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Glass House Concerto: Fateful Inspirations

In November 2010, I spent a week in residence at Iowa State University, while the orchestra prepared to give the premiere of my work **Some Assembly Required*, which they'd commissioned. While in Ames, I had a chance to meet and interact with Matthew Coley, the professor of percussion. Immediately following my visit, Matthew asked if I'd consider writing a concerto for him and we began to discuss what such a project would entail. First among Matthew's requests was that I use some of the unique instruments he has collected, including xylophones made of glass and stone, and an unusually large collection of woodblocks. I agreed to write the concerto for Matthew, attracted as I was to the timbral palette with which he wanted to work, and to the idea of crafting an original, unique work for a passionate, talented soloist.

Fate has a strange way of pointing one in the direction of inspiration. Shortly after my visit to Iowa, I had a chance to visit Philip Johnson's Glass House estate in New Canaan, CT. Johnson, who is perhaps the best known of the group of architects known as the "Harvard Five," built the house and its accompanying buildings for himself, and lived there until his death in 2005. The other buildings include a scale model of Johnson's New York State Theatre, and gallery spaces that house Johnson's impressive collection of modern art. The estate is now overseen by the National Trust for the Preservation of Historic Places.

While the buildings themselves are impressive, I was perhaps most taken by the way in which the modern structures interact with the natural surroundings; how ancient stone walls dissect the landscape, and how a stand of tall, slim trees contrasts with the low-slung, almost squat home that they surround. As I said in a blog following my visit:

What struck me most was the extraordinarily careful design and placement of all the constructed elements. The Glass House in and of itself is a milestone in modern design, but its orientation, across from a similarly proportioned brick building, at the top of a bluff overlooking the pond, and kitty-corner from the perfectly circular swimming pool strikes one as just "perfect." The same may be said of the illumination of the buildings and surrounding trees. The immediate juxtaposition of right and curvilinear angles, the natural and the constructed, hard and malleable elements, the old and (relatively) new creates an eerie sense of balance between competing forces.

After my visit to the Glass House, I knew I had the initial idea for the new concerto. In a notebook I sketched a rough plan of the site, recalling as much as I could about what I'd seen. I knew also that in one way or another, the concerto would deal with the blending and juxtaposition of elements in a way similar to

what I'd mentioned in the blog. Johnson's careful organization of materials resonated with me in a very personal way since much of my recent music has dealt with ideas of craft, organization, economy of materials, in many ways mirroring the smooth lines, clean surfaces, and clarity of mid-20th century modern architecture. My work also frequently deals with rhythm and color, so the incorporation of Matthew's atypical instruments is also very exciting. The work will not be overtly programmatic, it will not be a musical "tour" through the Glass House site, but some aspects of the locale will no doubt have an influence on the characteristics of the finished work.

I've had a fair amount of time to mull over the concept of the *Glass House Concerto* since my travels last November, and Matthew and I have had a chance to speak more about what the work should look like in concrete form, including that it will be about twenty minutes long and will include movements that will be easy to excerpt from the whole. We've both agreed that the work will be for wind ensemble and will involve, if at all possible, ensembles and conductors from across the country, particularly collegiate and high-level community groups.