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In the opera *Satyagraha*, Philip Glass presents his vision of M.K. Gandhi's fight for social equality in South Africa. The title makes reference to the Sanskrit word that was coined by Gandhi in 1906 and used to describe his philosophy and practice of passive resistance.¹ Together with librettist Constance DeJong, Glass put in place an imaginative and bold musicodramatic plan by framing Gandhi's political struggle and his practice of Satyagraha within the context of the sacred Hindu text, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The opera begins with a staged representation of the allegorical text, with actors portraying the main characters in traditional costumes from the *Kathakali* dance drama tradition of Kerala, India. While this is the only staged representation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in the opera, Glass still manages to frame the story of Gandhi's struggle within the context of the sacred Hindu scriptures by using the text as the libretto for Gandhi's story. This paper examines the ways in which Glass uses musical gestures to track Gandhi's development as a political, social and spiritual leader. I describe Gandhi's symbolic transformation from a mortal visionary into a mythological and deified figure and

¹ Edward A. Leonard, "The Political Theory of Satyagraha: An Introduction and a Plea for Further Study," *The Western Political Quarterly* 22 (1969): 594.

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also examine the ways in which Glass avoids the conventional traps of exoticism in his approach to this innately Indian subject matter.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* begins by depicting two opposing armies poised on a mythological battlefield. The conflicting groups are the Kauravas (led by Duryodhana) and the Pandavas (led by Arjuna), two feuding branches of the same royal family. Arjuna sits in his chariot surveying the battlefield and sees friends and loved ones occupying both sides. He is filled with doubt and wonders if he should proceed with the war. Arjuna asks for guidance from Lord Krishna, who is positioned as his charioteer. Krishna's response makes up the remainder of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, as he puts forth the doctrine of *Karma* (acting out of duty regardless of the outcome)² and ultimately, he convinces Arjuna that the battle must proceed because it is his duty as a warrior to fight.

In the opening scene, Glass draws parallels between Arjuna's and Gandhi's respective impending battles. Gandhi, who is faced with the dilemma of whether or not to take up the fight of racial discrimination in South Africa, "is portrayed as Arjuna, [...] who, in similar circumstances, questions the necessity of battle with its inevitable carnage."³ Gandhi sings a solo, but is soon joined in duet by Arjuna. Glass musically and conceptually positions Arjuna and Gandhi together as passengers in the symbolic chariot; both leaders ask for Krishna's guidance. Gandhi's and Arjuna's shared text is derived from Arjuna's speech in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

² S. Balaram, "Product Symbolism of Gandhi and Its Connection with Indian Mythology," *Design Issues* 5 (1989): 71.

³ Allison Welch, "Meetings Along the Edge: Svara and Tala in American Minimal Music," *American Music* 17 (1999): 192.

My very being is oppressed with compassion's harmful taint. With mind perplexed concerning right and wrong I ask you which is the better course? Tell me and let your words be definite and clear. I am your pupil and put all my trust in you. So teach me.⁴

Krishna answers, but as Allan Kozinn remarks, "rather than having Krishna respond *to* them, Glass has him answer *through* them, in a trio setting of Krishna's injunction to stand resolute for the right that duty prescribes."⁵ Krishna's indirect discourse anticipates the more abstract ways in which Glass musically represents this character throughout the opera.

Although Krishna does not physically reappear onstage after the opening scene, his presence in the opera is sustained through a symbolic motive in the flute - an ascending scale in the Phrygian mode, beginning and ending on E. Glass no doubt recognizes the flute's particular significance in reference to Lord Krishna; in Hindu mythology, Krishna is most commonly depicted holding or playing a flute, perhaps his most defining attribute. David R. Kinsley describes the sound of Krishna's flute as "more than a melody. It is a summons, a call to come to him. It calls the souls of men back to their Lord."⁶

⁴ Philip Glass, *Opera on the Beach* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1988), 122.

⁵ Emphasis in original. Allan Kozinn, "Glass's *Satyagraha*," in *Writings on Glass: Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, eds. Richard Kostelanetz, Robert Flemming (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 183.

⁶ David R. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krishna, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 33.

