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[Philip Glass' music redeems murky Cocteau sibling story](#)

- [Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic](#)

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I feel sure there's a constituency somewhere for shadowy family dramas of the French variety, done in a fluid blend of opera and dance and without much overt concern for sense or sensibility. Such audience members will be amply rewarded by the Oakland Opera Theater's production of "Les Enfants Terribles."

For the rest of us, Sunday's matinee performance at the Oakland Metro of this Philip Glass opera, based on the novel and film by Jean Cocteau, was pretty slow going.

Premiered in 1996, Glass' dance opera is the culmination of a trilogy based on Cocteau's work, whose most memorable component was the composer's inventive earlier opera-fication of the classic film "Beauty and the Beast." This time around, Glass tried to create a different kind of hybrid, in which the characters would be dually represented by singers and actors.

The Oakland production, directed by Tom Dean and choreographed by Danny Nguyen, adds an extra layer of interpretation by transplanting the action from Cocteau's Paris to French Indochina of the 1950s. The dancers of the Nguyen Dance Company double the singers and serve as a corps of subsidiary characters.

I couldn't quite grasp what was gained by this reinterpretation, but then again the dramatic gist of the original story proved pretty elusive. Maybe prior knowledge of the film would have helped, or maybe it's just a French thing.

Cocteau's is a story of two emotionally intertwined siblings, Elisabeth and Paul, whose private repertoire of language and play-acting becomes all the more insular after the death of their mother. Relations between the brother and sister are a strange and near-incestuous stew of teasing, insults and sexual double entendres, and eventually the world comes crashing in on them.

But private language seems to be at work here on several levels, and Cocteau is as enigmatic as his characters in revealing what is going on. Other people come to live in the siblings' house -- a man to inspire Paul's jealousy, a woman to inspire Elisabeth's -- and the emotional developments become even murkier and more haphazard. There is an endless amount of palaver about the sleeping arrangements, and then death brings the curtain down with a sense of welcome arbitrariness.

The rewards on Sunday were almost exclusively musical, as Glass' score, written for three pianos, unfurled his familiar but still effective repertoire of moody arpeggios and chunky minor chords. Musical director Deirdre McClure conducted nimbly, although not without a few rhythmic mishaps, and the three pianists (Skye Atman, Paul Caccamo and Kymry Esainko) weighted the

harmonies deftly.

In the two principal roles, soprano Joohee Choi and baritone Axel Van Chee summoned up matching levels of musical sophistication and dramatic intensity, making their intimate showdowns the most potent part of the performance. Their dance counterparts, Sarah Pun Richardson and Kao Vey Saephanh, moved with sinuous grace through the staging.

Tenor Ben Johns and mezzo-soprano Cary Ann Rosko alternated between scenes of sudden brilliance and passages of struggle. Actor Larry Rekow, at a desk with a vintage microphone, played the narrator as a suitably orotund newscaster.

Les Enfants Terribles: By Philip Glass. Oakland Opera Theater. Through Oct. 22. The Oakland Metro, 201 Broadway, Oakland. Tickets: \$32-\$36. Call (510) 763-1146 or go to www.oaklandopera.org.

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