REVIEW ESSAY

EGYPT IN BOSTON

Notes on a recent production of Philip Glass's *Akhnaten* by the Boston Lyric Opera and its programming alongside Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* and Verdi's *Aida*

Act I: A Musicologist's Question

1. It is Monday, the 31st of January, 2000, a day off for the Boston Lyric Opera between performances of Philip Glass's *Akhnaten*, and the composer is coming to the end of a questions-and-answers session at the tail end of a public talk on the opera. Yours truly, "a musicologist who has written a book on the opera" (Mancini Del Sesto) determines to open his heretofore judiciously sealed gob and fire one final question at the composer. This question was to be regurgitated two days later in BLO director Janice Mancini Del Sesto's introduction to Glass's second public appearance in Boston and was to be inoffensively (but not insignificantly) misquoted in the following day's issue of the *Boston Globe*.

2. "Mr. Glass," the musicologist asks, "how do you feel about *Akhnaten* being a part of this new "trilogy" now, along with *Aida* and The *Magic Flute*? It seems to me that the opera was designed..." (Glass presumably sees what is coming and heads the musicologist off at the pass, making his own amplified entry at this point).

3. "Fabulous!" the composer retorts. "It's very flattering! Mozart, Verdi and Glass! I mean, hey, what's not to like? (The audience erupts into laughter.) I should probably thank you for asking that question. I don't think anyone else would have thought of it! I always thought that I was the guy who wrote the *other* Egyptian opera! There are some other ones. There're some Meyerbeer operas; some of these 19th century guys that wrote a lot of operas. Some of them wandered over to Egypt, but the ones we really know are these" (Glass, Public talk).

4. The audience is both charmed and amused by the egotistical swagger of Glass's response. Who, in his position, would not relish the opportunity to be cast alongside two of the undisputed pillars of the canon, to have his or her name carved in stone at the pinnacle of the BLO's meticulously constructed operatic pyramid? Moreover, with the dawn of the new millennium, and some seventeen years having elapsed since the debut performance of *Akhnaten*, its inclusion in the "Egypt in Boston" season easily takes on a retrospective appearance. It is as if the annals of music history were now finally taking shape, the rightful heir to the operatic throne receiving his patiently awaited crown. A situation not dissimilar to that of Akhnaten himself in the Coronation scene, where he is seen prostrated before the two patriarchs, guardians of what Glass tellingly refers to as the ancient Egyptian "old order," Aye and Horemhab; his head bowed to receive the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt.

5. There is, however, an element of relief to the audience's laughter. The question in all likelihood had some members of the audience shuffling in their seats. The transition from Glass's former self, as toast of New York's downtown avant-garde, to his present day self, as one of the luminaries of contemporary opera, has not been easy. His controversial derogatory comments concerning the repertory in the late 1970s and early 1980s are now a matter of record. These days Glass seems more adept at treading the middle path, more comfortable with ambiguities. Thus, the composer's great escape from the musicologist's vain attempt to flag a possible discrepancy between his earlier (pre-1983) and his present day aesthetic positions could perhaps have been anticipated. And it was certainly not unappreciated by an audience comprising both those for whom the term contemporary opera implies almost anything after Wagner, and a considerably smaller contingent of those familiar with the tenets of Glass's more experimental work in music and the theatre. Neither of these groups would have wanted to feel like gatecrashers at the composer's party. And neither did.

6. But the discrepancy I had wanted to highlight—the half-completed question quoted at the beginning of this text in which I tried to draw attention to what I perceived as a significant rapprochement with the canon in this work—is difficult to ignore. In his book, Glass constructs an aesthetic vision of a new "music theatre" in which "subject or content ...could remain neither passive nor accidental" (Glass, *Music* 138); whereas *Akhnaten*, in one of the composer's public appearances in Boston, is described as the latest transformation in a genre that for the composer "has always been about the voice" (Glass, Public talk).

