"What Is It That Could Have Some Like I Into It": Christopher Knowles and the Aesthetic of *Einstein on the Beach*

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Abstract: This article explores the relations between Christopher Knowles and the aesthetic of *Einstein on the Beach*, and in particular how the dynamics of his collaboration with Bob Wilson paved the way for this "opera beyond drama." Drawing on disability studies, performance studies, and published interviews with Knowles and Wilson, I recontextualize the opera's aesthetic. If one seeks an adjective to describe the underpinnings of *Einstein on the Beach* the best choice should be *Knowlesian*, which avoids ableist essentialism and rectifies the imbalance of credit given to Knowles relative to Wilson and Philip Glass. Thinking about *Einstein on the Beach* through this lens can help audiences both appreciate and understand the opera on its own terms.

Keywords: Christopher Knowles, aesthetic, *Einstein on the Beach*, Knowlesian

Einstein on the Beach is an opera with a lot of potential to overwhelm. Clocking in at over four and half hours in duration with no intermissions, its approach to time is very different than almost any other. But this very potential to overwhelm is also a potential to enthrall, and *Einstein on the Beach* (henceforth *Einstein*) has captivated operagoers around the world since its premiere in Avignon, France in 1976. Moreover, the work has spawned documentaries and books with subtitles like "the changing image of opera" and "opera beyond drama."[1] The opera's success and legacy raise an important

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question about what made it so groundbreaking. As far as mainstream understanding is concerned, *Einstein* was a collaboration between Robert (Bob) Wilson and Philip Glass. According to this narrative, these two men happened to meet while they were exploring new ways of "constructing time and space"—as Wilson himself described it—and the rest was history.[2] But there is more to this story: namely, the influence of Christopher Knowles (b. 1959), who is credited as the author of most of the opera's spoken texts but whose influence extends far beyond what is said in performance.

This article explores the relations between Knowles and the aesthetic of *Einstein*, with particular focus on how the dynamics of his collaboration with Wilson paved the way for this "opera beyond drama." Drawing on disability studies, performance studies, and published interviews with Knowles and Wilson, I recontextualize the opera's aesthetic underpinnings as *Knowlesian*, with an emphasis on process as form, breaking the fourth wall, and observation as conveying emotional intimacy. First, a focus on Knowles's training and works rather than his medical diagnosis offers a productive framework for considering his influences on Wilson and *Einstein*. Next, examination of Knowles's "Emily Likes the TV" and *Typings (1974–1977)* teases out the nature of his aesthetic. Unpacking the collaboration between Knowles and Wilson then traces how Knowles's unique creative perspectives made it onto operatic stages in *Einstein*. Finally, considering some moments from *Einstein* through a Knowlesian lens raises concluding implications for understanding the opera more broadly.

A neurodiversity approach

Neurodiversity as a concept emerged as early as 1998, with sociologist Judy Singer's thesis on community-building among autistic people.[3] Psychologist Nick Walker defines it succinctly as "the variation among minds."[4] A neurodiversity approach, in turn, assumes that neurodiversity is a "necessity for cultural sustainability, in the same way that biodiversity is a necessity for ecosystem sustainability."[5] Following a neurodiversity approach, neurodivergent people—whose minds deviate in some way from the socially constructed mental norms of neurotypicality—are not problems to be solved but are instead essential contributors to human culture with perspectives worth considering on their own

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1 Obenhaus, *Einstein on the Beach*; Novak and Richardson, *Einstein on the Beach*.
2 Wilson and Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*, 3.
3 Singer, "Odd People In." There is ongoing discussion about the labels "autistic person" versus "person with autism" and in cases where an individual claims one label I defer to their choice. When speaking of autism in general and individuals who have not claimed one label over the other, I opt for "autistic person" in following with Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies*, 91–103.
4 Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies*, 53. Walker identifies as an autistic person rather than a person with autism.
5 Singer, "The Future of Neurodiversity."

terms.[6] A neurodiversity approach falls under the umbrella of the social model of disability and contrasts with medical models which seek to "neurotypicalize" autistic people by having them "camouflage" or "mask" their autism.[7] Above all else, a neurodiversity approach to autism centers the experiences of autistic people.

