

# INDIANAPOLIS OPERA

## Akhnaten by Philip Glass

With IU Opera Theater, Indiana University Jacob School of Music

Friday, March 8 & Saturday, March 9, 8 PM

Clowes Memorial Hall, Butler University

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### Philip Glass (b. January 31, 1937)

*American composer*

One of the most influential composers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Philip Glass describes himself as a composer of “music with repetitive structures”, a “Classicist” who is trained in harmony and counterpoint having studied such composers as Schubert, J.S. Bach and Mozart with Nadia Boulanger. Widely known as a minimalist composer, Glass has a prolific body of work – symphonies, concertos, operas, songs, chamber music and notably film scores. In 1997 he won his first Academy Award for the *Kundun* film score (a film about the Dalai Lama) and a second Academy Award for *The Hours* in 2002. Another audience has become familiar with Glass’ music when Rockstar Games release Grand Theft Auto IV featuring Glass’ *Pruit Igoe* in 2008.

### **THE OPERA: Akhnaten**

**Akhnaten** is an opera in three acts based on the life and religious convictions of the pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV), written by the American minimalist composer Philip Glass in 1983. World premiere of the work was on March 24, 1984 at the Stuttgart State Opera and *Akhnaten* made its American premiere that same year at the Houston Grand Opera on October 12.

Note the various iterations of the pharaoh’s name: Amenhotep, Akhenaten, and Akhnaten. (When the opera originally premiered in Germany, the title read, *Echnaton*.) Amenhotep (IV), meaning “living spirit of Aten” is the pharaoh’s name (earned in the fifth year of his reign) and the iteration “Akhnaten” is unique to the Glass opera.

Pharaoh of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty of Egypt, Akhnaten ruled for 17 years and



died perhaps in 1336 BC or 1334 BC. What makes him a unique historical figure was his “almost forgotten” attempt to abandon typical Egyptian polytheism introducing monotheistic worship centered on the Aten or worshiping of the sun. The pharaoh was re-discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and his tomb was unearthed in 1907.

The storytelling within the opera takes the audience through modern and ancient times in Egypt with strong aural and visual imagery. Setting a unique tone for the opera, the first human sounds heard in the opera are the spoken words of a narrator with Akhnaten making his first singing in the middle of the first act (even though we are introduced to the character early on as he watches his father’s funeral processions and awaits his coronation.)

When belief becomes obsession and rulers become myopic, the citizens will determine a new fate for themselves. History, as they say, certainly does repeat itself.  
(Director’s Notes, Candace Evans)

## The Text

The text, taken from original sources, is sung in original languages, linked together with the commentary of a narrator in English. The Egyptian texts of the period are taken from a poem of Akhenaten himself, from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, and from extracts of decrees and letters from the pharaoh’s time period. Other portions are in Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew. Akhnaten’s *Hymn to the Sun* is sung in English.

*Akhnaten is part of a series of biographical operas with operas also on Einstein, Gandhi and Walt Disney’s life. According to Glass, these operas are driven by an inner vision which altered the age in which they lived.*

## Akhnaten Roles

Akhnaten	Countertenor
Nefertiti, Wife of Akhnaten	Contralto
Queen Tye, Mother of Akhnaten	Soprano
Horemhab, General and future Pharaoh	Baritone
Amon High Priest	Tenor
Aye, Father of Nefertiti and advisor to the Pharaoh	Bass
The Daughters of Akhnaten	3 Sopranos, 3 Contraltos
The Scribe	Narrator

*DNA has linked Amenhotep (relatively unknown pharaoh today) as the father of King Tut (one of the most widely known.)*

Small male chorus (Priests), Large opera chorus (The people of Egypt)

## FROM THE ARTISTIC TEAM.....

*Made available by IU Opera Theatre, Jacob School of Music*

(Costume designs by IU's Linda Pisano)

### Synopsis

by Elizabeth Newton and Candace Evans

The opera is set in the city of Thebes, Egypt. It is a series of episodes from the life of Akhnaten, Pharaoh of Egypt from 1351 to 1334 B.C.

### Prelude

The opera opens with an orchestral prelude and a reflection on the current conditions in Egypt. We are then introduced to the Scribe, a narrator who will guide us throughout the opera. The Scribe's opening speech predicts the religious and social changes to come during the rule of Akhnaten.

