

AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY
8 OCTOBER 2007

AN EVENING WITH LEONARD COHEN AND PHILIP GLASS
Alan Acosta, Moderator

Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I'm Mark Gonnerman, the Forum's director, and like you, I have really been looking forward to an evening with Leonard Cohen and Philip Glass. [Applause] As you know, tonight's conversation is in anticipation of the West Coast premiere of *Book of Longing*, the hauntingly beautiful musical rendition of Leonard Cohen's recent poetry by composer Philip Glass. That performance tomorrow evening will open this year's Lively Arts season, the first under the direction of the new artistic and executive director for Lively Arts, Jenny Bilfield. Lively Arts co-commissioned *Book of Longing*, and this indicates well the spirit of creative adventure that Jenny brings to a campus that is now bursting with new energy for arts education. In addition to the Stanford Arts Initiative—an initiative directed by Professors Jonathan Berger and Bryan Wolf, that, for example, enabled hundreds of Stanford undergraduates to attend the dress rehearsal of Philip Glass's new opera, *Appomattox*, in San Francisco last Tuesday evening—in addition to this, plans are under way for a new performing arts center, a new film and art building in the vicinity of the Cantor Arts Center, and renovation of existing auditoria, including the great space we are seated in tonight. Karen Nagy will coordinate these ambitious efforts as our new assistant vice president for the arts. And, this fall, we welcome Richard Saller, former provost at The University of Chicago, as our new Dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences. So the Aurora Forum is pleased to present artists in conversation, especially at this time of unprecedented achievement, discovery, and innovation in the arts at Stanford.

Aurora Forum programs are free and open to everyone, and, thanks to you, we usually have a full house. But twice now, because of an extraordinary degree of interest in particular guests, we have had to issue tickets to ensure that people would not show up and be disappointed because they could not get in. The first time we had to ticket an event was when His Holiness the Dalai Lama came to the Forum in November of 2005. The second time is this evening. So that brings me to the question: What is it about Stanford and celebrity Buddhists? [Laughter] In any event, we're so grateful that we have opportunities to learn from such highly cultivated and creative individuals who give their time and talent to the work of generating insight and reminding us of the mystery and beauty in our lives.

Tonight we've modified our usual program format so that we'll only take questions submitted in writing. As the printed program states, and as I announced about twenty minutes ago, we ask that you submit questions for our guests on cards available from the Lively Arts ushers who have been such a big help to the Forum the last couple of years. I especially thank Bill Starr, our house manager, for the work he and his crew are doing to assist us with this ongoing conversation series. If you have not already submitted a

written question, the ushers will make their way down the aisles for the last time at around eight o'clock to gather your cards. For those who want to follow up on tonight's conversation, you can visit our Web site, auroraforum.org, to learn about this and other Aurora Forum programs. Our conversations are posted on our website in audio, video, and transcript formats. The Aurora Forum is cosponsored by Stanford's Office of Public Affairs and Stanford Continuing Studies.

I'm now delighted to introduce tonight's moderator, Alan Acosta, my friend and colleague in the Office of Public Affairs, where he is associate vice president and director of University communications. Prior to coming to Stanford, he was the deputy city editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, where he and his team of reporters received two Pulitzer Prizes for local news coverage. He is currently co-chair of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Foundation and has served on a number of other national executive boards, including that of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. Not to put any pressure on, but as we've learned from the three prior occasions when Alan has moderated an Aurora Forum event, he is one of the sharpest wits on campus. Please join me in welcoming Leonard Cohen, Philip Glass, and Alan Acosta to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

Alan Acosta: Well, I just want you to know that Mark has set the bar very high for you to match my wit. Thank you, Mark. That was overly kind, but thank you.

I am one of the 1,500 people here who is really honored to be sitting with you tonight, so thank you for being here and being at Stanford. I don't think you've had much time to spend together since the debut of *Book of Longing* in Toronto, is that correct? So tonight we're going to give you the opportunity to catch up with each other. You can act like we're not here, if you like, and just sort of continue, or I'll occasionally ask some questions, but I will try to stay out of your way because I think that's what everybody's here for.

I wanted to start by referring to something that Leonard said in an interview after the debut of *Book of Longing* in Toronto. Leonard, you made a comparison to the piece as, "It's like they say about a bumblebee: it shouldn't fly. Aerodynamically, there's something wrong." But there's something quirky and eccentric about it and yet you acknowledge that the *Book of Longing* works. It seems to have an intimacy of thought and experience even though you couldn't quite describe what it does. So my question is: How did this improbable pairing come about, and either one of you can take that to begin with.

Philip Glass: We've been asked this before, and ...

Leonard Cohen: What did we say? [Laughter]....

Glass: We've known each other through our work for quite a while. I think we met about nine years ago to talk about this, but I can't remember how we met.

Cohen: I don't know if we met, but ... [Laughter] ... but I was at several theatrical concerts that you gave, and we actually did shake hands.

Glass: That's right.

Cohen: When you were working with Allen Ginsberg, I was at that concert in Los Angeles, and your work with Rumi—I was at that one, too.

Glass: And then at one point—it was about ten years ago—I was in Los Angeles and I called Leonard and we got together. We got together at a friend's house and we had an afternoon and Leonard brought ... I don't know whether it was a book or.... It was a collection of poems, unpublished poems. And we spent the afternoon (he was reading it and I was listening to it) mostly rolling on the ground laughing because I thought they were so hilariously funny. I think we stopped for dinner and we came back and did some more. And by the end of the evening we had decided that we could maybe do something. Actually, this is very close to what we were talking about. But then he disappeared ... for how many years?

Cohen: Eight or nine. [Laughter]

Glass: That could have been discouraging. But then I found out that he was back in the world again.

Acosta: That's when you were at the Mount Baldy Zen Center, is that correct?

Cohen: Yes.

