

# An Interview with Nico Muhly

Think classical music is only for powdered wigs and NPR enthusiasts? Not so. Nico Muhly (b. 1981) is a modern classical composer who was raised in Rhode Island, and then attended Columbia University and the Juilliard School for composition. He has worked extensively with Philip Glass, which is why we chose to include him in this particular issue (ok, we know it's a stretch), but his music is worth checking out. His most recent album, "Speaks Volumes," is his first release on Bedroom Community and is in stores now.

**2.0:** Your new record coming out differs from other classical recordings in that its intent is not to recreate a live performance, but offer a digitally enhanced, unique listening experience. Why did you choose to record it this way?

**NM:** Basically, the classical recording tradition is a stereo microphone above the stage, designed to make everything sound like you, the listener, are in the audience. In my "top ten musical experiences," I would say that sitting in the audience is maybe 1 thing, 2 things. The rest of my favorite musical moments are my experiences playing, conducting, sitting in the sides, sitting in some weird place. So I figured, along with Valgeir, to try to make something super intimate and intense, like you're playing the piece, or sitting on the floor in the middle of a circle of musicians.

**2.0:** In the same vein, which side are you on in the Analog/Digital debate? Do you believe both have a place in the future of recording? Why? How does this affect the way our generation listens to music?

**NM:** I think there isn't really a debate, or if there is, I haven't (and don't want to) hear about it. Recording technology is a tool, not an end in and of itself. As the tools

get better, there are going to be people who use them better and who can harness them to greater ends.

**2.0:** I saw an installation of Visions Into Art at the Whitney, featuring your "Winter Sounds." How did you feel about the video interpretation of your piece?

**NM:** Oh, I'm a big fan. "Interpretation" is just another form of a compliment. If people hear something in my stuff, or see something, they should by all means do something.

**2.0:** You do a lot of collaborations with people like Bjork, Rachel Portman, Matthew Barney... Classical composing is traditionally a solitary undertaking. Is this unique to you, or are many new composers collaborating? How does this affect modern classical music?

**NM:** I can't speak for my "generation" at all, but I can say that I have enjoyed a wide variety of collaborators, some of which are collaborations only inasmuch as I was hired to take care of a specific element of a bigger project, if that makes sense. I think that composers need to have a really good balance between isolation and collaboration (or, in some cases, dictatorial engagement



with an orchestra, or a good back-and-forth with specific musicians] in order for the music to grow. It's definitely the case that you learn a lot when you lock yourself away for a weekend. When you're collaborating, you don't want to be learning, I don't think. You want to be calling on all the tricks and tools you learned during a period of study. Does that make sense? Like, if you're making dinner and somebody's house, you just want to turn up, have a glass of wine, and leisurely chop your vegetables and not be there consulting *La Methode* to see how to julienne a potato.

**2.0:** Given the layered quality of your pieces, it's not hard to see how you've been influenced by masters like Steve Reich and Philip Glass. You've also worked for Glass for quite some time. How have they been an inspiration to you? Who are some other influences?

*NM:* Strangely, Philip has been an influ-

ence more as a human being than musically. I mean, the musical influence is obvious and doesn't even bear mentioning. I have no shame in admitting influence! Anyway, Philip is an interesting character because he figured out how to create a life for himself in music without teaching or participating in the bitter New Music World. I think he took a look around in the 60's and basically checked out, and went from playing concerts in lofts to being, you know, a venerable and generous 70 year old with probably nine or ten people in his full-time employ, getting health care and job security etc. It's not necessarily for everybody, but it's pretty amazing! In terms of direct musical influence, I would say that John Adams has had a bigger impact on me, mainly because

I can more directly appreciate his wrestling with issues of style and content and form in the wake of the 60's. Glass & Reich are sort of pioneers and Adams is more of an ambassador, if that makes sense.

**DID  
YOU  
KNOW**

*The materials to make glass are: a blowpipe, the punty (or pontil), bench, marver, blocks, jacks, paddles, tweezers, and a variety of shears.*