

MICHAEL NYMAN: *THE MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE FOR A
HAT*

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2008

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Avant-Rossi, Joan, Michael Nyman: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.
Master of Arts (Musicology), May 2008, 50 pp., 5 tables, 7 musical examples, references,
32 titles.

Composer Michael Nyman wrote the one-act, minimalist opera *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, based off the neurological case study written by Oliver Sacks under the same title. The opera is about a professional singer and professor whom suffers from visual agnosia.

In chapter 1, the plot and history of the opera are discussed. Chapter 2 places *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* alongside a selection of minimalist operas from Philip Glass and John Adams. Chapter 3 contains a history of the Fluxus art movement and shows where Fluxus-like examples appear in the opera. Chapter 4 includes Nyman's usage of minimalism, vocal congruencies, and Robert Schumann as musical elements that convey the drama.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat is a one-act, minimalist chamber opera composed by Michael Nyman in 1986. The libretto is based on an actual case study conducted by the neurologist Oliver Sacks, whose book under the same title as the opera was a national bestseller in 1985. Nyman calls his work a “neurological” opera.¹

Research on this opera led to the exploration of other minimalist operas. Musicologist Joseph Kerman’s statement that the music conveys the drama in an opera helped me realize the difference in Nyman’s opera from prototypically minimalist operas such as those by Philip Glass.² Through the study of operas by Philip Glass and John Adams, I realized that the drama is hard to grasp by listening only because of the highly visual productions of Glass, while Adams’ works are more traditional in the sense that the drama is musically conveyed. Nyman’s opera, while employing a minimalist style similar to that of Glass, stays closer to Adams in that the drama is created by the music.

No scholarly writings are available on this opera. Here I study Nyman’s opera directly from the score, and place it alongside a selection of minimalist operas by Philip Glass and John Adams through a critical examination of their visual elements as well as

¹ Michael Nyman, “[Liner notes]” to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* [sound recording] (London: CBS Masterworks, 1988), 9.

² Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 1-3.

their musical significance (chap. 2). Chapters 3 and 4 focus on *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* by examining music and drama through various means. I first show how this opera employs Fluxus-like events as basic dramatic units. Then I describe the musical ways in which the character of Dr. P is presented as familiarized or defamiliarized with his surroundings. More specifically I will show how minimalist techniques, Schumann songs, and degrees of congruence between Dr. P's voice and the orchestra and voices of others musically conveys Dr. P's dramatic situation. Nyman's opera *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* is a one-of-a-kind minimalist piece that resorts to music as the main dramatic driving force.

Michael Nyman

Michael Nyman was born in London in 1944. He studied composition with Alan Bush at the Royal Academy of Music, and musicology with Thurston Dart at King's College, University of London specializing on sixteenth and seventeenth-century English rounds and canons. He also worked in the collection of folk music in Romania, which he later incorporated in some of his works.³

After his education, he worked for the *Listener*, *New Statesman*, and *The Spectator* as a music critic for little over a decade. During this time he did not pursue his compositional career. He returned to composition on the wake of American minimalism

³ Pwyll Ap Sion, "Michael Nyman," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy. <http://www.grovemusic.com> (Accessed 4 December 2007).

of the late 1960s and early 1970s, inspired by its sound and its non-emotional use of tonality. He worked on experimental compositions, influenced by both John Cage and younger composers such as Steve Reich, LaMonte Young, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley, and he presented his experiences in his 1974 book, *Experimental Music*.⁴

In 1976, he formed the Michael Nyman Band, for which he wrote pieces that combine sound and rhythms from rock and classical music, and, occasionally, early music instruments as well. The band still tours today playing Nyman compositions. Film scores, usually written for his band, perhaps are Nyman's best known music. He has composed five film scores for director Peter Greenaway and various other scores for different directors. His most famous score is the one written for Jane Campion's *The Piano*, which sold 1.5 million soundtrack copies. This particular number rivals only Philip Glass in terms of commercial success.⁵

His output also includes five operas, pieces for orchestra, winds or brass, chamber ensembles, chorus, solo voice with instrumental accompaniment, solo instruments with accompaniment and solo keyboard. His latest compositions (2007) have been a new opera entitled *Love Counts*, and a piece commissioned from the Great North Run called *50,000 Pairs of Feet Can't Be Wrong*.⁶

⁴ Florence Anne Millard Daugherty, "Narrative and Nonnarrative Structures in the Film Music of Michael Nyman" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1997), 40-46.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michael Nyman. Michael Nyman Ltd., www.michaelnyman.com (Accessed 2 December 2007).

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat: A Synopsis

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat refers to Dr. P, an internationally renowned singer and professor of voice. The opera includes just three characters, Dr. P, Mrs. P (Dr. P's wife) and Dr. S (in real life, Dr. Oliver Sacks). The opera is divided into a sung prologue by Dr. S, who introduces the story, and two sections performed without break. The first section takes place in Dr. P's office while the second part is set at the P's residence. The story narrates Dr. S's diagnosis of Dr. P's neurological disease, through a string of tests presented on stage.

In the prologue, Dr. P presents the humane and comprehensive basis for his neurological works, in which he diagnosis patients by taking into account their individual life. He then introduces Dr. P's recent troubles: he has lately been having incidents of mistaking certain objects or people for other things.

In the first part, Dr. S gives a routine checkup to Dr. P in his wife's presence, and notices that the professor cannot look at him straight in the face. Dr. S continues with another test by showing Dr. P some slides from the *National Geographic* and asking him to identify them, a task that Dr. P is unable to perform correctly. Before Dr. and Mrs. P exit the clinic, Dr. P intends to pick up his hat from the coat rack but instead reaches for his wife's head in the opera's title episode.

In the second part, Dr. S visits the P's apartment, furnished with a copy of Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. Mrs. P accompanies Dr. P's singing of "Ich grolle nicht", and Dr. S joins in realizing that Dr. P's musical abilities are working. Dr. S then conducts a series of visual tests on Dr. P. He begins with platonic solids, then he goes to the

television where a Bette Davis movie is playing, and then he presents photographs around the house to Dr. P. Dr. S realizes that Dr. P can identify the abstract solids, but cannot make sense of faces. Dr. S then hands a rose and glove to Dr. P and asks him to identify the objects, which he is unable to do visually. Then Dr. P and Dr. S engage in a game of mental chess and Dr. P beats Dr. S. Dr. S comes to the conclusion that Dr. P's visual memory is mostly intact.

After these tests, Dr. P has his afternoon tea. He sings quietly to himself his "eating song," while Dr. S and Mrs. P discuss his paintings. Dr. S notes the deterioration in the quality of the most recent paintings and Mrs. P becomes angry and shouts "Philistine!" at him. This sudden noise causes Dr. P to lose his bearings on what he is doing when his "eating song" is interrupted. At this moment, Dr. S figures out the diagnosis: Dr. P suffers from visual agnosia. This disorder causes the sufferer to be unable to make sense of the things they see. Dr. S is unable to offer any remedy to Dr. P's disease, but to continue using music to make up for his visual impairment, and letting it organize his life under his wife's loving supervision. In a closing monologue that mirrors the preface, Dr. S restates Dr. P's need for the music to compensate for his visual deficiencies, and mentions that this procedure allowed Dr. P to continue living a full life and of teaching until his death.⁷

Sack's Study as Operatic Source

The libretto closely follows Oliver Sacks' case study; they are essentially similar.

⁷ Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* [score] (London: Chester Music, 1986), 17-18.

Christopher Rawlence's libretto took the kernel ideas from the published study and elaborated upon them to adapt them to the operatic format.⁸ In fact, the Prologue of the opera Dr. S sings actual excerpts from the introduction to Sack's article. Changes are few and relatively unimportant; they tend to emphasize certain elements of a special value, either dramatically or musically. In a few instances Rawlence includes action sequences in the opera that are only referred to in the book. For example Dr. P's "Dressing Song" is acted out and sung in the opera, but Sacks merely mentions it in his study. Likewise, Schumann's music, an important musical factor in the opera, is only alluded to in the case study. Other changes of detail in the libretto respond to the purpose of dramatic development.⁹

History of the Opera

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat was created very soon after the publication of Sacks' case study (1985), which acted as the main motivation for the composer. While Sacks welcomed the idea of turning his research into an opera, the actual Mrs. P, who was still alive at the time, at first declined it, thinking that it would in some way mock the life and struggles of her husband. After Sacks and librettist Rawlence met with her, however, she changed her mind—and in the course of the conversation, Rawlence realized that her emotional support and care had been essential for Dr. P to cope with his disease, which he used to shape her character in the opera.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., iii.