Composers are commonly assumed to be ill-informed regarding the discursive concerns of recent cultural theory, an impression that has been reinforced by the modernist disdain towards all things "extramusical." But Glass's comment pertaining to the voice seems to imply an awareness of the ongoing debate between those who, following theorists like Barthes or Kristeva, celebrate the sensual materiality of the human voice, and those for whom subject matter and content, although not determining every aspect of reception, certainly play a key role in channeling the listener's understanding of the music. Glass would seem to have shifted from the latter to the former of these positions. And if, as he puts it, opera has "always been about the voice," then negotiating the divide between *Akhnaten* and *Aida* clearly becomes considerably easier. Given such an aesthetic shift, the BLO's historical-contemporary trilogy becomes a more attractive prospect, and the element of distancing from the repertory that is both implicit and explicit in Glass's earlier position, also becomes less in evidence.

7. So how significant is the shift between Glass's earlier position and that put forward in *Akhnaten*? The most obvious marker is the very subject upon which the opera is based, irrespective of the "story-line" and the complexities of how the material is treated. The simple fact is that Glass's previous two music theatre pieces were about contemporary figures. This grounding in the present day is a feature that has its roots in post-Cagean, postmodern aesthetics and can be recognized also in the works of contemporaries like Meredith Monk, John Adams, Laurie Anderson, and Gavin Bryars. But in returning to the past, Glass could not have been naïve as to the implications of this deed. The BLO, in including the opera alongside the two historical pieces, certainly were not naïve. It is clear that on a very general level Glass's *Akhnaten* invokes both *Aida*, one of the grandest of grand operas, and The *Magic Flute*, arguably the most popular work in the repertory. Aesthetic kinships notwithstanding, the exotic subject matter of all three works signifies among other things, and perhaps most directly, the category "opera." All three works fit into this category, but with respect to *Akhnaten* just how comfortable is the fit? And what are the repercussions of this closer relationship between the contemporary and the historical? The remaining sections may provide some tentative answers to these questions.

Act II: Review Based on Two Performances of *Akhnaten* (1/30/2000; 2/1/2000)

8. The BLO's production began ingeniously with the opera's Prelude, which, in particular, focused on the construction of the character of the scribe. The scribe is cast as an archivist carefully recording the historical events of the Armana period. He is seen pacing the stage, occasionally stopping to scribble notes on a handheld tablet. These notes are projected onto the dune-rippled, sand-colored set—a sort of birds-eye view of the desert that at one stage in the production featured an aerial view of the Gaza pyramids. The texts are not translated into English but are renditions of the original stone tablets found at the ruins of Akhetaten, Akhnaten's holy city. The music and libretto clearly support this interpretation. Just as the archivist carefully sifts through the documents with which he or she works, arranging them meticulously so as to allow them to tell their own "story," so Glass's music is pieced together fragment by fragment before the listener's ears. A binary rhythm is transformed into a tertiary with the addition of a single note; strings are introduced in the first cycle of the Prelude, then woodwinds, and then brass. In addition to his ancient Egyptian role, the scribe can be seen as a theatrical representation of Glass and his collaborators, and of the creative process of (re-)constructing the opera from found material. Glass's and his collaborators' Foucauldian fascination with the document thus finds its mirror image in the activities of the ancient Egyptian scribe—the only character in the opera that can be said to have a "personality," albeit a mercurial one.

9. Near the end of the Prelude the scribe tilts his tablet, which turns out to be a mirror, towards the audience in order to direct light around the auditorium. Akhnaten's doctrine of light thus mediated—or *reflected*—finds its way into the contemporary world. This becomes an apt metaphor not only for the subject matter of the opera—Akhnaten's doctrine—but for the aesthetic upon which the opera is based. The material is presented in the form of found texts. But still a scribe is needed to relate the story (or stories) and both the dimensions of the mirror and the material reflected by it are guided by interpretive choices. The same is true of Glass and his relation to his material. The story is incomplete but a story is nonetheless told. The presence of a mirror here brings to mind Lacan's "mirror phase," where the infant first perceives him- or herself as distinct from the surrounding world and, ultimately, the mother, thus entering the domain of the symbolic—just

as Glass makes his first self-conscious steps into explicitly narrative structures in the piece.

