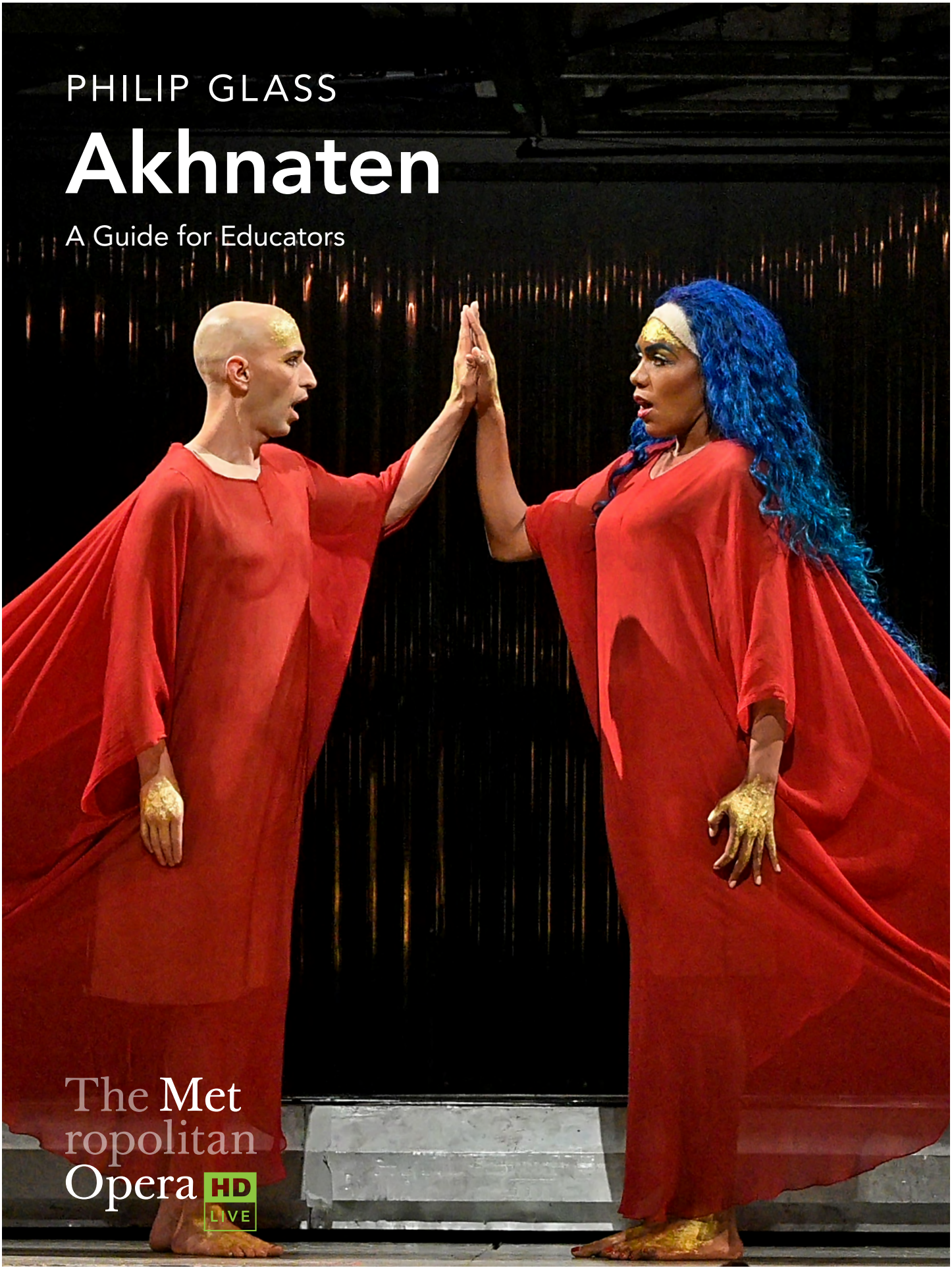
PHILIP GLASS

Akhnaten

A Guide for Educators



The Metropolitan Opera HD LIVE

Akhnaten

In the late 19th century, archaeologists working on the banks of the Nile made a remarkable discovery: some 400 fragments of letters addressed to a pharaoh named Akhnaten. The significance of the find was unmistakable, but who was this mysterious pharaoh? Unlike other Egyptian leaders, whose towering pyramids, richly decorated tombs, and exquisite temples left an indelible mark on Egypt's landscape, Akhnaten was cloaked in mystery. As archaeologists dug into this forgotten pharaoh's legacy, they unearthed a series of religious and social reforms so bold, so counter to ancient Egyptian traditions, that his successors felt compelled to erase all traces of his reign.

In 2019, Philip Glass's landmark opera *Akhnaten* received its Metropolitan Opera premiere. Directed by Phelim McDermott, the Met's production offered a mesmerizing mix of ancient imagery and modern stage spectacle. Yet McDermott made clear that the production was not intended to authentically represent Akhnaten's life. Instead, McDermott explained, he hoped to "create a mythical, dreamlike version of ancient Egypt," one that "communicates what it was like for people in the early 20th century to rediscover this ancient world." Star countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo agrees. "This production offers us a view of Egypt like it would have been imagined in 1922, when English explorers found Tutankhamun's tomb," he explains. "It's a representation of fantasies about ancient Egypt, mixed with images inspired by real ancient artifacts. So what you see is a *creative* depiction of history."

This guide takes the idea of a "creative depiction of history" as its jumping-off point, inviting teachers and students alike to ask: How do we construct narratives about the distant past? What can modern art teach us about the ancient world? And what can archaeological discoveries teach us about the modern age? As this guide delves into *Akhnaten*'s music, drama, and design, it will invite students to explore a variety of methodologies for studying history, literature, art, and the complex worlds of both the past and the present.


COSTANZO


BRIDGES


LÁRUSDÓTTIR


JAMES

THE WORK

An opera in **three acts, sung in ancient Egyptian, Akkadian, Hebrew**, and **English**

Music by **Philip Glass**

Libretto by **Philip Glass**, in association with **Shalom Goldman, Robert Israel, Richard Riddell**, and **Jerome Robbins**

First performed **March 24, 1984**, at the **Staatsoper, Stuttgart, Germany**

PRODUCTION

Phelim McDermott
Production

Tom Pye
Set and Projection Designer

Kevin Pollard
Costume Designer

Bruno Poet
Lighting Designer

Sean Gandini
Choreographer

PERFORMANCE

The Met: Live in HD
Broadcast: November 23, 2019

Anthony Roth Costanzo
Akhnaten

J'Nai Bridges
Nefertiti

Dísella Lárusdóttir
Queen Tye

Zachary James
Amenhotep III and the professor

Karen Kamensek
Conductor

This production was originally created by English National Opera and LA Opera

In collaboration with Improbable

Production a gift of the Rosalie J. Coe Weir Endowment Fund and the Wyncote Foundation, as recommended by Frederick R. Haas and Rafael Gomez

Additional funding received from The H.M. Agnes Hsu-Tang, PhD. and Oscar Tang Endowment Fund, Dominique Laffont, Andrew J. Martin-Weber, The Walter and Leonore Annenberg Endowment Fund, American Express, and the National Endowment for the Arts

HD Live in Schools is supported through a partnership with the New York City Department of Education.

