

Satyagraha Learning Resource

Learn more about Philip Glass' opera *Satyagraha* and explore the ideas behind English National Opera's production.



Contents:

Satyagraha: Context

Find out more about Gandhi's philosophy which inspired the opera

Satyagraha: Music

Explore the music of Philip Glass

Satyagraha: Staging

Learn about director Phelim McDermott's concept for this production

Satyagraha: Design

Find out more about the production set designs



Figure 1: Alan Oke as Gandhi in ENO's production of *Satyagraha*, 2013

Photograph by Donald Cooper

Satyagraha: Context

The opera *Satyagraha* is one of a trilogy of 'portrait' operas by American composer Philip Glass, celebrating individuals who inspired change through the power of their ideas.

Satyagraha is a meditation on the early life and work of Mahatma Gandhi, whose campaign of non-violent protest against racism and social injustice changed the course of history in the twentieth century and his ideas still resonate today.

Born in 1869 in Gujarat, Gandhi moved to London at the age of 18 to train as a lawyer at the Inner Temple, before spending the early years of his career working in South Africa (1893-1915). The discovery of diamonds in the 1860s and later gold, had triggered an economic boom in South Africa in the second half of the 19th century, resulting in an intensification of British control over the indigenous population and a struggle for power between the British, Boers and Zulus.

By the 1890s, the roots of a segregated society of white and black people that was to be formalised in the apartheid system when South Africa's National Party came to power in 1948, were already becoming entrenched. The large Indian community that had settled in the country also faced discrimination. Gandhi witnessed numerous incidents of racial injustice – individuals ordered to remove their turban, denied the vote or forcibly ejected from buses and trains due to the colour of their skin – and experienced bullying and prejudice against himself. These experiences underpinned his determination to focus his attention on challenging the laws that governed social justice and civil rights.

Gandhi recognised the strength of galvanising individuals together towards a common goal. He promoted peaceful resistance as a tool for change, organising strikes and mass protests, and founded a weekly newspaper *Indian Opinion* to disseminate his ideas amongst his fellow Indians. The newspaper also provided a means of alerting the wider world to the social injustices in South Africa, spreading news about the poor conditions of Indians living in the colonies which was to shape Indian political history and influence their struggle for independence from British rule, in which Gandhi played a vital part when he returned to India in 1915.

The opera is structured as a series of tableaux that depict significant moments in Gandhi's life in South Africa from the 1890s until the eve of the First World War. The title is taken from the phrase Gandhi coined to describe his philosophy – a compound of two Sanskrit nouns, 'satya' meaning 'truth' and 'agraha' meaning 'holding on'.

The libretto, assembled by the playwright Constance DeJong and composer Philip Glass, is a collage of Sanskrit texts from the sacred Hindu book the *Bhagavad Gita* - a meditation on how to prepare oneself for a spiritual fight - with non-linear interludes pervading the storyline of Gandhi's actions in South Africa. Each act is named after a thinker who influenced or worked with Gandhi, or who was inspired by his actions, bringing into focus other individuals who protested against the conditions of their time.

Act 1 remembers Leo Tolstoy whose ideas about how humans could live together harmoniously in self-sustaining communes inspired Gandhi's experimental Tolstoy Farm community in the Transvaal; Act 2 is presided over by the great Indian philosopher and poet Rabindranath Tagore who is recognised, alongside Gandhi, as the founder of modern India, though the two men respectfully challenged each other's views regarding the future of the country after freedom from British colonial rule; Act 3 commemorates Martin Luther

King whose leadership of the civil rights movement in the United States of America in the middle of the 20th century was influenced by Gandhi's ideas.



Figure 2: Gandhi (centre) at his law office in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1905

Satyagraha: Music

Philip Glass is a contemporary American composer born in 1937. His vast musical output includes opera, symphonies, chamber music, songs and film scores. His compositions, which he calls "music with repetitive structures", are renowned for their minimalist musical style. *Satyagraha*, written in 1979 and premiered in 1980, is the second in the trilogy of 'portrait' operas, the first being *Einstein on the Beach* (1975) and later *Akhmat* (1983).

