

cover



HEART *of* GLASS

Composer Philip Glass sparked the musical revolution of minimalism – then pronounced it dead. But, at the age of 75, he is still propelled by the manic energy of those early works, as **Julian Day** discovered

A couple of summers ago I was sitting in a hot Brooklyn backyard among musicians from MATA, a festival for young composers that Philip Glass helped set up in the '90s. As cold drinks were gratefully drained I found myself chatting to a cheery man who introduced himself as Glass's tour manager. At one point he drew from his back pocket a crumpled sheet of paper that on close inspection yielded a long list of cities and dates.

"This," he declared, "is Phil's schedule. Right now he ought to be in a cab in Kuala Lumpur heading towards the concert hall. In a few hours' time he'll be on a plane to Tokyo. He hits London the following morning then flies on to LA. He plays here in New York next week."

This has been the way of life for Glass for as long as anyone can remember. At 75, an age when many have long retired and hit the golf courses of Florida, he's on the go as much as ever. Even with the bulge of birthday events already scheduled, 2012 is pretty much business as usual – a constant stream of performances, commissions, collaborations and obligatory chats to the press. It's almost as if Glass's early minimalist works – all giddy arpeggios and whirring electric scales – were somehow just winding him up for a life of perpetual motion, in the studio, on stage, on the road and in the air.

This month Australia will once again get a chance to hear Glass's trademark sounds live, as the Philip Glass Ensemble, itself now 40 years old, performs the soundtracks to Godfrey Reggio's *Qatsi* trilogy of films at the Victorian Arts Centre.

As might be expected, when I catch up with Glass this time round it's only by Skype. Despite us both being in Europe, I've already missed his brief window of time in London. When I call him he is on a break between rehearsals in Paris. I immediately ask him about a schedule that would punish a man a third his age.

"It's not that insane if you don't worry about it," he laughs. "I just do it. It's what I do. It's nice; it helps me to put my kids through school. It's a very fancy job – but that's what it is. And it's one that I love."

The voice at the other end sounds surprisingly youthful, and not at all tired. In fact I suspect I'm speaking to one of those men for whom work is both the source of, and the salve to, their energies – in other words, a workaholic. I diplomatically query why doing so much appeals to him.

"Well, when I was a young man I never thought I would be so busy as I am now. Just to find work in your late twenties and thirties was hard enough. I didn't really make a living at music entirely until I was 41. I had day jobs like a lot of people, like a lot of American artists.

"Now, of course, playing has become more important for everybody. Partly because of the way the record business has changed and partly because we like to see artists on stage now. We like to see performances. Everyone we know is out playing. Whether it's Paul Simon or The Rolling Stones or Jon Gibson or myself or La Monte Young. Amazing isn't it?"

Glass's 75th birthday celebrations have been in full swing since last year. In New York, where critical reception towards his work has varied throughout his career, it's the big institutions that have thrown their hats in early. Firstly, in November, the Metropolitan Opera restaged the 1979 opera *Satyagraha* (its message of non-violent protest immaculately timed with Occupy Wall Street downtown). Then the American Composers Orchestra gave the US premiere of Glass's Ninth Symphony at Carnegie Hall on Glass's actual birthday, January 31. Next, the massive Park Avenue Armory presented a four-night celebration that included a sold-out performance of the complete five-hour opus *Music in Twelve Parts*.

As the year progresses, further landmark works will return to the stage ("retrospecting myself" as the composer puts it), including a worldwide tour of the 1976 cult hit opera *Einstein on the Beach* that has already included performances in London and will continue on to New York next month before visiting Mexico City and Amsterdam. Along the way there have been seasons of his new score for the classic film *Dracula* with Kronos Quartet in the UK and France, as well as the upcoming Australian shows. And more.

Glass has written so much music, possibly more than any other living composer, that even he has trouble keeping track of it all. He mentions the case of *Galileo*, a piece from a decade ago that's about to be recorded for the first time, which he'd "kind of forgotten about".

