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Philip Glass's Akhnaten

Paul John Frandsen

As an Egyptologist, I am often asked to recommend a good book on ancient Egypt, and for many years I have suggested *Sinuhe, the Egyptian*, written in 1945 by Mika Waltari, the great Finnish writer.¹ The novel is based on research into Egyptological literature, and for its time it was remarkably accurate from a historical point of view. Today, however, it is a bit outdated, and many colleagues disapprove when I tell them that I do not recommend a book that reflects the present stage of research. But the hypothetical request mentioned above did not concern research as such; it had to do with what life in ancient Egypt *might* have been like, and the two do not necessarily coincide. Researchers have long since abandoned any pretence of establishing *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how it really was), but there may be an alternative common goal that is less evident. The English historian, M. J. Oakeshott, says that “the historian begins with a homogeneous world of ideas, and his task is to transform (though not wholly transform) what is given into what is satisfactory.”² Or, as the Norwegian historian S. Langholm says of historical research, “We seek to reconstruct a reality which will account for the sources.”³

In fact, we are not just interested in “truth” but in intellectual constructs. Thus, the door is open to interpretations that are, for example, artistic, or not “strictly scientific.” Furthermore, I believe that a good artistic interpretation can make a contribution to understanding and insight as valuable as any produced by scholars, and Waltari’s book is an admirable example of this. The stage is set in the New Kingdom, more particularly during the years known as the Amarna Period (around 1350 B.C.). Through his fictional central character, the physician, Sinuhe, Waltari paints a sensuous and detailed picture of life all through the Middle East. An “artistic reconstruction” may ultimately even reflect on the research in which it originated, and *Sinuhe, the Egyptian* is included in the Amarna bibliography of many Egyptologists.⁴

The Amarna Period has, in fact, attracted many different artists, and one of the latest is Philip Glass, with his third opera, *Akhmaten*.⁵

As in Glass's two previous operas, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and the Gandhi portrait, *Satyagraha* (1980), which are all linked by a common musical "Trilogy" theme, *Akhmaten* represents an attitude toward history rather unlike Waltari's. To Glass, history is the history of "great spirits":

to me, the entire history of humanity is a history of ideas, of culture. When I think of Ancient Greece, Rome, France, China, or wherever, what comes to my mind are poets, painters, writers, musicians, philosophers. I never think of generals and politicians. Except, perhaps, for Alexander the Great or Napoleon, that part of history is a story of faceless violence which, though it may be exciting to read about, adds little or nothing to the sum total of our humanity. And yet we often act as if the opposite were true, naming airports, highways and other public places after warriors and politicians who are barely remembered, and sometimes totally forgotten, by the next generation.⁶

We are, in fact, presented here with a somewhat old-fashioned view of history, and Glass hardly differs from most other composers or dramatists. But while working on *Akhmaten*, he realized that social, political, and religious ideas could be made to play a central part in a work if they are, as in the works of the standard repertoire, clad in flesh and blood. It remains, however, for Glass to turn this dramatic requirement into something more than a common banality.

That requirement also implies a more conventional musical language than had been found in earlier minimalism, in general, or in Glass's own principles of composition, in particular. In the earlier operas, systematic repeats dominated, both in the melodic technique of additive process and in the rhythmical principle of cyclic structure. These procedures led to very complex links between melody, rhythm, and harmony, with little attempt to wed them to conventional plot. In fact, *Einstein on the Beach* has no plot at all. *Akhmaten*, while too fragmentary to be termed a true epic opera, is, nonetheless, a step in that more conventional direction.⁷ The chronological progress of the opera follows that of history and is probably no less coherent than *Boris Godunov*.

As a consequence of composing more conventional opera, Glass's musical language, in many respects, becomes more conventional as well. Thus, in *Akhmaten*, melody plays a much greater part than in his previous works, such that people actually find themselves humming tunes from the opera. Rhythm and harmony are also used more traditionally to convey dramatic situations. But the most decisive novelty is Glass's use of themes, timbres, and keys as leitmotifs in the epic/musical development.⁸

When we turn to the libretto—by Glass, Shalom Goldman, Robert Israel, and Richard Riddell—of the opera, however, we see at first glance that Glass hardly seems to consider the audience. With the exception of the Akhnaten's "Hymn to the Sun," all other texts are performed in the original languages, that is, in ancient Egyptian, Hebrew, or Babylonian. Glass does not wish the text to describe an action, and even less to provide a comment on it. If the listener does not understand the words, then the music must be granted even more explicit power of expression (though one may ask, Why then write an opera at all, and not a symphonic poem?). He also dismisses the intelligibility of the libretto with the argument that you can never understand opera singers' enunciations, no matter what the language. Still, Glass was unwilling to allow the text to bypass the audience totally, so he introduced a narrator, the scribe, whose recitation of largely supplementary texts functions in the contrapuntal manner that Glass allegedly disapproves of. It turns out to be a brilliant solution.

However, this decision raises questions about Glass's view of the relation between audience and composer. Glass has spent the majority of his adult life in the world of the theater. During a stay of several years in Paris in the mid-1960s, he was deeply influenced by Samuel Beckett, for whose drama, *Play*, he composed the music. Glass discovered that Beckett works in a way that incorporates the viewer into the work, thus providing the audience with an alternative option for interpreting or even completing the piece.⁹ Glass, too, wants the listener to play an active, creative part.

We might perhaps conclude that Glass, as a composer, is in much the same situation as his main character, Akhnaten, the religious reformer. To make himself understood, Glass, like Akhnaten, has resorted to convention. Yet, in the context of the opera, they are, nonetheless, still revolutionary, and the ideas presented in the following pages may therefore be seen as one response to such a challenge.

Prelude

Akhnaten begins with an instrumental prelude that consists of five sections, each divided into two subsections. The harmony of the first of the two subsections is characterized by alternating between A minor and F major, while every second subsection is identified by alternating between A minor and B-flat minor/B-flat major. The harmonic material is presented in the repeated arpeggios so characteristic of Glass,

where three- or four-beat rhythms both interchange and contrast in an increasingly complex polyrhythmic pattern.