A neurodiversity approach is essential to understanding the work of the interdisciplinary artist Knowles, who rose to prominence through his collaborations with Bob Wilson but has since made an international career in gallery and performance art.[8] Critics throughout Knowles's career have long described his works in relation to his diagnosis of autism "at an early age, which incurred as a result of toxoplasmosis in utero."[9] I argue, however, that society's treatment of Knowles as autistic—and not his diagnosis itself—is ultimately most crucial to understanding his work. To emphasize these external influences is not to downplay his perspectives but rather to recognize that his ways of being in the world never existed in a vacuum. As a child, Knowles underwent six years of experimental treatment that bears a striking resemblance to his later creative output.

> This program, undertaken at the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential, was run by Glenn Doman, and relied heavily on patterns of sensory stimulation and motor positioning to develop coordination, motor functions, and language in tandem for children who were diagnosed on the autism spectrum. Strenuous positions and physical tasks were performed, held, repeated, and cycled through. Individual poses were held and mirrored on both sides of the child's body for symmetrical physical development with the goal of stimulating the development of language in turn.[10]

In this light, that Knowles—who did not speak fully until he was twelve—would come to create works dominated by symmetry, pattern, and repetition comes as no surprise.[11]

In considering two of these works in more detail, it is crucial to keep in mind that Knowles's innate creative tendencies were shaped by years of "neurotypicalizing" treatments. Moreover, these experiences, ironically, may have made his creative output all the more distinctive in the end. In exploring Knowles's impact on Wilson and *Einstein*, centering what he did both before and during their artistic collaborations provides a non-essentializing perspective on how his creativity synergized with Wilson's.

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6 Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies*, 50.
7 Dwyer, "The Neurodiversity Approach(es)," 74.
8 Sadao, "Foreword," 12.
9 DiGiulio, "Choreographing the Network: Christopher Knowles and the Social Practice of Stuttering," 125.
10 Elms, "This Could Be About the Things on the Table," 78.
11 Elms, "This Could Be About the Things on the Table," 78.

The Knowlesian aesthetic

Wilson's first exposure to Knowles's creative output was the latter's "Emily Likes the TV," a poem/spoken performance work first put to tape in 1973 and continuously performed from memory by Knowles well into the 21st century.[12] Like most of Knowles's works, "Emily Likes the TV" is based on real events. He describes his sister younger Emily, her television-watching habits, her motivations for her television-watching habits, and the reasons behind these motivations. The work begins with Knowles repeating the text "Emily likes the TV because she watches the TV because she likes it." He then breaks this down and repeats increasingly shorter phrases, removing words and syllables slowly from the end of the text until only the sound "em" remains. After vigorously repeating "em," he slowly adds the words and syllables back until the text is complete, resulting in a structural palindrome from the original text down to "em" and back. Near the end of the performance he starts listing specific shows that she likes before reprising the "em" repetitions and ending with "and that's how it goes." Three aesthetic features of this work recur throughout Knowles's oeuvre. First and foremost, process is form: in this case, palindromes and the sounds of words—rather than their meanings—serve as the primary objects of interest. Secondly, the fourth wall is broken, as the ending indicates the performer's full awareness of the nature of the performance. Finally, there is an intimacy with the subject—in this case his sister—that Knowles conveys through a detailed accounting of his observations rather than emotive means expected from the social construction of neurotypicality.[13]

Knowles's published collection of *Typings,* which he originally produced one page a time for hundreds of pages at his typewriter, further evinces these aesthetic elements.[14] From visual compositions made entirely of different colors of the letter "c" to text compositions of all shapes and sizes to recreations of top song lists from years of his childhood from his memory, the visual/textual works in this collection attest to the consistency of Knowles's creative output across media.[15] Process and symmetry remain on full display, with asymmetrical processes serving as a means of creating contrast with the visual symmetries that dominate many of the pages. And though the subjects of each *Typing* vary among musical celebrities, brands, radio broadcast schedules, and even random people on the streets of Manhattan, the sense of observation conveying emotional intimacy remains throughout. Each work comes across as a labor of love that reflects Knowles caring deeply about its subject and recounting what he has

12 Knowles, "History of My Memories," 18. A 21st-century performance of the work was video recorded at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 2017: Knowles, "Emily Likes the TV."