GLASS FACTS

BORN: Jan 31, 1937

LIVES: New York

STUDIED: In Paris with the "unforgiving" Nadia Boulanger

PREVIOUS JOBS: Taxi driver, crane operator, removalist

BREAKTHROUGH: *Music in Fifths* (1969), *Music in Twelve Parts* (1974)

BEST KNOWN FOR: *Glassworks* (1981), *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), *The Truman Show* (1998)



“
WHAT I GOT IN
NEW YORK WAS A
WAY OF LOOKING
AT MUSIC – AN
OPENNESS TO MUSIC
”

“The trouble with having this really large body of work is that at a certain point it doesn’t leave you alone. It’s just there. It’s almost a full-time job keeping up with it, just keeping track of the time. Fortunately I don’t think about it that much. I’m just kind of swimming and I don’t think of each stroke I make in the water.”

Glass seems to be in a happy space right now. The first time we met was in Melbourne a decade ago, where he’d been invited to re-open the Melbourne Town Hall with a commission for organist Calvin Bowman and didgeridu player Mark Atkins. At the time he seemed preoccupied and darker in spirit, our conversation brief and intense. He was also notably health-conscious; during our interview he devoured a week’s worth of fruit, dried nuts and spring water, almost as if to steel himself against the grind. Nonetheless, for such a prolific composer, the degree of engagement with his own music was impressive. During the concert I sat behind him and noted the way he hooked and swayed in sync with the not-uncomplicated rhythms.

In subsequent meetings he’s appeared lighter and happier, a composer more at ease with his fame and the demands on his time. Scott Hicks’s 2007 film *Glass: A Portrait of Philip in Twelve Parts* portrayed a yoga-trained character devoted to Buddhism, seemingly at balance with himself despite the demands of raising a young family with then-wife Holly Critchlow (the pair subsequently divorced). Being in demand clearly works

for him, a man who describes himself as “lazy” and whose idea of relaxing is “sitting at the piano and making music”.

Philip Glass was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in January 1937 to a Jewish family of Lithuanian descent. His father was a radio repairer who had branched out into selling records, providing Glass with his first job – buying records for his father’s shop and trialling them for the customers. This space became a useful laboratory in which any musical style – classical, world, jazz – could be heard at the flick of a switch.

Glass’s academic and musical talents shone from an early age. He undertook advanced maths and philosophy classes in high school and before long had graduated from the Peabody Conservatory, the University of Chicago and the Juilliard School, where his classmates included a young Steve Reich.

By his mid-twenties Glass had hit a respectable plateau for a young musician. He had won various awards for his neo-classical works, was enjoying performances and publication and had even found a niche working as a composer-in-residence in public schools in Pittsburg. But something else beckoned.

An early trip to Paris had ignited the bohemian spirit in the young Glass. So at the age of 26, fiancée in tow, he decided to decamp for the Left Bank. There,

like Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter and many other Americans before him, he made weekly visits to 36 Rue Ballu to study with the “amazing, relentless, unforgiving pedagogue” Nadia Boulanger. In this fabled apartment, the routine was brutal.

“Counterpoint, counterpoint, counterpoint. Bach, Bach, Bach. That was it, man, that was it. She banged the harmony and counterpoint into my head. Eight, nine hours of work a day. I did it for years.

“As I say over here – *j’ai une formation française*. I have a French formation. It’s the bedrock of my technique. I didn’t get it in New York, I got it here in Paris.”

“TO MAKE MONEY, GLASS MOVED FURNITURE, FIXED WASHING MACHINES AND, FAMOUSLY, DROVE CABS”

Besides a strict training in harmony and counterpoint, Glass also picked up another career-defining insight in Paris. In 1966 he was invited by the Indian sitar player Ravi Shankar, with whom he remains close friends, to help notate the score to the counter-culture film *Chappaqua*. What Glass learned from Shankar turned out to be the stylistic catalyst he’d been looking for.

He discovered that in Indian music the rhythms are constructed additively – that is, they are created by stitching smaller components or motives together to create a larger whole. Such an approach is almost the opposite of the Western tendency to divide rhythms up into simple short beats. After a consolidating trip to India later that year, Glass was able to return to New York with the seeds for his new approach to music, what critics would – for better or worse – label “minimalism”.

Over the next decade Glass set about systematically building a career. He gathered friends about him to develop his nascent style, which combined simple additive rhythms with endlessly repeated common chords and arpeggios. The music, with its pseudo-mechanical synthetic sheen, was heavily amplified like that of a rock band – and it attracted a rock music crowd. *Music in Twelve Parts* of 1971-74 became his manifesto.

