quaver grid."⁵⁰ Like Balanchine's metaphorical corset, the grid is also a technology of discipline. However, although corsets discipline individual bodies, grids discipline larger and often more ineffable things: populations, traffic patterns, large spaces, even information. In this case, the backdrop literally helped order the bodies of the corps de ballet.

The grid in *Glass Pieces* also suggests a larger scope of control, a technology that disciplines not only the bodies of the dancers onstage but all of the modern city. Indeed, the "grid" has specific resonance in the context of New York City, which is famously built on a grid pattern of streets. It seems likely Robbins's decision to use the grid paper as the ballet's backdrop was supposed to resonate specifically with New York. As such, he may have been drawing on the imagery in *Koyaanisqatsi*. During the second half of the film, in a section called "The Grid," Reggio sets Glass's music under time-lapse footage of modern cities, emphasizing fast-moving traffic patterns and bright neon lights.⁵¹ By setting his footage of urban traffic to the sounds of Glass's music, Reggio became one of the first artists, or perhaps the very first, to associate minimalist music's grids with modernity and machines.⁵² In the years since, this association has become very commonplace in film and television. In 1983 when Robbins staged *Glass Pieces*, however, it was still a very new idea.

It is notable that although the dancers may have been mimicking the motions of New York City commuters, they themselves did not look like any type of cross section of the city: All young, highly athletic, and overwhelmingly white in a city with a racially diverse population. As dance scholar Rebecca Chaleff argues, postmodern choreographic interest in ordinary bodies paradoxically meant that they almost exclusively created works for white dancers, because they saw white bodies as unremarkable.⁵³ This is all the more jarring in face of the fact that, as both Brendan Dixon Gottschild and Thomas DeFrantz have argued, the "cool" detached aesthetic central to modernist ballet, postmodern dance, and contemporary ballet alike comes from Black dance forms, as observed by white

⁴⁷Deborah Wingert, interview with author, August 27, 2020, via Facetime. Carole Divet, interview with author, September 4, 2020, via Zoom.

⁴⁸Bart Cook and Maria Calegari, interview with author, September 17, 2020, via Zoom. Prior to this Robbins had considered using Cy Twombly paintings, but negotiations with the artist fell apart. Memo, March 7, 1983; Memo, March 10, 1983; Letter Robbins to Angela [Westwater], April 28, 1983, (S) *MGZMD 182, box 43, folder 3, Jerome Robbins Personal Papers, New York Public Library.

⁴⁹Suzuki, "Minimalism in the Time-Based Arts," 115–16; DiGiulio, "Disrupting the Grid," 21–22. "A Look at Lucinda Childs/Philip Glass/Sol LeWitt's Dance."

⁵⁰Kyle Gann, "A Technically Definable Stream of Postminimalism, Its Characteristics and Its Meaning," in Potter, Gann, and ap Sión, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*, 41.

⁵¹Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 161–62; Mitchell Morris, "Sight, Sound, and the Temporality of Myth Making in *Koyaanisqatsi*," in *Beyond the Soundtrack*, eds. Daniel Ira Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 125.

⁵²Doran Eaton, "Marking Minimalism," 3–6.

⁵³Rebecca Chaleff, "Activating Whiteness: Racializing the Ordinary in US American Postmodern Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 50, no. 3 (December 2018): 73–75, 79–80.

choreographers.⁵⁴ In using these ordinary movements with his largely—though not exclusively—white cast, Robbins reaffirmed the ways that whiteness was seen as ordinary.