Opera in the Classroom

The Metropolitan Opera Educator Guides offer a creative, interdisciplinary introduction to opera. Designed to complement existing classroom curricula in music, the humanities, STEM fields, and the arts, these guides will help young viewers confidently engage with opera whether or not they have prior experience with the art form.

On the following pages, you'll find an array of materials designed to encourage critical thinking, deepen background knowledge, and empower students to engage with *Akhnaten*'s story, music, and themes. These materials can be used in classrooms and/or via remote-learning platforms, and they can be mixed and matched to suit your students' individual academic needs.

Above all, this guide is intended to help students explore *Akhnaten* through their own experiences and ideas. The diverse perspectives that your students bring to opera make the art form infinitely richer, and we hope that your students will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE:

Philosophical Chairs: A series of questions that will introduce students to the opera's main themes while sparking their creativity and encouraging debate

Who's Who in *Akhnaten*: An introduction to the opera's main characters and their roles in the plot

Synopsis: A complete opera synopsis for young readers

The Source: Information about the literary sources and/or historical events that inspired the opera

Timelines: One or more timelines connecting the opera to events in world history

Deep Dives: In-depth looks at various topics relating to the opera

Active Exploration: Interdisciplinary activities connecting the opera to topics in music, the humanities, STEM, and the arts

THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE, YOU'LL ALSO FIND:

Critical Inquiries: Questions and thought experiments designed to foster careful thinking

Fun Facts: Entertaining tidbits about *Akhnaten*

Opening ceremony of the 1984 Olympics
U.S. AIR FORCE

FUN FACT

In 1984, between the European and American premieres of *Akhnaten*, Philip Glass was invited to compose the music for another modern event with its roots in the ancient world: the Olympics! At the opening ceremonies in Los Angeles on July 28, American decathlete Rafer Johnson lit the Olympic cauldron as Glass's newly composed work played in the background.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS AND *AKHNATEN*

This guide invites students to explore the opera through:

Music
Critical Listening and Aural Skills
Improvisation
Composition
History
Anthropology
Archaeology
Material Cultures
Visual Arts
Creative Writing
Dance and Movement
Speech and Communication
Social-Emotional Learning

Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play a game of Philosophical Chairs, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element of the game is what happens next: Participants discuss their points of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussion. (For more tips on using Philosophical Chairs in a classroom or via a remote-learning platform, see the activity description in your Google Classroom.)

Each topic statement is deliberately open-ended yet ties into a number of the themes present in *Akhnaten*—including Akhnaten's sparse archaeological record, the challenges of enacting social change, and how the present can shape our understanding of the past. As you and your students explore and learn about *Akhnaten*, you can return to these statements: What do they have to do with the opera's story? How might these questions help us explore the opera's story, history, and themes?

THE STATEMENTS

- Ancient history is relevant today.
- Teenagers are fit to lead a nation.
- Political power should be kept in the hands of a single person.
- A nation's citizens should obey their leader.
- It is okay to force people to do something for the betterment of all.
- Your name is a unique identifier and should not be altered.
- Traditions must be maintained and adhered to.
- It is easy to change your beliefs if someone tells you to.
- You have a civic duty to stand up for what you believe in.
- Images of people always reflect who they really are.
- History can be erased.
- Your view of the future is shaped by the past.
- Your view of the past is shaped by the present.

Keep in mind that the process of this activity is just as important as the statements themselves. Imagine a world in which everyone actively listens to one another and engages in respectful dialogue, honoring others and showing respect for the wide array of diverse ideas and opinions that others hold. Philosophical Chairs fosters exactly this kind of space, encouraging students to take what they've learned and change the global landscape for generations to come.

Who's Who in *Akhnaten*

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Akhnaten An ancient Egyptian pharaoh	ahk-NAH-ten	countertenor	Young and idealistic, Akhnaten envisions a new religion for the people of ancient Egypt.
Nefertiti Akhnaten's wife	neh-fer-TEE-tee	mezzo-soprano	Nefertiti's love for Akhnaten blinds her to the growing anger outside the palace walls.
Queen Tye Akhnaten's mother	Queen TIE	soprano	Unlike Nefertiti, Queen Tye knows the people of Egypt are unhappy about Akhnaten's reforms, and she worries about what will happen to her son.
Amenhotep III Akhnaten's father (a ghost)	AH-mun-HOH-tep	spoken	Although the opera begins with Amenhotep III's funeral, the pharaoh's ghost appears throughout the opera to offer commentary (in English) on the events taking place onstage.
The Professor		spoken, played by the same actor as Amenhotep	At the end of the opera, the professor can be seen lecturing a group of students about archaeology and ancient Egypt.


AKHNATEN


NEFERTITI


QUEEN TYE


AMENHOTEP III


THE PROFESSOR

Synopsis

ACT I *Year 1 of Akhnaten's reign, Thebes.*

FUNERAL OF AMENHOTEP III: Amenhotep III has died, and preparations for his funeral are under way. Priests mummify Amenhotep's body, removing his organs, placing them in canopic jars, and wrapping and embalming the body. When his heart is removed, it is weighed on a giant scale; according to an ancient Egyptian custom, if the heart is as light as a feather, the pharaoh will successfully travel on to the afterlife. Amenhotep III's ghost looks on, reciting prayers from the *Book of the Dead* as these rituals take place.

CORONATION OF AKHNATEN: Amenhotep III's son, Amenhotep IV, steps forward and prepares to be crowned emperor. He is dressed in sacred robes, and the two crowns representing Upper and Lower Egypt are brought together and placed on his head. Amenhotep IV climbs a flight of stairs and looks out over the country he now rules.

THE WINDOW OF APPEARANCES: The new pharaoh stands at the Window of Appearances and announces his desire to form a new religion dedicated to the sun disc, or "Aten." He has also decided to change his name to "Akhnaten," which means "Spirit of Aten." Akhnaten, Nefertiti (his wife), and Queen Tye (his mother) praise the Aten as the sun fills the sky behind them.

