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JOHN ADAMS

by ADAM WASSERMAN



Photographed at Chicago's Harris Theater by Steve Leonard

I have just a handful of recordings with the kind of musical durability that lets me pull

NATALIE DESSAY

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them off the shelf and listen to them every day without fatigue. But I have only one recording that - for the sake of my own durability - I can't listen to more than once a year.

I was apprehensive when I first heard that a CD of John Adams's Pulitzer Prize-winning

On the Transmigration of Souls was to be released. As someone who has been in this city long enough to have witnessed each new piece of 9/11-inspired art come and go, I had the expectation of hearing a kind of musical version of the ponderous personal remembrances that prevent me from reading *The New York Times* one week before every September 11 anniversary. When *Transmigration* made its way into my stereo, what I heard fairly shocked me with its modesty: recorded street sounds, scintillating strings, ethereal choruses and words taken from those ubiquitous and heartbreaking "missing-persons" signs. All were merged into a piece of art that I can only say still manages to evoke for me precisely the sad surreality of what it felt like to live in Manhattan in the fall of 2001.

Often the default question that is asked about a new work by a contemporary composer hinges upon the word "accessible" - as in, "Is it?" It's something of an intellectually disingenuous way of asking for whom a given composition is *really* intended - its audience, or its creator. So I can think of no higher compliment to pay John Adams than to say that his music gives the feeling of having been written for the people that it is about. The graciousness of vocal writing, structural genius and sheer beauty of Adams's compositions have perhaps, at times, been eclipsed by his penchant for newsworthy subjects, and even by a certain incredulity over his having become one of a few contemporary American composers to gain a foothold in the operatic canon. But what's clear to anyone who has heard an opera by Adams is that the only convention to which he is truly beholden is a deeply felt humanism in service to an oft-inhumane modern life. I suspect Adams's compositions speak to today's audiences for precisely the same reasons that many of Mozart's or Handel's still do: they arrive at a convincing artistic reality by treading the perilously blurry line between historical veracity and emotional truth. Hearing Adams's operas, one can't help thinking that many of the characters that populate his works - the Baudelaire-reading father of the atomic bomb, the media-hungry thirty-seventh President of the United States or the Virgin Mary, as given voice by Mexican poetry - would appreciate not just the grace with which they've been represented but the ennobling honesty with which their stories have been portrayed.

While intellectually satisfying, Adams's operas and compositions have achieved no small measure of success from their visceral musical appeal. Featuring the magnificent contributions of Dawn Upshaw and Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, the recording of Adams's nativity oratorio, *El Niño*, feels suffused with a tangible sense of life: listening to it imparts the kind of warmth one gets from placing one's hands on the belly of a very pregnant woman. And the trinity of countertenors that appears throughout the piece - singing in ghostly, close harmonies as the archangel Gabriel, then later in cascading melodic lines as the Three Magi - strikes me as one of the most eerily ingenious, goosebump-inducing moments of modern vocal composition. Likewise, the gentle, bucolic pulses and swells that comprise Kumudha's transformation scenes in *A Flowering Tree* serve to remind us of the insufficiencies of modern musicological nomenclature: calling the overwhelming beauty of these scenes the product of Minimalism is like attributing the metamorphosis of Strauss's *Daphne* to a few good gardening tips.

It's the inventiveness of Adams's music that best affirms his status as a decidedly American composer. His works pique our ears with new timbres, dissonances and textures while simultaneously drawing from the cosmopolitan resources of what he has referred to as our musical "genome." Audiences might be forgiven for tapping their feet a little too loudly amid the catchy, propulsive rhythms of *Nixon in China*'s "News has a kind of mystery," which alludes to a musical Americana that owes as much to Steve Reich's

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Music for 18 Musicians as to the boogie-woogie piano of Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill."

Adams writes in his recently released memoirs, *Hallelujah Junction*, of the epiphany he had at the age of fifteen when he attended a screening of *West Side Story* at his summer camp in Maine. Watching Bernstein's musical, Adams experienced what he refers to as "the moment when I first felt most aroused to the potential of becoming an artist who might forge a language, Whitman-like, out of the compost of American life." An audacious dream for anyone, let alone for a fifteen-year-old, but one that has proven to be rather prophetic. Next time you get to hear the music of John Adams, thank your lucky stars that there's room for it in our opera houses and concert halls. After all, it was written just for you. □

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