

Opposites Attract: Narrative Degree of Minimalist Music in Philip Glass's Operas *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Les enfants terribles*

Carolien Van Nerom

Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Research Foundation Flanders (FWO)

Background in literary studies. Narrativity as a trait is no longer considered as bound to novels only. With postclassical narratology and the concept of narrativity as a quality that is subject to gradations (see Ryan, Abbott) came a broader application of narratological terms to narratives in several media, including graphic novels, film, as well as music. In the latter field, however, assessments of narrativity have limited themselves to applying structuralist theories that are often reductive. Taking Ryan's transmedial definition of narrative as a starting point, this article aims to forego such a narrow analytical approach.

Background in music analysis. Harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic development are of importance when it comes to constructing a narrative plot via music. However, analyses of musical narrativity are often restricted to a discussion of melodic traits. For minimalist music, this barely scratches the surface of the music's narrative potential as the additional importance of repetition is not at all limited to melody.

Aims. The main goal is to show the narrativity of the opera music by minimalist composer Philip Glass. Additionally, the interaction between libretto and music is under scrutiny. To present how Glass's minimalist style is narrative the corpus consists of two operas with libretti based on novels. Furthermore, the aim here is to demonstrate how and why the opera music under analysis is varied in narrative degree.

Main contribution. By analysing operas composed by Glass I show how a minimalist style can contribute to the narrativity of the entire opera. Although scholars have implemented narratological schemata to analyse music (e.g. Micznik, Tarasti), minimalist music is seldom a subject. Moreover, music is often presented as having a narrator role (e.g. Larner, Maus) while the focus of analysis here is the interaction between language (libretto) and music in depicting both characters and setting.

Narratological concepts are used and tested as a hermeneutic approach to discussing music's meaning-making processes. Following Ryan's definition of narrative plot, I show how the narrative elements of characters, and spatial setting are evoked by the opera music. Additionally, it becomes clear how Glass's compositions can vary in narrative degree. To do so, the corpus consists here of two operas that are based on two diverse novels. Moreover, the example operas also represent a late and an early work by Glass: *Waiting for the Barbarians* was first performed in 2005, and *Les enfants terribles* in 1996.

Implications. The hermeneutic approach to the narrativity of music shows that narratological concepts can be useful in the description of music's communicative functions. The implication for minimalist music is that it can carry a narrative meaning in opera.

Keywords: Narrativity, Minimalist Music, Philip Glass, Characters, Spatial Setting, Opera.

- *Correspondence:* Carolien Van Nerom, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (FWO), Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussel; e-mail: carolien.van.nerom@vub.be
- *Received:* 15 March 2019; *Revised:* 30 November 2019; *Accepted:* 11 January 2020
- *Available online:* 3 March 2020
- doi: 10.4407/jims.2019.12.001

Introduction

The debate surrounding music's story-telling qualities is a long-standing one. Although sometimes particularly equated with programmatic music, musical narrativity is a very broad field and can be found in both purely instrumental music as well as text-accompanied music such as *lieder*, operas, or oratorios. Although efforts in musical analysis to incorporate narrative theory have increased since the 1990s,¹ the majority of analyses still takes its examples from the classical and romantic era exclusively.² Building on existing but few exceptions to the predominance of classical and romantic examples, I here seek to fuel discussions about music's narrative potential via the contemporary operatic oeuvre by minimalist composer Philip Glass.³ The American minimalist school, positioning itself opposed to the formalistic ideals of the second Viennese school, is mostly known for its anti-narrative compositions. Minimalist music might be defined as repetitive, motivic music with a goal of disrupting existing Western hierarchic traditions with regard to rhythm, harmonic development, and melodic development. Because of an avoidance of traditional Western modes of musical tension, minimalist composers generally write music that is non-narrative.⁴ This is true to varying degrees but is especially noticeable in the earlier works of minimalists. Moreover, the later output of minimalist composers begs the question whether music can indeed be absolutely non-narrative. The scope of this article does not allow for these elaborate discussions. Suffice it here to say that at least the goal of minimalist composers is to reduce music's narrative quality as much as possible. In reality, this object proves harder to achieve. In fact, a back-and-forth motion between minimalist, experimental pieces and what have been termed post-minimalist (i.e. less experimental,

¹ Consider, for example, the research outcomes supported and contextualised by the International Association for Word and Music Studies, founded in 1997.

² E.g.: Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005);

Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation and Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994);

Vera Micznik, "Music and Narrative Revisited: Degrees of Narrativity in Beethoven and Mahler," *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 126, no. 2 (2001): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3557481>;

Eero Tarasti, "Music as narrative Art," in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed.

Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

³ Exceptions include e.g.: Michael Halliwell, "Communicating from the Margins: Postcolonial Themes in *Voss* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*," *Musicology Australia* 32, no. 1 (2010):

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08145851003793994>;

Michael Halliwell, "Vocal Embodiment and Performing Language in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: Philip Glass's Adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's Novel," in *Word and Music Studies: Essays on Performativity and on Surveying the Field*, eds. Walter Bernhart, and Michael Halliwell (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2011);

Bryan Karetnyk, "Staging *Lolita* (and 'Saving' Humbert): Nabokov, Shchedrin and the Art of Adaptation," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 94, no. 4 (2016):

<http://doi.org/10.5699/slaveastorev2.94.4.0601>.

