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MUSIC REVIEW

Helping Philip Glass to break out of his mold

Cellist Wendy Sutter is masterful on a work outside the composer's usual palette, stealing an uneven show at LACMA

By Josef Woodard
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It may seem a strange compliment, but Philip Glass' new solo cello piece, "Songs and Poems for Cello," gains much of its potency and poetry from sounding so little like the Philip Glass that we've come to know and sometimes love, sometimes not.

As is often noted, Glass is one of the most prolific, commission-rich and publicly visible composers alive, but his musical vocabulary has been remarkably static since he settled on it in the late 1970s. At times, it can seem the composer has been working the same riffs for decades, though in different contextual packages.

Glass moves beyond Glass with his cello piece, premiered in New York last fall. As masterfully performed by Wendy Sutter, "Songs and Poems" was the centerpiece of a performance at Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Bing Theater on Saturday night, an event connected to the wider celebration of the opening of the new Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA. The program called "Philip Glass: An Evening of Chamber Music" was part of the sadly stripped-down music program at LACMA -- in a room once the home base of the great Monday Evening Concerts.

"Songs and Poems," a tough and yearning work with obvious nods to and borrowings from the solo cello music master Bach, starts out boldly and wanders through varied expressive terrain. From the outset, rolling double stops and harmonic colors alert us to material outside the usual Glass palette, although it is equipped with the familiar Minimalist repetitions and phrase

fragmentation.

Sutter handily stole this show and played the role of a muse, inspiring new ideas and syntax from the composer.

Also on the bill, Glass as solo pianist performed pieces from his 1970s salad days and a snippet of his score for the Erroll Morris film "The Thin Blue Line," one of Glass' most notably successful film projects. As a pianist, Glass is passable but leaden and prone to missteps, yet in an odd way, his fuzzy imprecision keeps the music from sounding as mechanistic as it can in surer hands. Sloppiness becomes the music.

Pieces adapted for piano, cello and percussion (the solid percussionist Mick Rossi, without much to do) included the short "Tissues," from Glass' score for "Naqoyqatsi," and "The Orchard." Compared with the luminous cello work, this music felt light and slight. At least one listener hardly noticed anything musical having occurred.

In the end, Saturday's Glass encounter was a frustratingly uneven affair. It moved from the impressive cello work to fluffier morsels from the Glass canon, from the sublime to the dubious.