Also in the first section we meet another familiar aspect of Glass's music—the extensive use of intervals of a second. Let us, as an example, examine more closely the first subsection of the first and second section (1, 1 and 2, 1). Over the alternating arpeggios in 1, 1, a theme gradually emerges, based on the aforementioned seconds. The theme, a quasi-ostinato figure, is made up of four groups, each of 32 notes. The first group, which may be regarded as a kind of introduction, consists of the note A repeated 32 times on a basis of pure A minor:

1. a a a a a a a a	a a a a a a a a
a a a a a a a a	a a a a a a a a

Hereafter, the rest of the subsection looks like this:

F major	A minor
2. f f f f g g f f	a a a a a a a a
f f f f g g f f	a a a b b a a
3. f f f f g g f f	a a a b b a a
f f f f g g f f	a b a b a b a b
4. f g f g g g f f	a b a b a b a b
f g f g g g f f	a b a b a b a b

Similarly, in the second subsection of the first section, the A-minor chords still form the harmonic basis for an interchange between A and B, while the B-flat minor/B-flat major link produces a figure that only emerges fully as a theme in the fourth and fifth section (Ex. 1). According to Glass, the emergence of the theme lends the entire introduction an ominous air, but since the theme further appears in the epilogue as well as at the foundation ceremony (*City/Dance*) and the destruction of Akhetaten, he grants it a much more comprehensive significance. Its rise and abrupt fall is synonymous with Akhnaten's rise and fall, in that, at the same time, it creates "an uneasy harmonic ambiguity" (vacillating between B-flat major and B-flat minor); it can further be considered "as a musical metaphor for that part of Akhnaten's character that was so unusual and unsettling to the people of his time."¹⁰



Example 1. All music from *Akhnaten* by Philip Glass, copyright 1984, Dunvagen Music Publishers, Inc. Used with permission.

Act 1.1: The Funeral

The first scene of Act 1 describes the funeral of Amenophis III. Glass has been fascinated by the traditional view of ancient Egypt as a civilization focusing on death, and in his opera, rituals of death therefore become the epitome of the old order—that is, of Egypt before Akhnaten and his attempted revolution. The theme of Scene 1 is thus traditional Egypt of the old order. Glass has looked at the general state of knowledge of Egyptian music and

to judge from that evidence, Egyptian music was soft, lyrical stuff. About funeral music, no mention is made at all. Thus the music I designed for the funeral of Amenophis III in the opening scene of the opera does not resemble any funeral music I have ever heard before. The drumming that begins it, the flourishes for brass and winds and the emphatic entrance of the singing, give it a raw, primitive, quasi-military sound. In this music, coming as it does right after the prelude to Act I, my idea was to give an unmistakable and clear image of how, at least in part, “our” Egypt would be portrayed. By vividly portraying that world through the music, I hoped to set off the idealism of Akhnaten even more strongly. The blaring brass and pounding drums introduce the world into which Akhnaten was born.¹¹

Glass, especially as far as his instrumentation of the funeral music is concerned, can be accused of indulging in the kind of “orientalism” that Western artists and scholars have often employed in their treatment of the Orient. But by speaking of “our” Egypt, the composer makes it clear that he is not concerned with historical validity and is hardly attempting to compose history.¹²

We have already encountered the musical raw material for the first scene in the prelude, with its contrast between the notes A and B. This contrast will ultimately constitute the points of tension in the “plot” of the opera: the funeral of Amenophis III is set in B major, while the opposite pole of the opera, the Akhnaten’s “Hymn to the Sun,” is in A major.

Act 1.2: The Coronation

In the next scene, Amenophis IV is crowned as king of Egypt. The high priest of Amon, Aye, and Horemhab, along with the priests of Amon, sing a coronation anthem, and while the scribe reads aloud the official titulary of the king, the latter receives the double crown. Here we first meet Amenophis/Akhnaten. He is characterized as a potential revolutionary, but also as someone who is part of the old

bassoon

+ celli

Example 2.

Example 3.

regime. The opera demonstrates this dual part by showing the king on stage, though he is left mute, not singing a single word. The music captures the situation in several ways, such as by creating new musical material out of old.

The first section of the coronation scene begins with a short repeat of the A/B contrast and the B-major tonality from the funeral scene, developing into a melodic phrase A–B–C–E (Ex. 2). The A–B–C–E phrase is then incorporated in what Glass has termed the “Trilogy” theme because it occurs in all three operas (Ex. 3). In its simplest form, the notes A–G–C, the “Trilogy” theme introduces *Einstein on the Beach*, and it may also appear in a number of variations. But the thematic role of the phrase is only seriously expressed by Glass in connection with its use in *Akhmaten*:

This Trilogy theme, linked as it is to scenes in which essential aspects of Akhnaten’s character are revealed, is strongly associated with Akhnaten himself. This is precisely how the Trilogy theme is used in *Satyagraha* and *Einstein* as well. In *Satyagraha*, it appears in the second scene when young Gandhi embarks upon his life’s work, and again in the final scene at the penultimate



Example 4.

moment of his political victory. The Trilogy theme occurs in all five *Knee Plays of Einstein*, scenes which represent the more intimate portraits of Einstein.¹³

The connection is even more clearly expressed in Glass's preface to the booklet accompanying the recording, where he calls Akhnaten, Gandhi, and Einstein "three men who revolutionized the thoughts and events of their times through the power of an inner vision. This, then, is the theme of the trilogy. Einstein—the man of science; Gandhi—the man of politics; Akhnaten—the man of religion. These themes (science, politics, religion) are, to an extent, shared by all three and they inform our ideological and real worlds."¹⁴

The first section of the scene ends with (Ex. 4) and variations thereof. This theme occurs several times in the opera, always as either an introduction to or an end of important moments in the opera. The theme usually appears with the A in the upper position, but at the end of the opera, this position is reversed, and, combined with the "Trilogy" theme, the reversal causes the opera to conclude in the same mode in which it began, A minor, which, in a manner of speaking, represents ancient Egypt.¹⁵

The deep note E leads us to the second part of the coronation scene, producing a tonal system of contrasted A minor and E minor. If the "Trilogy" theme represents the religious, revolutionary King Akhnaten, E minor must represent Akhnaten, the human being. Given the close relationship between E minor and A minor, we are tempted to interpret its effect in the scene as Akhnaten's achieving liberation from his parent.