10. The funeral scene contains the most overt references to ancient Egyptian iconography, the ancient Egypt we know best—that of the pantheistic "old order." From King of the Underworld Osiris to magical Zeret birds traversing the stage in time to darting, delving woodwind flourishes, this is some of the most powerful music and visual imagery in the opera. Akhnaten's headless father appears on stage, guided by the pantheon of gods and Glass's raucous, rancid torrent of sound. Those versed in Freudian theory will have no trouble identifying the psychological subtext to this appearance. This is Akhnaten's vision of his father—Akhnaten the iconoclast, the father-killer. The original conception of the opera drew extensively on Velikovsky's controversial theory attributing the origins of the Oedipus legend to events in the life of Akhnaten. And it is precisely in the recurring image of the dead king in each act of the opera, that Oedipus in Akhnaten comes to life. Glass insisted on the inclusion of this imagery in this production, since his instructions, clearly written in the libretto, were disregarded in the first two productions to the detriment of the overall narrative coherence of the piece.

11. The subsequent scenes gave the term "red carpet treatment" a whole new meaning. Small red mats were lugged relentlessly around the stage by Akhnaten's servants, flung in front of him as he arrived at any given point, whisked out from under him as he departed. This procedure formed a cycle, which for a while beautifully complemented the cyclical chaconne patterning that is the main foundation for this character's music. Unfortunately, however, all of this became a little tiresome as the opera progressed, leaving most of the audience as relieved as the young king seemed to be when the mats were eventually discarded after the introduction to the hymn. Clearly some sense of momentum, some rhythmic impetus is needed visually to complement Glass's whirling, pulsating musical textures—in order to anchor them to the surrounding multimedia environment and to set up a counterpoint between these constantly shifting surface textures and the relatively static (or at least slow moving) harmonic/linear "deep" structures of the music. Unfortunately, this business with the carpets was the closest this production came to providing a dramatic parallel to the bustling, ebullient textures of Glass's music.

12. Directors such as Robert Wilson and Achim Freyer have intuitively understood the importance of "keeping things moving" when working

with music of this ilk. Mary Zimmerman did not always manage to keep these two elements in balance, all too frequently allowing the bold to become bald and the strikingly or tellingly stark to appear just plain starkers. This was most apparent in Akhnaten's Hymn to the Sun à la Zimmerman. Critic Richard Dyer perceptively pointed out this weakness in his Boston Globe review of this production. As this writer put it, Zimmerman is "better at deconstructing images than creating them" (Dyer 8). What Dyer refers to as "[s]himmering Glass" (Dyer 1) did not, therefore, translate into visuals. Zimmerman's hymn did not shimmer. The pulsional discourse of Kristeva's semiotic, present in abundance in the music, was nowhere to be seen as the quietly regal but mostly static figure of Geoffrey Scott delivered the opera's pivotal text from center-stage. The director was evidently relying on the compelling, budding talent of the young counter-tenor to hold the audience's attention for the full eight minutes or so of the hymn. However, with little going on dramatically and the backstage choir banished to the wings in this scene, as stipulated in the libretto, this may have been asking too much of any singer. The intention on Zimmerman's part could have been a kind of Brechtian alienation effect. In this scene Akhnaten communicates with the audience in English, the only time he does so in the opera. Perhaps by stripping things down dramatically, the intention was to provide an opportunity for direct communication, in effect bringing down the fourth wall (presumably this is what Dyer means when he writes of "deconstruction"). This was certainly the case in the Epilogue, which I shall return to in a moment—but if the same was true of the hymn then it was hardly sufficiently indicated dramatically. The high point of the opera—Akhnaten's dazzling moment of apotheosis—thus fell a little flat.

13. Arguably the two strongest scenes in the opera, certainly in terms of the operatic voice, are the trio called the "Window of Appearances" (featuring Akhnaten, counter-tenor, Nefertiti, contralto, and Tye, soprano) and the duet (featuring Akhnaten and Nefertiti). Here Glass's quasi-renaissance counterpoint is some of the strongest writing in the opera. These scenes also offer some of the sexiest and most challenging material from the standpoint of the director. In the scene the "Window of Appearances," Zimmerman opted for self-reflexive "deconstruction" (of theatrical illusion), and here it was called for. In this scene Zimmerman addresses one of her key "interpretive" concerns: to draw attention to the discrepancy between the real Akhnaten (the living flesh and blood man) and the Akhnaten we construct from the artifacts passed down to us from the Armana period of Egyptian history. She also addresses the discrepancy between public and private selves and, in the following texts, draws a parallel between the story of Akhnaten and the

fragmentary narratives constituted by the artifacts relating to our own lives. Zimmerman writes:

> For me, Akhnaten the historical person, and Akhnaten the opera have become emblematic also of the discrepancy between the experience of a life and the recorded memory of a life. What part of us will remain, and what will go, when we go, into black granite? We leave behind that which is public and recorded: in Akhnaten's life a coronation, a plan for an eternal city and a funeral; in ours, an address, a few dates of births and weddings, and perhaps a death. But these public or historic records provide only the faintest outline of a guide to our lives, and are often far distant from our private experiences, about which they communicate nothing. (Zimmerman 23)

14. The Window of Appearances, then, becomes a family photograph. A life-size picture frame descends from the flies behind which the three protagonists stand. Different levels of reality and illusion become superimposed onto one another as the singing begins: public/private, historical/contemporary, theatrical illusion/everyday life. And in the midst of this confusion the voices of the three protagonists confuse issues further. The intertwining voices of Akhnaten and Nefertiti, counter-tenor and contralto, both occupying the same vocal range, and Tye and Nefertiti, the former of which is cast with the voice that should rightly belong to the latter (romantic leading ladies are usually sopranos). Towards the end of the scene, the protagonists turn their backs to the audience and gaze with them into the now empty picture frame. Here once again echoes of Brecht are perceptible.

15. Brechtian distancing arguably becomes a more pressing concern as the opera approaches its conclusion, or in-conclusion. And perhaps this is when it is needed most; when the primary directives of narrative form guide the viewer/listener most powerfully towards a resolution that can easily take on the appearance of necessity. In the scene depicting the ransacking of Akhnaten's temple to the sun god, a Wilsonesque touch is added by having an upside-down Perspex pyramid drop down from flies. When Akhnaten's torch-lit adversaries (visually, a cross between Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* and David Lynch) assume control of the temple, the ultimate adversary is revealed to be time itself as the pyramid becomes an hourglass dropping sand onto a glass-encased model of the temple. This not only is an accurate representation of what happened—Akhnaten's holy city was buried under sand for more that three millennia—it also brings to the foreground the artifactual foundations of theatre itself, the very theatrical artifice the model of the theatre is part and parcel of.

16. Brecht, or the elusive yet ever-present non-representational stratum of theatrical experience so much of the contemporary theatre has sought to invoke, becomes an almost embarrassingly obvious presence in the epilogue. Here tourists are seen perusing the ruins of Akhnaten's holy city. In the BLO production these took the form of a handful of garishly-attired, camcorder-wielding North Americans. Towards the end of the scene a young boy breaks off from group and is seen defiling the ruins with a spray can. "I was here," he writes; a motto that no sooner than it is written is adopted by the ghost of Akhnaten, who appears on the stage, eventually scaring the child away from the ruins. As the diegesis shifts in time from the Armana age to the present day, the temporal transition is negotiated theatrically by having the entire flying apparatus—bars, chains and all—descend into view. These come to rest at approximately knee height, about the height of the real Armana ruins. When discussing previous solutions to the problems raised by this scene, I considered the possibility of interpreting Glass's attempt at "historification" in post-Brechtian terms. Glass's intention was "to somehow underscore the fact that although we twentieth-century people were looking at an imaginary version of Egypt in 1400BC, the very ruins of that Egypt exist today. Therefore I decided to create an epilogue set in the present" (Glass, *Music* 154-55). But in order to really convince us that we have returned to the present, I thought Glass, or the directors of future productions, should go further than previously:

> Ostensibly a Brechtian strategy, the return to the present day at the end of the opera in fact adds a second diegetic stratum to its "rock formation": that of the "mythologized" contemporary. The text read by the scribe may be archaeological in the Foucauldian sense, but the tourists must be re-presented; real tourists cannot magically materialize on the stage for each performance of the opera—unless of course a video installment or some similar means of presentation is utilized. In order to fully realize the post-Brechtian potential of this moment, then—to properly ground the opera in the non-diegetic present—a strategy such as this might be called for. (Richardson 239)

