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JOHN ADAMS

at 75 How the composer
became one of
modern music's
most powerful voices

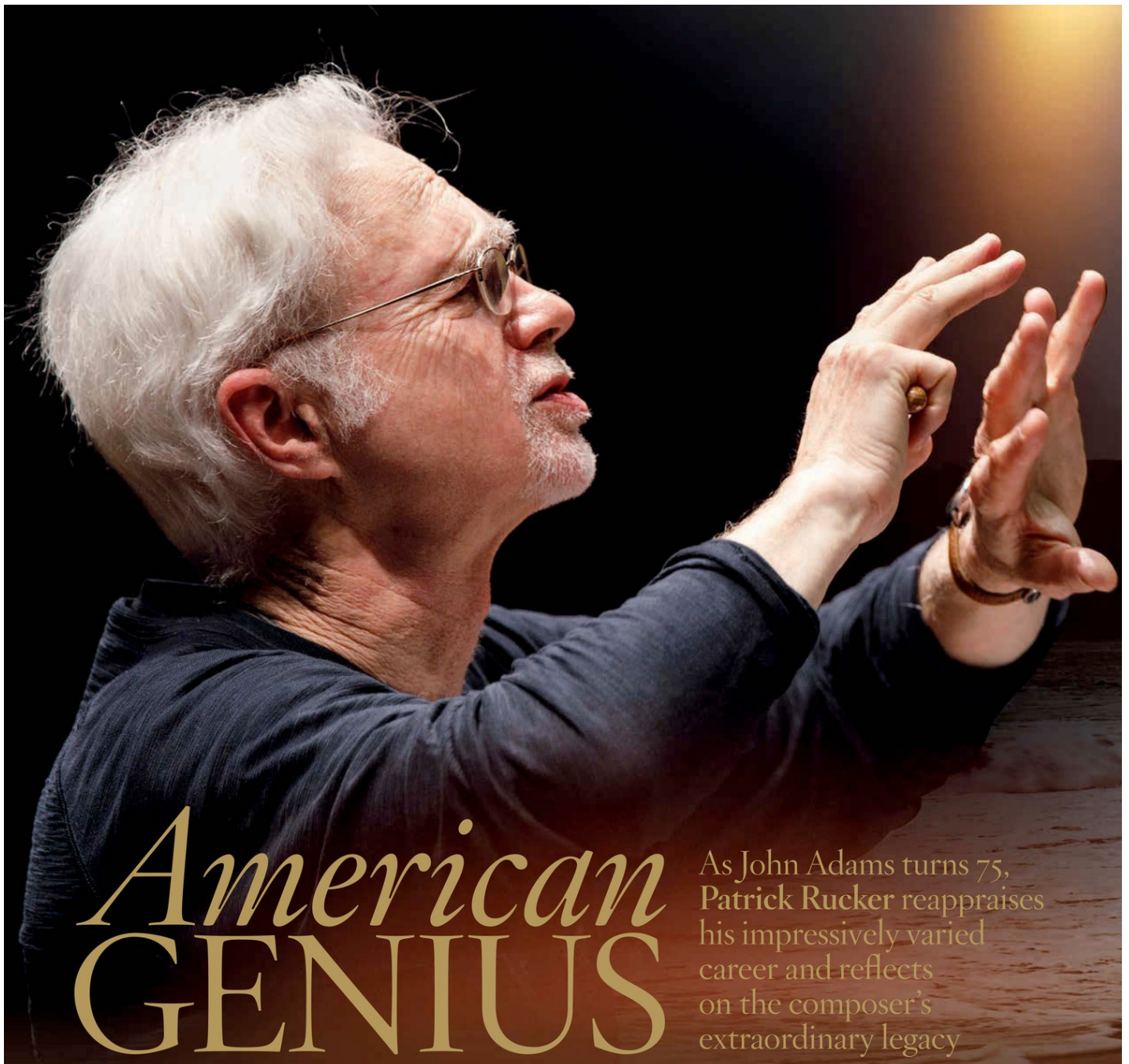
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American GENIUS