⁹ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 3-22.

¹⁰ Nyman, [score], 14-15.

In 1986, producer Michael Morris, of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, staged the opera for the first time. Soon afterwards it was filmed for Channel 4 TV (in Britain) and ICA TV, under the direction of Christopher Rawlence and with the production of Debra Hauer. The opera was also recorded and released by CBS Masterworks in 1987.¹¹ In the first stage production, tenor Emile Belcourt sung the role of Dr. S, and Patricia Hooper, Mrs. P (soprano—replaced by Sarah Leonard in the recording) while baritone Frederick Westcott performed the role of Dr. P. The score calls for 2 violins, viola and 2 cellos, piano, and harp; all singers and instrumentalists are amplified. Nyman wrote that the opera took less than a year to complete. Rawlence, Morris, and Nyman all worked alongside each other for the adaptation from stage to screen.¹²

A Unique Neurological Opera

Nyman was intrigued by the structure of Sacks' written-out case study in that he does not describe Dr. P's illness but instead leads the reader through the diagnostic process. He organized the opera along the same lines by translating the diagnostic tests into what he calls "Fluxus events" (discussed in chap. 3), which he linked to form a continuous line. Since Sacks' testing did not conjure drama *per se*, Nyman took the opportunity to create a congruent narrative of his own musical means, as well as projecting a perspective of Dr. P as someone suffering with visual agnosia.

¹¹ Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

¹² Nyman, [score], iii.

Nyman's musical representation of Dr. P's character is based upon the pitting of the familiar against the unfamiliar (fully discussed in chap. 4). The composer constructed what he termed a "harmonic identity" for Dr. P, namely a chord progression, which then acted as the basis for a set of variations. By taking out details—melodic shape, thematic content, instrumental color, textural elements—he turned this theme of sorts into increasingly unfamiliar music.¹³ The process represents the "familiar" evolving into the "unfamiliar"—hence Nyman's term, "defamiliarization." It conveys a sense of Dr. P's illness, not in its gradual worsening—during the opera, Dr. P's condition does not degenerate—but rather as the character's condition becomes increasingly apparent to both Dr. S and the audience.

Besides the musical features mentioned above, the music of Schumann is quoted repeatedly throughout the opera, serving as Dr. P's bearing on life (for a full discussion, see chap.4). As mentioned, "Ich grolle nicht" is sung during the meeting between Dr. S and Dr. P in the latter's home. Schumann songs also are the source for the melodies that guide Dr. P during his daily tasks, making up for his loss of visual ability. For his bathing song "Rätsel," "Hochländisches," and "Wiegenlied" are used while his dressing song is "Der Nussbaum," and he sings "Lied eines Schmiedes" while eating. Dr. P's songs "I see a river" and "From our end/High up there" are also based on Schumann compositions.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nyman, iv.

Nyman, Rawlence, and Sacks all worked together to create an original opera with a positive message about music at its heart. The history, and story behind this opera makes it what it is. Here, I offer a first attempt at understanding it as the rare neurological opera that it is, while at the same time discussing its manifold relationships to previous minimalist operas. Nyman's opera belongs to the canon of minimalist and twentieth century operas, yet at the same time it carries out a unique transformation of the genre to accommodate a story that rests upon the process of diagnosis.

CHAPTER 2

MINIMALIST OPERAS

Minimalism is a broad style category employed to describe music that contains repetitive rhythms and simple tonal melodies and harmonies. Instead of deriving solely from Western Art Music, minimalism shows an influence from several “popular” musics, including rock, jazz, Hindustani, and Karnatic music. Most minimalist music employs diatonic writing and simple key signatures, and incorporates some kind of technology, whether for manipulating recordings or for mere amplification.¹⁵

This set of styles emerged in the United States in the 1960s with the works by two East Coast composers, Steve Reich (1964) and Philip Glass (1967), matched almost simultaneously by two West Coast composers, namely LaMonte Young (1960) and Terry Riley (1960).¹⁶ The very application of the term “minimalism” to music was thought to have been carried out by Michael Nyman in 1968, during his period as a music critic;¹⁷ even though Edward Strickland disputed his precedence, the composer remained an influential contributor to the style.¹⁸ Even though minimalism in music, as in art, at first

¹⁵ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 4-8.

¹⁶ Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: LaMonte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 50, 97, 162, and 260.

¹⁷ Pwyll Ap Sion, “Michael Nyman,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy. <http://www.grovemusic.com>. (Accessed 4 December 2007)

¹⁸ Edward Strickland, “Terry Riley,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy. <http://www.grovemusic.com>. (Accessed 4 December 2007).

bore some traits of modernist opposition to the past, it soon came to be regarded as a reaction to the most intellectual branch of Modernism. Minimalism adopted a position close to rock and jazz, and against serial or otherwise atonal music.¹⁹

To a certain extent, minimalist music was a cultural phenomenon based upon everyday life in the United States. For example, rabid consumerism lays at the very heart of this country's capitalist economy. As a result, the average American usually is bombarded by repeated commercials on radio and television, as well as by graphic advertisements on buildings and billboards. All this repetition is so common that it becomes invisible; it is not noticed because it is always there.²⁰

Minimalist Operas

Minimalism has been commonly employed in contemporary opera composition. Minimalist operas contain five general traits that set them apart from other operas. Firstly, the music is categorically minimal; it is based upon a seemingly unending repetition of simple melodic and harmonic phrases, much diatonic, tonal harmony, and the continuous (over-) emphasis upon a main beat. Secondly, the operas are visually charged. The drama is primarily conveyed through visual means rather than by way of the music. Thirdly, the topics for minimalist operas are commonplace; they refer to current politics, religion, science, and technology. Fourthly, electronics, be it for

¹⁹ Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: LaMonte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-20.

²⁰ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1-22.

producing sounds or just amplifying them, is often employed in the scores. Finally, traditional operatic conventions are often avoided. For example, there is no rule as to how long an opera can be, nor about the specific number of acts that it should comprise.

In order to demonstrate these features of minimalist operas, I will discuss a few examples by Philip Glass and John Adams: Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, and *Akhmaten*, and John Adams' *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*.

Philip Glass

Philip Glass has thus far been one of the most successful opera composer of the late 20th century.²¹ He also is one of the most prone to developing experimental approaches to music theater that involve minimalist writing, notably including non-linear narratives, characters whose value is purely symbolic, and the almost complete absence of a plot.

His first contribution to the genre, *Einstein on the Beach*, written in collaboration with Robert Wilson, was completed in 1976 and accorded him immediate national success. The piece purports to present images of Einstein as a scientist, a humanist, and, not least, an amateur musician, presented without a narrative or plot in the traditional sense. Instead, it centers around the three abstract themes of the "train," the "trial" and the "field," each of which has its own act. A fourth and final act deals with their transmutation. The "train" represents the theory of relativity and becomes a building, the

²¹ Tim Page, "Philip Glass (1989)," *Writings on Glass*. eds. Richard Kostelanetz and Robert Flemming, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 3.

“trial” becomes a bed, and the “field” becomes a machine, all of which end in a final, frantic apotheosis that can be read as a nuclear explosion. The text of these four acts does not include dialogue, or even words. The singers only sing numbers and solfege syllables.

The acts are separated by intermezzos called “kneeplays,” representing the joining of two similar things, which include choruses and are meant to provide relief throughout the five hours that the performance takes.²² The “kneeplays” also feature spoken text, taken from cryptic poems by Christopher Knowles, a neurologically impaired youth that had been taught by Robert Wilson (the stage designer and co-producer).²³ Throughout the score, Glass uses an additive and subtractive cyclical process. The opera’s unconventional nature also affects the audience, which is invited to go in and out of the theater as it pleases during performances.

