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Music Review | 'Satyagraha'

Fanciful Visions on the Mahatma's Road to Truth and Simplicity

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This is a fitting time to revisit [Philip Glass](#)'s opera "Satyagraha," a landmark work of Minimalism. I take Mr. Glass at his word that when "Satyagraha" was introduced, in Rotterdam in 1980, he was following his own voice and vision, not firing a broadside against the complex, cerebral modernist composers who claimed the intellectual high ground while alienating mainstream classical music audiences. Happily, that divisive period is finally past.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Richard Croft, in white, at the Met as Mohandas K. Gandhi in the Philip Glass opera "Satyagraha," which depicts Gandhi's path to spirituality and political activism in South Africa.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

In a swirl of newsprint: Richard Croft as Gandhi, who relied on the news media in his agitation for civil rights, in the Philip Glass opera "Satyagraha," at the Met.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

A scene from the Philip Glass opera "Satyagraha."

[Metropolitan Opera](#) patrons, mostly bound by tradition, might not seem a likely source of Glass fans. But when Mr. Glass appeared onstage after the Met's first performance of "Satyagraha," on Friday night, the audience erupted in a deafening ovation.

"Satyagraha" (a Sanskrit term that means truth force) is more a musical ritual than a traditional opera. Impressionistic and out of sequence, it relates the story of [Mohandas K. Gandhi](#)'s fight for the civil rights of the Indian minority in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. The staging — created by Phelim McDermott, director, and Julian Crouch, associate director and set designer, for the Met and the English National Opera, where it was seen last year — makes inventive use of fanciful imagery, aerialists, gargantuan puppets and theatrical spectacle to convey the essence of a self-consciously spiritual work.

Without knowing the events of Gandhi's struggles in South Africa you would have little idea what is going on, starting from the opening scene. Gandhi, portrayed by the sweet-voiced tenor Richard Croft in a heroic performance, lies on the ground in a rumpled suit, his suitcase nearby. The moment depicts an incident when Gandhi, as a young lawyer en route to Pretoria and holding a proper first-class ticket, was ordered to take his place with the Indians on board and, when he resisted, was pushed from the train onto the platform.

But this abstract production takes its cues from Mr. Glass, who was not interested in fashioning a cogent narrative. What continues to make the opera seem radical comes less from the music, with its lulling repetitions of defiantly simple riffs, motifs and scale patterns, than from the complete separation of sung text from dramatic action, such as it is.

The libretto, assembled by the novelist Constance DeJong, consists of philosophical sayings from the Bhagavad-Gita, the sacred Hindu epic poem. Mr. Glass honors the text by keeping it in the original Sanskrit and setting every syllable clearly. This production dispenses with Met Titles on the theory that the audience would actually be distracted by paying attention to the words, which at best serve as commentary. Instead key phrases in English are projected on a semicircular corrugated wall that forms the backdrop of the production's gritty and elemental set.

"Satyagraha" invites you to turn off the part of your brain that looks for linear narrative and literal meaning in a musical drama and enter a contemplative state — not hard to do during the most mesmerizing parts of the opera, especially in this sensitive performance. For example, in the hauntingly mystical opening scene when Gandhi reflects on a battle between two royal families depicted in the Bhagavad-Gita, Mr. Croft, in his plaintive voice, sang the closest the score comes to a wistful folk song while undulant riffs wound through the lower strings.

That the impressive young conductor Dante Anzolini, in his Met debut, kept the tempos on the slow side lent weight and power to the repetitive patterns. At times, though, during stretches in the opera when Mr. Glass pushes the repetitions to extremes, as in the wild conclusion to the

final choral scene in Act I, the music became a gloriously frenzied din of spiraling woodwind and organ riffs.

Even in this breakthrough work Mr. Glass does not come across as a composer who sweats over details. He tends to rely on default repetitions of formulaic patterns, the only question being how often to repeat a phrase. Sometimes the daring simplicity just sounds simplistic. When he does work harder, fracturing the rhythmic flow or injecting some pungent dissonance into his harmonies, I am more drawn in.

In this regard Mr. Glass is different from another founding father of Minimalism, [Steve Reich](#), whose music is just as repetitious as Mr. Glass's. But Mr. Reich has always had an ear for ingenious, striking and intricate detail.

Sometimes, with its aerial feats and puppetry, the Met production relies too much on stage activity. Still, it's quite a show. Mr. McDermott and Mr. Crouch have assembled a group of acrobats and aerialists called the Skills Ensemble, who produce magical effects. In one scene they form a huge puppet queen clothed in newspaper who goes to battle against a hulking puppet warrior assembled from wicker baskets. The use of simple materials is meant as homage to the poor, oppressed minorities for whom Gandhi gave his life.

Because Gandhi relied on the news media of his day to support his agitation for human rights and published his own journal, Indian Opinion, newspapers are a running image in the production. Actors fashion pages into symbolic barriers for protests. At one point, in despair, Gandhi disappears into a slithering mass of people and paper.

The cast entered into the ritualistic wonder of the work and the production despite solo and choral parts that are often formidably hard. It's almost cruel to ask male choristers to sing foursquare, monotone repetitions of "ha, ha, ha, ha" for nearly 10 minutes, as Mr. Glass does. Yet the chorus sang with stamina and conviction.

Besides Mr. Croft, other standouts in the excellent cast included the soprano Rachele Durkin as Gandhi's secretary, Miss Schlesen; the mezzo-soprano Maria Zifchak as his wife; the bass-baritone Alfred Walker as Parsi Rustomji, a co-worker; and the baritone Earle Patriarco as Mr. Kallenbach, a European co-worker and ally. You are not likely to hear the long, ethereal sextet in the last act sung with more calm intensity and vocal grace than it was here.

Ultimately, despite its formulaic elements, "Satyagraha" emerges here as a work of nobility, seriousness, even purity. In the final soliloquy, timeless and blithely simple, Gandhi hauntingly sings an ascending scale pattern in the Phrygian mode 30 times. To some degree the ovation at the end, after a 3-hour-45-minute evening, was necessary. The audience had to let loose after all that contemplation.

"Satyagraha" continues through May 1 at the Metropolitan Opera; (212) 362-6000, metopera.org.

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