



# Akhnaten

## Study Guide

**January 23, 25, 2009**

Emory University's Schwartz Center – Atlanta, GA

AN OPERA BY PHILIP GLASS • [www.atlantaopera.org](http://www.atlantaopera.org)



THE ATLANTA OPERA

# INTRODUCTION

by Philip Glass  
and Shalom Goldman

## THE GODS

By the time of Akhnaten, the god of Thebes (Amon) had emerged from the highly elaborate Egyptian pantheon as the dominant deity. The challenge Akhnaten posed to the social order of his day was twofold. First, Akhnaten's god, Aten, was presented to the people of Egypt as a wholly abstract idea of God (the first abstract idea of a godhead that we know of). Secondly, he sought to preempt the place of Amon (which had allowed an established priesthood to be lavishly maintained) with the relatively obscure god of Heliopolis, whose slight political and religious ties Akhnaten attempted to support by his personal and invested authority.

## THE FUNERAL

The funeral of Amenhotep III, father of Akhnaten, appears as a central theme of the opera and embodies concepts central to the vision of life in ancient Egypt. In Act I, Scene 1, the funeral of Akhnaten's father is presented as the first major image. The other appearances of the funeral offer glimpses (some quite short) of the "progress" of the funeral. The funeral, then, appears as an ongoing event throughout the opera - an event that serves as a context in which all the other action appears.

## THE OLD ORDER VS. THE NEW

It is evident that within the three thousand years of recorded Egyptian history, the seventeen-year reign of Akhnaten known as the Amarna period stands apart as a brief, vivid aberration within the context of an extremely traditional, conformist society. This was apparent not only in Akhnaten's religious ideas but in the art and even in the manners of the time. The opera *Akhnaten*, therefore, aims at presenting a strikingly different picture of the "old" order as it appears in Act I, Scene 1, and the years of Akhnaten's reign. The gods of ancient Egypt were effectively banished by Akhnaten. Their somewhat exotic treatment, both musically and visually, during the scenes of the "old" order are meant to heighten this difference.

## THE OPERA

The narration - delivered by the Scribe (Amenhotep, son of Hapu) - presents all the spoken text in the language of the audience. This material, drawn directly from monuments, letters and inscriptions from the time of Akhnaten, accompanies the action and provides the audience with a text both understandable and descriptive.

The opera is divided into three acts, each about fifty minutes in length. The music in each act is continuous and the scenes follow each other without pause.

## THE TEXT

The vocal text of *Akhnaten*, with a single exception, is sung in three languages of the ancient Near East (Egyptian, Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew). Ancient Egyptian, written in hieroglyphs, was the language of Akhnaten and his court. Akkadian was the language that he and his scribes employed in their diplomatic correspondence. Biblical Hebrew was still developing at this time, for Akhnaten ruled more than a century before the commonly accepted date for the Hebrew exodus from Egypt (1250 BC).

The words of these vocal texts have been adapted from the foregoing ancient languages. They are not exact transliterations of the three ancient scripts, since these languages present multiple problems to the transliterator. Egyptian, for example, has no system for indicating vowels, and all of these languages contain sounds which are impossible to reproduce in English. We have attempted, therefore, to establish

a vocalization that can be effectively rendered by modern singers, enabling them to recreate the rhythms and cadences of the languages of a long-forgotten era.

The previously mentioned exception is Akhnaten's "Hymn to the Aten" in the second act. In this moment of deeply personal religious emotion, Akhnaten clearly was expressing his innermost thoughts. Therefore we have stipulated that the Hymn should always be sung in the language of whatever modern audience is hearing it.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

by Shalom Goldman

*Very deep is the well of the past, Should we not call it bottomless?* – Thomas Mann

The recorded history of ancient Egypt extends over a period of three thousand years. This vast time span opens with the legendary Menes, the king who unified the upper and lower kingdoms in 3100 BC and closes with the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. Our selection of these dates is, of course, arbitrary: as Westerners looking at the ancient Near East, we feel compelled to set definable limits and to describe dynasties and historical periods.