Act 1.3: The Window of Appearances

Here we are introduced to Nefertiti, Akhnaten's queen, and to Queen Tye, his mother. At once we are presented with a question that, strangely enough, I, as an Egyptologist, had never before asked myself: What did their voices sound like? Glass has made three choices—all unusual: Akhnaten is a countertenor, Nefertiti is sung by a mezzo-soprano, and Queen Tye by a light soprano.

To have the hero sung by a high, light voice may be in accordance with a tradition of centuries, but a countertenor is more than just a male voice that is higher than the tenor—especially when viewed from the end of the twentieth century. The sound of a countertenor to modern listeners is archaic. The voice has become more fashionable during the last two or three decades, especially in connection with performances aiming at historical fidelity, and if we are therefore to assume that Glass's choice of voices is to be judged within the conventional musical framework of appreciation, then Akhnaten must be viewed either as a conscious link with baroque opera, or he must "represent" something archaic. However, this reading contradicts the message that the opera otherwise seeks to express; thus we shall have to search for a different set of values.

Glass, himself, maintains that he has chosen this particular voice in order to emphasize, in the strongest possible terms, that the main character is something out of the ordinary. "The effect of hearing a high, beautiful voice coming from the lips of a full-grown man can at first be very startling," Glass writes. "In one stroke, Akhnaten would be separated from everyone around him. It was a way of musically and dramatically indicating in the simplest possible way that here was a man unlike any who had come before."¹⁶

This "differentness" of Akhnaten also applies to his appearance—at least to the extent that it has been transmitted through statues and reliefs. In Amarna art, the rendering of man, and thus not just the king and his family, is obviously different from representations of earlier periods, even to a modern observer. Therefore, it is not very likely that Glass should be right in saying that

the art of the Amarna period may be the first period of conscious naturalism in the history of art. One of Akhnaten's dictums was "living in truth," and presumably he chose to be portrayed as he really appeared, not in the formal, idealized style of the pharaohs who preceded him. If this is true, then he certainly must have been an odd-looking character: swollen thighs, enlarged hips, breasts almost pendulous. At first glance he appears almost hermaphroditic.¹⁷

I would interpret the use of a countertenor somewhat differently. A hermaphrodite is a monster, the result of something that has gone wrong. Although at the present we are uncertain as to whether or not Akhnaten's mummy has, in fact, survived, and thus there is no possibility of testing the hypothesis of the androgyny syndrome, there is little probability that he should have been genetically "defective," as schol-

ars in the 1930s believed. Nevertheless, the choice of a countertenor remains a congenial one. Scholars engaged in research on the Amarna period during recent years do now largely agree that the famous colossi of Akhnaten represents the king as god of creation, and hence androgynous, containing both the male and the female creative principle. The iconography of Akhnaten is the visual rendering of a theological dogma, and the musical rendering could hardly find a more apt expression than a voice that is neither male nor female, the countertenor.

The light, high, female voice is a lyric soprano, a voice typically associated with youthful purity and innocence. It is naturally interesting that Glass depicts the mother figure in this way. According to Glass, Queen Tye supports her son as a participant in the attack on the temple, but at the same time, she represents the old regime. Thus, the revolution of Akhnaten contains a certain ambivalence. The king is all set for innovation, but in this urge there is a longing for the old, for established, ritual cosmography.

This interpretation may be supported by the implications of having Nefertiti turned into a mezzo-soprano. The deep female voice is reminiscent of darkness, danger, and sensuality, and Nefertiti, in this context, is seen as a temptress, a seductress representing reform and thus also allowing for love between man and woman, as opposed to the ritual love between mother and son.

Glass has justified his choice of voices by a reference to purely musical/technical considerations: "Normally the younger woman, in this case Akhnaten's wife, Nefertiti, would sing the higher part, but for musical reasons, I wanted the voices in the Act II duet between Akhnaten and Nefertiti to be as close as possible to the same range, to create a more intimate effect in their vocal intermingling."¹⁸

But elsewhere, both in the opera and in his book, Glass considers the royal couple's love. Referring to the depictions of the family, mentioned below, he says: "It is easy to imagine a tender romantic connection between these two. If this is so, then Akhnaten and Nefertiti are among the earliest, if not the earliest, romantic couple in recorded history, predating Antony and Cleopatra by many hundreds of years. It seemed, then, that we should at least give them a scene to themselves in the opera.¹⁹ Besides, who could resist writing a love duet for such a pair?"²⁰ Indeed, one of the reasons the art of the Amarna period is revolutionary is that it introduces intimate family scenes into the official repertory of representation, and Glass's choice of just such a mezzo-soprano is admirably suited to Nefertiti.

Act 2

Act 2 takes us into the decade of revolution, from year five to year fifteen of Akhnaten's reign. During this period, Amon is overthrown and the new city is built: Akhetaten, the modern name of which is Amarna. Both are historical events that are included in *Akhnaten* in the first and third scenes of this act. Akhnaten's attempt to force upon Egypt the cult of one transcendent god, a god above time and space, makes up the climax of the act and of the opera in the fourth scene. The nature of love is characterized in the second scene.

Act 2.1: The Assault on the Temple

In this scene we witness how the priests adore Amon with a hymn. The text is performed by the priests, while the high priest invokes Amon [Amen]: the hymn itself is one of the most moving pieces of the opera.²¹ The attitude of Egyptologists toward hymns (and other Egyptian texts) is usually influenced by the problems of translating them, and this focus tends to make us forget that the hymns were performed—and that they were surely a pleasure to listen to. Glass's version is a beautiful piece of “orientalizing” music, with its abrupt transitions between A minor and A-flat major.