As John Adams turns 75, Patrick Rucker reappraises his impressively varied career and reflects on the composer's extraordinary legacy

On December 4, 1987, when Harvey Lichtenstein brought Houston Grand Opera's production of John Adams's *Nixon in China* to the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), New Yorkers – so prone to take everything in their stride – sat up and took notice. Minimalism certainly wasn't new. The careers of artists Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra and Frank Stella were in full swing. Two milestones of musical minimalism, Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* and Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, were already more than a decade old. Moreover, New York's downtown scene was roiling with cross-disciplinary vitality. The Kitchen, Judson Memorial Church, St Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, La MaMa, clubs like Danceteria and CBGB, and countless galleries and lofts below

Manhattan's 14th Street became the forcing houses of new art. Dancers, musicians, sculptors, creators of film and video, actors, poets and painters worked in close proximity, often in collaboration. The stream of exciting new work, whether by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Jeff Koons, Lucinda Childs, Meredith Monk, Trisha Brown, Laurie Anderson, Madonna, Al Carmines or Nam June Paik, seemed endless. So what made *Nixon in China* so noteworthy, especially in the midst of an unusually flourishing art scene?

The production, directed by Peter Sellars, was certainly dazzling, what with the arrival of Air Force One on stage and Chairman Mao's secretaries circling him like satellites. Alice Goodman's libretto was strong, even as it dealt with events only a decade and a half past. But overwhelmingly, it was the music



PHOTOGRAPHY: MUSACCHIO-ANNIELLO-PASQUALINI

of Adams, at that time not so well known on the East Coast, that made such an impression. Minimalist, perhaps, but with a distinctly individual quality, Adams's music was full of visceral energy, replete with acutely wrought vocal characterisations, and surrounded by orchestral textures of immense richness and finesse. Most remarkable was that, despite the intricacy of the artistic conception, the opera spoke with unambiguous directness. Uncharacteristically for a new American opera, near the end of the run of *Nixon in China* at BAM, conductor Edo de Waart and the cast and chorus were already travelling into Manhattan to begin recording it.

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Robert Hurwitz, then president of Nonesuch Records, was a longtime fan of Adams and supervised the recording, which was released the following spring.

On February 15 this year, John Coolidge Adams turned 75. To say that he is the most-performed living American classical composer is no hyperbole. Performances of his music in honour of his birthday began in January and will continue throughout the year. On January 13, the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra unveiled a series called The Cosmos of John Adams. Running until March 25, it presents 11 works, including five Swiss premieres, under the batons of Paavo Järvi, Robert Trevino,

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James Maddalena as President Richard Nixon and Janis Kelly as his wife in the revival of Sellars's US production of *Nixon in China* at ENO in London, summer 2006

David Zinman, Jaap van Zweden and the composer himself. Järvi, Music Director of the Tonhalle Orchestra, says in an interview: 'John Adams is one of the great living composers and without any doubt the leading figure in American music. Having him as our Artist in Focus is a great honour. The Tonhalle is committed to both tradition and innovation, and we need to keep our finger on the pulse of new music. No one represents this better than John Adams. He was one of the founding fathers of minimalism, but his music has now evolved – it has taken a different direction.'

Other ensembles celebrating the Adams anniversary are the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam, the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra in Hamburg, the Thailand PO, the Iceland SO, Seattle Symphony, Utah Symphony, the Baltimore, St Louis, Cincinnati and Milwaukee symphony orchestras, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Hong Kong PO,

the New York Philharmonic and the LSO. And that's just a handful of them.

All this celebrating might seem to suggest a career that has been smooth sailing. But that wasn't always the case. Even *Nixon in China* had its detractors. Covering the Houston premiere for the *New York Times*, chief music critic Donal Henahan wrote that he found the music 'difficult' and 'pointless', and described a score that 'sounded as if it were generated by a synthesiser'.