Einstein on the Beach exemplifies all five points of the prototypical minimalist opera. The music is unmistakably minimalist, creating an overall hypnotic effect, with much repetition of melodic phrases. Furthermore, synthesized loops are characteristic of this work, created by recording and electronically manipulating voices and keyboards that repeat a phrase rapidly in a continuous loop.

Whichever drama this opera has is created visually, rather than musically. Since the plot lacks both narrative and action, the piece is highly dependent on the visual cues

²² David Cunningham, “Einstein on the Beach,” *Writings on Glass*, eds. Richard Kostelanetz and Robert Flemming. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 152.

²³ Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach* [sound recording] (New York:Elektra Nonesuch Records, 1993).

created by stage designer Robert Wilson.²⁴ As stage sets, costumes and acting are divorced from the music that accompanies them, the piece is difficult to follow, particularly from the recording alone. The fact that Glass conceived *Einstein* on the wake of encountering Robert Wilson's drawings and a twelve-hour-long play of his based on Josef Stalin shows how important visuals are within the piece.²⁵

As for the topic of the play, the contemporary nature and its relevance to science are insured by the figure of Einstein, central to the play. The emphasis on the symbolic value of the subject and the unconventional, dream-like visual syntax, on the other hand, sets aside this piece from most other minimalist operas. As for the use of electronics, Glass incorporates synthesizers and loops into the score, and the whole production is amplified. Not least, *Einstein in the Beach* also shuns many operatic conventions, most obviously the duration of the performance (some five hours), but also the lack of traditional plot, characterization, psychological unfolding of the drama, and anything resembling a traditional recitative or aria.

Glass' two subsequent operas, *Satyagraha* (1980) and *Akhmaten* (1984), also are minimalist but in a different way from *Einstein on the Beach*. As in *Einstein* the music in both *Satyagraha* and *Akhmaten* is characterized by driving rhythms, diatonic harmony, simple phrases, and iterative arpeggios; yet it is not nearly as hypnotically repetitive. Furthermore, the two newer operas also base their drama upon visual elements, yet to a lesser degree than *Einstein on the Beach*. For example *Satyagraha*, which focuses on

²⁴ Cunningham, 152-63.

²⁵ Philip Glass, ["Liner notes"] to *Einstein on the Beach* (New York: Elektra Nonesuch Records, 1993), 10.

Gandhi, presents three iconic figures that never speak or sing but rather sit atop a twelve-foot pyramid in poses, while *Akhmaten* includes a perpetual funeral procession in the background throughout the duration of the opera. Both also exemplify the third typical trait of minimalist operas; *Satyagraha* is political while *Akhmaten* is religious. They also employ technology, but once again less so than *Einstein on the Beach*. *Satyagraha* includes a synthesizer for processed loops, and both pieces require amplification

John Adams

John Adams started his career writing minimalist music, yet he moved on to incorporate traditional features from Western classical music to a higher degree than any of his colleagues. In relation to my previous discussion of minimalist opera as exemplified by *Einstein on the Beach*, Adams's first opera *Nixon in China* is quite different. Furthermore, Adams's second opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* departs even more from the minimalist opera model.

Nixon in China, written to a libretto by Alice Goodman, premiered in Houston in 1987 under the stage direction of Peter Sellars. The opera takes place during President Richard Nixon's famous visit to Beijing in 1972, beginning with his arrival to the airport, accompanied by his wife. Throughout the course of the opera, the Nixons meet and interact with the Chinese Premier Chou En-Lai, Mao Tse-Tung, and Madame Mao. The essence of the plot revolves around the misunderstanding of Chinese culture. Nixon is portrayed as naïve and ignorant in Chinese matters. He knows that he does not like communism, but he does not know why, or even what it truly entails. President Nixon believes that capitalism and the American dream are superior to the Chinese way of life,

even though he does not even consider more serious issues such as the brutality of Mao Tse-Tung's Cultural Revolution. In turn Madame Mao introduces the Nixons to modern Chinese culture by taking them to a performance of the controversial "revolutionary ballet" *The Red Detachment of Women*. The opera keeps an introspective regard throughout, arguing that political motives are better understood when human vulnerability is taken into account on both sides.²⁶

While the music of *Einstein on the Beach* is truly minimal throughout, *Nixon in China* only includes certain minimalist aspects, notably repetitive ascending scales, reiterated words and musical phrases in the chorus. The orchestra also incorporates driving rhythms and continuously recurring melodies throughout the opera. *Nixon in China* is however unlike *Einstein on the Beach* in that harmony is more chromatic and complex, and there is much less repetition. Adams did use a more conventional libretto, with actual words and sentences, which contrast with Glass's exclusive use of numbers and solfège syllables for the text of the acts. These aspects make a totally different overall appearance of both of the operas .

Along the same lines, the preeminence of visual aspects is not as marked in *Nixon in China* as it is in *Einstein on the Beach*. In fact, that Peter Sellars directed the Houston premiere added an unorthodox aspect to the opera's stage sets and costumes, but they remain secondary to the music in terms of their contribution to the creation of the drama.

In what regards the subject matter, however, *Nixon in China* agrees with most minimalist operas. This is contemporaneous and political in nature. The plot juxtaposes

²⁶ Michael Steinberg, "Nixon in China," *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, ed. by Thomas May (Newark: Amadeus Press, 2006), 116-19.

two cultures, those of China and the United States, and delves into mutual misunderstanding. Nevertheless, *Nixon* is unlike *Einstein* in the presentation of their respective topics. Adams develops a straight narrative while Glass does away with anything that could create a linear argument.

In terms of technology, *Nixon in China*, like *Einstein on the Beach*, is amplified.

However this is the only electronic means asked for in Adams's opera. Glass's piece includes synthesizers and employs loops as well as other technical aides necessary for the elaborate visual staging. Furthermore, Adams's opera follows a traditional three-act format. Therefore Adams's opera is more conventional than Glass's more experimental minimalist production.

Adam's second opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, like *Nixon in China*, was created in collaboration with librettist Alice Goodman and director Peter Sellars; the piece premiered in Brussels in 1991. It deals with the Achille Lauro affair of 1985, in which Palestinian terrorists hijacked an Italian ocean liner for the purpose of getting fifty co-nationals out of an Israeli prison. In the course of the hijacking, the terrorists killed the Jewish American hostage Leon Klinghoffer. This opera also resorts to a non-linear narrative format. It is basically a real event presented more or less straightforwardly as an "operatic thriller."²⁷

The Death of Klinghoffer uses minimalist traits selectively. It agrees with the model of minimalist operas previously presented in that the orchestral accompaniment employs driving rhythms and much pitch reiteration. The subject matter is again

²⁷ Michael Steinberg, "The Death of Klinghoffer," *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, ed. by Thomas May (Newark: Amadeus Press, 2006), 127-129.

contemporaneous and highly political, and performances are amplified electronically. However, Adams' piece departs from the model in that both melodies and harmony are complex and chromatic to a much higher degree than any of the other pieces discussed thus far. Moreover, this opera does not emphasize visual aspects in any way, and the music consistently conveys the drama. *The Death of Klinghoffer* is written in just two acts, making it the most concise of all the minimalist operas in my sample. In short, the overall appearance and sound of this opera is quite different from the minimalist operas of Glass that can be taken as a model for the genre.

The exploration of operas generally considered as "minimalist" in this chapter discloses the existence of important traits common to most of the main representative pieces of the genre: repetitive and generally simple music, contemporaneous or everyday topics of scientific or political nature, the refashioning of certain traditional operatic conventions. Two lines can be discerned, an overtly experimental one, represented by Philip Glass' three works, and one that combines new features with traditional ones, exemplified by John Adams' two operas. The most experimental among the minimalist operas avoid shaping an unconventional sense of drama through music, but rather rely on complex visual aspects, including stage designs, costumes and acting. This study provides a most useful set of conceptual tools to set a context for *The Man who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. The following chapters discuss the piece as a minimalist opera whose score is highly experimental in its avoidance of many traditional features, in the line of Glass, but at the same time it continues to uphold the power of music to create drama, just as Adams did.

