

OPERA NEWS

Features

August 2009 — Vol. 74, No. 2

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Transformation Scenes

Composer John Adams, whose latest opera *A Flowering Tree* receives its New York premiere this month as part of the Mostly Mozart Festival, chats with ADAM WASSERMAN about the work's roots in myth and South Indian poetry.



Soprano Jessica Rivera as Kumudha and Eric Owens as the Storyteller in John Adams' *A Flowering Tree*

Few in any American composers have done more to further the idea of opera as a musico-dramatic representation of the media-saturated

modern American experience as John Adams. A facile consideration of post-War American composers seems find them largely content to create operas in the guise of a country cousin to a then-sclerotic, European tradition. But over the past three decades, Adams looks to have been largely responsible for fomenting a previously unconsidered harmonic and dramatic purpose in American opera. With drawn-from-the-headlines works like *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer* and *Doctor Atomic*, each conveying something specific about our own zeitgeist, Adams' efforts have seemed as much about upending audiences' horizon of expectation of what opera is meant to be *about* as what it should sound like.

With his newest opera, *A*

Flowering Tree, Adams seems interested in something far from the distinctly modern experiences of science, diplomacy and terrorism. Instead, *A Flowering Tree* is almost Joycean in its musical consideration of the power of myth and the modern search for something timeless. This month the work comes to New York for performances at the Mostly Mozart Festival.

OPERA NEWS: You've said that Mozart's *The Magic Flute* served as something of a thematic model for *A Flowering Tree* during the opera's inception.

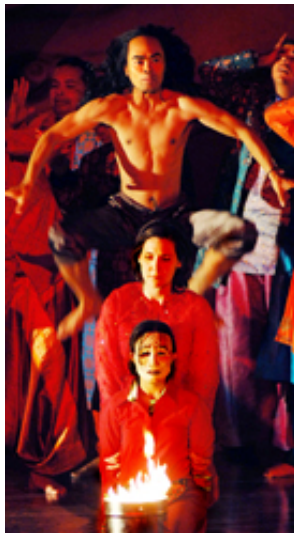
JOHN ADAMS: I wrote it for the New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna, and took as its general theme Mozart's very last year. "New Crowned Hope" was the name of the Masonic lodge at which Mozart was a member. I can't tell you too much about Masonic philosophy - I haven't read deeply about it - but at that time Freemasonry was very much imbued with Enlightenment values. *The Magic Flute* is a work that deals with transformation and youth - not only physical transformation but moral and spiritual transformation and general personal growth. I wanted to look at those issues, and find a similar story, but treat it in my own musical manner.



Composer Adams, an artist in residence at this year's Mostly Mozart Festival

(http://www.operanews.org/_uploaded/image/article/adamshsflwtrsm18109.jpg)

Composer Adams, an artist in residence at this year's Mostly Mozart Festival



Rivera, in a performance of A Flowering Tree at Vienna's New Crowned Hope Festival

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Rivera, in a performance of *A Flowering Tree* at Vienna's New Crowned Hope Festival

ON: You composed this *A Flowering Tree* soon after writing *Doctor Atomic*. Was undertaking the composition of what might have been called in Mozart's day a "zauberoper" an intentional shift in tone after having spent so much time composing a work as unsettling as *Doctor Atomic*?

JA: You know, looking back on it, one would think that. I think I probably had a need to come out into the light because the tone of *Doctor Atomic* was so dark and foreboding - how can anything that deals with the atomic bomb and nuclear annihilation not be? That doesn't mean composing *A Flowering Tree* was any easier, in fact it was extremely stressful because I needed to get it done in time for the festival which took place during the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth, so I wrote this entire full-evening opera in nine months. In fact, I actually wrote the libretto in the space of a couple of weeks, basing it on the English translation of a very old folk tale from South India.

ON: Where did you first come across the folk tale?

JA: Peter Sellars knew the story and he loved it. He had thought of making some kind of theater piece out of it for many years, and he called it to my attention. We had actually looked at stories from all over the world, before then. Peter also found - by the same person who translated the folk tale, Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan - poems from that same South Indian culture, utilizing the same language ... really amazing love poems, very sweet, at times very surreal. They have imagery that was so distinctly from the natural world - elephants, snakes, trees and jungles, rivers and streams. So we sort of inserted those poems into the narrative and story. When I started, we had the plan of utilizing only two solo singers and the chorus. I realized that I had to come up with some sort of means of advancing the narration. I first thought of having a spoken narrator, but that just didn't work. So I created this role of the Narrator who is a singer and it turned out to be the biggest of the roles of the three.

