

Magnifying their talent

Philip Glass recycles Leonard Cohen's poetry at Lincoln Center

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Composer Philip Glass is performing a concert piece built around the poems of Leonard Cohen at Lincoln Center next Saturday and Sunday. Cohen, the acclaimed Canadian poet and singer, has a prior commitment and won't be able to attend "Book of Longing," named after his best-selling 2006 collection of poems.

But even if he were free, Glass says he wouldn't have a clue as to whether Cohen would show up or not. The show will incorporate musicians (including Glass), four singers, and Cohen's artwork, along with taped recordings of Cohen reading his poetry. But Cohen himself won't perform.

"He's at a wonderful place in his life where he does whatever he damn well feels like," says Glass fondly about Cohen. "He doesn't do anything — as far as I can tell — to please people. He does things to please himself."

It's not selfishness on Cohen's part, just a realization at age 72 and a lifetime of acclaim that he should focus on what's best for him. So tell Cohen it would be great if he showed up for a certain event and he'll nod sagely and seem to agree, but not actually say anything.



Philip Glass (r.) lauds Leonard Cohen, who tips his hat to him in return. Photo by Lorca Cohen.

That mysterious aura has been a constant in the relationship between the two for almost 25 years. In 1984, Glass set a poem of Cohen's to music as part of Quebec's 350th-anniversary celebration. He sent it off to get permission, and the permission came ... but not a word from Cohen himself. Did he like it? Did he *hate* it? Did he even *hear* it? Glass simply didn't know.

Almost a decade ago, they began discussing this current collaboration. Then Cohen disappeared, becoming a monk, studying under a master and abandoning contemporary life for some five years while ensconced in a Zen monastery on Mount Baldy in Southern California.

Cohen "plays it down a lot, says he wasn't great in the 'renunciation department,'" says Glass, a long-time New Yorker who was famously driving a cab in 1976 when his ground-breaking opera "Einstein on the Beach" was being performed at the Met. "But he *did* live like a monk. It takes courage to do that. *I don't have it.*"

Now they've finally come together, pushing singers from the world of opera, Broadway and cabaret to develop a distinctive style of singing for this particular

piece, a style Cohen has dubbed "Glassic."

It's a good moment for Cohen, who's recovering from financial mismanagement that reportedly left him nearly bankrupt, despite a world-renowned music catalogue. His protégé and partner Anjani Thomas released her collaboration with Cohen, "Blue Light," last year. And on Aug. 7, Jennifer Warnes will issue a 20th-anniversary edition of Cohen's "Famous Blue Raincoat."

Glass, of course, is always busy. Now 70, he's touring with "Book of Longing," just enjoyed a revival of his Gandhi opera "Satyagraha" in London (it comes to the Met next year), has several film scores due including Woody Allen's new "Cassandra's Dream," and debuts his opera "Appomattox" in San Francisco in October. And viewers of a recent Paul Simon tribute on PBS saw Glass' instrumental take on "The Sounds of Silence." Which brings up more unfinished Cohen business.

"I've known Paul a long time and I discovered he and Leonard don't know each other, and I'm going to fix that," says Glass. "They should know each other, and they will, if *I* have anything to do with it." ♦