The next Adams opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, proved even more controversial – or perhaps explosive is the better word. Premiered at La Monnaie in Brussels in 1991, it involved the same creative team as *Nixon in China*: Sellars, Goodman and choreographer Mark Morris. The opera deals with the 1985 hijacking of the cruise ship *Acille Lauro* by four members of the Palestinian Liberation Front and their murder of a Jewish-American wheelchair-bound passenger, Leon Klinghoffer.



Catherine Wyn-Rogers, Jonathan Summers (*The Death of Klinghoffer*, Edinburgh, 2005); Brindley Sherratt, Aubrey Allcock, Gerald Finley (*Doctor Atomic*, London, 2017)

The American premiere and a number of subsequent productions were plagued by bitter debate. Adams, Sellars and Goodman have all insisted that, with regard to the political background, their aim was to give equal voice to the Israelis and Palestinians. Nevertheless, accusations of anti-Semitism and the glorification of terrorism have been persistent. When the Boston Symphony Orchestra cancelled a performance of excerpts from the opera in the wake of 9/11, Richard Taruskin defended its decision in the *New York Times*, denouncing Adams and the opera for 'romanticising terrorists'. Controversy also surrounded a production at the Juilliard School in 2009, prompting the then president, Joseph W Polisi, to write that Juilliard and other institutions 'have to be responsible for maintaining an environment in which challenging, as well as comforting, works of art are presented to the public'. As recently as 2014, the Metropolitan Opera production triggered protests, resulting in the cancellation of a simulcast of the opera. It is something that Adams still finds difficult to talk about. As he said recently 'It was a very painful time for me ... It was a real case of censorship.'

'The Tonhalle is committed to both tradition and innovation ... and no one represents this better than Adams. He was one of the founding fathers of minimalism, but his music has now evolved – taken a different direction' – Paavo Järvi, *Tonhalle Music Director*

But it would be a mistake to imagine that any of this has impeded Adams's creativity. In fact, his artistic progress has been remarkably steady and fruitful – and that's despite the process not always being a pleasurable one; as he writes in his memoir, *Hallelujah Junction*, 'Starting a new piece can cause me torment and can mean having to slog through a dismal swamp of indifferent ideas ... often abandoning them in disgust or desperation.' *The Death of Klinghoffer* was followed by a 'songplay' in two acts, with a libretto by poet June Jordan, called *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*. In 2000, *El Niño*, a nativity oratorio for chorus and orchestra, premiered at the Châtelet in Paris under Kent Nagano. *Doctor Atomic* is the third of the triptych of operas along with *Nixon* and *Klinghoffer*. Sellars compiled the libretto from documentary sources surrounding the invention of the atomic bomb under the aegis of the Manhattan Project and J Robert Oppenheimer. Donald Runnicles conducted its premiere at San Francisco Opera in 2005. Meanwhile, of the later work – including the operas *A Flowering Tree* (2006) and *Girls of the Golden West* (2017) – perhaps the most impressive is *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*, a large-scale 'Passion oratorio' for soloists, chorus and orchestra, first given in Los Angeles in 2012 under Gustavo Dudamel.


All this is to say nothing of the variety of instrumental works that Adams has composed, some dating from well before *Nixon in China*, which have, quite rightly, entered the repertoire: *Shaker Loops* (1978, rev 1983), *Grand Pianola Music* (1982), *Harmonielehre* (1985), *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986), the Chamber Symphony (1992), the Violin Concerto (1993) and *Doctor Atomic Symphony* (2007) are all frequently performed. And what of his orchestrations, which are sometimes said to have carried the art beyond Richard Strauss, Mahler and Sibelius?

