

Akhnaten by Philip Glass, performed by the Atlanta Opera

By Kenny Crucial
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Schwartz Center for Performing Arts, Emory
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Philip Glass ventured to the Emory University campus for a performance of his opera *Akhnaten* and to receive the President's Award from the university. Glass was honored for both his prodigious musical output and his contribution to previous events at the school. More particularly, he was cited for his service to Tibetan culture. This was also the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first performance of the opera.

Akhnaten's performance benefited from a pre-opera conversation between Glass and the librettist Shalom Goldman, a renowned Hebrew scholar. The opera also coincided with a major exhibit of King Tutankhamen at the Atlanta Civic Center.

Akhnaten ruled Egypt from 1375BCE to 1358 BCE. He is best known for his attempt to establish monotheism in Egypt. His reign was noted for its challenge to the dominant social order. When he first undertook his subject matter in 1977, Philip Glass was drawn to the emperor's artistic side. Glass asserted that it was the poets and not the generals who create a lasting history. For Glass, Akhnaten's tragic end was due to his embrace of an artistic vision that was dashed by the more conservative forces.

Much of the inspiration for the opera came from Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. Goldman offered the provocative observation drawn from Freud that monotheism provided the rise of intolerance for other religious beliefs. Both Glass and Goldman hinted how the themes of the 1984 opera are particularly vibrant in the present political situation. There was a passing reference to how Moses's Egyptian origins provide insight into the present struggle in Palestine. As well, Shalom Goldman invited Glass to comment on

comparisons between Akhnaten and Obama, which the composer declined to do.

Akhnaten chronicles the emperor's reign from his ascension to the throne to his final demise at the hands of his enemies. The funeral of Amenhotep III is followed by the crowning of his son, Akhnaten. Since the new emperor favors the worship of the Aten (the radiant disk of the sun), an abstract god, his primary conflict is with Amon, the high priest, who defends the worship of idols. He dismisses the high priest and becomes immersed in his new spirituality. His obsession weakens his kingdom and strengthens his enemies who overthrow him. An epilogue has Akhnaten and his entourage appear as ghosts who pass unseen while tourists gawk at the remains of his temple.

During the composition of the piece, while waiting for Goldman to complete the painstaking work on the primary ancient texts, Glass began the prologue. The overture is most characteristically Phillip Glass with its weaving repetitive lines. In an orchestra without violins, the viola assumes the role of the lead voice. The music flows very much like a river with its constant current, while the individual elements change slightly. The consistency of the musical line is maintained without marked dynamic. In a sense, the expressiveness is neutralized.

The musical development of the opera draws a great deal from traditional music. The chanted chorus at the beginning of the opera is reminiscent of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. The counter-tenor delivery of *Akhnaten* recalls Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. The very measured orchestral evolution echoes the chamber work of Bach. And the rich duets and trios have a touch of the classic opera of Mozart. When he ventures from his familiar atomistic style of composition, Glass

resolves his work into a pleasant variation of well-known styles. There is not a lot of daring demonstrated in the thematic choices by the composer. The melodies are simple ascending progressions that lack any sense of real drama.

Glass's musical decisions are somewhat mirrored in the telling of the story. For the first twenty minutes, Akhnaten is silent. Glass has remained faithful to the ancient texts so he does not put words into the mouths of the characters. By sticking to the fragments, he gives the audience the freedom to construct the narrative. However, Akhnaten's emergence as a leader seems somewhat abstracted from its historical context. Granted, the death of his predecessor leads to his accession to the throne. But Akhnaten's dialogue only relates to the artistic and spiritual. Except for the love poetry to his wife, there is no reference at all to the dramatic players in the opera. These simple renditions of the history may serve a clear translation into a certain kind of music. They do no justice to the actual forces that led to Akhnaten's downfall.

Inevitably, the music suffers from this shorthand. The lovely duets between Nefertiti and Akhnaten are a testament to the artistic achievements of the emperor. The Atlanta Opera did an impressive task in mounting the opera. Colorful banners are used to represent the various religious allegiances. John Gaston offers a moving rendering of Emperor Akhnaten. Overall, the simple outline of a historical presentation glosses over the spectacular social divisions and complexities of the era. Since the ancient texts are the only source, there is no opportunity to explore the full range of social interactions not mentioned in those texts. Their subject matter is confined to the particular concerns of the royal family and their allies. This self-absorption is perhaps appropriate.

The program indicates that foreign barbarians brought about the downfall of Akhnaten. It also notes how he was "isolated from the people." His political opponents talk of the need to overthrow the emperor. But the opera text seems as equally insulated from the people as the emperor. Glass has made a decision to exclude the kind of soul-searching drama on the part of the protagonists that we would expect from a Shakespeare history. The High Priest Amon engages in none of the argued reasoning on idolatry that is a staple of Arnold Schönberg's opera *Moses and Aaron*.

Moreover, there is never any reference to life outside Akhnaten's immediate circle.

In his Monday lecture, Philip Glass, who describes himself as a Buddhist, discussed his musical collaboration with director Martin Scorsese for the film *Kundun*, about the Dalai Lama. Both Glass and Scorsese are admirers of the Dalai Lama. The subject of the talk was no mere coincidence since the 14th Dalai Lama has served as a Distinguished Professor at the University. Like Akhnaten, Kundun was anointed a spiritual leader through a mysterious process.

Glass's sympathies for the Dalai Lama seem to originate with his admiration for a certain kind of charismatic leader, the same kind of leader he takes the Egyptian emperor to have been. These figures are treated and presented in an uncritical and ahistorical manner.

Akhnaten's individualism is apparently viewed as a forerunner of today's liberalism. Glass makes every effort to interpret the emperor's personal characteristics as signs of a spiritual enlightenment. By avoiding an extensive political or historical argument, however, the composer's artistry resembles nothing so much as religious ritual.

In the sacred ceremony, Akhnaten receives his divine anointing. There is really no place for his subjects to question the monarch's "divine right." What sort of an example is this for the present day? Akhnaten's present-day counterparts, according to this logic, should be praised for keeping themselves separate from wide layers of the population. The slaves and barbarians have no voice in Akhnaten's Egypt.

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