Philip Glass' 2005 opera, Waiting for the Barbarians is based on the 1980 novel by Nobel Prize winning South African writer J.M. Coetzee (Disgrace, Life & Times of Michael K) with a libretto by Academy-Award winning playwright Christopher Hampton (Dangerous Liaisons, Atonement). Waiting for the Barbarians is a harrowing allegory of the war between oppressors and the oppressed. The protagonist is a loyal civil servant who conscientiously runs the affairs of a tiny frontier garrison town, ignoring the threat of impending war with the so-called barbarians, a neighboring tribe of nomads. But with the arrival of a special unit of the Civil Guard spreading the rumor that the barbarians are preparing to attack, he becomes witness to the cruel and illegal treatment of prisoners of war. Torture is used to obtain confessions from the barbarian prisoners, thus "proving" the necessity of the planned campaign against the tribe. Jolted into sympathy for the victims, the old man decides to take a stand. He attempts to maintain a final shred of decency and dignity by bringing home a barbarian girl, crippled by torture and nearly blind, and subsequently returning her to her people - an act of individual amends. This
dangerous act brands him forever as a traitor after which he himself becomes a victim of public humiliation and torture. ---amazon.com