

JOHN ADAMS COLLECTED WORKS **ESSAYS**

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My first encounter with John Adams's music was also one of my first experiences as a "professional" musician. My freshman year of college, I found a niche on campus as the piano accompanist willing to learn anything—the more challenging and contemporary, the better. One of the first students to take me up on this was a violinist who was playing *Road Movies* on her degree recital. The music was unlike any I'd heard or played before. It had a pulse that was simultaneously relentless and slippery, never quite adhering to a beat, demanding counting skills I hadn't yet developed. The second I'd gotten the hang of the pattern, it would change slightly, an extra note or rest thrown in to keep things off-balance. But once it finally snapped into place in my brain, this repetitive, groovy, strangely expressive music was there for good.

In retrospect, it was a bit of a fluke that this concise chamber work was my entry point into a catalogue marked by grand operas, oratorios, and (in all but name) symphonies. But then, sometimes it's easiest to discover things in reverse. At my work-study job in the music library, I devoured all the John Adams albums I could find: *Harmonielehre*, *Nixon in China*, *El Niño*. I nagged the librarians to order more. Even the titles of his pieces—*Guide to Strange Places*, *Gnarly Buttons*, *My Father Knew Charles Ives*—made me want to hear them (which sounds like a trivial thing, unless you know how hapless most composers are at titling). Here were new harmonies, alien textures, ideas about musical time and structure. The music's scope and ambition matched the acoustical spaces it was built to occupy; there was a wonderful feeling of generosity. I often had the impression of watching a large object moving inexorably through a vast landscape, like how an airplane

seems slow and fast simultaneously. The remarkable thing was its ability to encompass so much, working with a relatively concise set of musical tools. Eclecticism never came at the expense of focus; it all sounded like the work of the same person, talking about different subjects, moving among them with playful authority.

As I familiarized myself with more of John's work, I followed the leads embedded in it, discovering music that had shaped and influenced it: Jean Sibelius, Duke Ellington, Terry Riley, Ingram Marshall (who would become my composition teacher a few years later). Meanwhile, John was pressing ahead with characteristic energy and unpredictability. It sounds strange, but closely following the work of a living composer was then a new experience for me. The objects of my youthful obsessions (Ravel, Ives, Bernstein) all had "double bars" on their careers; you could know everything there was to know. With the release of a new piece of John's, I felt the same excitement my friends did at the advent of a new Radiohead or OutKast album. So it only made sense my junior year to send myself to San Francisco to cover the premiere of *Doctor Atomic* for the school paper. I remember being overwhelmed from the opera's opening surround-sound rumbles right to its final, queasy drone—just as I was when I saw the opera a few years later at the Met, and most recently, in a concert performance at the Barbican. But at the time, for a young composer, it was almost too big a canvas to serve as a useful model for me.

I turned to the piano works—*Phrygian Gates* and *Hallelujah Junction*, specifically. Though John is a self-described "non-pianist," his piano writing has always struck me as wonderfully personal and idiomatic. As an instrument, the piano is well-suited to his music, as comfortable beating time in the percussion section as it is building up rich, Romantic waves of sound. *Phrygian Gates*, one of his earliest

published works, makes use of the full pianistic spectrum, stretched over a big-boned, three-part form. Playing it, I felt that I had found a kindred spirit. Here was a composer who clearly cared about harmonic beauty (of the sort described by some critics as “unabashed,” but what’s to be bashful about?) while maintaining the sense of rigorous control that can give music a feeling of inevitability, whatever its length and scope. *Phrygian Gates* has an almost obsessive formal plan, a series of interlocking harmonic and procedural skeletons that I proceeded to take apart and file away for future use while I practiced the piece. As the music passes through those eponymous “gates,” it undergoes stark, sudden change: a smooth, undulating pattern becomes dry and incisive, or a bass line drops three octaves without warning, creating a visceral jolt. To set up and dispatch these kinds of events requires the imposition of a firm authorial hand. Looking back, I realize that this sense of the intellect guiding and shaping the music, even having a good time in the process, was an important part of my initial attraction to John’s music. It confirmed a hunch I had that while a good conceptual framework could be the start of an effective piece, it wasn’t enough: it needed to be personal. This was a composition lesson in itself.

Written 25 years later, *Hallelujah Junction* wears its discipline more lightly; its chief concern is simply unadulterated pianistic joy. Written for two pianos, the piece’s sounds and rhythms therefore take on an additional dimension, like going from mono to stereo. (It’s also twice as loud, a fact not lost on me as an 18-year-old.) Like *Road Movies*, it is demanding chamber music; the pianists must each maintain extremely steady internal pulse while listening for hair-trigger responses to each other’s playing, their patterns interlocking at the 16th-note. These patterns grow and evolve in a way that’s emblematic of John’s style, traceable all the way from *Phrygian Gates* through recent works like the piano concerto *Must the Devil Have*

All the Good Tunes? In his early pieces, motives—that is, the smallest recognizable thematic chunks of material—develop gradually and methodically, arranged horizontally into repeating patterns. Those patterns are then layered on top of each other, spawning a developmental family tree. This ties the music to the sound of 1960s minimalism if not its conceptual underpinnings; John was never content to let a musical process simply “play out” or stay in the same place for long, as in true minimalism. In *Hallelujah Junction*, those patterns are no less present, but they’ve been granted more agency. They evolve more quickly and more discursively, the landscape changing as if on time-lapse.

Since I couldn’t play *Hallelujah Junction* by myself, I channelled my obsession into my own compositional experiments for two pianos, which eventually coalesced into my first record, *Shy and Mighty*. When I listen to it now, I hear John’s influence on the surface: the athletic interplay between instruments, slowly shifting layered motives, moments of sudden and seismic harmonic motion, extravagant juxtapositions of vernacular and recondite. Over the years, as I’ve absorbed these things more thoroughly, they’ve become part of the substrate of my music, a firm foundation on which to build additional layers.

There’s a productive creative tension at the heart of John’s work. On the one hand, he’s a preternatural communicator: an artist of and for his public, a composer widely embraced beyond the new-music bubble, a writer of books and articles, a prolific conductor and curator. He’s as close as we have to a “dean of American composers” (a title once bestowed on Aaron Copland, to his chagrin). My sense is that John is equally ambivalent about the unofficial role, and that a part of him chafes at the mainstreaming effects of institutional endorsement (the part of him whose father knew Charles Ives, perhaps). As a younger composer, he could be

something of an enfant terrible; pieces like *Nixon in China*, *Grand Pianola Music*, and especially *The Death of Klinghoffer* prodded and questioned all sorts of musical, cultural, and political orthodoxies. They turn out to have been good and pertinent questions, but in retrospect, it strikes me that their resonance owed less to savvy topicality than to the music's visceral thrill.

Of course, one can't remain an enfant terrible indefinitely. But that's not to say John's music has mellowed, or smoothed over, as sometimes happens to composers as they age. Quite the opposite: the populist and the maverick continue to duel. The music rarely swoons or blisses out the way it once did. The rhythms and harmonies which enchanted me 16 years ago haven't lost their richness, but they've wandered into darker, more ambiguous territory. Two recent string quartets feel as densely packed and obsessively developmental as late Beethoven; *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?* is a boogie-woogie noir driven by menacing syncopations, the orchestra snapping and snarling at the heels of its restless soloist. Driving pulse remains, but the rhythmic figurations sound as though they're under pressure, and evolve in Baroquely twisted ways. It's thrilling to be able to trace these aspects of his music over the course of four decades. All the layers are still present and intermittently visible, almost like hearing one of his pieces on a macro scale: an additive process that pushes idea after idea to its logical extreme, and then beyond it, to where it becomes something new.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that when *Road Movies* was dropped into my lap as a college freshman, it triggered a chain reaction that led me where I am now. I'm grateful the music found me when it did, at such a formative time. For composers, it can be difficult to tease apart the analytical, acquisitive absorption of music from unencumbered enjoyment of it; we're always on the clock, in a sense.

John's music has been such a constant in my life that it's reached a base level of my consciousness—it's part of the way I hear all music now. But in this case, it goes beyond the music. John showed me a model for life as an artist, one in which being communicative, permeable, and all-embracing can coexist with good craftsmanship, strongly held opinions, and the pursuit of one's life's work with single-minded intensity.

Timo Andres
New York, 2020



As composers mark birthdays and anniversaries of seminal works, it's too easy to look back at their work as a trajectory: from obscurity to fame, from simplicity to complexity, or from antagonist to institutionalist. We can lazily trace the genealogy of an idea to someone from a former generation ("Oh, I see where she got that..."). We're sometimes encouraged to let the line bend a bit, as with Stravinsky's stylistic changes of tack, but otherwise, the rigidity of the line always holds an analytical temptation. It would be difficult to make an account of all the ways John Adams's music has influenced me and my work, but in the spirit of writing something personal, I'd like to offer a few perhaps impersonal observations about his work in a more circular, even crabwise, fashion. There are specific places in John's music where there is a rhyme hidden across decades, relating to an elusive sense of "meaning" in his music which radiates across his body of work.

