

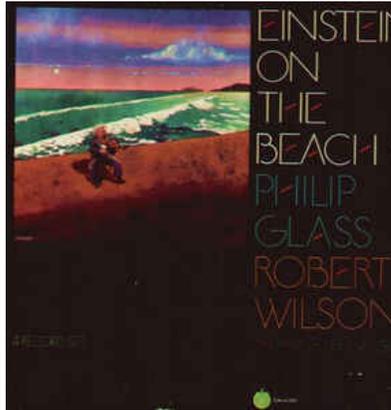
# “Einstein on the Beach”—Philip Glass, Robert Wilson (1979)

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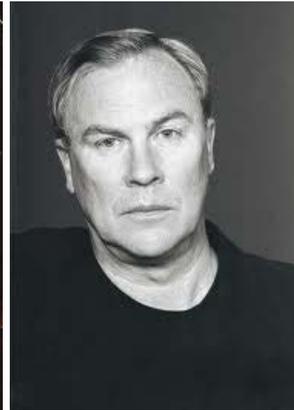
Essay by Tim Page (guest post)\*



*Philip Glass*



*Album cover*



*Robert Wilson*

“Einstein on the Beach” is a pivotal work in the oeuvre of Philip Glass. It is the first, longest, and most famous of the composer's operas, yet it is in almost every way unrepresentative of them. For “Einstein” is much more than the usual uneven collaboration between a librettist and composer. From its beginnings, worked out between Glass and the theater artist Robert Wilson over a series of luncheons at a restaurant on New York's Sullivan Street in 1974, this was truly a team effort.

At this time, Glass was writing long concert pieces for the Philip Glass Ensemble--most recently “Music In 12 Parts” (1971-74) which might be considered Glass's “Art of the Repetition”--while supporting himself by working as a plumber and driving a taxi. “Foundation support was out of the question, of course,” he recalled in 1981. “And most of my colleagues thought I'd gone completely off the wall.” By the mid-70s, the Ensemble had built a cult following in the lofts and galleries of Manhattan's nascent Soho district, and Glass had begun amassing credits as a theater composer by providing scores for the experimental Mabou Mines Company (of which his first wife, JoAnne Akalaitis, was a founding member).

Glass became aware of Wilson's stage work during an overnight performance of the 12-hour “Life and Times of Josef Stalin,” presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1973. He was attracted to what he called Wilson's sense of “theatrical time, space and movement.” The two men promptly determined to collaborate on a theatrical opus based on the life of a historic figure. Wilson proposed Chaplin, then Hitler; Glass countered with Gandhi. Finally, Glass and Wilson agreed upon Albert Einstein, and the name of the as-yet-unwritten work became “Einstein on the Beach on Wall Street.” The title was later shortened; neither creator now remembers when or why.

“As a child, Einstein had been one of my heroes,” the composer reflected in his book, “Music By Philip Glass” (Harper and Row, 1987). “Growing up just after World War II, as I had, it was impossible not to know who he was. The emphatic, if catastrophic, beginnings of the nuclear age had made atomic energy the most widely discussed issue of the day.”

The Glass-Wilson opera was intended as a metaphorical look at Einstein: scientist, humanist, amateur musician--and the man whose theories, for better and for worse, led to the splitting of the atom. Although it is difficult to discern a “plot” in “Einstein,” the final scene clearly depicted nuclear holocaust: with its renaissance-pure vocal lines, the blast of amplified

instruments, a steady eighth-note pulse and the hysterical chorus chanting numerals as quickly and frantically as possible, it seemed to many a musical reflection of the anxious late '70s, which had seen an increasing frost in the Cold War.

"Einstein" broke all the rules of opera. It was in four interconnected acts and was five hours long, with no intermissions. (The audience was invited to wander in and out at liberty during performances.) The acts were intersticed by what Glass and Wilson called "knee plays"--brief interludes that also provided time for scenery changes. The text consisted of numbers, solfege syllables and some cryptic poems by Christopher Knowles, a young autistic man with whom Wilson had worked as an instructor of what were then called "disturbed children" for the New York public schools.

To this were added short texts by choreographer Lucinda Childs and Samuel M. Johnson, an actor who played the Judge in the "Trial" scenes and the bus driver in the finale. There were references to the trial of Patricia Hearst (which was underway during the creation of the opera); to the mid-70s radio lineup on New York's WABC; to the popular song "Mr. Bojangles"; to the Beatles and to the teen idol David Cassidy. "Einstein" sometimes seemed a study in sensory overload, meaning everything and nothing.

The music was based on two techniques Glass had been working with since the mid-60s: additive process and cyclic structures. Additive process involved the expansion and contraction of tiny musical modules; a grouping of five notes might be played several times, then followed by a measure containing six notes (similarly repeated) then by seven notes, and so on. "A simple figure can expand and then contract in many different ways, maintaining the same general melodic configuration but, because of the addition or subtraction of one note, it takes on a very different rhythmic shape," Glass observed.

Glass defines rhythmic cycles as the simultaneous repetition of two or more different rhythmic patterns, which, depending on the length of the pattern, will eventually arrive together back at the starting points, making for one complete cycle. "This has been described by some writers as sounding like wheels inside wheels, a rather fanciful but not wholly inaccurate way of evoking the resulting effect," Glass wrote.

With these two techniques as the basis of his individual style, Glass had already begun to build a music of increasing richness and appeal. "Einstein" added a new functional harmony that set it aside from the early conceptual works. Indeed, some of the music in "Einstein" had been originally written for a long series of concert pieces called, appropriately, "Another Look at Harmony."