(The Egyptians themselves felt no such compunction. The priests of Memphis told Herodotus, who visited Egypt in 450 BC that they were in possession of a papyrus listing the 330 royal predecessors of the great Menes and that this list covered the last eleven thousand years of Egyptian history! His Greek readers, themselves heirs to ancient traditions, were astounded by these claims, but grew to accept them as proof of the antiquity of the wisdom of Egypt.)

Akhnaten appears in the midpoint of the time span of three millennia. His dynasty was the eighteenth to rule since the time of Menes, and, when he ascended the throne in 1375 BC, he fell heir to centuries of rigid conservatism and inflexibility. Though there had been political upheaval and even foreign domination during the preceding centuries, the structure of society and its relation to the royal court remained unchanged.

This fanatical conservatism, noted by the Greeks and other early visitors to Egypt, was the product of the secure, cyclical nature of the Egyptian environment. Unlike its neighbors in Asia and Africa, Egypt was not dependent on the rains to ensure its food supply: the Nile rose with predictable certainty, inundating the land and allowing for continuous cultivation of crops. The complex series of canals dug to facilitate irrigation had to be maintained and controlled by a strong central authority, personified by the king.

These environmental factors, combined with the tendency to elevate the king to divine status, gave the Egyptian state and religion an inflexible character. Indicative of the effect of the land and the environment on the culture was the fact that Egyptian religion did not travel well. Unlike later, monotheistic faiths that spread successfully beyond their own borders, Egyptian religious devotees outside Egypt itself were limited to members of the various mystery cults that flourished in the last centuries of the pre-Christian era.

During the reign of Amenhotep III, Akhnaten's father, the Egyptian religion, characterized by a bewildering multiplicity of gods, was dominated by the priesthood of Amon, god of Thebes. Economic and political power lay in the hands of that priesthood, and the priests' influence over the royal court was considerable. The art and architecture of the period betray a strong clerical influence. The obsessive nature of the temples of Karnak at Thebes - with their endless rows of sphinxes, columns and royal statues -

testifies both to the wealth of the priesthood and to the rigid conventions of their art. The pharaohs were portrayed as frozen in the "correct" posture; rarely was a sense of individuality conveyed.

The kings of the 18th Dynasty, founded two hundred years before Akhnaten by Ahmose I, had carved out a vast empire in Africa and western Asia. In a wave of conquests they took Nubia and the Sudan to the south, and Syria, Lebanon and Canaan to the east. The Egyptians held these territories by installing vassals over the area's city-states.

Amenhotep III solidified these holdings. An able administrator and statesman, he encouraged trade with foreign lands. Goods and services flowed between Egypt, Syria and Phoenicia, as well as Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus and northern and eastern Africa. With the increase in trade came an exchange of cultural artifacts and religious ideas. The latter part of Amenhotep III's reign ushered in international trade, exchange of ideas and religious ecumenicism.

This great age in Egypt's cultural and religious history might have remained unknown if it had not been for an accidental discovery: in 1887 an Egyptian peasant woman went to gather fertilizer in the ruins of Tel-el-Amarna, a site on the Nile midway between Memphis (near modern Cairo) and Thebes, turned over the soil and discovered hundreds of clay tablets covered with wedge-shaped characters. This proved to be the site of Akhetaten, the center of Akhnaten's empire.

These tablets made their way into the hands of local smugglers and later into those of antique dealers, though the first archeologists who saw them dismissed the tablets as an elaborate hoax. It was a number of years before the language of the tablets was identified as the Akkadian cuneiform script of Babalonia, and the tablets themselves found to be the correspondence between the Egyptian royal court and the kings and princes of western Asia. Though Egypt was the dominant world empire of the time, Egyptian scribes carried on their correspondence in Akkadian, the *lingua franca* of the age.

There are more than 360 of these tablets, now known as the Amarna letters, and one of their recurrent themes is the forging of political alliances through marriage: Amenhotep III marries the sister of the king of Babylon, and we find him requesting a royal daughter as well. He also marries a daughter of the ruler of the northern kingdom of Mittani, and when Amenhotep III dies, this woman, Tadukhipa, becomes the property of his son. In addition to these royal wives, he amasses a collection of royal concubines from the neighbouring states.