13 Elms, "This Could Be About the Things on the Table," 58.

14 Knowles, *Typings (1974–1977)*.

15 Even after the works from the 1970s most relevant to the creation of *Einstein*, the resemblances between Knowles's spoken/performance works, typed works, and more conventional gallery creations such as paintings, drawings, and sculptures can be quite hard to miss.

observed because he cares. The physical process of producing these works at the typewriter, in turn, recalls Knowles's formative time at the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential, albeit with an emphasis on expression rather than communication per se. The *Typings* collection also includes several of the most iconic spoken texts of *Einstein*: "Mr. Bojangles," "These Are the Days," and "I Feel the Earth Move," which highlight repetition and the sounds of words over the inherent semantic baggage of popular song titles, advertisements, and radio schedules, respectively. It is thus fair to describe "Emily Likes the TV," *Typings*, and the spoken texts of *Einstein* as minimalist in the best possible sense of the term.[16]

A closer look at the aesthetic threads connecting Knowles's minimalist output brings out several aspects that would emerge in his collaborations with Wilson. Critical theorist and musicologist Zeynep Bulut provides one such analysis in her study of "vocal effects" in *Einstein*.

> In this activity of fragmentation, [Knowles] brings together seemingly irrelevant words—as well as images and sounds—and draws attention to the concrete process of (de)forming sense. The idea of background and foreground disappears in such imagination and experience. That is, all patterns interact with one another on the surface and there is no necessary divide between surface and depth. Surface is, in itself, depth, one that can be imagined as horizon, as the beach perhaps. [...] With this speech, *Einstein* puts us both at work and at rest. It exhausts us with its length, obsessive counting, imaginative redundancy, and uncertain knowledge of sound...[and] makes us endure feelings of excessive sense and nonsense side by side, recognizing the nonsense as sense....[17]

Wilson, for his part, echoed the very same sentiment during a March 1993 interview with Arthur Holmberg: "The depth is on the surface."[18] But one must recognize that Knowles proved to be a connoisseur of both process and drawing attention to it before he ever began creatively collaborating with Wilson. In both his earlier solo works and his spoken texts for *Einstein*, Knowles succeeded not only in foregrounding process but also in making it a hallmark of his place "among the great conceptual artists of our time."[19] And engaging deeply with Knowles's creative works can indeed "exhaust" an audience. (It can be overwhelming to consider just how many individual letters or repeated words combine to produce the content of any given page, or exactly how many syllables Knowles ultimately utters over the course of a spoken word performance.) How Wilson succeeded in incorporating Knowles's creativity to spotlight processual depths on an *operatic*

16 The histories of the term "minimalist" as pejorative are beyond the scope of the present article; for more, see Gann, "Let X = X," 147–49.
17 Bulut, "Anonymous Voice, Sound, Indifference," 190–91, 193.
18 Holmberg, *The Theater of Robert Wilson*, 121.
19 Sadao, "Foreword," 12.

surface thus merits further exploration.

A fruitful collaboration

Though their professional collaborations only began in the 1970s, Knowles and Wilson share a personal connection of nearly 60 years. They both relayed this history to Laurence Shyer in a joint 1989 interview.

> **Wilson:** For years when people asked me about Christopher Knowles I always used to tell how I met him in 1973 when I was doing *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.[20] But I didn't really meet him there, I really met him when he was four years old or something like that.
>
> **Knowles:** Christmas time. 1963. That's when George Klauber—a very good friend of mine, my parents—brought you over. I was four. I was born May 4, 1959. I can tell you what time. Monday night at 11:10 P.M.
>
> **Wilson:** Chris was saying he remembers what he was doing. He was playing with blocks.
>
> **Knowles:** I still have them.
>
> **Wilson:** It's not possible.
>
> **Knowles:** I got those blocks for Christmas in '63. I remember that.
>
> **Wilson:** Then ten years later we met again at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I'd heard this tape of his.
>
> **Knowles:** "Emily Likes the TV."
>
> **Wilson:** ...I was fascinated. The musical sense of construction. The energy and rhythms. I was fascinated by what he was doing. I just liked listening to it. Later I had the tape transcribed and found that the words were all carefully patterned. Nothing was arbitrary. [...] Then, I went to the O. D. Heck School in Schenectady, New York where Chris was staying.[21] He was making all these typing and drawings and the people there were throwing them away. They were discouraging him. I thought what he was doing was beautiful. I see Chris as an artist.
>
> **Knowles:** So I became an artist.[22]

20 *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* is another opera by Wilson, in seven acts and lasting over twelve hours.

21 The O. D. Heck school was an Intellectual Disability Intermediate Care Facility where Knowles had been institutionalized in the 1970s.