Toward the end of the hymn, the song changes character almost imperceptibly; the invoking adoration becomes a cry for help, achieved through the abrupt transition via the E-flat of the horns to A-flat major. When the hymn fades away, an A, in iambic rhythm in the basses, takes us into the next section of what sounds like the danger music so familiar from films. A descending bass line is heard at full blast, and the battle is on. The units consist largely of a shrill, plunging, syncopated sequence led by the solo trumpet. The conflict is widely dissonant, with violently syncopated rhythms (for example, the choir vocalizes on F and G). Queen Tye's voice intermingles with the choir, and the destruction assumes more barbaric, musical forms. Toward the end of the section another motif emerges (Ex. 5) that also appears in the other violent scene in the opera (Act 3.2). Glass himself termed it a motif of destruction, but the entire theme—motif and key—seems now more complicated.²² The motif is also almost identical to a later motif of a dance of joy, and it may well be ecstasy, a violent euphoria, that forms the nucleus of the motif, the kind of ecstasy that is related to endless rejoicing or mad delight in pure destruction. The fact that A-flat major is maintained throughout the



Example 5.

scene may be interpreted as representing the restriction and rigidity that, according to the composer, is a structural feature of the old, ceremonial, established society that carries within itself the germ of its own destruction.

Musically, A (minor) is separated by half a tone from A-flat and B-flat, respectively. The key creates a balance between the potentially—and in this scene evidently—violent, on the one hand, and the “new and disturbing feature in Akhnaten,” on the other. However, the revolution is not sufficiently profound and is doomed to failure. The borders can be stretched in both directions, and they are accordingly extended to include G and B so that for a moment, G major is drawn into the harmonic pattern. But to no avail.

Act 2.2: Akhnaten and Nefertiti

As mentioned above, Glass sees Akhnaten and Nefertiti as the first lovers in history, and it is not difficult to follow him in this reasoning when you contemplate the reliefs of the royal couple or wonder in silent joy at the intimacy that radiates from the family scenes (Fig. 1).²³ Akhnaten and Nefertiti had to have a duet, but instead of choosing a suitable phrase from some piece of Egyptian love lyric, Glass and his collaborators made a surprising choice: the text on the end piece of the golden coffin found in Tomb No. 55 in the Valley of the Kings—one of the most disputed monuments, not only from the Amarna period, but from pharaonic Egypt as a whole.²⁴ The most peculiar thing about the text on the coffin is that it was altered during the Amarna period itself. The sections of gold-leaf text that contained pronouns and proper names were largely cut out and replaced by other corresponding grammatical categories. The fact that texts were changed in ancient times is well-known, but the interesting point about this text is that it was altered from what was probably a prayer to Akhnaten on behalf of a woman, more than likely a queen, to a prayer by Akhnaten to the sun god.

To Egyptologists, the most fascinating aspect lies in the possibilities that philological and historical considerations concerning the text provide to solve one of the fundamental questions of the time: How



Figure 1. Akhnaten and Nefertiti circa 1350 B.C.

did it end, and what happened to Akhnaten, Nefertiti, and Tye? But the opera uses this text in a totally different way. In the introductory phase of the scene, it is recited by the scribe, and the audience is led to believe that it is a prayer to a god. But then Akhnaten and Nefertiti sing the text to each other, and it becomes a love hymn. The translation has been “improved” somewhat, but the message is clear: in the universe of Akhnaten love is not atomized and labeled “love between man and woman,” “love between parents and children,” or “love of god.” Glass, however, has taken the text at face value.

The scene opens with a soft theme in the violas in E minor, descends into A minor and returns to E minor as the key of the duet. The relation between A minor and E minor in Act 1.2 represents Akhnaten as a man torn between a vision of a new life and his roots in old, safe but locked, patterns, a schism exemplified in his ambivalent relationship with his mother.²⁵ When the duet settles down in pure E minor at the end, Akhnaten has finally left the old realm of Tye for the new love of Nefertiti.

Act 2.3: The City and the Dance

This scene concerns the foundation of Amarna, Akhnaten's new capital city, where Akhnaten transferred his residence in the fifth year of his reign. The city was originally named Akhetaten, or Horizon of the Sun. It is situated in Middle Egypt in a huge semicircular plain on the east bank of the Nile and surrounded by low mountains. The circumference of the city was marked out with boundary stelae, all inscribed with a lengthy foundation text. Egyptologists refer to two sets of stelae, an older and a younger set, but the two pieces of text recited by the scribe during the first unaccompanied part of the scene are both excerpts from the older text.²⁶ Earlier, certain passages of both boundary texts were interpreted as statements of the King's intention never to leave Amarna; he had put the world behind him and wished to spend the rest of his life in Horizon of the Sun. But the words say nothing of the kind. They are simply Akhnaten's vows never to let the city expand beyond the boundary—and thus into areas belonging to others. In the opera, the libretto for this part was taken from Breasted's *A History of Egypt*, and the scribe thus repeats the former interpretation of Akhnaten's intentions.

The inauguration of the city is celebrated by a wild dance, which, according to Glass, is to contrast with “the heavy traditional ritual of the temple scene” (Act 2.1).²⁷ The music is wonderfully supple and energetic, and the orchestra uses triangle, tambourine, and wood block. The key alternates between A minor, F major, and B-flat major/minor tonality, the same combination as in the prelude. Ultra-fast arpeggios and a motif in the high woodwinds are reminiscent of the motives that began the opera. In the bass (Ex. 6), the sequence is strikingly reminiscent of the music (Ex. 7) for the violent destruction of the temple in the first scene of the act and it will return again in the other violent scene in the opera, the second scene of Act 3. For Glass, ecstatic jubilation and furious violence are the two sides of religious fervor.



Example 6.

Oboe

Bassoon

5

The musical score is presented in six systems, each with two staves. The top staff is for the Oboe and the bottom staff is for the Bassoon. The first system shows the Oboe part with a melodic line and the Bassoon part with a rhythmic accompaniment. The second system is marked with a '5' and shows the Oboe part with a melodic line and the Bassoon part with a rhythmic accompaniment. The third system shows the Oboe part with a melodic line and the Bassoon part with a rhythmic accompaniment. The fourth system shows the Oboe part with a melodic line and the Bassoon part with a rhythmic accompaniment. The fifth system shows the Oboe part with a melodic line and the Bassoon part with a rhythmic accompaniment. The sixth system shows the Oboe part with a melodic line and the Bassoon part with a rhythmic accompaniment.

