“DETONATION’S DENOTATION”
by Joseph Horowitz

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John Adams: *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life*
Farrar Straus Giroux

John Adams: *Doctor Atomic*
The Metropolitan Opera

Hector Berlioz: *The Damnation of Faust*
The Metropolitan Opera

Does it matter if a composer is an eloquent writer of prose? Well, it doesn’t hurt. These days most composers at least write program notes. A mediocre note – one insensitive to cliché or to the rhythm of words – often signals a mediocre piece. Certainly a composer’s prose can predict his music. The violet intensities of Berlioz’s essays, the dour playfulness of Busoni’s aphorisms, the fastidious intricacies of Steve Reich’s annotations are informative. The plainness of Copland’s written voice discloses both a strength and weakness in his musical voice. Wagner, a better composer than writer, is passionate, contentious, prolix. Virgil Thomson, a better writer than composer, is more complexly urbane on the page than onstage.

John Adams is a superb writer. His autobiography most reveals his music when he speaks of other things. In *Hallelujah Junction*, the chapters about *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky* or *Doctor Atomic* are among the least interesting. It is writing about his life – an American artist’s Wanderjahre for our time – that Adams articulates the capacity for wonder that can make his music matter. His keen sense of the historical moment is everywhere in evidence. His powers of observation and gift for metaphor translate directly into his experience of music. Discussing Ives’ Fourth Symphony and *Three Places in New England*, he ventures an observation equally pertinent to his own *Harmonium*: “Ives was the first composer to approach the orchestral setting as if it were a giant mixing board. . . . Objects, be they fragments or tunes, atmospheric effects, or enormous blocks of sound, appear on the listener’s radar as if the composer were moving faders in a grand mix.”

When Igor Stravinsky died in 1971, Pierre Boulez wrote a eulogy expressing envy that Stravinsky had lived through a fraught and purposeful historical moment: the post-Wagner quest for the modern. Adams, born in New England in 1947, is a beneficiary of the Sixties. He inhaled its heady aroma with avidity and relief; it changed and shaped him. In fact, his life story is iconic: a polyglot, post-modern fable for our time. His father, who never went to college, was a sometime clarinetist. His grandfather owned a dance hall. As a teenager, he played with the New Hampshire State Hospital Auxiliary Orchestra (local amateurs “who enjoyed a weekly confrontation with the instruments they had learned in their youth”). At Harvard, he wrestled indoors with “the hair shirt and bed of nails of the
serialists,” then emerged to daylight to hear “the screaming, slashing, bending, soaring, lawless guitar of Jimi Hendrix” wafted from dormitory windows. The “jabs and ‘bullets’” of Duke Ellington’s brass “made an indelible impression.” An indelible impression of another kind was his first psychedelic experience:

I felt serenely in control, finding great humor in the way the cosmos seemed to be revealing itself. The trip was symphonic in form . . . There were plateaus of steady state consciousness followed by dips and then ascents to soaring heights . . . At the very zenith I had a perception about the absolute nature of reality, life, and death that was immensely calming.

(Three decades later, Adams would compose his Naïve and Sentimental Music, whose finale evokes the hurtling, climbing, soaring finale of Sibelius’s Fifth on LSD.)

In 1971, Adams packed everything he owned and drove his coughing Volkswagen – a vehicle itself iconic – to San Francisco Bay. He there explored a subculture unglimped at Harvard. He heard Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and Robert Ashley, and stumbled into a job, directing the New-Music Ensemble of the San Francisco Conservatory, that compelled yet further explorations. He discovered an attendant physical landscape equally relevant to his music to come: mountains “both wild and serene,” a Pacific surf “that welled up in great surges of energy and smashed with a languid and brutal majesty against the continental shelf.” Slowly and haltingly – effortfully, because he never shed an intellectuality and sophistication he could not initially apply – he found his composer’s voice within a Minimalist fundament: “I had grown up listening to jazz and then later found myself surrounded by the pounding, insistent rhythms and simple harmonic language of rock. That genuinely native music felt to me like my own genome, and I wanted above all to be able musically to intone those roots, just as the great American writers like Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Kerouac, and Ginsberg had found poetry in the speech of the common person.” Adams also writes of being “aroused to the potential of becoming an artist who might forge a language, Whitman-like, out of the compost of American life.”

This goal, persistently applied, of course drove him restlessly beyond Minimalism. He retains his enthusiasm for jazz and swing. He has not jettisoned the modernists Harvard promoted. He remains in part an incurable Romantic, in love with Sibelius and Bruckner. He aspires (as he once put it) to move “with promiscuous ease” through a plethora of musical worlds – an aspiration that invites its share of risks and disappointments. In Hallelujah Junction, Adams writes with a degree of defensiveness about his post-Minimalist struggle toward growth and renewal. He foresees a promising future for new music, but cautions that post-modern open-mindedness has its down side, that “the urge to win approval and gain the kind of quick public acceptance that is common in the world of popular music threatens to produce a generation of composer lightweights.” And he confides: “From time to time when driving in the High Sierra I’ll see amateur gold miners, panning in a river that 150 years ago gave up the best of its treasure to the first prospectors, and I’ll be tempted to wonder if the image of these latter-day panners, hoping only for a tiny nugget, isn’t an illustration of my own predicament as a composer.”
Adams’s first opera, *Nixon in China* (1987), was a watershed. As Glass had already shown in *Satyagraha* and *Akhnaten*, the impersonality of Minimalism – its inhuman stamina and patterned repetition – promoted potently ritualized music theater. *Nixon* was that. In addition, Adams’ deft absorption of other influences – Stravinsky and Benny Goodman being among the most evident – subtly diversified his musical technique and vocabulary. Of the Adams stage works coming after, *Doctor Atomic* is the most significant. Its premiere, in San Francisco in 2005, was a singular event: never in memory had a new work by a living composer so galvanized the attention of American opera and symphony goers. And the buzz was sustained: the opera’s recent New York premiere, at the Met, retained a bristling sense of occasion.

