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Akhnaten

An Opera in three acts by Philip Glass

Libretto by the composer in association with
Shalom Goldman, Robert Israel and Richard Riddell

LEARNING RESOURCE



ENO's new production of *Akhnaten* is on stage at the London Coliseum 4-18 March 2016

Running time: Approximately 2 hours 50 minutes including two 20-minute intervals.

This learning resource contains preparatory material to explore the themes, music and drama of *Akhnaten*. It is intended as a resource for KS3 teachers and includes material to support curriculum learning and develop in school arts projects.

With thanks to the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL and The British Museum

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First and final pages: ENO Akhnaten production photos © Richard Hubert Smith

Note on the spelling: the Pharaoh is usually written with an e 'Akhenaten'; Glass entitled his opera '*Akhnaten*'; this resource includes both spellings.

Akhenaten, Pharaoh of ancient Egypt



Akhenaten was an Egyptian Pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The dates of his life are estimated as 1351-1334 BC. When his father Amenhotep III died, he inherited the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and ruled for 17 years with his principal wife, Nefertiti.

He is often referred to as the 'heretic' or rebel' pharaoh because of the great religious reforms he attempted to introduce during his reign. He declared a new religion based upon worship of a single god, the sun god, Aten, which he imposed on his people, suppressing the worship of other deities. His new god was universal and supreme. By re-naming himself Akhenaten 'Son of Aten', he associated himself

with this all powerful God. His radical ideas were not well received by the people of Egypt and after his death, his temples were destroyed and his name was erased from monuments in an attempt to obliterate all trace of him. This was significant as Egyptian beliefs concerning the afterlife placed an emphasis on speaking the name of the deceased; rebirth in the afterlife was not possible if a person's name was not honoured.

Late 19th and early 20th century archaeological excavations in the Valley of the Kings triggered a resurgence of interest in his story – though the full story of his life and reign remains unknown.

Akhenaten's new religion saw the sun god Aten replace the entire pantheon of Egyptian gods and goddesses. Before Akhenaten, Aten merely represented the light that emanated from the sun disc; typically represented by hands radiating from the sun and giving out the ankh sign.

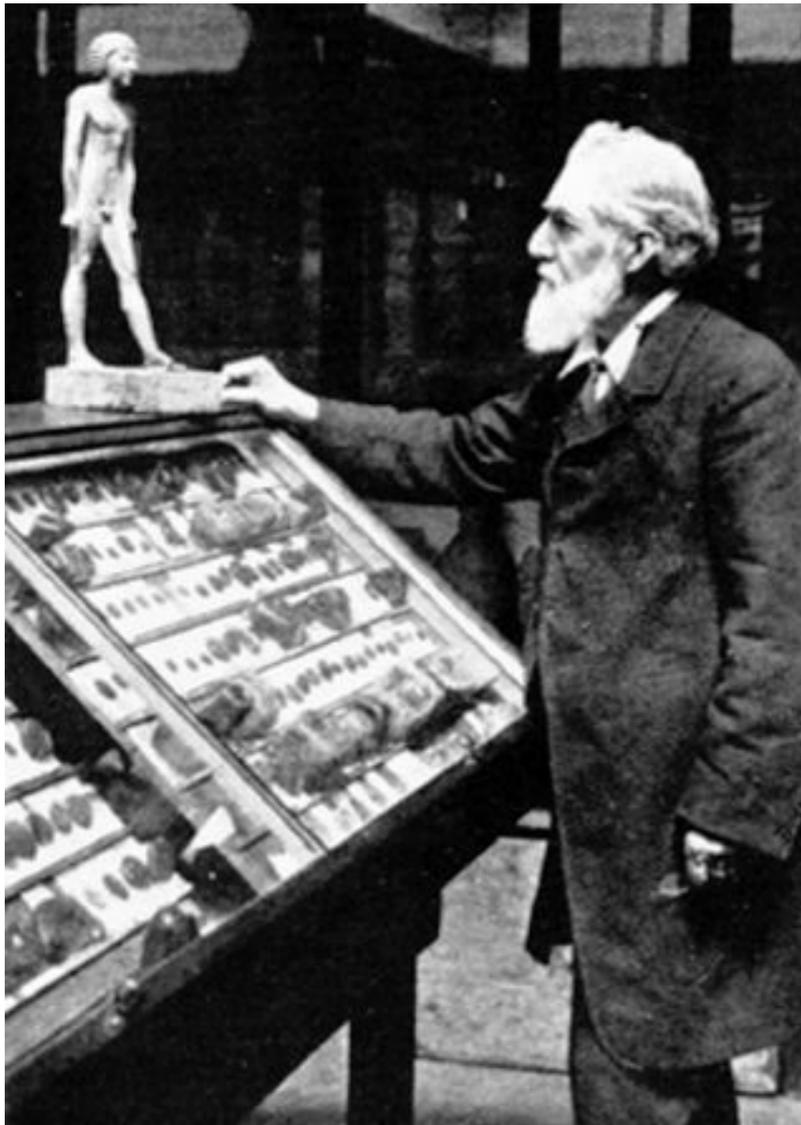
Akhenaten and Nefertiti became the high priests and sole mediators of Aten. This resulted in the royal couple having absolute power, undermining the power of the temple priests.