⁴ Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, trans.

J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983);

Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

perhaps more narrative) pieces can be discerned in most minimalists' oeuvres.⁵ Glass's opera music for example evolved over the years towards a more common-practice conception of opera.⁶ Although Glass himself does not consider his later works as minimalist, his music is still profoundly informed by the early days of minimalism.⁷ Regardless of how the composer sees himself, Glass's idiosyncratic style is still very far removed from classical or romantic works. It is therefore an interesting case study to demonstrate the narrative potential of music.

While the prevailing body of research of musical narrativity highlights music's capacity as narrator or commentator this is just the tip of the veil for music's narrative functions.⁸ Indeed, a large amount of narratological theorists concern themselves with a broad spectrum of narrative functions that might be fulfilled transmedially and not just by those specific processes tied to novels. Herman and Vervaeck for example posit an overview of narrative terms with exemplary illustrations from novels exclusively.⁹ Still, they explicitly mention the possibility for other art forms such as music to be narrative. Abbott, basing himself partly on Ryan who defines narrative as a transmedial given,¹⁰ considers the concept of narrativity to be applicable to any medium including those that do not inherently communicate through language.¹¹ Applications of narrative models to music have taught us that, though having a narrative potential, the musical processes that account for that narrativity are of course different in nature than those in novels. By means of examples from Glass's operas *Waiting for the Barbarians* (first performed in 2005) and *Les enfants terribles* (first performed in 1996), this article presents musical

⁵ Tristian Evans, *Shared Meanings in the Film Music of Philip Glass: Music, Multimedia and Postminimalism* (London: Routledge, 2016);

Rob Haskins, "Another Look at Philip Glass: Aspects of Harmony and Formal Design in Early Works and *Einstein on the Beach*," *Journal of Experimental Music Studies* (September 2005), <http://www.users.waitrose.com/~chobbs/haskinsglass.html>.

⁶ Arved Ashby, "Minimalist Opera," in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005);

Allan Kozinn, "Glass's *Satyagraha* (1986)," in *Writings on Glass: Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, eds. Richard Kostelanetz, and Robert Flemming (New York, NY: Schirmer Books, 1997).

⁷ William Duckworth, "Minimalists: Philip Glass (b. Baltimore, 1937)," in *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers* (Lebanon, IN: Da Capo Press, 1999);

Philip Glass, *Words Without Music: A Memoir* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2016).

⁸ E.g.: Michael Halliwell, "Narrative Elements in Opera," in *Word and Music Studies: Defining the Field*, edited by Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher, and Werner Wolf (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999);

James Lerner, "Music as Narrator: Mahler, Mussorgsky, and Beethoven in Visconti's *Death in Venice*," *College Music Symposium* 49/50 (2009/2010): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41225265>;

Fred Everett Maus, "Music as Narrative," *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24045349>.

⁹ Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Marie-Laure Ryan, introduction to *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

¹¹ H. Porter Abbott, "Narrativity," *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn, et al., January 20, 2014, Accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/27.html>.

strategies that give rise to the narrative.¹² The focus here goes beyond narratorship, specifically covering the evocation of characters as well as spatial settings.

Waiting for the Barbarians is an allegorical tale of a Magistrate who works an administrative job in a settlement of the Empire. No further details are given as to which Empire, or when this takes place which results in a narrative with a morale that reverberates on a general, allegorical level – something I discuss in detail below. The Magistrate has been living in this settlement for a considerable time, giving him the opportunity to go in search of the barbarians' history in the outskirts around the settlement's boundaries. Getting to know the barbarians by virtue of historical artefacts makes him increasingly doubt the purpose and validity of their actions as oppressors. Moreover, he gradually starts to question the image the Empire is painting of the barbarians. When an empirical squad is sent to assess the settlement's productivity as well as bring warnings of a barbarian attack, the Magistrate finds it hard to believe that the barbarians are as violent as portrayed.

Les enfants terribles tells the story of siblings Élisabeth and Paul who are confined to their house in France because of Paul's weak disposition. They play theatrical games in an attempt at fleeing from reality and from society's general disapproval of their borderline incestuous relationship. When love interests for both characters are introduced to the story in the shape of Gérard and Agathe, the siblings have a hard time dealing with these interlopers to their game. Although both Élisabeth and Paul ultimately try to build an independent and more mature life away from each other, in the end they are drawn to each other in a final escape game by committing suicide.

Presumably, opera music is more narrative than purely instrumental music. This can be attributed to a number of factors including opera's history as stemming from the dramatic arts, its incorporation of language (libretto), or its use of different media on stage (e.g. text in superscript, body language, sound, décors, or other visual projections) that shape the narrative.¹³ Another factor influencing opera's narrativity in these specific case studies is their adaptation history. Both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Les enfants terribles* by Glass are examples of operas with libretti based on novels – the eponymous novels by respectively J. M. Coetzee and Jean Cocteau.¹⁴ Although novels can also be or attempt to be non-narrative, it is clear from literary criticism as well as reviews that the novels above are narrative.¹⁵ Because both operas have a similar

¹² Philip Glass, and Christopher Hampton, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Philharmonisches Orchester Erfurt, Opernchor des Theaters Erfurt, conducted by Dennis Russell Davies, Orange Mountain Music, 2008, CD & booklet;

Philip Glass, and Susan Marshall, *Les enfants terribles*, conducted by Karen Kemensek, Orange Mountain Music, 2005, CD & booklet.

