

Martin Lawes – Oil Paintings

<https://www.musicimageryhub.org/martin-lawes-artwork>

Creating art through 'becoming music'

Painting title: Hymaaten

Music used: Glass - Akhenaten (Act 2, excerpt)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s3-IY359bAT403GFGNFBA9OUPdg7RteO/view?usp=sharing>



This was painted listening repeatedly to an extract from the second act of Philip Glass' opera *Akhenaten*, where *The Great Hymn of the Aten* is sung, the text praising how the sun gives life to everything. *Akhenaten* is one of a trilogy of operas Glass composed about people driven by an inner vision which altered the age in which they lived: *Akhenaten* in religion, Einstein in science, and Gandhi in politics.

The text of the *Hymn of the Aten* was originally composed in the 14th century BC and attributed to *Akhenaten* who was the Eighteenth Dynasty Egyptian Pharaoh. *Akhenaten* was a heretical figure noted for abandoning the traditional, polytheistic religion of ancient Egypt, and replacing it with a monotheistic faith focused on the *Aten*, a deity associated with the sun. The culture shift that he initiated away from traditional ancient Egyptian religion was reversed after his death, with monuments dismantled and hidden, statues destroyed, and his name excluded from lists of rulers compiled by later pharaohs.

In Glass' setting, *Akhenaten* is sung by a countertenor, the music of his *Hymn*, which is heard at the centre of the opera, having a gently building rapture. This contrasts with the dark, heavy music which begins the opera associated with the old Egyptian religion, its ceremonialism, ritualism, wealth and corruption, one of *Akhenaten's* ideas being that deities should not be imaged – the symbol of the *Aten* rather being the solar disc.

Akhenaten is sometimes described as the first protestant, *The Great Hymn of the Aten* bearing a notable resemblance to the biblical *Psalms 104*, this included in the opera, sung by the chorus after Akhenaten sings his earlier version.

The Great Hymn of the Aten

*Thou dost appear beautiful
On the horizon of heaven
Oh, living Aten
He who was the first to live*

*When thou hast risen on the Eastern Horizon
Thou art fair, great, dazzling,
High above every land
Thy rays encompass the land
To the very end of all thou hast made.*

*All the beasts are satisfied with their pasture
Trees and plants are verdant
Birds fly from their nests, wings spread
Flocks skip with their feet
All that fly and alight
Live when thou hast arisen.*

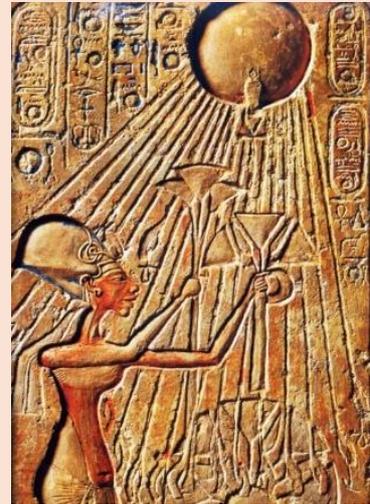
*How manifold is that which thou hast made
Thou sole God*

*There is no other like thee
Thou didst create the earth
According to thy will
Being alone, everything on earth
Which walks and flies on high.*

*Thy rays nourish the fields
When thou dost rise
They live and thrive for thee
Thou makest the seasons to nourish
All thou hast made*

*The winter to cool
The heat that they may taste thee.*

*There is no other that knows thee
Save thy son, Akhnaten
For thou hast made him skilled
In thy plans and thy might
Thou dost raise him up for thy son
Who comes forth from thyself.*



It is the end of the opera that for me is the most moving, where the setting moves to present-day Egypt, and to the ruins of *Amarna*, the former capital built by Akhenaten but destroyed after his death. A Narrator appears and recites from a modern tourist guidebook, describing the ruins to a group of tourists: "There is nothing left of this glorious city of temples and palaces."

The tourists leave and the ghosts of *Akhenaten* and his legendary queen *Nefertiti* appear, singing wordlessly amongst the ruins. The funeral procession of *Akhenaten's* father then also appears on the horizon, *Akhenaten* and the others forming their own procession which is seen moving towards the heavenly land of *Ra* as the opera ends.