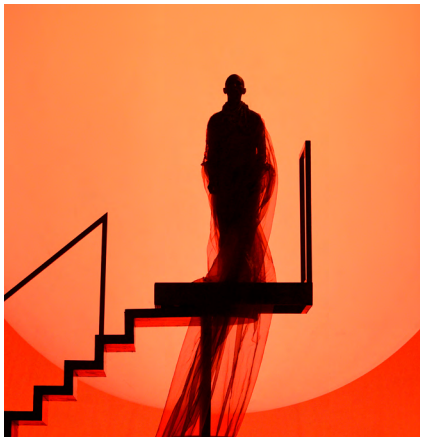
ACT II *Years 5 to 15, Thebes and Akhetaten.*

THE TEMPLE: Akhnaten and Queen Tye have begun to implement Akhnaten's religious reforms, replacing the old religious order with new rituals that venerate the Aten. So when Akhnaten enters a temple and finds priests performing the old religious rites, he is furious. He banishes the priests and decides to build a new temple dedicated entirely to the Aten.

AKHNATEN AND NEFERTITI: Akhnaten and Nefertiti sing a duet celebrating their love. Then they turn toward the sky and sing of their love for the Aten.

THE CITY: A temple to Aten is no longer enough for Akhnaten. Now, he wants to build a whole new city where he can rule Egypt while venerating the sun god. He will call this new city Akhetaten, "Horizon of Aten." Workers begin building Akhetaten in the Egyptian desert as Akhnaten looks on.

THE HYMN: Akhnaten sings a prayer to the Aten.



ACT III *Year 17 and the present, Akhetaten.*
THE FAMILY: Akhnaten, Nefertiti, and their six daughters live in peaceful harmony in their new palace. Yet outside the city, revolution is brewing. Queen Tye has heard that the Egyptians, unhappy about Akhnaten's changes, come regularly to protest at the gates of the city.

ATTACK AND FALL: The crowds of protesters have only grown, and now they are led by the priests of Amun (the priests of the old religious order). When the priests and protesters manage to break down the palace doors, Nefertiti, Queen Tye, and Akhnaten's daughters are dragged away. Akhnaten is attacked and killed.

THE RUINS: The ghost of Amenhotep III is seen mourning his son's death. Meanwhile, Akhnaten's body is prepared for burial, and the new pharaoh, Tutankhamun, is crowned. The old religion is restored. The Aten is forgotten, and Egypt's many traditional gods are once again venerated by the priests and people alike.

As Tutankhamun's coronation takes place, a modern-day professor tells a group of students about the archaeological discoveries that have helped bring ancient Egypt to light.

EPILOGUE The ghosts of Akhnaten, Nefertiti, and Queen Tye look down on the ruins of their city, and we hear their voices one final time.

FUN FACT

Akhetaten ("Horizon of Aten") was built on the east side of the Nile, about halfway between Memphis and Thebes, on a flat plane bordered by two high cliffs. At the eastern edge of this plane, the cliffs come together to form a valley; each morning, the sun disc (or "Aten") can be seen rising between the steep valley walls. The result is a geographical feature closely resembling the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for "Akhet" or "horizon," thereby evoking this divine city's name.

The Source

ANCIENT TEXTS COLLECTED AND COMPILED BY PHILIP GLASS, SHALOM GOLDMAN, ROBERT ISRAEL, RICHARD RIDDELL, AND JEROME ROBBINS

When Philip Glass decided to write an opera about the pharaoh Akhnaten, he faced an unusual creative challenge: How do you write an opera about a historical figure when almost all record of that person's life has disappeared? In contrast to the well-documented subjects of Glass's previous operas, Albert Einstein and Mahatma Gandhi, Akhnaten—today more commonly referred to as "Akhenaten"—is known to modern archaeologists only through a small, fragmentary collection of ancient artifacts. In fact, this scarcity of archaeological evidence was partly intentional: In the years following Akhnaten's death, his successors, scandalized and outraged by the pharaoh's religious reforms, had systematically destroyed the monuments of Akhnaten's reign. Add to this the inevitable ravages of three and a half millennia, and it is no wonder that archaeologists have pieced together only a spotty record of the pharaoh's life. Yet rather than viewing this fragmentary record as an impediment to understanding Akhnaten's story, Glass viewed it as a vital part *of* the story—a story encompassing not merely the 17 years of Akhnaten's reign but also the 3,500 years that have since elapsed.

Above: A view of the site of Akhnaten's city of Akhetaten during excavations in 1922, the same year Tutankhamun's tomb was discovered. Print from an archival negative
EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY

Chest of Akhnaten
ca. 1353–1336 BCE
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Working closely with Shalom Goldman, an expert on ancient religions of the Middle East, Glass set about piecing together a series of vignettes representing what is known of Akhnaten's life. Some of these scenes were inspired by artifacts from Akhnaten's reign (for instance, a relief of Akhnaten and Nefertiti sitting with their six daughters), while other scenes were inspired by ancient Egyptian artifacts more generally (such as the *Book of the Dead*). The libretto, too, was stitched together from fragments of ancient text, including an inscription from a boundary marker found near the ruins of Akhnaten's city Akhetaten, fragments of the "Amarna letters" (diplomatic correspondence from Akhnaten's court), and a prayer likely written by Akhnaten himself (the beautiful "hymn to the sun"). The text for the Prelude comes from the Pyramid Texts, the earliest extant funerary literature from ancient Egypt, while the text for Amenhotep III's funeral comes from the much later *Book of the Dead*. The love duet between Akhnaten and Nefertiti was taken from a poem found in a sarcophagus at the Valley of the Kings, while another text (from the "Attack and Fall" scene at the end of Act III) was found in the tomb of Akhnaten's close relative Tutankhamun. Glass and his collaborators also included Psalm 104 from the Hebrew bible (sung by the chorus after Akhnaten's hymn) and, as a gesture toward the importance of modern archaeology and tourism in bringing ancient Egypt back to light, passages from Frommer's and Fodor's guides to Egypt, spoken by the Professor at the end of Act III.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Rather than trying to fill in the missing pieces of Akhnaten's story, Philip Glass decided to embrace the fragmented nature of the pharaoh's archaeological record. What might be the benefits to telling a story this way? What might be some of the drawbacks? If you were preparing an opera (or a play/novel/television show/graphic novel/etc.) about Akhnaten, would you do the same thing?