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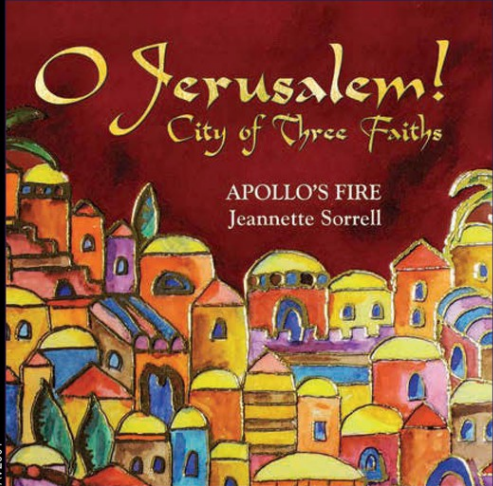
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Adams with conductor Eun Sun Kim - rehearsing his new opera, *Antony and Cleopatra*, December 2021

Surely there's no better way to test this than to sample some of the orchestrations not deployed to express his own musical ideas. Try, for instance, *The Black Gondola* (1989), Adams's orchestration of Liszt's piano work *La lugubre gondola II*, and you'll see what I mean.

It can be difficult to describe what all this music sounds like, because the musical means always seems perfectly suited to the expressive end. If his personal voice emerged grounded in minimalism (though he balks at the word), as a composer he has

never shied away from trying new things – witness the use of rock singing in *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, the incorporation of big band riffs in *Fearful Symmetries* (1988), or his courage in producing his own libretto for *A Flowering Tree*. Perhaps it is his open-minded approach to harmony that prevails throughout his music, giving it widespread and timeless appeal. As Adams has said (in *Gramophone*, 6/08), 'Tonality for me has always been the essential tool for building form. It's how you establish feelings and emotions ... I don't think you can be a great composer unless you have a feeling for harmony.'

The honours and awards have accumulated. Adams has been awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Cambridge, the Royal Academy of Music, Harvard, Yale, Northwestern University, the Juilliard School and San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He is the only American composer to have been awarded Holland's Erasmus Prize (2019) for 'contributions to European culture'. He received the Grawemeyer Award in 1995 for his Violin Concerto and a Pulitzer Prize for his 9/11 memorial piece,

On the Transmigration of Souls, in 2003. And just last year, Columbia University gave him the Ditson Conductor's Award for the advancement of American music.

Best of all, more is in the oven. In September, San Francisco Opera is inaugurating its centennial season with a new Adams opera, *Antony and Cleopatra*. Based on the Shakespeare play, it marks the company's fourth commission from Adams. 'John is one of the great operatic visionaries of our time and an incredible partner to the San Francisco Opera,' General

JOHN ADAMS – AN AURAL SNAPSHOT OF A MAGNIFICENT CAREER

Spanning a range from small-scale chamber to orchestral and choral – plus further reading thrown in for good measure



The Gospel According to the other Mary

Soloists; Berlin Radio Chorus;

Berlin Philharmonic / Sir Simon Rattle

Berliner Philharmoniker (1/18)

Here is one of Adams's most profoundly spiritual works, replete with vivid musical imagery, such as Golgotha and the raising of Lazarus, in a sterling performance from the Berlin Philharmonic's Adams 70th-birthday tribute.



Fearful Symmetries. The Wound-Dresser

Sanford Sylvan bar

Orchestra of St Luke's / John Adams

Nonesuch (6/90)

Sanford Sylvan, creator of the role of Chou En-Lai in *Nixon in China*, sings Adams's beautiful setting of Whitman's *The Wound-Dresser*

which he premiered in 1989. It is paired here with *Fearful Symmetries*, a favourite of choreographers, forming a veritable showcase of Adams's gifts as a conductor.



Absolute Jest. Grand Pianola Music

Orli Shaham, Marc-André Hamelin pfs

Synergy Vocals; St Lawrence Quartet;

San Francisco SO / Michael Tilson

Thomas, John Adams

SFS Media (9/15)

Inspired by the 'ecstatic energy of Beethoven', Adams's mighty concerto for string quartet and orchestra pays homage to the Viennese master with half a dozen quotes. This is followed by a bracing performance of the seminal *Grand Pianola Music*, that irresistible ear candy for anyone who loves the piano.



Fellow Traveler. John's Book of Alleged Dances.

String Quartet Attacca Quartet

Azica (10/13)

Superb realisations of some of Adams's works for smaller ensemble are here presented by one of America's foremost young quartets.



The Chairman Dances. Harmonielehre. Short Ride in a Fast Machine.

