

P E R F O R M A N C E

Voicings: John Adams

The celebrated *Nixon in China* (1987) by composer John Adams '69, A.M. '72, was the first of four operas that, along with many orchestral and chamber works, have won him international renown. On *the Transmigration of Souls*, a musical memorial to the victims of the September 11, 2001, attacks, won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize and a recorded version later captured three Grammy awards. Here are some of the remarks Adams made this May during Arts First weekend, when he received the 2007 Harvard Arts Medal.

When I compose or orchestrate, I imagine that I am in front of a huge mixing board or a divine synthesizer, and I think that way.

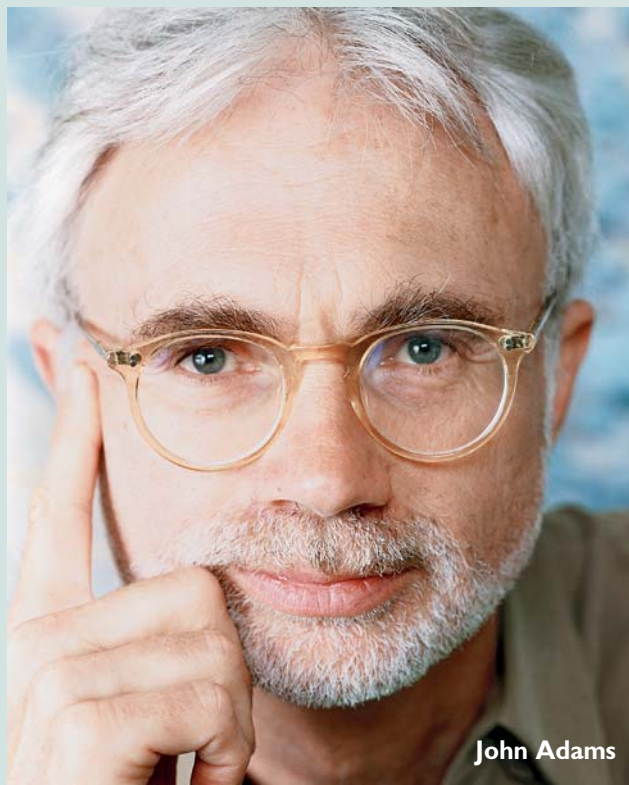
Collaboration is probably up there with double ax-murder in terms of the most painful things two people can do to each other.

What makes my operas special is that they are based quite fastidiously on the real historical facts.

Peter [Sellars]'s first idea was to have Kissinger absolutely mute in the opera, but I

thought, why pass up such an obvious *buffo* character? [Director Peter Sellars '80, the 2001 Arts Medalist, has collaborated on all four of Adams's operas.]

[Los Alamos, the setting of Adams's opera *Doctor Atomic*] is one of the great American stories because it combines Yankee ingenuity with this obsessively beautiful image—let's face it, atomic bombs are kind of morbidly sexy.



John Adams

I actually set declassified government documents. I have to tell you that setting the word "practicable" took me an afternoon.

Aida has become a kind of vehicle for vocal showboating and not really a comment on the human condition. I want this art form, opera, to be about our experience as Americans living right now.

I have bad days when I really feel that I'm working in an art form that's just not relevant anymore, that had its peak in the years from Vivaldi to Bartók, and now we are just fighting over the crumbs.

A really good recording of mine might sell 50,000 copies; that's very rare in classical music. For a rock group, 50,000 CDs sold would be a disaster.

If I were to do something cheap or rushed or not as good as it should be, I'm going to have to live with it. The reason we call it classical music is that we hope in 100 years, it will still be heard.

Harmony is where the psychological meaning of the music is. [Twelve-tone composers] wrote atonal music, and at the same time Duke Ellington, Richard Rodgers, and George Gershwin were having a fine time with harmony.

If you write the Great American Opera, then what's going to come after that? The Not-So-Great American Opera? ~C.L.

economically feasible in some times and places by mimicking capitalism, he was not at all sure how this would work out politically and socially. In his closing words, "As a matter of practical necessity, socialist democracy may eventually turn out to be more of a sham than capitalist democracy ever was." I join McCraw in urging anyone interested in these questions to read this stimulating book. Like Keynes, Galbraith, and many economic-development theorists today, Schumpeter saw economic affairs as inextricably connected with politics, society, and ideology.

After the war, Schumpeter was elected president of the American Economic Association; he presented his presidential address in December 1948. McCraw describes it as a valedictory example of his subject's characteristic blend of economic analysis, economic history, philosophy, and wit. In it, Schumpeter argued that there is no such thing as objective economics. Ideology is ever present, most obviously in the formulation of problems to solve. This admonition, true today as much as then, should not paralyze us, but rather be

seen as a necessary indeterminacy in our results—as an economic Heisenberg principle. Although Schumpeter died in 1950, McCraw is right to insist that his contributions to our understanding of the economies in which we live are still vital today. ▢

Peter Temin, JF '65, Gray professor of economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was president of the Economic History Association in 1995-1996. His books include *Iron and Steel in Nineteenth-Century America* and *The Fall of the Bell System*.