My access to John's music was always limited by the availability of the scores and recordings when I was young. In 1993, it wasn't easy to just pop out to the library and grab a giant orchestral score, and, limited to the selections at the local record store or library, I treated each new acquisition as a special occasion. I have a really specific memory of grabbing one of my best friends and a boombox to listen to the newly released CD of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky* (1995) in our high school's cafeteria; the joyful fourths that start that piece and expand out into that bouncy cluster remain a happy memory, a little present of a chord.

One of the first pieces I heard (whose score I wouldn't look on until easily a decade later) was *Harmonium* (1981), written the year I was born. It sets "Negative Love,"

by John Donne, and two of Emily Dickinson's most celebrated poems ("Because I could not stop for Death" and "Wild Nights"). The piece is formally organized into three movements in the traditional structure of fast–slow–fast, but within the first and third movements, there is a sub-organizational strategy of large shapes, mostly giant crescendi deploying various devices to swell and expand. Although the work can be lazily categorized as "minimalist" (inasmuch as repetition and layering form the predominant motor driving the ship), every orchestrational strategy here is toothsome, Romantic, dramatic, forceful, and derived from the texts. For instance, I would happily argue that the opening shape of the third movement would satiate even the most perverse Wagner enthusiasts' Rhine-needs.

Harmonium's first movement shatters the Donne text through repetition not just of words but by single syllables; even the unison choral moments are split into canons and pulse, leaving us with the thrust of the text abstracted through music. The second movement treats Dickinson's poem in almost constant unison; even though there are processes at work, the processes have delivered some proper tunes: "We passed the school where children played" should surely replace some depressing lullaby in common use. The third movement deploys a combination of abstract and straightforward setting, and contains some of John's more delicious modulations; even if the motor comes from the lofts of New York in the 1970s, the heart is Americana, romance, style, class, and show business all at once.

In the first movement, one of the more vertiginous waves delivers a choral entrance in full unison, in an ecstatic cluster based around an E-flat chord, on the words: "If any who deciphers beft, / What we know not, our felves, can know, / Let him teach mee that nothing [...]" I'm not sure how I can express how thrilling and

mind-blowing that climax was for me to hear as a high school student, with my background in both very traditional text-setting (Schubert) and fully topsy-turvy extended techniques, such as those found in Crumb. *Harmonium* taught me that you can take a beautiful piece of text and *choose* how to set it, and mix those choices. It doesn't have to be the pure abstraction of Berio or the stylized dryness of Stravinsky; it can be both when the text demands it. When talking about the ocean, you don't need the declamatory watersports of Vaughan Williams's "Behold! the sea itself! / And on its limitless, heaving breast, thy ships," followed by crash cymbals. John's dead-simple, quiet invocation, "Ah – the sea!" bears the full effect of the speaker's yearning, but in subtle dialogue with the heartbeat of benediction the accompaniment offers.

I heard those climactic chords again, radically transformed, when I first heard *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), written a decade after *Harmonium*. Its first chorus remains one of John's most expressive and powerful pieces of music of any kind. Its shape is, in brief, one giant crescendo, but not just in volume: after the first few bars, which consist of just an F minor chord played in even eighth notes, string lines begin floating above the grid, pushing the women's chorus higher and higher, step by step, as they relive a simple memory of a Palestinian childhood *en famille*. The orchestra becomes more and more agitated, shifting off the grid as well; the overall rhythmic footprint becomes driving and fervent. That shape ushers in an echo of the same climactic cluster from *Harmonium*, on nearly the same pitches, but this time the text is steely and clear, itself a declaration of a resilient monotheism so powerfully articulated by Alice Goodman's libretto: "Though we have paid to drink / Our water, and our wood / Is sold to us, we thank / The only God." Another bottom-to-top orchestral crescendo delivers us back to a very similar cluster, but here, the text is more strictly narratively emotional: "Let the supplanter look /

Upon his work. Our faith / Will take the stones he broke / And break his teeth." I don't want it to sound as if I'm belaboring a small technical point—because I am, of course, obsessed with the artistic achievement here—but it's important for me to note that a similar set of chords deployed entirely differently ten years apart creates a plasticity of meaning within the work of a single artist's career. Once, the bowsprit of a musical shape; here, a dramatic and savagely powerful *cri de cœur*.

Speaking entirely personally: I think it *should* be a truth universally acknowledged that two of the most extraordinary chords of the 20th century are to be found at the beginning of Britten's *Abraham and Isaac* canticle and at the beginning of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. Britten's is an E-flat major chord but without the fifth, so there is a sense of emptiness that, in Britten's universe, makes room for the voice of God, about to ask Abraham to do something terrible. Stravinsky's chord is note-for-note more overstuffed than Britten's: it's an E minor chord primarily composed of its third, with room between the highest and lowest expressions wide enough to drive a truck through. For me, it's always represented the sudden but ever-present shock of the Psalmist's devotions: a purely Old Testament expression of faith, where suffering is real and salvation is distant.

The third such chord, for me, is the sole currency of the opening few pages of John's *Harmonielehre* (1985). This opening chord, repeated 40 scourging times, is itself a hollowed-out E minor chord without a fifth. Like its colleague in the Britten, it grabs me by the throat and insists on the mind filling it up, narrativizing it, imbuing it with some covert and personal meaning. The last gesture of the piece, two movements later—during which "minimalist" techniques have somehow become liquid and deliquescent, passing through and being transformed by the ghosts of the 19th and 20th century in an elegant and singular way—is an E-flat major

chord, with much of the orchestra ignoring the fifth in their patterns, save for the ones who have it, who hammer it brutally, insisting on a sense of completion, fulfillment, and ecstasy.

This type of chord has come to *mean* something in John's work, inadvertently or not, and I think it's most important to focus on what it means for the listener. Dramatic, frozen pillars of it can be found in *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?* (2018) and, most arrestingly, in the orchestral introduction and the interludes attendant to the aria at the end of Act I of *Doctor Atomic* (2004–05), "Batter My Heart," which sets John Donne's sonnet by the same name. The aria begins on a unison D (unisons in opera generally set up something scary, as we know all too well from *Wozzeck*), agitated and dramatically lit from within, and suddenly expands out to the menace of a D minor chord, again without a fifth, pulsed violently between winds, strings, and timpani. That sonority and distance between the notes becomes an *idée fixe* in the aria. Here, Robert Oppenheimer is apostrophizing the bomb itself, struggling with the Mystery of the Trinity (a loaded term in Los Alamos), and wrestling with reason, faith, mortification, and destruction. In contrast to the interludes, the vocal lines are lyrical as befits the poem, albeit tormented. Between each vocal utterance, the hollow menace comes back, always dragging us back from any possible resolution into some kind of inexorable terror. The bad version of the end of this act would conclude, of course, in the Saint-Saënsian way with Oppenheimer singing some ridiculously high note, as the walls of the temple come tumbling down all the way upstage. John elects to place us in the middle of a man's very human fear, and shines strobe lights on the void of this chord for the entire audience to look through.

The first scene of *Nixon in China* (1987) features, among other celebrated musical and dramatic outrages, a wonderful, athletic aria for Nixon ("News has a kind of mystery"), in which the libretto and the music shuttle quickly between all of Nixon's preoccupations, hopes, and neuroses. There are fast and incessant pulses throughout, and small text fragments repeat in jittery ways. The text suggests a slightly ominous shift, and then a distant idea moves quite close, and the pulse becomes choppy—a morse code of anxiety. Nixon says, "The rats begin to chew / The sheets. There's murmuring below. / Now there's ingratitude! My hand / Is steady as a rock." He repeats "the rats begin to chew the sheets" several times, under which we begin to hear something quite unsettling: the male chorus starts muttering under their breath, without distinct words. The orchestra hollows out into an e-minor chord with no fifth in it, and we are left with a cold man in a cold, bare airfield; only a rude little key change, a pivot on the wished-for note, tells the choir to calm down and gets us back into the relative warmth of fully formed chords again. Given the stability of the harmonic language and repetition-based economy of the pulse, it's striking to have this murmur in the background: information without pulse, form, or (planned) pitch.

John uses this technique again in *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* (2012) a quarter of a century later, but it has been radically transformed from an effect into a highly pressurized and sacred moment. We are to imagine Jesus, Mary of Bethany, and Martha around Lazarus's tomb, four days after his death. Jesus calls forth Lazarus, and the orchestra melts and shatters: the cellos, quite high, start playing glissandi into uncharted notes; the chorus divides into strange clusters, with some women singing notes held at random lengths, making individual changes of dynamics. The male chorus enters, without notes and only a shape, and the composer instructs: "glossolalia; troubled, anxious muttering." It grows

ever more intense as Lazarus is raised from the dead. For me, the resonance between Nixon's distant rats, so important in American history, and this moment, so important in the New Testament, is striking. What was a distant effect has become powerful, sacred foreground, and here, as the text and story would suggest, the entire ecosystem of the music is murky, impossible to find footing, and dangerously hazy.