Glass: So then somehow I got his email address and I just emailed him and said, "I hear you're back." And my image is that Leonard was sitting by his computer because within twenty minutes after.... You know how emails are: sometimes you send an email and you don't hear for weeks or days. Twenty minutes later I got a reply: "Yes, I am, and I'm going to be in New York soon. Let's get together." So the idea was reborn. But in a certain way, we never really had started to work on it but we got to talk about it at that point.

Cohen: Well, you know, I'm sure you've all experienced this. I've had this deep fraternal feeling about Phil for many, many years. Even though I hadn't met him, he did set a poem of mine to music for a Quebec festival about twenty-five years ago. But I followed his work very, very closely over the years, and I thought that the nature of his work was so interesting—the fact that he worked with so many different kinds of people, so many different media, so many different visions that he was able to, on a pure basis of a kind of profound aesthetic friendliness, he was able to associate himself and his genius with so many operations. I thought he was kind of establishing a unified field theory in art [Laughter] so I was always very, very interested in.... What was the question? [Laughter]

Acosta: Let me get back to that. I guess what I was going to ask was: Did the book *Book of Longing* exist when you got back in touch with him by email?

Cohen: Embryonically, yes it did.

Glass: It was slated for publication. But before we go on, I did write this song, and it was a song about your father.

Cohen: Correct.

Glass: And in a way it was about my father. I think that was.... You know, everything we do (not just artists) ... but everything we do is autobiographical, so even though it was his father, it was actually my father. This kind of thing happens all the time. So I sent you a recording and I never heard from you. So I thought, Oh, maybe he didn't get it, maybe he didn't like it. I had no idea.

Cohen: Me neither.

Acosta: Have you ever heard this?

Glass: Oh, yeah, he heard it.

Cohen: Oh, yes, I heard it. You know, I've lived by a principle of procrastination. [Laughter] I will get around to thanking you. [Laughter]

Glass: It hasn't happened yet, you may have noticed. [Laughter]

Cohen: But what I was stabbing at was that I have this association with Phil that, as I say, I'm sure a lot of you have, which is a friend that you don't see very often but that doesn't somehow require constant nourishment—the kind of friendship that has a kind of buoyancy of its own and doesn't require constant attention. So even before I met Phil I felt this about him, and we've been collaborating on the same level. And we've never really spoken very carefully about the piece at all.

Glass: Not really, no. And it doesn't seem that we're going to. [Laughter]
Let me tell you something in terms of your description of my cross-pollinating with so many artists. Some years ago—it would have been more than ten years ago because Allen Ginsburg died about that long ago—I think it's been a while, maybe ten years ago, but maybe twelve or fifteen years ago. The last ten years of his life I spent a lot of time with him and we did poetry and music together. And one time I was sitting with Allen and I had just read one of the kind of nasty reviews that I often get, and in this particular review, the critic said: The thing about this Glass fellow is that he has a habit of working with people more talented than himself. [Laughter] And I said, "Allen!" and I read this to Allen, and I said, "What to you think of that?" And Allen said, "Sounds pretty good to me." [Laughter]

Acosta: I think it's kind of interesting because we call this collaboration, but really Leonard wrote poems. You [Glass] took them and set them to music. And I think ... I heard this piece in New York and it seemed seamless, and I think maybe what you're talking about here—this shared kinship that you have—maybe that added to this sense of seamlessness of the final product.

Glass: One of the difficulties of working with Leonard for me was to get over the idea or the knowledge and the familiarity that he was actually writing songs also. With Allen ... Allen pretended to write songs but he really couldn't write songs. He was a wonderful... But he had that little harmonium and he told me that Dylan had taught him three chords, which is about what you need.

Cohen: All I use. [Laughter]

Glass: Did you study with Dylan also? But Allen never really could ... he wasn't really a songwriter. The thing about Leonard is he really is a songwriter. So that it was a much more complicated enterprise to talk to a songwriter about it, and I also knew that a number of the songs—a number of the poems I looked at—had already been set.

Acosta: Were you familiar with those already when you set them and you had listened to them?

Glass: Yeah, I had, but the moment ... from the time we began doing it, I swore off listening to any more of his music. I just decided I wouldn't listen to it for a while.

Acosta: That happened to a lot of people in the 80s and 90s, Leonard, actually. [Laughter] And now you've come to be this great icon, of course, and I was going to read one of the poems from *Book of Longing*—just a little bit of it. That was a period I think you said that some critic suggested that they should be handing out razor blades with your albums. Is that so? [Laughter] This is from “How Much I Love You”:

Boys change their lives
in the wake of my gait
Anxious to study
elusive realities
under my hypnotic indifference.

I think what you're saying (please correct me if I'm wrong; it's your poem) ... [Laughter] but I think what you're saying here is that people now have come to you for some knowledge that might surprise you at this point in your life. I mean, thirty years ago, you didn't think that people would be coming to you for knowledge. Is that correct? It seems to be happening now.

Cohen: Thirty years ago I did. [Laughter] It's recently that it surprises me. [Laughter, Applause]

Acosta: Talk a little bit about the creative process that went from poetry to a somewhat elaborate theater piece, really. I think that's what I would call *Book of Longing*.

Glass: It became that in the end, but at the beginning it was really just poetry and music and then, at a certain point, we kind of discovered what was obvious, in a way, that there was associated with the work images as well. It's right in the book so we couldn't miss it. Then we had the idea that maybe that should become part of the piece. But at the beginning it was about poetry and music and it's a very ... it is a mysterious process about how that happens. Among songwriters, I don't know. I never asked Leonard how it worked for him, but I know songwriters who start with music and then add the words and some start with the words and add the music. In this case, clearly I was starting with the words and then adding the music, but poetry and music or songs often can be written the other way.