22 Shyer, *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*, 70–73.

Knowles's prodigious memory and the incredulity it raises in others are both fully evident in this conversation, as is the clearly comfortable dynamic the two share. But most notable here is Wilson treating Knowles's creations as art in their own right rather than pathologizing his creativity.

Wilson's relationship with Knowles clearly evinces a neurodiversity approach. Knowles's father shared a perspective on their relationship that appeared in print four months before the world premiere of *Einstein* and which proves very telling with respect to neurodiversity.

> You can say it is therapy, but I think the real significance of it is that Bob has the perspicacity and the genius to see that there are many different ways to communicate. And there are many different ways for phenomena to be understood by people, whether they be verbally or visually, or whatever. He watches and he listens and he is able to catch these things and then pluck them out of context and look at them and see them for the beautiful things that they are.[23]

Minimalism included additive and subtractive patterns well before Knowles and Wilson began their creative collaborations. And yet Glass's intuitive (rather than strictly process-based) music produced from Wilson's visual prompts was forward-thinking even within the musical context of the mid-1970s.[24] Combining this music with layered visual responses to Knowles's ways of being in and communicating with the world allowed Wilson to realize his vision of the opera as a portrait of Albert Einstein—rather than an opera "about" him—with the formats of portrait, still life, and landscape as inspirations for its three types of scenes.[25]

Wilson's own perspective further underscores how his human-centered—rather than pathology-centered—means of interacting with Knowles aligns with the aims of more recent neurodiversity approaches while predating them by several decades.

> Wilson notes that other people who had dealt with Knowles had tried to teach him to speak as they did: "That was an impossibility. The child cannot, because the brain functions differently and he will never, never put things together the way we do, because the brain is organized differently. The thought process is just very different. … And in some ways, it is absurd for us to impose upon him our way. We can try to have him imitate us, but maybe we should try to imitate him, too." As soon as Knowles joined [the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds], therefore, Wilson asked him to lead some of the workshops. By imitating him, Wilson was eventually able to approach some understanding of his thought processes. "I saw that he had very similar concerns as I had…" said Wilson, "in terms of language—in

23 Simmer, "Robert Wilson and Therapy," 100.
24 For more on the intuitive structures in the music of *Einstein* see: Gann, "Intuition and Algorithm in *Einstein on the Beach*," 89–105.
25 *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*.

> terms of his patterning words and thoughts. Once I learned...his patterns, then we had this exchange through his way of structuring thoughts."[26]

Wilson speaks to both the value and the necessity of rejecting a "neurotypicalization" (that is, masking- or one-way imitation-focused) approach to interacting with Knowles. Moreover, acknowledging the possibilities of learning from and imitating Knowles both affirms and celebrates neurodiversity, even as this specific terminology is absent. Wilson's emphasis on "exchange" also resonates strongly with Singer's comparison of neurodiversity to biodiversity as essential for human well-being because he recognized he had as much (if not more) to learn from Knowles as Knowles had to learn from him. Wilson, after all, was also drawing on a lifetime of his own experiences. As relayed by Zeynep Bulut, when he was young "Wilson had a mild speech impediment [and] worked with a movement therapist for his condition."[27]

Furthermore, Wilson's understanding of his relationships with both Knowles and Raymond Andrews attests to a rejection of the medical model of disability.[28]

> Wilson does not consider his relationships with Knowles and Andrews in terms of therapy. He was at least as much interested in learning from them as he was in helping them. He did plays that explored their unique ways of perceiving the world. That was his main interest—theatre, not therapy. He does not want to be thought of as a therapist.
>
> Nonetheless, both Andrews' and Knowles' close contact with Wilson had what might be called a "therapeutic effect." To note only the most obvious manifestations of this, Andrews was attending school (which he had never done before meeting Wilson) and Knowles was living independently and producing a large body of poetry [*Typings*] as this article was being prepared [in 1976].[29]

A fuller consideration of "therapeutic effects" of collaborative artistic endeavors realized through a neurodiversity approach lies beyond the scope of the present study.[30] Suffice to say, then, that Wilson provided Knowles with creative opportunities that were seldom available to people with his diagnoses at the

26 Simmer, "Robert Wilson and Therapy," 107.
27 Bulut, "Anonymous Voice, Sound, Indifference," 189.
28 Andrews was a deaf-mute child from Alabama who Wilson adopted in 1968 after seeing him nearly brutalized by a police officer. He later starred in *Deafman Glance*, a mostly silent work constructed of fantastical scenes composed purely of performed images. See *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*.
29 Simmer, "Robert Wilson and Therapy," 109.
30 See Arendell, "Thinking Spatially, Speaking Visually," and McCaffrey, *Incapacity and Theatricality*.