Above (top to bottom): Finger ring depicting King Akhnaten and Queen Nefertiti as Shu and Tefnut
ca. 1353–1336 BCE
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Relief of Queen Nefertiti
ca. 1353–1336 BCE
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Amarna letter: Royal letter from Abi-milku of Tyre to the king of Egypt
ca. 1353–1336 BCE
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Timeline

THE COMPOSITION OF *AKHNATEN*

Philip Glass

Nadia Boulanger
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS,
PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION

Ravi Shankar
MARKGOFF2972/WIKICOMMONS

1937

On January 31, Philip Glass is born in Baltimore. He begins studying violin at age six and flute at age eight. Sitting on the living room floor and listening attentively to his older brother's piano lessons, he soon picks up keyboard fundamentals, as well.

1952

At age 15, Glass begins attending the University of Chicago through their early admission program. He will receive his BA in Liberal Arts in 1956.

1957

Hoping to attend the Juilliard School in New York, Glass spends six months in Baltimore working as a crane operator and saving money. He enrolls in Juilliard at the end of the year.

1964–67

Glass travels to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger, one of the most revered music pedagogues of the 20th century. While there, he is introduced to sitar player Ravi Shankar, from whom he learns about the repeating cyclic patterns of Indian classical music. Glass is deeply impressed by this structure, which will later have a strong influence on his "minimalist" style of composition.

1976

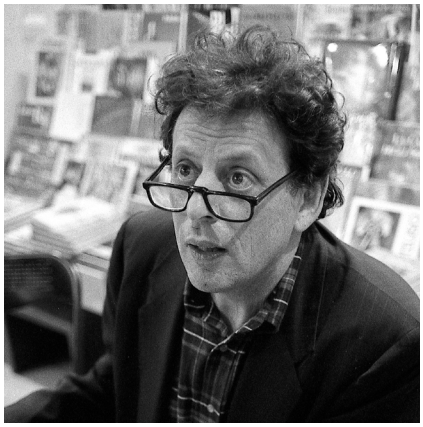
Glass's opera *Einstein on the Beach*, a five-hour work created with theater director Robert Wilson, premieres in France to wild acclaim. On November 21, the opera is performed at the Metropolitan Opera House, which Glass and Wilson have rented for the occasion. *Einstein* marks a decisive turning point in Glass's career. From now on, much of his time will be devoted to composing music for the stage.

1979

Glass visits the conductor Dennis Russell Davies at his summer home in Vermont. Glass's newest opera, *Satyagraha*, based on the life of Mahatma Gandhi, will premiere in Europe the following year, and Davies encourages Glass to turn *Einstein* and *Satyagraha* into the first two parts of an operatic trilogy celebrating great historical thinkers.

Satyagraha

Staatsoper, Stuttgart, Germany
REBECCA BEITER/WIKICOMMONS



Philip Glass
PASQUALE SALERNO/WIKICOMMONS

1980

Satyagraha premieres in Holland at the Netherlands Opera. Glass settles on Akhnaten as the subject for his third historical opera. The trilogy thus includes representatives from three broad categories of intellectual endeavor, with Akhnaten ("the man of religion") joining Gandhi ("the man of politics") and Einstein ("the man of science").

1981–82

Joining forces with Shalom Goldman, an expert on the ancient Middle East, Glass constructs a libretto for *Akhnaten* based on ancient artifacts and texts. Composition of the new opera's music begins in the summer of 1982.

1984

On March 24, *Akhnaten* premieres in Stuttgart, Germany. In November of the same year, it enjoys its American premiere in Houston before traveling on to New York and London.

1986

The *Einstein-Satyagraha-Akhnaten* trilogy is performed in its entirety for the first time, in Stuttgart.

1997

Glass is nominated for his first Academy Award for best original score, for the film *Kundun*. He will be nominated again in 2002 (for *The Hours*) and 2006 (for *Notes on a Scandal*).

2015

Glass receives the National Medal of Arts "for his groundbreaking contributions to music and composition." At the award ceremony, President Obama calls Glass "one of the most prolific, inventive, and influential artists of our time."

2015

Glass receives a Kennedy Center Honor. His fellow 2018 honorees include Cher, Reba McEntire, Wayne Shorter, and the creative team behind *Hamilton*.

Timeline

REDISCOVERING AKHNATEN

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Phelim McDermott, who directed *Akhnaten* for the Met, wanted his stage design to reflect the 1920s, the period when King Tutankhamun's tomb was discovered and ancient Egypt became a major international fad. Do you notice any costumes or other design elements in the opera that evoke this time period?

1353 BCE

The ancient Egyptian pharaoh **AMENHOTEP III DIES**. His son Amenhotep IV is crowned Pharaoh of Upper and Lower Egypt.

RICHARD MORTEL/WIKICOMMONS

c. 1347 BCE

AMENHOTEP IV abolishes the traditional Egyptian religion and **ESTABLISHES A NEW RELIGION** dedicated to the sun disc, or "Aten." He changes his name from Amenhotep ("Amun Is Satisfied") to **AKHNATEN** ("Spirit of Aten") and founds the city of Akhetaten ("Horizon of Aten").

1336 BCE

AKHNATEN IS OVERTHROWN. The pharaohs who succeed him reinstate Egypt's traditional religion and attempt to destroy all traces of Akhnaten's reign.