¹³ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, new and revised ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1988); Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 2004); Jean Cocteau, *Les enfants terribles*, 56th ed. (1925; Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 2016).

¹⁵ Think for example of the modernist avant-garde writing scene with James Joyce's publications such as *Ulysses* (1922) or *Finnegans Wake* (1939) as examples of novels with a high threshold for narrative

narrative potential that is in part due to the similarity in adaptation process, it is possible to draw conclusions as to their respective narrative degrees. Particularly, it is clarified why the music in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is less profoundly narrative than in *Les enfants terribles*. It is assumed here that the former has a lower degree of narrativity because it is based on an allegory. As such, *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Coetzee offers fewer narrative components that are also less specific or detailed than those in *Les enfants terribles* by Cocteau. This is because the allegorical meaning of the story (i.e. the abstract succession of events) in *Waiting for the Barbarians* should be the focal point rather than the specifics on the discourse level (i.e. the events as they are presented in the novel).¹⁶ Throughout the article I use examples from Glass's operas to illustrate that both the quantitative and the qualitative differences in narrative degree of the novels have their effect on the operas' narrative degree.

Narrative building blocks

To assess the degree of narrativity, Marie-Laure Ryan's definition of narrative leads this discussion because she considers it as a concept that might be achieved through any medium. Thus, what constitutes narrative is in fact also attainable in opera music. According to Ryan, a narrative script should feature three minimal elements:

1. A narrative text must create a **world** and populate it with **characters** and objects. ...
2. The world referred to by the text must undergo **changes of state** that are caused by nonhabitual physical **events** These changes create a temporal dimension and place the narrative world in the flux of history.
3. [An] **implicit [interpretive] network** gives coherence and intelligibility to the physical events and turns them into a plot.¹⁷

The first and third elements or building blocks, namely the narrative world and characters and the implicit network, are the focal point of this article. While the former components are easily identified on the explicit surface layer, the implicit network Ryan mentions is usually something that takes shape in the reader's mind. Chronology for example needs to be constructed by the reader in stories that feature flash-forwards or flash-backs. A thematic thread is another example of a construction that needs to be noticed and tied together by the reader. Thus, in this case study, examples of musical elements that make up the narrative texture of both space and characters are discussed

interpretation. Both examples push the limits of literary convention and form which makes them complex and puts more strain on the reader's interpretative processes.

¹⁶ The distinction between story and discourse level is based on Gérard Genette's narrative theory. For a more detailed description of these concepts see e.g. Herman, and Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* or James Phelan, "Narrative Theory, 1966-2006: A Narrative," in *The Nature of Narrative*, revised and expanded 40th anniversary ed., eds. Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 283-336.

¹⁷ Ryan, introduction to *Narrative Across Media*, 8-9 (emphasis added).

along the lines of ‘oppositions’. Note here that several implicit networks, or thematic threads, are possible since the perception or construction of coherence is varied and continues to change during the interpretation of a story. Making sense of a story is always a multi-layered cognitive activity. ‘Oppositions’ as one of the governing principles that push forward the operatic narrative is quite justified by both operas. Ample examples of opposition, such as the colonisers versus the barbarians in *Waiting for the Barbarians* or the game versus reality in *Les enfants terribles*, are offered as examples below.

Comparing musical elements from both operas regarding characters and created world or spatial setting, it becomes clear that *Les enfants terribles*, more so than *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is an opera with explicit and prolific elements guiding the narrative. This might be attributed to the generic design of the respective novels on which the operas are based. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is considered an allegory.¹⁸ In an allegory, the surface story stands for a more general truth.¹⁹ Indeed, Coetzee’s novel itself suggests it should be read as an allegory as it unambiguously refers to allegorical reading. In the following quote, the Magistrate describes the historical artefacts he found and ponders their socio-cultural function:

[The wooden slips] form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of the Empire – the Old Empire, I mean.²⁰

In Coetzee’s postcolonial allegory, “the authority of the past” or former ideologies of ‘Empire’ are questioned.²¹ Because the deeper-lying, more abstract meaning-layer is of more importance in allegorical texts than “the surface, literal meaning,” the allegorical mode of writing can be quite unspecific or abstract.²² Characters for example are not a specific person with a detailed description but instead go by the name of that which they stand for (e.g. Justice, Revenge, or Sleep).²³ In other cases, the name given to a character might be common enough but also points towards his or her defining feature

¹⁸ By e.g.: Afaf Ahmed Hasan Al-Saidi, “Post-colonialism Literature the Concept of *self* and the *other* in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*: An Analytical Approach,” *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 5, no. 1 (January 2014): <https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.5.1.95-105>;

Teresa Dovey, “*Waiting for the Barbarians*: Allegory of Allegories,” in *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, eds. Graham Huggan, and Stephen Watson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996);

Stephen Slemon, “Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23, no. 1 (March 1988): <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198948802300115>;

Jean-Philippe Wade, “The Allegorical Text and History: J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* Opsoimming,” *Journal of Literary Studies* 6, no. 4 (1990): <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564719008529955>.

