2-20-2019

John Adams Composing Through Others: Modeling, Innovation, and Recomposition

Michael Edward Palmese

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations)

Part of the Musicology Commons

**Recommended Citation**


[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4809](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4809)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).
JOHN ADAMS COMPOSING THROUGH OTHERS: MODELING, INNOVATION, AND RECOMPOSITION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in The Department of Music

by

Michael Edward Palmese
B.M., Georgia Southern University, 2012
M.M., University of Miami, 2014
May 2019
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation and topic came about not only through my writing, but also through the support and guidance from many individuals. My interest in John Adams arose while I was an undergraduate in my first music history courses taught by Gregory Harwood at Georgia Southern University. Our conversations about general research topics and the thrill of discovery that could result from musicological studies was immensely stimulating and drew me towards pursuing just such a scholarly path. When attending the University of Miami for my master’s degree, I received my first opportunities for translating the excitement I had built up into meaningful research. Under the guidance of my advisor, Melissa de Graaf, I began to take my first tentative steps towards contributing to the musicological discipline. I presented my first conference papers, published my first reviews for academic publications, and wrote a master’s thesis thanks to her insights and guidance.

I arrived at Louisiana State University as a PhD student in 2014 with much more to learn, and Brett Boutwell has provided precisely the kind of counsel and instruction needed. While drastically improving my technical writing abilities, he has also communicated issues of research methodology and criticism that have proven invaluable in my development as a musicologist. His scrupulous attention to detail, meticulous approach to the entire scholarly undertaking, and seemingly endless reservoir of patience, are all models to which I aspire well beyond my time at Louisiana State University. The other members of my committee have also provided valuable guidance in my work on this dissertation: Andreas Giger’s remarkable capacity for organizing prose into a sharp, coherent overall form; Blake Howe’s attention to details of language and clarity; and the interdisciplinary insights offered by Adelaide Russo.

I would be derelict in my duties as a son to not acknowledge the endless supply of support I have received from my parents and siblings. Earning a PhD is difficult. It would have
been even more difficult had I not possessed a robust support system to help process the anxieties, both personal or professional, that inevitably came up during this process. Words will of course never fully capture the enormity of your contributions, but my entire family should know that they have played an essential role in the completion of this dissertation. I also must acknowledge what is now the decade-long mentorship and friendship I have had with Michael Braz, my undergraduate composition advisor. He has seen me develop from an inquisitive freshman to a PhD candidate and was there every step of the way providing support and guidance.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ ii

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ v

Chapter 1. Introduction.................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 2. A Portrait of John Adams as a Young Man: The 1970s Juvenilia................................. 8


Chapter 4. John Adams Reconstituting Ives and Debussy............................................................... 83

Chapter 5. Epilogue......................................................................................................................... 118

Bibliography.................................................................................................................................. 121

Appendix A. John Adams, April 18, 1973 *Ode to Gravity* Interview.......................................... 134

Appendix B. Original Radio Material for “Christian Zeal and Activity”....................................... 143

Vita.................................................................................................................................................. 146
ABSTRACT

John Adams has frequently embedded allusions to the music of others in his work while also drawing on more general stylistic conventions and sensibilities of others to inform his creative output. Although this dynamic has been widely acknowledged in Adams’s body of work by scholars and critics generally, it has received little sustained attention or explanation. I argue that much of his work involves “composing through others,” a process in which he adopts, in various ways, the aesthetic conventions, styles, and sensibilities of other composers. By unearthing traces of this creative approach through a focus on short, but significant, periods of his career, we can craft a more nuanced picture of Adams’s stylistic development.

The title of this dissertation suggests three ways in which Adams has composed through others: modeling, innovation, and recomposition. Modeling involves the outright adoption or mimicking of other composers’ styles, a conspicuous feature of his earliest compositions, which were written in the early- and mid-1970s. Innovation, in this dissertation, refers to the process by which Adams has cultivated new styles and subjected them to testing and development; this process gave rise to Adams’s first large-scale ensemble works during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Recomposition was his most straightforward strategy for composing through others in the late 1980s and early 1990s; he orchestrated the music of past composers as an exercise in revision and elaboration, using the process to help chart new paths forward in composing original works.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