CHAPTER 3

FLUXUS EVENTS IN NYMAN'S OPERA

Fluxus, an avant-garde performance art movement of the 1960s, influenced Nyman's conception of his opera. The movement began in Western Europe—in West Germany, to be precise—and quickly spread throughout Europe and the United States. Together with several other mid-twentieth-century avant-garde movements, Fluxus challenged the very definition of music, a term that referred to the resulting sounds from any Fluxus performance, whatever they were. Fluxus “music” essentially corresponded to the soundscape or ambient sounds produced during a performance, ranging from the sounds of an instrument being destroyed to the nothingness of silence. The first Fluxus concert was held in Wiesbaden; other followed, including pieces by Dick Higgins, George Brecht, Nam June Paik, James Tenney, LaMonte Young, Allison Knowles, and Yoko Ono.²⁸

Fluxus intended to rid the world of “bourgeois intellectuals,” together with the consumer driven culture and the institutionalized art that they promoted.²⁹ The term was adopted from medical vocabulary, where it refers to fluid discharges. More specifically, Fluxus promoted the creation, not of traditional artwork, but rather of performing units called “events.” A Fluxus event consists of a composition, which is a set of instructions

²⁸ Eric Drott, “Ligeti in Fluxus,” *The Journal of Musicology* 21 (2004): 201-240.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 201.

to be performed live. These particular instructions are brief and entail a concrete activity.³⁰

Fluxus also included purely visual works of art. No definition could capture all the means that the movement employed—and artists themselves never agreed on what was considered “Fluxus.” Thanks to scholarship, a better collection of resources has been made available to provide a more authoritative description of the Fluxus experience.³¹

The works of Fluxus that are not musical in nature fall into the general category of visual experiences. For example George Maciunas, and others as well, made wooden boxes called Fluxkits. A Fluxkit consisted of a small wooden or plastic box that contained a number of small items inside, such as a rubber ball and some small paper cards with words printed on them. Another example of a visual Fluxus piece are the plethora of small boxes that contained the so-called games made by George Brecht. One such work is his piece “Games & Puzzles: Inclined Plane Puzzle,” which includes a box with a metal ball inside and a set of instructions on a card that ask the viewer to “place ball on inclined surface. Observe the ball rolling uphill.”³²

Other Fluxus visual arts on a larger scale are photographs, paintings on canvas, and film. An example of a Fluxus photograph is the one by George Brecht and Robert Fillilou titled “La Cédille qui Sourit” (The Cedilla that Smiled). This is a double exposure photograph. Fluxus painting typically follows other minimalist modern trends,

³⁰ Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

³² Thomas Kellein, *Fluxus* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 42-48.

by using blobs of one main color together with dots or touches of impurities in the color. For example if the main color is dark red, the impurities would be black smudges and lighter and darker shades of red.³³ An example of a Fluxus film is *Flicker*, by John Cavanaugh, produced in 1966. This film consists of a quick alternation of black and clear celluloid, resulting in a black background with bright white flickers. This type of projection causes the viewers eyes to become fatigued and to experience an illusion of blindness in which the eye sees slow moving and colorless blobs while the film flashes.³⁴

Fluxus is also linked to the broader category of multimedia art, which connects visual components to sound and music by default. From this perspective, Fluxus can be placed alongside other artistic mediums such as electronic music, kinetic sculpture, and pop art, which also intend to develop a philosophical and anthropological set of experiments with society and counterculture.³⁵ As the French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes once expressed, Fluxus is a symbiosis of music and the visual arts that takes their usual partnership one step further.³⁶

Fluxus is similar in several ways to the Pop Art movement. Pop art was countercultural in that it contained elements of anti-elitism. Instead of cultural items portrayed through art it used mundane or popular elements such as comics and advertisements. Coincidentally, pop art was actually popular. Many enjoyed it who did

³³ Ibid., 33.

³⁴ Higgins, 17.

³⁵ David Dunn, "A History of Electronic Music Pioneers," *Classic Essays on Twentieth-Century Music*, eds. Richard Kostelanetz and Joseph Darby (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 118.

³⁶ Michael Broyles, *Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 324-25.

not belong to the cultural elite.³⁷ Electronic music can be seen as countercultural because of its manipulation of machines and the conversion of acoustic instruments into electronic ones. Electronic music alters the cultural normalcy as identified with the natural beauty of the instrument and voice. The electronic aspect replaces all things natural with unnatural and synthesized sounds. Kinetic sculpture is also evolutionary in that, by putting sculpture into motion, it overturns the idea of a static piece of art that is central to the art. A kinetic sculpture is a three-dimensional work of art that contains a moving part, usually propelled by a motor, air, or the observer. For example, fountains and mobiles are considered kinetic sculptures.³⁸

Audio-visual Fluxus works go beyond these arts, however. Fluxus pioneer George Maciunas's goal was to present an ordinary event such as a game or gag in a theatrical setting, letting its ordinary character criticize the (over) constructed and (ultra) refined features of contemporary art. For Maciunas, Fluxus was "the fusion of Spike Jones, vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp."³⁹ Fluxus artists also acknowledge the influence of John Cage. Cage demonstrated that it was impossible to separate sound from silence in his famous 4' 33'', a piece that requires a performer to approach the stage and do nothing for the duration of four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The sound or music results from the atmospheric sounds of the audience and

³⁷ Higgins, 125.

³⁸ Hannah Higgins, "Fluxus Fortuna," In *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. by Ken Friedman, (London: Academy Editions, 1998), 52.

³⁹ Michael Nyman, ["Liner notes"] to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (CBS Masterworks, 1988), 10.

the performance space. Similarly, Fluxus artists argued that it would be impossible to separate seeing from hearing in their artistic events.⁴⁰

Nyman himself, who was much attracted to experimental music early in his career, knew and discussed the Fluxus movement as a music critic. He devotes a chapter to it in his book, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*. Nyman credits Cage's creation of indeterminate music and music theater as precursors to Fluxus. In Fluxus, he emphasizes the combination of seeing and hearing, and, ultimately, of theater and music. He writes that an aspect of Fluxus is the performance of visual and aural events.⁴¹

Cage undoubtedly was an inspirer of the Fluxus movement. This is especially evident in a "happening" he organized at Black Mountain College in 1952. Cage created a rhythmic structure on the basis of a series of overlapping time brackets, which merely set starting times for performers to begin their performances. Within each time bracket, a performer would act in any way he or she wanted for as long as they liked. The happening thus consisted of several simultaneous independent activities performed by a number of artists, with no determination of content or subject matter.⁴²

In Cage's 1958-59 class at the New School for Social Research in New York, students conducted experiments in which chance operations were incorporated into music, performance, and poetry.⁴³ It was there that George Brecht developed his idea of Fluxus events, which consisted in brief, mundane directions written on an index card.

⁴⁰ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), 60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 61-2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴³ Higgins, 2.

The event was inspired by Cage's concept of indeterminacy, insofar the sound that resulted from a concrete and defined action was nevertheless random or indeterminate. Other examples of events in the spirit of Brecht include works by Alison Knowles, Takehisa Kosugi, and Yoko Ono. For example, Knowles wrote a composition titled *Make a Salad*, in which the performer is merely instructed to make a salad (with no other specifications). Kosugi wrote an event called *Walking*, that only instructs a performer to walk intently. Following this trend, Ono composed an event titled *Lighting Piece*, in which the performer needs to light a match and watch until it extinguishes.⁴⁴

Not all events are so commonplace. The fact that the directions for an event are short does not necessarily imply that its actions are mundane. In fact, the thrill of Fluxus lies in the unexpected nature of the performance, leaving the stage wide open for a variety of possibilities. There have been cases of setting instruments on fire, locking the audience members in a theatre until they find their way out, and placing a cat or dog inside of a piano while playing Chopin. Many Fluxus events could be described as bizarre, comical, absurd or even violent.⁴⁵

Fluxus According to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*

Nyman resorted to Fluxus events as a basis to organize *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. At the planning stage, he construed many of the actions described in Oliver Sacks' case study as what he considers Fluxus events, such as a Greeting event,

⁴⁴ David T. Doris, "Zen Vaudeville: A Medi(t)ation in the Margins of Fluxus," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. by Ken Friedman (London: Academy Editions, 1998), 114-118.