Satyagraha is not a conventional opera. Many scholars have called it a 'para-opera': a work that intends to oppose the musical and dramatic expectations of Western operatic audiences. The opera is scored for nine solo voices, chorus and a greatly reduced orchestra comprising only strings and woodwind to create a distinctive instrumental colour without percussion, horns and brass. In typical eighteenth and nineteenth-century opera, arias, duets and chorus numbers were clearly differentiated in their contrasting musical styles and formed new sections in the musical score.

In contrast, the music of *Satyagraha* is written in continuous through-flowing scenes where solo, ensemble and chorus singing form part of one musical atmosphere, weaving in and out of the whole, and emotions are conveyed through changes in musical texture. This musical structure builds on the beginnings of the through-composed structure of opera championed by composers such as Wagner and Strauss in the late nineteenth century with operas such as *Salome* and *The Ring Cycle*.

Glass' compositions typically involve short repeated musical phrases, often using repeating rhythms and musical phrases that slowly morph over time on top of a stable tonal harmony. This creates an atmospheric sound world that can be perceived as a suspended moment in time. In *Satyagraha*, for example, typical features of 'minimalism' are used in a variety of ways throughout the opera, as illustrated in the scanned score extracts in the Photo Gallery: in Act 2, Scene 2 short arpeggio orchestral patterns are repeated above a simple bass line; solo vocal lines are written in linear, syllabic phrases that outline the tonal harmony of the music section, as in the example from Gandhi's opening scene in Act 1; the ensemble sections are composed in many-layered homophony above ascending repetitive arpeggio figures, as seen in the beginning of Act 3.

The image displays four musical score extracts, numbered 58, 59, 60, and 61, from Act 2, Scene 2 of *Satyagraha*. Each extract shows a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The upper voice (treble clef) features arpeggiated chords that are repeated multiple times, indicated by 'x' followed by a number (e.g., x4, x3, x6). The lower voice (bass clef) provides a simple, steady bass line. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The extracts illustrate the minimalist style of Philip Glass, characterized by repetitive structures and a focus on texture and rhythm.

Figure 3: orchestral patterns in Act 2 Scene of *Satyagraha*

gan.
kri- pu- ya pu- ru- ya vish- to

Figure 4: Solo vocal line in Act 1, Scene 1 of *Satyagraha*

20^{x1} 21^{x2}

mp 1. yu- tru ka- tā tuu
2. tuu- na- vri- tim a-

mp 1. yu- tru ka- tā tuu
2. tuu- na- vri- tim a-

mp 1. yu- tru ka- tā tuu
2. tuu- na- vri- tim a-

mp 1. yu- tru ka- tā tuu
2. tuu- na- vri- tim a-

mp 1. yu- tru ka- tā tuu
2. tuu- na- vri- tim a-

mp 1. yu- tru ka- tā tuu
2. tuu- na- vri- tim a-

NOTE: L.H. (1) TO (2) IS FOR GENERAL PURPOSES ONLY; DOES NOT APPEAR IN ORCHESTRAL SCORE.

Figure 5: Ensemble vocal writing in *Satyagraha* Act 3

Satyagraha: Staging

This production is a collaboration between ENO and theatre company Improbable, directed by Phelim McDermott. It was created in 2007 and has been seen at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, as well as revived at the London Coliseum in 2010 and 2013.

McDermott's concept stems from his recognition of a connection between the way in which the theatre company Improbable works and Gandhi's ideal of satyagraha: of people taking responsibility both as individuals and as a collective to enact change. This mirrors Improbable's work with ensemble casts, bringing together artists of different disciplines.