It's overly convenient to say that John's music has "changed a lot" over his career (in the enervating way that the parents of childhood friends make it a point to comment about how they knew one when one was [extend hand mid-thigh] tall), but it is also great fun to see the extent to which he has, in fact, moved house a great deal, and in a satisfyingly non-linear way. Many composers are stylistic homebodies, buying early, fixing the place up slowly, maybe tearing up the shag carpet in 1982 to expose the wood beneath and barely re-doing the kitchen in the late '90s to get rid of the glass brick by the breakfast bar. John has moved from place to place out of an artistic need, happily jettisoning the trappings of one place, knowing he can get them back again. Even when the immediate environment of his music sounds different on the surface, there is always a deep curiosity and vigor to which I can only aspire. His music from this morning doesn't immediately sound like his music from 1971, or from 1993, or from 2013; the orchestral works don't sound like bigger versions of the piano pieces, and the string quartets don't sound like sketches for symphonies. However, on closer examination, you begin to see old friends popping up not just through subtle or explicit influence ("Hey, isn't that opening of *Ceiling/Sky* like the impish grandkid of Steve Reich's *Four Organs*?"), but through a sense that the things he's carried with him have taken on additional luster, patina, and emotional resonance. A detail has become a centerpiece; a figurative painting, lit differently, has offered

levels of unforeseen abstraction and telling detail. It's these small details that make me admire John so much: the big shapes are obviously fantastic, effective, powerful, and brilliant, but the little *objets*, the strange tools of the trade and talismans kept close to hand, keep me on my toes, with a sense of constant wonder.

John's now become a colleague and a friend, but it's worth noting that we most formally met when I was playing orchestral piano in *Harmonielehre* as a student. The piano plays the opening triple-forte hollowed-out terror-chord with the rest of the band (trust and believe I played it with perhaps too much gusto), but the composer, for reasons perhaps best left unexamined, leaves the piano out of the last 50 bars' joyful repetition of that fifth. Recently, I made a few calls to other pianists who'd played that part over the years and I expressed my vexation at being left out of the final tutti. Most of them just said, "Oh yeah, I always just play it with the xylophone and the vibes; it's *so good*." Don't tell John.

Nico Muhly
New York, 2020



Back in 2011, my former classmates from Eastman School of Music and I decided to make a pilgrimage of sorts to the Metropolitan Opera in New York, to hear *Nixon in China*. It was to be an historic event: the first time this opera was to be heard in the theater; the first time John Adams would be conducting from the Met podium; the first production on that stage to be directed by Peter Sellars. But in truth, those historic firsts weren't what excited me about attending, because I had no investment or interest in the buzz of the music business at that time. I was still a music student at Bard College, living in the Hudson Valley, and I just loved the idea of going to hear the music of a living American composer at the Met with my music school friends. I wasn't very familiar with the opera (or any of John's music for that matter), other than the famed arias "News has a kind of mystery" and "This Is Prophetic!"

It's been ten years, but I vividly remember the stark images from that night. Red, blue, gray, and forest green echoed across the broad stage. Individual performers seemed to be at such a remote distance, both from each other and from the audience; each character isolated, independent, lonely. The musical moments I most remember are of pulse, precision, and power. The strict performative unity of the choir, orchestra, and ensemble singing in close harmony was chilling—even threatening. It was an electrifying night. And yet, as impressed as I was by the performance, in a theater packed for an historic musical event about an historic time, I admit I didn't leave the Met feeling compelled to delve more deeply into John Adams's music. The impact of the opera, as stirring as it was, remained contained to that live theater experience.

It's interesting to reflect on that now, as I write this during the COVID-19 pandemic, because there is an ongoing discussion about the importance of hearing music in live performance. As a performer, of course I value the live experience and want to share it with as many people as possible. But I can't deny that in many cases, I've *first* come to acquaint myself and fall in love with certain musicians and their music through exposure to their recordings. Listening on repeat allows me to develop an intimate connection with the material. The process of coming to deeply appreciate and feel connected with John Adams and his music has been no different.

In 2014, while studying at The Juilliard School, I got a message from my manager that the New York Philharmonic was setting up an audition to have me sing for John in person, because he was looking for a soprano for his Christmas oratorio *El Niño*. Although excited about the opportunity, I didn't know the work, so before agreeing to take the audition, I wanted to determine whether I even felt compelled to sing it. I checked out a copy of the score and the audio recording from the Juilliard library. It made me happy to see some familiar names: Peter Sellars, who created the libretto and whom I had already worked with at that point; soprano Dawn Upshaw, whom I came to know very well while earning my master's degree from Bard's Graduate Vocal Arts program; and mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, whom I only "knew" because I idolized her performances of Handel and Mozart on DVD. I settled into a small cubicle in the library with a set of headphones, and listened with the score, liner notes, text, and translations in hand.

With a rush of instruments and a hushed choir murmuring syllables that slowly evolved into the word “maiden,” I felt immediately ignited and invested while listening to this recording in solitude. Tears streamed down my face, my thoughts raced. I was transported. It may seem strange when I compare that profound, private experience listening to a recording in a library, with how I was impressed by—and yet a bit detached from—the power of John’s music while hearing it live, surrounded by thousands of people in a stadium-like setting at the Met. Maybe that says more about me than the context or the content, but all I know is that for two hours while listening to *El Niño* in that cubicle, I felt invited into a space I hadn’t ever experienced so poignantly. This work was centered around the fragility of human existence, not human accomplishment. It centered on women, children, and life. Was it the compact and transparent voices of the three countertenors, combined with the unwavering directness of Dawn Upshaw’s delivery, that affected me so deeply? Or the fire and fragility of Lorraine Hunt Lieberson’s voice? For whatever reason, at the end of it I not only wanted to sing John’s music, I felt like I understood what he was aiming to accomplish with it, and also maybe what I could aim to do with it.

For my audition, we were in one of the red-carpeted rehearsal spaces at the New York Philharmonic, surrounded by mirrors. John sat on a couch across the room. I began with Olivier Messiaen’s “Résurrection” from *Chants de terre et de ciel*. “*Alléluia*” is the first word, soaring and roaring as a prolonged melisma. The final lyrics are, “*Parfum, porte, perle, lavez-vous dans la Vérité*” [Perfume, portal, pearl, wash yourself in the Truth]. When I finished, John sat back and said, “You know, Messiaen’s music requires the performer to be swept away in a transcendent space,

or it just doesn’t work. You just go there, Julia. I’m not sure my music will ever go where Messiaen’s did, not ever...” Attempting to brush his comment aside, I shook my head and my hand, and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, John.”

And I genuinely didn’t. Over the course of my life, there have been only a few musicians whose material had me transfixed to such an intense degree after having listened to it for only a few minutes. Messiaen’s music certainly did that for me, which is why I chose to sing it that day, and after listening to *El Niño*, I could say the same about John Adams. But I had just met this man, and didn’t yet want to reveal how swept away I had been the week before.

I went on to sing several other songs ranging in style, including “Brown Baby” by Oscar Brown Jr. and “La conga Blicoti,” an upbeat dance tune that Josephine Baker originated. John was either quiet, smiling, or chuckling. We then sat on the couch and talked for a while. He told me that his era was really the 1970s, and that even though he always wanted to write an opera about the Black Panthers, he didn’t feel it was his story to tell. My admiration for him grew as we sat and chatted. He had earned a name for himself by memorializing particularly poignant moments in history, but he was cognizant of when and where to position himself. He didn’t presume to represent everyone or everything. Before we met in person, I felt like I understood his music—but now, over the course of those 30 minutes together, I felt that we were beginning to recognize each other with calm, mutual respect.

The following week, I was asked to consider singing several live concerts and staged performances of John’s music, as well as the new Nonesuch recording of *Doctor Atomic* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and BBC Singers. I was also

told that he was writing a new opera, and had my voice in mind. I was excited and a bit scared, but weirdly not surprised, based on the time I'd spent with John that afternoon. After looking through the repertoire offered, I couldn't wait to rip into the scores, to study and sing John's music. He wrote good tunes with pulse and drive, and he was so mindful of the intense words that he chose to set.

The first piece of John's that I performed was *El Niño*, with the LA Phil in December 2016. I remember the experience distinctly, as I often find myself in a hyper-alert state while performing John's music. But hearing the children's choir at the end of the oratorio—the clear, untarnished sound of young voices emerging from the sonic haze of the orchestra—was an unforgettable musical moment. It communicated how unwavering stability and resilience can be found in something gentle, even vulnerable. John and Peter were in the audience, and I was honored to lend my voice to a work that I consider to be one of their greatest collaborations.

The next project, scheduled just a few months later, was *Doctor Atomic*—my first commercial studio recording. I was terrified, in part because I was quite sick with a case of laryngitis going into the recording sessions. For several days preceding I was on complete voice rest. I didn't dare tell John how delicate I felt, and how careful I thought I needed to be. In retrospect, maybe that delicate nature was perfect for the recording. It led to a certain fragility paired with determined fire that Lorraine Hunt Lieberson always seemed to capture. I tried to center on precision and clarity of the rhythm and words, like Dawn Upshaw always seems to have as her primary focus. But above all, what became

paramount was the intention behind my delivery. Since I hadn't performed the work before, I needed to make explicit decisions on the characterization.

