COUNTING TO ONE: THE TRIUMPH OF *AKHNATEN*

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COSTUME DESIGNS BY KEVIN POLLARD

Numbers, chanted in hypnotic patterns, set the stage for Philip Glass's first opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, and the very idea of numbers underlies the revolution depicted in his third, *Akhnaten*: the monotheistic revolution instigated by the opera's pharaoh-protagonist, who fatefully attempts to replace ancient Egypt's traditional polytheistic order with the one god Aten.

"Religions get enamored with numbers the way the sciences are," says Philip Glass during a recent interview from his studio in New York. And, of course, so do composers. Aficionados of J.S. Bach recognize the central role numbers play in his works, where they encode the intersection between theology and artistic design. Glass ushered in a revolution of his own when he began experimenting with a new method of composition by stringing small musical patterns together into increasingly complex cycles in an "additive process"—the term he prefers to the more familiar label "Minimalism."

Glass's predilection for the number three—from the grand architecture of trilogies to the primal musical building blocks of triads—is especially relevant to the creation of *Akhnaten*. The composer points out that even before settling on the Egyptian ruler from the 14th century BCE

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as an ideal subject, he had decided to complete a trilogy of "portrait operas" (his term): works centered on iconic figures in human history who "revolutionized the thoughts and events of their times through the power of inner vision" and thus transformed society. (Glass's extraordinarily varied and extensive catalogue of operas includes another trilogy from the 1990s inspired by the work of Jean Cocteau—this time focused on "the transformation of the individual.")

Following his breakthrough with the first of these portrait operas, *Einstein on the Beach* (premiered in 1976), came *Satyagraha* (1980), which explored the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and his principle of non-violent resistance to confront social injustice. "So far I had covered the areas of science and politics. After that I was looking for a figure who had influenced the religious side of a society," Glass recalls.

As with Einstein and Gandhi, he wanted his choice to stand in pointed contrast to the standard roster of politicians and warriors who have effected change "through the force of arms" and who tend to be the ones who get officially memorialized by societies—even though they are often forgotten within a generation. "I began to imagine: what if we had a 'Jackson Pollock Expressway' or an 'Igor Stravinsky Airport' instead? We should be honoring the people who really have changed the world and who have accomplished that not by having a new war (which isn't changing very much)."

The Akhnaten Attraction

Glass's attention was drawn to Amenhotep IV, the 18th-Dynasty pharaoh who changed his name in the fifth year of his reign to Akhnaten. (The composer alighted on that spelling rather than what is now the more-standard Akhenaten.) The new name signified a radical departure from Egypt's rigidly conservative belief system: "Aten," which refers specifically to the disc of the sun, had previously been a rather obscure aspect of the sun god (Ra) but was now elevated to the supreme and only god, supplanting the traditional hierarchy of multiple deities.

"[Akhnaten's] rebellion against the massive weight of tradition encompassed religion, statecraft, art and language; and in each of these areas he attempted revolutionary innovations," writes Shalom Goldman, a scholar of comparative religions and ancient languages, who assisted Glass in compiling the libretto for *Akhnaten* entirely from original sources: a collage of inscriptions, diplomatic letters, fragmentary poems, decrees—even excerpts from an old Fodor's travel guide.

But the Pharaoh's reign (c. 1353-1336 BCE) was cut short after only 17 years. Following his death (murder?), Akhnaten's successors restored the old order of gods, and Akhnaten himself became aggressively erased from official history. "The vehemence with which his very memory was defamed … knows no parallel in Egyptian history," according to Goldman.

Evidence of Akhnaten's reign was rediscovered only by accident in the late 19th century, when a peasant woman uncovered a trove of small clay tablets on a Nile site. (Goldman incorporated some of these texts into *Akhnaten*'s libretto.) The site, Tell el-Amarna, turned out to be the location of the new capital city Akhnaten had founded to disseminate his theological revolution. Shortly after his death it was abandoned when the court

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JUGGLING IN *AKHNATEN*

The earliest known record of juggling was created 4,000 years ago, a wall painting (above) in Tomb 15 of Egypt's Beni Hasan cemetery complex near present-day Minya. The tomb belonged to Baqet III, a provincial governor during the later years of the Eleventh Dynasty of Egypt. It depicts female dancers and acrobats juggling up to three balls; one of them is juggling with her arms crossed. Brooklyn Museum associate curator Dr. Robert Bianchi has suggested that the tomb's depiction of jugglers may be "an analogy between balls and circular mirrors, as round things were used to represent solar objects, birth and death." "While there is a symbolic connection to these first known representations of juggling, the juggling featured in this production of *Akhnaten* has a purposely equivocal role," says Sean Gandini, choreographer of the juggling ensemble. "In some ways, the objects are alter egos to the characters' ideas: miniature globular deities, bouncing thoughts, desert sand. On another level, I feel like the juggling has a structural relationship to Philip Glass's score. We have tried to make the patterns relate to the music and create a dialogue with it. We tried to create a series of little ephemeral geometries that hover visually around the music."

returned to the traditional capital of Thebes. Akhnaten's city quickly fell into oblivion, not even leaving an Ozymandias-like reminder of faded glory. Thanks to archeological excavations, however, Amarna has since become one of the most famous sites of ancient Egypt.