time—and are scarcely more so today. At the same time, it does bear mentioning that their collaborative dynamics were not always "therapeutic." Wilson in one account recalls relentlessly asking Knowles, "Chris, who is Einstein?" nine times in a row to eight responses of "I don't know" before one final "I'll think about it." Following this exchange, Knowles wrote a substantial amount of text in an extremely short amount of time, including the iconic "Would it get some wind for the sailboat."[31] Nonetheless, Wilson's openness to working with what Knowles had to offer creatively regardless of how it related to the (socially constructed) conventional made their partnership all the more fruitful in the end. It is the most well-known result of this creative collaboration to which I turn next.

Knowlesian influences

Having explored Knowles and his solo works as well as his collaboration with Wilson, a consideration of *Einstein* with these in mind demonstrates how the Knowlesian aesthetic permeates the work to both enthralling and potentially overwhelming effect. One early moment that reflects this influence occurs at the end of Act I. Here the set to the first trial scene is built and then populated and transformed in front of the audience's eyes for more than 45 minutes while Glass's music and Wilson's meticulously choreographed motion create cross-modal counterpoint through their combination.[32] This live showcase of set construction deliberately breaks the fourth wall while offering the audience a rare moment to focus on the stage crew as performers themselves. Wilson invites the audience to become observers akin to Knowles while the motion of the set pieces provides a non-human choreography of sorts to recognize in juxtaposition with the movement of performers who later enter just as deliberately. Though the proscenium arch and pit orchestra seem to firmly position *Einstein* in a perhaps unexpectedly traditional vein with respect to opera, this construction of the set during performance clearly establishes a marked opposition with convention while living up to Wilson's observation that "the depth is on the surface."

A later moment in *Einstein* highlights many of the same aesthetic elements in a different context. Act IV, Scene II of the opera presents a wordless aria labeled "Bed" in the score.[33] In the prelude to this scene, a massive bar of white light slowly rotates from its initial horizontal position at stage level to a vertical position dividing the stage in half. As the soloist sings her aria, the bar recedes vertically off of the stage. In both cases the end goal of the bar of light's motion is very predictable from the moment it begins, with the slow pace at which it

31 *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*.

32 Thanks to Sarah Louden for introducing me to the vocabulary of cross-modal counterpoint through conversations in May 2019. With one exception noted below, this and all following descriptions of the visual content of *Einstein* in performance are based on the commercial videorecording of the 2014 recreation of the 1976 production at the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris: *Einstein on the Beach*, directed for the screen by Don Kent (BBC & Opus Arte, 2016).

33 Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*, 161.

unfolds allowing for the audience-observer to savor the real-time process of their expectation being fulfilled. Once again there is a sense of intimacy created through observation, this time with the audience invited to recognize a piece of the set itself as having agency rather than the stage crew. Symmetry and balance are also evident in the bar of light's visual positions in the darkness (horizontal and vertical) as well as dividing proportions (all:none through 50:50) as it rotates and then disappears.[34] The contrast between the bright white light of the bar and the apparent blackness of the unlit backdrop provides yet another sort of symmetry. In addition to how the bar vertically divides and then undivides the open space of the stage as it recedes, there is also a balance of color—between the combination of all colors and their absence. And since there is not any concurrent spoken text, the bar itself can be personified by the memory of those which have come before, almost all of which Knowles authored.[35]

The large-scale structure of *Einstein* also benefits from consideration through the lens of the Knowlesian aesthetic. The opera is based on three visual motifs: train (1), trial (2), and spaceship (3). Glass worked from drawings of each motif in producing the music for the corresponding scenes, allowing the themes he and Wilson agreed upon to influence his musical decision-making without any explicit narrative or teleological concerns entering the process.[36] The four acts of the opera—not counting the Knee Plays which like their namesakes connect things together—see three repetitions of each visual motif for a total of nine scenes. The opera distributes these motifs over its four acts in the order 123 123 123 such that every possible combination of two or more is featured: Act I, 12; Act II, 31; Act III, 23; Act IV, 123. This approach recalls the fragmentation and rebuilding of "Emily Likes the TV" both in conception and execution. It is obviously more difficult to perceive such a numerical structure over the span of several hours than over the span of several minutes. All the same, exhausting every possibility in the organization of *Einstein*'s acts mirrors how Knowles works all the way from the complete text to just "em" and back with repetitions of each shorter fragment in "Emily."