I stood to John's right side as he conducted. Naturally I wanted him to be pleased, but mostly I wanted to please myself—I wanted to offer a performance that was definitive, not derivative, and I wanted to capture the consciousness of Kitty Oppenheimer, a troubled woman living in a troubled time. Most of *Doctor Atomic* takes place in the hours leading up to the testing of the atomic bomb on July 16, 1945. There was great anticipation for this scientific development, a “creation” that promised the preservation of some, and the destruction of others. In John's musical and theatrical interpretation, Kitty Oppenheimer seemed to represent the voice of many, yet didn't have the ear of anyone. She was combustible, and inexhaustible in how far her expression of thoughts and feelings could extend.

Listening to the recording now, there are some technical mistakes—a few wrong words of Muriel Rukeyser's poetry, some inaccurate rhythms—but it's clean and clear as an entire musical offering. And it established this important musical relationship and friendship in my life.

In June 2016, a few months prior to the performance of *El Niño*, I took another pilgrimage to hear John's music. This time it was to John's house, with Peter Sellars by my side. Peter and John were so excited about their new opera, *Girls of the Golden West*. Peter had told me, “John didn't know how to write the effervescence of this woman, Louise Clappe (a.k.a. Dame Shirley), until after he'd heard and met you for the first time.” I was filled with curiosity.

We gathered around John's computer with the digital score and listened to a MIDI realization—a shallow, computerized audio file that gives just enough information to grasp what the music aims to achieve. I first enjoyed what I heard. It was as if Kurt Weill and John Adams had a meeting in sonic space. But as he went on playing through sections of the opera and the arias he'd written for the other singers, I started to feel jealousy and frustration. I was strangely envious of how John captured the brilliance of Frederick Douglass's words and the despair yet unwavering strength of Josefa's character. Even though John had told me that two of my main arias—Dame Shirley's delivery of a Lady Macbeth soliloquy, and the ode to California at the end of the opera—were not yet written, all I could say of Dame Shirley's music that day was that it was “delightful,” which I know wounded John and Peter to a degree.

Those feelings quickly faded once I started working on the role. While learning the Lady Macbeth aria, I wrote to John telling him that I was in hysterics laughing and screaming, because the extremes of the vocal writing were so intense. The music was wild, irreverent, searing. In this soliloquy, Lady Macbeth, an otherwise noble woman, beckons nature to make her less of a human being so she can commit crimes against humanity. This attempt to harness violence stood in complete contrast to the last aria of Dame Shirley, which closes the opera. The music was lyrical and flowing. It was about reflecting on life and gaining perspective, even after something that was once whole had been shattered.

I was so proud of *Girls of the Golden West*, which premiered at the San Francisco Opera in 2017. I was proud of my colleagues and what we created together on stage. We were a family that struggled with, occasionally got disappointed in, but most often found ourselves in awe of each other. As a result, I didn't expect

the piece's reception, especially the reviews, to be so dismissive. Also, as sensitive as I was as a performer about reviews, I didn't expect that this composer—who had already gone through the experience of not having his work embraced at its premiere, only to have it recognized a decade later—could be hit hard by any critique. I had to ask myself what my contribution was to the perceived failure. Because if my persona had inspired the writing for Dame Shirley in this production, then what was my role in this?

I've since listened back and watched some of the opera myself. For obvious reasons, I can't be fully objective. But what some critics identified as shallowness in the first half of the opera, especially in comparison to the second half, is exactly what I feel John and Peter aimed to frame. They captured and critiqued a certain perception of American history—the one that is typically written and told by white men—which has the habit of not taking full responsibility for its choices, of making a lot of assumptions, and is often presumptuous and proud. It takes the entire first half of the opera for the stereotypes of the Wild West to unfold and collapse. It's only after this point that the characters reveal the full extent of who they are and what they represent. It is a pointed slap in the face to those accounts of American history which are superficial, incomplete, and highly abridged.

While working on *Girls*, I told John that I wished there was a moment when all of the women would unite and sing together. He replied that, other than his choruses, he doesn't write voice ensembles anymore because he can't tolerate when it's impossible to understand everyone's words upon first listening. I thought back to the final scene of *Nixon in China* and also some parts of Mozart's sextets, when you can't grasp every word, but nevertheless there's power in listening to the overlay of voices, representing a diversity of experiences simultaneously.

The recording of *Girls of the Golden West* was delayed because of the pandemic, which was disappointing in many respects. But I also wonder how John will continue to re-examine the material, as he did between the premiere and the follow-up performances. I believe that recording everything John wrote about California in the 1850s—all of its elements and aspects, its development and disappointments—will be worth capturing for posterity.

There's a lot to learn while working on any composer's music. There's the technical demands of the composition with which one has to grapple. There's the comprehension of the music and how that amplifies, conflicts with, or conflates the text and lyrics. There's also the responsibility of interpreting the intended messages, which need to be internalized, metabolized, processed, and articulated.

But through John's music, I learned much more. I've been surprised by what has been unleashed in my voice and myself while working on his music. Whether I'm being driven to the extremes of my vocal range or psyche, there's an expectation that I will continue to take risks, and to remain open, available, and ever expansive. No hesitation is allowed. John's music requires that I trust myself, and it also challenges me to realize that trust. The design of his composing encourages me to focus solely on finding a way to deliver and share the material without obfuscation or obstruction. As a result, it has made me confront how to be less preoccupied with how I am perceived.

He writes three-dimensional representations of human beings, and so his music invites me to have access to all parts of my voice at all times—to not get locked into one way of making sound at any given moment, but to stay conscious, consistent, and self-directed. As a singer, it's the greatest feeling to know that I've become better, stronger, and more capable while working through the challenges of a composer's music. As a person, there's nothing greater than feeling freedom and agency.

John imagines the extremes of what an individual dares to express, and finds a way of translating a complex and demanding imagination. His music can be purposefully challenging and grotesque, risky and biting. It calls for our full attention and requires a commitment. He doesn't shy away, and asks that we don't either. John doesn't make claims about his music, but it's clear when he loves what he's written and when he hears it realized. It's fun to see him overjoyed while listening, because he doesn't hide the delight he takes in his work. Witnessing that has helped me find joy in celebrating my own.

John and I share a mutual understanding and respect—a precedent set at our first meeting. Because of this I've never hesitated to ask John for anything. When I asked him if I could take *El Niño*, his grand oratorio that made me fall in love with his music, and rework it for a distilled chamber ensemble for my residency at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2018, he agreed. When I asked to excerpt three of the operatic arias from *Girls of the Golden West* for a chamber recital with voice and piano in 2021, he agreed. My intention has always been to bring John's music to as many people as possible, in as many contexts as possible. Yes, John's music often leaves a big impact on the listener because of its impressive scale, but it's the intimacy and immediacy of his music that drives me to want to share it.

“Julia, I don’t want you to end up gagging on too much Adams, seriously. I’m so extremely grateful to have met you and to be able to have you sing my music, and I don’t want to risk having you feel like you’re overdosing on doing it.”

“Let me tell you when I’m tired of singing your music, John.”

John and I write a fair amount to each other. Most of our correspondence is centered on music and literature, with jokes and family pictures interspersed. We celebrate each other’s successes and honor each other’s concerns. But when I began to think about what to write for this compilation, this short exchange about his music and my role in it was what immediately came to mind. I have to laugh at John writing this, because while he was pitching another major project, in the same paragraph he called it like it is: it’s undeniable how deeply I’ve been immersed and invested in John’s music. I’ve probably spent more hours of my life pouring over, analyzing, internalizing, and figuring out how to deliver his material than I have on any other composer’s music.

I’m a fan of John Adams. I’m a fan of the scope of human experience his music has the capacity to hold. He’s one of the greats, and how amazing that it’s recognized in his lifetime. He writes music that is classic: it’s classic because we don’t only listen to it one time. We must return to it, engage with it, and reflect on it, with a serious point of inquiry and interrogation. I look forward to seeing what musicians, and in particular singers, will understand about his music and how to deliver it and interpret it as time goes on.

John is irreverent in some ways, combating certain works of art and composers that are among the most widely celebrated. He took on the tradition of the oratorio; he challenged Puccini’s *Girl of the Golden West* with his own. With his new opera, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, I wonder if it’s as much about taking on William Shakespeare as it is about Samuel Barber’s opera of the same title.

John’s music is about promise and progress. It comments on the inherent threat of exploiting power while embodying it. There’s fire and fragility, placed alongside organized form and frequency. I love John’s music. I love singing it, learning from it. And I love listening to it.

Julia Bullock
New York, 2021



Prelude to Flight: John Adams's *Collected Works*

Jake Wilder-Smith

For a generation of listeners born in last two decades of the 20th century, the music of John Adams sounded as if it had always been there, a fixed point in a vast musical landscape. Having already arrived in concert halls and on compact discs before our musical sensibilities began to take shape, this music colored our first impressions of a musical world. But as we grew older, Adams's music continued to shift and expand. Listening as his work stretched in new directions, we found we had encountered the work of a significant composer *in medias res*: the narrative firmly established, but still in motion.