⁴⁵ Nyman, 67-74.

Shoe event, or Rose event. These events are still found in the final version of the opera, usually identified directly in the score with the appropriate title (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Fluxus-Like Events in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*

Event	Action	Place	Page
1. [Greeting]	Dr. and Mrs. P meet Dr. S the neurologist.	Dr. S's Office	10
2. [The Examination]	Dr. P receives a routine neurological exam from Dr. S.		12
3. The Shoe	Dr. P gets dressed and unintentionally leaves his left shoe off. Dr. S tells him of his mistake. Mrs. P helps her husband with his shoe.		36
4. The Slides	Dr. S. asks Dr. P to identify what he sees in a slides from a National Geographic magazine. Dr. S misinterprets what he sees.		47
5. The River	Dr. P sings "I See a River" to describe what he sees.		54
6. [Hat]	Dr. P mistakes his wife's head for a hat.		60
7. The Dressing Ritual	Dr. P dresses while singing to himself. Mrs. P hums along with him.	P's House	64
8. The House Call	Dr. S enters the apartment of Dr. and Mrs. P.		71
9. "Ich grolle nicht"	Dr. P and Dr. S sing, Mrs. P accompanies them on piano.		78
10. The Solids	Dr. P correctly identifies the abstract solid shapes that Dr. S puts in front of him.		82
11. [The Caricatures]	Dr. S asks Dr. P to identify a set of caricatures. Dr. P cannot do this correctly.		89
12. [Bette Davis]	Dr. S turns on a Bette Davis film and asks Dr. P to identify the things on the screen, however he cannot recognize faces.		97
13. Photographs	Dr. S picks up photos from around the house and asks Dr. P who is in them. Dr. P cannot identify anyone.	P's House	111
14. Rose	Dr. S hands Dr. P a rose and asks him to identify the object, and it is not until Dr. P touches and smells the rose that he can tell what it is. Dr. and Mrs. P sing together.		119
15. Glove	Dr. S gives Dr. P a glove for identification. Dr. P correctly identifies it by the sense of touch than vision. Then he hums his dressing song to himself while putting on the glove.		125

[Table 3.1—Continued]

Table 3.1—*Continued*

Event	Action	Place	Page
16. The Chess Game	Dr. S challenges Dr. P to a game of mental chess (because Dr. P cannot identify the real chess pieces). Dr. P beats Dr. S.		133
17. The Street	Dr. S asks Dr. P to describe Hope Street. Dr. P does this relatively well except he has trouble describing the left side of the street.		142
18. The Paintings	Dr. P hums his eating song to himself while he has tea and snacks. At the same time Dr. S comments to Mrs. P that the quality of Dr. S's paintings has decreased over time. Mrs. P exclaims "Philistine!" at Dr. S. Mrs. P's shriek interrupts Dr. P's eating song and he loses his bearing on what he is doing. It is not until Mrs. P hands him another cup of tea that he gets reoriented.		151
19. The Wife	Mrs. P tells Dr. S about Dr. P's eating and dressing songs.		168
20. The Prognosis	Dr. S prescribes more music for Dr. P so he can orient his life more effectively.		175

Source: Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Chester Music, 1986).

Nyman, however, does not use all of the audio-visual aspects of Fluxus in these events. A Fluxus event simply is a concrete everyday activity to be performed on stage; the act of performance turns the commonplace action into art. The opera is built on the basis of a string of such everyday activities, which correspond to the observations or tests that Dr S carries on in order to diagnose Dr P.'s diseases, and he names them in accordance to their nature. For example the section of the work where Dr. S challenges Dr. P to a game of mental chess is titled "The Chess Game." These activities do not quite belong to the traditional category of operatic actions in that they do not form a continuous narrative, hence their labeling as Fluxus events. Essentially, everything after the prologue in the opera is such an activity (see Table 3.1 for a listing).

The Examination (score, p.12) properly exemplifies these events. At this point in the play, Dr. P receives a neurological exam from Dr. S. The stage directions in the libretto ask Dr. S to give Dr. P “a *routine* neurological examination—reflexes, vision field, muscle tone, tuning fork on sole of foot etc.—as Mrs. P addresses the audience [my emphasis].” As an action, it is Fluxus-like because a concrete, everyday task—the examination is expressly marked as “routine”—is prescribed in the libretto and performed on stage, without contributing to a traditional narrative plot.⁴⁶ It only fails to be truly Fluxus in that its disruptive potential has been minimized, greatly downplaying its criticism of traditional bourgeois art. Instead of ambient sounds of Dr. P’s exam there is structured orchestral music. Chance, furthermore, plays no role in the piece: the events ultimately make sense as steps toward Dr. S’s diagnostics. Nyman’s approach to Fluxus-like events acknowledges an influence from Fluxus actions only, leaving out the indeterminate sound that accompanied them in the actual artistic movement of the 1960s.

Nyman has creatively used Fluxus events in a selective way in his opera. He has taken several concrete activities, similar in nature to Fluxus events, and paired them with his music. The whole opera is a string of Fluxus-like events, in which each successive event leads to the final diagnosis of Dr. P’s illness. In a way similar to Fluxus, Dr. P’s disorder also embodies the banal, the bizarre, and the comedic. Fluxus, then, is an important component of Nyman’s opera, one that accorded the piece much of its identity.

⁴⁶ Nyman, 12.

CHAPTER 4

THE MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE FOR A HAT: FAMILIARIZING AND DEFAMILIARIZING

According to Joseph Kerman's famous idea, music creates the drama in operas. Nyman's score does it—yet at the same time it does not. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* does not use music's traditional psychological role; viewed from tradition, the piece is expressionless—music does not convey any of their emotional life. Still, the score is the main force behind the unfolding of the drama. The music projects the situations that Dr. P finds himself in, and that lead to his diagnosis by Dr. S. How is Dr. P's dramatic story conceived musically? Three distinct musical elements contribute to narrate Dr. P's story with sounds, namely minimalism, vocal-orchestral congruence, and Robert Schumann's songs.

These musical aspects reflect Dr. P's abilities and inabilities to understand his world. As Nyman wrote, the opera conveys a process of familiarization and defamiliarization with the world of Dr. P. For this sake, his main tool is a minimalist device—the repetition of a single chord progression, which creates familiarity. The progression is abandoned when Dr. P moves into unfamiliar territory due to his illness.⁴⁷ The remaining musical elements, namely the degree of Dr. P's congruence with the orchestra, and his familiarity with Schumann, also help convey the process of familiarization and defamiliarization.

⁴⁷ Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Chester Music, 1986), iii.

Minimalism

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat is a minimalist opera. Its overall outlook is generally minimal, based upon driving, repetitive rhythms and phrases. Furthermore, Nyman created his score around a single harmonic sequence that appears throughout, and that is related to Dr. P. Here I will deal first with the harmonic sequence and then turn to other minimalist features in the piece.

Nyman incorporates the repeating chord sequence C, Db, F, B, Eb, A, Db, G, and B. This is a minimalistic way of familiarizing and defamiliarizing with Dr. P. The presence of this chord progression represents the familiar while the absence conveys a sense of the unfamiliar. This chord progression is not so much telling the audience whether Dr. P is correctly identifying objects or not but rather acts as the narrator of Dr. P's illness. First it establishes a prototype (the chord sequence) and then departs from it through variation and avoidance, thus representing Dr. P's degenerative disease.

The C, Db, F, B, Eb, A, Db, G and B Chord Progression

Nyman has written that he used a particular chord progression to create "harmonic identity" in his opera. The continuous insistence upon this small harmonic vocabulary creates the repetitive, minimalist effect that perhaps is the most salient feature of the composition. Furthermore, the progression constitutes a characteristic musical segment that represents Dr. P's sense of the familiar. In order to portray Dr. P's illness, Nyman continually changes the segment by gradually taking texture, melody, and detail away.

