

# 7: STREET POLITICS

---

## A. LOCAL

1. Class title 1 (scene from Street Scene)
2. Kurt Weill and Philip Glass

Our subject today is how opera may address real-life political and social issues. But there is more than one way of handling it. We will feature two composers. One is **Kurt Weill** (1900–50), whose operas and musicals generally have a left-wing content, and whose focus is always realist. The other is **Philip Glass** (1937– ), equally left-wing, but whose topics tend to be global in scope, and who is anything but realist. Microcosm and Macrocosm; I have summed it up in this little video.

3. Animated title (Global/Local)

Although Weill wrote *Street Scene* for Broadway in 1946, he called it an “American Opera.” Glass also called his *Satyagraha* of 1979 an opera, but in many respects it is more like an oratorio, as you will see.

4. Weill and Brecht
5. Weill/Brecht collaborations

Weill found almost instant fame in interwar Berlin through his collaborations with **Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956). More than merely left-wing, Brecht was an out-and-out Communist who found a welcoming berth in East Berlin after the War; I am just old enough to have seen one of his productions there. But at this stage he was intent on satirizing the gross inequalities of the Weimar Republic in the Twenties. Their first collaboration was a half-hour piece called the *Mahagonny Songspiel*, about an imaginary Utopia where nothing is forbidden, but peopled by whores and crooks. Brecht and Weill later made it into a full opera, but in the meantime they collaborated on *The Threepenny Opera*, a reworking of the 18th-century English hit, *The Beggar’s Opera*, with the action transferred notionally to Victorian London, but really to the Berlin they saw around them. I’ll play one scene, where the villain-hero **Mack the Knife**—the notorious criminal, who nonetheless gets our sympathy—is marrying the heroine (one of the two, actually; he is a bigamist), and the party is gatecrashed by the Chief of Police **Tiger Brown**. Awkward moment—but soon defused as it appears that Brown is there quite unofficially simply to share a moment with his old comrade-in-arms. So the two launch into the *Kanonensong*, an utterly racially inappropriate satire of colonialism.

6. Weimar-era paintings by George Grosz

I’ll play a clip from a movie about the film that Brecht wanted to make of the piece, but couldn’t. You will see that the film imagines him channelling the work of the satirist **George Grosz** (1893–1959).

7. Weill: *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Kanonensong*

8. Weill on Broadway

Being Jewish, Weill had to flee Germany in 1933. After a year in Paris and a short time in London, he came to New York, where he was immediately snapped up as a composer for Broadway. Many of his Broadway shows are airy confections, but there were two exceptions towards the end of his life. His last piece, *Lost in the Stars* (1949), was a serious treatment of **Apartheid**, rather uncomfortable in its Broadway form. But the piece he wrote before that, *Street Scene* (1946), was a perfect amalgam of Broadway escapism and the social realism that so attracted him.

9. Transformation to *Street Scene*

*Street Scene* was a Pulitzer-winning 1929 play by **Elmer Rice** (1892–1967) about a group of immigrant families living in a tenement building on the Lower East Side. Weill also won recognition for his 1946 setting, the first ever **Tony Award**. Rice himself wrote the script, and they called in **Langston Hughes** (1901–67) for the lyrics. Frankly, the show keeps oscillating between opera and musical; it is nowadays often performed by opera companies—ours is from Madrid, directed by **John Fulljames** (1976– )—but it has never gone back to Broadway. But there is no doubt that it begins, at least, as a depiction of real life.

10. Weill: *Street Scene*, “Ain’t it awful, the heat!”

This is just a slice of life, introducing some of the families that live in the tenement. The main plotlines both concern one family, the **Maurrants**: the burgeoning love between the daughter **Rose Maurrant** and **Sam Kaplan** next door, and the double murder committed by **Frank Maurrant** when he discovers his wife **Anna’s** affair with the milkman. The latter is the more operatic, but it would involve me in playing a long aria for Anna Maurrant plus several other scenes to show it, so I will confine myself to a much shorter aria for Frank, “Let things be as they always was,” which shows him not only as a MAGA voter a century early, but as a walking time-bomb. The singer is **Paulo Szot**.