¹⁹ Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory*, The New Critical Idiom, ed. John Drakakis (London & New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

²⁰ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 122.

²¹ Slemon, “Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History,” 158.

²² Tambling, *Allegory*, 34.

²³ Tambling, *Allegory*, 9-12.

or the ethical meaning a character personifies. For example, in one of the most famous allegories in British literary history – Paul Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Process* (1678) – the name of the main character ‘Christian’ shows that this character is in fact a personification of devotedness to Christianity. So too do Coetzee’s mostly unnamed characters and spaces point towards a more general truth about colonial regimes and treatment of ‘the other’. The spatial setting of an unspecified ‘Empire’ is also indicative of the novel’s allegorical nature. Additionally, the technique of opposing dream spaces to ‘real’ spaces (see also below) explored in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a well-used red flag for an allegorical tale.²⁴

Contrarily, *Les enfants terribles* is a novel with very specific characters as well as spaces with detailed descriptions. In fact, a substantial number of narrative details are references to Cocteau’s own life.²⁵ Hence it is not surprising that Cocteau proffers abundant specific elements (e.g. items owned by the main characters or place names) that individualise *Les enfants terribles*.

In sum, both characters and spatial settings are less precisely delineated in Coetzee than in Cocteau. The main character of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, for example, is unnamed and goes by his job title ‘the Magistrate’ while Cocteau’s characters are named and have distinct personalities. Élisabeth is self-assured and manipulative while her brother Paul is introverted and kind. On the one hand, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is set in a colonial setting that is unspecified. The deliberate indistinctness on Coetzee’s part enhances the allegorical character of his novel. On the other hand, a narrative space is clearly delineated in *Les enfants terribles*: the story is set in France, in a village called Monthiers which is an inspiration that Cocteau took from his own childhood.²⁶

The libretto displays the same difference in narrative degree as the novels and Glass’s music also shows those generic differences in composition. Where the music is sometimes viewed as literally underscoring the libretto in operas, the following examples show that music is not secondary to text. Rather, music can play an independent role in consolidating the operatic narrative and offers narrative building blocks that the libretto not always necessarily does. Additionally, the examples point out that the less narrative the source text and consequently the libretto are, the less narrative the music also is. Indeed, not only is *Waiting for the Barbarians* less detailed in terms of characters’ names and space names than *les enfants terribles* libretto-wise, it also offers fewer and less conspicuous examples of musical constituents that construct the narrative. The operas as a whole thus end up on a different place in the spectrum of narrative degree.

²⁴ Examples of allegories in the form of a dream are, amongst others, *The Romance of the Rose* (13th century), or *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) (see Tambling, *Allegory*, 7).

²⁵ Jennifer Hatte. *La langue secrète de Jean Cocteau: La mythologie personnelle du poète et l’histoire cachée des enfants terribles*, *Modern French Identities* 47, ed. Peter Collier (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

²⁶ Hatte, *La langue secrète de Jean Cocteau*.

Characters and their interconnectedness

The main characters of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate and Colonel Joll, are clearly opposed to each other. The former holds an administrative and financial position in a colonial settlement but is having doubts about the settlement's role in the uprooting of the indigenous people. While the Magistrate is thus a personification of change and evolution, Joll sticks rigidly to his colonial state-of-mind. In the novel, visual markers point towards Colonel Joll's adherence to the colonial institutions: he always wears dark sunglasses as a sign of his disinterest in the fate of the so-called barbarians. Because he darkens and veils his vision literally, it is clear that figuratively he is not capable of change. Musically, Glass also highlights this by adding an accent to the final note of the musical line on the Magistrate's part, when in Act 1 Scene 1 he sings: "Can you really see with those things?"²⁷ In this case, the music encourages the audience to focus on a textual marker of Joll's appearance that can also be understood metaphorically.

Additionally, Glass puts forward the opposition of Joll and the Magistrate by contrasting the level of affect present in their singing lines. Also in Act 1 Scene 1, when the Magistrate is first introduced to Colonel Joll, the Magistrate's register is more widespread than Joll's translating into an emotional unbalance. After they meet, two captives from outside of the settlement are roughly questioned by Joll. To show his disquiet, the Magistrate asks the Colonel about his questioning tactic:

MAGISTRATE: If I were to lie to you, would you always be able to tell?

JOLL: That's different. I'm speaking of a specific situation. In there I'll know if he's lying. And, if he is, I simply push him till he breaks and tells the truth.

MAGISTRATE: And the pain is...

JOLL: Truth.

MAGISTRATE: Can you really see with those **things**?

JOLL: Clearer than you. I guarantee I can see clearer than you.²⁸

During this conversation, the Magistrate's emotional involvement is clear because of the movement in his musical lines. In contrast, Joll often sings in a flatlined voice and repeats the same pitches. In this particular dialogue for example, the Magistrate reaches his highest pitch (Eb) on the word "pain," voicing his emotional involvement. Conversely, Joll remains below that pitch and sings no particular outliers. Especially in the last line the repetitiveness in Joll's voice is clear:

²⁷ Glass, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 6.

²⁸ Glass, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 6 (emphasis added).