Acosta: I don't know how you work in general, but as you were composing the music to Leonard's poems, were you self-conscious about it or was that more of an unconscious process in that you see this and things start coming to you?

Glass: I certainly wasn't self-conscious and it was probably profoundly unconscious, but the way I actually work.... First of all, I had to figure out what to do with the book. The book had (is it 140 or 150?) poems, and I was prepared to make quite a long piece, but Leonard said that we had to do it in ninety minutes, and they're a little bit off but not much over that. And I wanted to go for a couple of hours. The first thing was to figure out what poems I was going to use. My first thought was that I realized very quickly that every poem in the book was a potential song. That was already a problem because it wasn't a function of looking for the lyrics that were waiting to be set. I had the clear impression that Leonard, given enough time, could have set them all to music. But I doubt anyone would have that much time. So I began to think about the book in this way: I noticed that with this book, as I do with a lot of poetry books, I kind of opened it up at random and I read different poems, and eventually I found that I had read the whole book. And what I wanted to do was to recapture that experience for an audience, except that instead of the audience selecting the poems in this random way, I would select them for them. So the idea of the *Book of Longing* was quite different because I never actually asked Leonard how he organized the poems. I have no idea. I don't think it's chronological, but I have no idea what his principle was. I had to create an alternate principle for the organization of the evening of poetry, and I divided those poems into categories of ideas, and then from that I decided to cycle through that four or five times. And in that way, I wanted a distribution of the poems in terms of subject matter throughout the evening. At the same time, I also worked towards a kind of theatrical arc to the piece as well. So I knew at a certain point that what looked to me like the big poem was going to be "A Thousand Kisses Deep," and I knew where that would go. Then I knew what the first poem would be and I knew the last one because he says it in the book. That was easy. The first one was easy because he tells you what the first one is, and the last one was easy because he says, Now I've come to the end of the song. So I knew. At the beginning of the end, I had almost the thing before the end, and then I began to work on the structure of the poems from that. Does that make sense to you?

Cohen: No. [Laughter]

Acosta: Leonard, were you at all surprised by the poems that Philip chose?

Cohen: No. I think it was a masterful selection that gets at a version of the book. I don't really know anymore. I did when I was in the thick of selecting the poems and organizing them and trying to establish some kind of principle for that organization. I did know what it was about then. I've forgotten what it was about now, and I feel the work was completely over, and that's why I was so intrigued by Philip's interest in the book because it was completely over for me. And I suppose if some writer in times past ... if Mozart came and said, "Would you like my take on what you've done?" ... that's how I felt. I was just very, very intrigued by Philip's take on what I'd done and I'm completely delighted by it, and it lives on its own terms now exactly as he's established it. When I pick up the book, which I rarely do, and look through it, of course it has another kind of significance, but it lives, and I think it breathes, very freely and deeply in this construction.

Acosta: Leonard has what I would call a distinctive voice. Weren't you the best male vocalist in Canada one year?

Cohen: Best-dressed man. [Laughter, Applause]

Acosta: Seriously, you got a Juno Award—is that correct?—for best male vocalist one year in Canada. It's a distinctive voice, and it was thirty-five years ago and it is now. With that in your head, did you try to get it out of your head? I mean, you were scoring this for other people.

Glass: Well, I found that, in fact, I had unconsciously used Leonard's voice, which I didn't realize I had done it. It's written for four singers: a high and low female voice and a high and low male voice, so it's a quartet. And I provided solos and duets and trios and quartets for everybody so that there would.... And as I was doing it, I felt I had pretty much arranged it equitably in terms of the voices. Then Michael Riesman, the music director, after the piece was done, went back and calculated for me how much each voice was singing, and it turned out that the bass-baritone voice had by far more music than the other parts, which I hadn't realized. I said, Oh, well, I guess I had not succeeded in getting Leonard's voice out of my ears because it had sneaked back in. So then Michael and I together began rearranging it so that we rebalanced it. But even so, it's heavier on that side of the voice. So that was a surprising discovery for me because I didn't know I had done that. I didn't know that I had. And yet, of course, since I knew his records and knew his songs, somewhere in my mind I had the idea of a Leonard Cohen song having that voice in it, and I thought I'd overcome that, but I hadn't. I would say that when you hear it now, it won't be that obvious. There's a lot of mixing of voices together and it was meant to be that way. One of the things that we talked about very early is that some of the songs that were written as poems, which would have been probably ... if you read it you would think it was done in a male voice ... I set for a woman's voice. And they

became particularly moving in a certain way, and I asked Leonard about that and he said that he was starting to do the same thing himself with his records.

Acosta: Just to veer away a little bit from the piece itself, do you have your own voice in your head when you write your songs or are you thinking...? I mean, you've been covered by hundreds of people.

Cohen: I have my own range when I write the songs. It's four or five notes. [Laughter] I'm very, very aware of how far up I can go. But you know, I wish we were seeing the piece right now because it's really wonderful. I wish we would just get off the stage now and it would start now instead of tomorrow night. [Applause] I feel I have the credentials to be in the audience. [Laughter] But it really is such a delightful experience, and I'm afraid only one person can have this, and it's me. To see this theatrical concert, it is so beautiful, it is so well done, it is so delightful, that, as I said, I feel I'm taking up valuable time between now and tomorrow night when you could be anticipating it on your own. [Laughter]

Acosta: I think you have a new career in marketing. [Laughter] Let's go back then to the piece itself. When you first heard, did you hear it in pieces, what Philip had done with your poems, or did you hear all of it?

Glass: I think I made a work tape. A work tape is a kind of a sketch where I had all the parts there and not all the instruments were the real instruments. I used some synthesized sounds. And I did it, first of all, because I needed to hear how the sequencing of the songs was working. I had some idea about that and I wasn't sure. And I wanted also ... it was very important for me that Leonard heard it. And so you came to New York and I think we listened to the whole thing. Did we listen to the whole thing? We did.

