

PHILIP GLASS

Hydrogen Jukebox

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ELEKTRA NONESUCH 79286-2 • 1993, 72:31

Performance ★ ★

Sound Quality ★ ★ ★ ★

Philip Glass and Allen Ginsberg are a likely pair: two radicals who shook up the worlds of opera and poetry, both now firmly ensconced in the establishment—if not exactly beloved—and probably none too happy with the idea.

The result of their collaboration is *Hydrogen Jukebox*, which premiered at the Spoleto Festival in 1990. Drawing upon Ginsberg's poems for the libretto, it broaches such topics as the Middle East, nuclear war, a dying planet, and the Iran-Contra scandal.

Despite this wide reach, the high points are mostly personal, such as the reminiscence "Aunt Rose." Glass' melodies are typically vigorous, with a strong emphasis on percussion, and the six-member vocal ensemble acquits itself nicely.

The main liability here is Ginsberg, acting as narrator. He performs in an annoying, sing-song voice laced with irony—or perhaps it's an attempt at wide-eyed naivete. Regardless, it's very distracting. The main strengths are the opening and closing numbers. In "From Iron Horse," Gregory Purnhagen's plaintive baritone captures the helplessness that the approach of war can stir. And "Father Death Blues" is a striking a cappella hymn to death and reconciliation. Both are good enough to make you feel more kindly about the stumbles in between. —*Michael Giltz*