Limestone stela with seated figure of Akhenaten

This limestone stela from The British Museum collection illustrates the shift in religious belief and artistic style in the Amarna period. The king, Amenhotep IV (renamed Akhenaten, who reigned 1352-1336 BC), is shown in a relaxed pose, which would have been unthinkable in earlier times, with a protruding chin and belly; he is seated below the disc of the Aten (the sun) whose rays extend down to the king. Each ray terminates in a small hand and symbolizes the manner in which the sun hands its benefits down to the king. The new beliefs formulated at Tell el-Amarna, and held to a limited extent elsewhere, stressed that Akhenaten was the sole person with access to the Aten. The Aten, Akhenaten believed, was the principal god and the source of all life. Thus, only the royal family is ever shown making offerings to the Aten; private individuals had to direct their devotions through the king. Stelae like this, bearing images of the king, have been found in a number of houses at Tell el-Amarna, and would probably have formed the centre of domestic devotions.

Two busts of Akhenaten's father, the Pharaoh Amenhotep III, flank the entrance to The British Museum's [Egyptian sculpture gallery](#). The gallery contains a number of statues of other pharaohs and ancient Egyptian deities, monumental pieces of stone architecture and the Rosetta Stone with its three inscribed scripts which led to the decipherment of hieroglyphs – Egypt's ancient form of pictographic writing.



Flinders Petrie and the excavation of Amarna

Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (3 June 1853–28 July 1942), commonly known as Flinders Petrie, was an English archaeologist. He excavated dozens of major sites in the course of his career, including Amarna. Petrie was a pioneer of systematic methodology in archaeology and the preservation of artefacts.

Petrie was the first Professor of Egyptian Archaeology and Philology at University College London (UCL). In 1913, Petrie sold his large collection of Egyptian antiquities to UCL. These are now housed in the [Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology](#). The museum has a collection of more than 80,000 objects.

Petrie stressed in his reports the decorative arts he excavated at Amarna. He admired the 'new' and 'naturalistic' style that differed from the traditional and conventional style of previous generations. Petrie excavated a large quantity of glass at the site, as well as evidence of kilns, showing the city was a centre for large-scale glass production.

After Petrie, various archaeological teams excavated Amarna. In the 1920s and 30s, the Egypt Exploration Society funded several expeditions, focusing on the retrieval of religious and royal structures and 'museum-quality' objects. During this period, The Illustrated London News published extensively on the excavations, helping to create a glamorous and fetishised image of Amarna. The city became an idyllic garden suburb with aesthetically pleasing houses and good sanitation. Akhenaten and his 'dream city' were an ancient precursor of modern progress. In 1977, Barry Kemp of the University of Cambridge took over directorship of excavations at Amarna. His excavation is still ongoing.



Amarna

As part of Akhenaten's reforms, a new capital city was built at Tell el-Amarna. Everything including the placement of the road and temples was for the veneration of the sun god, Aten. Akhenaten built the city on virgin territory in the desert between Thebes and Memphis. To the east of the city, the sun rises between a break in the rising cliffs. The sunrise could be 'read' as the hieroglyph 'Horizon-of-the-Aten' (Akhet-aten). It was for this reason that Akhenaten chose the spot as his city's location. Shortly after Akhenaten's death, the court returned to Thebes, and the city was abandoned. Over time, subsequent rulers such as Horemheb (r.1312/1306-1292 BC) dismantled Amarna's monuments. These actions were deliberate attempts by Akhenaten's predecessors to erase his memory from official record. The period of Akhenaten's rule is called the Amarna period.

