

**Oberlin Opera Theater to present
Philip Glass song cycle January 27-29**

by Mike Telin



When composer Philip Glass released his *Songs from Liquid Days* in 1986, the groundbreaking album featuring lyrics by Paul Simon, Suzanne Vega, David Byrne, and Laurie Anderson quickly became Glass's most successful album to date. Writing for *The New York Times*, critic Stephen Holden noted: "The album's six songs are short, oracular reflections on time and love, with imagery that explicitly evokes mystical connections between people and objects, the living and the dead, and portrays dreams as portholes into eternity."

This weekend those portholes into eternity will be reimagined by Jonathon Field when Oberlin Opera Theater presents Glass's *Songs From Liquid Days* as part of Cleveland Opera Theater's {NOW} Festival. Performances will take place on January 27 and 28 in Oberlin's Warner Concert Hall, and on January 29 at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. (Seating is limited for the Oberlin performances. Ticketing information for all events is below.)

The performances will coincide with Philip Glass's 80th birthday celebration on January 31. "He is one of the most important composers of our time," Jonathon Field said during a telephone conversation. "Although he always retained his musical language, he was always pushing boundaries, and I think that's what he was doing with this album. It's a piece that I've liked since it was released — I still have the cassette recording, and often listen to it."

Although Field has always thought *Songs From Liquid Days* would make a great performance piece, he could never figure out how to make it work on stage.

After giving it some thought, Field said he realized that if he shifted the order of one of the songs, a storyline began to appear. “It came about after reading Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. I thought it would be cool to take that, and mash it up with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, because they both explore what happens during the afterlife.”

The 45-minute, fully staged version of Glass’s cycle centers around a main character that Field is calling Dante. “Dante discovers that he is dead, and each of the songs represents little demons or spirits that are stripping away the illusions he’s had that have kept him from achieving a higher realization,” Field explained. During the piece, Dante meets Beatrice, who initially only communicates in vocalise (wordless melody). At the end, Dante and Beatrice find a state of enlightenment that leads into the David Byrne song *Open the Kingdom*. “So the storyline goes from the *Divine Comedy* to Mozart’s *Magic Flute*,” Field said with a laugh.



Field has drawn inspiration for the staging from the allegorical paintings of the late medieval ages, and put them in a modern context. “At one point in ‘Inferno,’ they come up against a group of people who are in the ground with their feet sticking up, so we’ve got people in bags with their legs up in the air,” he said. “Every once in a while, the staging does reference either the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* or the *Divine Comedy*.”

Field said he is looking forward to seeing how the audience reacts to the production, although he is certain they will find the storyline as relevant today as it ever was. “We’re born into this world, and we’re never sure what to expect. We meet strange people, and all sorts of weird things happen to us,” he said. “And hopefully at the end we reach some sort of state of awareness that is better than what we started with.”

Performances of Philip Glass’s *Songs from Liquid Days* are on January 27 and 28 at both 4:00 and 8:00 pm in Warner Concert Hall at Oberlin Conservatory. Admission is free, but seating is limited and reservations required. Call 440.775.8206.

On January 29, the production will be presented at 5:00 pm at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. The event will feature an optional, pre-show exhibit and information session beginning at 3:30. Free tickets can be ordered [online](#) (as well as paid reservations for a VIP reception to follow the performance).

The pre-performance presentation will discuss the fusion of rock and classical music, and the divisions between what are perceived as high and low art. Attendees will discover insights about the work and learn how Philip Glass's piece is connected to the many Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees who were involved in the creation and performance of *Songs from Liquid Days*.

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