Cohen: Yes.

Glass: And then he did actually have some questions about the sequencing, and in fact I redid.... It wasn't completely redone but there were several important changes. The first poem, which I thought was the first poem, later became very much later into the poem. It was at that point when I discovered the first poem in the book, which said, This is the book and this is the longest. It's the one that we begin with. It was in the sequence that I had presented to you, but it wasn't in the correct place. So that was a big help. But you know, in fact there was only one person I could play it to and get the response that I needed. No one else would have known. Or not that they wouldn't have known—everybody could have had an opinion—but none of those opinions would have mattered so much as I wanted to know what he thought about that.

Cohen: There's one thing I think Philip forgot to mention in the process. I recorded the whole book, poem after poem, because Philip wanted just to hear the cadence as I produced it. So he had a tape of the entire book....

Glass: Four CDs, actually.

Cohen: ...which he might even have listened to. I don't know.

Glass: Oh, yes.

Cohen: Because you never mentioned it. [Laughter]

Acosta: Well, Philip said that yours was the only opinion that mattered, so what was your opinion when you first heard it?

Cohen: I don't know what my opinion was. You know, in this association with Philip, somehow my own opinions I consider to be extremely shabby and irrelevant. I mean, I can try to have an opinion if I have to, but I prefer not to, and especially when I'm dealing with a vision that is so refined and complete. So the luxury was that I didn't have to come up with an opinion. I didn't have to come up with an emotion. It was just to look at something that someone had done that I was very familiar with. It was a special kind of luxury to be able to look at the work from a point of view, as I say, that only I could have. So it was an especial delight to be able to participate in this silent conversation with Philip, which is how he saw it. And that is exactly what has nourished me in the whole procedure that I was able to hear and to see and to feel what this extremely refined and accomplished spirit took from this work, so that was a great delight for me.

Acosta: At that point, you let Leonard hear it, you went back. Did the more theatrical parts of it start to take place at that point?

Glass: I made a few changes. Leonard didn't insist on any changes. He made a few comments, which I interpreted as being suggestions. He may not have been making suggestions, but I took them. I went back and made a few changes. Then the next part of process, actually, was we had a long process of finding the singers. Now, this was a very ... one of the most interesting things, I think, that we were working on. When Leonard and I were thinking about the singers, one of the most interesting processes was to think of what kind of voices they would be and what kind of singing it would be. There's all kinds of singing. We in fact auditioned 130 singers. I skipped the first and second cuts. When it got down to forty, I started going to auditions. There were a lot of people. We ended up with four singers, one of whom Leonard knew, kind of by accident. He had suggested a person and her name appeared. It was almost a blind audition. These were the people we wanted. But if I can jump ahead, one of the really interesting things was when we started getting into the actual performance of the piece. I had by that time orchestrated it. I had decided to have strings—violin, cello, double bass—and a double-reed instrument and a single-reed instrument and percussion and piano. I was playing the keyboard. Michael Reisman was conducting and also playing the keyboard. It ended up being a very different kind of ensemble than I was used to working with. That wasn't such a big deal to figure out. The more important thing was to figure out what the style of singing was. That was something that we began working on almost immediately, wouldn't you say, once we got the singers assembled. We were up in Toronto, and you

were there for a little while, weren't you? And we talked about this and Leonard met with the singers a number of times and spoke with them. And it wasn't so obvious what it should be, and the singers we had picked, in fact, without having really known what the style would be. There were singers that were from the world of opera, from the world of cabaret, from the world of—I wouldn't say popular music, exactly, but certainly not commercial music, I would say—opera, for sure. The issue in developing the case once we had figured out that we had a piece was what the vocal style would be, and that became very interesting and something that we worked on with the singers for quite a while.

Cohen: There was one moment that I don't know.... Phil, will you forgive me for telling this story?

Glass: I don't know.

Cohen: I don't know either. Maybe I'd better not tell it.

Glass: Well, you'd better tell it now.

Cohen: Well, after the first or second performance in Toronto where it opened, Philip and I were sitting in my hotel room and this was the only time I've really resisted Philip because he said, "I think it's too beautiful."

Glass: Yes, that's right. We did have that conversation.

Cohen: Philip thought it was too beautiful, and I don't know what course he would take to correct that aberration [Laughter] but I was very worried.

Acosta: I do think that must have been an issue for you because many of the poems, I think, like much of Leonard's work, he goes between sexuality, sensuality, and spirituality and religion. I wouldn't say that your work is coarse, but there is a certain coarseness to it that is important. It's really central to what you're writing about, and to have very beautiful voices might alter the way it...

Glass: It wasn't that. That wasn't the issue. It's somewhat sad, and the concurrence of these aspects, also. In fact, the other poet I was very close to—and another great poet as I consider Leonard to be a great poet—was Allen. Allen did the same thing. He combined a spirituality, a sensuality, an appalling frankness, an openness, that could be quite scary at times. So I'd had that encounter before. And, in fact, I think what we're really talking about in not just poetry but in any of the arts or any of our social discourses or civil discourses—we're talking about an integration of parts of our being. And in the world of poetry and the world of music and the world of painting or dance or any world that we choose to be part of, we have that possibility of integrating all those things, and that's what I was looking at when I was looking at this. So as I said, I was thinking about that. Now the only way I could think about it in terms of the text that I had in front of me ... once I had selected—I had figured out, OK, there are twenty-two poems—some would be

spoken, most of them would be sung, some would be spoken with music, some without music—there were all kinds of things that happened ... but the only way I could think of it was to think that all the poems were, in fact, portraits of Leonard. Then I looked at the artwork: they also were portraits of Leonard. So at that point, and I was just beginning to write the work at that time, it made it possible for me to think about it. It was very simple: this piece would be about Leonard. I didn't have to worry about it because it was about him. Now, again, the curious thing with that first poem that we did many, many years ago ... it's all very well to say that the poem is about somebody else, but it's impossible for it not to be about yourself at the same time. That we would like it to be, perhaps, but the voice of whatever figment of the self that we can handle springs out of us. It oozes out of us; it's impossible to prevent it from surfacing. So, in a way, having thought about it this way, it actually made the writing of the music quite easy, if you see what I mean. If you don't, explain it to me. [Laughter]

