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**PHILIP GLASS'S SATYAGRAHA  
ROTTERDAM, SEPTEMBER 5-6, 1980**

KEITH POTTER

Musically speaking, Holland often seems, from our shores, to be excitingly radical: open to the new, to the experimental, even to the lavishly expensive avantgarde experience (after all, the Dutch still seem to have the money). Two years ago the Holland Festival had visits from Cage, Kagel and Stockhausen in the same week; this year it's been among the first to mount parts of Stockhausen's music-drama *Licht*. And while acting as willing host to what must be the most grandiose operatic project since *The Ring*, the Netherlanders have also initiated a few departures of their own in that now traditionally most conservative medium. I well remember the 'circus opera' *Houdini* by Peter Schat (the nearest thing the Dutch have to Peter Maxwell Davies) in 1977: a veritable annus mirabilis for Dutch opera which also saw the premieres of Hans Kox's *Dorian Gray* and *Axel*, a jointly composed venture by Jan van Vlijmen and Reinbert de Leeuw.

One of the ways in which Holland differs so markedly from Britain is by its support for the American repetitive, systemic or process musicians, call them what you will. The 'minimal music composers', as the Dutch still insist on calling them, have gone down almost embarrassingly well there. Steve Reich has been a hit in Holland for years; La Monte Young and Terry Riley have both visited (which is more than they ever have here, at least during the last decade or so). Some years ago there was a special festival for the minimalists, to which even some British representatives were invited.

The only American process composer to have indulged in operatic or at least theatrical ventures so far is Philip Glass. Holland was quick to mount his first 'opera' *Einstein on the Beach*. And now the City of Rotterdam has been responsible for the commissioning of a second, *Satyagraha*, written for the Netherlands Opera Company and premiered in Rotterdam's Stadsschouwburg on September 5. Dutch devolution being what it is, the opera was seen in Utrecht, Scheveningen and Amsterdam by the end of its run on September 23.

*Einstein on the Beach*, a collaboration between Glass and Robert Wilson first performed in 1976, was not so much an opera, more a five-hour extravaganza (for a company of 21, who have to sing, act and dance, a solo singer, a solo violinist — who represents Einstein himself — and the composer's regular ensemble of amplified flutes, saxophones and electric organs) in four continuous acts which has no plot in any conventional sense and in which the presumed hero is sought rather than found.

The hero of *Satyagraha* is Mahatma Gandhi: unambiguously so in that, visually at least, he is a 'realistic' operatic character sung by a conventional operatic tenor. He appears in all seven scenes of the opera's three acts and is variously surrounded by other very real-looking characters — a wife, a secretary, co-workers both Indian and European — who perform ordinary activities: working on a farm, working on a newspaper, engaging in demonstrations of peaceful protest. The plot of the opera is concerned with the story of the years Gandhi spent in South Africa at the turn of the century, before his more famous exploits in India. *Satyagraha* is the name of the movement Gandhi formed to practise what is commonly known as 'passive resistance'; it was directed at European racial discrimination against Indians living in South Africa with some eventual success.

In other ways, too, the opera *Satyagraha* is quite traditional. Glass has deliberately chosen to write for the forces to be found in the average opera house: nine singing parts for the usual range of male and female soloists, three non-singing parts, a chorus (not large) and an orchestra modest and normal in every respect except that there is a prominent part for electric organ. There are traditional operatic set-pieces: big arias in which Gandhi stirs up the Indian crowd to burn their registration cards in a ceremonial protest against the repressions of the Black Act or, at the end of the opera, sums up the power of *Satyagraha* to overcome evil with the aid of religion; the offstage chorus which begins the last act (and which is curiously reminiscent, to English ears, of Holst's 'Neptune' from *The Planets* in both harmonic character and mood).

So far so conventional; and *Satyagraha*'s traditional virtues should do a great deal to endear it to any operagoer who likes Massenet or Puccini, say, as well as Holst. But where Glass and his librettist, the American novelist Constance DeJong, score most particularly and most powerfully is in the ways in which these reassuringly familiar aspects of both drama and music are combined with the more radical ones, redefining the old in the context of the new. For the characters in *Satyagraha* are not 'real' in the sense of having real dialogue with one another in a language which the audience understands. The entire libretto is drawn from the *Bhagavad-Gita* (part of the vast Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*) which, as Gandhi's 'dictionary of daily reference', relates with ease to the more clearly narrative aspects of each scene as a kind of philosophical commentary; the cast sings in Sanskrit from DeJong's own phonetic translation. Another important aspect of the opera which brings it closer to the genre of 'radical interior drama' than to conventional, exterior realism is the 'figurative counterpart' watching over each act from a high platform at the back of the stage: Leo Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Luther King are the three silent roles representing the *Satyagraha* movement's past, present and future — a brilliant dramatic stroke.

Musically, too, *Satyagraha* combines the diaphanous diatonic euphony familiar from much process music with the rigorous additive rhythmic structures derived from Indian music which have been an essential feature of Glass's compositions for the last decade or so. The opera contains some of his best music to date; the difference from his earlier work lies largely in the fact that it is filtered through the familiar textures of late Romantic operatic vocal line and full opera orchestra to make a new and refreshing synthesis of unfamiliar manner and familiar means.

Glass's debut with 'conventional' opera in the conventional opera house was enthusiastically acclaimed in Rotterdam on the first night, and already Stuttgart Opera has not only scheduled it but also requested another; it looks very much as though the composer may now devote himself largely to opera. The Netherlands company has made a very good job of the first production, with some fine sets and costumes by Robert Israel, a moving Gandhi, vocally extremely consistent over a four-hour evening, from Douglas Perry and a cast and orchestra under Bruce Ferden which had settled much more happily to the score by the second night. Since the producer was David Pountney, shortly to take over at ENO, it is perhaps not too much to hope that England may yet benefit from Holland's enterprise.