### Funeral

Pharaoh Amenhotep III has died, and the people of Thebes bid farewell to him and accompany the funeral procession along the Nile.

### Coronation

Akhnaten, the son of the late Pharaoh, receives the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt from the High Priest Amon, General Horemhab, and Aye, a government advisor.



### The Window of Appearances

The new regime is formally announced as Akhnaten, his wife Nefertiti, and his mother, Queen Tye, sing a hymn of acceptance and resolve from the Temple windows.

This is the first time we hear the voice of Akhnaten, a role sung by a countertenor, musically illustrating the unusual aspects of the coming era—the Amarna period of Egyptian history.

### The Temple

It is eight years into the reign of Akhnaten, and, in the Temple, the priests are worshipping the traditional Gods of Egypt. Akhnaten, Nefertiti, and Queen Tye arrive and engage in a wordless debate with the priests, declaring a new monotheistic order of religion. The Pharaoh's former name, Amenhotep IV, will be abandoned in favor of Akhnaten, meaning son of Aten, the Sun God. The Temple is destroyed and the sun enters to light the way for the new, revolutionary Aten order

## **Akhnaten and Nefertiti**

The second half of the opera begins with the Scribe reading a poem from an ancient tomb inscription. Repeating this poem in song, the words become an illustration of the love between Akhnaten and Nefertiti. In the background, we see Queen Tye, who realizes her time of power has passed, as she thinks of her husband Pharaoh Amenhotep III's funeral procession journeying to the land of Ra.

## **The City**

Using a text from the Boundary markers of the Amarna period, the Scribe illustrates the changes in Egypt's power and Akhnaten's plan to build a new utopia, Akhetaten. Meaning the horizon of Aten, the city is to be a place of openness and light.

## **The Dance**

As Akhnaten consults with his architects, we see the city of Akhetaten being built by the joyful citizens.

## **Hymn**

At a defining moment of the opera, Akhnaten sings a "Hymn to the Aten." Determined by the composer that this music is to be sung in the language of the opera's audience, Akhnaten praises the Sun God and speaks of himself as one with him. Following the Hymn, the chorus sings Psalm 104 from the Old Testament in Hebrew, a direct musical influence from the time of Moses in Egypt

## **The Family**

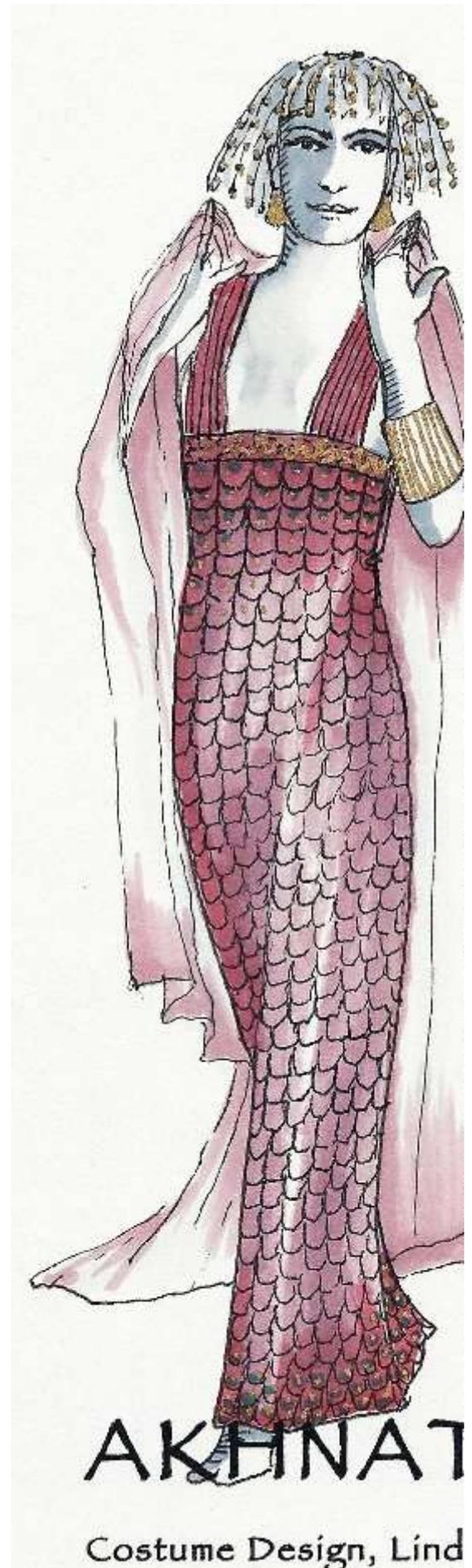
It is year 17 of Akhnaten's rule, and he is with wife Nefertiti and their six daughters inside their palace. Increasingly isolated from the outside world, the family revels in their own utopian ideals.

