

*John Adams's
new memoir is also a
journey through sixty
years of American culture*

Dr. Eclectic

by John Steinmetz

Last fall, just as John Adams's opera *Doctor Atomic* opened at the Metropolitan Opera, Nonesuch released *Hallelujah Junction*, a two-disc sampler of his compositions, to coincide with publication of his autobiography of the same name. Only a few months later, the Saint Lawrence String Quartet premiered the composer's new quartet at Juilliard; and meanwhile John Adams's music and John Adams the Conductor continued to pop up on concert programs around the globe.

How did a kid from New England become such a famous classical composer-conductor? *Hallelujah Junction* tells the story, and I found it wonderfully engaging and enjoyable, often exciting, sometimes

quite moving, and full of fascinating observations and insights. The book's genial, conversational tone made me feel as though I were chatting with a friend about old times. It's fun to see what Adams has to say about living and listening through the last 60 years. If you're alive now, you lived through at least some of those times, probably hearing some of the same music and certainly encountering (if not inhaling) similar influences.

The book starts and ends with music. It opens at the New Hampshire dance hall where Adams's parents, performers with different jazz bands, met in 1935. It ends two generations later as Adams, listening to music from his son Sam's playlist (Sibelius, Maghreb rap, electronica, Japanese

gagaku music, Adès, Nancarrow, and Wayne Shorter), celebrates the wonderful diversity of music available to today's young composers. In the pages between, Adams recounts his ongoing fascination with music, which caught him up from an early age:

I first listened to music on a simple LP turntable that my father had connected to the speaker of a wood-enclosed radio receiver. A Leopold Stokowski recording of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture and an album called Bozo the Clown Conducts Favorite Circus Marches had my undivided attention for several months. I played these recordings over and over, conducting them, following the example of the picture of Bozo the Clown on the cover, with a knitting needle for a baton.

Born in 1947 in Worcester, Massachusetts, Adams grew up in New Hampshire, played clarinet, started composing and conducting, studied at Harvard, then moved out to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he found his voice as a composer, grew a career, started a family and settled down. Part of the fun of his memoir is that the journey unfolds several different stories at once: It's a coming-of-age tale—in which the artist-hero endures poverty, stylistic uncertainty, writer's block, and car trouble—and ends with his finding true love and a personal artistic voice. Along the way are classic moments of exploration and illumination, like this one from his high school years:

In the summer of 1962 I attended a summer music camp on the shore of an idyllic lake in western Maine.... At the camp I was allowed to conduct, not just once but many times. I conducted the Schumann Piano Concerto with the camp orchestra, and I led several pieces with the wind band. I had my first tentative sexual experiences with a pretty and sympathetic blond bassoonist,

and with her, on a camp outing to a nearby town, I saw the recently released film West Side Story.... it was the moment when I felt most aroused to the potential of becoming an artist who might forge a language, Whitman-like, out of the compost of American life.

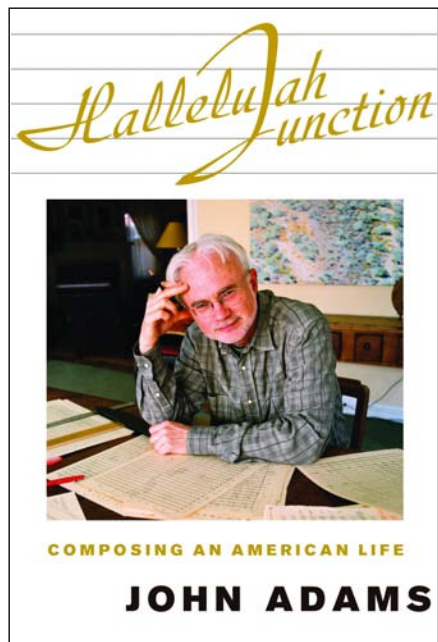
Adams's book is a musical adventure through a colorful, turbulent landscape of social and artistic upheaval: Webern and Zappa, the Ellington Band and John Cage, Vietnam and 9/11, drugs and the draft, Philip Glass and Gustavo Dudamel.

Imagine me, if you will, an aspiring composer, sitting in a [Harvard] classroom diligently counting backward from twelve, tracing down combinatorial transformations, and trying to get a rush from a three-minute setting of a poem by Georg Trakl or Stefan George. Then imagine this same student emerging from his somber seminar, walking across the campus, and hearing from some dorm window the screaming, slashing, bending, soaring, lawless guitar of Jimi Hendrix.

It's a gathering of celebrities, with deft descriptions of famous composers, conductors, singers, and instrumentalists, as well as stage directors, poets, and scientists.

...the warmth and generosity of her [Dawn Upshaw's] being was mirrored in her manner of singing, which conveyed a sense of open heartedness and emotional sincerity rarely encountered in the world of divas and extravagant flower-strewn curtain calls.

It's a cavalcade of music: jazz, rock, classical, modernist, minimalist, musicals, electronic, non-Western, and a host of new styles. The formalities of classical music tend to hide the omnivorous musical tastes of its participants, so it is refreshing to watch a concert-hall composer revel in so many kinds of music and in unexpected collisions and connections.