Removed from the historical moment of its emergence onto the contemporary music scene, our introduction to Adams's music was untouched by the cultural tensions that influenced its early reception. For those of us who didn't live through it, tales of opposing factions of Modernists and Minimalists have taken on the nostalgic ring of war stories. The notion of a Minimalist Trinity comprised of Glass, Reich, and Adams—so popularly invoked in Adams's early critical reception—had little impact on how we heard this music. If anything, it alerted us to the perennial phenomenon in which provisional groupings and cursory labels take root before listeners and critics have fostered the expressive vocabularies new music demands of us.

Adams's faith in the sweeping possibilities of tonality, harmony, and rhythmic pulse reached us with the inflection of fact, not something fought for. The confluence of musical idioms that overlap, collide, and combine across Adams's music announced the possibility of a musical multilingualism with startling sincerity, rather than modernist irony or postmodern pastiche.

When listening to a recording of Mahler's Third Symphony or Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, I have often heard the voices of children in the chorus and thought back to the earliest performances of these works. When these works were still new—not yet fixed in the Western canon—how did they sound to ears unaccustomed to them?

My first encounter with the music of John Adams offered a hint of what those children might have heard. In 2006, I took my place on stage in Boston's Symphony Hall among the young singers who enter Adams's Nativity oratorio, *El Niño* (2000), just as it draws to a close. In the first and final phrases of the poem Adams sets for the children's chorus, Rosario Castellanos's "Una palmera," the musical line crests repeatedly in the interval of a minor second on the stressed syllable: *Alta*. *Desmuda. Única. Poesía*. Lasting only a second, these moments of dissonance dissipate into a major third as soon they're touched. Those brief glimmers of dissonance fascinated me. Feeling my voice brush up against the voices of the children beside me, I was captivated by how, in Adams's hands, that interval—so close, so narrow—sent out a faint ripple when struck. Glistening and shuddering at once, it swept across *El Niño*'s musical landscape, irrigating it with the sound of children's voices.

As an 11-year-old, this moment marked my introduction to the music of John Adams. In the years that followed, I, like many others of my generation, came to know Adams's music primarily outside of the concert hall, listening to recordings of his music with the repetitive intensity characteristic of childhood. While no longer onstage, in the midst of music being made, the rush of performing Adams's music hadn't entirely washed away, either. In these recordings, I discovered an invitation into musical worlds almost overwhelming in their forceful presence.

Years later, I would read of John Adams's own childhood experience with recorded music, listening repeatedly to Bach, Beethoven, Sibelius, Ellington, Benny Goodman, and others on the Magnavox record player his father brought home one Christmas. Hearing Adams's music, one senses what it must have meant for the young composer to absorb these early musical influences this way: lying on the floor, flush with the speaker, the sound swelling with amplified immediacy. In works as spread apart in his career as *The Chairman Dances* (1985) and *Absolute Jest* (2012), you can almost hear the composer dropping the needle time and again on a movement, tune, or phrase, moving fluidly from an Ellington record to a Beethoven symphony, discerning each composer's delight in rhythms and sounds that jut out unexpectedly and take you by surprise.

In the early years of his musical career, Adams might have heard Ravel drifting into Ellington, hymns evaporating and condensing along the shifting surfaces of Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony. When we listen to Adams today, we hear the diverse strands of our own contemporary listening habits drawn together with second-nature ease.

Traveling Music: Traversing Adams's *Collected Works*

Adams's early works came on the heels of an abrupt shift: the cross-country trek that brought him from the academic enclave of Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the San Francisco Bay Area, his adopted home since 1972. Here, he would construct his own modular synthesizer (encased in redwood and nicknamed the "Studebaker," after an old family car), curate unconventional concert series featuring avant-garde music, and embark upon a period of musical experimentation that would lead to his first mature musical works.

If Adams's move west is sometimes spoken of with intimations of *American Progress*, it is perhaps an impulse all-too-tempting when faced with a composer who shares his name with an American founding father. Narratives of forward progress, however, insinuate themselves quite often when we seek to trace a line across a composer's career. Listening for the gradual development of early ideas, we expect a composer's body of music to reveal the clear contours of sonata form, with youthful exposition maturing into development and culminating in recapitulation. Yet as the 40-year arc of work collected here demonstrates, Adams's music doggedly resists such narratives. "Rather than viewing 'progress' as the paradigm for novelty in the arts," he cautions in his memoir, *Hallelujah Junction*, "we might be better advised to welcome the idea of 'variation.'"

So while Adams's music invites us to follow the outlines of a musical life ever evolving, it also challenges our assumptions about how composers move through their careers. Ever the trickster, Adams turns on their head many of our expectations about how a composer develops and innovates. Spurning conventional naming practices for his symphonic works, he has opted instead for titles teeming with

historical and aesthetic implications: *Harmonielehre* (1985) after Schoenberg, *Naïve and Sentimental Music* (1998) after Schiller. Allusions illuminating for the earnest listener double as mischievous traps set for the overeager critic. In other composers' bodies of work, small-scale chamber compositions serve as studies that build toward large-scale operatic and symphonic forms. Yet across Adams's career, we encounter the exact opposite: his operas and oratorios fuel the discovery of new musical forms, and in the works that follow in their wake, the musical ideas so densely layered in his musical dramas seem to fan out—suddenly discernible in their individual shapes.

The breadth and variety of Adams's music thus begs a question: how do we navigate a body of work that seems to shake off the usual structures and scaffolds we might seek to impose upon it?

Traversing the four decades of music gathered here is like stepping foot onto a landscape that shifts and slides as we travel across it. "We now and then detect in nature slight dislocations, which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding," Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his quintessentially American essay, "Circles." Emerson's vision of the American landscape suggests a possible path through the 40-year span of music collected here. There is something distinctly American about Adams's approach to shaping his career: resisting neat narrative lines and rhetorical forms, he delights in sudden swerves and curving paths that bend back upon themselves. Envisioning a musical future rooted in American soil, Adams composes a body of work that re-imagines music history as a foundation that never stands still—a ground sliding subtly underfoot.

Gradual Changes and Sudden Shifts: *Phrygian Gates* (1977) to *Nixon in China* (1987)

Moving away from the meditative musical processes suggested by the minimalism of Steve Reich's *Drumming* (1970–71) or Philip Glass's *Music in 12 Parts* (1971–74), Adams's early works feature sudden, dramatic, and unprepared shifts in harmony, rhythm, and meter. Early works, including *Phrygian Gates* (1977), *China Gates* (1977), *Shaker Loops* (1978, rev. 1983), and *Common Tones in Simple Time* (1979), illustrate how Adams sought to trace new pathways for minimalist techniques, repurposing them in support of new expressive ends. His break from the minimalist aesthetic of gradual change paved the way for his first explorations of what he has referred to as "traveling music," music that "gives the impression of continuous movement over a shifting landscape."

In these works, harmonic centers slide into one another, passing from one to the next in waves. Rhythms cross and collide, giving rise to the undulating effects of polyrhythmic motion and the acoustic shimmer of voices unfolding just out-of-phase. Listening as these musical gestures ripple across Adams's early compositions, we might recall the Pacific swells that lapped against the shore outside the small beachside cottage where he worked out the musical forms underlying *Phrygian Gates* and other formative early works. But in these waves of sound, we can also discern the influence of the oscillators and waveforms of electronic music merging with Adams's unique visions of the American landscape.

Beginning with his first published work for solo piano, *Phrygian Gates*, Adams weaves these fluid movements back and forth into tapestries of tension and release. Across its three movements, constant shifts between Phrygian and Lydian

musical modes propel the pianist's passage through six tonal centers. Drawn along in the constant, *moto perpetuo* pulse of *Phrygian Gates*' musical sibling, *China Gates*, you find yourself drifting across a familiar landscape made alien, as in a dream. New tonal centers open like vistas that greet you unexpectedly. Climbing higher and higher, you feel yourself on the cusp of a view neatly framed, final and certain—but it never arrives. Instead, your newly elevated perspective reveals only a multiplicity of peaks stretching all around, all notions of finality forever out of reach. As the piece comes to a close, its relentless pulse, finding no place to rest, seems to evaporate into the atmosphere.

In the orchestral works that follow—*Common Tones in Simple Time* (1979), *Harmonium* (1980), *Grand Pianola Music* (1982), and *Harmonielehre* (1985)—Adams builds expansive musical structures in which these same waves of sound cross and overlap. Though representative of the minimalist grammar underlying Adams's early compositions, these large-scale works give rise to forms astonishingly varied, and hardly minimal. From the waves that characterize his early works for piano, Adams devised a minimalist syntax capable of absorbing the harmonic vocabulary of late Romantic chromaticism as fluently as the American vernacular.