Commissioned by Pamela Rosenberg during her brief but eventful tenure as general director of the San Francisco Opera, *Doctor Atomic* was conceived as a modern-day *Faust* starring the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who supervised the creation of the first atomic bomb. The eclectic, allusive libretto – culled by Peter Sellars, who directed the first production – uses letters, government documents, and poems. The action, set in New Mexico in 1945, includes the final preparation and detonation of the bomb as well as scientific banter and a rhapsodic bedroom scene for Oppenheimer and his wife Kitty.

If in places *Doctor Atomic* feels like a work in progress, it is not irrelevant that, both as listener and composer, Adams came late to opera. By any traditional measure, he is not a finished opera composer. His Minimalist roots work against the plasticity of tone and characterization normally associated with the genre. His stiff handling of such quotidian elements as Frank Hubbard’s weather forecasts is idiosyncratic at best. Balancing Oppenheimer, he casts Kitty and her Native American maid, Pasqualita, as Cassandras – embodiments of the anima versus heedless men of action. This promising conceit falls short. Singing verse by Muriel Rukeyser, Kitty is arcane; Pasqualita’s Indian songs skirt banality. But Oppenheimer – in real life, a figure of prodigious intellectual complexity, who composed sonnets at night to unwind – comes alive. When at the end of act one Adams has him intone John Donne’s “Batter my heart, three-person’d God,” the elevated strophic rhetoric grasps the enormity of the metaphysical moment.

Crucially, the opera gradually establishes a restless forward trajectory, a vortex of expectation shadowed by steady rain and mounting anxiety. Here, the inventive sonorities and textures, and the techtonically shifting sonic slabs, are Adams signatures put to maximum use. Chugging, stuttering musical particles, trembling with shifts of meter and accent, animate a climactic choral peroration set to apocalyptic imagery from the *Bhagavad Gita* (which Oppenheimer studied in Sanskrit and famously cited in relation to his momentous yet morally encumbered assignment). And Adams has conceived a subtle and chilling ending: a taped woman’s voice, in Japanese, asking repeatedly for a glass of water.

Some in San Francisco found Sellars’ original production (which I did not see) too busy. Penny Woolcock’s Met staging (which comes to the English National Opera in February) is not. The central prop – a white tent suggesting mountains or (when raised) a mushroom cloud – is clumsy. But the many hieratic elements Woolcock has devised are telling, and her cast, led by Gerald Finley as Oppenheimer, sings and acts with authority. Everyone’s diction is superb. Alan Gilbert – the New York Philharmonic’s music director designate – exerts strong leadership in the pit. The evening matters.
Whether by accident or Faustian design, the Met’s other important new fall production happens to be the company’s stage premiere of Berlioz’s *The Damnation of Faust*. Berlioz conceived his “dramatic legend” as a concert work, reasoning that only the imagination could fantasize the lightning transitions and apparitions. Equally understandable was his unrealized impulse to adapt this narrative masterpiece to the stage. The prospect of mounting the *Damnation* has proved irresistible ever since. At the Met, the Canadian stage magician Robert Lepage wagers that, applying the latest computerized wizardry (including projections that interact with the performers) in play, more can be gained than lost – a veritably Faustian gamble.

That Lepage is a genuine sorcerer is undeniable. He also commands an acute sense of style. The Delacroix reds and blues of his stage pictures are both beautiful and apt. Tackling the climactic Gallop to the Abyss, he shrewdly makes no attempt to realize the dancing skeletons and rain of blood of Berlioz’s libretto. Instead, he elegantly conjures animated silhouettes of the paired black steeds (and not so incidentally evokes the historic stereoscopic motion pictures of Eadweard Muybridge). A monstrous bird scrambles aloft. Faust drops 20 feet into the underworld.

But the risk of over-production is not wholly avoided. If Lepage’s underwater sylphs are poetically tuned, his anti-war Soldier’s Chorus, embellished with acrobatically rising and falling bodies, seems at odds with music and words. Marcello Giordani’s Faust and John Relyea’s Mephistopheles are inexplicably cast against type: thick timbres, thick speech. James Levine’s reading is characteristically massive: the rapier ironies are trampled. Still, if at the center of things Berlioz’s Romantic artist desperately at odds with the world seems absent, a more refined, more urgent tenor might have done the trick.

The audiences for Adams and Berlioz that I encountered were remarkably different. Susan Graham’s eloquent “D’amour l’ardente flame” was challenged by a chorus of coughers impatient for the next stage miracle. *Doctor Atomic* (with lowered ticket prices) was received with a concentrated attention rarely found at the Met. Lepage returns for an overdue new Met *Ring* beginning in 2010-2011. The same season brings the overdue Met premiere of *Nixon in China*, in Sellars’ classic production. Can Peter Gelb, the Met’s activist general manager since 2006, manage to retain the youthful Adams crowd in his search for a refreshed constituency? A tall order. We will see.

An incidental postscript to Lepage’s Berlioz: across the Lincoln Center Plaza at Fisher Hall, Valery Gergiev and his peerless Kirov Orchestra and Chorus clinched a Prokofiev festival with a performance of the *Alexander Nevsky* cantata so right in timbre, to intense in feeling and projection, so searing in affect as to eclipse all memory of the Eisenstein film.