Example 7.

Thou dost ap - pear beau - ti - ful

On the ho - ri - zon of heav - en

Oh, liv - ing A - ten He who was the first to

live

A

B

C trumpet

Example 7. continued

Act 2.4: The Hymn

The last scene of the act is the most important one in the opera from an ideological, dramatic, and musical point of view. Here, Akhnaten is shown to us as our ancestor and contemporary in that his religious program, exemplified in his hymn, is seen as the true predecessor to our own Christianity. With Judaism as intermediary, the connection between the ancient Egyptian doctrine of Akhnaten and our faith is, of course, far from immediate. Glass and his co-librettists have adopted the older belief, according to which the author of the 104th *Psalms of David* allegedly was inspired by the *Sun Hymn* of Akhnaten,

and the scene, therefore, concludes with the choir singing this psalm in Hebrew.²⁸

The *Sun Hymn*, performed by Akhnaten, is justly famous. Even in translation it retains a poetic vigor that has appealed to many composers (for instance, as a setting by the Danish composer Vagn Holmboe).²⁹ The text, found in the tomb of Aye, was allegedly written by Akhnaten himself.³⁰ It praises the sun and light as creator of all life and emphasizes strongly the role of the king as intermediary between god and men. Scholars specializing in religion do not agree on how to interpret the doctrine of Akhnaten in relation to what preceded it, but what matters to Glass is that Akhnaten “changed his (and our) world through the force of his ideas and not through the force of arms.”³¹

Although rendered in a textually corrupt version, the hymn (Ex. 7) is, nonetheless, given a musical shape of great beauty and meaning, and Glass instructs that it should be sung in the language of the country where the opera is performed. The tonal center is A major, thus counterbalancing the funeral of Amenophis III, as mentioned previously, symbolizing life versus death.

The music begins by a repeat of the coronation music (Ex. 2), and once more we encounter the Trilogy theme, which heralded the coming revolution. A few new phrases have been added (from Ex. 7), which, like the preceding music, serve as instrumental intervals between the two parts of the hymn and the *Psalm of David*. The hymn begins in F-sharp minor and, as usual, the melody is harmonized in a series of arpeggios. But this time their mutual relation differs. Glass is never much in favor of triads, and even in the hymn, where there are more thirds than anywhere else in the opera, we still find chords where the third has been omitted, sometimes obscuring cadential formulas. Indeed, one is left to consider why Glass uses the cadential formula at all. However, since the harmonizations of the transitions are abrupt and brutal in a pre-Baroque way, while the cadential formulae in the hymn are more conventional, suitable to its own conventionality of being sung in an understandable language, we might guess that this more “advanced” harmonization of the setting serves to underscore the revolutionary nature of the hymn text.³²

Act 3.1: The Family

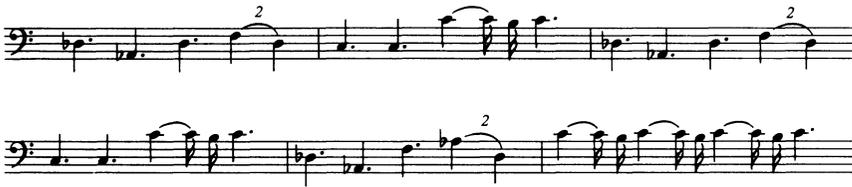
As previously mentioned, representations of the royal family provide an important new motif in Amarna art. Glass’s interpretation of the

material made him view Akhnaten and Nefertiti as the first loving couple in history, and consequently, he is justified in depicting the royal couple and their daughters as the archetypal family in this scene—a family unit sufficient in itself.

This interpretation is revealed musically in a simple and dramatic way. The scene opens with the music from the love scene between Akhnaten and Nefertiti played by the woodwinds and synthesizer, and this music remains the foundation of the monotonous and homophonic song of the family, which, briefly, consists of alternating E-minor and A-minor chords. The song is occasionally interrupted by an ominous E-flat-major chord in the brass, but the family persists in its self-indulgence, musically expressed through a stream of E-minor scales, rolling up and down, first in the strings, but then in contrary motion in the woodwinds so that it grows to an increasingly complex cycle of scales. After the second cue, where the ominous E-flat major of the brass alternates with the quiet familial E minor, there is a sudden shift to F minor, the relative minor of the A-flat major of the temple scene. The scribe begins to read select passages of the Amarna letters.

These letters once formed part of what would in modern times be called the archives of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Found toward the end of the nineteenth century, the texts were written on clay tablets in cuneiform writing. The letters are addressed to Amenophis III, Akhnaten, and Tutankhamun, the senders being the kings of Babylon, Assyria, Mitanni, and Hatti—the Hittites—and some of the minor Syrian kings whose city-states were under Egyptian suzerainty. The conventional interpretation of the letters from these minor kings is that they reflect Akhnaten's preoccupation with his religious reforms to the extent that he had lost interest in the fate of his vassals; they were left to quarrel among themselves without interference, and hence the Egyptian empire fell apart. Although recent research has begun to question such an interpretation, Glass follows it.³³

The free excerpts of these lamentations used in the libretto (Ex. 8) are recited at a fervent pace. The enemies of the letter writers charge ahead amidst the roaring signals of their trumpets of victory: intervals of the fourth and sixth are here transformed into a gloomy theme in A-flat major, which has a deep sound below the aggressive and syncopated F-minor music. However, the impact fails. Through E-flat major, the E-minor music returns, the family music of Akhnaten and his two daughters (Ex. 9). Although reminiscent of the phrase "Oh, living Aten, he who was the first" from Akhnaten's *Hymn to the Sun* and, at the same time, being a transformation of a trumpet signal,



Example 8.



Example 9.

which in the temple scene (Act 2.1) heralded Akhnaten's revolution, everything has come to a standstill, and nothing can upset the circular world of the family.