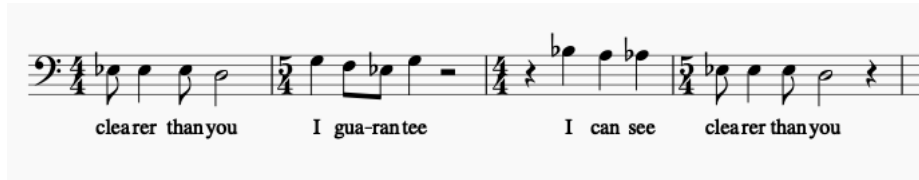


Figure 1. Joll's singing voice in Act 1 Scene 1 in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (New York, NY: Dunvagen Music Publishing, 2006).

Joll not only reiterates his words, he also echoes the tone of those words. In essence, I must conclude he is convinced of his opinion in the matter and is clearly not going to retract his decisions concerning the captives whom he later imprisons. Clearly, these are narrative elements that cannot be conveyed by mere dialogue. The music here serves as a marker of the character's emotional engagements and political stances.

Interestingly, Glass also uses repetition as a musical technique in *Les enfants terribles*, though to a different end. The difference between Élisabeth, the main character, and Gérard, who has a crush on nefarious Élisabeth, is painfully obvious in Scene 17:

ELISABETH: Je te somme de ne plus me regarder d'un œil languide;
d'épouser Agathe et de ne pas dévoiler le rôle que je joue. C'est toi
qui m'y forces.

GERARD: C'est inouï.

ELISABETH: Alors, voilà du bon travail. Allez, couche toi. Je vais chez
Agathe lui annoncer la nouvelle. Tu l'aimes et la folie des
grandeurs te grisait. Réveille toi, et félicite toi. Et embrasse moi. Et
avoue que tu es l'homme **le plus heureux du monde**.

GERARD: **Puisque tu me le demandes.**²⁹

Specifically, by using repetition of musical motifs in their alternating voices, it becomes clear who is the dominant and who is the more subservient character. Because Gérard repeats Élisabeth's vocal melodic line – going upwards, then downwards – at the end of their conversation, it is clear that he idolises Élisabeth and will do anything she asks.

²⁹ Glass, *Les enfants terribles* (sic; emphasis added).

Élisabeth

Et av - oue que tu es l'hom - me le plus heu-reux du mon-de

Gérard

Puis-que

É.

G.

tu me le de - man - des

Figure 2. Exchange between Élisabeth and Gérard in Scene 17 of *Les enfants terribles* (New York, NY: Dunvagen Music Publishers, 1996).

When Gérard repeats the motif, it is in the higher pitches of his tenor voice while Élisabeth before sang in the lower regions of her soprano register. This suggests that Gérard has more female characteristics, such as meekness, subservience, or subordination, than his female counterpart Élisabeth. Additionally, the slight alteration in Gérard's motif offers less changes in pitch since Élisabeth revolves around the D while Gérard immediately offers a downward motion. This sounds effectively like a character robotically repeating what his superior just voiced. Although Gérard is the narrator of the opera (he speaks in between and during scenes), he evidently does not pull the strings in this one-sided relationship.

To branch out from the narrator's point of view, novels often use varied focalisation as a technique, namely using different characters as perceiving agents.³⁰ As we cannot access the mind of the opera singers in terms of language, as the novel would, the music often discloses what is going on in the minds of perceiving agents in *Les enfants terribles*. For example, Élisabeth's manipulative nature goes hand in hand with lying and secrets that only she herself is aware of. To make an audience attentive to these secrets, Glass shapes her melodic lines, e.g. in the following utterances of Scene 17:

ELISABETH: J'ai à te parler. Qu'est-ce-que tu comptes faire vis-à-vis Agathe?
 GERARD: Faire? Pourquoi?
 ELISABETH: Comment, Pourquoi? Je voudrais savoir si tu ne sais pas **qu'Agathe t'aime, espère tellement et ne s'explique pas ton silence.**
 GERARD: Agathe. Agathe?

³⁰ Herman, and Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, 70.

ELISABETH: Bien, oui, Agathe. Tu es trop aveugle, à la fin. **Agathe t'aime et imagine que tu m'aimes. Ce qui est énorme et [comique], et dégoûtant, étant donné ma fortune.**³¹

Élisabeth is spinning a plot among the other characters and Gérard is unwittingly manoeuvred to do her bidding. Highlighted in bold are Élisabeth's secrets but also those lines when she takes on a more expressive musical line.

Com - ment pour - quoi? Je vou - drais sa - voir si tu ne sais pas - qu'A - ga - the
t'ai - me es - pè - re tel - le - ment et ne s'ex - pli - que pas ton sil - en - ce
Tu es trop a - veu - gle à la fin A - ga - the t'ai - me et i - ma - gi - ne que tu m'ai - mes.
Ce qui est é - norm' - et comique, et dé - goûtant é - tant don - né ma for - tu - ne

Figure 3. Élisabeth's more expressive lines in Scene 17 in *Les enfants terribles* (New York, NY: Dunvagen Music Publishers, 1996).