He refers to this process as “defamiliarization.” This process also includes the absence of this chord progression all together. All this interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar is aimed at musically revealing the deterioration of Dr. P’s mental capabilities to the audience.⁴⁸

Nyman bases entire sections of the opera upon the chord progression C, Db, F, B, Eb, A, Db, G, and B. These chords return in a thematic way, once and again. However, every repetition is different, including small incremental changes in tempo, timbre, texture, rhythm, and precise chordal content as well. These changes are most prominent within context to the different events. Each event has a thumbprint-like quality in that a particular mood or character is evoked, depending on the way the chord progression is used. The return of the chord sequence at the beginning of a most events signals the start of a new section of the piece, and a new event, together with the presentation of a new character or mood. The chord progression also insures the opera’s basic cohesiveness because it is repetitive and it is used throughout the piece.

Sections based upon the “familiar” chord progression, that accompany a narration of Dr. P’s diagnostics, alternate with other sections in which the music uses “unfamiliar” harmonies to set Dr. P’s bizarre responses to Dr. S’s tests. Paradoxically enough, the latter use fifth relationships, including dominant-tonic progressions, far more often than the former. “Familiarity,” here, should be understood in the context of the piece, rather than in reference to functional tonality. Alternatively, Nyman may have thought of a more conventional writing as a good means to convey Dr. P’s disease. Not that the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

composer is equating tonality (or Classical convention) to a disease; rather, he may consider conventional writing as more trivial and less meaningful than the more interesting, less common chord progression upon which the piece is based.

Well into the opera, Nyman also uses incomplete statements of his basic chord progression, interrupting them with different, unfamiliar harmonic developments. This interplay of familiarity and unfamiliarity seems to parallel Dr. P's striving to find familiarities in objects around, in which the sense of the known often leads to wrong identifications. Likewise, the chord progression can sometimes appear familiar, only subsequently to take an unfamiliar route. For example, in *The Slides* event (mm. 317-356, p. 47-55), Dr. P is confused and cannot correctly identify what he sees therefore the chord progression does not finish.

The absence of the familiar chord progression is an effective means for conveying drama, symbolizing Dr. P's shortcomings in understanding his surroundings: his inability to identify faces, his lost abilities to read music, and the poorer paintings of his later period. All in all, the absent chords project the deterioration of the visual part of his brain due to his disease, translating neurology into music, as if it were.

Through the drama in the music, there are not merely recognizable and unrecognizable sections but moods and characters present in each part, familiar and unfamiliar alike. Table 4.1 illustrates the alternating of the familiar and unfamiliar territory in the opera through the usage of the full chord cycle, the partial chord cycle, as well as the absence of the chord sequence. As already stated, Nyman alternates the basic

Table 4.1. Presence and Absence of the C, Db, F, B, Eb, A, Db, G, B Sequence

Event	Complete Chord Cycle Measures	Partial Chord Cycle Measures	Absence of Chord Cycle	Character/Mood
Greeting	36-68			Cold
			69-81	
Greeting, Exam	82-110			
Exam	112-138			Dutiful/excitable
	143-167			
	169-205			
			206-226	
The Shoe	227-250			Dark/anxious
The Shoe/The Slides			251-316	(Shoe) Dark/anxious, (Slides) Curious
The Slides		317-356 (to G)		Curious
The Slides/Hat			357-410	(Slides) Curious, (Hat) Doubtful/sad
Hat/The Dressing Ritual			424-484	(Hat) Doubtful/sad, (The Dressing) Dutiful/cheerful
The House Call	485-501			Cheerful
The House Call/"Ich grolle nicht"			502-519	(House Call) Cheerful, ("Ich grolle...") Melancholic
		520-529 (to 2 nd Db)		
"Ich grolle nicht"		568-577 (to A)		Melancholic
The Solids/Caricature/Bette Davis			578-747	(Solids) Curious/intense, (Caricatures) Anxious/desperate, (Bette) Confused/disturbed
Bette Davis		748-787 (to Eb)		Confused/disturbed
Photographs	790-804			Melancholic/depleted
	808-822			
	826-840			
			841-858	
The Rose	859-888			Dutiful/confused
		893-916 (to Eb)		
			917-924	
The Glove	925-959			Curious/intense
		964-970 (to A)		
			971-1001	

[Table 4.1—Continued]

Table 4.1--*Continued*

Event	Complete Chord Cycle Measures	Partial Chord Cycle Measures	Absence of Chord Cycle	Character/Mood
The Chess Game	1002-1101			Confident/cheerful
The Chess Game/The Street			1102-1175	(Chess)Confident/cheerful, (Street) melancholic
The Paintings	1176-1211			Anxious/dark
The Paintings/The Wife			1212-1349	(Paintings) Anxious/dark, (Wife) melancholic
The Wife	1350-1354			Melancholic
		1355-1357 (to A)		
The Prognosis			1358-1364	Mournful
		1365-1438 (to 2nd Db)		
The Prognosis			1439-1448	
Photographs	790-804			Melancholic/depleted
	808-822			
	826-840			
			841-858	
The Rose	859-888			Dutiful/confused
		893-916 (to Eb)		
			917-924	
The Glove	925-959			Curious/intense
		964-970 (to A)		
			971-1001	
The Chess Game	1002-1101			Confident/cheerful
The Chess Game/The Street			1102-1175	(Chess)Confident/cheerful, (Street) melancholic
The Paintings	1176-1211			Anxious/dark
The Paintings/The Wife			1212-1349	(Paintings) Anxious/dark, (Wife) melancholic
The Wife	1350-1354			Melancholic
		1355-1357 (to A)		
The Prognosis			1358-1364	Mournful
		1365-1438 (to 2nd Db)		
			1439-1448	

Source: Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Chester Music, 1986).

progression of the piece with “unfamiliar” chords or gestures. These “unfamiliar” sections generally correspond to situations in which Dr. P finds himself lost.

Exceptionally, when Schumann’s music is quoted in the piece, the “unfamiliar” chords correspond to Dr. P’s use of that composer as a means of orientation.

This interplay of the familiar with the non-familiar holds a peculiar dramatic importance. The gradually deteriorating “familiar” segments represent the growing awareness of Dr. P’s visual agnosia. The “non-familiar” sections, on the other hand, reveal the full extent of Dr. P’s disease perhaps in a better way than the libretto. The libretto never fully reveals the gravity of Dr. P’s illness, but it mainly gives a piece-by-piece account of Dr. P’s world. Music, instead, directly encapsulates the tragedy of Dr. P’s illness. Even though the opera does not attempt any psychological portrait of the characters or the situations, music succeeds in conveying the cold, non-sentimental evolution of this “neurological” drama. The chord progression central to the opera, coupled with its absence and its eventual demise accurately narrate Dr. P’s story.

Other Minimalist Elements

Aside from the use of the same chord sequence throughout the opera, several other important traits of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* denote a minimalist approach, prominently including simple or repetitive melodic lines that contribute to the unfolding of the drama. The minimalistic composition of Dr. P’s melodic line represents his visual agnosia in that he has to methodically make sense of the world around him. For example he cannot just view a rose and identify that object, but he has to feel and

smell it before he can tell what it is. In these situations, Dr. P's vocal line is repetitive in pitch and rhythm, and essentially mechanical, as if he were acting automatically due to his illness.

Moreover, the tonal simplicity of the opera seems minimalist. The entire opera is mostly in C major. There are a few key changes, mostly to accommodate Schumann melodies sung by Dr. P, to A major, B major, Eb major, and Bb major. All original music remains in the home key.

This opera's rhythm also displays important minimalist features. The time signature is predominantly 4/4. There is a constant sense of forward motion, mostly characterized by driving rhythms and a pounding beat. There are of course repetitions of pitches and phrases but they are highlighted by the urgency of the rhythm. Not only is a pitch or phrase repeated, it is repeated rapidly.