Glass’s minimalist revolution was funded not by arts grants or music institutions but by a network of small art galleries and a healthily growing audience. To make up the shortfall, Glass moved furniture, fixed washing machines and, famously, drove cabs. All of this within the heady atmosphere of an economically depressed Lower Manhattan, a space populated by artists looking for any means possible to peddle their art.

“What I got in New York was a way of looking at music”, he recalls, “and a way of listening to performers. From New York I got an openness to music.”

The public breakthrough came in 1976 with an absurdly ambitious project conceived with theatre director Robert Wilson. *Einstein on the Beach* was a



The 75-year-old composer thrives on his punishing touring schedule

five-hour opera with precious little plot or narrative logic. The set consisted of giant trains, spaceships and even supermarkets within which identically dressed singers chanted number patterns or intoned bizarre monologues. A violinist dressed as Einstein occasionally appeared to spin copious major and minor arpeggios about the stage.

Somehow, despite or even because of its surreal basis, the opera became a hit in both Europe and New York – and Glass’s efforts were finally vindicated. Within a few years he had secured further big opera commissions, an exclusive record deal with CBS and the first of many film soundtracks. He would even begin to appear, as himself, in commercials for scotch whisky. Philip Glass had become a household name.

Nowadays it’s hard to think of a musical world without

HAND BUILT IN JAPAN FOR SYDNEY

It’s the premier piano of Japan with up to five times more handcrafting than other pianos. Six models from 178 to 276cm, so there’s one to suit your living space. Precious, renewable timbers. Carbon fibre Millennium III action. Click the ‘From Japan with Love’ link at kawai.net.au to see how we built our piano for the 2012 Sydney International Piano Competition and to experience the full Shigeru Kawai range.

www.kawai.net.au or 1800 636 005



SPONSOR



MAJOR SPONSOR



SHIGERU KAWAI

The world’s most advanced concert grand pianos



Glass's influence. It's present in film scores, pop and rock bands – and has inspired waves of post-minimalist composers in New York and beyond, from John Adams to David Lang to Nico Muhly. Glass has even turned some of these influences back onto themselves, writing two symphonies that sampled themes by two of his biggest fans, Brian Eno and David Bowie.

“GLASS REFUSES TO CALL HIS STYLE 'MINIMALIST'. AS EARLY AS 1980, HE DEMANDED THE TERM BE STAMPED OUT”

One thing Glass refuses to call his style, even now, is “minimalist”. While the tag might suit the early stripped-back works, it fails to capture the textural and harmonic richness of anything from *Einstein* onwards. As early as 1980, Glass demanded the term be “stamped out”, declaring the historic period of such reductionism to be officially over.

Indeed, in recent decades the composer has woven a different path – a slow return to the classical. To his output he's added an increasing number of more traditional forms such as symphonies, concertos, string quartets, etudes and sonatas. Despite the radical turns, there has always been a part of Glass that remains a Juilliard alumni with the strictest of musical upbringings.

“Yes, that's true,” Glass admits, “that shift has happened.” To a composer who openly admires Mozart, Schubert and Virgil Thomson, it's simple evolution.

“When we play *Einstein on the Beach* it still has that original feeling to it. The performance practice of that music goes with that particular period of music. Pieces like the *Etudes for Piano*, that I began in the '90s, however, have a very different performance style. There's much more rubato, there's pedalling, I play them very differently. It's different music. As your ideas change, the way you play it will change.”

Many have noted this transformation. As Australian composer Damien Ricketson puts it, “Glass challenged not only the musical conventions of the time, but the entire apparatus in which classical music was created and consumed. He's a model for composers sticking to what they believe in and going their own way. Curiously, however, his stature has changed over the years from sitting outside of the establishment to becoming it”.

Ricketson co-directs, alongside percussionist Claire Edwardes, the award-winning Ensemble Offspring. Theirs was one of the first groups outside of Glass's own troupe to tackle Glass's early works, the pair being drawn to the “austerity” and the “genuinely sensory mind-altering experiences” the pieces offer.