The Opera

Akhnaten is the last in a trilogy of 'portrait' operas by Philip Glass, focussing on three individuals who changed the course of history through the power of their ideas. The first, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), focuses on the mathematician – physicist Albert Einstein; *Satyagraha* (1979) focuses on Gandhi's non-violent protest movement; *Akhnaten* (1983) is about the life and religious convictions of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten.

The work is structured as a series of tableaux over three acts, representing the rise, reign and fall of Akhenaten. Though based on fragments of known facts, with characters drawn from known persons in history, the scenes are imaginary.

Characters and voice type

Akhnaten: Pharaoh of Egypt	COUNTERTENOR
Nefertiti: Akhnaten's wife	CONTRALTO
Queen Tye: Akhnaten's mother	SOPRANO
Horemhab: General & future Pharaoh	BARITONE
Amon: High Priest	TENOR
Aye: Nefertiti's father & advisor to the Pharaoh	BASS
The Daughters of Akhnaten: Bekhetaten, Meretaten, Maketaten, Ankhesenpaaten, Neferneferuaten, Sotopenre	3 SOPRANOS. 3 CONTRALTOS
The Scribe	NARRATOR
Priests, the People of Egypt	CHORUS



Synopsis

ACT 1: YEAR 1 OF AKHENATEN'S REIGN, THEBES

Funeral of Amenhotep III

The opera begins with the death of Amenhotep III. We see him first revealed both as a corpse and as a ghostly figure, reciting words taken from The Egyptian Book of the Dead. During the ceremony we see a sacred ritual performed in which the body's organs are carefully taken out and placed into canopic jars and the body is wrapped and embalmed. A ceremony takes place that represents a ritual occurring in the Book of the Dead, in which the Pharaoh's heart is weighed against a feather; if his heart is as light as this it will ensure that Amenhotep will travel through into the afterlife.

Coronation of Akhnaten

The figure of Amenhotep's son steps forward and the ceremony of coronation has begun. The new pharaoh is dressed in sacred robes and the crowns representing upper and lower Egypt are brought together to symbolise Amenhotep IV's power over all of Egypt. Once he is crowned the new Pharaoh once again rises up the stairs to make his first pronouncement.

The Window of Appearances

At the Window of Appearances the Pharaoh reveals his intentions to form a monotheistic religion. He changes his name from Amenhotep IV (meaning "spirit of Amon") to Akhnaten (meaning "spirit of Aten"). Aten, the sun god, is glorified by Akhnaten, his wife Nefertiti, and Queen Tye, his mother. As the trio make their pronouncement at the window the sun rises behind them.

ACT 2: YEARS 5 TO 15, THEBES AND AKHETATEN

The Temple

Akhnaten and Queen Tye begin to make the changes that he has promised. He leads a revolt to banish the old religion and replace it with his own. Akhnaten enters the temple and finds the priests performing the old religion rituals. Akhnaten banishes them and forms the new order of Aten.

Akhnaten and Nefertiti

A simple duet is performed by Akhnaten and Nefertiti, which affirms their love for each other.

The City

The site for a new city is chosen carefully. The new city of Akhetaten "The City of the Horizon of Aten" is built in praise of the new religion.

The Hymn

Akhnaten sings a private prayer to his god. His vision of a new religion and new society is complete.

ACT 3: YEAR 17 AND THE PRESENT, AKHETATEN

The Family

Akhnaten and Nefertiti dwell in an insular world of their own creation with their six daughters. Meanwhile Queen Tye is uneasy. She senses unrest beyond the city's walls. Crowds gather outside the gates and letters arrive expressing increasing concern about Akhnaten's self-imposed isolation.

Attack and Fall

The priests of Amon emerge from the gathering crowds and break through the palace doors. The daughters try to escape and are drawn away from Akhnaten and into the swelling mass. Queen Tye and Nefertiti are also separated from Akhnaten who is finally killed.

