
REVIEWS

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Review of *Einstein on the Beach: Opera Beyond Drama*, Jelena Novak and John Richardson (eds.), Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, 350 pages, ISBN: 978-1-4724-7370-7

In his autobiography, *Words without Music*, Philip Glass elicits how the audience at the premiere of the opera *Einstein on the Beach* “was totally enraptured [...] They were screaming and laughing – practically dancing” (Glass 2015, 364–5). Indeed, since that performance at the Avignon Festival in 1976, Robert Wilson and Glass’s ground-breaking five-hour work has prompted countless debates on its interpretation.

In *Einstein on the Beach: Opera Beyond Drama*, Jelena Novak, Researcher at the Center for the Study of the Sociology and Aesthetics of Music at NOVA Uni-

versity of Lisbon and John Richardson, Professor of Musicology at the University of Turku has compiled a collection of essays, interviews and reminiscences on this seminal work. In light of the 2012–15 revival of the opera, the idea for the book was conceived following the “*Einstein on the Beach: Opera after Drama*” symposium organized by Sander van Maas and Jelena Novak at the University of Amsterdam in 2013. The conference coincided with a performance by De Nederlandse Opera, and the event featured a conversation between Glass and Richardson. Two years later, Richardson hosted the “Minimalism Unbounded” conference – the Fifth International Conference on Minimalist Music at the University of Turku and the Sibelius Academy, which provided yet another springboard for the publication.

The interdisciplinary and holistic nature of the book is illustrated in the contributions by experts in the fields of music, dance, architecture and theater. Its layout reflects the structure of the opera itself: five ‘Knee’ chapters (representing the “Knee Plays” within the opera), consisting of interviews and reminiscences, and four Parts (reflecting the four Acts), presenting scholarly chapters from a range of artistic perspectives.

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Susan McClary's Foreword evaluates the impact of *Einstein* on the subsequent development of the operatic form, and its reaction against high modernity; Glass's innovation is contextualized within new currents in popular music during the 1970s, although McClary concedes that understanding why listeners gravitate towards such styles is a future inquiry. In the introduction, Novak and Richardson approach the question of how operatic *Einstein* actually is, and they discuss the work in terms of "opera beyond drama", or "postopera" (xxvi). Postmodern heroism and neosurrealism are addressed, as are the temporalities and neutral mood of the opera.

Knee Chapter 1 presents Glass's interview, in which he firstly recalls the work's early performances. Glass refers to the emotional power of music over image, with the music being the "vehicle" that takes the audience to the image – a journey that makes the audience "own" the work (5–6). Evaluating how *Einstein* is related to his current work, Glass concludes that the "language of the work hasn't change all that much but its position has shifted" (11).

Part 1, "Einstein on the Shores of Culture", opens with Robert Fink's chapter analyzing the use of radio broadcast data in the opera's libretto as contributed by Christopher Knowles. Fink examines the broadcast flow of the WABC radio station, and its "forward momentum" is considered analogous to the flow of *Einstein*'s libretto (33). *Einstein*, Fink concludes, "rests in a basic dialectical conflict between modern and postmodern ideas of representation" (44).

Johannes Birringer describes the work as "a new-mythical time machine" (65), and it is examined in the milieu of Wilson's overall theatrical output. The formal techniques employed in the opera are mapped out; the significance of the beach is also explored, which is considered "a hypnagogic event, a drifting by of a distant early warning system of changes to come" (*ibid.*).

Reflecting on the cultural political context of Yugoslavia at the time of the Cold War, Miško Šuvaković discusses the reception of the performance at the 10th Belgrade International Theater Festival in 1976. Šuvaković notes how the opera played a role in the cultural politics at the time: its staging at the festival in Belgrade, in advance of the USA premiere, was considered "a statement of mediation both to the East and the West" (77).

In Knee Chapter 2, Robert Wilson is interviewed by Bojan Djordjev, offering an insight into his collaboration with Glass and the dancer Lucinda Childs among others. The malleability of theatrical time is considered, as is the importance of light as a structural device, as influenced by architect Louis Kahn.

Part 2 ("From repetition to representation") opens with Kyle Gann's chapter, which argues that although certain parts of the work are founded upon basic mathematical procedures, other scenes are more freely based on intuition. Drawing on his analysis of chord progressions and formal structures, Gann reveals a sense of unpredictability and variation in the music, particularly in the Train scene and the dances.

Pwyll ap Siôn observes how meanings are found "in the liminal space between the perceiver and that which is

perceived” (108), and the relevance of subject position. Such concepts as estrangement, fragmentation, irony, and personalization are applied to the debate; ap Siôn argues that although meaning “is certainly not indelibly fixed in the opera”, the relationship between “what is represented in it and what one may think it represents” offers an approach to its interpretation (124).

