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EXPLORE & LEARN



Nixon in China

JOHN ADAMS (1947 -)

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The dress rehearsal will take place on Wed. Feb. 2, 2011. Performances this season will take place on Feb. 5, 9, 11, 13, 19, 22, 24 and 26, 2011 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.

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***Nixon in China:* Background and Characters**

COC PREMIERE

Nixon in China is an unusual opera in many ways. In 1987 it very well may have been the only opera ever written about people who were still alive. Writing an opera about recent history was an idea for which the composer John Adams credits the American stage director Peter Sellars. The pair, with the help of librettist Alice Goodman, staged the actual story of President Nixon's trip in 1972 to the People's Republic of China. It was the first time an American President had visited China, and an important step towards bettering relations between the two nations.

The idea for *Nixon in China* belonged to Peter Sellars who brought together the John Adams and Alice Goodman to create an artistic representation of what might have

happened during Nixon's fateful visit to China. After researching back issues of news magazines, tapes of the television newscasts, and once she had made clear what happened on each day of the visit, Goodman met with Adams to simplify events and construct the opera.

The story covers five days, from February 21 to 25, 1972 during U.S. President Richard Nixon's historic visit to Peking (now known as Beijing), China. Adams and Goodman decided the work would have three acts, the first comprised of three scenes, the second, two, and the third, just one. Voice types were assigned to the roles – for example, Mrs. Nixon would be a lyric soprano, Chiang Ch'ing a coloratura, and the secretaries, lower voices who would sing in the background.

The COC presents Nixon in China. Robert Orth (centre) as Richard Nixon in the St. Louis Opera Theatre's production, 2004. Photo: Ken Howard



Goodman then returned home to England to do more research, ignoring everything written after the 1972 visit except for the Mao, Nixon and Kissinger memoirs, and consulting biographies of Mao, Madame Mao and Nixon. When it came to creating the opera's characters, Goodman incorporated aspects of the real people into her characterizations. For example, she wove in Mao's classical education and his use of allusions to classical Chinese literature for his own ends. Also incorporated were Mao's admiration of Western philosophy and the heroes of the American Revolution. When turning to the Nixons, Goodman chose to highlight the President's wartime stint in the Navy when he was stationed on various Pacific islands, the poverty of Mrs. Nixon's childhood and the various rented accommodations of their early marriage.

The ages of the characters also seemed significant: the Nixons, Kissinger and Madame Mao were middle-aged while Mao and Chou were old men. All were at a stage in life where the ambition of their youth had either been

achieved or abandoned. Goodman became convinced that each character should be as eloquent as possible and that the opera would be heroic and not a satire. The end result, while incorporating actual events and works, is ultimately a character-driven work that explores the human emotions of these real-life figures as the story travels from public to private and back again. Adams' music, in its range and its accomplishment, elevates what could be nothing more than the evening news into a story of universal appeal and significance.

The premiere performances of *Nixon in China* took place at the Houston Grand Opera from Oct. 22 to Nov. 7, 1987.

The opera is a co-production of Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Chicago Opera Theater, Opera Colorado, Houston Grand Opera, Minnesota Opera and Portland Opera.

The opera is sung in English with English SURTITLES™.

MAIN CHARACTERS in order of vocal appearance

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Richard Nixon	President of the United States	Baritone	
Pat Nixon	First Lady	Soprano	
Chou En-lai	Premier of the People's Republic of China	Baritone	Cho-en-lye
Mao Tse-tung	Chairman of the Communist Party of China	Tenor	Mow-tseh-tuhng
Henry Kissinger	Secretary of State	Bass	KISS-in-JER
Chiang Ch'ing	First Lady	Soprano	Chang-ching
Nancy T'sang	First secretary to Mao	Mezzo-soprano	
Second Secretary to Mao		Alto	
Third Secretary to Mao		Contralto	

Nixon in China: Synopsis

ACT I

Feb. 21, 1972: On an airfield outside Peking, a contingent of the Chinese army, navy and air force sings a 1930s Red Army song. "The Spirit of '76"* taxis and lands. Richard and Pat Nixon and Henry Kissinger are greeted by Premier Chou En-lai. Richard Nixon is introduced to various Chinese officials by Premier Chou.