"The fact that he was erased tells you that religious beliefs are not to be trifled with," remarks Glass. "If you change the theory of gravity, you can get away with it!" The dramatic impact of Akhnaten's innovations has fueled an enormous amount of speculation in modern Egyptology—particularly since the tomb of his successor (and possible son) Tutankhamen (aka "King Tut") was found intact in the 1920s, kindling an international media frenzy of "Tutmania" that still resurfaces periodically.

Glass recalls coming upon one such piece of speculation about the significance of Akhnaten: a work by the controversial 20th-century "independent scholar" Immanuel Velikovsky (1895-1979) in which he argued that the iconoclastic pharaoh was the "real" historical source for the later Greek mythic figure of Oedipus. Velikovsky was following an attempt at uncovering "repressed" history that had been pioneered by Sigmund Freud in his curious final collection of essays, *Moses and Monotheism*, in which Freud posits a direct link between Akhnaten's teaching (driven underground after his demise) and ancient Judaism, with Moses serving as a conduit.

Velikovsky's hypothesis is what Glass calls a "good crackpot theory"—in the sense that this is the sort of speculation whose historical validity matters far less than its ability to inspire artists to make connections of their own. Initially the composer envisioned a double opera on the twin figures of Oedipus and Akhnaten (presented simultaneously upstage and downstage, respectively). That idea highlights the archetypal, mythic dimension of the "portrait" operas that appealed to Glass: particularly after focusing on two highly recognizable 20th-century figures with Einstein and Gandhi. Glass says, "I wanted to find someone from the ancient world. I then got so interested in Akhnaten—rereading Freud's book

PHOTO BY RAYMOND MEIER

Philip Glass

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convinced me that he was the figure I'd been looking for—that I dropped the Oedipus part entirely."

Recontextualizing the Familiar

Einstein on the Beach's unlikely success had catapulted Philip Glass to a new level of celebrity. After an intensive period of abstract pieces for his ensemble (often performed in downtown lofts and gallery spaces), *Einstein* came as a surprise to many—including the composer himself, who says he had never even dreamed of writing opera before then.

In fact, while *Einstein* inaugurated the portrait trilogy, it also marked the end of a major period for Glass. He then continued to startle many of his followers by shifting tack significantly in his next two operas, which paved the way for Glass to become one of the pre-eminent exponents of the art form in our time, the author of some 25 operas (from major productions to "pocket operas" like his most recent effort based on Kafka, *The Trial*).

Decades ago, the eminent critic Allan Kozinn recognized that with opera "Glass found a medium in which he could put his newly developed language to expressive use."

Despite having its American premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House (though not as part of the Met season—the theater was rented), *Einstein* was a game-changer obviously situated on the far fringes of experimental music theater. Both *Satyagraha* and *Akhnaten*, in contrast, were commissioned by opera companies and were consequently composed for operatically trained, unamplified voices accompanied by orchestras: "opera" in the traditional sense.

When *Satyagraha* (the title is Sanskrit for "truth force") premiered in 1980 in Rotterdam, anyone expecting a rehash of the style taken to its limit in *Einstein*—above all, with its focus on rhythmic processes—was in for "a tremendous disappointment," recalls Glass in his recent memoirs, *Words Without Music*. "If [people] were angry about *Einstein*, they were doubly angry about this... I was looking for a way of radicalizing the music again, and sometimes that can mean doing something that people already know."

Satyagraha became Glass's first large-scale composition calling for a full score in two decades, since his student years. "I was just 43 and was, after almost 12 years with my ensemble, about to reenter the world of concert music and traditionally presented opera," Glass writes.

On the surface, *Akhnaten* in particular might suggest a return to some of the trappings of 19th-century "grand opera." Reviewing the New York premiere in 1984, the late Andrew Porter referred to its epic aspects: "processions, dances, hymns, love duets and ensembles, conspiracies, attacks, triumphs provide an almost Meyerbeerian framework for music." And Glass's signature arpeggio figures, now the mesmerizing undertow against which vocal melodies soar aloft, might occasionally bring to mind Bellini and *bel canto.*

But all these are merely superficial associations. What is characteristically Glassian

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is the recontextualization of seemingly familiar imagery and associations into an utterly new experience. As with the previous two portrait operas, *Akhnaten* unfolds in a sequence of immersive, heavily symbolic episodes that are imbued with a ritualistic, even dream-like quality. These take the place of an event-filled plot. The opera's action can be briefly summarized as a rise-and-fall story, an action-reaction pattern that is framed by images of death and funereal solemnities.

Glass's musical patterns encode this trajectory on the microcosmic level (one of the opera's principal thematic ideas, heard in the later part of the lengthy instrumental prelude, literally traces a rise and fall) and on the largest scale as well. A melancholy A minor pervades vast stretches of the score. This is the key of *Akhnaten*'s beginning and of its final scene (when the slain pharaoh and his family appear as wondering ghosts who join the ongoing funeral procession, disappearing into the silence of history).