The specific expressivity of Élisabeth's lines (in bold above) illustrates her fondness for playing games and play-acting to the audience – something that is never explicitly said in the libretto text. The music achieves this by mean of pitch range. In her most expressive moments, Élisabeth starts on F⁵, a pitch before unheard. Additionally, she also goes as low as F⁴ on “silence”. Notes of longer duration can here also be found in the more expressive parts whereas Élisabeth maintains a more progressing rhythm based on speech patterns, mostly in eighth notes, in less expressive moments. Additionally, the implied tonality of F major in “que tu m'aimes, ce qui est énorme et comique” stands out from the otherwise lack of tonal centre, so focussing the audience's attention on Élisabeth's attempt to come across as genuinely concerned. She is so concerned with keeping up appearances, however, that the harmonic development of tonic to subdominant is never resolved. Instead, Glass opts for a chord (Db) that is totally removed from the tonality of F major. Although these examples may seem like

³¹ Glass, *Les enfants terribles* (emphasis added).

minute details, they are very discernible in a composition otherwise characterized by a minimalist style. Thus, pitch changes, unreplicative rhythms and hints of tonalities are quite discernible to attentive audiences.

Les enfants terribles features four characters whose relations to one another are hinted at in the libretto and often clarified in the music.³² Because of the minimal number in characters, the singing type is of importance in foregrounding the juxtaposition of characters. For example, siblings Paul and Élisabeth are caught in a love triangle with Agathe who is in love with Paul. Meanwhile, Élisabeth is jealous of Agathe and feels as if Agathe is stealing away her brother's love for her. Accordingly, in terms of singing types, Élisabeth is a soprano whereas Agathe is a mezzo-soprano. Furthermore, Élisabeth's character clearly showcases the possibilities in register. In fact, most of the colourful, evolving and progressing passages are sung by Élisabeth whereas Agathe only takes the spotlight in very few moments. Similar to Colonel Joll and the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, then, two characters' conflict is elicited by means of musical markers.

Compared to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Les enfants terribles* shows a larger amount of such musical markers. An additional example from *Les enfants terribles* does not only stage the characters' connections, but also reveals characteristics of Paul's persona in a metonymical way.³³ Dargelos is Paul's childhood friend who is in part responsible for the latter's secluded lifestyle. Paul remains heart-broken throughout the opera because his love for Dargelos was unreciprocated. Although Dargelos appears only once (in Scene 2) as a young boy, his singing type is of the utmost importance. As a marker of young age, Dargelos is sung by a female singer. Additionally, the singer who portrays Dargelos also portrays Agathe. This intended doubling by Glass mirrors Cocteau's detailed description of Agathe's striking physical similarity to Dargelos. Consequently, the link between both characters could not be clearer and hints at Paul's bisexuality. It becomes clear that Agathe forms Paul's lasting connection with the period of his youth, casting doubt on the sincerity of Paul's feelings for Agathe.

Setting

Oppositions partly lead the audience's understanding of spatial settings as well. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, dream settings are opposed to reality settings. Orchestration is a clear marker of this difference as the choir is decidedly present in the Magistrate's dreams whereas the choir's role during 'real' scenes is limited. Moreover, dreamscapes stand out because no additional singers from the opera cast sing. The choir also utters only vowels during dreams while the use of words makes the choir function

³² For instance, I show in detail how the overture also foreshadows the characters' liaisons in: Carolien Van Nerom, "From Novel to Opera: Child's Play," in *Cahier voor literatuurwetenschap: Literatuur en muziek – Literature and Music*, eds. Inge Arteel, and Bruno Forment (Ghent: Academia Press, 2018).

³³ See Herman, and Vervaeck for examples of indirect characterization, such as "[t]he character's physical appearance and his environment" (*Handbook of Narrative Analysis* 67).

as a mob of dissenting people in ‘real’ scenes. Because the choir plays a distinct role during the dreamscapes, attention is drawn to the evolution of the Magistrate’s dreams. His dreams become increasingly rhythmical and agitated – signs that the Magistrate’s doubts are growing. In terms of percussion, the number of instruments increases towards the final dreamscape. The first dreamscape features only melodic percussion instruments. Adding more and more percussions sounds along the way, the final dreamscape stars, most poignantly, the snare drum played with both wire brushes and sticks as well as the tambourine. In the choir, the augmenting tension is due to an increase in rhythmical complexity. Where the first two dreamscapes consist of clustered tones filling entire measures, the following dreamscapes offer respectively triplets alternating eight notes, syncopated rhythms and, finally, different rhythms in the male versus the female voices. Indeed, whereas the first dreamscapes only feature female voices, the final dream scene (Act 2 Scene 7) includes male voices as well. Initially, the female voices imply that the Magistrate’s dreams revolve around one specific Barbarian woman who he has come to love and provide for. However, the last dream should be understood as the moment when the Magistrate finally understands that his dreams are not at all specific but that they are an evocation of his general unease with colonial reign. The addition of male voices shifts the audience’s attention from the Magistrate’s infatuation with a particular woman to a general, ungendered truth about the Empire. As in Coetzee’s novel, Glass turns the narrative into an allegory.

Les enfants terribles maintains a curious balance or rather unbalance between game settings and ‘real’ settings. However, the game setting is an imagined one that is easily represented in Cocteau’s novel by means of characters’ thoughts or varied focalisation (as discussed also above). In the opera, Glass works with motivic action to render that tension between escape games and the reality of the siblings’ surroundings. In Scene 7 for example Élisabeth and Paul are jesting, teasing each other:

PAUL: Qu’est-ce c’est que ça?