There furthermore are specific aspects of minimalism in Dr. P's vocal line. Table 4.2 includes all of the instances of minimalist melodies in Dr. P's part. Some of them, such as the rather slow gestures that accompany the character's realization of his inability to read music (mm. 515-521, p. 75-76) are simply declamatory. Other ones resort to the kind of fast repeated notes typical of "patter song" in opera buffa, placing a note of ironic humor upon the character's otherwise successful recognition of the Platonic solids, (mm. 602-619, p.84-86). Here, the minimalist construction and the buffa reference imply that, even if Dr. P's recognition of the solids was effective, the result nevertheless lacks any real meaning, for it does not refer to actual objects but only to abstractions. All the

passages in Table 4.2, however, add one more minimalist element that reinforces the general aesthetics of the piece.

Table 4.2. Minimalism in Dr. P's Vocal Line

Measure Number	Fluxus-like event
515-521	The House Call
602-619	The Solids
647-651	Caricatures
727-729	Bette Davis
739-741 766-769	
1105-1156	The Street
1304-1309	The Paintings

Many other passages include clear examples of minimalism throughout the opera. For example, during “The Exam” (mm. 88-111; example 4.1) the sympathetic first violin contains a minimal solo while the second violin plays strict, driving sixteenth notes. This idea continues after breaks, on mm. 118-134 and 143-178, unifying much of the music for the Exam event.

Example 4.1. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, mm. 88-91

The musical score for Example 4.1, mm. 88-91, is presented in a standard orchestral layout. At the top, the tempo is marked "Più mosso" with a quarter note equal to 138. The score includes parts for Mrs. P (Mezzo-soprano), Dr. S (Soprano), Dr. P (Bass), Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello 1, Violoncello 2, Horns, and Piano. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor). The lyrics for Dr. S are "No cause to worry here." The score shows a complex texture with overlapping vocal lines and instrumental accompaniment.

[S] Reproduced with permission from Schirmer Music.

Another example occurs during “The Photographs” event (m. 849-855; ex. 4.2). Dr. S imitates Dr. P’s slowly declamatory vocal line when the singer cannot identify the faces in the pictures. A generally repetitive texture marks this moment of epiphany for Dr. S, who now realizes that Dr. P cannot recognize faces. Also, in “The Street” event, (m. 1105-1155, ex. 4.3) the first and second violins play a series of quarter notes to accompany the repetitive solo of the viola, as if conveying the steady motion of people and vehicles in the street outside. These examples show how minimalism also shapes small elements that contribute to the more general minimalist aesthetic of the opera.

Example 4.2. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, mm. 849-851

The musical score for Example 4.2, mm. 849-851, features the following parts and markings:

- Vocal Lines:** Soprano (S), Alto (A), and Bass (B). Lyrics: "Blank mo - tion - less fa - ces With - out per - son - a - li - ty." Dynamic marking: *p*.
- Violin I (Vl. I):** *pp* nat. senza vib.
- Violin II (Vl. II):** *pp* nat. senza vib.
- Viola (Vla.):** *pp* nat. senza vib.
- Violoncello (Vcl.):** *pp* nat. senza vib.
- Double Bass (Vcl. 2):** *pp* senza vib.
- Piano (P):** *pp* nat. senza vib.
- Harmonica (H):** *pp* marc.

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Example 4.3. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, mm. 1105-1109

The image shows a page of a musical score for the opera *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, measures 1105-1109. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. At the top left, the measure number '1105' is indicated, followed by a tempo marking '♩ = ♩'. The vocal line for Dr. P is the central focus, with lyrics: 'From our end, High up there, The'. The score includes parts for Mrs. P, Dr. S, Dr. P, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello 1, Violoncello 2, Horn, and Piano. Various dynamics and performance instructions are present, such as 'mf', 'f', 'f cantabile', 'Solo', and 'spusi express.'.

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Meaningful Doublings of Dr. P's Voice

Every time that an instrument doubles Dr. P's vocal line, the character understands and makes sense of his surroundings. Different instruments represent diverse conditions of Dr. P's disease, as if introducing degrees of congruence between voice and orchestra. The different degrees of understanding are best presented in a hierarchy, in which individual instruments correspond to precise states of the character (Table 4.3). Dr. P has a unique relationship to several of the instruments in the orchestra. The higher pitched instruments double Dr. P's vocal line when he can best make sense of his surroundings, while when the lower pitched instruments play with him, they represent

his inability of recognize certain objects. This hierarchy from high to low works incrementally: good equals “high,” moderate equals “middle,” and poor equals “low.”

Table 4.3. Instrumental Hierarchy

Register	Instrument	Relation to Dr. P
Highest	First Violin	Dr. P’s correct understanding of the world around him.
High	Second Violin	Represents Dr. P’s ability to somewhat decipher the world around him.
Medium	Viola	Represents Dr. P’s faltering to understand the things he sees.
Low	First Cello	Represents Dr. P’s faltering deeper in his visual agnosia.

Table 4.4 contains all of Dr. P’s vocal congruence to the orchestral doublings according to the hierarchy of the instruments. For example, the first violin clearly projects Dr. P’s melody at the beginning of the Greeting event (m. 36-66), when Dr. P recognizes the street sounds outside of Dr. S’s office, interprets them musically, and comments on his continuous ability to sing professionally. At the other end of the spectrum, when Dr. P does not recognize a rose that Dr. S handed him (in the Rose event, m. 865-881), the orchestra does not double him at all. When he finally realizes what the object is (m. 893), the first cello plays with him.

Table 4.4. Orchestral Doublings of Dr. P’s Voice

Instrument	Measure Numbers	Fluxus-like event
First Violin	36-66	Greeting
	77-83	
	241-257	The Shoe
First Violin	435-441	The Dressing Ritual
	445-446	
	474-477	
	602-619	“Ich grolle nicht”
	647-651	Caricatures

[Table 4.4—*Continued*]

Table 4.4--Continued

Instrument	Measure Numbers	Fluxus-like event
	(TUTTI)	
	961-963	The Glove
	969-971	
	1119-1121	The Street
	1124-1132	
	1147-1149	
	1433-1440	The Prognosis
Second Violin	351-352	The Slides
	445-446 (as second voice to Mrs. P)	The Dressing Ritual
	479-484	
	961-963 (unison with first violin)	The Glove
	969-971 (unison with first violin)	
	1155-1159	The Street
Viola	354-356	The Slides
	427-434	The Dressing Ritual
	474-477 (doubles first violin at the octave)	
	955-956	The Glove
	1318-1319	The Wife
	1433-1440	The Prognosis
First Cello	647-651	Caricatures
	886-908	The Rose
	989-997	The Glove
	1155-1159	The Street
	1204-1300	The Paintings
	1318-1319 (doubles viola at the octave)	
	(orchestral unison)	
Harp	635-643	The Solids
	713-718	Bette Davis
Piano	770-773 (left hand, in unison with piano left hand)	
	1350-1356 (unison with piano left hand)	The Wife

Source: Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Chester Music, 1986).

Dr. P is also doubled occasionally by the harp, without reference to register. The harp symbolizes the abstract objects that Dr. S employs in his testing of Dr. P playing cards (see ex. 4.4), caricatures, and the Bette Davis movie. In these particular events, Dr.

P does not perform very well when attempting to recognize these abstract images: the voice of the harp remains linked to items that Dr. P cannot fully identify.

Example 4.4. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, mm. 636-640

The image shows a page of a musical score for the opera 'The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat'. The score is for measures 636 to 640. It features several staves: Mrs. P (soprano), Dr. S (soprano), Dr. P (bass), Vln. 1 (violin), Vln. 2 (violin), Vla. (viola), Vcl. 1 (viola), Vcl. 2 (viola), Hp. (harp), and Pno. (piano). The Dr. P staff has the lyrics 'King of Clubs' written below it. The harp part is particularly prominent, playing a melodic line that is linked to the abstract images mentioned in the text. The piano part also has some doublings of the Dr. P line.

[S] Reproduced with permission from Schirmer Music.

Finally, the piano also doubles Dr. P on occasion. These doublings do not seem to be meaningful or intended. They are few and perhaps just coincidental. They do not reach beyond the instrument's almost permanent supporting role in Nyman's orchestra.