## **Attack and Fall**

Outside the palace, the citizens have grown restless over the neglect of the country's needs. As they gather, the Scribe incites their anger by reading letters chronicling the years of myopic rule. As their distress increases, the mob surrounds and enters the palace, carrying the Pharaoh and his family away. The scene closes with the Scribe announcing the end of Akhnaten's rule.

## **The Ruins**

The Scribe describes the return of the Amon order, with the ascendancy of Tutankhamen, a son of Akhnaten by a lesser wife. King Tut ordered the destruction of his father's city and monuments and oversaw the rebuilding of the temples that Akhnaten had destroyed. The scene then transitions to present



Costume Design, Lind

day, where we see the ruins of the city Akhetaten, the site of the few archaeological remnants of Akhnaten's rule. The Scribe, transformed into a twentieth-century tour guide, tells the modern visitors the story of what once was.

## Epilogue

In a timeless juxtaposition, we see the ghosts of Akhnaten, Nefertiti, and Tye, and the citizens of modern Egypt amidst the ruins.

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## Program Notes

“Dead Languages, Living Music” by Daniel Bishop



We know very little about the historical Akhnaten, the rebellious Egyptian Pharaoh of the fourteenth century B.C.E., who initiated the short-lived religious reform that came to be known as the Amarna period. In approaching tonight's opera, we might imagine ourselves as archaeologists, examining millennia-old stelae inscriptions and sarcophagus carvings. Always, with such relics, far more is lost than is preserved. Akhnaten, like ancient history itself, embraces distances and gaps in its search for familiarity and relevance.

Philip Glass's music counters the distance of this fragmentary history with recognizable, even traditional operatic traits. At the time of Akhnaten's premiere, Glass was increasingly engaging with Western operatic traditions. In his earlier, more avant-garde theater works such as *Einstein on the Beach* (1979), Glass had even explicitly avoided the term "opera." But *Einstein* would eventually be tied together with *Satyagraha* (1981) and *Akhnaten* (1984), to form a trilogy of historical "portrait" operas. While the first two had originally been independent works, written without any cycle in mind, only *Akhnaten* was conceived from the start as part of a "trilogy," and, as such, it is far more deliberate in drawing together motives from the previous two works to create a complementary whole.

Almost inevitably, Akhnaten's sense of grand historical-mythic sweep drew comparisons to Romantic opera, especially Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle. But instead of a Wagnerian libretto, which would have given dramatic dialogue to historical or mythic characters, Akhnaten marks out its themes and historical trajectory entirely with "found texts," conveying an estranging sense of historical distance. Excerpts from a group of religious documents traditionally called the "Pyramid Texts" set the scene for the funeral of Akhnaten's father. Dating from nearly a thousand years before the opera is set, they convey the traditionalism of the ancient priesthood, which the newly crowned Pharaoh will soon forcibly suppress. Glass suggests this shift of power through recognizable musical tropes. The music of the old order is percussive and primitivist, suggesting an archaic tribalism from which the "purified" music of Akhnaten will emerge.

A new era is established by texts dating from the Amarna period itself, in which Akhnaten and his family overthrow the priesthood of the sun god Amon and establish a city consecrated to the “Aten,” a transcendent, ineffable deity. Glass characterizes the young Pharaoh through dramatic instrumentation.

The role of Akhnaten is written for countertenor, and his singing is always accompanied by a solo trumpet, in much the same way that a string “halo” surrounds the words of Christ in J.S. Bach’s St. Matthew Passion. Thus Glass marks Akhnaten apart as strange and different, befitting both his unconventional spirituality and his vast historical distance from the modern audience. Perhaps implicitly, Akhnaten’s high voice is also reminiscent of the heroic male lovers of Baroque opera, often performed by castrati (castrated adult male sopranos). The gender ambiguity implied in this connection perhaps links Akhnaten’s strangeness to a theory, contested by many scholars, that the young Pharaoh was sexually androgynous, perhaps even a hermaphrodite

The libretto’s historical texts are sung as they were written, in the ancient languages of Akkadian, Ancient Egyptian, and biblical Hebrew. The only exception to this distancing linguistic archaism is Akhnaten’s Act II “Hymn to the Sun.” The libretto instructs that this declaration of faith, traditionally ascribed to Akhnaten himself, should be sung “in the language of the audience,” a technique Glass described as imparting a sense of sudden, intimate communion with Akhnaten’s thoughts.