For many years only the Philip Glass Ensemble had the rights, or indeed the technical chops, to play these pieces. “In fact”, says Ricketson, “when Ensemble Offspring made a request for *Music in Fifths* and *Music in Similar Motion* his publisher could only find incomplete

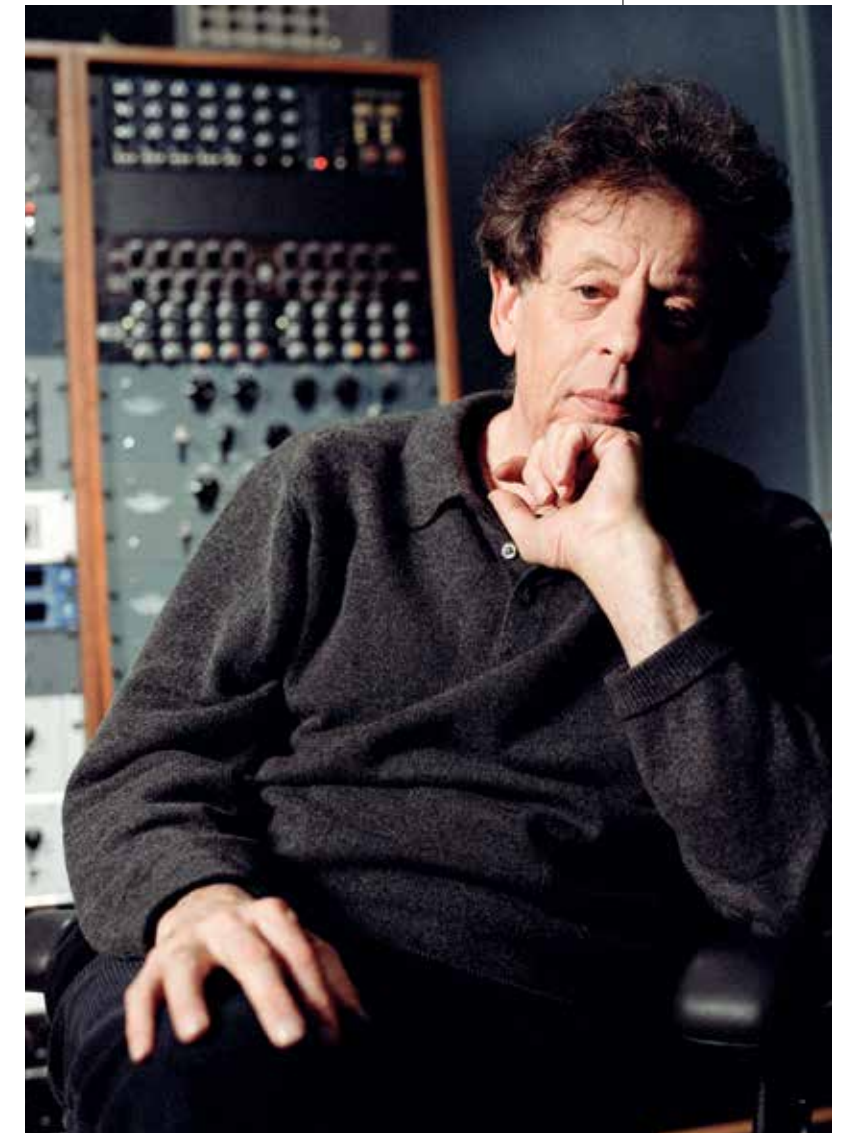
and battered scraps of paper from one of the PGE players and had to organise for the works to be re-transcribed by [Glass's former assistant] Nico Muhly.”

I put it to Glass that his decision to restrict performance rights to his early music (thus ensuring repeat engagements) was a “canny” move, at which he laughs. “To be frank, when I was younger nobody wanted the music anyway!”

While reductive on the page, these early pieces are uniquely challenging. Says Ricketson, “with a simple palette of five or so notes and a lot of repetition you could be fooled into thinking his music is easy to perform. It's not. There is little musical training that prepares musicians for the mental and physical stamina required to get to the other end of one of these works”. Edwardes concurs: “Even a tiny lapse in concentration can throw everything out of whack.”

“I set the bar very high with those early pieces,” Glass says, “in terms of focus and concentration. With a piece like *Music in Similar Motion* from 1969, we can play it pretty well now. But when I wrote pieces like *Music in*

Glass harnessed electronica to create his relentlessly pulsating early works



Twelve Parts we didn't play them that well at all. We learned to play them over the years. That was very true of *Einstein*. The precision of the piece eluded us for a while. It took three or four years before we could play the piece easily. And then it took another 10 or 15 years before we could play it and put some real life into it."

Now that he's relinquished some control, what does Glass think of newer interpretations of his work?