John Adams, born in 1947, is arguably America’s most prominent living composer. Originally from Massachusetts and educated at Harvard University, Adams reached his self-described artistic maturity in the late 1970s with works in a motoric, repetitive style influenced by 1960s minimalism. He found his first critical success with the choral symphony Harmonium (1981), whose synthesis of minimalism and romanticism would later earn the label “postminimalist.”¹ He brought postminimalism to opera with Nixon in China (1987) and The Death of Klinghoffer (1991), both of which drew publicity from their politically charged libretti. He continued to explore moral dilemmas and anxieties of the twentieth century with Doctor Atomic (2005). Although best known as an opera composer, Adams has also found success in other genres, composing such well-received pieces as the Grawemeyer Award-winning Violin Concerto (1994), the nativity oratorio El Niño (2000), and the large-scale orchestral work Absolute Jest (2012). Alongside his growing popular appeal emerged a body of scholarship dating back to the early 1990s.

When observed from afar, Adams’s development as a composer can appear irregular and even capricious, with stylistic starts, stops, reversals, reengagements, and unexpected continuities. This dissertation will argue that the stark stylistic differences we see across many of Adams’s instrumental works result from a creative strategy of experimenting with or adopting aesthetic conventions, styles, and sensibilities of other composers. By unearthing traces of this strategy through a focus on short but significant periods of his career, we can craft a more nuanced picture of Adams’s stylistic development.

**Literature Review**

Timothy Johnson was a pioneer in the scholarly study of Adams’s oeuvre. His 1991 dissertation was analytically oriented, providing in-depth studies of Adams’s harmonic style as it developed over time by investigating four works from 1977 to 1987.\(^2\) Johnson’s research bore fruit decades later in his 2011 monograph, which is devoted to a broad discussion of the analytical, historical, and political dimensions of *Nixon in China*.\(^3\) Adams’s works from the 1990s and early 2000s have also received attention, with the primary theoretical discovery being the importance Nicolas Slonimsky’s scales and melodic patterns held for the composer. This insight came from Alexander Sanchez-Behar’s 2008 dissertation, which sought to explain how Adams shifted in the 1990s towards greater contrapuntal density and away from the gradual unfolding of basic harmonic blocks.\(^4\) More recent Adams scholarship of particular interest is Alice Cotter’s 2016 dissertation, which chronicles the revision histories of *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Doctor Atomic* through sketch studies. This dissertation, in focusing on the conceptual and ethical problems the composer and his collaborators tried to solve as they altered the operas, sheds light onto Adams’s compositional practice and how art engages with tragedy.\(^5\) Despite the many valuable insights of the extant scholarship on Adams, many avenues of research remain, including those based in the study of primary sources, especially sketches and correspondence. My dissertation provides just such an investigation, revealing discoveries of

---


music previously thought to be lost, as well as new insights into obscure or unknown pieces in his oeuvre of which current scholarship is unaware.

Secondary sources, unconcerned with Adams specifically, have also informed this dissertation, especially my depiction of select compositions as individual research tasks or works-in-progress in an ongoing project of artistic development. This theme relates well to Adams’s tendency to unpredictably invoke the techniques and stylistic traits of others over long spans of time. As Dominique Jameux explains when discussing the very different body of work presented by Boulez: “[the] ‘work in progress’ calls for extension, proliferation, subdivision into others... forming a single, open-ended, all-encompassing project.” More intimate is the idea of compositions serving as private studies designed to explore an idea or solve a given problem. Indeed, J. Peter Burkholder has argued that many of the small-scale pieces Ives produced are best understood as private compositional studies because of their experimentation with new or unorthodox procedures. Orchestrations and arrangements too can serve as private studies, with composers reconstituting works of the past to reflect their own aesthetic values in the present. Joseph Straus has investigated this condition in recompositions by Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and

---


Webern, while Erinn Knyt has discussed the value of transcriptions and arrangements for Busoni’s compositional practice.\(^8\)

**Primary Sources**

Much of the research for this dissertation relies upon published primary sources and unpublished archival materials that have not been examined by scholars. Radio interviews of Adams at KPFA in Berkeley, CA contain several hours of previously unknown discussion and music that provide new insights into his creative process at early points in his career when he was still establishing himself. The Yale Oral History of American Music likewise contains a high volume of deeply personal conversations between Adams and friends that span multiple decades. Numbering over two hundred pages, these interview transcriptions from 1983 to 2013 have helped me clarify how influence, allusion, and musical traditions of the past relate to Adams’s approach to composition. I have also undertaken my own interviews with composers who were collaborators or colleagues with Adams. Their insights have been especially helpful in explaining the creative circles in which Adams traveled in the Bay Area avant-garde music scene of the early and mid-1970s.