In fact, Robbins's ballet only breaks out of its self-conscious modernity in the third section through the balletic language of exoticism. The music in this section, "Akhnaten," comes from the opening funeral scene of Glass's opera of the same name. The score uses exoticist tropes to evoke an ancient Egyptian setting.⁵⁵ It features loud, exposed drumming, which was unusual for Glass's style, and, in his own admittance, totally unrelated to ancient Egyptian music. Instead it creates, in Glass's words, "our' Egypt" (quotation marks in original); an imagined version that appeals to Western imaginations.⁵⁶

Robbins's choreography matches the exoticism of the music. "Akhnaten" opens with a solo for single male dancer running in a wide circle around the stage, as Glass's drums pulse in the background. The soloist that Robbins chose for this moment was Soto, a dancer with Navajo and Puerto Rican parents, and his Native American heritage seems to have played a role in his selection.⁵⁷ As Soto described it in our interview, during the rehearsal process, Robbins grabbed his hand and pulled him to the front corner; Soto was worried that he was in trouble and that Robbins was walking him out of the hall. Instead, Robbins had him run around the stage in a wide circle. Afterward, someone mentioned to Soto that it was a powerful moment because of the dancer's heritage and because at the time Soto had, in his words, "pretty long hair."⁵⁸ Other dancers I spoke to about the ballet also mentioned this solo as a special moment because of Soto.⁵⁹

When the soloist has finished circling the stage, he is joined by two other men, and for another few minutes "Akhnaten" features only male dancers. They pulse in wide lunges, smack their chests, and swing their arms while running, dancing with the inelegant athletic effort that is associated with exotic male characters in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ballets.⁶⁰ Robbins also attempts to draw from ancient Egyptian art by playing with a two-dimensional type of body positioning (Figure 4).

Section three also offers the thematic and musical structure closest to that of modernist ballet. In the beginning, Robbins introduces a few key choreographic gestures—running in an exaggerated bent-over position, jumping forward onto the heel while kicking the back leg up, and holding one hand to the chest with both wrists sharply bent. These are combined and developed over the course of the movement. In other words, this third section features the type of linear thematic development characteristic of Balanchine's and Robbins's earlier work. The choreography in the "Akhnaten" section is also matched to the pulse of the music, though in much less rigid ways than the corps movement of "Façades." Altogether, the combination of group unity and development gives a sense of group subjectivity: That these are identifiable characters but all as one unit, not as individual people. The effect is very different from the mass disorganization of the corps in the first movement or the assembly line

⁵⁴Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 47–79; Thomas F. DeFrantz, "The Race of Contemporary Ballet: Interpellations of Africanist Aesthetics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet*, eds. Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel and Jill Nunes Jensen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 562–80.

⁵⁵Glass had long used techniques from south Asian music, especially additive rhythm, in his music. Before the 1980s, however, he tended to absorb these non-Western techniques into something vaguely marked as Western. *Akhnaten* performs the opposite move, making his music sound markedly other. Allison Welch, "Meetings Along the Edge: Svava and Tåla in American Minimal Music," *American Music* 17, no. 2 (1999): 179–99; Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 270–73. More research has been done on Steve Reich's relationship with non-Western music, race, and exoticism. See Sumanth Gopinath, "Reich in Blackface: *Oh Dem Watermelons* and Radical Minstrelsy in the 1960s," *Journal for the Society of American Music* 5, no. 2 (May 2011): 139–93; Scherzinger, "Afro-Electric Counterpoint."

⁵⁶Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, ed. and with supplementary material by Robert T. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 153, quoted in Paul John Frandsen, "Philip Glass's 'Akhnaten,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (1993): 245.

⁵⁷Anna Kisselgoff, "Not Only a Partner, a Dynamic Interpreter," *New York Times*, June 18, 2005.

⁵⁸Jock Soto, interview with author, September 1, 2020, via Zoom.

⁵⁹Deborah Wingert, interview with author, August 27, 2020, via Facetime; Heléne Alexopoulos, interview with author, September 1, 2020, via Zoom.

⁶⁰Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 32–35. As an example, Michel Fokine's setting of the "Polovtsian Dances" from Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor* features men who jump vigorously onstage and wave their arms, none of this in a classical body position.



