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Galileo Galilei

Philip Glass
Barbican
(2002)

The only appearance in Europe of a new opera by Philip Glass was always likely to be one of the highlights of BITE:02. This opera demonstrates that science can be fun.

It tells the story of Galileo in reverse. This follows recent precedents set by Martin Amis in his novel *Time's Arrow* and the film *Memento*. The nine scenes and epilogue take Galileo from a man "blinded for seeing the world turn" and on the brink of death, through an inquisition and recantation of his "heresy" back to the young man who had invented the telescope.

This is a remarkably wordy opera, as music (played by members of the City of London Sinfonietta under Beatrice Affron) that will be familiar to those who know Glass' other works whether for film or opera, accompanies biography and scientific explication. While we get a feel for what minimalism might have sounded like in the seventeenth century, its nature means that there are few musical surprises. This is the strength and weakness of minimalism. Its familiarity is comforting but there are only so many ways to express yourself within its self-imposed limitations.

The personal comes out as the great man's life and that of his daughter, Maria Celeste, is told. The political is equally important as Galileo's ideas, as embodied in his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief Systems of the World*, are initially accepted by Cardinal Barberini. Later, as Pope Urban VIII, he attacks the heresy of suggesting that the earth orbits the sun and Galileo is imprisoned. This nicely encapsulates the opera's major theme of the clash between science and religion.

The reversal of time presents Galileo's life and creativity in an unusual light. It turns a relatively well-known story into more of an adventure and on occasions is very informative, particularly as the disastrous consequences of the eponymous hero's inventiveness make one cringe as he subsequently takes innocent-seeming actions. It also makes his relationship with the daughter - who predeceased him - even more poignant.

The libretto, written by Mary Zimmerman with assistance from the composer and Arnold Weinstein, is constantly informative in a manner that is unusual in opera. Like John Adams, Glass has always been willing to address major subjects. In only 90 minutes, a vast number of issues are considered very fully.

The set designed by Daniel Ostling and lit by T.J.Gerckens is tremendous. It catches its period perfectly while massive backdrops fly in to change scenes.

The singing from both the old and young Galileo (Carl Halvorson and Eugene Perry) is relaxed and always clear, especially from Halvorson. This is essential when so much has to be explained. In addition, the older Maria Celeste (Alicia Berneche) possesses a beautiful pure voice. There is also clever casting in the use of a counter tenor (Mark Crayton), particularly in the Kafkaesque

inquisition and recantation scenes as three cardinals attack simultaneously. The different voices add to the threatening atmosphere.

To summarise, this is an enjoyable run through Galileo's life in operatic form and will particularly appeal to lovers of minimalism and those with a scientific bent.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)