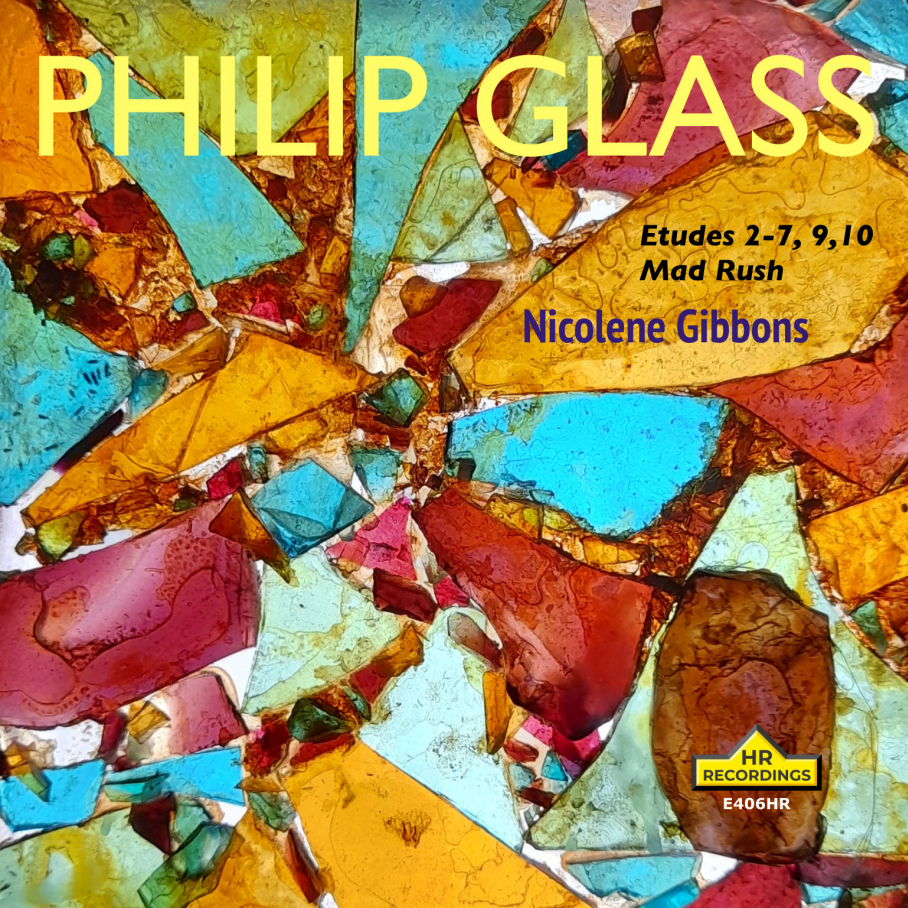


The background of the entire cover is an abstract mosaic composed of numerous irregular, overlapping fragments of translucent, stained glass in various colors including deep reds, vibrant blues, warm yellows, and earthy browns. The fragments are set in a dark, possibly black, grout, creating a complex, textured visual field.

# PHILIP GLASS

*Etudes 2-7, 9, 10*  
*Mad Rush*

**Nicolene Gibbons**

**HR**  
**RECORDINGS**

**E406HR**

# Philip Glass, (1937)

|                  |       |
|------------------|-------|
| 1.-Etude 2.....  | 6:34  |
| 2.-Etude 3.....  | 4:12  |
| 3.-Etude 4.....  | 5:24  |
| 4.-Etude 5.....  | 8:10  |
| 5.-Etude 6.....  | 4:36  |
| 6.-Etude 7.....  | 9:36  |
| 7.-Etude 9.....  | 3:40  |
| 8.-Etude 10..... | 5:47  |
| 9.-Mad Rush..... | 15:41 |

*T.T:60:03*

Nicolene Gibbons, *piano*





**Nicolene Gibbons**

## The piano music of Philip Glass and its place in the piano repertoire

Philip Glass (b. 1937) occupies a unique position in the history of piano music. Few contemporary composers have written works that are simultaneously embraced by concert pianists, students, minimalism enthusiasts, and audiences who may otherwise have little interest in contemporary classical music. While Glass first achieved international fame through his operas, film scores, and ensemble works, his piano music has become one of the most widely performed bodies of contemporary keyboard repertoire. It has entered recital programmes around the world and has helped redefine the place of modern music within the classical piano tradition. Glass emerged during the 1960s as one of the pioneers of musical minimalism. Although the term “minimalism” is often applied to his music, Glass himself has expressed reservations about the label, preferring to describe his work as “music with repetitive structures.” His mature style is characterised by recurring rhythmic patterns, gradual harmonic change, additive processes, and a strong sense of momentum. Unlike the serial or avant-garde composers who dominated much of twentieth-century academic music, Glass sought clarity, directness, and accessibility without sacrificing sophistication.