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Similarly, in Glass's opera, the flute functions symbolically and leads Gandhi back to Krishna through the teachings in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

The first representation of Krishna's presence through this motive occurs in Act I, scene 2. This Krishna flute motive is repeated and figures prominently in this scene, appearing in the interludes interspersed throughout Gandhi's solo passages as well as in the trio numbers involving Gandhi. Glass also features this melody later in the scene, where he superimposes it over an ensemble. The flute motive can be understood as representing the presence or voice of Krishna as he continues to instruct and teach Gandhi, guiding him on his journey. Ruth Cecily Katz describes that in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, "Krishna serves specifically as Arjuna's instructor [and] his guru. Both as Arjuna's charioteer and as his teacher, Krishna [acts] as a helper for the humanized Arjuna."⁷ The voice of Krishna serves the same purpose for Gandhi, guiding his decisions and actions as he begins his battle against social injustices in South Africa; the character of Gandhi thus assumes Arjuna's role in the opera. Gandhi has symbolically replaced Arjuna in the chariot while Krishna continues to be the charioteer, leading and guiding Gandhi with his voice and teachings.

The Krishna flute motive thus demands further musical examination, as it represents a link between Glass's American minimalist techniques and the ancient traditions of classical Indian musical practices. An examination of this scale from the perspective of *Hindustani* (North Indian) music offers an interesting perspective. In *Hindustani*

⁷ Ruth Cecily Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna is, There is Victory* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 132.

music, the organization of pitches or melodies is constructed around the concept of *raags*, or modes. The Krishna flute motive can thus be described in two ways: as the Phrygian scale of Western classical music or as the *Bhairavi raag* of *Hindustani* music.⁸

BHAIRAVI: sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa
PHRYGIAN: E F G A B C D E

An important feature of *Bhairavi* is its role as a morning *raag*, in other words its traditional purpose included its performance only during the morning hours, specifically between 9:00 a.m. and noon.⁹ Interestingly, Glass and his librettist, DeJong, refer to specific times of the day in the libretto. In Act I scene 2, where the first prominent statement of *Bhairavi* in the Krishna flute motive occurs, DeJong specifies in the libretto “Mid-morning (wispy clouds).”¹⁰ Thus, Glass and DeJong incorporate *Bhairavi*, the morning *raag*, in its proper place in the opera according to *Hindustani* tradition. The same motive returns once more at the very end of the opera. This reiteration of *Bhairavi* is once again quite appropriate, since *Bhairavi* is also a closing *raag*; it is designed to be the final *raag* performed in a music concert.¹¹ Through his careful treatment of the *Bhairavi* motive, Glass effectively integrates traditional Indian musical elements into his opera while avoiding the

⁸ S.G. Kanhere, “Some Remarks on Indian Music,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 4 (1926): 111.

⁹ Alain Daniélou, *Northern Indian Music* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1968), 179.

¹⁰ Glass, *Opera on the Beach*, 123.

¹¹ Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West: Bhairavi* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 4.

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“mere surface-level evocation”¹² of exoticism. Indian musical and cultural content is present, but Glass encodes it within the fabric of his composition in a precise and sophisticated manner.

One of the most significant moments during Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement in South Africa was the mass burning of registration cards as a symbolic protest against the Black Act, a law that restricted the movement of non-Europeans and consequently oppressed the entire Indian community.¹³ Under the guidance and leadership of Gandhi, Indians living in South Africa congregated for a prayer meeting that was to be followed by the public burning of registration cards. Glass himself, among others, asserts that the burning of the registration cards was the pinnacle of the Satyagraha movement: “Even greater than the commencement of the movement, Satyagraha now had its baptism of fire.”¹⁴ This event, which is operatically conceived in Act II, scene 3, functions as a highly symbolic moment in the drama in respect to Gandhi’s transformation. After a brief instrumental introduction, Glass introduces a new motive in the flute, a 6-note motive beginning on A that alternates between falling fourths and rising seconds. The final interval is a falling tritone, ending the motive on a G-sharp. The motive as written leaves the melodic idea unresolved, since the G-sharp functions as a leading tone to the tonic, A. The flute, however, does not complete the phrase but instead passes it to the clarinet, which resolves the leading tone and continues the motive in its own range. The motive is stated four times in imitation before Gandhi’s solo passage begins; each motivic occurrence appears in a

¹² Welch, “Meetings Along the Edge,” 195.