In the trilogy of operas composed by Glass, there is in each a sense of the visionary idea which inspired the individual who the opera is about being something that exists eternally, beyond them, where it can be realized in different ways by different people in different ages. Hence the version from the psalms sung in the opera, and the funeral procession at the end in the ruins of *Armana*. Though his city was destroyed, the idea that inspired *Akhenaten* was not.

In my painting, which is both an inner landscape and an outer one, I imagine *Akhenaten's* funeral cortege endlessly processing somewhere on the plane below in a mythical *Armana*, though neither can be seen, the sunlight nevertheless bearing witness.

General background information about my approach to painting

As a creative arts psychotherapist and practitioner of Music and Imagery (MI), a psychotherapeutic approach which involves supporting clients to create art-work whilst listening to music to explore their inner experience, I have developed my own practice as an oil painter using a similar technique which integrates art-making with music listening.

My paintings involve my being intuitively drawn to music which I then listen to repeatedly whilst I paint. For this I use short extracts of music that is especially meaningful to me, each extract lasting around a minute and a half. I typically repeat such an extract for several hours at a time as I work on a painting, the process often repeated on many different occasions over a period of weeks and sometimes months until the painting is finished. Repeating the music never feels like repeating the same experience. Rather it is a way of ever deepening into the present moment experience of the music until I feel that I have 'become the music' in a way that transforms my state of consciousness. It is only out of this that the painting emerges authentically in the way I work. 'Becoming the music' involves feeling immersed in it as though I am living within the music, continually aware of its transformative presence.

Titles and meanings

The titles of my paintings are intended to be both evocative and ambiguous, so as not to convey a precise meaning but be open to many possibilities of interpretation. I don't consider the paintings to represent the music but to arise from my having 'become it' in a way that is personal to me as I explore universal human themes. There is often a connection with the music's meaning for the composer, or a connection with the text set, though this may not be immediately obvious. It is in any case for the viewer to create their own possibly very different meaning.

I will end with a favourite quotation about meaning in art which gets to what is most essential I believe. This comes from Ken Wilber's 2001 publication *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*:

Let me return to what art is finally all about. When I directly view, say, a great Van Gogh, I am reminded of what all superior art has in common: the capacity to simply take your breath away . . . you are changed somehow, maybe just a little, maybe a lot; but you are changed. No wonder that for the East and West alike, until recent times, art was often associated with profound spiritual transformation.

. . . When we look at any beautiful object (natural or artistic), we suspend all other activity, and we are simply aware, we only want to contemplate the object. . . In that contemplative awareness, our egoic grasping in time comes momentarily to rest. We relax into our basic awareness. We rest with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. We are face to face with the calm, the eye in the centre of the storm. We are not agitating to change things; we contemplate the object as it is. Great art has this power to grab your attention and suspend it: we stare, sometimes awestruck, sometimes silent, but we cease the restless movement that otherwise characterises our every waking moment.

It doesn't matter what the actual content of the art is; not for this. Great art grabs you, against your will, and then suspends your will. You are ushered into a quiet clearing, free of desire, free of grasping, free of ego, free of self-contradiction. And through that opening or clearing in your own awareness may come flashing higher truths, subtler revelations, profound connections. For a moment you might even touch eternity; who can say otherwise, when time itself is suspended in the clearing that great art creates in your awareness?

. . . Great art suspends the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future: we enter with it into the timeless present; we are with God today, perfect in our manner and mode, open to the riches and the glories of a realm that time forgot, but that great art reminds us of: not by its content, but by what it does in us: suspends the desire to be elsewhere. And thus it undoes the agitated grasping in the heart of the suffering self, and releases us - maybe for a second, maybe for a minute, maybe for all eternity - releases us from the coil of ourselves.

That is exactly the state that great art pulls us into, no matter what the actual content of the art itself - bugs or Buddhas, landscapes or abstractions, it doesn't matter in the least. In this particular regard - from this particular context, great art is judged by its capacity to take your breath away, take your self away, take time away, all at once.

And whatever we mean by the word "spirit" - let us just say . . . that for each of us it involves our ultimate concern - it is in that simple awestruck moment, when great art enters you and changes you, that spirit shines in this world just a little more brightly than it did the moment before. (Wilber 2001: 122-124)