The piano became one of the ideal instruments through which Glass explored these ideas. Its ability to sustain rhythmic precision while producing clear harmonic textures made it perfectly suited to his compositional language. Much of his keyboard writing consists of repeating arpeggios, oscillating figures, and flowing chordal patterns that evolve almost imperceptibly over time. Rather than relying on thematic development in the classical sense, Glass creates musical interest through subtle transformations in harmony, rhythm, register, and texture. The musical sections within his compositions are similar but different, much as motifs and designs repeat in nature, with their subtle differences. This may account for the effect these compositions often have on audience members, inducing a state of calm alertness. This approach places considerable demands upon the performer. Although the notes themselves are often technically approachable compared with the virtuoso works of Liszt or Rachmaninoff, the true challenge lies elsewhere. The pianist must maintain absolute rhythmic consistency while shaping long musical spans that may unfold over ten or twenty minutes. Small changes in dynamics, voicing, articulation, and pedalling become essential tools for creating direction and sustaining listener engagement. The performer must possess not only technical control but also exceptional concentration.

Glass's piano music occupies an unusual position within the broader piano repertoire. Historically, keyboard literature has largely centred upon melody, harmonic progression, and dramatic contrast, creating an overall narrative sweep. Glass instead invites the listener into an immersive sound world in which repetition becomes expressive rather than static. Time itself becomes one of the central elements of the composition. This places Glass within a broader historical tradition than is sometimes recognised. His repeated figurations recall the perpetual-motion textures of Scarlatti, the hypnotic preludes of Bach, and even the accompaniment patterns of Schubert. The difference lies in the scale and purpose of repetition. In earlier music, repeated figures usually support melodic development; in Glass they often become the principal musical subject themselves.

His harmonic language also distinguishes him from many twentieth-century composers. Glass generally employs tonal or modal harmony, although he often avoids conventional cadential progressions. Chords change gradually, creating a sense of suspended motion rather than dramatic resolution. This harmonic accessibility has contributed significantly to the popularity of his music among audiences who might otherwise find contemporary music intimidating.

Among his most important piano works are *Metamorphosis* (1988), *Opening*, *Truman Sleeps*, *The Hours*, *The Photographer*, *Dreaming Awake*, *The Piano Sonata* (2019), and the twenty *Piano Etudes*. These works span several decades and reveal a composer continually refining rather than radically altering his musical language.

Glass's music has also benefited enormously from its close relationship with cinema. Scores for films such as *The Hours*, *Mishima*, and *The Truman Show* introduced millions of listeners to his distinctive style. Piano arrangements from these scores have become widely performed, blurring the traditional boundaries between concert music and film music.

Critics have sometimes questioned whether Glass's music possesses sufficient variety or structural complexity. Some have argued that extensive repetition risks monotony. Others, however, see precisely the opposite: that within apparent simplicity lies extraordinary subtlety.

Ultimately, Philip Glass has expanded the expressive possibilities of piano music. His works demonstrate that profound musical experiences need not depend upon virtuosic display or elaborate thematic development. Instead, they invite both performer and listener into a contemplative space where time unfolds gradually, revealing beauty through patience, precision, and subtle transformation. In doing so, Glass has secured an enduring place within the international piano repertoire.

## Philip Glass's Piano Etudes

Among Philip Glass's contributions to the piano repertoire, none are more significant than the twenty Piano Etudes and the earlier masterpiece *Mad Rush*. Together these works represent the culmination of his keyboard writing, combining technical discipline, emotional depth, and philosophical reflection. They reveal not only Glass the composer but also Glass the pianist, for many of the etudes were written as studies for his own performances.

The Piano Etudes were composed over two decades, from 1991 to 2012, and are divided into two books of ten studies each. Although conceived as technical studies, the etudes have become substantial concert works, frequently performed individually or as complete cycles. Pianists such as Maki Namekawa, Víkingur Ólafsson, Jenny Lin, and Glass himself have demonstrated the remarkable expressive range contained within these seemingly economical scores.

This recording centres around Book 1 of the etudes. The ten etudes of Book 1 were written primarily to improve Glass's own piano technique before concert tours. Unlike the traditional etudes of Chopin, Liszt, or Debussy, which generally isolate specific technical problems, Glass's studies address broader musical concerns: rhythmic control, endurance, independence of the hands, voicing, balance, and the ability to sustain concentration over extended periods. For performers, the greatest challenge lies not in speed or virtuosity but in control. The repetitive textures expose every inconsistency of rhythm, tone, or articulation. Because so much material returns again and again, even the slightest variation becomes musically significant. Successful performances require remarkable precision combined with an acute sensitivity to long-term structure.

