



John Luther Adams is more closely identified with his geographical location than perhaps any other current American composer. A “military brat” as a child, he grew up all over the lower 48 states, but he’s lived his adult life in Alaska, near Fairbanks. And he writes Alaskan music. At least, he’s the only Alaskan composer to gain enough national reputation that we surmise from his work what Alaskan music must sound like. In

## **JOHN LUTHER A D A M S**

these days in which composers rotate academic posts, and California composers sound more and more like New Yorkers and vice versa, Adams’s music never lets you forget where he lives. His very titles—*Sauyatugvik: The Time of Drumming; Five Yup’ik Dances; In a Treeless Place, Only Snow*—breathe the bracing, pristine air of a northern wilderness few sub-Canadians are familiar with.

I hope my readers understand that I'm not speaking of John Coolidge Adams, composer of the opera *Nixon in China* and oft-played orchestra works such as *Harmonielehre*. JLA, as his friends sometimes call him, began using his middle name when *Nixon* appeared, to distinguish himself from his then faster-rising, eponymous colleague. J. C. Adams may be the top American operatic and orchestral composer around by some criteria, but the thorniness and characterlessness of some of his recent orchestra works are beginning to cost him some fans; meanwhile, the mysterious beauty of J. L. Adams's music is causing more and more people to see him as the Adams to keep an eye on.

Adding to the confusion is that the Alaskan Adams writes mostly for orchestra as well, and he thinks big. His *Clouds of Forgetting*, *Clouds of Unknowing*, which Joann Falletta recorded for New World Records with the Apollo Chamber Orchestra, is over sixty minutes; the newer *In the White Silence* is seventy-five minutes, and neither work is broken into movements. Adams needs both the time and the large orchestral forces because he works on many rhythmic levels at once, building up layers of distinct activity whose simultaneity creates a gentle information overload, and a mystical continuity. The string players might move in slow, ethereal chords

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inherited from Ives's *The Unanswered Question*, while the harp plays quintuplet arpeggios, the mallet percussion shimmers in tremolos, and celesta or solo string quartet climb in arching melodies.

What occasions this article, though, is that in the last few years Adams has made an all-out assault on the chamber music medium. He's always written a few small-ensemble pieces, mostly for percussion: there's the *Green Corn Dance* of 1989, and several percussion quartets from his opera on Eskimo place names, *Earth and the Great Weather*. But lately he has transposed his orchestral concept to several long chamber pieces, and though I've always been a fan of his orchestral works, I've come to find the chamber pieces even more compelling. I'll try to explain why.

Clouds of sound is a central concept in Adams's music. Follow only one instrument or section of the orchestra, and not much seems to be happening, but the mass effect is overwhelming because everyone's playing, and everyone's moving at different paces. The music avoids dissonance or apparent complexity by an austere restriction of pitch material; in fact, the number of Adams pieces, including some of his longest,

that *contain not a single sharp or flat* is rather astounding: *In the White Silence*; *In a Treeless Place*, *Only Snow*; *Dream in White on White*; four of the *Five Yup'ik Dances*; and several of the *Five Athabascan Dances*. Not since Palestrina has a composer so devoted himself to the diatonic scale, and it's clear (even from the titles) that there's a connection in his mind between all those white keys and the wintry Arctic landscape.

Now, clouds of sound are easy to create with an orchestra. The strings sustain chords, the woodwinds arpeggio at different rates, and Adams likes the shimmering of the "Harris gamelan" favored by Roy Harris—celesta, marimba, and vibraphone—though he uses it very differently. Strip down to only a few instruments, though, and new strategies are required. And it is Adams's impressive achievement that he has learned how to create the same luminous, mystical feeling in his chamber works, even when every individual line is audible.

Take *In a Treeless Place*, *Only Snow*, for string quartet, two vibraphones, celesta, and harp (1999). The celesta starts out playing wide-ranging irregular arpeggios in septuplets, echoed more slowly but almost canonically in the first violin. The harp enters in quarter notes, the vibraphones in triplets and quintuplets respectively. Clearly, a conductor is called for. But while the melodies, thickening out to twelve at a time and then thinning down to one in a recurring process, are not simple or predictable, they are featureless enough not to call attention to themselves. Melodic motives echo constantly from instrument to instrument, and there's rarely any specific line one is tempted to focus on.

Likewise, *Time Undisturbed* (also 1999) achieves a restful continuum with flute, alto flute, bass flute, synthesizer, and three harps. *The Light that Fills the World* (2000), written for the Paul Dresher Ensemble in San Francisco, is a slowly evolving chord for violin, contrabassoon, percussion, and organ. What Adams achieved in the orchestra pieces with clouds, he has to achieve here by the more careful shaping of melody, and a seamless polyphony. And it works. These pieces are as inscrutable as a fifteenth-century mass by Ockeghem, but more colorful, and just as noble-sounding.

For there is undeniably a spiritual aspect to every J. L. Adams work. His personal sense of ethics is highly developed: he's been almost as active in environmental causes as in music, and as president of the American Music Center he's encouraged a healthy, inclusive sense of new-music community. His music is as earnest as he is, never flashy, never technical-sounding, always intent on a sustained sense of timelessness. His melodies are graceful yet impersonal, usually couched in climbing quarter-notes. His dissonant clouds are just as selflessly sustained as his consonant ones, and when drumming is involved—as it often is—the aim is a kind of ritual dance ecstasy that does not find release in cathartic climax.

In short, his music perfectly echoes the landscape he loves: impersonal, relentless, larger than human scale, yet gorgeous, a quiet chaos of colors, suffused with light. It's not a climate everyone could live in. But for those who want to bathe their ears in an aural aurora borealis while staying warm inside, it's a spiritual odyssey well worth taking. ■