Besides these direct doublings, the first violin assumes a direct participation in the drama. In at least one passage, it seems to take over the musical persona of Dr. P when the latter does not sing, as if it were sympathetically reacting to the character's situation (m. 88-111 in the Greeting event). In this case, the violin projects Dr. P's confident and firm mood while he undergoes Dr. S's examination (ex. 4.5).

Example 4.5. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, mm. 88-91

The musical score for Example 4.5, mm. 88-91, is presented in a standard orchestral layout. It includes parts for Mrs. P, Dr. S, Dr. P, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello 1, Violoncello 2, Harp, and Piano. The score is in 4/4 time. Dr. S has the lyrics "No cause to worry" and Dr. P has the word "here." The score features various musical markings such as "mf", "cantabile", and "marcato".

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Schumann

As far as “familiarizing” and “defamiliarizing” in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, references to Schumann are one of the “familiarizing” strategies for Dr. P. It

represents the music that Dr. P. sung and taught, with which he was perfectly acquainted.

Nyman uses Schumann as the source for Dr. P’s dressing and eating songs. Schumann orients Dr. P in his daily chores and serves as a kind of personal soundtrack for his life.

Table 4.5 lists all of the references to Schumann’s music in the opera. Most borrowings are clear. In a few instances, however, I was unable to identify the source, even if Nyman himself singled out the German composer as the basis for his score. In the table, these cases are labeled as “Unidentified Schumann.”

Table 4.5. Schumann Quotations In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*

Measure	Character(s) Instrument(s)	Fluxus-like event	Schumann Song
51-55	Dr. P	Greeting	Das ist ein Flöten und Geigen, from <i>Dichterliebe</i> , Op. 48 No.9
364-384	Dr. P	The River	Unidentified Schumann
427-450	Dr. and Mrs. P	The Dressing Ritual	Der Nussbaum, from <i>Myrthen</i> , Op. 25. No. 3
459-469	Dr. P		
474-477	Dr. and Mrs. P and First Violin		
478-484	Dr. and Mrs. P		
533-567	Dr. P and Dr. S and Mrs. P (Piano)	“Ich grolle nicht”	Ich grolle nicht, from <i>Dichterliebe</i> , Op. 48 No. 7
707-768	Dr. P	Bette Davis	Unidentified Schumann
908-924	Dr. and Mrs. P	The Rose	Die Rose Die Lilie, from <i>Dichterliebe</i> , Op. 48 No. 3
992-993	Dr. P	The Glove	Der Nussbaum, from <i>Myrthen</i> , Op. 25 No. 3
1106-1171	Dr. P	The Street	Unidentified Schumann
1204-1300	Dr. P	The Paintings	Lied eines Schmiedes, from <i>Sechs Gedichte von N. Lenau und Requiem</i> , Op. 90 No. 1
707-768	Dr. P	Bette Davis	Unidentified Schumann
908-924	Dr. and Mrs. P	The Rose	Die Rose Die Lilie, from <i>Dichterliebe</i> , Op. 48 No. 3
992-993	Dr. P	The Glove	Der Nussbaum, from <i>Myrthen</i> , Op. 25 No. 3
1106-1171	Dr. P	The Street	Unidentified Schumann
1204-1300	Dr. P	The Paintings	Lied eines Schmiedes, from <i>Sechs Gedichte von N. Lenau und Requiem</i> , Op. 90 No. 1

Sources: Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Chester Music, 1986).

Nyman has taken songs from *Dichterliebe* as well as other Schumann songs as thematic sources for the opera. However the versions represented in the opera are Nyman's own elaborations of these Schumann songs. There is only one exception in which a whole Schumann song was used, namely the "Ich grolle nicht" event.⁴⁹ The song symbolically stands for Dr. P's illness, since it contains poetic references to illness and misery.⁵⁰

The version presented in the opera, accompanied only by the piano, is essentially the same as Schumann's original composition. Both are in C major, include the same number of measures and dynamic markings, and the piano accompaniment is identical. The main difference occurs at the end of the song, when Dr. S joins Dr. P by singing a different line. In Nyman's version (ex. 4.6) Dr. S sings what in the *Dichterliebe* score and (ex. 4.7) is notated as an *ossia* for higher voices *Dichterliebe*, beginning a measure earlier.

Example 4.6. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, mm. 556-561

[S] Reproduced with permission from Schirmer Music.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Mrs. P, Dr. S, and Dr. P. The score is in C major and 4/4 time. Mrs. P's part is mostly silent, with a 'ritard.' marking at the end. Dr. S's part begins at measure 556 with the lyrics 'Und sah die Schlang', Die dir am Her - zen frißt. Ich sah, mein Lieb, Wie sehr du e - lend'. Dr. P's part begins at measure 556 with the lyrics 'Traum - e Und sah die Nacht In dei - nes Her - zens Rau - me. Und sah die Schlang', Die dir am Her - zen frißt. Ich sah, mein Lieb, Wie sehr du e - lend'. The score includes dynamic markings of *mf* and *cresc.* for both Dr. S and Dr. P.

⁴⁹ Nyman, [score], iii.

⁵⁰ Robert Schumann, *Dichterliebe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), 26.

Example 4.7. Robert Schumann, “Ich grolle nicht,” from *Dichterliebe*, mm. 28-31.⁵¹

[N] Reproduced with permission from WW Norton & Co.

The use of “Die Rose, Die Lilie” to set William Blake’s poem, “The Sick Rose,” deserves a special commentary. Nyman’s choice here was inspired by the real Mrs. P, who indicated that the poem had been a favorite of both hers and Dr. P’s. The poem’s presence in the opera then operates as a personal nod toward the person of Mrs. P.⁵²

The use of Schumann as musical source material in this opera is one of many interesting features of the composition, together with the Fluxus-like events, the familiar chord progression, minimalism, and instrumental congruencies. It further defines Dr. P’s character by according him a greater depth. Schumann also helps clearly represent the familiar in Dr. P’s world, as opposed to other, free and unfamiliar melodies.

Conclusion

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat is a minimalist opera in which the drama is conveyed musically. My study of the minimalist operas by Philip Glass and John Adams allows me to contextualize Nyman’s composition within the panorama of late-twentieth-century operas. Even though Nyman’s music is perhaps best aligned with

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Michael Nyman, [“Liner notes”] to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, 9.

the prototypically minimalist style of Glass, his piece unfolds the plot's drama on the basis of the music, shunning visual elements, somewhat in line with Adams' plays. My analysis of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* discloses that Nyman reprises the traditional idea of music as generator of theatrical tension—very aptly so for a piece that stops short of celebrating the power of music to overcome nervous disease.

Nyman's music rightly conveys the drama of the narrative through various means. He used the idea of Fluxus events to organize the piece's dramatic flow. The opera is divided into a string of Fluxus-like events, which account for every action that Dr. S carries on in order to diagnose Dr. P, and that work as units, dramatically as well as musically.

The music of piece generally uses minimalist procedures. It remains in C major, except when Schumann music is quoted; it features simple melodies and harmonies, and driving, repetitive rhythms. An interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar is crucial to the opera; it is chiefly based upon a repeating chord progression that reappears throughout the opera. Departures from this known progression represent unfamiliarity, aptly conveying Dr. P's nervous disease. Vocal congruence is another important musical aspect in the opera. Dr. P's level of understanding of what he sees is conveyed through specific orchestral doublings of his melodic lines: when his mind works better, higher pitched instruments sing along with his voice; when he is not doubled at all, he is utterly lost.

Lastly Schumann serves as a crucial aide to Dr. P, representing the music with which he is familiar; many borrowings from the German composer's songs inform

Nyman's score, as I demonstrated. These quotations perform several different functions in the piece, notably that of serving as a kind of personal soundtrack to Dr. P's disease, guiding him through quotidian tasks such as eating or dressing.

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat essentially tells Dr. P's story through a unique combination of theatrical and musical elements: Fluxus-like events, minimalism, congruence between voice and instruments, and Schumann quotations. Nyman effectively brings to life the case study by Oliver Sacks. He has creatively solved with music a musical way of coping with a terrible illness, perhaps due to the real musician who lived through the tragedy.

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