Figure 4. Unusual reference to Egyptian artistic figures in ballet. Note the head tilt to the side, with the torso facing the audience. NYCB dancers in *Glass Pieces*, section three. Photographer: Paul Kolnik. Used with permission.

in the second movement. The corps seemed to have appreciated it, particularly the men in the corps, who at NYCB often get much less active dancing than the women.⁶¹

By using exoticism to free his dancers from modernity, Robbins taps into a phenomenon pinpointed by musicologist Phil Ford in his article “Taboo.” In his research on 1950s exotica, Ford argues that exoticism functioned as a way for people living in a self-consciously modern society to express their longing for an imagined other world. Indeed, by indulging in this longing, exotica listeners were not only able to maintain their sense of a modern self, but also to strengthen it. Moreover, as Ford argues, members of the 1960s counterculture were equally obsessed with this exotic escapism, despite their own self-proclaimed horror of it. In other words, as Ford and others have pointed out, exoticism reinforces, even creates, modernity.⁶² “Akhnaten,” for all its seeming incongruity with the first two sections of *Glass Pieces*, does the same work as the rest of the ballet. It creates an exotic escape valve from the self-conscious modernism of “Rubric” and “Façades,” and in doing so reinforces the sense of modernity present in the first two sections. It allows the viewer to indulge in the same fantasy as 1950s exotica, and as the *Rite of Spring* before that, and *La Bayadère* before that. It is a fantasy of being a person in another world; one who does not need to rush to the subway in order to get to work and perform a grindingly repetitive job. In creating this fantasy, however, “Akhnaten” reinforces the difference between this imagined world and the present. The lights go down on the dancers stretching their arms to the sky in group triumph, and the audience applauds with wild abandon. Then they go back out onto Lincoln Center Plaza and rush to catch their subway train, perhaps just a little more conscious of the modern nature of their lives.

⁶¹Jock Soto, interview with author, September 1, 2020, via Zoom; Justin Peck, “Justin Peck on *Glass Pieces*: Anatomy of a Dance,” September 24, 2016, YouTube video, 1:53–2:19, <https://youtu.be/VVwUZPqPv5Y>.

⁶²Phil Ford, “Taboo: Time and Belief in Exotica,” *Representations* 103, no. 1 (2008): 110–11, 121–22, 125–26.

Glass Pieces and the Creation of Contemporary Ballet

Glass Pieces was a turning point for Robbins, the company, and ballet more broadly. It demonstrated that NYCB could move past Balanchine and create a new style that vividly depicted present-day New York. Clive Barnes wrote in his review of the ballet “[Robbins] is a poet of the instant.”⁶³ The opening performance was greeted by tremendous applause. Calegari and Cook, too, described the sense of relief they felt at the ballet’s premiere. Cook said that “after the tragedy of losing our captain [Balanchine]” he felt that there was a sense that “this [was] a big success and we [were] safe.”⁶⁴ When the company took *Glass Pieces* on a European tour later that year, *International Herald Tribune* critic David Stevens remarked that the entire program was “a kind of manifesto, a promise of continuity and a commitment to renewal.”⁶⁵

This shift in form and style helped set the stage for contemporary ballet. In the following two decades, choreographers at NYCB and elsewhere turned again and again to minimalist and postminimalist music, though Robbins himself used the style only once more, in the markedly less successful 1985 ballet *Eight Lines* to Steve Reich’s 1983 *Octet*.⁶⁶ Although this trend dropped off slightly in the 2000s, it returned in the 2010s, particularly as NYCB strengthened its ties to the indie classical scene in Brooklyn.⁶⁷ Today, North American and European ballet stages are dominated by minimalist and postminimalist music, from Akram Khan’s collaboration with Jocelyn Pook for English National Ballet to Justin Peck’s choreographic debut at NYCB to music by Glass.

The genre of contemporary ballet has continued to rely not just on minimalist music but on the interpretation of minimalist music as the sound of modernity. *New York Times* critic Anna Kisselgoff reacted particularly strongly to the premiere of *Glass Pieces* in 1983, writing in her review that “It is a picture of our systematized times—the electronic age, the computer age. And it is always, through its very formal structure, a metaphor for the human striving to survive this systematization, itself self-willed by humans.”⁶⁸ That sense of systematization is closely related to the interplay between dance, music, and time in *Glass Pieces*. The grid that surrounds the ballet represents the undifferentiated time within Glass’s music: Relentlessly even in pulse, relentlessly non-developmental in theme. There is something terrifying about the depiction of human civilization as a grid, about the endless undifferentiated squares that are the backdrop to *Glass Pieces*. They speak to the more disturbing side of postmodern dance, the notion that there is an average human who can be smoothed out like a statistic.