Avra Sidiropoulou addresses Wilson’s visual authorship, and explores such matters as the use of form, bricolage, and metaphors. For Sidiropoulou, the work is “a meditation on life” (132), combining mystery with the sublime; its humanistic elements contrast with the critical views of the opera as “being cold and stilted, devoid of meaning” (136).

Knee Chapter 3 presents a conversation between Childs and Novak, recalling her collaboration with Wilson, and her work on the 1984 production. Childs explains how the choreography derives from the music itself; her thoughts on the 2012 revival of the opera are elucidated, and noted that it was “emotional to be on the outside looking in” (146), although such distance allowed her to interpret the work from a different perspective.

In the initial chapter of Part 3 (“Beyond Drama”), Leah G. Weinberg examines both the organizational role of dance within the overall structure, and the actual content of the dances. Childs offered an alternative style to de Groat’s original choreography, Weinberg notes, with Glass and Childs using their formal training in non-classical ways. Subsequent productions of the opera are discussed, in addition to the re-contextualized uses of Glass’s music in other dance productions.

Zeynep Bulut looks at the use of “foreground speech” in the opera (175), and explores such concepts as obsession and indifference. The “conception of the beach heightens a similar symmetry between excessive sense and nonsense” is subsequently discussed (188).

In the opening part of Knee Chapter 4 (“Artists recall and respond”), Suzanne Vega provides an insight into Glass’s compositional thinking by drawing on her recollections of conversations with the composer. The chapter proceeds with writings by Juhani Nuorvala and Petri Kuljuntausta; Nuorvala describes the impact of hearing *Einstein* for the first time, and its influence upon his current compositions. Kuljuntausta recalls hearing the early works, and later *Einstein*, which influenced his work in different ways. Tom Johnson recollects attending a rehearsal of the opera prior to its premiere, commenting on such features as its orchestration and the technical demands upon a singer. The chapter concludes with a talk between Peter Greenaway and John Richardson, covering a wide range of topics relating to minimalist music.

The final part of the book, “Operating machines and their ghosts” opens with Sander van Maas’s writings, which address the absence of intermissions within the work. The sense of totality in the opera is explored; moreover, van Maas argues how the audience members in fact “overhear” the performance (224), with the freedom to enter and leave the auditorium being central to the listening experience.

Jelena Novak explains the pitfalls of re-interpreting the work at the Stuttgart Opera in 1984. Novak divulges her own

response to this production, particularly to the impressive Spaceship scene. The site-specific Staatsbankberlin productions (2001, 2005), the State Opera of South Australia production (2014), and other performances, are discussed comparatively. Different interpretations of the Spaceship scene reveal the directors' understanding of the opera, Novak concludes.

In Knee Chapter 5 ("Critical excavations"), Peter T'Jonck focuses on Lucinda Childs's contribution, and writes on her collaboration with Glass on another projects, *Dance*, which led to her choreography for *Einstein* in 1984. Frits van de Waa analyses the critical receptions, particularly in relation to the premiere and the 2012–15 revival.

Published over forty years after the legendary performances at the Avignon Festival, this book offers an abundance of fresh debates and fond reminiscences of the work. This review has been able to highlight only some of the topics addressed in this impressive collection. Simply put, this edited compilation is a ground-breaking and multifaceted examination of a landmark piece of theater, and it is written in a very approachable and clear style. Not only is a highly valuable contribution to the study of opera studies, but also to an array of other artistic disciplines.

Cited Works

Glass, Philip: *Words without Music: A Memoir*. New York: Norton, 2015.

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On the Margins of the Musicological Canon: the Generation of Composers

Petar Stojanović, Petar Krstić and Stanislav Binički, Biljana Milanović (ed.), Belgrade, Serbian Musicological Society, Institute of Musicology of the SASA, 2019, 378 pages, ISBN 978-86-80639-52-9

On the Margins of the Musicological Canon: the Generation of Composers Petar Stojanović, Petar Krstić and Stanislav Binički [Na marginama muzikološkog kanona: kompozitorska generacija Petra Stojanovića, Petra Krstića i Stanislava Biničkog] is a thematic collection of papers published by the Musicological Society of Serbia (MSS) and Musicological Institute of the SASA initiated by the international scientific meeting of the same name organized by the MSS from December 1st – 2nd, 2017 on the occasion of the 140th anniversary of the birth and 60th anniversary of the death of Petar Stojanović (1877–1957) and Petar Krstić (1877–1957), and the 145th anni-

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