What I did—the actual way I did it—was quite simple. These are the poems. I figured that it was about Leonard and it was about things in a certain way that I knew about but that we never talked about. Actually, Leonard and I rarely talk about each other. We talk about all kinds of other things. But I didn't ask him, "What did you mean by this?" or "Did you do that?" or "What did you think of that?" We don't seem to have that kind of conversation. But what I did that actually made it quite easy, as I said: I would take a poem and say, OK, this is the poem I'm going to work on. And I would read it over and over. You know, at times I'm very simple. I read it over and over until I began to hear the music. Then I wrote it down. That was actually what happened. Now, what happened ... I had the skills to write it down—I had the ability, I had the ears and the training and all that stuff. I'm not saying that anyone can just do it. I mean, I had come to this at the age that I was, with the experience I had, and it was like someone taking a beautiful photograph. It seems effortless, in a way. And yet someone else holding that camera might not be able to take that photograph. One of the most amazing things for me is how distinctive photography is, and yet anyone can buy a camera. But why someone can do it and someone else can't ... I'm one of the ones who can't ... and yet I can't figure that out. But still, in the same way, in the work that I do or perhaps Leonard might think the same (I don't know what he thinks), but my feeling also was that songs ... my conviction, I would say, more than a feeling) ... is that songs ... you shouldn't have to work very hard with them. You either hear them right away or they're not there. So that I didn't spend days and days and days working on a song. I either heard it or I didn't.

Acosta: I told you I was going to do this. We're going to move just briefly and then back into the general line of questioning from the essay part of this exam to the short answer part of this exam. [Laughter] I'm going to ask each of you five very, very short questions.

Philip: your favorite living composer?

Glass: Oh, living composer? I have so many. Ravi Shankar is still alive and well. Foday Suso is still alive and well. People I work with. I've had the great pleasure to work with and great opportunity to work with many composers, and there's Ornette

Coleman; I've never worked with him but I've admired him. There are so many. Paul Simon I like very much. I like a lot of different people.

Acosta: Leonard, your favorite Canadian songwriter?

Cohen: I have a couple. Joni Mitchell, of course, is one. [Applause] Gordon Lightfoot. I'll stay with those two.

Acosta: OK, now your favorite deceased composer?

Glass: Well, the one that we had to study and I learned the most from—well, that won't be the one. I would say Schubert, then, but that wasn't the one I learned the most from.

Acosta: Who was that?

Glass: Bach, of course, he wrote the book many, many, many times over. But the one that I've loved was Schubert.

Acosta: Leonard, your favorite American songwriter?

Cohen: Oh, there are great songwriters. I'd say Dylan, Tom Waits, Van Morrison, and stay there. [Applause]

Acosta: Philip, your most difficult movie to score?

Glass: I would say *Notes for a Scandal* was very difficult. That was a recent one. It was very difficult basically because the producer and the director couldn't agree on what I was supposed to do. [Laughter] That's what made it difficult.

Acosta: A little bit of reality there.
Leonard, the dead poet you'd like to spend an evening drinking and talking with?

Cohen: A dead poet?

Acosta: Yes.

Cohen: He wouldn't be talking back. [Laughter]

Acosta: Which may be the charm of the evening.

Cohen: I guess Villon.

Acosta: Philip, someone you'd love to work with but haven't yet?

Glass: Well, I've been talking to Laurie Anderson for about twenty years, and we are still talking, but the other person I've talked to for a long time is Ornette Coleman. We're still talking.

Cohen: What was the question?

Glass: Who I would like to work with.

Cohen: Oh, yeah. Let's do another opera. [Laughter]

Glass: We could to that.

Acosta: Leonard: Best cover of a Leonard Cohen song?

Cohen: I don't want to create enemies.

Acosta: You don't want to get in trouble.

Cohen: Well, I feel especially grateful to Judy Collins, who recorded "Suzanne" many, many years ago and enabled me to make a living for a while. [Laughter]

Acosta: And this is the same question for both of you ... the last one. You know you had it made when ...?
No, excuse me: You know you had *made it* when ...? [Laughter]

Glass: Had made it? Well, I knew very early because I gave a concert when I was about thirty-two years old in a loft in downtown New York. It was six flights up and about twenty people walked up six flights of stairs and sat all afternoon, and I thought I had made it. [Laughter]

Acosta: Leonard?

Cohen: Well, there was a double negative there I didn't get.

Acosta: The way I first said it. You *knew* you had made it when...?

Cohen: Well, I'm kind of waiting still. [Laughter]

Acosta: Still waiting. OK. Well, let us know when you do ... when you know that.

Let's go back to *Book of Longing*. One of the first things you mentioned was when you heard the poetry for the first time and Leonard was reading it was that it was so funny, and a lot of the poems that you chose are very funny. Were those hard to write music to and did you ever feel: This is a serious piece; can I have this much humor in it?