¹³ Glass, *Opera on the Beach*, 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

different orchestral voice. The elided instrumental lines create a large cyclical pattern that continually descends in pitch and register while increasing in dynamic intensity.

This cyclical pattern in the opera is a representation of Gandhi's spiritual alignment with Krishna and his transformation into a deified figure. The flute in this passage no longer functions as a symbol for Krishna alone. Rather than accompanying Gandhi's discourse and symbolically guiding his words, the flute initiates a musical line that is taken up by the rest of the orchestra. Glass builds dynamic volume with each restatement of the theme. This transformation of a single instrumental line into a fuller orchestral texture is a metaphor not only for Gandhi's teachings through the Satyagraha movement but also for Krishna's teachings through the *Bhagavad-Gita*; one single voice functions as the starting point for a sweeping, rapidly growing movement. The flute, previously associated only with Krishna, now represents Gandhi as well.

Glass's deliberate manipulation of the flute to represent both of these religious leaders draws attention to the figures' similarities. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Krishna articulates the essence of Hindu philosophy (the doctrine of *Karma*, or unattached duty), thereby spreading his wisdom to Arjuna and ultimately becoming a leader for the Hindu masses.¹⁵ Similarly, Gandhi declares the doctrine of *Ahimsa* (non-violence), spreading his philosophies to the mass Indian population in South Africa and ultimately inspiring future social and political leaders.¹⁶ Through the symbolic use of the second flute motive and its subsequent

¹⁵ Balaram, "Product Symbolism of Gandhi," 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

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treatment in other orchestral voices, Glass places Gandhi and Krishna side by side as spiritual leaders. This scene serves as a representation of Gandhi's transformation from the questioning Arjuna seated in the chariot into a fully deified figure now seated alongside Krishna as a charioteer in his own right.

The final scene of the opera, Act III, scene 3, is rich in symbolism and fully affirms Gandhi's status as a mythological, deified figure. The text of Gandhi's solo is taken from Krishna's discourse:

I have passed through many a birth and many have you. I know them all but you do not. Yet by my creative energy, I consort with Nature and come to be in time. For whenever the law of righteousness withers away and lawlessness arises, then do I generate myself on earth. I come into being age after age and take a visible shape and move a man with men for the protection of good, thrusting the evil back and setting virtue on her seat again.¹⁷

The concept of rebirth is significant in this verse. As Katz explains, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, "by the time Krishna's exposition is concluded, Arjuna has been transformed in devotee par excellence, and has learned of his identity with Krishna himself."¹⁸ In the same way, by the time *Satyagraha* concludes, Glass's Gandhi not only identifies with Krishna but also transforms to become the very essence of Krishna.

¹⁷ Glass, *Opera on the Beach*, 132.

¹⁸ Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata*, 225-226.

Glass represents this transformation through musical means by placing a familiar motive in a new context. The original *Bhairavi*/Phrygian Krishna motive, previously played by solo flute in Act I, scene two, returns in the final scene, except that the motive is now sung by Gandhi; the flute no longer features in any prominent manner. The absence of prominent flute material suggests that Glass has conceptually removed us from the mythological battlefield found in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and has repositioned us on a new battlefield. Gandhi's teachings are equated with Krishna's, and Gandhi is himself the charioteer, informing and instructing those who follow him.

Allison Welsh notes that the eventual "rebirth of Gandhi's ideas and deeds is symbolized through the appearance of Martin Luther King Jr., who was inspired by Gandhi's methods."¹⁹ The non-singing role of Martin Luther King Jr. is present throughout the entire third act. He stands on a raised platform at a podium with his back to the audience, positioned to speak to the masses. In the final scene, Gandhi's supporters are led away one by one, and they reposition themselves as King's audience. King thus represents the future of Gandhi's principles of *Satyagraha*.²⁰ In the final act, Glass fully and completely passes the chariot's reigns from Krishna to Gandhi. It is now Gandhi's task to lead and instruct the new occupant of the chariot: Martin Luther King Jr. The stage action reflects the text's assertion that rebirth occurs in cycles. Glass thus concludes the opera with the symbolic suggestion that the battlefield continues to exist, even as different leaders

¹⁹ Welsh, "Meetings Along the Edge," 194.

²⁰ Glass, *Opera on the Beach*, 120-121.

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assume the position of the charioteer, who serves as guide, leader, and inspirational figure to the masses.

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