Act 3.2: Attack and Defeat

It is not only in Syria and Palestine that the situation is critical. In Egypt, as well, a threat is looming from the opposition, that is the old gang led by Horemheb, Aye, and the high priest of Amon. In this scene, they manage to complete a revolution in the palace. As a pretext, they use the loss of the city-states of the Levant, and in order to instigate an attack on the royal palace by the people, they sing an excerpt of an Amarna letter, which concludes with the words "All is lost." The end of the scene witnesses the crowds storming the palace.

The music is a direct tonal continuation of the previous scene. When Akhnaten and his two daughters have ended their song, the ominous E-flat-major chord is heard again, and once more the music suddenly shifts to F minor, which is now clearly the key of violence. All musical elements in this scene refer to earlier parts of the opera.³⁴ The "all is lost" letter is sung as a scornful and distorted allusion to the *Coronation Anthem* (Ex. 10). The tempo may be a little faster, the music has an obtrusive and exciting pulse rate, and the orchestration becomes even more savage with the addition of syncopated bass drum and cymbals. Nevertheless, the basic metrical resemblance remains unmistakable, and the same persons remain in action. From a melodic

ye - nedj hra - ak ye - mi em he - te - pu ye - nedj hra - ak ye - mi em he - te - pu

5
ye - nedj hra - ak ye - nedj hra - ak ye - mi em he - te - pu ye - nedj hra - ak

10
ye - mi em he - te - pu ye - nedj hra - ak ye - mi em he - te - pu

Example 10.

Example 11.

point of view, the situation is slightly different, for Glass combines the coronation anthem-like motif with the “ecstasy” motif, which this time appears in D-flat major (Ex. 11). With the opening motif of the opera (Ex. 1) now set against the distorted coronation anthem motif, Akhnaten and all that he represents is about to fall.

Act 3.3: The Ruins

Akhnaten's regime has come to an end, as has his attempt at substituting Aten for Amon and having a sincere, creative dialogue with god replace the old relationship, where communication consisted in an exchange of material goods. History is back where it began. The music expresses this state of affairs through an abbreviated version of the music of the prelude, while the scribe recites excerpts from two texts, which together proclaim the “new” Old Order. The first text invokes Amon,³⁵ followed by an excerpt from the so-called restoration stela of Tutankhamun. The passage chosen by the authors concerns all the material riches offered to Amon and the doubling, tripling, even quadrupling of all temple income.

The Amarna period has come to an end. The sand has settled over the disintegrated city. Life goes on in the Nile Valley much as it

did before Akhnaten, but the ancient Egyptian civilization is dead. Only the ruins remain, but they have been the subject of abundant attention on the part of scholars and travellers. Toward the end of the prelude music, the ruins of Akhetaten, now Tell el-Amarna, appear on stage. Tourists walk about taking pictures while their guide, the former scribe, reads from a *Guide of Egypt* describing how to get to Amarna and how ruined the monuments are.

Act 3.4: Epilogue

With this the opera could have come to an end, for ancient Egypt is no more. But Glass did not wish to reject the legacy of Egypt, and it is not surprising that the opera concludes with an epilogue that both emphasizes death as the foundation of all existence and refers to the integration into our “world” of Akhnaten’s ideas, which was the starting point of the entire opera. The tourists leave Amarna at dusk, and as the city lies deserted at night, Akhnaten and the other characters of the opera appear as ghosts, moving about in their erstwhile capital. The funeral procession of Amenophis III is shown on the horizon, approaching heaven. Akhnaten and all the people “of his time,” as the Egyptians would have said, take up their positions in a funeral procession in the footsteps of the above mentioned.

The music in this scene is the only part of the opera that Glass himself has described: “I designed the Epilogue to form a kind of restatement of all the important materials, this time forming a new, compressed series of musical events. The series repeats four times with a final resolution at the end.”³⁶ The sequence consists of three motifs and an end. The first motif is the Trilogy theme; then follows Example 1, taken over by a gentle version of the “ecstasy” motif, which in Glass’s words has “a lyrical, almost distant quality, as if death and the passage of centuries . . . have softened the violence of those moments, making them almost beautiful.”³⁷ The end (Ex. 12) is similar to the concluding phrases in the *Sun Hymn*. At the conclusion of the opera, Glass says, “The Trilogy theme becomes the key that turns the lock, setting the ending firmly in A minor, the ‘relative minor’ of C Major, the key in which *Einstein* began.”³⁸

Let us now return to the question of the artistic path to understanding. Our starting point was a novel, a piece of fiction, and a claim concerning the possibilities of fiction to depict reality. The Hungarian philosopher and literary theoretician Georg Lukács maintained that the most adequate representation of reality is fictional,



Example 12.

that is, that reality is construed. According to Lukács, naturalistic authors, who allegedly seek to depict reality, do not achieve true insight because they mistake the typical for the average, a statistic median, by means of which they veil a true reality of contrasts.³⁹ Instead of persons who embody nothing but ideas, clichés, or slogans, Lukács prefers the kind of description of reality, realism, that introduces “the typical by concentrating the essential determinants of a great social trend, embodying them in the passionate strivings of individuals, and placing these personages into extreme situations, situations devised in such a way as to demonstrate the social trend in its extreme consequences and implications.”⁴⁰ The core of realism thus becomes a dialectic relationship between individual and society, in which the individual, conscious of his own roots in a given society, seeks to alter the present situation of that very society.

Drama, conversely, must condense its rendering of life. It focuses on a conflict and arranges all matters of life to the effect that they are only experienced with this goal in mind. This concentration leads to a necessary simplification.

The portrayal is reduced to the typical representation of the most important and most characteristic attitudes of men, to what is indispensable to the dynamic working-out of the collision, to those social, human and moral movements in men, therefore, out of which the collision arises and into which the collision dissolves. Any figure, any psychological feature of a figure, which goes beyond the dialectical necessity of this connection, of the dynamics of the collision, must be superfluous from the point of view of the drama.⁴¹

The important thing in these plays is that the inner social substance of the conflict makes of it a decisive event, historically and socially, and that the heroes of such plays have within themselves that combination of individual passion and social substance that characterizes the “world-historical individuals.”⁴²

Glass has chosen to write such an opera with a historical subject and with a number of world-historical individuals as characters, but he does not consciously aim for insight—“truth”—in the form of a

dramatic, intellectual construct. Glass's opera has, instead, become a form of "singing archaeology," and, hence, he finds an easy way out. It is, of course, not a question of going straight to the raw material, since the opera has largely been gathered from nonprimary sources. It is, perhaps, a question of construction. On one hand, Glass speaks of "our Egypt," and he makes use of texts out of context. On the other hand, he uses original texts and has them sung in their original language. There is no meaningful reconstruction of a reality, nor has any attempt been made to place the opera in a context that goes beyond "the philosophy of a great spirit," which we referred to earlier. I do not think that Glass and his collaborators had a clear picture in their minds of what they were aiming for when they tackled this subject.