"Well, I heard a beautiful performance by Lisa Kaplan from eighth blackbird. She played *Mad Rush*, which is in print so anyone can find it. But I hadn't actually heard anyone else play it.

"In my rendition I enjoy the 'three-ness' and the 'four-ness' going together. Lisa played it much faster and it became more ethereal, more like a texture. And I thought, 'Gee, this is really good'. I told her afterwards that it was a beautiful performance and she was pleased. But then I played it myself a few weeks later and I just played it the way I usually do."

So at least he's open then to these other interpretations? "Well, of course, I have to be. Look, the reality is I'm not going to be here to hear the stuff in 20 or 30 years. My feeling is it's better to let go very early."

Manhattan's East Village has changed dramatically since Glass moved there four decades ago. The formerly seedy corners once populated by crack addicts and prostitutes have given way to that safely gentrified mix

MINIMALIST HUMOUR...

Knock knock

Who's there?

Knock knock

Who's there?

Knock knock

Who's there?

Knock knock

Who's there?

Knock knock

Who's there?

Philip Glass

of trendy restaurants and bars. Some diversity remains thanks to the nearby campus of New York University, but the shift reflects the great exodus of artists from Soho and Greenwich Village to cheaper spots in Brooklyn and beyond.

It's difficult these days to retain a vision of the hard streets on which Glass used to drive his fabled cab, let alone the utopia of oversized downtown loft spaces. Even for a steely New Yorker like Glass, the temptations of the genteel are too strong to resist.

"I just put in sound-proofing in my house so when I look out the windows, which I don't get to do very much, it's like looking at a silent movie. I don't hear the cars and buses going by. It's very calm at my house but I had to put in three-inch thick windows to do that."

He does, in fact, like visiting remote places, having long owned a cliff-top getaway on the northeast tip of Nova Scotia. Does he need this kind of refuge? "I do, although I don't get to go there very much. This summer I'll be there for three weeks, the longest period in a while.

"I like the north. In Canada they talk about the north as having a distinct quality, a unique attraction. Glenn Gould used to talk about it that way. Living in the north is to encounter nature in a different way. I picked that up from being up in Cape Breton; I love being up there. It's different from anything I've seen.

"I wonder – do you have the same sort of feeling in Australia for Tasmania?"

Contemplating nature is at the heart of the film cycle Glass will accompany in Australia. Like *The Hitchhiker's*

Guide to the Galaxy, the *Qatsi* series is an increasingly absurdly-named trilogy. Besides the three official films – *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Powaqqatsi* and *Naqoyqatsi* – there's a left-field short named *Anima Mundi* and now a fifth in production. Collectively they deal with the impact of technology on the planet through a visually dazzling palate of slow-motion and timelapse photography, computer-generated imagery and rapid-fire editing of shots from stunning locations throughout the world.

The director Godfrey Reggio pursued Glass for years before the composer relented and provided, for *Koyaanisqatsi*, what is now one of his best-known scores. Now, three decades on, the team has evolved a solid, well-oiled partnership. "It can't really be any other way. That kind of interpenetration of image and music is the only way those films could be made.

“ULTIMATELY, PHILIP GLASS IS A MUSICIAN'S MUSICIAN; HE WRITES, HE GIGS, HE WRITES... WITH NO SIGN OF A LET-UP”

"For every movie I would go to wherever he was shooting, whether it was Africa or South America or New Orleans. Then for post-production and editing we're usually side-by-side. He usually moves to New York and finds a studio where I can go any day of the week. The back and forth is very intense at that time. I don't wait for him to finish the film and he doesn't wait for me either. We just plunge ahead and catch up with each other as we can. In fact our roles change throughout the process of making the film."