Similar structures also recur throughout the solfege and counting numbers Glass used to aid singers in learning their repetitive vocal polyphony, made apparent in performance like so many of the scaffolds of production to break the fourth wall. These lyrics, of course, follow predictable patterns and lend degrees of balance and symmetry to the singing that are right at home alongside the Knowlesian pacing of Wilson's onstage activity. More broadly, the processes

34 This description of the visual content of the "Bed" aria in performance is based on archival footage of the Avignon premiere: *Einstein on the Beach, July 29, 1976,* NCOV 3068, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

35 At this point in the opera the only spoken texts not by Knowles have been the Judge's monologue in Act I (by Samuel M. Johnson) and the "prematurely air-conditioned supermarket" monologue in Act III (by Lucinda Childs). The opera concludes with one further text by Johnson, "Two Lovers."

36 Wilson and Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*, 129.

of teaching and learning *Einstein* merit a mention, not least of all thanks to Robert Fink's useful question: "How different was the Suzuki method from the obsessively methodical listening and playing it took to create and perform early minimalism?"[37] As Glass himself told it, when it came to the untrained singer-dancers of the premiere, there seemed to be very little difference at all.

> Teaching the singing parts to the chorus took place over the next four months. . . . I used a method I had learned from *Alla Rakha* when I had been studying tabla with him some eight years before. Very simply, we began at the beginning, memorizing a small amount of music. The next day we reviewed the previous day's work and added a new section. We continued this way, each day beginning with a review of the accumulated learned material and adding new material at the end. Ultimately we were able to do full run-throughs of the work entirely by memory.[38]

Knowles himself has a prodigious memory and likely would not have needed such a process to learn the music were he to sing in a production of *Einstein*. And yet, there is somewhat of a similarity between this additive process of learning and memorizing the sung music and Zeynep Bulut's identification of "no necessary divide between surface and depth" in Knowles's output generally speaking.[39] Palindromes such as those in "Emily Likes the TV" and the rhythmic cycles of *Einstein* alike represent the most obvious additive process that the audience experiences but turn out to not be the only additive processes relevant to the performance of the opera. These processes ultimately resemble the individual letters that comprise many of Knowles's *Typings*: easy to take for granted when considering the bigger picture but impossible to miss when zooming in on the details.

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Taking a closer look at *Einstein* to center the contributions of Knowles allows audiences to understand the aesthetic of the opera in a new light. The question of how best to describe this aesthetic, however, might be debated. I believe that focusing on Knowles rather than his diagnosis is the best approach, in following with Marla Carlson's perspective.

> I see limited benefit in applying the label "autistic" to any person who does not publicly claim it. Conceivably, Christopher Knowles provides a positive role model for autists in his audience, but this would be true without the diagnostic label. I advocate retiring the

37 Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 216.
38 Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 43.
39 Bulut, "Anonymous Voice, Sound, Indifference," 191.

use of this adjective in reference to him.[40]

In this light, I argue for understanding the aesthetic underpinnings of *Einstein* as Knowlesian. Beyond avoiding "applying the label 'autistic' to any person who does not publicly claim it," to speak of a Knowlesian aesthetic comes with the added bonus of avoiding such locutions as "a postmodernist intersubjectivity in which the autistic and the artistic intersect in a dialectics of identity and alterity."[41] Given that autism "has been frequently misconstrued as being essentially a set of 'social and communication deficits,'" to avoid its use in describing Knowles's aesthetic also avoids raising the specter of an "overcoming" narrative through which his artistic gifts somehow see him "triumph over" his way of being in the world.[42] Using the term Knowlesian also helps to rectify the long-standing imbalance in the attribution of credit behind this groundbreaking opera, as both Wilson and Glass have firmly entered the postmodern canon, even as Knowles himself has not attained nearly the same level of renown in operatic circles. In addition to these benefits, thinking about *Einstein* through this lens can help audiences both appreciate and understand the opera on its own terms. Indeed: should one seek knowledge of why Knowles's sister Emily likes the TV, one need only ask Knowles himself—Emily likes the TV because she watches the TV because she likes it.

40 Carlson, *Affect, Animals, and Autists*, 161.
41 McCaffrey, *Incapacity and Theatricality*, 99.
42 Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies*, 86.

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