

Hydrogen Jukebox

Music by Philip Glass, Libretto by Allen Ginsberg

"Ultimately, the motif of Hydrogen Jukebox, the underpinning, the secret message, secret activity, is to relieve human suffering by communicating some kind of enlightened awareness of various themes, topics, obsessions, neuroses, difficulties, problems, perplexities that we encounter as we end the millennium."

— Allen Ginsberg

A pioneering piece of music theater in two acts, *Hydrogen Jukebox* was premiered in 1990 to create a commentary on the social and political issues of an era. Combining Philip Glass's signature minimalist musical style with Allen Ginsberg's iconic poetry, this 90 minute work gives voice to a collectively frustrated generation through lyrical words and haunting melodies that continue to resonate with contemporary themes and experience.

What to Expect

- *Hydrogen Jukebox* does not feature a linear plot, but is rather a sequence of twenty distinct dramatic scenes intended to "form a portrait of America" from the 1950s-80s, reflecting on political and social issues of this period in American history such as the anti-war movement, sexual revolution, drugs, eastern philosophy, and environmental issues.
- The production is double-cast to provide more students opportunity to perform, featuring only six vocalists and one narrator each of the two performances.
- The costuming and set design mirror the "minimalist" quality of Philip Glass's score, allowing the audience to focus on the music and text rather than flashy visuals of traditional opera. (See below for more on minimalist music)
- Unlike a lot of traditional operas, *Hydrogen Jukebox* is sung in English. The libretto is comprised of selections from the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, one of the pioneers of the Beat poetry movement of the 1950s and 1960s. (See below for more on Beat poetry)

Creative Team

- **Philip Glass, Composer**
- **Allen Ginsberg, Librettist**
- **Dean Williamson, Conductor and Musical Direction**
- **Deanne Meek, Stage Direction and Choreography**

Minimalism

Characteristic Traits:

fragmented, structurally and texturally complex, repetitive, cyclical

Minimalist music, a trend which grew out of the tradition of minimalist art of the 1960s and 1970s, was typified in the 1980s and 90s by composers like Philip Glass and Steve Reich. Characterized by an intentionally simplified rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic structure, minimalist composers work to reduce the components of their pieces to their essentials, challenging listeners to respond directly to the work by resisting conventional notions of interpretation. To put it another way: the music heard is to be taken at face value, not analyzed.

Glass, while one of the most recognizable minimalist composers, has never liked the term; he rather prefers "music with repetitive structures." In describing his own music, Glass has said, "Events happen in the music but rather more slowly than you're used to. So it was like taking a microscope and looking at something very close up and you'll see things that you never would have seen before. That happens to music when you slow down the rate of change. The music isn't slow but the rate of change is slow."

Beat Poetry

Characteristic Traits:

stream-of-consciousness, sounds like spoken word with breath breaks, themes of post-WWII political and social frustration

The Beat poetry movement in American literature first emerged in the 1940s and 1950s following the end of World War II. Beat poets, frustrated by the state of their country following the war and with the start of the Cold War, started to rebel against conventions of mainstream American life and writing. Taking inspiration from jazz musicians, surrealists, and the tradition of haiku, Beat poetry is characterized by its "authentic, unfettered style," spontaneous nature, and stream-of-consciousness narration. Through this style, Beats were able to express themselves more freely and gave a new voice to a collectively frustrated American people.

Much like Philip Glass's music is to minimalism, Allen Ginsberg became the pioneer of the Beat movement. Ginsberg's collection *Howl and other Poems* (1956) is often considered a "revolutionary event," that sent shockwaves through the American poetry world. His poetry, considered "obscene" by readers at the time, gave other poets permission to write about previously forbidden and "unliterary" topics.

Allen Ginsberg: 1926-1997. *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/allen-ginsberg>.

An Introduction to the Beat Poets. *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/147552/an-introduction-to-the-beat-poets>.

Philip Glass: Complex Minimalist. (2008, October 3). *NPR Music*. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95313989>.

Potter, K. (2014, January 31). Minimalism (USA). *Grove Music Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002257002>.

Spontaneous Composition: Allen Ginsberg and Philip Glass Partner to Create Hydrogen Jukebox. *National Endowment for the Arts*. <https://www.arts.gov/about/40th-anniversary-highlights/spontaneous-composition-allen-ginsberg-and-philip-glass-partner-create-hydrogen-jukebox>.