An hour later, Nixon, Kissinger and Premier Chou visit Chairman Mao's study. While Nixon attempts to set forth a simplistic vision of peace between America and China, Mao wishes to discuss philosophy and speaks in riddles. The elderly Mao is soon worn out, and Nixon and Kissinger depart with Premier Chou.

Following the audience with Chairman Mao, a great feast for the American delegation is held in the Great Hall of the People. Premier Chou rises to make the first of the evening's toasts, a tribute to patriotic fraternity. The President responds in kind, congratulating the Chinese for their hospitality and proposes a toast in the name of peace.

ACT II

Mrs. Nixon is ushered by a party of guides and journalists to various showcases of contemporary Chinese life – a glass factory, a health centre, a pig farm and a primary school. Her Chinese guides hint darkly of the repressive side of Chinese life that lies underneath the façade shown to foreign dignitaries. She expresses her hopes for a peaceful future of modesty and good neighbourliness, a future based on the values of the American heartland.

That evening, the Nixons attend a performance of *The Red Detachment of Women*, a revolutionary ballet devised by Mao's wife, Chiang Ch'ing. The piece is a simplistic display of politicized music-theatre, with the oppressed peasants of a tropical island saved from their brutal landlord by heroic women of the Red Army. The audience becomes a part of the ballet and takes on the role of the performers: the Nixons empathize with the downtrodden peasants; Kissinger sides with the brutal landlord while Madam Mao's desire to save the peasants at all costs leads her to become more brutal than the landlord was in the first place.

ACT III

On the Americans' final night in Peking, the main characters relive the paths that have brought them to this place and this moment. The Maos and the Nixons look back to the struggles of their early years and realize that despite all the public displays of solidarity during this visit, the relationship between the United States and China remains uncertain. Only Chou En-lai looks deeper, asking "how much of what we did was good?" before casting doubts aside and wearily carrying on with his work.

* "Spirit of '76" is a patriotic phrase relating to the independence of the United States from Great Britain in 1776. President Nixon named the Air Force One presidential plane after this expression.

Nixon in China: John Adams

Composer John Adams was born on Feb. 15, 1947 in Worcester, Massachusetts. He began composing at the age of 10 and first heard his music performed at the age of 13. His father taught him how to play the clarinet, and he was a clarinetist in community ensembles.

Accepted into Harvard University in 1965, he studied composition under Leon Kirchner, Roger Sessions, Earl Kim, and David Del Tredici. While at Harvard, he conducted the Bach Society Orchestra and was a reserve clarinetist for both the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Boston Opera Company. He performed as the soloist in the Carnegie Hall world premiere of Walter Piston's *Clarinet Concerto*. He earned two degrees from Harvard University (BA 1971, MA 1972) and was the first student ever to be allowed to submit a musical composition for a Harvard undergraduate thesis.

He taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music from 1972 until 1984. In 1985 he 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*, which are among the most-performed contemporary American operas. A recent stage work, *I Was Looking At The Ceiling And Then I Saw The Sky*, was also given more than 50 performances in both the U.S. and Europe.

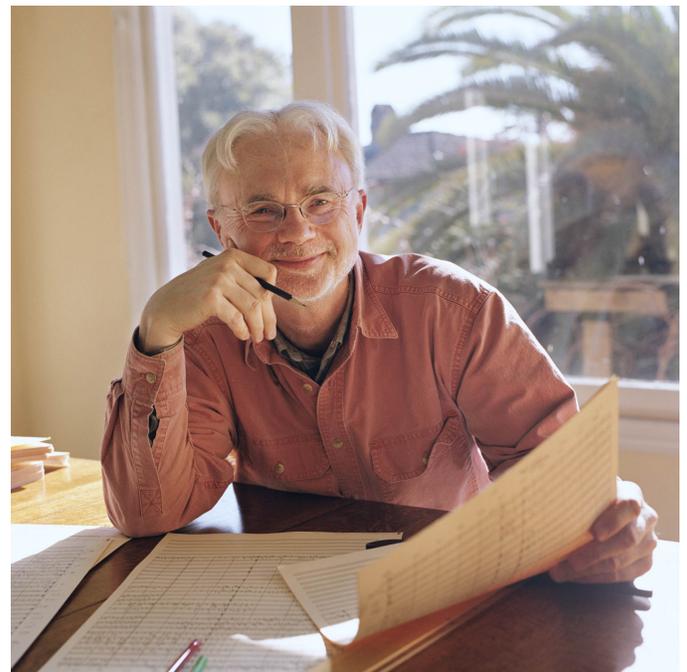
El Nino, a further collaboration with Peter Sellars, premiered in Paris in December 2000 and was seen again in San Francisco in January 2001. A filmed version of *The Death of Klinghoffer* was unveiled in 2003, directed by Penny Woolcock and conducted by the composer leading the London Symphony. It was shot on location in the Mediterranean and aboard a cruise liner.