But Glass has obviously learnt from Bertolt Brecht, who opposed "dramatic opera" with "epic opera":⁴³

DRAMATIC OPERA

the music dishes up
music which heightens the text
music which proclaims text

music which illustrates
music which paints the psychological
situation

EPIC OPERA

the music communicates
music which sets forth the text
music which takes the text for
granted
music which takes up a position
music which gives the attitude⁴⁴

Glass seems to want opera to fit into Brecht's idea of epic drama. Brecht's aesthetics are firmly linked to his didactic aim: "once the content becomes, technically speaking, an independent component, to which text, music and setting 'adopt attitudes'; once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins, for the first time, to affect the theatre's social function."⁴⁵ The theater must provoke a debate, and, according to Brecht, so must opera if it is to survive.⁴⁶

In many respects the dramatic structure of *Akhmaten* fits into Brecht's idea of epic opera. The music, however, does not appear to do the same. Take, for example, the music of the *Sun Hymn*: Does the music heighten and proclaim the text? Or does it set forth the text and take it for granted? Glass does not seem to be interested in creating truly dramatic situations, let alone meeting Lukács's demands.⁴⁷ The opera has many fine details, as I have sought to demonstrate, and it attempts a greater historical statement. But does it succeed in going beyond entertainment? I think it does not, in part

because Glass has relied too much on a fragmentary, archaeological, and allegedly existing reality. In this way, it becomes almost irrelevant to the dramatic form whether the emphasis is on the dramatic or the epic form of theater. Like so many others, Glass has succumbed to the terribly conventional (twentieth-century?) opinion that only “true reality” is real.

But this is not so, neither in science nor in art. One of the clearest expressions of this apparent paradox can be found in a famous passage in a letter of 1876 from Verdi to Countess Maffei; it reads,

I saw *Color del Tempo* in Genoa. There are great things in it, above all a quick-wittedness which is a particular gift of the French. But, *au fond*, there is little there. To copy truth may be a good thing, but to invent truth is better, much better. There may seem to be a contradiction in these words “to invent truth,” but you ask Papa [i.e., Shakespeare]. It may be that Papa found Falstaff just as he was, but it would have been difficult for him to find a villain as villainous as Iago, and never, never such angels as Cordelia, Imogene, Desdemona, etc. etc. and yet they are so true! To copy the truth is a fine thing, but it is photography, not painting!⁴⁸

Akhnatén does not, I think, offer us much insight into the “reality” of ancient Egypt, as does a work like *Simuhe, the Egyptian*. I shall probably have to admit such reservations because I am an Egyptologist and because the opera creates associations and ideas for me. Nonspecialists may not feel the same way. The “sound” of the music, its repetitive nature, the fascination with ancient Egypt, etc., do have their attractions, the same attractions that make opera lovers appreciate romantic Italian operas, in spite of their notorious story lines. But maybe, just as *Simuhe* has helped popularize ancient Egypt far more than any scholar could, that is not such a bad thing.

Notes

1. This article is a more comprehensive version of a paper read during a theme day on this very novel, arranged by The Danish Egyptological Society, on 10 Feb. 1990. Until I ventured into this project I had hardly any knowledge of minimalist music—and hence of Glass. Since then I have derived great pleasure from reading Jacob Levinson's dissertation “Et nyt syn på harmoni—Philip Glass og den amerikanske minimalmusik” [Harmony in a New Light—Philip Glass and American Minimalist Music], Copenhagen, 1989. I am greatly indebted to my colleague, Jens Brincker, in the Department of Music, who drew my attention to Levinson's work, read my article, and, above all, “proofread” my recording of Glass, which saved me from a number of errors. I owe a debt of gratitude to my colleague Niels Martin Jensen, Department of Music, for having undertaken the time-consuming task of computerizing my musical examples. I also wish to thank Britta Munch for the excellent drawing. I am grateful to Lise Manniche for translating my Danish text and to the Faculty of Humanities,

the University of Copenhagen, for sponsoring that translation. I thank William K. Simpson for advice on practical problems of publication. Finally, I am indebted to my father, John Frandsen, for having “lent me his absolute pitch” when I was in doubt.

2. Michael J. Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1933), 98.

3. S. Langholm “Vi søger at rekonstruere en virkelighed som kan forklare kilderne,” in *Historisk rekonstruksjon og begrunnelse* (Oslo: Dreyer, 1967), 17.

4. See, for example, also Claus Bjorn’s remarks concerning the impact of the historical novels of B. S. Ingemann in “Kontinuitet og forandring i dansk historie” [“Continuity and Change in Danish History”], in *Over hegnet*, ed. M. Trolle Larsen (Copenhagen: 1990), 9.

5. I would also like to refer the reader to a fairly recent novel by the Egyptian Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz, ‘Al- a’is fi l-haqiqa [*Who Lives in Truth*]. I am indebted to Mohammed Ablu for this reference.

6. Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, ed. and with supplementary material by Robert T. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 138.

7. During a visit to the Cairo Museum, Glass experienced the Amarna room as a metaphor of the future opera, both because of its location in the museum building itself and because of its collection of fragmentary objects.

It seemed to me, at that moment, that we needed no more story than was already there, that the missing pieces, far from needing to be filled in or explained, actually added to the mystery and beauty of the subject. A theatrical approach, to be sure, but theater was what we were making. Back in New York, I explained my idea to Shalom [Goldman, an Orientalist and librettist]: an opera about Akhnaten based upon fragments with the missing bits intact as it were. His face lit up, and at the end he exclaimed, “Ah! Singing archaeology!” (Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 150).