However, *Glass Pieces* demonstrates not just one impulse from minimalist music but two. One impulse leans toward anonymity: the desubjectified masses of postmodern dance. The other leans toward heroic subjectivity, embodied in the soloists of the first two sections and the corps in the third section. As the dancers move inside the grid, they alternately align themselves with its time structures absolutely—Kisselgoff’s systematization—or move away from it to produce some other sense of subjectivity. By claiming a similarity between all humans, Robbins leans in the same direction as the postmodern choreographers did, asserting that every human is equally ordinary and thus equally

⁶³Clive Barnes, “Robbins and Mikhail: the Best of Times for Dance Lovers,” *New York Post*, May 13, 1983.

⁶⁴Bart Cook, interview with author, September 17, 2020, via Zoom.

⁶⁵David Stevens, “Jerome Robbins: City Ballet’s ‘Senior Advisor’ Rides the Crest of a Sustained Creative Wave,” *International Herald Tribune*, September 29, 1983.

⁶⁶Reich’s 1983 score *Octet* was a revised version of his 1979 work, titled *Eight Lines* like the later ballet. Anna Kisselgoff, “Dance View: Jerome Robbins Continues a City Ballet Tradition,” *New York Times*, February 24, 1985. Twyla Tharp and William Forsythe, two of the most widely acknowledged founders of contemporary ballet, both worked with minimalist music. Tharp choreographed her 1986 ballet *In the Upper Room* to Glass’s music. Moreover, though early contemporary ballet choreographer William Forsythe’s long-time collaborator Thom Willems is rarely characterized as a minimalist composer, his spare sound worlds, use of repetition, and relatively even pulse all place his work in conversation, at the very least, with Glass.

⁶⁷Almost one quarter of the ballets staged at NYCB from 1983 to 2020 used minimalist or postminimalist music. Many of the works that are not set to minimalist music are set to related styles of music, especially highly repetitive (and dryly played) eighteenth-century music or cyclic types of popular music. “The Repertory,” New York City Ballet, accessed May 2020, <https://www.nycballet.com/discover/ballet-repertory/>.

⁶⁸Anna Kisselgoff, “Ballet: World Premiere, Robbins’s ‘Glass Pieces,’” *New York Times*, May 14, 1983.

deserving of attention. At the same time, by reasserting hierarchy he also leaves space for audiences to feel their own subjectivity in the ballet. Wingert noted that “Façades” could reflect a positive sense of anonymity in New York: “you can walk out on the street and never run into someone you know ... [W]e’re all part of the same energy and structure and culture and life but we each have our own ... protection, that’s why we live here so that we can be what we want to be.”⁶⁹

Minimalist music created the space for both the anonymization and the celebration of the individual in contemporary ballet by facilitating two different types of hearing. In one, the listener notices the music as a marker of long sections of time but does not pay close attention to its contents, letting the sound wash over them. In the other, the listener attunes to small changes over time, to emergent melodies, and to the driving pulse. Because of the contrast between these two different positions, the audience can choose to move back and forth between the two, mimicking the experience of moving through a subway station at rush hour, both a cog in a mindless machine and an individual hurrying toward a train.

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⁶⁹Deborah Wingert, interview with author, August 27, 2020, via Facetime. Similarly, current dancer Russell Janzen remarked in a promotional video for NYCB that “There is kind of an impersonal way that people move through the city, especially in the in-between spaces. And you’re all leading these very separate existences but sharing space. And I think Robbins really captured that in *Glass Pieces*.” nycballet, “NYC Ballet’s Russell Janzen on *Glass Pieces*,” May 1, 2018, YouTube video, 1:25–1:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCxKlB1skQA>.

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