Archival print materials are also essential components of this dissertation research. For example, the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University holds all of the materials related to *Hockey Seen*, a previously unknown piece of juvenilia by Adams that receives significant attention in chapter 2. Archival interviews and correspondence among the collaborators, along with unpublished recordings, illustrations, and sketches, have all helped illuminate this large-scale electronic work. Archives at the San Francisco Conservatory and Juilliard also hold

important early manuscripts of Adams music, with comparisons between differing versions of the same documents allowing me to evaluate Adams’s creative process and potential influences with a high degree of certainty.

Chapter Summaries

Three chapters follow this introduction, each devoted to a different way in which Adams composes through engaging with another composer: modeling, innovation, and recomposition.

Chapter 2 deals with modeling and investigates the avant-garde works Adams composed during the six-year span before the arrival in 1977 of *China Gates* and *Phrygian Gates*, the pair comprising his self-described opus 1. The youthful pieces that receive attention are *Heavy Metal* (1971), *Hockey Seen* (1972), “Christian Zeal and Activity” from *American Standard* (1972–73), and *Ktaadn* (1972–74) because of their explicit use of techniques and styles associated with other composers, most notably Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage. These compositions suggest that Adams was aware of minimalist musical conventions and was gradually incorporating them into his writing style far earlier than he, and previous scholarship, has acknowledged. *Heavy Metal* is a tape work inspired by Cage’s and Stockhausen’s electronic music, as well as the cut-up technique of the author William Burroughs, suggesting that Adams had an early instinct for utilizing material that featured repetition. In his next work, *Hockey Seen: A Nightmare in Three Periods and Sudden Death*, we will first observe Adams’s gradual adoption of conventions associated with musical minimalism. Throughout *Hockey Seen*, we will find him using drones, repetitive cells of thematic material, and engaging with the expressive possibilities of tonality and modality. Adams’s interest in tonality and modality is also important for his next work, *Ktaadn*, a piece for choir and electronics that seeks to reconcile Cagean indeterminacy with minimalism. “Christian Zeal and Activity” suggests influences from Cornelius Cardew, Christian

---

Wolff, and especially Gavin Bryars, whose 1971 composition *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet* may have served as a direct model for Adams.

Chapter 3 deals with innovation, centering on the brief chronological span from 1978 to 1981 and the three compositions Adams produced during this period: *Shaker Loops* (1978), *Common Tones in Simple Time* (1979), and *Harmonium* (1981). These pieces reveal Adams’s effort to translate a style associated with synthesizers and tape loops into large-ensemble works for live performers on acoustic instruments. Detailed studies of the scores reveal a refinement of this innovative idea as Adams attempted to develop an individual style that demanded an internal coherence and integrity. In this chapter, we find Adams stimulating his own creativity by drawing inspiration from the stylistic development of a predecessor. I argue that it was Steve Reich’s shift from electronic experimentation to composing for acoustic instruments and ensembles in 1960s and 1970s that Adams latched onto and copied in his own unique way.

Chapter 4 investigates two ambitious recomposition projects undertaken by Adams in the late 1980s and early 1990s: *Five Songs of Charles Ives* (1989–90) and *Le livre de Baudelaire* (1994). This chapter examines both recompositions through comparisons to the original songs by Ives and Debussy, demonstrating how Adams inscribed his compositional sensibilities and interests into the new versions. By studying the technical choices and emphases Adams made when recomposing these scores for an orchestra, we can see what he found most interesting and aesthetically valuable from his predecessors. These recompositions, and their allusive correspondences to original works Adams composed like *My Father Knew Charles Ives* (2003) and *Eros Piano* (1989), suggest that he sought to learn from his predecessors and use aspects of their idiomatic styles to inform his own writing. When accounting for the compositional decisions made in *Five Songs of Charles Ives* and *Le livre de Baudelaire*, we find less of the self-aggrandizing, Freudian struggles scholars have detected in recompositions from other twentieth
century composers. I propose that a compelling explanation for Adams’s approach to recomposition stems from the influence of Carl Jung. Historical evidence indicates that Adams was heavily involved with Jungian analytical psychology during the 1980s, and the Jungian understanding of the creative impulse matches well Adams’s exploration of affinities between himself and his predecessors. He recomposes to revise and elaborate upon music of the past, finding material that will also enhance his original compositions and provide a sense of balance in relation to other composers that make up the Western musical tradition.
CHAPTER 2
A PORTRAIT OF JOHN ADAMS AS A YOUNG MAN: THE 1970S JUVENILIA