The Ruins

Akhnaten's father mourns his son's death. Meanwhile the new Pharaoh, the young Tutankhamun, is crowned in a similar ceremony to that of his father, and the old polytheistic religion is restored.

Intercutting this ceremony a group of modern day students is listening to a lecture given by a professor.

Epilogue

The ghosts of Akhnaten, Nefertiti and Queen Tye are heard from the ancient world once again.

The Text

The libretto was written by Philip Glass in association with Shalom Goldman, Robert Israel and Richard Riddell

The text is derived from original sources and is sung in original languages. The Egyptian texts are taken from the Book of the Dead, from a poem by Akhenaten himself, and from extracts of proclamations and letters contemporary with the Pharaoh's reign. Other sections are in Babylonian Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew. Akhenaten's 'Hymn to the Sun' is sung in English. The words of the narrator, who represents both Scribe and twentieth-century tour guide, are performed in English. At the opera's conclusion, a 'found text' reinforces the opera's sense of distance and ambiguity by reducing the great world-changer and his family to ghosts wandering through the ruins of their lost world.

The Book of the Dead was a collection of spells and illustrations written on a papyrus roll. The papyrus roll was put inside a hollow statue, or sometimes wrapped within the mummy wrappings, and placed in the tomb with all the other things which the dead person would need for the afterlife. The spells and illustrations were intended to give a dead person the knowledge and power they needed to journey safely through the dangers of the netherworld and achieve eternal life in the afterlife.



In Act 1 Scene 1 of the opera, the funeral of Amenhotep III, the chorus sings a passage from the Book of the Dead:

**Ankh ankh, en mitak
Yuk er heh, en heh
ahau en heh**

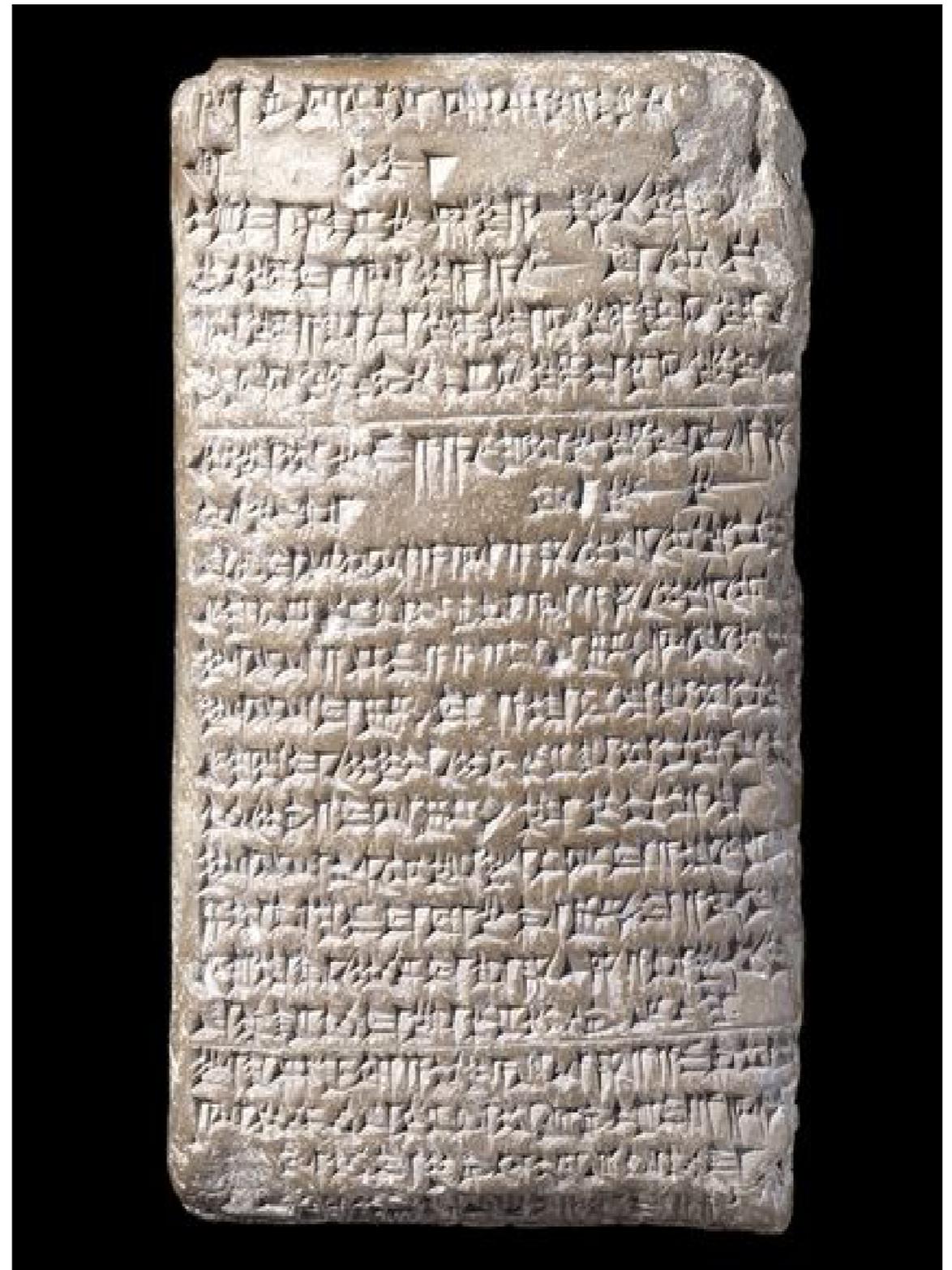
**Live life, thou shalt not die
Thou shalt live for millions
of millions of years
For millions of millions of years**