GERARD: Écoutez, les enfants.

ELISABETH: Allons, fichez nous la paix, je vous le conseille.

PAUL: Oui, fiche nous la paix, on te le conseille.

GERARD: Mais...

ELISABETH: Il n’y a pas de “mais.” Mêlez vous de ce qui vous regarde.

GERARD: Mais je... Tu...

PAUL: Mais, mais, tu. Rien du tout.

ELISABETH: Je vais le gifler.

GERARD: Mais, voyons, Élisabeth.

ELISABETH: Ah, non!

PAUL: Gérard, rends la lui, ne te laisse pas faire.

ELISABETH: Oh, les ignobles, les lâches. Frapper une femme!³⁴

Gérard’s presence and his intrusions to calm down Paul and Élisabeth are a reminder of reality. The siblings are clearly not distracted by him. Even though this scene is set

³⁴ Glass, *Les enfants terribles*.

in the siblings' mother's house, the physical space does little to abate Paul and Élisabeth's need for the game space. As the music clearly shows, their mental space is filled with the game. The repetitive motifs of an ascending scale in the lower piano register and a descending scale in the upper register as well as the repeating half tones with accents on both upbeats and downbeats (see Figure 3) sound extremely playful and might remind the audience of young children's taunts.



Figure 4. Playful motif in keyboard in Scene 7 of *Les enfants terribles* (New York, NY: Dunvagen Music Publishers, 1996).

The game/reality tension comes to a culmination at the end of this scene when the siblings are forced to face reality – their mother has died while they were playing games:

PAUL: Maman, elle m'a giflé!
 ELISABETH: Il m'a craché dessus.
 PAUL: C'est pas vrai.
 ELISABETH: Ose dire à maman que ce n'est pas vrai. Répète le.
 PAUL: C'est pas vrai. C'est pas vrai.
 PAUL: Qu'est-ce que tu as?
 ELISABETH: Paul! Arrive! Je crois que maman est morte.³⁵

The mother's death is somewhat foretold musically: the dynamic is a piano to pianissimo dynamic rather than the strong mezzo forte dynamic that came before and the motivic action is slowed down by means of added pauses between motifs. Still, Paul and Élisabeth's attention is not drawn to their mother as the final exclamation of Élisabeth is still followed by a double repetition of a final two chords that tie in with the playful teasing motifs from before:

³⁵ Glass, *Les enfants terribles*.



Figure 5. Final bars in keyboard in Scene 7 of *Les enfants terribles* (New York, NY: Dunvagen Music Publishers, 1996).

In other words, Élisabeth and Paul are so caught up in the game that even their mother's death does not fully ground them.

Conclusion

Although the libretto goes a long way in forming a narrative, the examples above show that music is an important, often independent component that co-builds the operatic narrative. Adding up the musical elements that enhance both characterisation and the elicitation of space, it becomes clear that Glass uses both direct and more circuitous musical techniques. The use of secondary musical parameters to melodies (e.g. dynamics, accents, contrasting registers, or motifs), for one, is a very immediate narrative marker. Other musical means (e.g. orchestration, or alternations in singing types) span the whole opera and are more subtle markers. Because audiences then have to rely on musical memory and competence, it takes more time to connote those components with their narrative value. When comparing *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Les enfants terribles*, the latter clearly shows more direct types of musical methods to build the narrative. That is why the music of *Les enfants terribles* might be called more narrative than that of *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

On the whole, 'oppositions' are one of the guiding themes in both operas under scrutiny. In terms of characters, Glass opposes the Magistrate (personification of change) to Colonel Joll (personification of stasis) in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *Les enfants terribles* features conflicting relationships between a main character (Élisabeth) and two minor characters (Gérard and Agathe) as well as a main character (Paul) with an internal battle between past (Dargelos) and present (Agathe). Regarding space, Glass pairs imaginary space with real space as well, even though the operas have a different take on the meaning of those game/dream settings. 'Opposition' is thus considered as an important guiding light for audiences to interpret both operas. In other words, to consider the operatic narrative in terms of 'opposites' is helpful to build what Ryan would call "a logic network of interpretation".

While both operas are composed in a very narrative way, they are still very much minimalistic as repetition and timelessness are of the essence. Indeed, Glass keeps to

his minimalist mode of composition while also leaving room for narrative interpretation of his music. While the goal of minimalist composers is to cancel out narrative interpretations, these case studies provide more confirmation that a complete absence of narrativity is hard to achieve. Notwithstanding the early and more abstract compositions of minimalist composers, including e.g. Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, these operatic examples show that minimalist music can possess narrativity to varying degrees.