At the opera's luminous center, in the final scene of the second act, Akhnaten's "Hymn to the Sun" is set in a radiantly contrasting A major (though shaded with beautiful archaisms). Glass enhances the transcendent effect of this moment by making it the one moment in his musical setting to be sung in the language of the audience hearing it. All of the other sung texts in *Akhnaten* are set in ancient Near Eastern languages: Egyptian (the language of the court), Akkadian (used for diplomatic correspondence), and, in the offstage chorus that complements Akhnaten's solo hymn and concludes the second act, biblical Hebrew—where Glass sets Psalm 104, in a nod to Freud's theory.

The Sound of *Akhnaten*

It would be mistaken to approach Glass's musical language here expecting a homogeneous style, as if each scene were cut from the same "Minimalist" cloth. Instead of a retreat to something more conservative, the

turn to traditional instrumental and vocal forces opened up new expressive possibilities. With its more prominent role for the orchestra, *Akhnaten*'s soundscape is not only set apart from *Einstein* but differs significantly from that of *Satyagraha* as well. *Akhnaten* was commissioned by Stuttgart Opera—much of Glass's operatic career has been fostered by adventurous European companies—in a production directed by Achim Freyer (known to LA Opera audiences for directing the company's first-ever *Ring* cycle and other productions). Freyer would also go on to stage all three of the portrait operas at Stuttgart as a trilogy.

The premiere of *Akhnaten* was scheduled during a period of renovation of Stuttgart's main opera house and therefore had to take place in a smaller theater. When Glass realized the orchestra pit for this alternative space was too small to accommodate a full orchestra, he decided to omit violins entirely.

Having violas as the top string body results overall in a darker hue, which Glass varies with fascinating sonorities from the percussion and timbral contributions from woodwinds and brass that occasionally add an almost Baroque flavor. Indeed, his orchestration in *Akhnaten* is remarkably adept in underscoring the dramaturgy, using highly contrasted textures—the aggressive drumming of Amenhotep III's funeral is the "old order" and the familiar Egypt against which his successor son rebels. Glass's vocal casting similarly extends the drama and its implied ambiguities: soprano not for the young love partner but for Akhnaten's mother, Queen Tye, and the conventionally "older" mezzo-soprano voice for his spouse, Nefertiti.

Most stunning of all is the pharaoh's casting as a quasi-Baroque countertenor. Owing to the countertenor renaissance of the past two or so decades, it's not so easy to imagine just how ravishingly *different* this must have sounded to Akhnaten's original audiences. The cult figure Klaus Nomi (an idiosyncratic performance artist whose music blended opera and pop) had recently cultivated a camp/avant-garde persona based on his countertenor stylings.

Tom Pye's set design for Act One, Scene 3: The Window of Appearances

What's more, Glass has his protagonist appear silently onstage long before he sings his first notes in the final scene of act one ("The Window of Appearances"). It's a clever stratagem that brings home another important point about Glass as an opera composer: he is every bit as much a practical man of the theater as Puccini.

"When you write an opera, you have a very limited time to tell a complicated story," says Glass. "So any shortcut becomes important. You don't hear Akhnaten sing until 40 minutes in—and at the premiere the audience didn't know he was going to be a countertenor. We had a big, strapping singer [Paul Esswood], and they were so astonished by the sound that came out of his mouth. It was a clever way of emphasizing him as different. I could also get into the semi-erotic nature of his relationships with his mother and his wife by the way I cast the voices." This practical sensibility also led Glass to introduce the character of the Scribe as a speaking narrator who introduces the events of each scene.

For all of its unique features, *Akhnaten* also takes its place as an integral capstone to the "portrait trilogy." Thematic material is derived from the opening scene of *Einstein on the Beach* (and from that work's other interlinking scenes, collectively nicknamed "Knee Plays"). *Akhnaten*'s haunting epilogue, for example, clearly echoes music from the opening of the trilogy. But as in the *Ring*, history's apocalyptic sweeping-away sets the stage for a new countdown, but our experience of the world has been changed: the *Ring* shifts downward from its opening E-flat major tonality to D-flat major by the end of *Götterdämmerung*, and *Akhnaten* counters *Einstein*'s primal C major with its wistful relative key of A minor.

It really isn't farfetched to regard the trilogy as Wagnerian in ambition. Like Wagner, Glass has reimagined the entire art form of opera, devising his own musical and dramatic tools, and using smart teams of collaborators to flesh out his vision—and even reconditioned once-skeptical audiences to set aside their biases and take the journey with him. "I had always felt there was a public that would like this music," writes Glass, "and over time, the audiences, so small in the beginning, have only gotten larger."

Glass expresses his enthusiasm for British director Phelim McDermott's vision in *Satyagraha* (English National Opera, 2007) and what he calls his "splendid production" of *Akhnaten* (ENO, 2016)—and hopes that McDermott will complete the trilogy with a fresh production of *Einstein on the Beach*. As the elderly Wagner famously exhorted,"Kinder, schafft neues!" ("Children, create new things!") It's a sentiment with which Glass, approaching 80, seems whole-heartedly to agree.

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