

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

History and Hypnotic Magic

Philip Glass's 'Satyagraha' in a Remarkable Staging

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April 19, 2008; Page W14

New York

Those who attend Philip Glass's "Satyagraha" at the Metropolitan Opera would be well-advised to read the program notes beforehand and then allow themselves to simply surrender to its hypnotic visual and musical magic.

The opera, first performed in 1980, is an extended meditation running three hours and 45 minutes with two intermissions. There is no narrative. The text, adapted by Constance DeJong from the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu epic, is in Sanskrit and only snippets of it are translated and shown as projections on the set. Scenes suggest nonchronological episodes from the years that Gandhi spent in South Africa (1893-1914) when he worked for the civil rights of Indian immigrants and formulated his transformative philosophy of nonviolence. The music sounds simple: cells of tonal melody are endlessly repeated by the voices and the orchestra in Mr. Glass's now unmistakable signature style. The operatic experience that "Satyagraha" most closely resembles is Olivier Messiaen's "St. Francois d'Assise," a similarly lengthy and episodic portrait of a deeply spiritual figure that invites the audience to enter into its subject's mind and heart through music.



Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

Elie Dehn as Mrs. Naidoo, Richard Croft as Gandhi, and Alfred Walker as Parsi Rustomji.

The Met's remarkable new staging, co-produced by the English National Opera and created by Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch, founders of Improbable, a theater company in London, provides striking visual clues to the story while maintaining a theatrical flow as trance-like as the music. The basic physical materials are humble: a high wall of what looks like corrugated metal arcs around the stage and forms the backdrop of the action, suggesting the poverty of South Africa's Indian immigrants and the figurative and literal prison of their lives there. Sheets of newspaper are read and then transformed into figures; dozens of rolls of sticky tape are unwound and stretched across the stage, forming an impenetrable barrier.

The visual flow is orchestrated by the 12-member Skills Ensemble of actors, dancers, aerialists and stiltwalkers. They fluidly manipulate sheets of newspaper to look like a printing press (Indian Opinion was the influential newspaper of the satyagraha movement) and assemble bits of paper and baskets to create two enormous warring figures who fight and then, just as quickly, dematerialize. Ten huge papier-mâché puppets, representing the wealthy industrialists of Durban, loom threateningly for a few moments and then stalk offstage.

While such apparitions are dramatic and unusual, they seem at one with the texture of the opera, offering brief, concrete visualizations, anchors in the continuing, abstract flow of the piece. Yet they are mysterious as well. Kevin Pollard's apt period costumes provide additional clues, differentiating between white South Africans and Indians as well as illustrating Gandhi's metamorphosis by dressing him first in a buttoned-up British-style barrister suit and finally in the dhoti and staff of an itinerant Hindu sadhu.

The production also makes the profound connections between eras that are so central to the story of Gandhi and to the opera. This is especially potent in Act III, when an actor silently portraying Martin Luther King

Jr. climbs up to a window in the corrugated wall and stands at a lectern, his back to the opera house audience, as if addressing a great crowd beyond. As Gandhi and his followers march to the Transvaal border on the stage, projections of marchers from the U.S. civil-rights movement appear on the walls and policemen climb down and arrest Gandhi's people, illustrating the direct line between two world-changing leaders and their achievements.

Yet it is the hypnotic music that submerges the listener into an understanding of the concept. Sinking into it, one feels viscerally how repetition adds power, and how the individual commitment of each participant adds up to a political movement. Indeed, the music, which sounds simple, is very difficult to perform because of its long stretches without markers or variation and demands unusual concentration from its performers. The Met's forces were superbly up to the task. The orchestra of winds, strings and keyboards, expertly conducted by Dante Anzolini, expressed both stasis and relentless, onward flow. The excellent chorus supplied mass, texture and even menace: The opening of Act II, in which Gandhi is stalked by the citizens of Durban, features a men's chorus (costumed in clown-like colors) repeating the syllables "ha-ha-ha" to terrifying effect.

The tenor Richard Croft, whose beautiful vocalism is so suited to Mozart and Handel, made an ideal Gandhi, giving the character a single-minded intensity that was both practical and saintly. He was surrounded by a fine cast of soloists: Rachelle Durkin, Ellie Dehn, Earle Patriarco, Alfred Walker and Mary Phillips sang the roles of Gandhi's white South African and Indian friends and co-workers in the satyagraha movement; Maria Zifchak was Gandhi's wife, Kasturbai; Bradley Garvin was Prince Arjuna and Richard Bernstein was Lord Krishna, both figures from the Bhagavad Gita. As individuals and in ensembles (one standout is the lengthy, difficult sextet in Act III), they captured the lyricism and clarity of Mr. Glass's vocal writing and infused its otherworldly quality with a sense of invitation for the listener.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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