



# Vanessa Wagner

## Philip Glass

### The Complete Piano Etudes



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*"After more than three decades dedicated to interpreting the classical canon, discovering Philip Glass's music has, in a profound sense, reshaped my identity as a musician", confesses Vanessa Wagner.*

An emblematic artist on the French music scene, winner of a Victoire de la musique award and director of the Chambord and Giverny festivals, Vanessa Wagner's interpretations of Mozart, Debussy, Tchaikovsky and Dusapin are as inspiring as her work with Murcof or Rone.

With her innovative and daring approach, she has established herself as a major influence on the classical music scene, crossing borders and blazing inspiring trails.

A tireless pioneer of new repertoires, she has been exploring the works of minimalist composers for several years. For InFiné, she has dedicated 4 albums to the major figures of this courant, John Adams, Meredith Monk, Brian Eno, Ryūichi Sakamoto, as well as to the new generation Caroline Shaw, Bryce Dessner or Nico Muhly.

Alongside countless hours performing these works live, Wagner felt an urgent artistic calling: to record in full one of the great contemporary landmarks bridging the musical legacies of the 20th and 21st centuries — the twenty piano Études of

Philip Glass. Wagner's decision not only underscores Glass's Études as an integral part of modern piano literature but situates them within the grand lineage of études cycles by masters such as Ligeti, Debussy, and Dusapin, and further back, Chopin and Liszt.

Yet the subtle thread connecting Wagner to Glass extends beyond mere chronology or technique—it emerges from shared philosophical and pedagogical roots. In his memoir *Words Without Music*, Glass reflects upon Boulanger's uncompromising teaching in Paris, a city then witnessing its own cultural upheaval with the cinematic revolutions of the French New Wave—a parallel movement to minimalism's quiet yet radical disruption of musical conventions. Deeply influenced by Debussy and Ravel, Boulanger instilled in her students a rigorous yet open-minded discipline, one that embraced innovation while honoring classical tradition.

Philip Glass's Études, composed over a period marked by special commissions and artistic introspection, originated in the early 1990s as sketches intended for the Brazilian dance company Grupo Corpo. Facing increased demand for solo piano performances, Glass methodically refined these sketches into two comprehensive volumes. ►



Glass was born in 1937 and grew up in Baltimore. He studied at the University of Chicago, the Juilliard School and in Aspen with Darius Milhaud. Finding himself dissatisfied with much of what then passed for modern music, he moved to Europe, where he studied with the legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger (who also taught Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson and Quincy Jones) and worked closely with the sitar virtuoso and composer Ravi Shankar.

The first volume of ten Études arose primarily from Glass's own desire to address his self-confessed "technical shortcomings." Yet even in deceptively simple pieces like Étude No. 5, listeners encounter the quintessential Glass effect—an evocative, mesmerizing simplicity encouraging deep contemplation and emotional escape.

"There's such intensity and dreamlike qualities", Wagner remarks. "It demands the courage to surrender oneself entirely to repetition, allowing the mind to drift freely." Études No. 9 and No. 4—both previously recorded by Wagner on her celebrated albums *Inland* (2019) and *Mirrored*—have become definitive pieces within her live repertoire, demanding extraordinary technique and velocity, thus amplifying their hypnotic quality and drawing both performer and listener into a trance-like state.

Among the most technically challenging, Études No. 3 and No. 6 require absolute mastery, seamlessly transitioning from fragile pianissimos to powerful, resonant chords, followed immediately by rapid, intricate rhythmic patterns. All this must be delivered in a compact timeframe without sacrificing coherence or narrative flow.

"It demands constant emotional openness alongside unwavering technical control", Wagner explains.

In the second volume, Glass intensifies his exploration of musical language itself, venturing deeper into complex rhythmic structures and harmonic innovation. These Études seem envisioned for an imaginary virtuoso, a pianist capable of unlocking their full expressive potential. Indeed, Glass himself rarely performed the works from this second collection in public.

Yet, these later Études constitute some of Glass's most compelling achievements: from the expansive, meditative voyages of Nos. 11 and 12, the whimsical playfulness of Nos. 13 and 14, and the poignant poetry of No. 16, to the intimate lyricism of Nos. 17 and 18, culminating in the profound, dreamlike vistas of Étude No. 20.

Glass's narratives here become richer, more elusive, more layered. Etude No. 20, inspired by his composition "Gone," originally conceived for Godfrey Reggio's experimental film *The Visitors* (A postscript to his acclaimed *Qatsi* trilogy), astonishes listeners with its "unexpected impressionistic flourishes and the haunting depths lurking beneath its tranquil surface."

Etude No. 17, according to Wagner, is "radiantly lyrical, drifting between shifting atmospheres—at once luminous, tumultuous, translucent, and turbulent". Legend has it that Glass rediscovered a personal manuscript, "Magic Psalm," among the poetry of Allen Ginsberg—an iconic figure of the Beat Generation, known for inspiring

an entire generation's quest for discovery. This manuscript evolved into Etude No. 17, capturing an essence both elusive and captivating.

*"I made the musical language the center of the piece (...) I began to use process instead of 'story,' and the process was based on repetition and change (...) It was a way of paying attention to the music, rather than to the story the music might be telling. There is a psychology of listening involved in this. One of the most common misunderstandings of the music was that the music just repeated all the time".*

Philip Glass, *Words Without Music* (2015)

Each Étude embodies a self-contained musical universe, powerful enough to stand alone. Yet performing or experiencing the full cycle in sequence reveals a profound, unparalleled dimension: themes and echoes connect these works across an expansive emotional landscape, enriching their collective meaning.

*"My relationship to these Études is continuously evolving, shaped by the ebb and flow of my personal life, my shifting moods, and my accumulated experience performing them over the years",* Wagner concludes. "These pieces become lifelong companions—growing, maturing, and resonating ever more deeply within me".

For Vanessa Wagner, who previously recorded several of these Études individually, capturing the entire cycle has illuminated the true radicalism and stylistic depth of Glass's musical language. It also provides a definitive, emotionally resonant framework that deeply enriches her interpretation ●