

JOHN ADAMS

2008-2009 Composer of the Year

John Adams is one of America's most admired and respected composers. A musician of enormous range and technical command, he has produced works, both operatic and symphonic, that stand out among all contemporary classical music for the depth of their expression, the brilliance of their sound and the profoundly humanist nature of their themes. His music has played a decisive role in turning the tide of musical aesthetics away from the theoretical principles of European modernism toward a more expansive and expressive language, so characteristic of his New World surroundings.

Born and raised in New England, Adams learned the clarinet from his father and played in marching bands and community orchestras during his formative years. He began composing at the age of ten and heard his first orchestral pieces performed while still a teenager. The intellectual and artistic traditions of New England, especially the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Harvard University, helped shape him as an artist and thinker. After earning two degrees from Harvard University, he moved to Northern California in 1971 and has ever since lived in the San Francisco Bay area.

Adams taught for ten years at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music before becoming Composer in Residence with the San Francisco Symphony (1982-85) and the creator of the orchestra's highly successful and controversial "New and Unusual Music" series. Several of Adams's landmark orchestral works were written for and premiered by the San Francisco Symphony, including *Harmonium* (1981), *Grand Pianola Music* (1982), *Harmonielehre* (1985) and *El Dorado* (1992).

In 1985, Adams began a collaboration with the poet Alice Goodman and stage director Peter Sellars that resulted in two operas, *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, worldwide productions of which made them among the most performed operas in recent history. These operas were followed by three further stage works done with Sellars, the 1995 "songplay" *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, with libretto by June Jordan; *El Niño*, a multi-lingual retelling of the Nativity story composed for the celebration of the Millennium; and *Doctor Atomic* (2005), about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the creation of the first atomic bomb. Commissioned and premiered by the San Francisco Opera, *Doctor Atomic* was introduced to European audiences in

June of 2007 at the Netherlands Opera and again in the U.S. in Chicago (December 2007) and at the Metropolitan Opera (October 2008). The production is scheduled for performance at the English National Opera in March 2009.

Adams's latest opera, *A Flowering Tree*, inspired by Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, was premiered in November of 2006 in Vienna. Based on a folk tale from southern India, it shares similar themes with its Mozart model: youth, love and the emergence of moral consciousness. Further performances of *A Flowering Tree* include London, New York, Chicago, Amsterdam and Los Angeles.

In 2002, Adams composed *On the Transmigration of Souls* for the New York Philharmonic, a work written in commemoration of the first anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks. This work received the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Music, and the Nonesuch recording won a rare "triple crown" at the Grammys, including "Best Classical Recording," "Best Orchestral Performance," and "Best Classical Contemporary Composition."

In April and May of 2003, Lincoln Center presented a festival entitled "John Adams: An American Master," the most extensive festival ever mounted at Lincoln Center devoted to a living composer. International festivals of Adams's music have been presented in London, Rotterdam and Stockholm. He has twice been featured guest on NPR's "Fresh Air" with Terry Gross and has been the subject of a New Yorker Magazine profile, "The Harmonist," by Alex Ross.

In 2003, a film version of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Adams's second opera, directed by Penny Woolcock for Channel Four, was released in theaters, on television and on DVD. The film, for which the composer conducted the London Symphony Orchestra, made its American debut at the Sundance Film Festival and went on to win several international prizes, including the Prix Italia and the Vienna TV Award for 2004. *Wonders Are Many*, a new film by Jon Else about the creation and premiere of the opera *Doctor Atomic*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and will be telecast by PBS.

Among other recent works are *The Dharma at Big Sur*, for electric violin and orchestra, inspired by literary impressions of the California landscape by such writers as Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder and Henry Miller, and *My Father Knew Charles Ives*, an evocation of Adams's boyhood in central New

Hampshire. The Nonesuch recording of these two works, featuring the composer conducting the BBC Symphony won the 2007 Classical Brits award, naming Adams as composer of the year.

Adams has twice been the recipient of awards from Harvard University. In 2004, he received the Centennial Medal of the university's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences "for contributions to society." In 2007 President-elect Drew Gilpen Faust presented him the Harvard Arts Medal. In 2004, he became the first ever recipient of the Nemmers Prize in Music Composition from Northwestern University.

From 2003-2007, Adams held the Richard and Barbara Debs Composer's Chair at Carnegie Hall. During that time he conducted the first public concert in Carnegie's new Zankel Hall as well as founding the annual "In Your Ear" festival. Adams has also served as Music Director of the Cabrillo Festival, as Artist in Association with the BBC Symphony, Creative Chair of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Honored with a proclamation by the governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California for his distinguished service to the arts in his home state, he has also been awarded an honorary doctorate by Cambridge University in England as well as an honorary membership in Phi Beta Kappa and, on his sixtieth birthday, was honored by his home city of Berkeley, California.

Nonesuch Records released Adams's *Harmonielehre* in 1985, and since then all of his works, both symphonic and theatrical, have appeared first on that label. A ten-cd set, *The John Adams Earbox*, documents his recorded music through 2000.

Adams is currently writing a book of memoirs and commentary on American musical life. With a title *A Rhythm Among Harmonies*, it is due for release in 2008.

The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer, edited by Tom May and published by Amadeus Press, is a 400-page summary of writings about Adams and his music is the first full-length in-depth collection of texts dealing with over thirty years of his creative life.

John Adams maintains an active life as a conductor, appearing with the world's greatest orchestras and with programs combining his own works with composers as diverse as Debussy, Strauss, Stravinsky and Ravel to Zappa, Ives, Reich, Glass and Ellington. As a guest conductor and as director of music festivals in the US and Europe he has appeared with orchestras that include the New York Philharmonic, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, the Concertgebouw

Orchestra and the London Symphony. In 2006 Adams curated the hugely popular “Minimalist Jukebox” festival for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. As Artist in Association with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, he regularly appears with that orchestra as conductor in concerts in London’s Barbican and at the annual Albert Hall Proms concerts.

Adams is currently at work on *Son of Chamber Symphony* for the ensemble Alarm Will Sound. The work will also be choreographed by Mark Morris for the San Francisco Ballet.

The official John Adams website is www.earbox.com.

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