

Composition 002 with Dr. James Wilding

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Brief Personal Reflection on

The overture to the opera **Akhaten**,

by Philip Glass

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For this essay I chose the 1983 opera **Akhaten** by the American composer **Philip Glass**. Since Akhaten is an entire opera, I am specifically talking about the overture in this essay.

To a certain extent, I think that musically speaking: “*the proof of the pudding is in the eating*”; or to put it another way – as the incomparable Peter Schickele used to say – “*it don't mean a thing unless it has that certain je ne sais quoi*”.

This is all to say: *if it sounds good, it is good!*

Therefore, if I had to explain why I chose this piece, it could be put simply: because I liked it!

Although many of the composers on the list – such as Ravel, Sibelius, and Bartok – are well known, all of the pieces listed were new to me.

Because of this, the first thing I did upon encountering the list of pieces was just to go through and listen to the beginning of all of them. As I did this, Glass’ piece struck me as beautiful right away.

One possible reason for this might be because I am vaguely familiar with Glass’ music and general style; therefore, the overture to Akhaten generally was “recognizable” as representative of familiar sonic territory. (According to Wikipedia, Glass describes himself as a composer of “music with repetitive structures.”)

It is hard to believe that even a hundred odd years ago, hearing musical masterpieces might have been a once-in-a-lifetime affair-- even for the very rich.

I bring this up because it serves to show how amazing it is that not only is *listening* to Akhaten’s music readily available to us via YouTube... but even a piano reduction score was at my fingertips after a quick internet search.

# AKHNATEN

Piano Score

Act I: Prelude

Philip Glass

1

$\text{♩} = 140$

*mf*

5

Seeing the piano reduction really helped me “wrap my brain around” what I was hearing.

Even without the score, anyone listening to this piece can realize that the music is repetitive. But just *how repetitive* it is really is striking once one begins to peruse the score.

In the bars shown above, for example, it is obvious that the primarily “material” that the music is being constructed from is a single a minor triad.

Several things struck me as interesting about the opening bars of the overture as I began to study it further. The first thing is that even though only a single triad is being drawn from, Glass manages to find interesting things to do by creating tension between repetition and variation of the material he is presenting.

An example of this is noticeable in the above reduction by noticing that even in just the eight bars pictured, Glass establishes a pattern of presenting material, and then gradually layering additional aspects *of itself* over itself.

This can be seen in the first two measures where the arpeggiated chordal tones are presented; they will subsequently stay consistent throughout the rest of the entire excerpt.

Analysis of the first two bars then gives the key to seeing the primary material Glass is working with; as mentioned it is simply an a minor chord, arpeggiated with *an unusual two note slur pattern*.

The particular rhythmic grouping strikes one (me) as somewhat unexpected; especially for piano, this would not be a “natural” way to articulate the notes.

The unexpected effect of a “break” being experienced between the first and second beats – which is then **repeated again** between beats three and four – instantly sets up a strange tension of unexpected things occurring within a repetitive pattern.

In measure three, two additional layers appear at once: the first is a sustained A minor pedal point which is to be maintained throughout the excerpt. While it is obvious, Glass seems to be beating the listener over the head: *“Nope; there ain’t going to be no harmonic variation here.”*

The second layering observed in measure three is the introduction of the 5<sup>th</sup> of the A minor triad: an E in the middle register. It is interesting that this E appears, and is simply sustained for 2 measures. After being struck, it is sustained, but instantly begins disappearing from the awareness of the listener...

until the E begins to be repetitively **pounded out** on each beat for the remainder of the excerpt.

The strange tension between not knowing what is going to happen next, while listening to very repetitive music, I found an interesting aspect to this overture.

As I mentioned, I was initially drawn to Glass’s composition simply because I enjoyed listening to it at first hearing. I think Glass’s utilization of a single triad to open his composition is illustrative of why triads form the basis of Western music: triads simply sound good together to the human ear.

Therefore I think I liked Glass’s composition because of the accessibility of it to me; I didn’t have to “work at” liking it. Further, I also enjoyed reading more about the actual opera (Akhmaten) and the story it told specifically because I was attracted enough to Glass’s overture to want to investigate further.

Had his Overture been less accessible, I might have skipped over his composition entirely, and never even opened the door to the interesting story his Opera tells.

I also think I was attracted to Glass’s composition – especially after I began to study the piano reduction of it – in the light of the fact that I too, in my own small way, aspire to become a composer myself. (An interesting thing about trying to compose one’s own music is that it makes you appreciate the compositions of other composers in an entirely different light and level of appreciation.)

In my case, I am trying to base an entire movement of a piano fantasy on a simple four bar chord progression (**C minor, F minor, Bflat, G7**) and sometimes it is easy to feel discouraged having such a small “palette” of musical material to draw from.

I think Glass’s Overture helped me to realize that actually there is a “lot of mileage” to be gotten out of a small amount of material. After realizing this, upon further reflection I then started to see how this fact is true of many pieces of music:

Beethoven 5<sup>th</sup> symphony, anyone?

The final thing that is evident in the musical excerpt above is that at the end of measure eight Glass begins to vary another non-harmonic aspect of the music he is presenting: the meter; this is seen when Glass switches from 4-4 to 3-4 after only 8 bars of music.

Observing the way that Glass varies meter over a repetitive harmonic structure I found interesting from a compositional perspective as well. I think the reason for this is because it is helping me to realize that specifically in my own piano writing, I can create more interesting material by utilizing more rhythmical or metrical variation.

Overall, I really enjoyed my initial exposure to Glass' opera, both as a lay listener, as well as a novice composer studying the compositional techniques of another composer.