Adams has received a number of prizes including the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Music for *On the Transmigration of Souls*, composed for the New York Philharmonic to commemorate the first anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks. In April and May of 2003, the Lincoln Center presented *John Adams: An American Master*, the most extensive festival devoted to a living composer ever mounted at that venue.

More recent projects include *The Dharma at Big Sur* (composed for the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the opening of Disney Hall in Los Angeles in October 2003); a new opera, *Doctor Atomic*, based on the life of Robert Oppenheimer, was commissioned by the San Francisco Opera and premiered there in September 2005; and a new orchestral work for Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic.

In 1999, in celebration of a 15-year partnership, Nonesuch Records released *The John Adams Earbox*, a 10-CD compilation comprising almost all of the composer's music over a 20-year period.

In addition to composing, John Adams enjoys a career as a conductor performing with the world's greatest orchestras. He will debut with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in March 2011.



John Adams. Photo: Margaretta Mitchell

The Life and Times of John Adams

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| <p>1947 ♦ John Adams is born in February in Worcester, Massachusetts.</p> <p>♦ The Cold War begins.</p> <p>1949 ♦ Britain, France, the United States, Canada, and eight other western European countries sign the North Atlantic Treaty, establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).</p> <p>1950 ♦ Kim Il-sung's North Korean People's Army invades South Korea initiating the start of the Korean War.</p> <p>♦ The first non-stop trans-Canada flight is made.</p> <p>1953 ♦ The Stratford Festival of Canada opens.</p> <p>♦ The Korean War ends, with a final Canadian death toll of 314.</p> <p>1957 ♦ Adams begins composing.</p> <p>♦ Competition between the United States and the Soviet Union heats up as both countries work towards developing the first real-world exploration of outer space ("The Space Race").</p> <p>♦ Dr. Seuss publishes the famous children's books <i>The Cat in the Hat</i> and <i>How the Grinch Stole Christmas</i>.</p> <p>1962 ♦ The Cuban Missile Crisis takes place as a stand off between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. over Russian missiles based in Cuba. The crisis ends with agreements signed after a tense period in which the world stood on the brink of nuclear war.</p> <p>1965 ♦ Adams is accepted to Harvard University to study music. While at Harvard, Adams conducts the Bach Society Orchestra and is a reserve clarinetist for both the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Opera Company of Boston.</p> <p>♦ The red flag with a white square in its center featuring a red maple leaf is adopted as Canada's national flag.</p> | <p>♦ The musical <i>The Sound of Music</i> premieres at the Rivoli Theatre in New York City.</p> <p>1969 ♦ Neil Armstrong becomes the first man to walk on the moon.</p> <p>1972 ♦ Adams receives his bachelor of music degree and master of music from Harvard University.</p> <p>♦ President Richard Nixon visits China in 1972, a historical event that would later become the setting of Adams' 1987 opera, <i>Nixon in China</i>.