The words are written phonetically in the score to assist pronunciation.

Egyptian hieroglyphic signs represented a wide variety of observed images, for example, people, birds, trees, or buildings. Some images represent the sounds of the ancient Egyptian language, but consonants only. No vowels were written out. It was not an alphabetic system; one sign could represent a combination of two or more consonants. Egyptologists make the sounds pronounceable by putting an e between the consonants, so mn is read as men. Many other hieroglyphic signs were not pronounced at all but served to clarify meanings, such as a boat following the sound sign dpt which was the word for boat.

Other fragments of text in the opera were sourced from [letters such as this one written on a clay tablet which was sent from Burnaburiash to Amenhotep IV](#)

[This clay tablet is part of The British Museum's collection of 382 cuneiform documents discovered in 1887 in Egypt, at the site of Tell el-Amarna. They are mainly letters dating from the reign of Amenhotep III \(1390-1352 BC\), to the first year of the reign of Tutankhamun \(1336-1327 BC\). The majority date to the reign of Amenhotep IV \(Akhenaten\) \(1352-1336 BC\). This letter is addressed to Amenhotep IV from Burnaburrias, a king of the Kassite dynasty of Babylonia. It is written in Mesopotamian Akkadian, the diplomatic language of the period.](#)



The Music: Philip Glass

One of the most influential contemporary composers, Philip Glass (b.1937) describes himself as a composer of 'music with repetitive structures'. Following a period of study in the 1960s with the influential French teacher Nadia Boulanger, from whom he acquired a technical mastery of basic compositional skills, he also came under the spell of Indian music, in particular its attitude to rhythm.

Although he loathes the term, Glass is often classified as a 'minimalist' composer. He has written a prolific body of work spanning symphonies, concertos, operas, songs, chamber music and notably film scores – his scores for *Kundun* and *The Hours* both earning him Academy Award nominations. Much of his mature work is based on the extended repetition of brief, melodic fragments interwoven to form a rich aural tapestry. Glass limits compositional material to a few elements, which are then subjected to a variety of transformational processes. In Glass's musical world, the listener should not expect typical Western musical 'events' such as sudden climaxes; instead, the listener is immersed in textures that surround and develop.

Glass created a different and distinctive sound world for each of his portrait operas. He remarks 'In *Akhnaten*, my emphasis is orchestral, with choral and solo voices sharing common ground with the orchestra'. Though it is written for 12 solo voices, chorus and narrator, *Akhnaten* is not typically operatic in style with extended orchestral interludes and passages of spoken text. Glass characterises *Akhnaten* through dramatic instrumentation. He employs standard orchestral forces but with the unusual additions of oboe d'amores, extra percussion, celeste and synthesizer, and omitting violins to give the string texture a much darker tone. To emphasise the strength and military might of the Egyptian Pharaohs Glass included a prominent role for blaring brass and pounding drums.