ON: Did you feel that dramaturgically, there was an advantage to adapting something that came from a poetic tradition? It seems that so many modern operas run in to trouble at the very beginning by selecting massive, seminal works of literature as their urtexts.

JA: Peter and I have made six theater pieces together. But this is the very first time that we took a literary work - a single, literary work - and created a libretto out of it. I enjoyed doing it and I enjoyed actually writing the libretto myself, because, since it was something that I'd done, I was much freer to tweak it and change it during the composition process. It's a little harder when you're setting John Donne - you're not going to change that - or even when I was working with [*Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* librettist] Alice Goodman. If I made a change in her libretto, I had to clear it with her and sometimes it was very hard for her to accept a change on something she'd labored so hard over.

ON: So you were able to consider the dramatic and theatrical elements of *A Flowering Tree* at the same time that you were composing the music.

JA: Well, one always does. That's why it's good to be working hand in hand with a very thoughtful and imaginative stage director.

ON: Compositionally, the work is very much in your style. It doesn't attempt to allude to Mozart's opera.

JA: No, I started out with the notion that it would be very direct and simple in the way that Mozart's *Magic Flute* was. If you compare *Magic Flute* with *Don Giovanni* or the "Great" G-Minor symphony, or some of the pieces that he wrote just before then, it's almost like folk music in its simplicity. There's a very pure symmetry to the music - with song-like forms. I wanted to do something that had that kind of simplicity to it. It starts out like that and continues that way for the first ten or fifteen minutes. Then,

things change, just as folk tales often reveal themselves to have darker corners than maybe you catch the first time that you read them. The more I lived in this story, the more I realized that is very strange and at times violent and upsetting story. So the music necessarily had to reflect that. What I loved about the story is that it gave me the opportunity to compose not just one transformation scene, but four. That was just a great musical opportunity - to picture the character of Kumudha for the very first time, transforming herself into a beautiful, flowering tree. I thought of it like the first time someone takes a psychedelic drug ... they just have no idea what's going to happen to them. Then there's a second time, and the third time it goes wrong and it's a hideous transformation. Then the final transformation represents the climax of the opera.

ON: A woman changing herself into a tree is certainly a trope in the operatic tradition. Though a work like Strauss's *Daphne* treats the transformation as the opera's apotheosis. In *A Flowering Tree*, it's an element of exposition, a means to an end.

JA: It's funny because I had thought of *Daphne* in the original Greek version, and there are far more examples of women's transformations throughout mythology than you would think. I wonder if, in a way, it's an archetype of protection - protection of one's vulnerability from physical violation. In this case it's a symbol of this young girl's desire to go through something that is transformative, and possibly painful even, in order to help her mother. Then the transformation becomes an object of obsession for the prince and ridicule for the prince's jealous sister.

ON: What was the process of composition like for this opera, particularly since it was done in such a short period of time?

JA: Well, all of my pieces are always hell to start. I'll get an idea - whether it's a piano concerto or an opera about the atomic bomb, or a girl that becomes a flowering tree - and I'm very excited about the general idea, but when I sit down to work, very often, the very first images that come to me are stuttering ... they don't come easily and often I'll spend a month or more throwing away my ideas and being very disgusted with what I've done. It's almost *de rigueur* - I can't think of a single instance in which a piece started effortlessly. But once things get going and the piece starts to develop its own DNA, then the flow starts and - knock on wood - I'm rarely at a loss for inspiration.

ON: The work's choruses are performed in Spanish, while the principals sing in English. What made you opt to embrace that multilingual perspective?

JA: Well, in all of my stage works, the chorus is very often a sort of otherworldly or disembodied voice. It might be the conscience of the character - very much like the Greek chorus. It might be the natural world speaking, like in *The Death of Klinghoffer*, which features an "Ocean Chorus," a "Desert Chorus," a "Night Chorus" and a "Day Chorus." In *Nixon in China*, the chorus is the voice of the people. So for *A Flowering Tree* I didn't feel that it had to be speaking necessarily in the same language. I knew that I was composing this work for an astonishing chorus from Caracas, the Schola Cantorum de Venezuela, and I love Spanish - it's very much part of my life. I speak it and I'm aware of Hispanic culture and Latin American culture. Part of the idea of this festival in Vienna was to bring vibrant, alive art and culture from all over the world. They invited dancers from East Asia, and filmmakers from the Middle East and singers from Africa, so I felt that part of Mozart's worldview was a global one. That's part of the reason why I did that. Plus Spanish just sounds great when it's sung. □

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