</p> <p>♦ The musical <i>Grease</i> premieres on Broadway.</p> <p>1977 – 1987 ♦ Adams composes an impressive body of work while working at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music; some major works include: <i>Wavemaker</i> (1977), <i>Shaker Loops</i> (1978), and <i>Common Tones in Simple Time</i> (1979).</p> <p>1981 ♦ Adams completes <i>Harmonium</i> for the Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco. It establishes him as a major writing force in the landscape of American contemporary music.</p> <p>♦ Ronald Reagan becomes the 40th President of the United States of America.</p> <p>♦ Chiang Ch'ing (Madame Mao) is sentenced to death in the People's Republic of China.</p> <p>1983 ♦ Adams is commissioned to write, <i>Light Over Water: The Genesis of Music</i>, which is used as the score for a collaborative artwork by choreographer Lucinda Childs and architect, Frank Gehry.</p> <p>♦ The Nintendo Entertainment System goes on sale in Tokyo.</p> <p>♦ The Eaton Centre shopping mall in Toronto, Ontario is completed.</p> <p>1985 ♦ Air India flight 182 explodes en route from Toronto to London.</p> |
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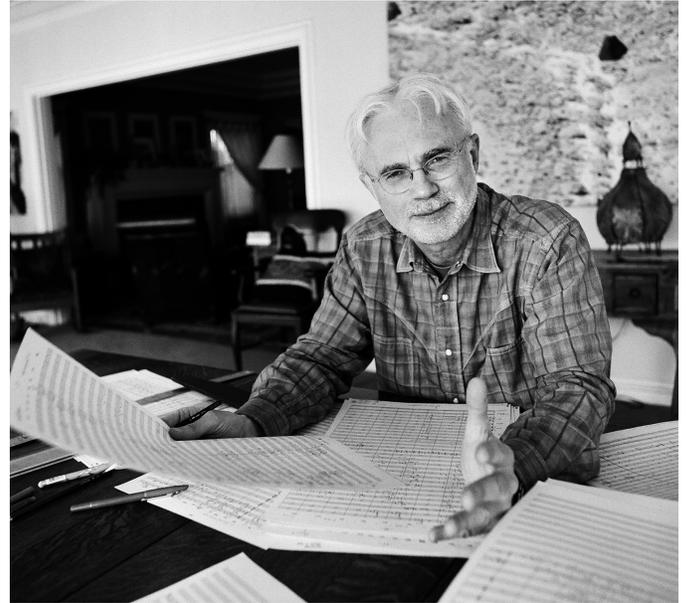
- ◆ Margaret Atwood writes *A Handmaid's Tale*, a novel later adapted into an opera (2000) with music by Poul Ruders. It was performed by the COC in 2004.
- ◆ 1987 Adams completes *Nixon in China*.
- ◆ *The Simpsons* premiere as animated shorts as part of *The Tracey Ullman Show*.
- ◆ Hockey star Sidney Crosby is born in Halifax, Nova Scotia.
- ◆ 1995 Adams completes *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*.
- ◆ Yahoo! Inc., an internet services provider, is founded in California.
- ◆ Oklahoma City is devastated by a bomb attack. The blast claimed 168 lives and injured more than 600 people.
- ◆ 2001 On September 11, suicide attacks by members of al-Qaeda rocked the U.S., most visibly with the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City.
- ◆ 2002 Adams commemorates the one-year anniversary of the September 11 attacks with *On the Transmigration of Souls*.
- ◆ Accused of being a CIA agent, Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl is kidnapped in Pakistan.
- ◆ Reality TV gains in popularity with the debuts of *American Idol*, *Big Brother* and *The Bachelor* franchises.
- ◆ 2004 The popular social media site, Facebook, is launched.
- ◆ 2005 Adams completes *Doctor Atomic*, with a libretto written by Peter Sellars. The opera focuses on J. Robert Oppenheimer, and the Manhattan project – the WWII project that developed the atomic bomb.
- ◆ Four explosions blast the London Underground (transit system) killing 56 people and injuring over 700.
- ◆ 2006 Adams writes *A Flowering Tree*, commissioned to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth.
- ◆ The Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, the first purpose-built opera house in Canada and performance venue of the Canadian Opera Company, opens in Toronto.
- ◆ 2007 *Wonders Are Many*, a documentary about the making of *Doctor Atomic* is released, the same year a symphony based on music from the opera is made.
- ◆ The final book in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, is released, selling over 11 million copies in the first 24 hours.
- ◆ American soprano Beverly Sills dies of lung cancer at the age of 78.