8. Glass, 171.

9. Glass, 36.

10. Glass, 173.

11. Glass, 153.

12. Glass, 137.

13. Glass, 172–73.

14. Text booklet, CBS Masterworks M2K 42457, 11. In greater detail in Glass, 138–39.

15. Glass, 174–75.

16. Glass, 156.

17. Glass, 149. The quotation continues, “Medical analysis is not conclusive. Akhnaten’s appearance could have been genetic in origin, or it may be the result of disease. In any case, he was biologically male and capable of fathering children.”

18. Glass, 156.
19. Act 2.2. See below.
20. Glass, 151.
21. The text booklet of the record indicates that the text is taken from the article mentioned in footnote 24. This is not the case.
22. Glass, 173.
23. See, for example, the numerous depictions in Cyril Aldred, *Akhnaten and Nefertiti* (New York: Brooklyn Museum in association with the Viking Press, 1973). For no. 114 (Berlin/DDR 17813) see now especially Harris in *Acta Orientalia*, 35 (1973), 5–13.
24. See A. H. Gardiner, "The So-called Tomb of Queen Tiye," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 43 (1957): 10–24, 17; G. Perepelkin, "The Secret of the Gold Coffin," *Nauka* (Moskva, 1978), 26–35.
25. See the discussion of Act 1, Scene 3, and also Glass's somewhat cryptic remark concerning "a veiled reference to the ambiguous sexual relationship of the three principals does remain in this aspect of the vocal writing" (170), where the reference is to the intermingling of voices in the ensembles.
26. Wolfgang Helck, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie* (Berlin, 1958), 1968, 2–10, 14–17; 1972, 4; 1973, 6.
27. Glass, 185.
28. E. A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Egypt, vol. IV, Egypt and Her Asiatic Empire* (London: Books on Egypt and Chaldaeae, 1902), 12: 125–26. Budge is the first scholar to suggest this hypothesis. The most elaborate discussion is in James Henry Breasted, *A History of Egypt*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909) 371–77, where the following remarks occur:

In the hymn the universalism of the empire finds full expression and the royal singer sweeps his eye from the far-off cataracts of the Nubian Nile to the remotest lands of Syria. These are not thoughts which we have been accustomed to attribute to the men of some fourteen hundred years before Christ. A new spirit has breathed upon the dry bones of traditionalism in Egypt, and he who reads these lines for the first time must be moved with involuntary admiration for the young king who in such an age found such thoughts in his heart. He grasped the idea of a world-dominator, as the creator of nature, in which the king saw revealed the creator's beneficent purpose for all his creatures, even the meanest; for the birds fluttering about in the lily-grown Nile marshes to him seemed to be uplifting their wings in adoration of their creator; and even the fish in the stream leaped up in praise to God. It is his voice that summons the blossoms and nourishes the chicklet or commands the mighty deluge of the Nile. He called Aton, "the father and mother of all that he had made," and he saw in some degree the goodness of that All-universal sway of God upon his fatherly care of all men alike, irrespective of race or nationality, and to the proud and exclusive Egyptian he pointed to the all-embracing bounty of the common father of humanity, even placing Syria and Nubia before Egypt in his enumeration. It is this aspect of Ikh-naton's mind which is especially remarkable; he is the first prophet of history.

29. "Solhymne" (Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen Musikforlag, 1961). The text also exists in an English version, and the work had its first performance by Dansk Korforening on June 3, 1961. Holmboe's text has also been abbreviated.
30. Norman de Garis Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna, Part IV* (London, 1908), 29–31 and plates XXVII & XLI.
31. Glass, 138.
32. Cf. Glass, 60.
33. See M. Liverani, "Contrasti e confluente di concezioni politiche nell'eta di el-Amarna," *Revue d'Assyriologie* (1967), 41:1–18.
34. When, for example, the choir sets in in A minor, the pattern is identical to Ex. 10.
35. The text is allegedly taken from the tomb of Aye, but surely this must be a misunderstanding.
36. Glass, 172.
37. Glass, 173–74.
38. Glass, 175.
39. See, for example, his remarks on Emile Zola in *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 91.
40. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 168.
41. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 108.
42. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 120. It is the absence of these elements that, according to Lukács, makes the majority of bourgeois and also "proletarian plays so banal, tedious and insignificant." Furthermore, modern drama focuses on "the most prosaic moments of modern daily life. In this way the grey banality of life becomes the subject of representation, underlining those very sides of the material which are the least favourable for drama. Plays are written which dramatically are on a lower level than the life which they portray."
43. Bertolt Brecht is mentioned several times in Glass's book, and Glass's first experience in musical theater consisted in rehearsing Paul Dessau's music for a performance of *Mother Courage*. See Glass, 5.
44. Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is Epic Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964), 38.
45. Brecht, 39.
46. Brecht's notes to the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* "form part of a series of notes and essays labeled 'On a non-aristotelian drama,' which is scattered through Brecht's *Versuche* starting in 1930." These papers were originally announced under the title "On a Dialectical Drama" (Note by J. Willett, *op. cit.*, 46).
47. Although Lukács (1885–1971) and Brecht (1898–1956) are contemporaries, they do not seem to make reference to each other; I should have thought that Brecht's works would pass muster with Lukács.

48. The letter is quoted in virtually all editions of Verdi's letters, here from Charles Osborne, *Letters of Giuseppe Verdi*, trans. and ed. from the COPIALETTERE, (London: Gollancz, 1971), 200–201. See also the opening lines of *King Henry the Fifth*, a play with a “world-historical” subject, where Shakespeare himself has the Chorus make the same point:

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
 The brightest heaven of invention, —
 A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
 And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
 Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
 Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,
 Leash'd-in like hounds, should famine, sword, and fire,
 Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,
 The flat unraised spirits that have dared
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
 So great an object: can this cockpit hold
 The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
 Within this wooden O the very casques
 That did affright the air at Agincourt?
 O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
 Attest in little place a million;
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
 On your imaginary forces work.
 Suppose within the girdle of these walls
 Are now confin'd two mighty monarchies. . . .

(Prologue, 1–20)