Zimmerman evidently heeded these words or was thinking along similar lines. But whether her interpretation is convincing is finally in the hands of the individuals watching this specific production. A proportion of these may well have been savvy with respect to recent theatrical techniques, but perhaps these people were not the intended addressees. Perhaps knowledge of theatrical convention deprives the moment of its full rhetorical clout. To a more knowledgeable audience, Zimmerman's solution may have appeared a little hackneyed. I myself applauded the director's awareness of the issues raised by the composer in this scene. And for some it did appear to have the intended effect; an elderly lady

sitting behind me at one of the performances audibly gasped as the stage was stripped bare. However, even the Epilogue did not appear to be enough to shake the impression of an overriding realism; as I was walking out of the theatre on the same night, I overheard one season ticket holder tell another how she was "transported to Egypt in all but body."

17. In a sense, it is possible to understand these remarks. Much of the iconography of the BLO production drew extensively on relics from the Amarna period. And many in the audience would have been familiar with the source materials, since performances of *Akhnaten* coincided with an exhibit put on at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston called "Pharaohs of the Sun." This exhibit was the largest collection of artifacts from Akhnaten's holy city ever gathered together under a single roof. Back projections, stage sets, dance steps, and costumes in the BLO production were all to some extent modeled on images from the exhibit. A nice touch that certainly complemented Glass's and his co-librettists wholesale dragging of archaeological artifacts into the libretto. But the transportation of the audience into the interior world of the work went beyond the archaeological, thus setting up a dualism between presentational and representational strata. The scribe, played by Christopher Donohue, clearly "acted" in a part that according to Dryer "requires more authoritative oratory" (Dyer D8), dance movements were lyrical and expressive, and the lovers in the duet were clearly in love. Thus realism on one plane came up against antirealism on another, resulting in some degree of aesthetic confusion.

Act III: Realism, Exoticism, and Representation

18. The question of realism is clearly related to the recent debates on exoticism and representations of the "Orient." Exotic stereotyping "is not," as Ralph Locke has commented, "necessarily as repressive and regrettable" as is made out to be the case in some of the more provocative postcolonialist texts (Locke 106). But it can be. The consensus seems to be that there is more of a danger of misrepresenting another when the representations in question are transparent and realistic. If they are not, if there remains some distance between the representations and the reality represented, then identification of a person or group becomes less of a possibility. Thus, Mozart's *Magic Flute*, which is clearly "unrealistic," is viewed by many as a relatively unproblematic piece—at least with respect to the issue of exoticism (gender is a very different matter). *Aida*, although defended

by Said himself (134-57), among others, is regarded by many as a more problematical piece. Opinions are divided apropos of Akhnaten. Paul John Frandsen, an Egyptologist who wrote an article on Glass's opera, describes some of the music of Akhnaten as "orientalizing" (Frandsen 250). Derek Scott implies otherwise, when he places Glass's opera in the same category as Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, as a piece of music that does not have any purported "Egyptian" content (Scott 321). In my *Singing Archaeology*, I identified the central issues pertaining to Akhnaten and exotic musical coding as follows:

> The crucial question seems to be...whether there is anything in the music or the drama that marks the contemporary rather than the ancient culture as other and in this way stigmatizes it in the eyes or the ears of audiences. Is geographical location alone enough to establish such a link? The conflation of the contemporary and the ancient can, of course, be suggested in the music by using exotic scales or rhythms, for example, that evoke scales or rhythms that are still in use in the region in question or that in some way conjure up stereotyped images of that region for Western listeners. There is very little of that kind of representation in *Akhnaten*, although there are, admittedly, some moments when the music does seem to connote "ancient Egyptian-ness" in a relatively indirect way (in the use of reed or percussion instruments; in the use of the "lowered" second and third of the scale; etc.). (Richardson 195)