John Adams' Music

Nixon in China is one of the major operas of the 20th century and, along with Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, is considered one of the cornerstones of American minimalist music. Minimalism originated in the U.S. in the 1960s, based mostly in consonant harmony, repetition, steady pulse, tension in the static flow and slow transformation. It often features the reiteration of musical phrases or smaller units such as figures, motifs, and cells. The actual term, "minimalist music" was coined around 1970 by Michael Nyman from the concept of minimalism, which was earlier applied to the visual arts.

Adams has an encyclopaedic knowledge of all forms of music, believing that an harmonic style incorporating regular pulses is a human necessity, and that audiences relate to these elements on a genetic as well as a cultural level. He notes that composers Verdi and Handel wrote to please their audiences, while still maintaining their musical ideals. As Adams has stated quite bluntly: "Something tremendously powerful was lost when composers moved away from tonal harmony and regular pulses... among other things the audience was lost."

Adams' contemporary musical inspirations include Steve Reich whose seminal minimalist piece, *Four Organs*, was a 25-minute exploration of a single five-note chord. Adams premiered his first orchestral work, *Common Tones in Simple Time* in 1980, an example of pure minimalism in which there is no melody, and other elements such as colour, rhythm, and harmony are treated with extreme delicacy.



John Adams. Photo: Margareta Mitchell

Nixon in China: Art and Politics

By Gianmarco Segato

John Adams' opera *Nixon in China* covers American President Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing, China for five days, from Feb. 21 to 25, 1972. Peter Sellars, one of the opera's co-creators and the stage director for its premiere in 1987, has said that *Nixon* was an attempt to base an opera on recent political history and make it a living, breathing part of the generation for which it was first produced. Many operas tend to be based on political events from the distant past rather than those within the living memory of the audiences watching them, as is the case with *Nixon in China*.

Commenting on his opera, Adams has noted that "the meeting of Nixon and Mao is a mythological moment in world history, particularly American history." He points

out that Americans tend to invest a lot of emotional and psychological energy into the idea of "the President" and that in 1972, many of them were shocked when Nixon, a Republican, announced he was going to visit Communist China, thus ending the decades-long Cold War between the two nations. Adams, Sellars and the opera's librettist, Alice Goodman, could have interpreted this event in many ways, but elected to treat each character with as much respect as possible. They wanted to produce a heroic opera and felt that this quality would best be served by having each character express themselves eloquently in song and words. *Nixon in China*, Sellars says, "shows you what opera can do to history, which is to deepen it and move into its more subtle, nuanced, and mysterious corners." This aspect of the piece is best exemplified in the elegiac final act in which we see these powerful world leaders staring at younger versions of themselves on TV, wondering what happened to all the promise of their youth.

The COC presents Nixon in China. Tracy Dahl as Madame Mao in the St. Louis Opera Theatre's production, 2004. Photo: Ken Howard



Throughout operatic history, the relationship between politics and opera has been a two-way street: the dominant political views of the day have often influenced composers, and operas themselves have in turn played a part in shaping the political climate. A case in point is the 19th-century Italian, Giuseppe Verdi. Of the great opera composers of the past, perhaps none was embroiled in the political world as much as he. His 1867 opera *Don Carlos* is not only intrinsically woven into the political fabric of its own time, but also to that of the more distant past. It is based on the 1787 play by German playwright Friedrich von Schiller, which in turn was inspired by events that took place more than 200 years earlier. Verdi's operatic version retains most of the crucial elements of Schiller's political drama: a powerful King Philip II of Spain who is controlled by the even more ruthless Catholic Church, and the invented character of Rodrigo Marquis of Posa, who stands as an outspoken symbol for political freedom. One of the most thrilling scenes in the opera occurs between Philip and Posa in which the King justifies the blood spilled in his efforts to repress the Flemish nation. He believes this is the price that must be paid to maintain peace in the civilized world. Posa questions his King's methods asking, how can "you believe that by sowing death you can provide for the future?" For Verdi's Italian audiences, Spain's occupation of Flanders in *Don Carlos* would have resonated with their own struggle to break free of Austrian rule, and their desire to unify Italy – which at that time was made up of separate city-states – into one nation. Verdi's strong political convictions were not only played out in operas such as *Don Carlos*, but also in his personal life: at one time he even ran for, and succeeded in entering, the national parliament.