With a common tone or rhythmic pulse acting as a “hinge,” Adams moves among diverse worlds of sound, finding particular pleasure in moments of elision. In the first movement of *Harmonielehre*, we hear a G pulsate as the harmony shifts subtly around it, wavering between E minor and E-flat major. In the final movement of Adams's *Grand Pianola Music*, “On the Dominant Divide,” it is the archetypal progression of Western tonal music—I–V–I, tonic–dominant–tonic—that rocks back and forth with unabashed delight. Within the arc of Adams's early career, *Grand Pianola Music* itself functions as a kind of hinge, moving between

the diatonic purity and minimalist leanings of *Common Tones in Simple Time* and *Harmonium* and the bold synthesis of chromatic color and minimalist form introduced in *Harmonielehre*.

Adams has written of how landscapes born in dreams precipitated both *Grand Pianola Music* and *Harmonielehre*. Listening to these works, the harmonic transformations and sliding rhythmic planes of Adams's music seem to rhyme with the fluid movements of dream logic, where faces and landscapes make and unmake themselves with liquid ease, and the fragment of a memory, desire, or anxiety is drawn out into narrative.

With the arrival of *Nixon in China* (1987), Adams's first opera, the musical landscapes of his early works give rise to dramatic forms that swerve between the satirical and the sincere, the sacred and the profane. When Peter Sellars proposed that Adams compose an opera about Nixon's 1972 visit to China, he had already discerned the ease with which Adams's music moves between emotional states: “It's funny, then it isn't,” he observed. In *Nixon in China*, expressive shifts and empathic leaps almost impossible to conceive manifest in an instant. Richard Nixon, sweating and stuttering in his media-obsessed Act I “News” aria, transforms into a sort of accidental philosopher by the opera's end. With its interplay of satire and psychological portraiture, *Nixon in China* transcends any cartoonish vision of Nixon, the historical import of his meeting with Mao, or the changing geopolitical landscape of the late 20th century.

American Variations: *Nixon in China* (1987) to *Doctor Atomic* (2005)

The composition of *Nixon in China* represents a turning point in Adams's career. Rather than progressing neatly from one to the next, the works that follow in *Nixon's* wake tend to veer between contrasting characters and moods. "Along with every dark, introspective, 'serious' piece, there must come the Trickster, the garish, ironic wild card that threatens to lose me whatever friends the previous composition might have gained," Adams reflects in his liner notes for the Nonesuch recording that pairs his elegiac Walt Whitman setting, *The Wound-Dresser* (1988–89), with *Fearful Symmetries* (1988), a return to the off-kilter big band orchestrations of *Nixon in China*.

Composed one after the other following *Nixon's* premiere, these two works illustrate one of the primary rhythms underlying Adams's compositional career: abrupt shifts between consecutive compositions. Likewise, the driving dance club rhythms of *Lollapalooza* (1995), a fantasia on the syncopations spring-loaded within the word that lends the work its title, are met by the slackened pulse of *Road Movies* (1995)—a work for violin and piano that summons up drives along roads so straight and so still that you're never sure whether you're really moving forward, except when passing objects appear momentarily in the glint of headlights. The possibilities and perils of human transformation that run through his folktale-inspired opera *A Flowering Tree* (2006) follow his study of the irreversible consequences of the creation of the atomic bomb in *Doctor Atomic* (2005), a Faustian portrait of J. Robert Oppenheimer that unfolds across the desert landscape of Los Alamos, New Mexico.

Though Adams's captivation with American landscapes, real and mythic, represents a through line in his work, his compositions travel across musical

terrains as varied as the topographies they evoke. In the first decade of the 2000s, we move from the precariously shifting ground of *Guide to Strange Places* (2001) into the Kerouac-inflected California coast of *The Dharma at Big Sur* (2003); the New England of Adams's childhood in *My Father Knew Charles Ives* (2003) to the celluloid fantasy of postwar Hollywood in *City Noir* (2009).

Following the premiere of *Nixon in China* in 1987, Adams returns repeatedly to musical drama. It is in these works that we sense the most pronounced transformations of his musical language. In each opera and oratorio, Adams channels the unique dramatic demands of the subject matter into expressive energies that reverberate across the concert works that follow.

His theatrical works center on moments in history charged with the potential for tectonic change. Eastern communism comes face-to-face with Western capitalism in *Nixon in China*, but we soon find its characters' complex inner lives supplanting the ideologies they purport to represent. The long history of Palestinian-Israeli conflict rushes toward dramatic confrontation aboard the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship in *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), where individual voices and choral commentaries both clash and converse. The advent of the atomic bomb in *Doctor Atomic* heralds a future forever altered by a human invention devoid of its creators' humanity. *El Niño*, conceived as an opera-oratorio, sets its sights on nothing less than the dawn of Christianity in its nuanced exploration of the mystery, joy, and sheer force of birth through the story of the Nativity.

"History is our mother," Nixon sings in *Nixon in China*. Indeed, the diverse subjects of Adams's operas and oratorios converge in a unique vision of the past, finely attuned to its reverberations across our present lives. "Opera...exists across

time,” Adams’s long-term collaborator Peter Sellars reflected, but the “heart of the operatic form is *simultaneity*.” In Adams’s dramatic works, the past and present are overlaid, burning into one another like a double-exposed frame of film.

The transhistorical reach of Adams’s musical dramas is reflected in the inventive nature of their libretti. In her texts for *Nixon* and *Klinghoffer*, librettist Alice Goodman distills a wide array of poetic registers—from the *King James Bible* to the modernist American poet Wallace Stevens—into a voice somehow timeless, even as it remains closely hewed to the contours of the historical events depicted in these works. Individual lines from her libretti—“News has a kind of mystery,” from *Nixon in China*, or “It sounds like the truth,” from *Klinghoffer*—can be transposed into the present historical moment with uncanny, and sometimes uncomfortable, relevance.

Beginning with *El Niño*, Adams’s dramatic works feature libretti assembled from a variety of sources. Texts gathered from various cultures and time periods glide in and out of one another, opening into moments of startling juxtaposition. In *El Niño*’s account of the Nativity, Herod’s Massacre of the Innocents is represented by feminist Mexican poet Rosario Castellanos’s “Memorial de Tlatelolco,” a stirring and seething response to the 1969 massacre of unarmed civilians in Mexico City. Earlier in *El Niño*, “The Christmas Star,” by 20th-century Chilean writer Gabriela Mistral, unfolds over a choral setting of “O quam preciosa,” a text by the medieval writer and composer Hildegard von Bingen. As the modern text unspools above the medieval poem, a rush of sound soon engulfs both. Echoes of Gregorian chant break through to the surface for a moment, only to recede again, breaking into

repeated fragments that float and shimmer in a stream of sound characteristic of Adams’s choral compositions extending back to his settings of John Donne and Emily Dickinson in *Harmonium*.

In *Doctor Atomic*, Sellars’s libretto weaves together documentary material from the Los Alamos laboratory with a broad array of texts, ranging from the *Bhagavad Gita* to 20th-century writer Muriel Rukeyser’s poetry. Early in the opera, J. Robert Oppenheimer answers physicist Edward Teller’s admission that “no amount of protesting or fiddling with politics will save our souls” (taken from Teller’s letters) with the words of Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire: “The soul is a thing so impalpable, so often useless, and sometimes so embarrassing, that at this loss I felt only a little more emotion than if, during a walk, I had lost my visiting card.” Later in Act I, Oppenheimer transforms before our eyes into a metaphysical poet, as Adams brings an earthly physicality and contemporary sheen to his setting of Donne’s 1633 sonnet, “Batter my heart, three-person’d God.” Operatic form is like an electric current shot through time in *Doctor Atomic*, carrying with it histories of human suffering and resistance, traces of our collective dreams and desires.

Unanticipated resonances emanate from the compositions written in the wake of Adams’s dramatic works. The haunting melody that drifts over strumming chords in the “Chorus of Exiled Palestinians” from *The Death of Klinghoffer* forms surprising slant-rhymes with later compositions, including the tender clarinet caresses that characterize the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons* (1996), and the sinuous melodic line unfurled by unison flutes and oboe in the opening movement of *Naive and Sentimental Music* (1998). The sheer magnitude of *Doctor Atomic* leads

unexpectedly to the compressed forms that frame the three movements of his *Doctor Atomic Symphony* (2007). Though the sparks of Adams's dramatic imagination scintillate across his vast body of work, we find that they ignite musical ideas distinct from their dramatic sources.

Adams's operas and oratorios have also propelled changes in how sound design and digital amplification are used in opera houses and concert halls. From *Nixon* on, synthesizers and keyboards with sampled sounds lend new timbral shadings to Adams's orchestrations. In works as spread apart as *Christian Zeal and Activity* (1973), *John's Book of Alleged Dances* (1994) for the Kronos Quartet, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2002), and *Doctor Atomic* (2005), pre-recorded and manipulated sounds are woven into acoustic fabrics.

While an interest in the possibilities offered by musical technology informs much of his music, here, too, a paradigm of forward progress quickly breaks down. Musical technologies—past and present, analog and digital—influence Adams's music in unexpected, and markedly non-chronological, ways. It was the piano roll, for example, that prompted Adams's *Century Rolls* (1997). Written for pianist Emanuel Ax, Adams's first piano concerto was sparked by his experience listening to the sounds of the player piano, a technology used by both George Gershwin and Sergei Rachmaninoff (and many others) in the first decades of the 20th-century, and later by experimental American composer Conlon Nancarrow, whose *Studies for Player Piano* reimagined the possibilities of a piano that plays itself.