1887 CE

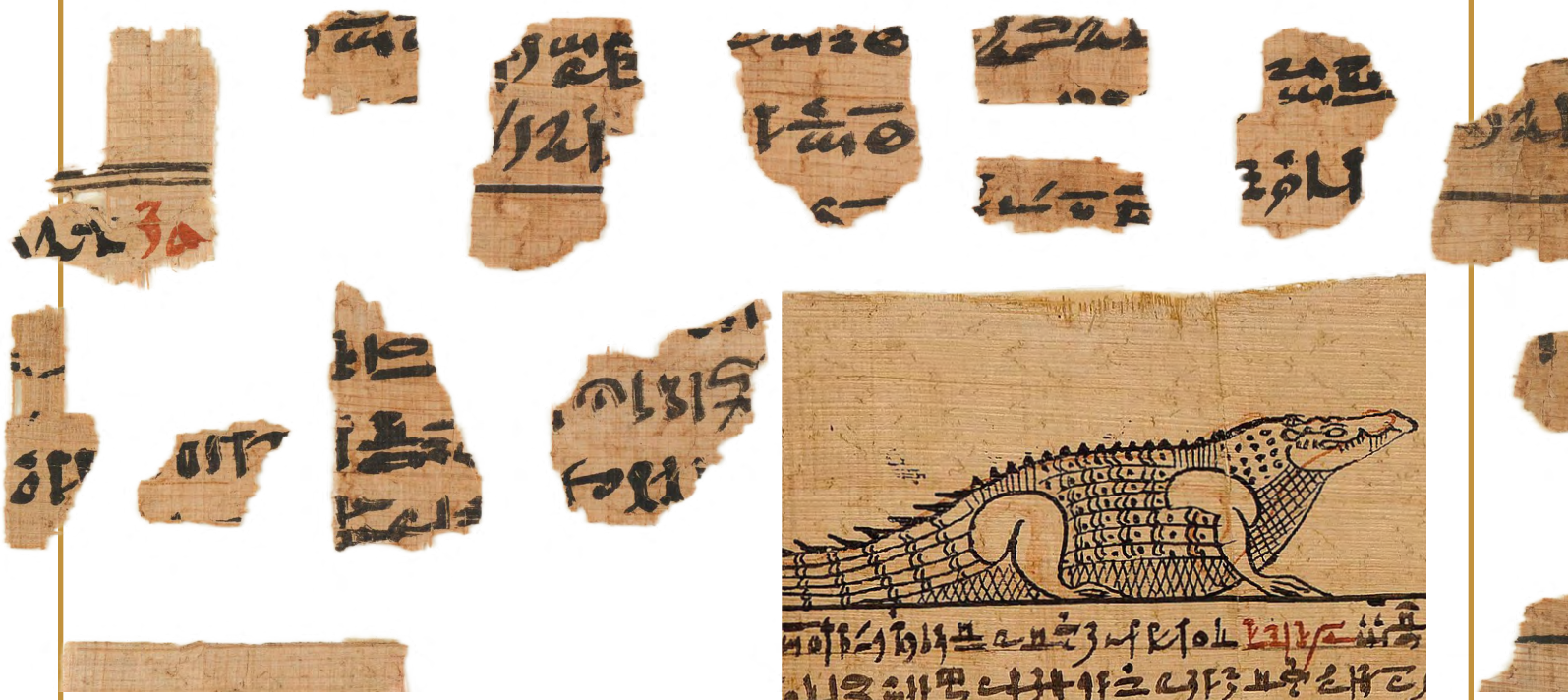
A collection of nearly 400 clay tablets and fragments is discovered at the ruins of Akhetaten, near the modern town of Tell el-Amarna. Mostly consisting of diplomatic correspondence sent to Akhnaten's court, the **AMARNA LETTERS** (as the collection comes to be known) spark archaeological interest in Akhnaten's reign.

1891

The British archaeologist Flinders Petrie conducts the first **FORMAL EXCAVATIONS** of Akhetaten.

1922

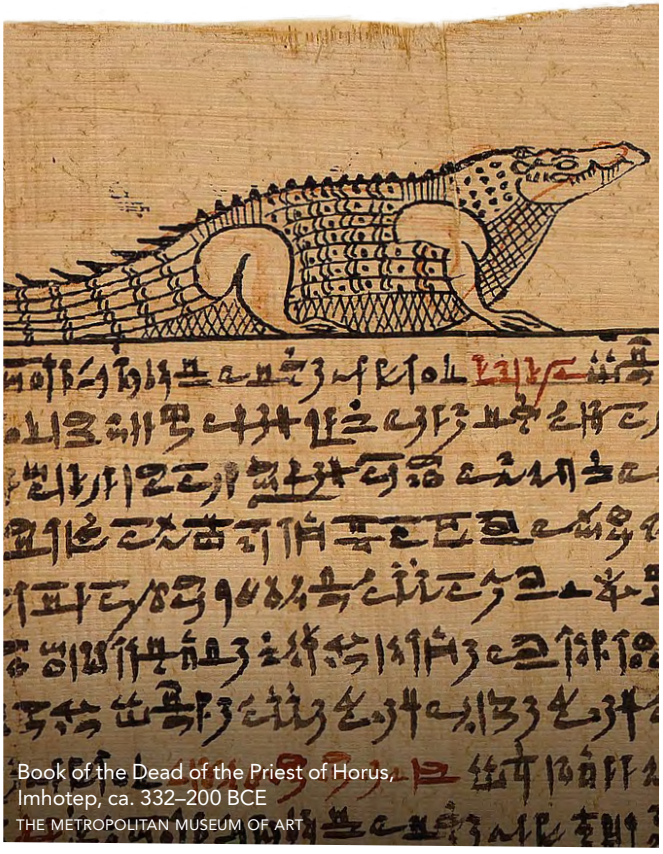
The pharaoh **TUTANKHAMUN'S TOMB IS DISCOVERED** in Egypt's Valley of the Kings. A close relative of Akhnaten, Tutankhamun (whose birth name was actually Tutankhaten, "Living Image of the Aten") was a short-lived pharaoh who played a relatively minor role in Egyptian history. Yet his tomb, untouched by grave robbers for more than 3,000 years, is full of treasures, and its discovery—one of the most famous archaeological finds of all time—sparks a worldwide craze for all things ancient Egyptian.



Deep Dive

THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

For the ancient Egyptians, death was both an end point and a beginning. Although burial signified the end of life on earth, the tomb was the space from which souls could be reborn into the eternal land of the dead, or *duat*, as long as the proper rites were followed during burial—and as long as the dead were adequately prepared for their journey to the afterlife. It was this latter necessity, of equipping souls for their posthumous journey, that gave rise to the fascinating body of Egyptian literature known as "funerary texts." In contrast to the spells recited by priests at the time of burial, funerary texts were intended to be spoken by the soul itself after death. (For this reason, funerary text prayers are written in the first person.) Moreover, since funerary texts were buried with mummies—written on small papyrus scrolls placed over mummies' mouths, carved into tomb walls, and/or painted on the linens in which mummies were wrapped—they have frequently been unearthed during archaeological excavations of burial sites, and numerous examples exist for study in the present day.



Book of the Dead of the Priest of Horus, Imhotep, ca. 332–200 BCE
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The earliest known funerary texts were carved into an interior wall of the Pyramid of Unis around 2250 BCE; in reference to these carvings, all funerary texts from the Old Kingdom (c. 2700–c. 2200 BCE) are grouped under the general title "Pyramid Texts." The funerary texts from the Middle Kingdom (c. 2200–c. 1550 BCE) are known as "Coffin Texts," while the funerary texts dating to the New Kingdom and after (c. 1550 BCE–c. 100 CE) are known as the *Book of the Dead*, a name bestowed on them by 19th-century Egyptologists. Philip Glass and Shalom Goldman drew extensively on funerary texts while crafting the libretto for *Akhnaten*: The text of the prologue comes from the Pyramid Texts, while the chorus from Amenhotep III's funeral is drawn from the *Book of the Dead*.