The BLO's production did nothing to contradict this impression. Its inclusion as part of a season and larger cultural event called "Egypt in Boston" is not, however, entirely problem free. We have seen that Glass himself felt compelled to differentiate between ancient and contemporary Egypt. He did this by setting one scene of the opera in contemporary Egypt. The creative team behind Egypt in Boston felt no such compulsion, and by not explicitly pointing out that they were referring to European and North American impressions of (ancient) Egypt and not examples of contemporary Egyptian artistic production, they demonstrated remarkable insensitivity to the concerns of those who might have had an interest in the latter category. The nearest "Egypt on Boston" got to including some contemporary Egyptian input in one of their events was a screening at the Museum of Science of the National Geographical IMAX film *Mysteries of Egypt*, featuring the Egyptian actor Omar Sharif as a narrator. The point is not that the event was as such wrong, or that political correctness should dictate that all such events include some authentic indigenous contribution. Rather, that the largely implicit conflation of ancient and contemporary, Western and Egyptian, in the title of the event, created the impression that the Egypt on offer was *the only* Egypt. Had the

event been called "Ancient Egypt in Boston," or "Western Impressions of Egypt," the problem would not have been so manifest.

19. The other interesting issue relating to recent postcolonialist theory is the casting of a black singer in the title role. Not only casting him in this way but having him represented in this way in all of the paraphernalia surrounding the production: bookmarks, posters, programs, and so on. Perhaps the effect is reinforced by the fact that this is a role for the counter-tenor voice, with all of its cultural and gender-related baggage. One still sees relatively few black counter-tenors in the classical music scene. What a surprise, then, not only to see a black man as Akhnaten but a black counter-tenor. Of course there is no reason why this should not be the case, but the stereotype relating to black operatic singers is still extremely pervasive. Cultural conditioning in the West somehow makes it easier to accept the dark, brooding, soulful, passionate, and menacing Othello stereotype, preferably equipped with a rich, powerful bass or baritone voice. A far cry from the mild-mannered, contemplative counter-tenor we see in this role. Full marks to Zimmerman and her team for breaking with convention in this way.

20. The iconography surrounding the opera does raise some problems, however, and offers new solutions. The main artistic representation of the pharaoh is essentially a deconstruction of the character, much in the vein of some of the recent archaeological writing on the subject. Akhnaten's sun god is bound together with tape or papyrus. Presumably it would disintegrate if it were not bound in this way. And there is something not quite right about the man himself. The horizon is slanted and waves emanating from the sun disk encompass Akhnaten's head, giving the impression perhaps that his view of reality is somehow skewed, distorted. This view of Akhnaten as someone delusional, fanatical, sun-struck or not entirely sane resembles that propagated in some of the archaeological literature as well as popular representations, such as Mika Waltari's novel *The Egyptian* and the Hollywood film based on this novel. But this view of Akhnaten is not wholly congruous with Glass and Zimmerman's portrayal, which is fundamentally sympathetic to the pharaoh and the causes championed by him. So the question becomes, to what extent does the Akhnaten of the poster art conform to the Othello stereotype; that of the black man out of control? Or is the asking of this question merely another example of—white, academic, liberal—political correctness?

21. The idea of a black Akhnaten has other implications, similar to those raised by the historian Martin Bernal in his *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (1990). In this highly controversial deconstructive account of the history of the ancient world, Bernal posits a (predominantly black) African as opposed to a (European) Hellenic origin to many ideas we conventionally associate with the latter category. In this book, Bernal goes against the grain of Egyptological opinion by suggesting that Akhnaten was black. The pharaoh's facial features would appear to lend support to this admittedly speculative theory. Whether the BLO's production team where aware of Bernal's theory, I do not know. But the implications are similar: a black man may have been behind a major religious revolution in ancient Egypt, a revolution which many contemporary scientists agree almost certainly influenced some of the central tenets of Judeo-Christian monotheism. Western ideas may not, therefore, be as thoroughly Western as was previously thought. In this respect, I would hold that despite its shortcomings, the BLO's production of *Akhnaten* accurately reinforced ideas that were present in the music and libretto of Glass's opera. That this message was somewhat obscured by its inclusion in a larger event not entirely sensitive to progressive notions of identity, influence and representation is unfortunate. On the other hand, it could be argued that the programming of *Akhnaten* alongside these other Western representations of Egypt only served to highlight its own distinct position with respect to these issues.

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