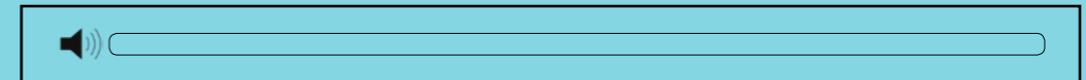
Death was the great subject of the Egyptian culture and the obsession of all the Pharaohs. The opera begins with the funeral of Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III. The music is intended to wake up the gods in the heavenly land of Ra - hence the use of brass and drums - so that they notice his journey after death towards them. The idea of funeral became an overall image for the opera, with the funeral music from Act 1 being reprised and reworked several times and the image of the funeral procession towards the afterlife never being out of our minds.

Unlike some of Glass's more recent operas, for example, *The Perfect American* about Walt Disney, *Akhnaten* uses a higher level of dissonance, especially in the second act, than we have come to expect from Glass. Akhnaten's 'Hymn' is especially dissonant.

The role of the young Pharaoh is written for countertenor, always accompanied by a solo trumpet, which Glass marks *Akhnaten* apart as strange and different, befitting both his unconventional spirituality and his vast historical distance from the modern audience. Glass wrote the character of his wife Nefertiti as mezzo soprano so that they sing in a similar vocal range. The chorus represents both the society and the two priestly factions that were pitted against one another, the old order of Amon priests and Akhenaten's priests who served the new religion of Aten.

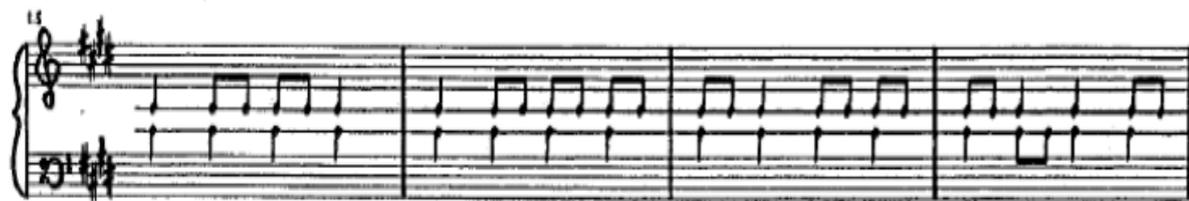
ACTIVITY

Listen to the extraordinary sound of the countertenor's voice in this except from Act 2, The Hymn.



Act 1:1 Funeral of Amenhotep III

1 $\text{♩} = 160$



2



16.

ACTIVITIES

Look at this excerpt from the score and listen to the extract



With a partner, try clapping the first eight bars, one person clapping the crochet pulse bass line and the other clapping the top line. Make sure the pulse is steady.

Try creating a few of your own two bar rhythms and practice clapping them. You can make them as simple or complicated as you like. Layer them on top of each other to create a more complex texture then, using only two different notes, try adding pitch to compose a melodic line (like Philip Glass has done from fig.2 alternating between and E and an F# in the bass line)

Compose a short fanfare or funeral march using the rhythms you have created. Consider what emotional state you want to communicate: celebration of eternal life, grief, respect, anger or acceptance. You should think about how you will use the following musical devices to communicate these ideas: instrumentation, dynamics, tempo and articulation.

The Production

The opera had its UK premiere at ENO in 1985.

The new 2016 ENO production is directed by Phelim McDermott and conducted by Karen Kamensek

[Click here to listen to director Phelim McDermott talking about the production:](#)



Director's Notes

The challenge of directing a Philip Glass opera is to develop a vocabulary for his non-narrative style of work. During rehearsals we explored how we might perform it so that it could sustain an intensity throughout the whole piece. The score gives only an indication of the events that happen. Each scene has a title, for example 'Funeral of Amenhotep III' but there was very little further constraint. This allowed us to create our own narrative within the piece. We found that performing anything quickly didn't work with the shape and character of the music. We therefore developed a performance practice that relied on slow movement. In each of the Glass opera I've worked on, we've found a different visual language for this: in *Satyagraha* it was through puppetry, sellotape and newspaper, in *The Perfect American* it was through animation. In *Akhnaten* we have developed a choreographic juggling language that uses the systemic patterns in juggling to create visual rhymes that complement the music. We were inspired by images from the period that show the ancient Egyptians juggling balls.