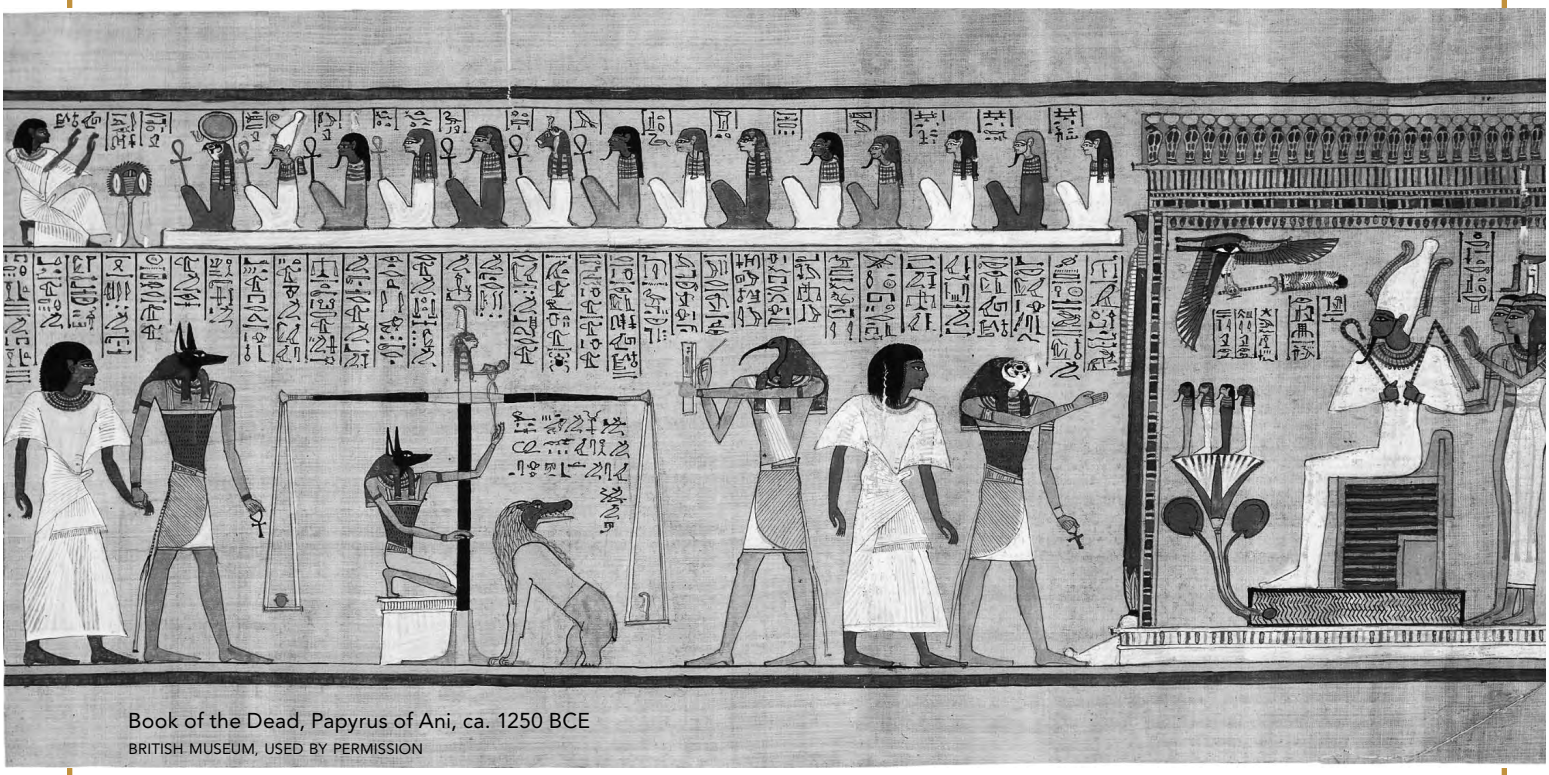
Below you will see an image from a copy of the *Book of the Dead* now in the collection of the British Museum. Prepared for the royal scribe Ani around 100 years after Akhnaten's death, this papyrus scroll is famous for its exquisite illustrations. The panel reproduced here depicts an event featured in the opening scene of *Akhnaten*: the weighing of the heart. In the lower-left corner stands Ani, clad in white, approaching a giant scale. Ani's heart sits in the left pan of the scale, while the right-hand pan holds a feather, representing *maat*, or "divine truth and order." The jackal-headed god Anubis (kneeling under the left arm of the scale) steadies the scale before the weighing begins. Along the top of the panel, gods and goddesses wait to deliver judgment on whether or not Ani will be allowed to travel on to the land of the dead. The ibis-headed god Thoth stands to the right of the scales, ready to notate the results of the judgment. If the scale is balanced, Ani's soul will be allowed to continue on to the afterlife. Otherwise, Ani's heart will be devoured by the creature sitting under the scale, a terrifying monster with the head of a crocodile, the shoulders of a large cat, and the haunches of a hippopotamus.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

What are some traditions in your own community for remembering people after they die?

FUN FACT

It took a long time for Philip Glass to make ends meet through composition; during the 1960s and '70s, he mostly made his living as a mover and taxi driver. This did not mean, however, that his compositions remained unknown. As Glass recalls in his 1987 book *Music by Philip Glass*: "I vividly remember the moment, shortly after [*Einstein on the Beach* played at the Met Opera House], when a well-dressed woman got into my cab. After noting the name of the driver (New York law requires the name and photograph of the driver to be clearly visible), she leaned forward and said: 'Young man, do you realize you have the same name as a very famous composer?'"



Book of the Dead, Papyrus of Ani, ca. 1250 BCE
BRITISH MUSEUM, USED BY PERMISSION

Deep Dive

IMAG(E)INING AKHNATEN

Compare the images on this page. They all represent ancient Egyptian pharaohs. They were all produced in the 14th century BCE. And yet, within these three portraits, we see two strikingly different aesthetic styles. The statue to the right depicts Akhnaten's father, Amenhotep III, and is a classic example of Egyptian portraiture. The lines are straight and strong. The body is muscular. The elbows, hips, and knees form right angles. Amenhotep's neck is obscured by the false beard worn by Egyptian pharaohs, while a heavy headdress surrounds his face. His appearance is chiseled but generic; there are no features that truly distinguish him from the other Egyptian rulers of this dynasty.

Now look at the other two images on this page. Both depict Akhnaten. In one relief, Akhnaten (on the left) sits with his wife, Nefertiti. They both look up toward the Aten, the rays of which can be seen streaming down in bold diagonal strokes. The other relief also depicts Akhnaten, although this time we see only his head. In contrast to the rectilinear statue of Amenhotep, these images are defined by curves. Akhnaten's hips and thighs are voluptuous. His lips are thick, and his face is fleshy. Commentators have observed that Akhnaten seems to have not only male physical attributes but female attributes as well; indeed, in some portraits Akhnaten even seems to have breasts or a pregnant belly.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

How do people in the modern world adjust their images for public consumption? You might think of Instagram filters, Photoshop, or other technological means of adjusting an image. You might also think about clothing, makeup, and the various ways that we change or ornament our bodies to project a certain persona or idea.