The potential of opera to stir up political unrest has long been a preoccupation of kings, prime ministers and government censors who have always kept a close eye on what composers wrote and staged. For example, in

its original version, Verdi's *A Masked Ball* dealt with the assassination of the King of Sweden and therefore censors demanded that its setting be shifted to Boston where the king became a less-exalted, more expendable governor. The Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky needed approval of the censors to stage *Boris Godunov*.

One of the most notorious examples of political interference in opera is the case of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* which was based on a lurid story combining vivid and exciting music with graphic violence and sexuality. It was an instant hit at its 1934 premiere and over the next two years, it was performed almost 200 times in Leningrad and Moscow, and was produced on stages from London to New York to Argentina. Early in 1936, three different productions of the opera were being staged in Moscow alone.

The troubles for Shostakovich began in January of 1936 when a delegation of Soviet officials, including Joseph Stalin, attended the opera at the Bolshoi and reportedly walked out before the final act even began. Almost immediately, an article appeared in the government newspaper *Pravda* denouncing the opera. It was unsigned, but many think it originated with Stalin himself. Many in the Soviet artistic community saw this not just as an attack on one opera and one composer, but as an effort to impose government control on all artistic expression.

Politics and opera have long shared a complex, interdependent relationship, and John Adams' *Nixon in China* continues in this tradition, not only by finding its inspiration in real political events, but also by shaping the listener's own thoughts and perceptions about political history.

Gianmarco Segato is the COC's Editorial and Retail Co-ordinator.

Nixon in China: **The Visit, Feb. 21 – 28, 1972**

By Gianmarco Segato

“The week that changed the world,” as US President Richard Nixon called his historic 1972 visit to China, made for an eight-day television extravaganza – and a public relations coup for hosts and guests alike. For eight days and nights, television audiences around the world witnessed a spectacular parade of images from China thus ending twenty-five years of isolation between the United States and the People’s Republic which had begun with the Communist takeover of China in 1949. *

When Nixon emerged alone from his Air Force One jet in Beijing on February 21, 1972 he became the first American President to go to China. The visit was an immense gamble but a brilliant stroke of policy, orchestrated to serve the political interests of the USA. This was the period of the Cold War when there was widespread fear in the United States of a perceived Communist threat as embodied in the USSR and China. Nixon recognized that bringing China onside might strengthen the U.S. position against the USSR. A better relationship with the Chinese, who were important strategic allies of Communist North Vietnam, was also part of Nixon’s strategy to withdraw U.S. forces from the conflict between North and South Vietnam, a war which US citizens were increasingly unwilling to support.

Soon after their arrival, Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger were summoned to a previously unannounced meeting with Chinese leader, Chairman Mao, which Kissinger later referred to as their “encounter with history.” Next came a formal welcome banquet hosted by

Premier Chou En-lai. In the Great Hall of the People, as the People’s Liberation Army band played such American favorites as “America the Beautiful” and “Home on the Range,” course after course was followed by seemingly endless rounds of toasts. ““Seize the hour! Seize the day!”” Nixon quoted from Mao, raising his glass to his Chinese hosts. But beyond the pomp and spectacle, the banquets sent a clear and dramatic message to everyone watching that a new relationship was being forged.

Throughout the week, when not meeting with Chou and Chinese officials, Nixon attended cultural and athletic performances and more banquets, and toured such architectural and artistic treasures as the Forbidden City, Ming Tombs, and the Great Wall of China. “I think that you would have to conclude that this is a great wall,” the President observed, when pressed for comment, “and it had to be built by a great people.” Since the events were so heavily televised, millions of people got their first glimpse of life behind the “Bamboo Curtain” ** as the President’s wife, Pat Nixon toured communes, schools, factories, and hospitals.

