

## John Adams

Clarinetist, conductor, composer, director. These four words are often used to describe John Adams. Born on February 15, 1947 in Worcester, Massachusetts, John Adams is, “The most performed living American composer” (Sedlar). He discovered music and began performing at a very young age. John Adams has continued to perform, conduct, compose, and direct throughout his life.

Adams grew up in New England with his father. His first instrument and favored instrument is the clarinet, which he began to learn from a talented man, his father. “...his father, a jazz clarinetist in bands, taught his son the instrument” (Sedlar). His father taught him how to play the clarinet and continued to train him throughout the years. Adams had an early interest in music. “At the age of ten, he was able to begin studying composition, music theory, and the clarinet” (Staff). He continued to study throughout grade school and high school. He was able to attend Harvard University and left with a degree in 1971. While at Harvard, Adams was privileged to study and collaborate with some very well known names including: “Leon Kerchner, David Del Tredici, and Roger Sessions by performing with the Boston Symphony as a clarinetist” (Staff). Adams once stated that, “I was much inspired by certain albums that appeared to me to have a fabulous unity to them, like *Abbey Road* and *Dark Side of the Moon*” (Forney, Dell’antonio, and Machlis 345). After graduating from Harvard University, Adams made the decision to move to California and take the next steps in his career.

In California he took a job at the San Francisco Conservatory. He was “...the head of the composition department at the San Francisco conservatory and held the position until 1981” (Staff). While in San Francisco, many composers influenced Adams. While in California, “...he came under the influence of Steve Reich and sought the music of the

experimentalists such as John Cage and Morton Feldman” (Staff). John Adams is sometimes known as a minimalist style composer due to the influence from Reich, Cage, and Feldman. According to *dictionary.com*, minimalist music is, “a reductive style or school of modern music utilizing only simple sonorities, rhythms, and patterns, with minimal embellishment or orchestrational complexity, and characterized by protracted repetition of figurations, obsessive structural rigor, and often a pulsing, hypnotic effect” (“The Definition of Minimalism”). Adams wanted to expand horizons with this minimalist style, which led him to his classic, *Shaker Loops*.

John Adams was still in San Francisco while he produced *Shaker Loops* in 1978. “While working as the composer-in-residence of the San Francisco Symphony, he composed, *Harmonium* and *Harmonielehre*, which were his first major orchestral works” (Sedlar). After these two works, his pieces were in high demand, which eventually led to him resigning at the San Francisco Conservatory but stayed in California and moved to Berkeley. During his early works, Adams’s musical language was very heavily influenced by “stripped-down harmonic palette and motoric pulse of minimalism.... His trademark rhythmic vigor and sense of large-scale architecture and a lively humor rooted in juxtapositions of borrowed styles were consistently crowd-pleasers” (Staff). Adams was already being compared to previous composers and was said to “be well on his way to becoming the most influential and widely performed American composer since Copland” (Staff).

After early successes, Adams began to write modern operas from 1985 through 1991. For his first opera, *Nixon in China* (1987), Adams was “approached by theater director Peter Sellars to write the opera. He teamed up with librettist Alice Goodman and Sellars to create the Opera” (Sedlar). *Nixon in China* was based of the historical event that occurred in November of 1972 when Nixon was president. “*Nixon in China* was successful at the Houston Grand Opera and the Booklyn Academy on Music” (Staff). The operas that followed *Nixon in China*, “...showed an increasing awareness of the sumptuous orchestration and expressive harmonies of neo-Romanticism” (Forney, Dell’antonio, and Machlis 345). The next opera that Adams collaborated on with Goodman and Sellars was, *The Death of Klinghoffer* in 1991. “*The Death of Klinghoffer* was premiered at the Theatre Royal de

la Monnaie in Brussels” (Staff). This opera was “based on the 1985 hijacking of a cruise liner by Palestinian terrorists” (Forney, Dell’antonio and Machlis 345). After, *The Death of Klinghoffer* had premiered, Adams believed that he was ‘blacklisted’ stating, “I can’t check in at the airport now without my ID being taken and being grilled. You know, I’m on a homeland security list, probably because of having written *The Death of Klinghoffer*, so I’m perfectly aware that I, like many artists and many thoughtful people in the country, am being followed” (Thorpe). Although this gave Adams an uneasy feeling, he continued to compose and work through the new millennium.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Adams produced a number of new works including: “*Centure Rolls* (1997), a piano concerto for Emmanuel Ax, symphonies; *El Dorado* (1991) and *Naïve and Sentimental Music* (1998), *Chamber Symphony* (1992), *John’s Book of Alleged Dances* for the Kronos Quartet (1994), and the theater piece, *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky* with poet June Jordan in 1995” (Staff). Adams adds to his resumé by taking a step farther in his conducting career and “...creates a number of arrangements and orchestrations of works by Liszt, Debussy, Astor Piazzolla, Charles Ives, and many others” (Staff). Along with these new works and beginning to conduct more, John Adams also produced multi media works, which continued to address major emotional and national events and began with the new millennium. *El Niño* was Adams first composition with the start of the new millennium. *El Niño* is, “... an oratorio with the birth of Jesus being the subject. It was a multimedia work, which was originally presented by the San Francisco Symphony” (Staff).

Perhaps the most emotional piece that Adams every composed was, *On the Transmigration of Souls*, which was commissioned in the wake of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. “On the Transmigration of Souls, for adult and children’s choirs, orchestra, and taped sounds, was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic... In Adams’s words, the work sought, “to create what I would call a meditative space forth listener to bring one’s emotions and memories, as you would go into a cathedral” (Sedlar). The work premiered on the one-year anniversary of the attack, September 11, 2002. “*On the Transmigration of Souls* acted as a memory space and was named the Pulitzer Prize for music

winner in 2003” (Staff). This work is still remembered today. Adams’ next major work was, *Doctor Atomic*, which was another opera performance, “...based on the life and career of J. Robert Oppenheimer, who was the lead designer of the U.S. atomic bomb” (Staff).

To conclude, John Adams has composed, conducted, and performed many pieces in his lifetime thus far. His talents are undeniable and his works, although controversial at times, have received copious amounts of reviews. Some even consider that Adams is, “becoming among the most influential and widely performed American composers since Copland” (Staff). John Adams has already had major success in his life and is still working to this day.

## Works Cited

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