Clockwise from top:
Colossal seated statue of Amenhotep III, reworked, reinscribed by Merneptah
ca. 1390–1353 BCE
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Trial piece with relief of head of Akhnaten
ca. 1353–1336 BCE
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Akhnaten, Nefertiti, and three daughters beneath the Aten
ca. 1345 BCE
PERGAMON MUSEUM, BERLIN

RICHARD MORTEL/WIKICOMMONS

So what should modern viewers make of these images of Akhnaten? One possible explanation is that Akhnaten was a hermaphrodite or had a rare medical condition. Archaeologists and medical historians have identified diseases that may have caused these unusual physical features, but without a mummy that can definitely be identified as Akhnaten's, such hypotheses remain conjecture. Other scholars, meanwhile, have suggested that these portraits are not meant to be seen as realistic images of the pharaoh. Instead, they argue, Akhnaten chose to be represented with both male and female attributes because fertility was a central component of his new religion. By straddling the boundary between male and female, Akhnaten could become a singular source of human life. In this, he was akin to the Aten, which nourished and enabled all life on earth with the warmth of its rays.

However we choose to interpret Akhnaten's portraits, it is important to remember that images always tell a story. Today, we curate our images through how we dress, through the use of photographic filters, or through the selection of a particular artist who will paint, sculpt, or photograph us. As your students look at these images of Akhnaten, invite them to consider: If people 3,000 years from now were going to see an image of me, what would I want it to look like?

Elizabeth Taylor in the title role of *Cleopatra*
20TH CENTURY FOX

FUN FACT

Mention the phrase "ancient Egyptian makeup," and an image of Elizabeth Taylor's iconic green-and-black *Cleopatra* cat-eye is likely to spring to mind. Yet there is good evidence that this dramatic makeup was, in fact, part of ancient Egyptian beauty rituals. Green malachite and black galena (a type of lead ore) were the two basic cosmetic pigments used in ancient Egypt; these were mixed with water and applied to the skin with a small spatula of wood or metal. In addition to lending a rich color to the skin, the minerals offered practical health benefits. Galena has antibacterial properties, and it absorbs the sun's rays, acting as a kind of proto-sunglasses or eye-black, like athletes use today. There is also evidence that the shape of the eyeliner was meant to imitate the eye of the falcon-headed god Horus; amulets of this eye, worn as jewelry, were thought to protect the wearer, and it is possible that the quintessential Egyptian "cat-eye" was meant to have a similar effect.

Entrance to the Temple of Khonsu at Karnak
NEITHSABES/WIKICOMMONS

Facsimile painting from the "Green Room" in the North Palace at Amarna
ca. 1353–1336 BCE
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

CRITICAL INQUIRY

If someone from the future were to look through your trash can, what might they discover? What would these items tell them about you?

Deep Dive

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM THE DUSTBIN OF HISTORY

From a modern perspective, it's easy to view Akhnaten as a bold thinker ahead of his time. For his contemporaries, however, Akhnaten's reforms were infuriatingly sacrilegious. As soon as Akhnaten was dead, his successors reestablished Egypt's traditional religion and set about destroying all traces of his reign. Faces were picked out of reliefs depicting Akhnaten and his family. The buildings at Akhetaten were systematically dismantled. References to the Aten were even removed from royal names: Akhnaten's close relative Tutankhaten, for instance, was renamed Tutankhamun, a reference to the traditional Egyptian sun god Amun-Ra. Yet this story of overthrow and destruction, so central to the opera *Akhnaten*'s final scenes, raises an obvious question: If the material markers of Akhnaten's reign were destroyed, how do we know anything about him?

The fact that Akhetaten's building blocks had been detached and desecrated didn't mean they weren't still useful. Egyptian pharaohs, who liked to build large commemorative temples and tombs, were always in need of raw building materials. The carved stones from Akhetaten couldn't be used in a way that would render their imagery visible, of course, but there was another way that Egyptian builders could repurpose these stone blocks: as stuffing materials inside monumental walls. In particular, the pylons (large trapezoidal gates) at temple entryways required a good deal of filler stone, and in the century following Akhnaten's death, the stone blocks from his capital city were used to fill pylons at the temples of Karnak and Hermopolis Magna. Some 3,000 years later, when archaeologists began studying these temples, they discovered the stones from Akhetaten as well.

Studying history through ancient detritus may at first seem strange, but vital historical artifacts have often survived precisely because they were once identified as trash. Medieval bookbinders, for instance, used scraps from old manuscripts to help bind new books; today, these scraps offer the only existing trace of books that are otherwise lost forever. *National Geographic* and other scientific publications often report on archaeological and anthropological discoveries enabled by studying prehistoric garbage piles. In other words, the old adage that "one person's trash is another person's treasure" is nothing short of a fundamental tenet of archaeology.

A Conversation with Anthony Roth Costanzo

Countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo enjoys a remarkably versatile career. Equally at home performing a Tiny Desk Concert for NPR and on the monumental stage of the Met, Costanzo brings his enthusiasm, love of music, and eclectic repertory to audiences all over the world. In the spring of 2019, shortly after returning from a series of triumphant performances of *Akhnaten* in London, Costanzo sat down with the Metropolitan Opera's Kamala Schelling to discuss his voice type, the journey that brought him to the opera stage, and the unique challenges of singing *Akhnaten*'s title role.

KS: Tell us a little bit about how you got into music and singing. What first attracted you to opera in particular?

ARC: I started taking piano lessons when I was six, and it was my piano teacher who first suggested I try singing. I sang a lot of musical theater in my home town in North Carolina, but when I was 11, I decided I wanted to try singing professionally, in New York. I started by singing on Broadway, where I had an amazing time. Two years later, when I was 13, I was asked to do an opera. It was Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, a complicated psychological story with very difficult, very beautiful music, and it had a kind of emotional expression that I hadn't found in other music. I really liked having this connection to human emotion through art—that's what got me hooked on opera. In a more general sense, opera deals with major subjects like love and death: things that happen only a handful of times in our lives. So opera lets us see and think about these major subjects through a lens of beautiful art, which I think is very valuable.

KS: Why and how is opera singing different from the other kinds of singing you've done?