In the almost 40 years since Nixon’s visit, attitudes towards China have changed dramatically to a point where the West now embraces and relies heavily on trade with the People’s Republic as part of its ongoing social, political and economic agenda. That change started with Nixon’s historic trip in 1972.

Gianmarco Segato is the COC’s Editorial and Retail Co-ordinator.

* Following World War II, Communist forces took over China. This caused a rift between the newly-named People’s Republic of China and the United States which lasted for the next 27 years until Nixon’s visit in 1972.

** The “Bamboo Curtain” was a term often applied to the imaginary ideological border which divided Communist China from the anti-Communist West, most especially, the United States.

***Nixon in China:* What to Look for**

Nixon in China was first performed in 1987 in a production by Peter Sellars, the well-known American opera director who also came up with the idea for the opera, bringing together its composer and librettist John Adams and Alice Goodman. Sellars' original production stressed the monumentality of the story: for example, President Nixon and his wife, Pat Nixon made their initial entrance from a huge jumbo jet (the Presidential airplane known as the "Spirit of '76"). In contrast, the COC's production directed by James Robinson takes a more miniaturist approach, focusing on the inner lives of the characters.

Robinson does this in several ways including his use of what he calls "the romantic bluish glow of the television screen" which not only presents us with actual footage of the meeting in China, but also adds a sense of nostalgia for the audience, as they look back on recent historical events. The television images also provide us with the sense of history being made in the moment: the events are taking place on stage in the opera and we're simultaneously witnessing their documentation by the media on the TV screens. Also, by juxtaposing the characters on stage in their official, state roles with more intimate home movie footage on the TV screens, there is the suggestion that the public and the private lives of these people have become more and more intertwined.

In *Nixon in China* the singers play personalities from recent history (the visit to China took place in 1972), an unusual situation given that the majority of opera characters are drawn from more distant time periods and often from outside of the realm of reality itself (mythology, fiction and fairy tales). Given that older generations would still remember the Nixon era and witnessing the historic visit on TV, the opera singers have quite a challenge ahead of them in delivering a realistic portrayal of the main characters.

Fortunately, cast members such as Robert Orth (Nixon) and Thomas Hammons (Kissinger) have a long history with this opera: in fact, Hammons played Kissinger in the very first production in 1987. They have therefore become not only extremely skilled in singing their roles, but also in physically transforming themselves into personalities who will be well known to a good portion of the audience. Anyone familiar with Richard Nixon's appearance and mannerisms is in for a treat (after all his face has been caricatured in many

forms, perhaps most memorably as a rubber Hallowe'en mask which seems to suit his jowly features!); with his hands in his pockets and hunched shoulders, singer Robert Orth has developed an uncanny ability to mimic Nixon in every way. Being aware of the challenges with writing about people in recent history, John Adams helped shape the character of Richard Nixon to musically reflect his natural speech tendencies.



The COC presents Nixon in China. Maria Kanyova as Pat Nixon in the St. Louis Opera Theatre's production, 2004. Photo: Ken Howard

Nixon in China: Listening Guide

For *Nixon in China*, John Adams developed a distinct style of musical composition that went beyond the restrictive, repetitive nature of the minimalist movement to which he is usually linked. He takes traditional features of minimalism, such as repeated melodies, harmonies and rhythms, knowing exactly when to alter those compositional elements to reflect the drama of each scene.

The tracks listed below correspond to the complimentary Naxos recording of *Nixon in China* which is provided to

all school groups attending the COC production. This recording features many of the same singers as will be heard on stage during our performances in February 2011.

Robert Orth is Richard Nixon, Maria Kanyova is Pat Nixon, Thomas Hammons is Henry Kissinger and Chen-Ye Yuan is Chou-En-Lai. Marin Alsop conducts the Colorado Symphony Orchestra and the Opera Colorado Chorus in this 2008 recording. NAXOS 8.669022-24.