Although much of the action of *Satyagraha* tells the story of one man, McDermott brings together in this production a collective of singing and non-singing artists who work together to portray a dramatic narrative that functions on two levels in each scene— that of Gandhi's storyline and a more abstract evocation of the themes within the opera. In several scenes, members of the Skills Ensemble manipulate striking oversized papier maché figures alongside the principal singers, filling the stage and commenting upon the action.

These abstract features are another way for McDermott to make on-stage sense of the multi-layered and non-linear libretto, in which the audience experience the work's meaning through different times, spaces and styles, and in which characters collide in unexpected ways. McDermott chooses to physically represent onstage the icons that each act is named after, placing them in vantage points within the set as if they too meditate on the action below. Actors from the Skills Ensemble play the icon figures as silent roles looking down from high windows placed within the set, portraying the overseeing inspiration and embodiment of the ideas of satyagraha.



Figure 6: Phelim McDermott's production of *Satyagraha*

Photo by Donald Cooper

Satyagraha: Design

Set designer Julian Crouch and director Phelim McDermott worked together to create a set which reflects the complex layers and themes of the opera *Satyagraha*.

The team decided to choose humble materials to build up their theatrical world, referencing the living conditions of many people in South Africa at the turn of the century. Newspaper is used in the giant papier-mâché figures and base elements of the set such as the floorboards, reflecting the importance of Gandhi's paper *Indian Opinion*. Set structures are made from corrugated iron, reflecting the typical building materials of this time.

The use of video projection in the production draws attention to the fact that developments in photography and film during Gandhi's lifetime meant that he is one of the earliest historic figures captured on film. Video design company 59 Productions collaborated with Crouch to create images, key words and messages that are overlaid and projected onto the set in repetitive patterns, mimicking the repetitive phrases of Glass' music. For McDermott, these techniques seek to suggest a rapid succession of thoughts that are abstractly related to the narrative action for the audience to consider in each scene.

Costumes, designed by Kevin Pollard, are a mix of Edwardian English and traditional Indian styles.



Figure 7: Video projection on the set of *Satyagraha*

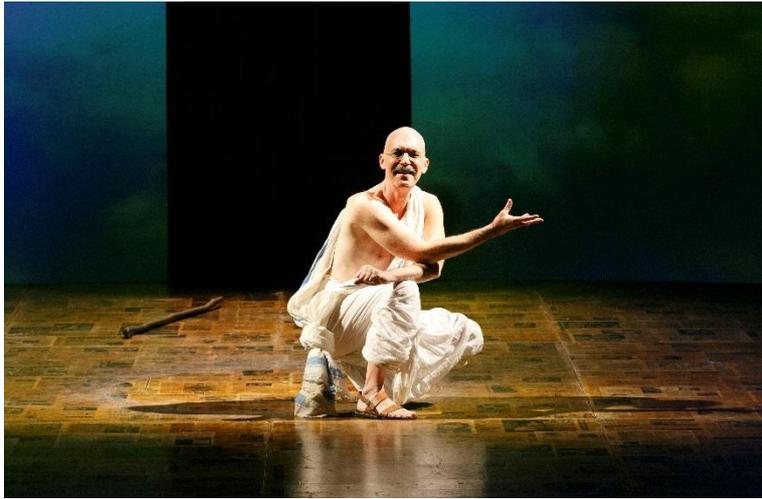


Figure 8: Newspaper is used on the *Satyagraha* set floor

Photos by Donald Cooper



Figure 9: Corrugated iron is used to create *Satyagraha* set buildings

Photo by James Gower



photo by catherine ashmore

Figure 10: Giant papier-mâché figures made of newspaper join the singers onstage

Photo by Catherine Ashmore



This learning resource is produced by ENO Baylis, the learning and participation department of English National Opera.

To read more about ENO Baylis' work with adults, higher education students, young people and schools or to see how you or your group can get involved, please visit www.eno.org/learn or email a member of the Baylis team: baylis@eno.org

To learn more about other ENO productions, please visit www.eno.org



Figure 11: Previous ENO Baylis Youth Projects responding to productions of *Jenufa* and *The Winter's Tale*