Notes from the rehearsal room

To address how we might stage some of the scenes in the opera, we introduced rehearsal techniques developed by Michael Chekhov which concentrate on physical movements through space, notably moulding, floating, flying and radiating. This was particularly useful for the family scene without words at the beginning of Act 3. We began by moulding the daughters together. They began to discover a common movement and even began to breathe together. Later in the scene we introduced the technique of radiation as the performers moved around the space. From these movement dynamics, a narrative started to develop. When we linked the two sections it became clear that the moulding movements suggested the development of a strong family bond, which gradually radiated outwards. Similar images of a tight family unit radiating power can be found on stelae from the period.

ACTIVITIES

Try using these Michael Chekhov techniques with your group of students. They are a useful way of creating a group dynamic before starting to improvise a scene.

Begin by asking the group to explore their own movement through space, thinking about the dynamics of moulding, floating, flying and radiating. Gradually ask them to extend this movement awareness to include the people around them. Notice how the group starts to develop a common movement and begin to breathe together.

These slow movement techniques allow focus to be drawn to each character and the intention behind their movements. Explore the character qualities and drama that can emerge when one person is asked to walk slowly across a space or down some stairs.

Listen to The Family Scene at the beginning of Act 3 and use these movement techniques to begin to create your own staging ideas.



The Design

The set has been designed by Tom Pye.

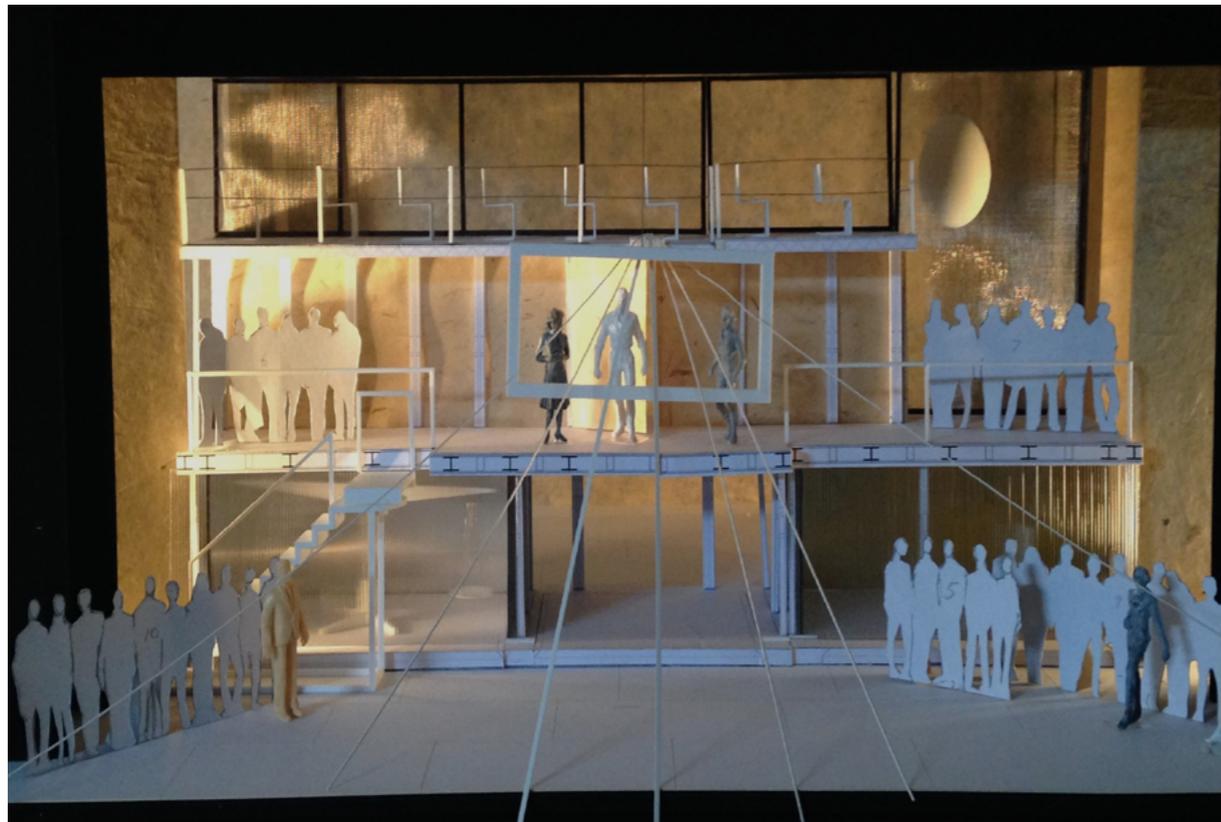
The opera jumps between time, from the funeral of Amenhotep III to the world of the tour guide. The production references two periods: the ancient Egyptian world of the 18th dynasty (approx. 1350BC) and the time of rediscovery of this world in the early 20th century.