Track #	Musical excerpt	Connection to the story	Musical elements and significance	Further Reflection
CD 1, tracks 2 & 3	“Soldiers of Heaven Hold the Sky” and “The People are the Heroes Now”	The opera begins on an airfield outside Peking. A contingent of the Chinese army, navy and air force marches onto the stage and sings a 1930s Red Army song, “The Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points of Attention.”	<i>Nixon in China</i> is constructed within the framework of conventional opera, beginning with a traditional chorus which builds up to the entrance of two of the principal characters, Richard and Pat Nixon. This opening music strongly exhibits some of the hallmarks of Adams’ minimalist style: a restricted use of harmonic vocabulary and a steady pulse. The repetitive, declamatory, clipped nature of the vocal line in this opening chorus suits the propagandistic texts (“Your master is the labourer who rules the world with truth and grace”) and the faceless military forces who sing them.	Why do you think unification in song is so widely used by politicians and governments when trying to further their propaganda?
12	“Like the Ming Tombs”	Nixon idealistically sings about the future of all nations’ youth. With this piece, he reminds those in the present of their unaccomplished dreams.	In this excerpt from a scene between Nixon and Chairman Mao, the music characterizes as precisely as do the words: two distinct musics have been created for the two characters. Mao’s is fluent, flexible, confident and free, yet highly rhythmic as befits his more philosophical speechifying whereas Nixon’s is staccato, nervous, made up of short phrases and stiff in its irregularities, speaking to his discomfort within an alien culture. At the end of the excerpt, Chairman Mao’s dutiful secretaries repeat his lines “Founders come first, then profiteers” as they write them down.	After listening to the clip, think about if you were asked to direct the singers portraying Nixon and Chairmain Mao. How would you ask them to act, move, and gesture?

Track #	Musical excerpt	Connection to the story	Musical elements and significance	Further Reflection
16	"Cheers!"	Nixon and Chou-En-lai toast each other, and then, Mrs. Nixon. Caught up in the spirit of friendship, the banqueters go from table to table toasting one another.	After the audience with Mao, everyone at the first evening's banquet is euphoric. The guests are caught up in a tribute to patriotic fraternity, and to reflect this, the music's tempo becomes increasingly frenetic, punctuated by loud brass chords and choral shouts of "Cheers" all of which create a festive mood. When Nixon finally admits that his opinion of China has changed "I opposed China. I was wrong," the chorus simultaneously sings "Cheers" and drowns out the word "wrong." The multiple conversations and proclamations that ensue after this moment highlight the blissful ignorance and naïveté of the revellers.	If you were only reading the synopsis one scene at a time, based on this upbeat chorus, what do you think would happen next in the story?
CD 2, track 3	"This is prophetic"	Mrs. Nixon is taken on tour by a party of guides and journalists. At the Gate of Longevity and Goodwill she pauses to sing of an idyllic future in which "luxury dissolves into the atmosphere like a perfume."	Here, Adams begins to open up the strict minimalist musical vocabulary by giving free rein to his more lyrical side in Pat Nixon's aria, "This is prophetic." At one point its music references the famous "Unknown Soldier" tune, as a muted trumpet adds counterpoint to the soprano's voice. This is not a one-off musical effect since the trumpet continues as an organic part of the texture for the remainder of the aria.	Do you believe that Pat Nixon truly believed that the union between the United States and China was successfully achieved during this visit? What world is she describing for the listener?
13	"I Am Old and I Cannot Sleep"	Chou-En-lai has the last word, wondering "How much of what we did was good?" as the opera concludes with simple scales stretched into broken chords, and finally, silence.	As the opera progresses, the music becomes more richly inventive in melody, freer in rhythm, subtler in harmony, and more fanciful in texture. By Act III, we are in a world quite different from the previous two acts; there is little action, with more individual reflections from each character. Adams gives us lyrical music of considerable beauty to suit the elegiac and contemplative mood as the characters muse on the present, past and future. The reference to birds, first heard in an odd birdsong in the Overture, is once again highlighted in Chou-En-lai's final statements inferring that life in China will go on as it did before the monumental visit and meeting between Nixon and Mao.	Why do you think John Adams gave the last moments of the opera to Chou En-lai instead of Nixon or Chairman Mao?



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Cover: The COC presents Nixon in China. A scene from the St. Louis Opera Theatre production, 2004. Photo: Ken Howard