11. Weill: *Street Scene*, “Let things be as they always was”

12. Numbers for Rose and Sam

The romance between Rose and Sam begins in the last half-hour of Act One. Again too long to play, but I will give you some selections. I must admit that it they have little business in a course on **Opera and Real Life**, because they are neither especially operatic nor especially realistic. But they are pretty and I reckon you would prefer something heart-warming to having your nose rubbed in the dirt! First, the aria “Lonely House” for Sam, a bluesy number that you occasionally hear in opera auditions. Then Rose appears, having been taken out by her boss Harry Easter, a married man who nonetheless has his eye on her; his song “Wouldn’t you like to be on Broadway?” is a Broadway number rather than an operatic one. But her reply “What good would the moon be?” is also occasionally heard in auditions; this is the first half. I’m then cutting a real Broadway dance number, and a scene in which Rose is harassed by one of her punk neighbors, who lays Sam out when he tries to intervene. Rose appreciates this and begins to talk. A woman upstairs is having a baby and cries out in pain. Sam’s rant about the misery of life is a brief moment of grit, I suppose, but it doesn’t ring true—not nearly as true as the duet that follows.

- 13. Weill: *Street Scene*, “Lonely House” through “What good would the moon be?”
- 14. Weill: *Street Scene*, Sam/Rose duet
- 15. Ending title (still from the above)

## B. GLOBAL

### 16. *Satyagraha* poster

The word ***Satyagraha*** is a combination of two Sanskrit words, meaning **truth** and **adherence**. It was the name given by **Mahatma Gandhi** (1869–1948) to his policy of non-violent resistance with which he fought for civil rights first in South Africa and then in his native India. Among the many leaders who followed his example were **Nelson Mandela** and **Martin Luther King**, shown in the background here. The opera covers Gandhi’s 21 years in South Africa from 1893 to 1914, arriving as a London-trained young barrister-at-law who did not even think of himself as a person of color, and leaving as a political and spiritual leader who lived and dressed as a common peasant.

### 17. Gandhi transformation, and list of excerpts

I will play four excerpts from the opera, two from Act II and two from Act III. First, an **attack** by a jeering crowd of settlers when he returns to Durban after a trip to India in 1897. Then the incident in 1906 when he leads a crowd in burning the **registration cards** issued to persons of color by the Transvaal authorities. Then his last act of civil disobedience in India, a march beginning in **Newcastle** to protest a tax on Indians, broken up by armed police. And ending with the **final scene** of the opera, in which Gandhi sings the promise of Krishna to return age after age to rectify injustice, a scene that seems to dissolve time.

### 18. Glass with the ingredients of time, language, and action

However, by focusing on **events**—as I am forced to do in such a short class—I am being completely untrue to Glass’s approach. The normal ingredients of opera include the composer’s use of **time** to move the action forward, the sung or spoken **language** that tells us what is going on, and the **action** that emerges from these. That’s what we get in *Street Scene*—or *La bohème*, for that matter. But Glass is writing on a global, even cosmic, scale, not a local one. And to do this, he virtually erases action, suspends time, and makes the language unintelligible; the entire opera is sung in **Sanskrit**.

### 19. Glass time-dissolution demo

### 20. *Satyagraha* in Paris, 2026

A production this year in **Paris** updates the costumes and treats the action realistically. Frankly, I can’t see how this would fit a musical aesthetic that is not realistic at all. The production at the Met by English director **Phelim McDermott** (1963– ) that I *am* going to show treats the entire opera as timeless myth.

### 21. Scene marker 1

For example, when Gandhi arrives back in Durban after a trip to India, he is accompanied in his mind by monstrous figures from Indian myth. But the attack by the jeering mob is real enough, as is his rescue under the protecting umbrella by the wife of the police chief, **Mrs. Alexander**. The scene is too long to show; I am making a 5-minute cut in the middle. The singers are **Richard Croft** and **Mary Phillips**.

22. Glass: *Satyagraha*, Gandhi lands in Durban

23. Glass: *Satyagraha*, Gandhi is knocked down and rescued

24. Scene marker 2

The **burning of the registration cards** is a 12-minute scene. Again, I have to zoom into the climax, though I hope I am playing enough of that to give you an idea of the composer's sense of time.

25. Glass: *Satyagraha*, burning of the registration cards

26. Scene marker 3

The depiction of the **Newcastle March** also takes its time; I have also chosen a relatively short part of it. Glass wrote each act under the aegis of a different historical figure: Leo Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore, and Martin Luther King. The scene I have chosen makes explicit reference to King and the brutality at Selma and elsewhere. The entrance of the shock troopers seems an invention of the director's.

27. Glass: *Satyagraha*, Newcastle march

28. Scene marker 4

The reference to MLK is quite explicit in the final scene. I have not made cuts here, because I wanted you to hear the hypnotic effect of the composer's handling of time, and particularly that rising **Phrygian scale** that Gandhi sings over and over. The words come from the ***Bhagavad Gita***, and are the promise of Lord **Krishna** to return age after age wherever there is injustice that needs righting.

29. Glass: *Satyagraha*, ending

30. Class title 2 ("How different can you get?")

Let's discuss these two different approaches to real life in opera, and the role of time in each.