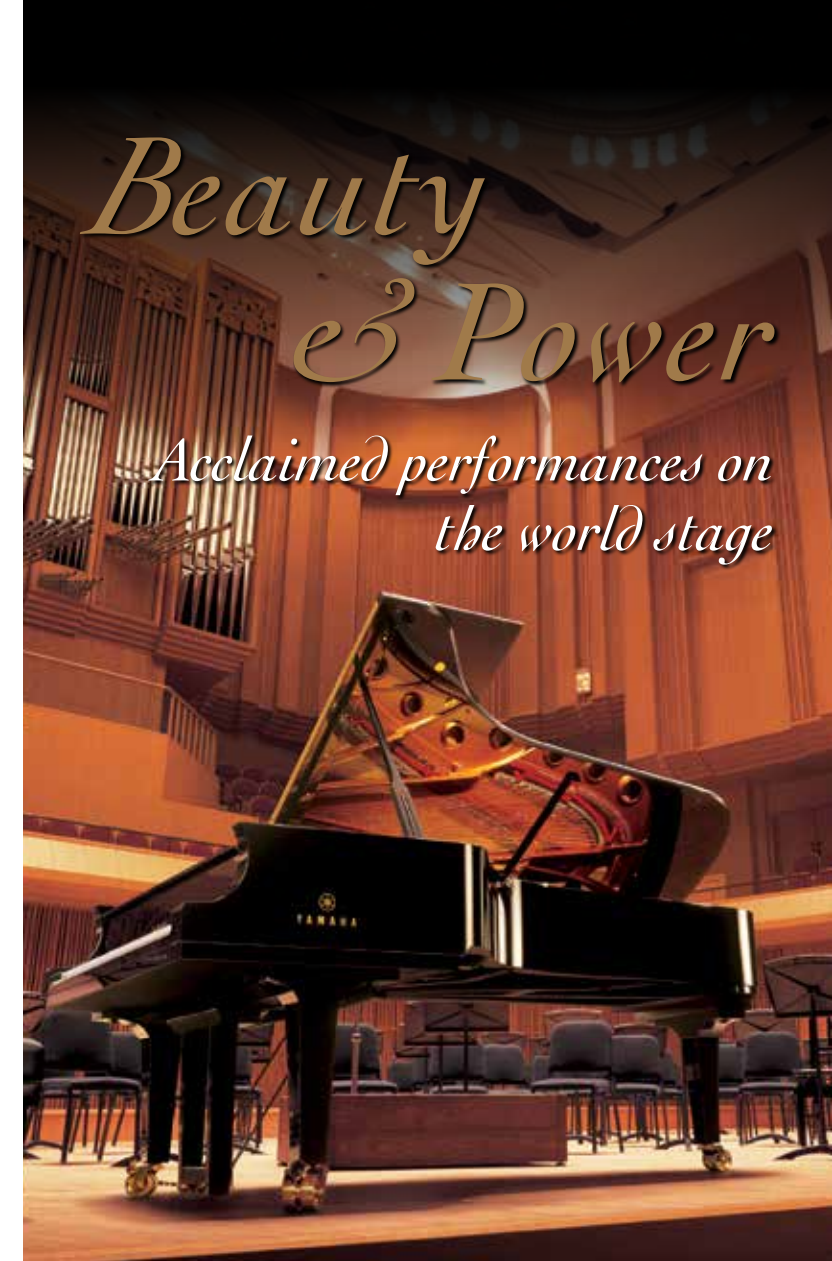
The three non-narrative films are, famously, devoid of dialogue and are thus open to interpretation. So how does Glass himself read them?

"Until very recently, I thought that Godfrey's work was totally about social change and how the way we live has been impacted by technology. However, now I'm working on the new movie I don't look at it that way. I think what he is really doing is teaching us to see in a different way. It's about teaching us to see the world we live in."

Considering his own radical approach, could it be that Glass is trying to do just this in his own music? "Maybe so. I don't know. I don't think that literally about it. It's only when talking to people and trying to explain it that I think about it at all, to be truthful."

So, no big answers about the meaning of music, then. Ultimately, Glass is a musician's musician; he writes, he gigs, he writes. So long as his health and the demand for his work continues – and there's no sign of a let-up – he'll be there to see that it's performed, whether it's in Melbourne or Tokyo or Paris.

Suddenly remembering the time and his hectic schedule, I bid Glass a hasty farewell. Before I've had a chance to hang up Skype the composer is already at his piano, a Satie-esque phrase ringing out in his room. The 75-year-old human juggernaut rolls on. ●



Beauty & Power

Acclaimed performances on the world stage

Yamaha – Delivering winning performances year after year,

including the gold medal at the 16th International Chopin Piano Competition (Warsaw, Poland)

“Beauty and Power” – the concept behind Yamaha’s exquisitely handcrafted concert grand piano, is imbued in both the exceptional tonal quality and the refined appearance of the new CFX.

Proud Sponsor of the Sydney International Piano Competition.

For further information please call 1800 331 130

CFX

YAMAHA
au.yamaha.com