Glass: The pieces I was most concerned about were what I call the ballads—things like “Boogie Street,” “A Thousand Kisses Deep,” “By the Rivers Dark.” I thought of the ballads ... a ballad is a traditional poetic form—there could be stanzas of maybe four lines and there could be twelve or fourteen or sixteen or eighteen. “The Night of Santiago” would be another one. I always thought of the ballads as being the big pillars of the evening, and that I would build a piece around those. What I did ... the way the piece works ... is that they come up about every fifth or sixth poem, the big ballad will come up, but they form in themselves an ascending order or kind of emotion, if I can put it that way. When you end it with “A Thousand Kisses Deep,” you know there’s nowhere else to go. Then I have two or three poems to finish the evening and that’s it. But those were the ones I was most concerned with, and some of them were very difficult. I know I said it was easy to write, but they presented structural problems. And the other maddening thing that Leonard would do was that ... it wasn’t maddening, but sometimes the last line of one verse would become the first line again of the next verse. And sometimes for no particular reason the whole set of four lines would suddenly reappear later in the ballad as if they had never been spoken before, so that within the ballads themselves there were oddities in the way that the structure would reveal itself that I had to make it work in the music. They were very interesting things to think about.

Acosta: Some of them also did have humor in them ... some of the ballads. “Night of Santiago” actually has a lot of funny lines in it.

Glass: I didn’t think that was one of the funny ones. [Laughter]

Acosta: “She said she was a virgin/That wasn’t what I heard/But I’m not the Inquisition/I took her at her word.” [Laughter]

And there are other lines like that.

Glass: I think they’re very straightforward. [Laughter]
[Laughter]

Acosta: Leonard, the songs that had music written to them before: When you heard them, what kind of experience did you have when you were listening to them?

Cohen: I felt mine were a lot better. [Laughter]
I really ... I must say that I was seized by a kind of blessed amnesia when I began this project with Philip, because just as he put that voice away, I put it away, too. In other words, it was impossible for me to hold. For instance, I’d written a tune to the first poem, “I can’t make the hills/The system is shot/I’m living on pills/For which I thank God.” So I had a song, but I must confess, after hearing your version of it, I don’t like mine anymore. [Laughter] Basically, it really wasn’t an issue because I just put my own voice away. I was really interested in what effect the lyric had on Philip.

Glass: At the beginning, I asked Leonard if he wanted to work on the music, too, and he said, “Oh, no, no, no, no. I want to hear my poetry with *your* music.” You know, that’s, in fact, a gesture of terrific generosity for someone to do, and I appreciated that.

Cohen: It wouldn’t be in any other case. [Laughter]

Glass: Basically, he gave me permission to write songs to words that already, as far as I could tell, if they hadn’t been written down, they could have been. My feeling about the poems was that they were all possible lyrics. I have lists that never got... There were a couple that I wanted to do and I was, because of our ninety-minute ... we decided no. I think, in the end, Leonard was right. I think that the length of it is quite good because, don’t forget, there’s no intermission. And it’s a question of how much material that we can take in and find enjoyable and there are a lot of reasons why that was a good length although it meant that I had to leave out a lot of things.

Acosta: I wanted to ask you, Leonard, a little bit about a number of these poems but your work in general. Actually, something that you and Philip share is that you both grew up in Jewish families and later in life embraced Buddhism. It’s present in much of your work and I think, in particular, much of this poetry was written while you were at Mount Baldy. Is that correct?

Cohen: That’s true.

Acosta: How do you feel about—in your career and in this work—how is that manifested in what you wrote?

Cohen: I think my experience is somewhat different from Philip’s. I was never really interested in Buddhism, although I am an ordained monk, but [Laughter] I wasn’t really looking for a new religion because my born religion was a perfectly good religion and I still observe it in many respects. But I bumped into somebody [Joshu Sasaki Roshi] about forty years ago who was just living at a level of authenticity and comfort that I hadn’t recognized in anybody else. Now if he had been a professor of physics at Heidelberg, I probably would have learned German and studied physics in Heidelberg. I’m glad he wasn’t. [Laughter] But he was a Zen monk and in order to study with him, in order to associate with him, in order to really experience this man, there was an obvious invitation for me to participate in the structure that he’s established. He was a Zen monk running an American version of a rather strict Zen monastery, so I shaved my head and put on robes and participated in that structure, in that protocol, so that I could study with him. And I’m really happy that I did. He just turned 100 a couple of months ago.

Acosta: I think in some of the poems you feel, I would say, his presence in a good deal of them—this strong influence that he had.

Cohen: I was just saying, we were having a drink a couple of years ago. He was about, I guess, ninety-seven at the time. Still drinking well. [Laughter] And he raised his glass to me and he said, “Excuse me for not dying.” [Laughter]

Acosta: How did you respond?

Cohen: As I always do: with a bow.

Acosta: Philip, did you feel a kinship with that?

Glass: We’ve never talked about this before, but in fact I don’t remember ever saying I was a Buddhist. People have thought I was, and people can say whatever they like. I’ve been interested in a lot of things. I’ve had very strong connections with the Buddhist community, which I encountered for the first time in northern India in the sixties, and I met a friend there who happened to be my age. Unfortunately, I’ve outlived him; he died about seven or eight years ago. But we were friends for a very long time, for maybe thirty-five years. And I was in a similar situation, whereas in order to spend any time with him I had to learn some of his language and to spend some time with him. But if it hadn’t been, he could have been somebody else and that’s what I would have done. I’ve been interested in all kinds of things. My mother and father were Jewish, but my father was an avowed atheist—he wasn’t interested—and he passed that on to me, so I didn’t have that connection. And yet through my mother’s brothers and sisters I learned something of the religion, so I learned it anyway, much to the displeasure of my father, by the way. So I have that background. But I took up Hinduism when I was twenty; I took up Buddhism when I was thirty. When I say “take it up,” I spent time with people. And then a wonderful Qigong teacher I met when I was fifty or sixty. But I’ve never felt the need to join anybody. In fact, I felt that to join—to officially become part of something—I would have lost some essential skepticism, which I’ve cherished, and yet I’ve learned more from these people, who I claim to be skeptical of, than anybody else.

