

# JOHN ADAMS

*Creative Chair of the Los Angeles Philharmonic*

John Adams, one of America's most admired and respected composers, is a musician of enormous range and technical command. His works, both operatic and symphonic, stand out among contemporary classical compositions for their depth of expression, brilliance of sound, and the profoundly humanist nature of their themes. Over the past 25 years, Adams's music has played a decisive role in turning the tide of contemporary musical aesthetics away from academic modernism and toward a more expansive, expressive language, entirely 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 age ten and heard his first orchestral pieces performed while still a teenager. The intellectual and artistic traditions of New England, including his studies at Harvard University and attendance at Boston Symphony Orchestra concerts, helped shape him as an artist and thinker. After earning two degrees from Harvard, he moved to Northern California in 1971 and has since lived in the San Francisco Bay area.

Adams taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music for ten years before becoming composer-in-residence of the San Francisco Symphony (1982-1985), and creator of the orchestra's highly successful and controversial "New and Unusual Music" series. Several of Adams' landmark orchestral works were written for and premiered by the San Francisco Symphony, including *Harmonium* (1980-81), *Grand Pianola Music* (1982), *Harmonielehre* (1984-85), and *El Dorado* (1991).

In 1985, Adams began a collaboration with the poet Alice Goodman and stage director Peter Sellars that resulted in two groundbreaking operas: *Nixon in China* (1984-87) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1990-91). Produced worldwide, these works are among the most performed operas of the last two decades. Three further stage collaborations with Sellars followed: the 1995 "songplay," *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, with a libretto by June Jordan; *El Niño* (1999-2000), a multilingual 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 by the San Francisco Opera and premiered there in 2005, *Doctor Atomic* was introduced to European audiences in 2007 at the Netherlands Opera and given new productions by Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Metropolitan Opera in 2008. It will be presented by the English National Opera in March 2009.

Adams' latest opera, *A Flowering Tree*, was inspired by Mozart's *Magic Flute* and premiered in Vienna in 2006. Based on a folk tale from southern India, it shares similar themes with its Mozartian model: youth, love, and the emergence of moral consciousness. A new CD recording of *A Flowering Tree*, with the composer conducting the London Symphony Orchestra and the Schola Cantorum de Venezuela, was released on Nonesuch Records in the autumn of 2008.

Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls*, composed for the New York Philharmonic in 2002 to commemorate the first anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks, received the 2003 Pulitzer

Prize for Music, and the recording on Nonesuch won a rare “triple crown” of Grammys: “Best Classical Recording,” “Best Orchestral Performance,” and “Best Classical Contemporary Composition.”

In 2003, a film version of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Adams’ second opera, was directed by Penny Woolcock for Channel Four TV, and 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 won such international prizes as the Prix Italia and the Vienna TV Award. *Wonders Are Many*, a film by Jon Else about the creation and premiere of the opera *Doctor Atomic*, premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, and was a *New York Times* Critics’ Pick in 2008.

Other recent Adams works include: *The Dharma at Big Sur* (2003), for electric violin and orchestra, inspired by literary impressions of the Californian landscape by such writers as Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Henry Miller; and *My Father Knew Charles Ives* (2003), an evocation of Adams’ boyhood in central New Hampshire. The *Doctor Atomic Symphony* (2005), drawn from the opera, was given its American premiere in February 2008 by the St. Louis Symphony, conducted by David Robertson.

Harvard University has twice given Adams significant awards: in 2004 he received the Centennial Medal of the University’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences “for contributions to society,” and in 2007 he received the Harvard Arts Medal. He has received from Northwestern University both the 2004 Michael Ludwig Nemmers Prize in Music Composition (the first ever awarded) and in 2008 an honorary doctorate. Honored with a proclamation by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California for his distinguished service to the arts in his adopted home state, he has also been awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Cambridge and an honorary membership in Phi Beta Kappa. He was honored by his home city of Berkeley, California, for his 60th birthday.

In 1985, Nonesuch Records released Adams’ *Harmonielehre*, a landmark recording of American symphonic music. Since then, Nonesuch has released first recordings of all of his works, both symphonic and theatrical. Nonesuch’s ten-disc set, *The John Adams Earbox*, documents his recorded music through 2000. Adams’ works are among the very few written in our own time that have achieved repertory status, appearing regularly on programs by orchestras throughout the world.

The young American violinist Leila Josefowicz has made the Adams Violin Concerto her signature piece, having presented it in Europe and the U.S. in more than 60 performances. Pianist Emanuel Ax premiered and recorded *Century Rolls* (1996), Adams’ piano concerto, and later recorded it with the Cleveland Orchestra. A new work for solo piano by Adams, commissioned by Emanuel Ax, will be premiered in 2010.

*Hallelujah Junction* – Adams’ volume of memoirs and commentary on American musical life – was published in 2008, by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the U.S., and by Faber & Faber in the U.K. *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, edited by Thomas May and published by Amadeus Press, is a 400-page summary of writings about Adams and his music, and the first in-depth anthology of texts dealing with more than 30 years of the composer’s creative life.

John Adams is an active conductor, appearing with the world’s greatest orchestras and with programs combining his own works with others by composers as diverse as Debussy, Strauss,

Sibelius, Stravinsky, Ravel, Ives, and Ellington, as well as his contemporaries Zappa, Reich, Glass, and Michael Gordon. As a guest conductor in the U.S. and Europe, he has conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and London Symphony Orchestra, among others.

Adams has also received critical acclaim for his creative programming at the most important music venues in the world. In April and May of 2003, Lincoln Center presented a festival titled “John Adams: An American Master,” the most extensive festival that the venue has ever devoted to a living composer. As the Richard and Barbara Debs Composer’s Chair at Carnegie Hall from 2003–07, Adams conducted the first public concert in Carnegie’s Zankel Hall and founded the annual “In Your Ear” festival. In 2006, he curated the hugely popular “Minimalist Jukebox” for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. As Artist-in-Association with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, he regularly conducted the orchestra at London’s Barbican Centre and the annual BBC Proms concerts at Albert Hall. Adams has also served as Music Director of the Cabrillo Festival and Creative Chair of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

*Son of Chamber Symphony*, Adams’ sequel to his popular Chamber Symphony of 1992, was given its stage premiere in April 2008 at the San Francisco Ballet with the title *Joyride*, choreographed by Mark Morris. Adams’ most recent work, a string quartet commissioned by the Juilliard School and Stanford University for the St. Lawrence String Quartet, was given its premiere in January 2009 during an Adams residency at the Juilliard School.

The official John Adams website is [www.earbox.com](http://www.earbox.com). The music of John Adams is published by Boosey & Hawkes and Associated Music Publishers.

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