The overarching design concept for the production is the idea of viewing the Egyptian world through the lens of the early 20th century. The set is inspired by the first photographic images from the discovery of the tombs, with the idea of something from the past being brought back to life, and of light breaking into a space that hasn't seen light for many years. Colours are muted as if beneath layers of dust. The set is based on hieroglyphic panels and paintings from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, with a backdrop of papyrus. It is quite formal in its structure with three tiers in a vertical wall, and different activities taking place on each level. In the first layer there are three chambers – one lead, one gold, and one completely open to the back. Designing for a Philip Glass opera is different to designing for a more classical, narrative-led opera. For Akhnaten the focus is on slowly moving tableaux – images or sequences which take time to unfold. Being less prescriptive than a traditional opera, there is much more freedom with the design and with the stories we tell within each scene or tableaux.



White card model box photograph, Act 1 Funeral

The ancient Egyptian gods judged how the dead person had led their life to decide if they deserved to be given eternal life and enter the afterlife. The dead person's heart was weighed on a set of scales against the feather of truth. If the scales showed the dead person was free from evil, they were declared 'true of voice' and admitted to the afterlife. If not, their heart would be eaten by the 'Devourer' monster and they would cease to exist – forever. The scales have been represented as part of the stage set, shown here stage right



White card model box, Act 1 Window of Appearances, showing the rays of light emanating from the pharaoh Akhnaten

The new order of Akhnaten's reign and focus on the sun god Aten, is represented in Act 2 with more intense colours and an orb that radiates light, breaking through the three tier set that depicts the old world.



White card model box photograph, Act 2 The City

To solve the practical challenge of building such a large orb on stage and storing it between performances, a giant balloon is used. It is inflated and deflated during the intervals.

Tom Pye worked closely with the lighting designer Bruno Poet to realise the best way of lighting the balloon so that it appears to radiate light and retains its spherical shape from the audience perspective. The lighting develops throughout the scene, creating a transition from the light falling on the orb's surface at the beginning to light emanating from inside the orb at the end. This transition reflects the development of Akhnaten's new religion and focus on the life giving power that radiates from the sun god Aten.

The costumes have been designed by Kevin Pollard. They extend the design concept for the production, blending elements from the 1920s with clothing that has seemingly been buried for millennia in the Egyptian tombs.

The chorus wear headdresses of broken stone and skulls, wrapped in layers of hessian, inspired by mummified animals. They depict a dark and mysterious image of the old Egyptian world, avoiding clichéd Egyptian symbolism. Some members of the chorus are dressed in clothing from the 1920s.

Costume design drawings by Kevin Pollard.



4 milliners have been working to create the hats and headdresses for the production.



Examples of source material and inspiration for costumes and headdresses.



Akhenaten is depicted in many stelae from the period as having an unusual physical appearance, with a swollen stomach and feminine features. His costumes have been designed to present a silhouette of this physicality, with jodhpurs and a low slung waist line as shown here in these early costume designs by Kevin Pollard.





The members of the royal family are dressed in costumes inspired by images from statues and sculptures of the period. A wig of red hair was found in the tomb of Queen Tye so she is depicted in the production with red hair. Images on stelae from the period show Akhenaten, Nefertiti and their children all with blue hair which inspired the costume design for Nefertiti and her daughters.