Acosta: I think it’s time for us to take questions from the audience. I want to thank you—you’ve used the word a couple of times—not only for the generosity you’ve shown each other but for the generosity you’ve shown us here tonight. [Applause]

Acosta: Ah, look at this. A lot of questions here. [Laughter]

Glass: Do we have to get through all of them? [Laughter]

Acosta: No, we do not.

I take it that this first one is for Leonard.
Why did you call it the *Book of Longing*?

Cohen: I originally called it the *Book of Blue Coffee*, but I didn’t think it would fly. [Laughter] Naming something is very tricky, and I’m not sure exactly what the mechanism is, but it seemed to be about longing and the end of longing.

Acosta: This is a question that I think either of you could answer. Let's ask Philip first. Do periods of silent retreat play a role in your creative process?

Glass: I've never practiced silent retreats.

Acosta: You don't go away?

Glass: I don't.... [Laughter] I envy and admire, but not even secretly dread, the kind of retreats that Leonard has undergone. I have never been tempted.

Cohen: They're dreadful. [Laughter]

Glass: What?

Cohen: They're dreadful. [Laughter]

Acosta: All right. Moving ahead. [Laughter]
Is there some common source or experience from your childhood for artistic expression?

Cohen: My father died when I was nine, and I didn't know how to respond to this, so I went to his closet and I took one of his bow ties and I cut half of it off and I wrote a little message in it and I buried it in the garden behind the house. Somehow that operation, that ritual, that procedure, comforted me tremendously, and I think that it in some way defines my approach to expression.

Acosta: Philip, do you want to take a crack at that?

Glass: Well, the thing about music for those of us who spend our life with music: it comes upon you at such an early age that there's no memory of it entering your life. My memories are of listening to music with my father, but I was so small. I was supposed to be asleep and he would be downstairs. He'd come home from work around nine o'clock at night and listen to music. He had a little record store, so he would bring music home. I would sneak out of my bedroom and sit on the stairs, and I didn't think he knew I was there, but I now imagine that perhaps he thought I was there. These are the kinds of memories that I have of that, but they're very, very early experiences, and it seemed to me that I was one of those fortunate people who always knew.... I didn't have a choice of professions. It was only a question of being able to do the work—surviving to do it.

Acosta: And that music that you were listening to at the top of the stairs: was it all kinds of music?

Glass: It was Schubert, just as I said. Have you forgotten already? [Laughter]

Acosta: Short memory. Sorry.

Both of you have minimalist proclivities. Now that's an interesting choice—"proclivities"—but how does one become a minimalist? [Laughter] How does a minimalist aesthetic play into your day-to-day life?

Glass: Day-to-day life?

Cohen: Yes. You used to have one. [Laughter]

Glass: That's a most difficult question because I wasn't aware that I was one. So first of all, I'd have to fabricate a memory that I don't have.

Acosta: Do you consider yourself a minimalist?

Glass: No, I never did. I thought I was writing classical music. That's what we used to call it in those days.

Acosta: And yet the Establishment didn't think so.

Glass: Look, people have called me all kinds of things. Shall we start through that? [Laughter] One thing ... I've been very free of other people's ideas about myself and I think that the great good fortune of my life is I never use other people's descriptions of myself to define myself. I've been free of that and that's made my life much easier than I've seen. I can do all kinds of things. I can even be a minimalist. [Laughter]

Acosta: There's still time. [Laughter]

Cohen: Me, too.

Acosta: Leonard, do you think of yourself as a minimalist?

Cohen: Only in a pejorative way. [Laughter]

Acosta: Well, that would go with the use of the word "proclivities," I think.

This is for Philip: I heard a story that after *Einstein on the Beach* debuted, you still needed to drive a cab for a living and a woman got into your cab, looked at your license, and remarked, "Young man, you have the same name as a very famous composer." That's a great question, and I didn't know what I was getting into when I started reading it. Is that a true story?

Glass: Well, OK. It is a true story. And it happened two weeks after we did the last performance of *Einstein on the Beach*. But there's another interesting part of the story which you don't know—which no one knows. In New York City cabs, your name is there and your picture. But I never looked back to see who it was. I didn't know who it was. Since then, any number of elderly women have claimed to have been that person.

[Laughter] It's like how people said they were at Woodstock. How many people could you get into the cab, for God's sake? [Laughter]

Acosta: This, I think, is a question that got asked several times. It's for you [Cohen]. Was I justified in feeling a profound sense of shocked delight tinged with confusion at hearing your song "Hallelujah" on the soundtrack to *Shrek*? [Laughter]
Again, thank you for that question.

Cohen: It was nothing compared to my delight and shock. That song has had such a curious trajectory, because when I first brought that record to Columbia Records at the time, it had "Hallelujah" on it, it had "Dance Me to the End of Love," it had "If It Be Your Will." It had some very decent songs. And they didn't put it out. So the song was almost unknown. Dylan did it in concert for a brief period of time and then it completely evaporated from anybody's consciousness. Then it was revived by Tim Buckley's son, Jeff Buckley, and John Cale, and my fortunes had ... "fallen" would be a charitable description [Laughter] of what happened. So I was very, very pleased when the song surfaced again and people started covering it.

Acosta: I read somewhere that John Cale saw you performing at the Beacon Theater and he asked you for the words to the song, and then he got home one night and his fax machine had run out of paper because verse after verse after verse of this song had been...

Cohen: Yeah, I gave him a few extra verses. [Laughter]

Acosta: And it's true. If you go on to the web and look for the lyrics to that song, there are something like twelve different versions of it.

Cohen: There are, yes.

Acosta: For Philip Glass: *Appomattox* underscores Abraham Lincoln's pessimistic view of human nature. First of all, you can agree or disagree with that.

Glass: Oh, it is in the opera at the very end; it's quoted.

Acosta: The second part of that question is: Do you share his view?