Early acoustic compositions found inspiration in the sounds of synthesizers and underlying forms of electronic music. The “gates” of his early piano works and “loops” and “slews” of *Shaker Loops*, for example, can be read as technical references, as well as evocations of how this music moves: the gate signals of

modular synthesizers, the tape loops of *musique concrète*, and the electronic slewing that enables analog synthesizers to slide between notes. In his purely electronic compositions for synthesizer, culminating in *Hoodoo Zephyr* (1993), one senses that the synthesizer may represent for Adams what the player piano did for Nancarrow: a sort of workshop where musical motion can be studied with superhuman precision and gleeful abandon.

Whenever Adams reimagines musical forms associated with the past, we see that his vision of music history is decidedly non-linear, revealing repeating loops and abrupt splices like those found in the tape music that influenced *Shaker Loops*. Take, for example, the middle movement of his Violin Concerto (1993), which borrows its title from a Robert Hass poem, “Body through which the dream flows.” While the Baroque chaconne is Adams's model, here, we meet a chaconne floating in the half-light of dreams: as an eight-bar ground bass cycles through the movement, filtered through shifting, luminous orchestral textures, the violinist unspools long lines of sustained sound. Throughout, a hazy mist hovers between the bass line and the violin, through which filaments of light only occasionally pass, restructured.

Or take the passacaglia that emerges from the wreckage of the 1994 Northridge earthquake dramatized in *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky* (1995), a musical drama with a libretto by poet June Jordan. The vernacular pop forms with which Adams experiments throughout *Ceiling/Sky* make the sudden appearance of the passacaglia in the work's finale all the more surprising. A musical form in which variations layer and elide across a constant bass ostinato, the passacaglia

might be translated literally as “a walk along the street”—a far cry from the driving pulse that skids and swerves through *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986).

Over the simple repeated motive that launches the finale of *Ceiling/Sky*, voices merge and overlap as fragments of the characters’ fears, dreams, and desires fold into one another. “Baby I can’t call an ambulance and even if I could / that wouldn’t do any good because the freeway’s down,” David sings at its start. With all movement in Los Angeles brought to a halt, Adams’s passacaglia speaks of beginning to move again, speak again, love again. Listening to it now—25 years after it was written, in the midst of a pandemic that cleared LA freeways and filled its hospitals—the moment hits with disquieting relevance. When everything crumbles around us, it seems to say, the rhythms that restart our bodies and our souls are not revved-up engines, but the rhythms closest to our bodies: our heartbeat and our breath, the steps we take and the words we utter.

Crosscurrents of Influence: Adams’s Recent Work

For composers navigating the rapidly evolving culture and commerce of contemporary music today, Adams has served as both model and mentor. Even for those composers whose work bears little outward resemblance to Adams’s musical aesthetic, one discerns the imperative of responding to his musical vision.

One of the oddities of influence, however, is that it flows both forward and backward. Whenever a truly new musical voice emerges, its influence casts itself in reverse, ricocheting across the musical past and transforming our perception of what came before. “What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it,” T.S. Eliot

writes. “The *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.” Like the poet who transforms tradition by building upon it, Adams has distilled musical history into a voice as original as it is indispensable to how we listen to the tradition it carries forward today. “John’s musical language isn’t just contemporary,” Sellars has said. “It moves back across and through time.”

After the provocative re-imaginings of the Passion form in *Klinghoffer, El Niño*, and *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* (2013), one begins to hear Bach’s Passions under Adams’s influence, discerning within them a wholly modern vision of suffering and resilience, rituals of mourning and repetitions of trauma. And after internalizing Adams’s reinvention of dance forms—from *The Chairman Dances* and *John’s Book of Alleged Dances* up to his recent piano concerto, *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?* (2018)—how can we not hear a hint of Adams in Mozart, as he recasts social dance forms to electrify his operatic structures, or even Mahler, as he infuses his symphonic forms with contaminated Viennese *Ländler*?

Adams’s vision of Beethoven looms especially large in his work of the last decade. After encountering the rush of Adams’s early work *Grand Pianola Music*, we may already begin to hear glimmers of Adams in Beethoven at his most exuberant and playful. But in three works written over the last decade—*Absolute Jest* (2012), *Second Quartet* (2014), and its “sister piece” *Roll Over Beethoven* (2014), an arrangement of the *Second Quartet* for four-hand piano—it’s as though Adams has concentrated and bottled the pure Adams energy *already* circulating within Beethoven’s music.

The gesture of reanimating a musical past recalls Stravinsky’s excavations of Pergolesi in *Pulcinella*. While Adams has cited a performance of *Pulcinella* as an important influence for *Absolute Jest* and the two works that follow, there is something more

deeply personal about Adams's engagement with this musical material from the past. Listening to them, one can't help but recall the image of the young Adams listening repeatedly, obsessively, to Beethoven records on the family Magnavox, sussing out the electric impulses behind each melodic phrase, rhythmic cell, and harmonic shift.

Across these three works, shards of Beethoven's late quartets, piano sonatas, and symphonies churn, amassing energy and current. Listening to them, we might think of Rainer Marie Rilke's vision of old structures as conduits for new technology: the ancient Roman sarcophagi repurposed as aqueducts through which fresh waters might flow, delivering new life. In *Absolute Jest*, a work scored for string quartet and orchestra, Adams processes fragments of the scherzo movements from Beethoven's Opp. 131 and 135 quartets through a musical machine in which particles of energy hurtle forward, revitalized and redirected. If the scherzo, rendered literally as "jest" or "joke" in Italian, is not the form most often associated with Beethoven's late period, Adams reorients our ears: Beethoven somehow *sounds* different after hearing *Absolute Jest*.

The past is not to be sworn away or consecrated from a distance in Adams's contemporary visions of music history, but drawn into a new relationship with the present. Fragments of a musical past, cut-up and converted into an outpouring of energy all Adams's own, converge in the vision of a musical future in constant conversation with what preceded it.

Adams's music assures us that the past does not simply recede from view: its waves of influence continue to extend across each cultural era, uncovering renewed meaning and relevance. Like the other music we carry with us—whether Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Beethoven's Late Quartets, or Ellington's *Such Sweet*

Thunder—Adams's compositions never hold still. We can already discern that works like *Nixon in China*, *El Niño*, and *Doctor Atomic* will mean something uniquely charged for each audience that discovers them in the future, just as each era finds its archetypes, affections, and anxieties crystallized in a different Shakespeare play.

In "Circles," Ralph Waldo Emerson imagines the course of history and human life not as a line that stretches from origin to conclusion, but as "a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles." Like the ripples that move out from a disruption in a body of water, each work collected here can be imagined as a small disturbance that unsettles the perceived stillness of the Western canon, setting it in motion once again. Radiating across a surface that never stands still, Adams's music promises to keep expanding like Emerson's "self-evolving circle" for each listener who returns to it time and again, and for every generation that encounters it anew.

Los Angeles, 2020



CHRONOLOGY

- 1947 Born February 15 in Worcester, MA. Family moves shortly after to Woodstock, VT, and then settles in 1954 in East Concord, NH.
- 1955–65 Learns clarinet from his father; plays in local bands and orchestras. Begins theory lessons at age 11; at the age of 13 hears his first piece performed by a community orchestra. Studies conducting during summers at Dartmouth College.
- 1965–71 Attends Harvard College. Studies composition with Luise Vosgerchian, Leon Kirchner, David del Tredici, Harold Shapero, and Roger Sessions. Begins first serious compositions; has his first exposure to electronic music. Performs occasionally as a clarinetist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and other local orchestras; with BSO, plays in American premiere of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. Conducts student orchestra and opera productions at Harvard. A.B. *magna cum laude*, 1969; M.A., music composition, 1971.
- 1971 Moves to San Francisco.
- 1972 After a year of working in a warehouse on the Oakland waterfront, accepts teaching position at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he teaches and conducts for the next ten years. Produces concerts of avant-garde music, introducing new works by Ashley, Cage, Feldman, Bryars, Cardew, Oliveros, Marshall, and Palestine.
- 1973 Composes *American Standard*, influenced by Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra pieces from England. First performed and later released by Brian Eno on the Obscure label.
- 1975–76 Studies video technology and creates video and live electronic works in collaboration with artists and friends from Mills College and San Francisco. Builds analog synthesizer ("The Studebaker"). *Grounding*, *Studebaker Love Music*, *Onyx*.
- 1977 *Phrygian Gates*, a 24-minute work for piano premiered by Mack McCray, is Adams's first work to show influences of minimalism. *China Gates*.
- 1978 Meets Edo de Waart, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, and becomes advisor for new music. *Shaker Loops* for string septet.
- 1979 Moves to Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco; purchases small cabin in California Sierra Nevada mountains. First New York concert at Guggenheim Museum, sponsored by Steve Reich. *Common Tones in Simple Time*.
- 1980 With de Waart, creates the "New and Unusual Music" series, which plays in alternative spaces throughout San Francisco.
- 1981 *Harmonium* premiered by San Francisco Symphony under de Waart.
- 1982 *Grand Pianola Music*.
- 1983 Marries photographer Deborah O'Grady and moves to Berkeley the following year. Daughter Emily born in 1984; son Sam in 1985. *Light over Water*, electronic score for choreographer Lucinda Childs's work called *Available Light*, opens the new Temporary Contemporary in Los Angeles, with set designed by Frank Gehry. *Grand Pianola Music* performed by New York Philharmonic.