References

- Abbate, C. (1991). *Unsung voices: Opera and musical narrative in the nineteenth century*. Princeton University Press.
- Abbott, H.P. (2014). Narrativity. In P. Hühn, et al. (eds.), *The living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg University. <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/27.html>
- Al-Saidi, A. A. H. (2014). Post-colonialism literature the concept of *self* and the *other* in Coetzee's *Waiting for the barbarians*: An analytical approach. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 5(1), 95-105. <https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.5.1.95-105>
- Ashby, A. (2005). Minimalist opera. In M. Cooke (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to twentieth-century opera* (pp. 244-266). Cambridge University Press.
- Cocteau, J. (1925). *Les enfants terribles* (56th ed.). Éditions Bernard Grasset.
- Coetzee, J.M. (1980). *Waiting for the barbarians* (Reprint). Vintage Books.
- Dovey, T. (1996). *Waiting for the barbarians*: Allegory of allegories. In G. Huggan, & S. Watson (eds.), *Critical perspectives on J.M. Coetzee* (pp.138-151). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Duckworth, W. (1999). Minimalists: Philip Glass (b. Baltimore, 1937). In *Talking music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and five generations of American experimental composers* (pp. 318-342). Da Capo Press.
- Evans, T. (2016). *Shared meanings in the film music of Philip Glass: Music, multimedia and postminimalism*. Routledge.
- Glass, P., & Hampton, C. (2008). *Waiting for the barbarians* [Album]. Orange Mountain Music.
- Glass, P., & Marshall, S. (2005). *Les enfants terribles* [Album]. Orange Mountain Music.
- Glass, P. (2016). *Words without music: A memoir*. Liveright.
- Halliwell, M. (2010). Communicating from the margins: Postcolonial themes in *Voss* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *Musicology Australia* 32(1), 45-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08145851003793994>
- Halliwell, M. (1999). Narrative elements in opera. In W. Bernhart, S.P. Scher, & W. Wolf (eds.), *Word and music studies: Defining the field* (pp. 135-153). Rodopi.
- Halliwell, M. (2011). Vocal embodiment and performing language in *Waiting for the barbarians*: Philip Glass's adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's novel. In W. Bernhart, & M. Halliwell (eds.), *Word and music studies: Essays on performativity and on surveying the field* (pp. 173-189). Rodopi.
- Haskins, R. (2005). Another look at Philip Glass: Aspects of harmony and formal design in early works and *Einstein on the beach*. *Journal of Experimental Music Studies*. Retrieved December 10, 2019, from <http://www.users.waitrose.com/~chobbs/haskinsglass.html>
- Hatte, J. (2007). *La langue secrète de Jean Cocteau: La mythologie personnelle du poète et l'histoire cachée des Enfants terribles*. Peter Lang.
- Hatten, R. (1994). *Musical meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, correlation and interpretation*. Indiana University Press.

- Herman, L., & Vervaeck B. (2005). *Handbook of narrative analysis* (Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska, Trans.). University of Nebraska Press. (Original work published 2001).
- Karetnyk, B. (2016). Staging *Lolita* (and ‘saving’ Humbert): Nabokov, Shchedrin and the art of adaptation. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 94(4), 601-633. <http://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.94.4.0601>
- Kerman, J. (1988). *Opera as drama* (New and revised ed.). Faber & Faber.
- Kozinn, A. (1997). Glass’s *Satyagraha* (1986). In R. Kostelanetz, & R. Flemming (eds.), *Writings on Glass: Essays, interviews, criticism* (pp. 176-192). Schirmer Books.
- Larner, J. (2009/2010). Music as narrator: Mahler, Mussorgsky, and Beethoven in Visconti’s *Death in Venice*. *College Music Symposium* 49/50, 385-391. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41225265>
- Lindenberger, H. (1985). *Opera: The extravagant art*. Cornell University Press.
- Maus, F. E. (1991). Music as Narrative. *Indiana Theory Review* 12, 1-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24045349>
- Mertens, W. (1983). *American minimal music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (J. Hautekiet, Trans.). Kahn & Averill. (Original work published 1980)
- Micznik, V. (2001). Music and narrative revisited: Degrees of narrativity in Beethoven and Mahler. *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 126(2), 193-249. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3557481>
- Phelan, J. (2006). Narrative theory, 1966-2006: A narrative. In R. Scholes, J. Phelan, & R. Kellogg (eds.), *The Nature of Narrative* (40th ed., pp. 283-336). Oxford University Press.
- Potter, K. (2000). *Four musical minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ryan, M.-L.. (2004). Introduction. In M.-L. Ryan (ed.), *Narrative across media: The languages of storytelling* (pp. 1-40). University of Nebraska Press.
- Slemon, S. (1988). Post-colonial allegory and the transformation of history. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23(1), 157-168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198948802300115>
- Tambling, J. (2010). *Allegory*. Routledge.
- Tarasti, E. (2004). Music as narrative art. In M.-L. Ryan (ed.), *Narrative across media: The languages of storytelling* (pp. 283-304). University of Nebraska Press.
- Van Nerom, C. (2018). From Novel to Opera: Child’s Play. In I. Arteel, & B. Forment (eds.), *Cahier voor literatuurwetenschap: Literatuur en muziek – Literature and Music* (pp. 77-91). Academia Press.
- Wade, J.-P. (1990). The allegorical text and history: J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the barbarians* opsomming. *Journal of Literary Studies* 6(4), 275-288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564719008529955>

Biography

Carolien Van Nerom works on the narrativity of music, specifically in Philip Glass operas, at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in conjunction with Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel (KCB). She holds a Master’s degree in both English and Dutch Literature (VUB) and is a classically trained clarinetist (KCB). Her publications include articles on Glass operas *Orphée* and *Les enfants terribles*.