In that new age of internationalism, religious and theological distinctions tended to blur. Men of neighboring countries realized that there could be only one set of divine powers, though the names of the gods might differ from locale to locale. Within Egypt itself there were ideological forces tending toward monotheism. Each nome (district) has its own god, usually in animal form, but this same god tended to be identified with the god of another nome. The god Thoth, deity of wisdom and writing, was portrayed as the sacred ibis in one district, as a baboon in another. Thus the idea arose that the gods might be different manifestations of the same creative power.

The most frequent worshipped force in the natural world was the sun. Its power was represented by the falcon-headed god Horus, by the human-divine figure Atum, or by the dung beetle Kheper. The sun also had a secular designation - *aten* - which symbolized the sun disk itself. The stage was thus set for Akhnaten's introduction of the *aten* as the manifestation of the supreme power of the universe.

Akhnaten's reign, and his revolution, lasted only seventeen years. His rebellion against the massive weight of tradition encompassed religion, statecraft, art and language; and in each of these areas he attempted revolutionary innovations.

His reign ended violently. The forces of conservatism and reaction were too powerful, and the old order prevailed. The failure of his revolution strengthened the conservative trend in Egyptian life. The vehemence with which his very memory was defamed (his successors subsequently labeled him "that great criminal of Akhetaten") knows no parallel in Egyptian history.

With the demise and disappearance of Akhnaten and the end of the Amarna period, a dark curtain descended over Egypt. The Kingdom of Light was no more.

## SYNOPSIS

*Akhnaten* is based on the life of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhnaten, who ruled Egypt from 1375 BC to 1358 BC.

**Act I** begins with the death and funeral of Amenhotep III. His son Akhnaten is crowned Pharaoh in his place. The act ends with Akhnaten, his mother Queen Tye, and his bride Nefertiti on the windowed balcony of the palace, called the Window of Appearances. They praise God in terms that begin to show a move away from the old Egyptian pantheon to a new monotheism.

### *Intermission*

**Act II** begins with a ceremony of the old religion, led by the Amon High Priest. It is interrupted by Akhnaten, Tye, and their followers. They overthrow the old temple and plan to institute in its place worship of the Aten, or sun disk. Unlike other gods who were represented by idols, Aten was the first totally abstract concept of God, and Akhnaten calls on his people to join him in worshipping this revolutionary god.

Akhnaten abandons the polygamy of the prior pharaohs for love of his one wife Nefertiti. He then builds Akhetaten, the City of the Horizon of Aten, dedicated to the new god. There is a dance to celebrate this dedication. The act ends with the Hymn to the Sun, a prayer sung by Akhnaten praising its beauty and recognizing it as the force of creation which only he, as the son of Aten, can recognize. The chorus then sings excerpts from Psalm 104.

### *Brief Pause*

**Act III** depicts Akhnaten's fall. Akhnaten dwells in an insular world of his own creation: his city Akhetaten and his family. He is isolated from his people and oblivious to the pleas of the outlying lands of his kingdom, where foreign barbarians are attacking the Egyptian empire. The priests of Amon emerge from the gathering crowds and call for the people to overthrow this pharaoh who ignores their suffering and, lacking a male heir, must be thought cursed by the gods for his heresy. The temple of the Aten is destroyed. The old order is restored. Akhetaten is now a ruined city, recently excavated and on view for tourists only to hint at how much has disappeared with time. The spirits of Akhnaten, Nefertiti and Queen Tye appear wandering through these ruins. At first unaware that they are only spirits and then realizing that the world and time have moved on, they follow Amenhotep's funeral procession on their final journey.

# PROGRAM NOTES

by Eric Mitchko

After having composed the operas *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and *Satyagraha* (1980), Philip Glass had the idea of writing a third opera about a historical figure and describing the three works as a trilogy. He settled on Akhnaten, the pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty who ruled Egypt from 1375 to 1358 BC. Among the elements that attracted Glass to the subject was Akhnaten's role as the history's first recorded monotheist. The young pharaoh overthrew the old Egyptian pantheon and replaced it with worship of the Aten, or sun disk. He ruled approximately one century before the Hebrew captivity in Egypt; hence some writers, including Freud, suggest that Akhnaten's monotheism inspired Moses. Glass highlights this connection in the opera by having Akhnaten's Hymn to the Sun in Act II followed immediately by textually similar passages from Psalm 104, sung by the chorus in Hebrew. The various texts of the opera are taken from actual stele, and are sung in Ancient Egyptian and Akkadian. Akhnaten's aria and the Scribe's spoken narration are in the language of the audience.