- 1985 *Harmonielehre* premiered and recorded by San Francisco Symphony, conducted by de Waart. Begins long-standing relationship with Nonesuch Records. First meetings with Peter Sellars and Alice Goodman to plan *Nixon in China*. *The Chairman Dances*.
- 1986 *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*. *Tromba Lontana*.
- 1987 *Nixon in China* opens in Houston, followed by productions in Brooklyn, Washington, Edinburgh, Helsinki, and Amsterdam. The recording wins a Grammy® for Classical Contemporary Composition and is later listed as one of the “Ten Most Important Recordings of the Decade” by *Time* magazine.
- 1988 Lives briefly in Rome. Visits Soviet Union. Begins association with publishers Boosey & Hawkes. *Fearful Symmetries*.
- 1989 Holds the position of Creative Chair with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. First London concerts, conducting London Sinfonietta at Queen Elizabeth Hall. *The Wound-Dresser*. *Eros Piano*. Work on *The Death of Klinghoffer*.
- 1991 *The Death of Klinghoffer* opens in Brussels, followed by performances in Lyon, Vienna, Brooklyn, and San Francisco. Conducts *Harmonielehre* for the first time, with the Cleveland Orchestra. Meets Simon Rattle, who conducts *Harmonium* for the film *Adams in Eden*. Conducts premiere of *El Dorado* with San Francisco Symphony. The recording of *El Dorado* wins a Grammy® for Classical Contemporary Composition. Receives California Governor’s Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts from Gov. Pete Wilson. Music Director of Cabrillo Festival.
- 1992 Conducts premiere of *Chamber Symphony* in Holland. Nonesuch releases *Hoodoo Zephyr*, created entirely on synthesizers in Adams’s own studio.
- 1993 First appearances in Germany; conducts German premiere of *Nixon in China* in Frankfurt. Music Director of Ojai Festival.
- 1994 Violin Concerto premiered in Minneapolis by Jorja Fleezanis; conducts Israel Philharmonic in six performances of the concerto with Gidon Kremer. Works with Kronos Quartet on *John’s Book of Alleged Dances*. Begins work with Peter Sellars and June Jordan on a new music-theater piece comprising 24 pop songs.
- 1995 *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, with libretto by June Jordan, opens in Berkeley and, after substantial revision, plays over 50 performances in Montreal, New York, Edinburgh, Helsinki, Paris, and Hamburg. Wins Grawemeyer Prize for Violin Concerto. *Road Movies* for violin and piano. *Lollapalooza*.
- 1996 Tours United States with Ensemble Modern, conducting *Scratchband*, *Chamber Symphony*, and music of Rihm, Nancarrow, Zappa. *Gnarly Buttons*. *Slonimsky’s Earbox*.
- 1997 Celebrates 50th birthday with a concert in Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw featuring his own music and works for big band by Gil Evans, Miles Davis, and Duke Ellington. Premiere of *Century Rolls* for piano and orchestra by Emanuel Ax and Cleveland Orchestra. Elected to American Academy of Arts and Letters and American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

1998 Both *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* presented by London Symphony Orchestra in concert performances at Barbican Hall. Conducts concerts in Rome, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Oslo. *Hallelujah Junction* for two pianos.

1999 *Naive and Sentimental Music* for orchestra premiered by Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Tours Europe with Ensemble Modern Orchestra, conducting *Naive and Sentimental Music* and Ives's Fourth Symphony. Conducts Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Cleveland Orchestra. Nonesuch releases *The John Adams Earbox*, a ten-CD box set retrospective representing nearly all of Adams's music written between 1977 and 1998.

2000 *El Niño* premieres at Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, followed by the North American premiere by the San Francisco Symphony in 2001.

2001 *American Berserk. Guide to Strange Places*.

2002 *On the Transmigration of Souls*, commissioned by the New York Philharmonic to commemorate the first anniversary of 9/11, honored with the Pulitzer Prize; the recording wins three Grammy® Awards. Barbican and BBC Symphony Orchestra present *John's Earbox*, a festival featuring eight all-Adams concerts.

2003 Lincoln Center presents *John Adams: An American Master*, the most extensive festival they have ever devoted to a living composer. Penny Woolcock's film version of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, conducted by Adams, makes its American debut at the Sundance Film Festival; film is released in theaters, on television, and on DVD. Receives Honorary Doctorate of Arts from University of Cambridge. *The Dharma at Big Sur. My Father Knew Charles Ives*.

2004 Named first recipient of Northwestern University's Michael Ludwig Nemmers Prize in Music Composition, honoring classical music composers of outstanding achievement.

2005 *Doctor Atomic* premieres at San Francisco Opera; European premiere at De Nederlandse Opera in Amsterdam follows in 2007.

2006 Prepares orchestra and chorus in Venezuela for *A Flowering Tree*, which travels to Vienna for its premiere.

2007 Conducts American Composers Orchestra in a Carnegie Hall performance of his work to celebrate his 60th birthday. Awarded Harvard Arts Medal. *Son of Chamber Symphony. Doctor Atomic Symphony*.

2008 Farrar, Straus and Giroux publishes *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life*, a volume of his memoirs and commentary on American musical life. The book is awarded the Northern California Book Award for Creative Nonfiction, named one of the "most notable books of the year" by *The New York Times*, and excerpted in *New Yorker* magazine. Receives Honorary Doctorate of Arts from Northwestern University. *First Quartet*.

2009 Named Creative Chair of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where he is instrumental in the Green Umbrella new music series; curates *West Coast, Left Coast* festival exploring California's musical culture. Gustavo Dudamel begins tenure as Music Director of Los Angeles Philharmonic with world premiere of *City Noir*. The film *I Am Love*, directed by Luca Guadagnino and starring Tilda Swinton, features Adams's music throughout. Receives National Endowment for the Arts Opera Honors Award and Honorary Doctorate of Music from Duquesne University.

- 2010 Begins writing occasional book reviews for the *New York Times*, including articles about Cage, Mahler, Debussy, Boulez, Wagner, Antheil, and Hedi Lamarr.
- 2011 Conducts six performances of *Nixon in China*, including a live international HD telecast, at the Metropolitan Opera. Awarded Honorary Doctorate of Music from The Juilliard School.
- 2012 Receives Honorary Doctorate of Music from Harvard University. *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*.
- 2013 In residence at Library of Congress, which presents festival of Adams's chamber music. Awarded Honorary Doctorate of Music from Yale University. *Absolute Jest. Saxophone Concerto*.
- 2014 *The Death of Klinghoffer* opens at the Metropolitan Opera amid heated controversy and organized protests. Under pressure, the Met cancels video telecast but continues with seven public performances. Curates city-wide *Minimalist Jukebox* festival for Los Angeles Philharmonic. Together with his wife, creates the Pacific Harmony Foundation, which funds young composers, ensembles, and music education outreach. *Second Quartet. Roll Over Beethoven*.
- 2015 *Scheherazade.2*, dramatic symphony for violin and orchestra, premiered by Leila Josefowicz, with New York Philharmonic under Alan Gilbert; further performances conducted by Adams in Cincinnati, Atlanta, Cleveland, Amsterdam, London, Paris, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. Receives Honorary Doctorate of Music from Royal Academy of Music.

- 2017 *Girls of the Golden West* premieres at San Francisco Opera, and travels to the Dutch National Opera in 2019 for its European premiere. Composer in residence with Berliner Philharmoniker, which releases *The John Adams Edition*, a multi-CD and DVD compilation of performances conducted by Rattle, Dudamel, Petrenko, Gilbert, and Adams. *I Still Play* for piano, written in honor of Bob Hurwitz, premiered by Jeremy Denk.
- 2018 *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?* premiered by pianist Yuja Wang, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Gustavo Dudamel. Awarded American Academy of Arts and Letters' Gold Medal. Receives BBVA Frontiers of Knowledge Award for Music and Opera.
- 2019 Begins work on *Antony and Cleopatra*, his sixth opera, adapting texts by Shakespeare, Virgil, and other sources. Becomes only American composer ever chosen for Holland's Erasmus Prize, "for contributions to European culture." Receives Honorary Doctorate from San Francisco Conservatory of Music. *I Still Dance*, written for Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony.
- 2020 Conducts French and Dutch premieres of *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?*, with pianist Vikingur Ólafsson.
- 2021 Receives Glashütte Original MusikFestspielPreis for lifetime achievement, and Ditson Conductor's Award, honoring conductors who have a distinguished record of championing contemporary American music. Music Director of Ojai Festival.



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