James Joyce draws on music when describing one of the moments leading up to Stephen Dedalus’s aesthetic epiphany in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

He heard a confused music within him as of memories and names which he was almost conscious of but could not capture even for an instant; then the music seemed to recede, to recede, to recede: and from each receding trail of nebulous music there fell always one long-drawn calling note, piercing like a star the dusk of silence.¹

Such imagery of confused music, comprising sound, memories, and names from the past, appearing and receding in the creative consciousness of an artist, desperate to forge an identity, seems particularly apt when describing young composers.² The narrative trajectory from youthful inexperience to artistic maturity in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* shares similarities with the non-fictional early career of John Adams as he experimented with differing compositional styles between 1971 and 1976. During this phase of Adams’s career, both popular music and the avant-garde influenced his creative consciousness. The result was an erratic sequence of aesthetic shifts as Adams tried out differing stylistic conventions and compositional techniques from influential composers, seeking a potential path forward. Although Adams especially sought to align himself with Cage’s notions of indeterminacy and chance between 1971 and 1976, he eventually found himself at an impasse not only with Cage, but also the entire avant-garde. Years later, he could recall:

---

I took Cage seriously in his admonishment about keeping the ego out of the music. But I wasn’t happy about it. I could feel a restlessness and lingering dissatisfaction with the avant-garde position. [...] I didn’t see much difference between a work created American-style by tossing coins and one created Euro-style by transposing serial sets of pitches.3

This chapter examines this previously unstudied phase of the composer’s creative life through detailed studies of four works. It will show that Adams modeled his early music on influential avant-garde pieces and sometimes emulated their sound worlds before the arrival of his “official opus one” in 1977: a pair of piano pieces entitled China Gates and Phrygian Gates that he describes as illustrating the “fruits of my initiation to Minimalism.”4 These four pieces of juvenilia cut against the grain of this narrative, demonstrating that Adams was aware of minimalist musical conventions and incorporated them into compositions far earlier than he, and previous scholarship, has acknowledged.5

The chapter begins with Heavy Metal, an electronic work composed by Adams in 1971 as a graduate student at Harvard University, and one sharing stylistic correspondences with works by Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and William Burroughs. Hockey Seen, written in 1972, is a 40-minute electronic piece for a multimedia dance project sponsored by Harvard University. This lengthy composition exhibits a conflation of avant-garde influences that include sound spatialization, musique concrète elements, as well as minimalist drones and repetition. Ktaadn, composed between 1972 and 1974, is a choral piece that employs indeterminacy. While Cage’s influence remained a crucial factor, Adams also availed himself of minimalist conventions, from the modular scoring style of Terry Riley to modal pitch collections. “Christian Zeal and Activity,” the second movement of American Standard, written between 1972 and 1973, draws

5 I have chosen to describe these pieces as “juvenilia” principally as an indication of their chronological status: they came about when Adams was still a young and unknown composer in his twenties who would not begin widely publishing or recording his music until 1977.
compositional influences from such contemporaries as Cornelius Cardew, Christian Wolff, and Gavin Bryars.

Heavy Metal (1971)

Heavy Metal, completed in 1971, is a tape work inspired by Cage’s and Stockhausen’s electronic music, as well as a literary technique developed by Burroughs. Adams composed this electroacoustic piece during his time at Harvard University, satisfying the requirement for his master’s degree in composition. Unfortunately, by the composer’s own admission, he was unaware of how to care for the tape on which the original work was recorded. Over the years the tape completely deteriorated, leading him to claim in his memoir, “Heavy Metal is lost to the ages.”6 He was mistaken: a single recording of the work exists as part of a larger interview of the composer conducted by Charles Amirkhanian and broadcast on KPFA in Berkeley, California on April 18, 1973.