The piece was commissioned by the Stuttgart Opera, where it was premiered on March 24, 1984, in a production by Achim Freyer. Dennis Russell Davies conducted a cast that included countertenor Paul Esswood in the title role and Milagros Vargas as Nefertiti. Houston Grand Opera presented the American premiere shortly thereafter, in a David Freeman production that starred Christopher Robson and Marta Senn under the baton of John De Main; this same production and cast went to New York City Opera in 1985. Director Mary Zimmermann's production was premiered at Chicago Opera Theatre in 1999, and later went to Boston and Strasbourg, where David Walker sang the title role.

With its repetitive sequences the opera *Akhnaten* is immediately recognizable as music of Philip Glass, yet in its grand subject matter, scope, and vocal writing it fits comfortably into the mainstream operatic tradition. These performances mark the piece's southeastern premiere.

## COMPOSER BIOGRAPHY

Philip Glass was born January 31, 1937 in Baltimore, Maryland. He is considered one of the most influential composers of the late-20th century. Glass is widely acknowledged as a composer who has brought art music to the public. Art music refers to musical traditions implying advanced structural and theoretical considerations. Composers of art music preceding Philip Glass include Richard Strauss, Kurt Weill, and Leonard Bernstein.

He studied the flute as a child at the Peabody Conservatory of Music and entered an accelerated college program at the University of Chicago at the age of 15, where he studied Mathematics and Philosophy. He then went on to the Juilliard School of Music where the keyboard became his main instrument. His composition teachers included Vincent Persichetti and William Bergsma and fellow students included Steve Reich. During this time, in 1959, he was a winner in the BMI Foundation's BMI Student Composer Awards, one of the most prestigious international prizes for young composers. In the summer of 1960, he studied with Darius Milhaud at the summer school of the Aspen Music Festival. After leaving Juilliard in 1962, Glass moved to Pittsburgh and worked a school-based composer-in-residence in the public school system, composing various choral, chamber and orchestral music.

Glass then went to Paris, where he studied with the eminent composition teacher Nadia Boulanger, analyzing scores of Johann Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. It was during his years in Paris

when Glass began composing for theater. It was also during this time that he worked as a music director and composer on a film score (*Chappaqua*) with Indian sitar player and composer Ravi Shankar. Glass would later renounced his previous compositions in a moderately modern style resembling Milhaud's, Aaron Copland's, and Samuel Barber's, and began writing pieces based on repetitive structures of Indian music. Glass left Paris in 1966 and traveled to northern India. There he came in contact with Tibetan refugees and began to gravitate towards Buddhism. He met Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, in 1972, and has been a strong supporter of the Tibetan cause ever since. In 1987 he co-founded the Tibet House with Columbia University professor Robert Thurman and the actor Richard Gere.

Although his music has been described as *minimalist*, Glass has distanced himself from this label. ("That word should be stamped out!" he said in a 1978 interview.) He would rather describe himself as a composer of "music with repetitive structures", a "Classicalist", trained in harmony and counterpoint.

Glass is a prolific composer: he has written works for his own musical group which he founded, the Philip Glass Ensemble, operas, music-theatre works, eight symphonies, eight concertos, solo works, string quartets, and film scores, and has been nominated for three Academy Awards. Glass has worked with many visual artists, writers, musicians, and directors, including Ravi Shankar, Linda Ronstadt, Paul Simon, David Byrne, David Bowie, Brian Eno, conductor Dennis Russell Davies, electronic musician Aphex Twin, fellow New Yorker Woody Allen, and poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen.