Glass: Well, you know, this is interesting. That's a curious question. What he says in the opera ... I think that's what he said, because I'm depending on Christopher Hampton, who is the writer, who claims that everything he wrote was true and everybody said it, so let's say that that's true. I take his word for it. Lincoln said, "Human nature being what it is, everything that has happened before will happen again." It's in response to the old idea that this war is the saddest war, but this is the end of all wars. This is sung by the women at the beginning of the opera. At the end of the opera, they sing it in Lincoln's version, which is that this war will recur because of human nature being what it is. You come back to.... This is one of the ideas that I can say, if I may say myself, and perhaps

Leonard, that you learn that as long as we are living in these bodies and breathing the air in this world that we live in, of course it's going to be like that. We're not angels and we're not Bodhisattvas; we're just people. That's what people do, you may have noticed. What we're having now is a kind of orgy of misbehavior around the world. Do I think it's inevitable? I think people a lot smarter and wiser than me seem to think so.

Acosta: Leonard, congratulations on being nominated to possibly become a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Cohen: Possibly? What do you have to do to get in? [Laughter]

Acosta: So many answers came to mind at that, I'm not going to say. What do you make of that, and what do you think the chances are that you and Madonna will walk into the hall together?

Cohen: She *begged* me to walk in with her. [Laughter]
I don't know. I'm not aware of this institution. Is there an actual hall?

Acosta: Yes, there is.

Cohen: Do they give you an apartment there? [Laughter]
I'm not sure what this really involves.

Acosta: And you can have all the ice cream you want. [Laughter]

Cohen: I don't know. I keep thinking that I've been nominated for it before, but then it did not have a good outcome.

Acosta: But you are in the Canadian Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, is that correct?

Cohen: I don't know if we call it that. I think it might be the Vestibule of Fame.
[Laughter]

Acosta: Well, we're always a little more grandiose in the United States.

Now, we're going to move on to a serious question. To both of you: What advice do you have for young artists who hope to make a living with their art?

Glass: Is that a serious question? [Laughter]

Acosta: Yes.

Glass: Well, I would say.... It's a similar question to when people say, How do you become a successful opera composer? You live a long time, and with a little luck and mostly hard work, something might happen. Someone recently was showing me a book that this person was writing and she said, Do you have any advice? I said, Yes, my

advice is: Don't stop working before the book is finished. And I quickly added: Because it's in the last moments of the work that the quality appears. It doesn't happen at the beginning; it happens at the end. But again, in the same way, the.... You know, it doesn't really matter. The thing is that we do this work because there's nothing else we know how to do. If you have the stamina or maybe ignorance or persistence to spend your life doing it, then it may happen that you make a living, but it may happen that you don't. So many great artists didn't; people in my lifetime I've known who were wonderful composers and painters didn't. So to be among the lucky few is a kind of bitter victory because it's a victory over nothing—nothing but chance. Is that fair to say?

Cohen: Beautifully put, yeah.

Acosta: But both of you, I would say, have been driven by a particular vision, I think, that perhaps others don't have ... I mean, that has really driven you. And you've been fortunate to live long, productive lives, also. There are people who achieve a small amount of greatness and don't live to really see.... We don't know what they could have done. But would you say that you had a particular vision that drove you for years while you were driving that cab or while you were young?

Cohen: Well, I think I would agree with Phil. For one thing, I also know many, many—well, not many—I know a handful of very great poets who are unpublished and unknown. I am in touch with a number of people who live on the streets in Montreal—a man like Philip Tétrault or a poet who died recently by the name of Henry Moscovitch. Their writing is as good as anything I've read anywhere. Their lives just somehow did not unfold in a way in which they could take advantage of the institutions that promote this kind of work. So I think it is a great privilege, first of all, to make a living doing what you want to do. And that's a very, very rare privilege, and I'm quite aware of how rare it is.

Acosta: Last question for you, Leonard. I understand you have been influenced by classical Chinese poetry. What is the nature of that influence?

Cohen: Well, I don't know a great deal about it. I've read these poems in translation. But I was exposed in a kind of intense way to the sermons—to the very poetic and very beautiful and intriguing sermons—of Rinzai. Rinzai-ji is my temple. Rinzai was a great Chinese Zen master, so I suppose what the real influence is, is just uncovering the layers until you get something that sounds right—the elimination of the superfluous.

Acosta: I wanted to finish by perhaps each of you saying a little bit about what's coming up for each of you. Philip, we know your opera opened this week in San Francisco. Is there anything else that's happening soon?

Glass: I've begun on work on some music for Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*, which won't be until next summer, but I'm working on it now. There's a new opera to begin in January. There always seems to be something to do.

Acosta: And we heard tonight that there's perhaps another collaboration ...

Glass: Oh, we've talked a little bit, but ... That could happen.

Acosta: And Leonard, somebody wanted to know if you're going to be going on tour again soon.

Cohen: I think I will go on tour again. [Applause]

Acosta: I'll do a little marketing for tomorrow night: I did see *Book of Longing* in New York, and it's really a magical evening. Thank you both for that. And thank you for coming here to share time with us. We really do appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Cohen: Thank you very much. Thank you.

Leonard Cohen

A Companion of the Order of Canada, his nation's highest civilian honor, Leonard Cohen was born in Montreal in 1934. *Book of Longing* is his thirteenth book and the first book of poetry to top Canadian bestseller lists. He has made seventeen albums, of which *Dear Heather* is the latest. The film, *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*, was released in 2006.

Philip Glass

Philip Glass was born in Baltimore in 1937. Through his operas, symphonies, compositions for his own ensemble, and wide-ranging collaborations with leading artists, he has had an extraordinary and unprecedented impact upon the musical and intellectual life of our times. His most recent opera, *Appomattox*, premiered with the San Francisco Opera on October 5, 2007.

Alan Acosta (moderator)

Alan Acosta is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who is Associate Vice President and Director of University Communications at Stanford.

Comments?

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