Following the Hymn, we hear a choral setting of the biblical text of Psalm 104, echoing its themes and drawing our attention toward an often-speculated historical connection between Akhnaten’s monotheism and that of the later Abrahamic faiths. Several aspects of Akhnaten’s biography, especially several taboo sexual imputations, may have originated in later Egyptian sources that, following the restoration of the traditional priesthood, essentially engaged in a historical smear campaign against the usurper. Nevertheless, Akhnaten’s legacy still contains complex, even troubling aspects for modern audiences. As a monotheist, Akhnaten was both an idealist and an absolutist and his destruction of the images and worship of the old gods was ruthless—leading us, perhaps, to see him less as a rebellious spiritual hero defying a conservative order and more as a prophet of modern religious intolerance.



Another such dilemma is played out musically at the opening of Act III. In Glass’s sharp juxtaposition of the royal family’s dreamy, wordless singing against the denunciations of the people, we might hear represented an inherent paradox in the mystical experience, whose withdrawal from everyday reality is both its blessing and its curse. Led by their spiritual imaginations, Akhnaten and his family move beyond words into a purely musical, transcendent realm, but also become increasingly insular and alienated from the very real empire that their negligence of duty allows to decay and crumble.

Glass and his collaborators on this operatic trilogy were aware of the complexity of their subjects. Einstein on the Beach, for example, presents Albert Einstein as a beacon for scientific possibility, but also puts the physicist on symbolic trial for his role in developing the theories that would make possible nuclear warfare. Five years later in its genesis, and three millennia earlier in its subject, Akhnaten is likewise a work with no

simple “message.” At the opera’s conclusion, a more recent “found text”—an early twentieth-century tourist guide—further reinforces the opera’s sense of distance and ambiguity by reducing the great world-changer and his family to ghosts wandering through the ruins of their lost world.

## Director’s Notes

by Candace Evans



When asked to direct this production, I was at once delighted and overwhelmed. The music of Philip Glass is uniquely challenging, and the scope of Egyptian history is vast.

My first step with any opera is always the music. Why was it written and orchestrated as it was? What did the libretto illuminate? And, most urgently, what was the real story being told? As I listened again and again, ideas began to form. Parallel to this world of listening, I began doing research. Beyond the Tutankhamen exhibits which toured the United States, a few hours in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the opera *Aida*, my knowledge of Egypt was minimal. One of the great joys of my career is the continual expansion of knowledge that accompanies each project. New language, rich history, varied geography, fascinating social behavior, and apparel are revelations within each directorial assignment. I studied books, toured exhibitions, watched historical DVDs, and immersed myself in all things Egyptian, all the while continuing to listen to the music.

Every new piece of information added knowledge and piqued my interest, but the core question was as yet unanswered. What is this opera really about, and why should we, as an audience of this time and place, care?

Each day as I listened to the score and continued my research, the media buzzed about the Arab Spring. As my knowledge of ancient Egypt increased, each day provided more awareness of modern Egypt. And there, in that synchronicity, was my answer.

Akhnaten was not Mubarak. His leadership did not purposefully limit the freedom of his citizens nor was he brutal to his people. However, he was a man who became increasingly uncaring about the daily needs of his country. While he was history making in his declaration of monotheism, he allied himself more with God than his citizens. Constructing a utopian city, surrounded by mountains and bordered by the Nile, he became philosophically, and literally, isolated from his people. As in modern-day Egypt, an historical populace continually marginalized by its leadership becomes a populace who will revolt.

The original work of Philip Glass concludes the opera with a modern look back at the Akhnaten era during the Ruins scene. I have added another modern scene during the opera’s Prelude and extended the Ruins scene—with a current reflection on life—as the opera concludes. Through the use of projections and present-day action, I invite you to consider the parallels of these two significant eras.

When belief becomes obsession and rulers become myopic, the citizens will determine a new fate for themselves. History, as they say, certainly does repeat itself.