"Einstein on the Beach" brought the composer fame--and, in some circles, a certain notoriety. It was presented throughout Europe in the summer of 1976, then brought to the Metropolitan Opera House for two sold-out performances in November 1976. Then, as later, audience response was mixed; Glass's works were presented to boos and bravos.

The flutist Ransom Wilson, who would later conduct and record some of Glass's music, was left a vivid impression of a New York performance of "Einstein on the Beach":

As I listened to that five-hour performance, I experienced an amazing transformation. At first I was bored--very bored. The music seemed to have no direction, almost giving the impression of a gigantic phonograph with a stuck needle. I was first irritated and then angry that I'd been taken in by this crazy composer who obviously doted on repetition. I thought of leaving. Then, with no conscious awareness, I crossed a threshold and found that the music was touching me, carrying me with it. I began to perceive within it a

whole world where change happens so slowly and carefully that each new harmony or rhythmic addition or subtraction seemed monumental....

“Einstein on the Beach” was revived in 1984 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and then again in 1992 and 2012--the last of which included a tour through Europe, Canada and the West Coast of the United States. In 1989, Achim Fryer attempted a new visual interpretation of the Glass music at the Stuttgart State Opera, which was generally judged unsuccessful. It is in its original form--as a collaboration between Glass and Wilson--that “Einstein” has become one of the most famous operatic collaborations of the century.

Virgil Thomson, whom Glass admired and considered one of his few genuine forerunners, wrote a letter to Gertrude Stein after the first production of “Four Saints in Three Acts” and his words apply to “Einstein” as well: “Of course there were some who didn't like the music and some who didn't like the words and even some who didn't like the decors or the choreography but there wasn't anybody who didn't see that the ensemble was a new kind of collaboration and that it was unique and powerful....”

The recording of “Einstein on the Beach” necessarily lacked Wilson's visual complement and Glass abridged the score to fit on to four LP discs. The opening scene, for example, was cut from some 40 minutes to a little more than 20 by reducing the number of repeats. Glass likened the process to a friend after a diet: “It's the same person before and after; there's just a little less of him.” Still, that first recording, issued on Tomato and then CBS Masterworks (later SONY), won considerable attention. The opera has since been re-recorded by Nonesuch and there are many private recordings that exist on-line and on Glass's own label, Orange Mountain.

The score has many beauties: the pulsing, inevitable forward motion of “Train” (with its climactic exploration of a tricky, elegant modulation between F minor and E major, reprised throughout the opera); the slow, droning, quasi-hypnotic use of additive process in “Trial”; the furious, rhythmical reiterations of the dances; the sweet, gently rocking, solfege in the duet, “Night Train”; the crazed “prematurely air conditioned supermarket” speech in “Trial/Prison” that leads, finally, to one of the most ecstatic outbursts of ensemble playing in the opera; the curious, detached, aria for solo electric organ and soprano (“Bed”); and then the apocalyptic “Spaceship” movement. Ultimately, the “Knee Play 5” brings it all back home and the mammoth opera ends rather as it began.

“Einstein on the Beach” may be said to represent the apogee of Glass's modernism. As the composer observed in “Music by Philip Glass”:

In its own way, the pre-“Einstein” music, rigorous and highly reductive, was more “radical” in its departure from the received tradition of Western music than what I have written since. But as I had been preoccupied at the point with that more radical-sounding music for over ten years, I felt I could add little more to what I had already done. Again, it is surely no coincidence that it was at the moment that I was embarking upon a major shift in my music to large-scale theater works that I began to develop a new, more expressive language for myself.

Indeed, it is not “Einstein” but “Satyagraha” (1980) that marks the first of Glass's more-or-less “traditional” operas (insofar as an opera without linear narrative, written in Sanskrit and based directly on the Bhagavad Gita may be considered “traditional”). As opposed to the Spartan “Einstein,” composed for the Philip Glass Ensemble, “Satyagraha” was scored for more conventional forces: strings, woodwinds in threes, organ, six solo singers and chorus of forty. While “Einstein” challenged ideas about what an opera--even an avant-garde opera--should be, “Satyagraha” neatly fit Glass into the operatic continuum. “Einstein” broke the rules with Modernist zeal: “Satyagraha” adapted the rules to the composer's own esthetic. It was difficult

to find any historical precedent for “Einstein”; in “Satyagraha,” one may find references to many of the composer's predecessors.

And yet Glass insists there is a strong connection between “Einstein,” “Satyagraha” and “Akhnaten” (1983). “Each of the three operas of this portrait trilogy has its own distinctive sound world,” Glass observed, adding:

“Einstein on the Beach,” an opera about a great mathematician who loved music, is for amplified ensemble and small chorus singing a text comprised of numbers (actually the beats of the music) and solfege syllables. “Satyagraha,” a work about one man leading his people to freedom, is a large choral opera with text taken directly from Gandhi's philosophical guidebook in the actual language in which he read it. In “Akhnaten,” my emphasis is orchestral, with choral and solo voices sharing common ground with the orchestra.... Should the three operas be performed within a fairly narrow time span (within the same week, for example) I believe their internal connection will become increasingly obvious and provide the audience with a coherent musical and theatrical experience.

Maybe so. Nevertheless, as those who are familiar with the work already know, and those who have never heard it will quickly find out, “Einstein on the Beach” remains one-of-a-kind.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.