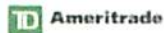


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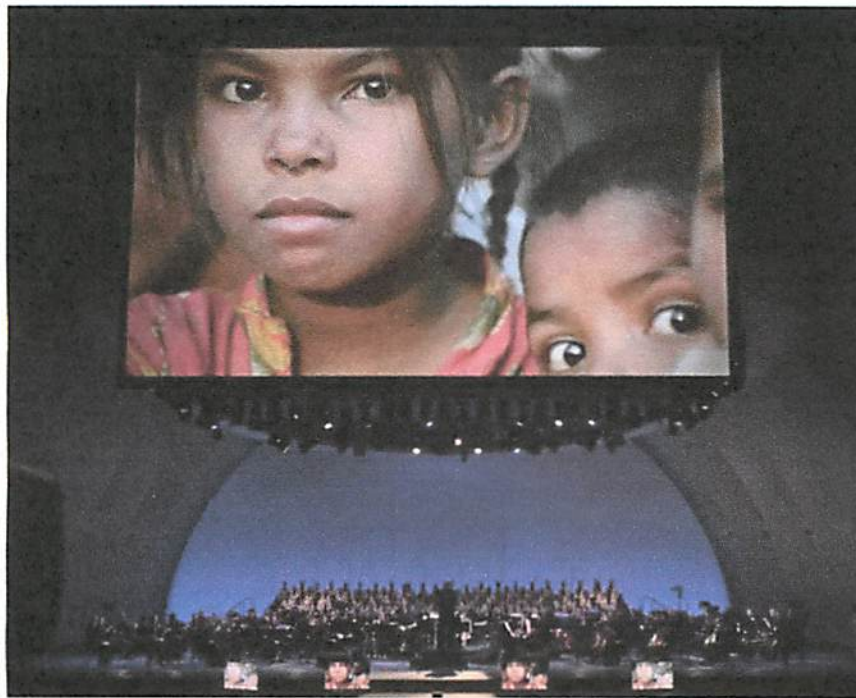


Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Music review: 'Powaqqatsi' at the Hollywood Bowl

August 31, 2011 | 1:54 pm



The full title of the second film in the "Qatsi" trilogy by director Godfrey Reggio and composer Philip Glass is "Powaqqatsi: Life in Transformation." The transformation was that of the southern hemisphere in the mid '80s. The life is timeless in this essay in spiritual wonder, astounding humanity and miraculous beauty. The film has become an art-circuit classic, occasionally screened with Glass playing the soundtrack live. But "Powaqqatsi" has probably never looked better, sounded more sumptuous or mattered more than it did Tuesday night at the Hollywood Bowl.

It looked so good because of the startlingly vivid projection on a large screen draped over the shell, which helped the Bowl to function like a sacred space on this dark night. Glass' score sounded new because it was. Two summers ago the Los Angeles Philharmonic commissioned Glass to make an orchestral version of his score to "Koyaanisqatsi" for the Bowl. Tuesday was the premiere of a newly orchestrated version of the sequel (which was originally released in 1988), once more commissioned by the orchestra, and this time also utilizing the Los Angeles Children's Chorus along with the Philip Glass Ensemble.

The film mattered because it deals with critical issues about how traditional cultures endure in the modern world. At the Bowl, a collective some 7,500 strong gathered outdoors attending to the profane and profound urgencies of a planet and its inhabitants in a ceremony of image and sound.

What "Powaqqatsi" means is a topic for a long conversation. The word is Hopi for the sorcerer in us that consumes the life forces of others in order to further our own life. Reggio's film consists entirely of images, offered without comment or overt judgment, of cities and villages in Brazil, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, India, Hong Kong, Israel, France, Nepal and Berlin. Glass visited all the locations, many during the shooting with Reggio. The score and film were made together, and the diversity of subject matter is dizzying.

"Powaqqatsi" begins in an enormous open-pit gold mine in Brazil, where tens of thousands of miners carry heavy sacks of dirt in a choreography of hardship but also of an astonishing collective will. A worker is injured and carried out, Christ-like. The searing vision is unforgettable.



Reggio's camera falls in love in with faces, young and old, of all ethnicities. A craggy, ancient man in India, with a single tooth, is mired in poverty but has an angelic aura. Guileless eyes of children in Africa and South America sparkle like stars over the Cahuenga Pass. Tawdry São Paulo skyscrapers, seen from a helicopter's perspective, are like eerie, fantastic canyons, and at the Bowl we saw them while helicopters militantly flew over our heads. Whew!

Glass' score sews different threads. Always a composer with an attachment for world music (his first Minimalist musings in the '60s were inspired by Ravi Shankar), he made here one of his first large-scale works that tied together a number of musical cultures. Of particular note was the application of African music. The Gambian singer and kora player, Foday Musa Suso, Glass' guide in Africa, collaborated on the soundtrack. The score also features Glass' most extensive and exciting use of percussion up to the time.

The original "Powaqqatsi" score was mainly for Glass' small keyboard, winds and vocal ensemble, enhanced by strings, brass, percussion and a small Latin American children's chorus. For the Bowl, the ensemble, with Glass as one of the keyboard players and Michael Riesman expertly conducting, was enhanced by the full orchestra and children's chorus with a certain amount of caution, lest the larger orchestration take away some of the punch heard on the ensemble's "Powaqqatsi" recording. Still, an added sonic scale suited both the grandeur of Reggio's camera and the venue.

The L.A. Children's chorus made the biggest impression, their massed voices were thrilling from the first moments of the evening when they began the national anthem a cappella. But I did miss Glass' curious arrangement of the national anthem that he made for "Koyaanisqatsi" at the Bowl in 2009. Ben Youcef sang Suso's stirring call to prayer.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of this "Powaqqatsi" presentation was its ability to create a mood at the Bowl. Hollywood, whether it's the Bowl or the business, doesn't have a strong record these days in holding an audience's high-minded attention. Not everyone Tuesday turned away from picnics to watch the film, refrained from talking or could stop the urge to check cellphones for messages. But for the vast majority, the bigger message was that a large world outside our narrow concerns calls for our undivided attention, and that made this "Powaqqatsi" uniquely moving and important.