ARC: Opera has no microphones; instead, we use singing techniques that are hundreds of years old to project our voices. If you think about opera as the Olympics of singing—as the most extreme thing that we can do with the human voice—you realize it's all about the mechanics of how our bodies work. You have to use your body to get as much breath as possible, and then you have to control how that breath comes through your vocal cords. If we had no head—if our head was cut off at the throat—vocal cords would sound just like a kazoo. But as we change the shape of our mouth, or manipulate different pieces of skin in our throat, or use any of the other things we learn how to do as singers, that "kazoo" sound bounces around into what we call resonators and takes on shape and color. It's really the shape of your face that determines the sounds you make, which is what is so cool and so deeply human about singing opera.

KS: You're a countertenor, which is an unusual voice type in opera. Tell us about your voice: What is your range, and how do you do it?

ARC: I don't want to rely too heavily on gender, but in the simplest terms I am basically a man singing in a woman's register using what's called "falsetto," or the "head voice." We all have two different vocal registers: our "chest voice," which is the voice that we speak in, and our "head voice," which you can find if you slide your voice all the way up until it cracks—that's where the head voice begins. Now imagine you're stretching a rubber band. The more you stretch it, or the shorter the piece of rubber you have, the higher the sound will be when you pluck it. What I'm doing with my vocal cords as a countertenor is either stretching them out or making them shorter so the sound they produce has a higher pitch. And I'm doing that by only vibrating part of my vocal cords. So we countertenors just take normal physiology, the standard tools that anyone uses when they speak or sing, and then do slightly different things with them.

KS: How did you discover that you wanted to be a countertenor? What made you want to focus on your falsetto range?

ARC: I sang on Broadway as a boy soprano, and I really enjoyed and had a lot of success with it. Then, when I was doing my first opera, people started saying, "Your voice has changed, but you're still singing high; maybe you're a countertenor." I didn't even know what that was, but I thought, "Well, if I can keep singing like this, then great!" So when I was about 13, I started to take lessons and figure out how to sing as a countertenor—very gently and in very simple ways—and I never looked back.

KS: Why do you think Philip Glass chose a countertenor for the role of Akhnaten?

ARC: There are statues and paintings from ancient Egypt that depict Akhnaten with some features—hips, chest, even lips and cheeks—that some people feel look more feminine. So was Akhnaten a hermaphrodite, or was he potentially trying to make himself more feminine because he saw god as the unification of man and woman? Akhnaten saw god as the sun, rather than as a specific, gendered person. And since Akhnaten made himself more female, was in a sense "between" man and woman, I think Philip Glass thought the perfect voice for this leader and thinker would be that of a countertenor, which straddles that line between masculine and feminine.

Costanzo won the Met's National Council Auditions in 2009 (top), later going on to sing three major roles with the company. In 2014 he participated in a middle-school choral workshop at a Bronx school (bottom).

KS: You've sung a good deal of Philip Glass's music. What are some of the challenges of singing his work?

ARC: First of all, memorizing Philip Glass's music is almost impossible! There is a lot of repetition. Philip Glass will take a little chunk of music and repeat it two or three times, and then he'll make a small change and repeat that two or three times, then make another small change and repeat that … So it's easy to get lost. And *Akhnaten* is three hours of music—that's a lot of music to remember, and a lot of repetition! The only way to learn it is to practice, practice, practice. It took me about four months to learn this music by heart. Also, once I enter in *Akhnaten*—which is about 15 minutes into the show—I'm singing almost the whole night through. And so, for me, singing *Akhnaten* is like running a marathon. I have to be really prepared, I have to be really strong vocally, and I have to understand how to pace myself, just like you would if you were running a long race.

KS: *Akhnaten*'s libretto features three ancient languages: Hebrew, ancient Egyptian, and Akkadian. What are the specific challenges of singing those languages?

ARC: Hebrew is a language that still exists, so we know how to pronounce it. Ancient Egyptian and Akkadian are much more challenging, because we don't know exactly how they were pronounced. We know what the consonants were, but (and this is my understanding from talking with Egyptologists and scholars) we don't know exactly what the vowels were. For instance, if you look at how Philip Glass and one of the librettists, Shalom Goldman, chose to spell Akhnaten, you might notice it's with one fewer E than you often see—sometimes it's spelled Akhenaten. That was because we don't know exactly how many Es were in there, so Goldman and Glass thought, "Well, it's easier to say and easier to sing without that extra syllable, so we'll just do the shorter version."

KS: *Akhnaten* isn't, of course, just music and poetry: Like all operas, it also has a huge production that goes along with it. Is there anything in particular we audience members should know going into it?

ARC: I think Phelim's staging is, at its heart, about creating a sense of ritual and a sense of unlocking the spirits of the ancient world through our own concentration and attention. When this opera starts, and the music is very repetitive, and things are happening very slowly, I imagine people often think, "How am I going to make it through three hours of this?" But if you let yourself go there, if you take your mind away from swiping through apps on your phone or clicking through different tabs on your browser and let it slow down slightly to a different pace, the opera grabs you.

Anthony Roth Costanzo in the title role of Philip Glass's *Akhnaten*

Active Exploration

The following activities will help familiarize your students with the plot of *Akhnaten*, forge connections between a variety of classroom subjects, and encourage creative responses to the opera. They are designed to be accessible to a wide array of ages and experience levels.

UP IN THE AIR

Use the videos available on the Met Education website to learn all about juggling from Sean Gandini, the choreographer of *Akhnaten*.

BEHIND THE MUSIC: MINIMALISM

Introduce students to the key stylistic features of minimalist music, and then invite them to compose and perform their own minimalist masterpiece.

AN EPITAPH FOR THE AGES

Ancient Egyptian funerary art was personal and distinctive, celebrating the life of the individual as well as the belief that life continued after death. Study Egyptian funerary art with your students, and then have students create their own funerary art inspired by the plot and characters of *Akhnaten*.

PUZZLE ME THIS

Invite your students to make a jigsaw puzzle from images of Akhnaten. Then have them throw away half of the pieces—what does the resulting puzzle look like? How might this activity relate to the plot of *Akhnaten*? How might it relate to Philip Glass's creative process?

PUTTING TOGETHER A PLOT

Piece together the story of Akhnaten's life by studying some of the artifacts that inspired the opera's plot. Then ask your students to construct a narrative of their own lives through a selection of meaningful artifacts. How might an external observer understand their lives based on the artifacts they chose?

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Imagine that an archaeologist 3,500 years in the future is investigating the ruins of our society. Ask your students to consider: What might this archaeologist find? How might the archaeologist interpret these artifacts? What would these artifacts tell them about our society?

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

These activities directly support the following ELA-Literacy Common Core Strands:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.9
Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9–10.2
Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally), evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9–12.1
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

AKHNATEN PRODUCTION PHOTOS: KAREN ALMOND / MET OPERA
SATYAGRAHA PRODUCTION PHOTO: KEN HOWARD / MET OPERA