

Philip Glass

Gray Matter

BY KYLE GANN

At a recent meeting of the Chicago Music Alliance, the one-time Lyric Opera marketing director Earl Schub opined that musicals like *Jesus Christ Superstar* constituted our real 20th-century musical heritage, rather than all that "modern cacaphonia" and theorized that the great composers of our time had been seduced into writing for television and film, rather than the concert hall. (Sure. Listen to the background music for *The A-Team* to hear the modern Beethoven.) In the discussion that followed among a score of Chicago performers and administrators only one person (and she a composer) voiced any dissent. Such is the mentality that new music has long fought in Chicago.

Which is ironic, because Chicago has a new-music appetite far larger than local institutions are willing to satisfy. In '82 Chicago's New Music America engendered more lay enthusiasm, with crowds of 2000 a night, than the festival has before or since. Kronos, the Rova Sax Quartet, and Diamanda Galas have played to SRO audiences, and September 28, when the Lyric Opera gave Philip Glass's *Satyagraha* its midwest premiere, a near-houseful jumped to its feet when the composer came onstage. Chicago may house America's largest new music vacuum.

One of the few presenters who believes is the Lyric's general director, Ardis Krainik, whose vision is bringing the conservative Lyric into the 20th century. The Lyric approached *Satyagraha* with a mixture of pride and condescension, as though their imprimatur would lend the

work of this rather naughty fledgling composer an aura of respectability, as if it had lacked it in its Rotterdam, New York, and Stuttgart performances. And indeed, this sumptuous production almost justified that insinuation. Of the productions, I missed the Rotterdam premiere on which the Lyric's production was based, though I am told that the major difference was an enlargement of scale. I further suspect that *Satyagraha* has never before looked and sounded so smooth, so glib, so natural, so thoroughly assimilated. If any production could force this square peg of an opera into a round-holed repertoire, this was it.

In 1981 BAM staged the Glass/De Jong tale of Gandhi's resistance movement with a white/gray austerity that reflected minimalism's alleged less-is-more ideology. Famous for no-expense-spared sets, Lyric Opera doesn't have "austerity" in its vocabulary, and they splashed *Satyagraha* with what it had been screaming for: vivid color. The fabulous costumes and red-and-blue skins of Krishna and Prince Arjuna, pulled rickshawlike by elaborate monsters, were not the only reminders that Hinduism is, after all, one of the world's most spectacular cultures. Enchanting visual effects gave the opera a structural framework beyond that inherent to the music; the matches lit in Act II by the *Satyagraha* followers setting fire to their registration cards were gracefully echoed in Act III when stars suddenly appeared over the solitary and still optimistic Gandhi. Such visual craft,

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along with Clare West's dashing choreography, compensated for much of the music's predictability.

Glass's static music leaves *Satyagraha* patently open-ended as to dramatic requirements, and even the Lyric hasn't determined whether that's the work's genius or curse. The Stuttgart Opera took a



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Gandhi (Douglas Perry): he slept around.

decadent, *Lulu*-like approach, and one can imagine some 22nd-century Peter Sellars having a postpostmodern blast. David Pountney's staging (he did Rotterdam, too) vacillated between naturalistic drama and symbolic pageant. Gandhi's expulsion from the train in Scene I was as ritualistically repetitive as an early process piece, but when the workers assembling *Indian Opinion* newspaper pretended to confer on editorial decisions while actually singing (in Sanskrit) "Whatever the noblest does, that too will others do," a subtle incongruity crept in. Such discrepancies await a tradition for solving them, but in the end I hardly think that operagoers who so easily swallow the camels of Puccini and Wagner are going to strain at Glass's gnat.

Most such kinks were rendered moot by a superb cast, headed by Douglas Perry, who's done every Gandhi except Stuttgart, and whose sincerity and understated command of the stage have set his stamp on *Satyagraha*. The other roles are disturbingly interchangeable, but Carl Glaum's bottomless-pit voice as Krishna,

Henry Raney's heated Rustomji, and Pamela Laurent's righteously indignant Mrs. Alexander made for electrifying moments. Best of all, conductor Christopher Keene has developed a mastery for sweeping an orchestra through Glass's virtuosic arpeggios, and the Lyric's playing was free of the lapses that plagued the piece at BAM. *Satyagraha* was written for machines, not humans, but I still found more power in this swelling, real-life performance than on the absurdly overprocessed CBS recording.

As the Lyric proved to its own amazement, *Satyagraha* in 1987 is controversial only by reputation. By setting his story in a language with virtually no native speakers and wrapping it in deadpan music that implies no stage action, Glass excised from opera the two things that had been considered essential, but which had been, in actuality, ignored. He's a reformer impatient with reformers, not a visionary like Gluck or Wagner, but a shrugging acceptor of workaday realities. (His Cutty Sark endorsements point to the same trait.) For those inured to the pretense and lip service of grand opera, Glass's matter-of-factness is an illusorily scary move, a rug pulled out to reveal a gaping but imaginary abyss.

In reality the work only has one flaw, and it's a whopper: the entire opera is utterly horizontal, without a single vertical articulation anywhere: Each scene by itself is full of tranquil or rousing beauty, but by mid-Act II the ear is starved for a sudden interrupting chord, a ritard, a climactic (and nonrepeating) melody. The opening scene's interminable crescendo is irresistible, but the promise it makes is never fulfilled. I've always heard you can figure out a composer's sex life from his music, and if Brahms could never reach a climax, Glass has mastered the withholding of the semen to an exasperating extent. What better composer, I suppose, to portray Gandhi, who slept with women in order to resist their charms? ■

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