## INTERESTING TIDBITS

At the time *Akhnaten* was commissioned, the Stuttgart Opera House was undergoing renovation, necessitating the use of a nearby playhouse with a smaller orchestra pit. Upon learning this, Glass and conductor Dennis Russell Davies visited the playhouse, placing music stands around the pit to determine how many players the pit could accommodate. The two found that they could not fit a full orchestra in the pit. Glass decided to eliminate the violins, which had the effect of giving the orchestra a low, dark sound that came to characterize the piece and suited the subject very well. Another significant aspect of *Akhnaten* is Glass's experimentation with polytonality.

Polytonality is the use of more than one key at the same time. Philip Glass was influenced here by his teachers Vincent Persichetti and Darius Milhaud, and compares this musical technique to "an optical illusion, such as in the paintings of Josef Albers". Other famous composers who have used bitonality or polytonality include Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók, Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, and John Adams. A well-known example of polytonality is the fanfare at the beginning of the second tableau of Igor Stravinsky's ballet, *Petrushka*. The first clarinet plays a melody that uses the notes of the C major chord, while the second clarinet plays a variant of the same melody using the notes of the F sharp major chord.

The role of *Akhnaten* is written to be sung by a countertenor. A countertenor is a male singing voice whose vocal range is equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano or (less frequently) a soprano. This is usually achieved through use of falsetto, or more rarely the normal or modal voice. A pre-pubescent male who has this ability is called a treble. This term falsetto was once used exclusively in the context of the classical vocal tradition, although it is also used now by numerous popular music artists.

The term first came into use in England during the mid 17th century and was in wide use by the late 17th century. During the Romantic period, the popularity of the countertenor voice waned and few compositions were written with that voice type in mind. In the second half of the 20th century, the countertenor voice went through a massive resurgence in popularity, partly due to pioneers such as English singer

Alfred Deller, by the increased popularity of Baroque opera and the need of male singers to replace the castrati roles in such works. Although the voice has been considered largely an early music phenomenon, there is a growing modern repertoire. Today, countertenors are much in demand in many forms of classical music. In opera, many roles originally written for castrati are now sung and recorded by countertenors, as are some trouser roles originally written for female singers. Some countertenors you may recognize who have appeared in pop culture music include Steve Perry of Journey and Freddie Mercury and Roger Meddows-Taylor of Queen.

### **WHO IS SINGING?**

Akhnaten (Countertenor)	John Gaston	
Nefertiti (Mezzo-Soprano)	MaryAnn McCormick	<i>wife of Akhnaten</i>
Queen Tye (Soprano)	Kiera Duffy	<i>mother of Akhnaten</i>
Horemhab (Baritone)	Brent Davis	<i>General and future Pharaoh</i>
Amon High Priest (Tenor)	Chauncey Packer	
Aye (Bass)	Benjamin Polite	<i>father of Nefertiti and advisor to the Pharaoh</i>
The Scribe (Narrator)	Matthew Hendrix	

### **ORCHESTRATION**

As orchestrated by Philip Glass:

2 flutes (one doubling piccolo)  
 2 oboes (both doubling oboe d'amore)  
 2 clarinets  
 bass clarinet  
 2 bassoons  
 2 french horns  
 2 trumpets  
 2 trombones  
 tuba  
 percussion  
 celesta/synthesizer  
 8 violas  
 6 celli  
 4 double basses

\*This orchestra is about the size employed for early 19th-century opera.

## SUGGESTED LISTENING

### ***Einstein on the Beach***

Philip Glass (1937- )  
Robert Wilson, Design & Direction  
Philip Glass Ensemble  
Michael Riesman, Conductor

### ***Satyagraha***

Philip Glass (1937- )  
Robert McFarland, baritone  
Scott Reeve, bass  
New York City Opera  
Christopher Keene, Conductor

### ***Stravinsky: Petrouchka; Le Sacre de printemps***

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)  
Cleveland Orchestra  
Pierre Boulez, conductor

## SUGGESTED READING

***“Music by Philip Glass”*** by Philip Glass (1987, Harper & Row, USA, ISBN: 0060158239)

***“Talking Music”*** by William Duckworth (1995, Schirmer, USA, ISBN: 0028708237)

***“Formulation: Articulation”*** By Josef Albers (2006, Thames & Hudson, UK, ISBN: 0500238286)