The etudes also offer rich opportunities for interpretation. Unlike Romantic repertoire, where expressive markings often prescribe dramatic contrasts, Glass leaves considerable responsibility to the performer. Decisions regarding tempo flexibility, pedalling, voicing, phrasing, and dynamic shading profoundly influence the listener's experience. Consequently, different interpretations can sound surprisingly distinct while remaining faithful to the score.

For reasons of personal preference, Etudes nos. 1 and 8 have been omitted from this recording. Although the etudes have definite tonal centres, they have been notated without key signatures, with sharps or flats written as accidentals instead. The only exception is Etude no 10, which has been notated in the key of E flat major. Another feature that is noticeable in each etude, is Glass's absolute refusal to write big, showy and loud endings. Instead, he brings proceedings to an inconspicuous close: a whisper rather than a bang.

**Etude no 2 in C Major** is based on a repeating 10-bar chaconne-type structure consisting of alternating 7/8 and 8/8 measures. A fragmented melody appears first below, then above it. The etude gains in volume and urgency, before retreating back to silence. The writing here reminds one of a multitrack recording, with layers added or taken away.

**Etude no 3 in A Major** is fast and boisterous. Quavers grouped in 2s and 3s are opposed between the hands, in densely textured chords. These are alternated by lighter, playful passages in unison that hint towards A minor. The etude extinguishes itself abruptly during two slower, pianissimo measures.

**Etude no 4 in D Minor** shimmers ambivalently between major and minor tonalities, all the while driven by the “engine” of a repeating LH figure. The themes finally move through lower and lower registers, ending and disappearing at the bottom of the keyboard.

**Etude no 5 in F Minor** is uses an extreme economy of means. A 22-measure harmonic structure is introduced, then repeated six more times. Alongside it, a sparse melody appears, first in octaves, then in 2-note harmonies. Eventually all of these elements combine, creating a ponderous polyphony. The melody sounds incomplete, as if notes have been forgotten. The phrases reach upwards, but fail to truly come to rest.

**Etude no 6 in F Minor** has become a modern classic, and is arguably the best-known of all the etudes. It has a moto perpetuo character and disappears without warning in thin air.

**Etude no 7 in A Minor** contains one of the best examples of the “repetition with changes” so typical of this music. The same harmonic progression occurs 24 times, before a tempo change finally brings this etude to an understated ending on a dominant chord.

**Etude no 9 in F Minor** harmonises its repeating melody four different ways, before changing gears to a slower tempo, then expiring into nothing.

**Etude no 10 in E flat Major** consists of only one chord, an inversion of a dominant 7th. Yet there is plenty to keep the attention, such as the driving rhythm and fast-paced changes. Again, an unexpected diminuendo brings the final etude from Book 1 to a close.

## Mad Rush

The piece we now know as Mad Rush was written in 1979, for the first public address given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in North America. Philip Glass wrote it on the organ of the St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City, the same instrument on which it was subsequently premièred. It had to be of indeterminate length, to accommodate the Dalai Lama's unspecific arrival time and processional into the cathedral. The choreographers Lucinda Childs and Benjamin Millepied later used the music in a ballet which was given the title Mad Rush.

Structurally, Mad Rush unfolds through a succession of contrasting episodes. Powerful, rapidly moving passages alternate with serene chorale-like sections built upon simple harmonic progressions. This alternation creates an emotional dialogue between agitation and peace, motion and stillness.

Many commentators regard Mad Rush as one of Glass's greatest achievements for piano because it balances formal discipline with emotional immediacy. Unlike some earlier minimalist works that maintain a relatively constant musical process, Mad Rush embraces dramatic contrast without abandoning the repetitive structures central to Glass's language. The result is music that feels both architecturally rigorous and deeply expressive. Its popularity among audiences has helped establish contemporary piano music as a regular feature of recital programming.

Together, the Piano Etudes and Mad Rush represent the summit of Philip Glass's achievement as a composer for piano. They demonstrate that technical economy need not imply expressive limitation, and that repetition can become a vehicle for profound emotional communication. In the twenty-first century, these works have secured a permanent place in the international piano repertoire, standing alongside the great keyboard cycles of earlier generations while speaking in an unmistakably modern voice. Their continuing popularity reflects not only their accessibility but also their enduring artistic depth, ensuring that future generations of pianists will continue to discover new insights within their deceptively simple surfaces.

Recorded on 22-24 June 2026  
at the *Odeion Auditorium*,  
*University of the Free State*,  
Bloemfontein.  
SOUTH AFRICA

Recording engineer: **John Smit**

Cover photograph: **Nicolene Gibbons**

Additional photography: **SunFire**