Tromba lontana

CBSO / Simon Rattle

Warner Classics (6/94)

Sir Simon Rattle, longtime friend and champion of Adams, offers sympathetic readings of the composer's orchestral showpieces. This bracing *Harmonielehre* is hard to beat.



On the Transmigration of Souls

New York Choral Artists; Brooklyn

Youth Chorus; New York

Philharmonic / Lorin Maazel

Nonesuch (10/04)

Winner of the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for music, this moving tribute to the heroes of 9/11 and memorial to its victims is a work of solemn dignity and profound pathos which leaves an indelible impression.

Recommended reading

John Adams *Hallelujah Junction*:

Composing an American Life

(New York: Picador, 2008)

Thomas May, ed *The John Adams*

Reader: Essential Writings on an

American Composer (Pompton

Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2006)

Alex Ross *The Rest Is Noise: Listening*

to the Twentieth Century (New York:

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007)



Adams enjoys conducting, which he describes as 'the yin to the yang of composing'

Director Matthew Shilcock told *San Francisco Chronicle* in a recent interview. 'I could imagine no greater collaborator for us as we go into our second century.' Music Director Eun Sun Kim will conduct, with the title-roles sung by soprano Julia Bullock and baritone Gerald Finley.

So what, finally, are we to make of this John Adams, the born-and-bred New Englander who learnt the clarinet from his father and worshipped Benny Goodman? Who, when Duke Ellington and his orchestra came to play at his grandfather's New Hampshire dance club on Lake Winnepesaukee, summoned the courage to join the Duke on the piano bench and soak it all in? Who, when he'd finished at Harvard, chose not to take the path followed by generations of American musicians and go to Europe, but headed west instead?

Far from indulging in ivory-tower isolationism, Adams has revelled in the stimulus and joy of collaboration

Who, once established in San Francisco Bay (he has resided on the West Coast since the early 1970s), continued to develop his individual voice, ever mindful of a creed which he himself articulated as 'Whenever serious art loses track of its roots in the vernacular, then it begins to atrophy'? Who, far from indulging in ivory-tower isolationism, has revelled in the stimulus and joy of collaboration (particularly as a conductor – 'the yin to the yang of composing', as he puts it)? Who wrote an autobiography as humble and candid as one is likely to encounter from a major creative figure? Who, through dedicated and diligent work and cultivation of his immense gifts for more than five decades, continues to create music which thrills audiences both at home and around the world?

Adams is many things to many people, but his overriding legacy is surely the music itself, which has both altered and enriched the landscape of American culture – and continues to do so. And if his prime motivation has always been to 'express an ethnic American sensibility', as he once described it, then one only has to listen to realise that he has achieved exactly that. Happy birthday, John Adams. 🎂

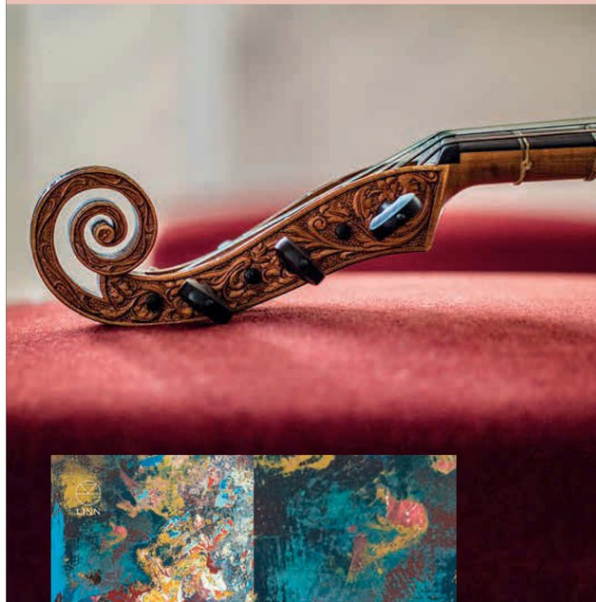
'John Adams: Collected Works', a definitive 40-CD box-set from Nonesuch, is planned for release in June this year

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