HALLELUJAH JUNCTION:
COMPOSING AN AMERICAN LIFE

By John Adams
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008
340 pages

[Schoenberg's Opus 9 Chamber Symphony] had long fascinated me for its manic intensity and hyperactive athleticism. Listening to it and conducting it, I was made to think of an entire Strauss tone poem or a Mahler symphony compressed into a trash compactor, squeezed down and spring-loaded into a tightly wound mass of volatile energy. I began to wonder what my version of such a piece would be. Around the same time I'd also become aware of the brilliant music written in the 1940s and 1950s for Hollywood cartoon films.... My mind began to conflate the compressed intensity and abrupt mood shifts of cartoon music with the not dissimilar ambience of the Schoenberg symphony.... And thus my own Chamber Symphony... came to life as a result of these strange but not irrational connections.

It's a story of musical revolution, with a ragtag alliance of composers outflanking high modernist orthodoxy.

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[Terry Riley's] In C may have been to contemporary American music what Ginsberg's Howl or Kerouac's On the Road were to literature. With its insistent, unyielding pulse on the high C of a piano and the sunny, upbeat fragments of melodies recirculating over and over in a loose polyphony, In C captured the congenial hippie spirit of the West Coast while at the same time proposing a new, slowly evolving approach to musical form. It was also marvelously provocative, giving an R. Crumb middle finger to the crabbed, pedantic world of academic modernism.

It's a feast of ideas, serving up fascinating perspectives and opinions on music, musicians, other arts, and social issues. No stranger to controversy (his theatrical works based on recent history have aroused strong reactions), Adams offers his views without pontificating, and often provides his critics' opinions, too. His writing conveys an infectious enthusiasm for whatever subject he explores.

But by the 1920s a miraculous marriage occurred that fused African American blues harmonic and melodic inflection to the tonal chromaticism of the European Romantics.... In the hands of Gershwin, the ambiguity and restlessness of those potent Romantic chords is reborn to a new life, not morbidly self-aware and shaded toward the dark end of the emotional spectrum, but full of a fresh optimism, busy and brash and thoroughly at ease with itself.

And it's a peek into the composer's workshop as new pieces take shape.

Wavemaker, for three violins... eventually became the basis for Shaker Loops, one of my first successful works, but it took the better part of two years and several misfires before I could perfect the idea.... my compositional thinking for it was murky and indecisive....having

realized what was wrong with Wavemaker, I completely changed it, added three more string instruments (including a crucial double bass), and renamed the piece Shaker Loops. This was emphatically a better piece. Expanded to seven strings, the music could sustain long harmonic pedals and produce a richer, more powerful sound.... I gave each individual player pages full of repeated musical phrases, and then, while conducting them, I spontaneously cued each player's progress through the modules. This was similar to but more complicated than what Terry Riley had done with his In C. However, I noticed that Shaker Loops only seemed to work when I was the conductor. When someone else gave the cues, the overall shape of the piece, and especially its harmonic movement, always troubled me. In the end I made a written-out version.... locking in the harmonic and formal design in a time scale....

As a Californian from New England, Adams writes with Yankee directness mellowed by a friendly candor that feels West Coast. There's some Yankee reticence, too: the book gives only brief glimpses of Adams's family life; and if you're hoping for celebrity gossip, you'll be disappointed. Plenty of famous musicians appear, but Adams doesn't report on offstage shenanigans.

One omission aroused my curiosity. Although the composer names many people crucial to his artistic life and often acknowledges help and encouragement, he says very little about the business side of his endeavors, or how he developed relationships with publishers, managers, and the others necessary for a career of high-profile commissions and conducting engagements. Success at this level requires helpers for the logistics of bookings, interviews, travel, fees, royalties, proofreading, music copying, publishing, recordings, web site, computer upgrades, and all the rest. In our field, the machinery of career

maintenance is generally kept invisible, and the book's silence on this aspect of life, whether a conscious choice or inadvertent omission, plays into classical music's myth of the artist as lone hero and creates a small dissonance with Adams's otherwise candid writing.

During John Adams's lifetime, American concert music underwent one of those huge mood swings that music periodically makes, relaxing its almost priestly devotion to intellectual abstraction and beginning to reincorporate pulsing energies, visceral pleasures, a wider emotional palette, and influences from across stylistic and cultural boundaries. One of the hallmarks of this great change has been a rebalancing of music's intellectual and emotional aspects. Adams's music has participated in this change and has urged it along. His book chronicles that change while embodying it, displaying both smarts and heart. For my taste, it gets the balance just right.

I'm sure my enjoyment of this book came partly from having grown up in the same years, living through the same sea-changes, getting excited about the same music. (Adams reminded me, for instance, of the thrill of first hearing Steve Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians*.) And I think the book kept me fascinated through its combination of thoughtfulness and feeling. While recounting his life, while shining his own particular flashlight on recent music and recent history, Adams applies his intelligence to reveal what he cares about and what he loves.

John Adams's website is earbox.com, which also provides a link to the Nonesuch site, where you can hear musical excerpts from *Hallelujah Junction*.

John Steinmetz is principal bassoonist of Los Angeles Opera and faculty bassoonist at U.C.L.A. His compositions are released on CDs from Albany, Crystal, and Helicon; and another is forthcoming from Pacific Serenades. More at www.johnsteinmetz.org.