Adams has explained that his indebtedness to Cage in Heavy Metal stemmed primarily from his exposure to Cage’s works of the 1960s, most notably Variations IV.7 His citation of this particular work by Cage is odd, given that Heavy Metal is a fixed electroacoustic composition that does not change from performance to performance. Variations IV is, by contrast, a deeply indeterminate work that will differ in each realization. A more likely reason Adams viewed correspondences between Heavy Metal and Variations IV stems from the latter work’s being a culmination of Cage’s evolving ideas regarding interpenetration and multiplicity. As James Pritchett explains, these two interrelated concepts imagine “an infinite space of sounds that were all unique and completely interconnected: all sounds, in other words, were thought of as existing

---

6 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 60.
7 Ibid., 60.
simultaneously in this space and hence were all interrelated to each other.”

In *Heavy Metal*, Adams crafts just such a sonic environment, with disparate and seemingly unrelated sounds coexisting within the same space. *Heavy Metal* also suggests influences from Stockhausen, with Adams citing the contemporaneous *Telemusik* and *Hymnen* as models. Both of these works are based on Stockhausen’s “moment form,” in which the music avoids functional or conventional implications of continuity and developmental forms. As Jonathan Kramer explains:

> A proper moment form will give the impression of starting in the midst of previously unheard music, and it will break off without reaching any structural cadence, as if the music goes on, inaudibly, in some other space or time after the close of the performance.

The correspondences between Stockhausen’s moment form and Cage’s concepts of multiplicity and interpenetration describe just as well the chaotic and dissonant sonic environment Adams sought to create, as he included everything from kitchen pots and pans and Beijing Opera gongs, to radio transmissions. The particular incorporation of radio transmissions in *Heavy Metal* suggests a desire to emulate Stockhausen’s *Hymnen*, itself one of his many experiments with moment form. In addition, the meticulous attention Adams places upon editing and mixing the discrete sound elements in *Heavy Metal* suggests an awareness of Stockhausen’s pioneering interest in musical spatialization.

---


13 A similar spatial element factors into a given realization of Cage’s *Variations IV* in terms of where sounds arise. For more information, see William Fetterman, *John Cage’s Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 125–28.
The experimental literary work of William Burroughs, whose chance-based cut-up technique resulted in a dense prose style that avoids conventional syntax, is also important for understanding how Adams conceived Heavy Metal. In 1970, Burroughs published an essay collection entitled The Electronic Revolution demonstrating his interest in the possibilities afforded by tape recording and the manipulation of sound. Burroughs viewed the tape recorder as a technology with the potential to subvert language and the limits it places upon human understanding. He envisioned a hypothetical pop festival that would involve a vast grid of tape recorders placed everywhere to envelop audiences and demonstrate the best application of the cut-up technique for entertainment purposes. On a more general level, Burroughs’s ideas about tape recorders and sound were part of a larger wave of ongoing experimentation with previously unconsidered dimensions of the medium, with tape loops, samples, and feedback becoming sources of creative invention. Douglas Kahn, when surveying the ideas espoused in Burroughs’s philosophical writings, suggests “among the postwar arts only Cage was on par with Burroughs in the sophistication of his ideas about sound.”

When discussing Heavy Metal in 1973, Adams stated that the piece’s text drew exclusively from the last paragraph of Burroughs’s 1961 novel The Soft Machine. Adams was mistaken in this regard, as the opening of Heavy Metal uses a textual fragment from Naked Lunch, a text not devised through the cut-up technique:

And I would like remind you, Gentlemen and Hermaphrodites of the Jury, that this Great Beast... has appeared in this court on many previous occasions, charged

---


with the unspeakable crime of brain rape... In plain English. In plain English, Gentlemen, forcible lobotomy.\textsuperscript{19}

Where Adams casually drew on ideas from Cage and Stockhausen when composing \textit{Heavy Metal}, he followed the same process when he chose the texts. Their general mood and atmosphere was the most appealing element, not the technical aspects of the cut-up technique. Adams confirmed this sentiment during the 1973 interview, indicating an awareness of Burroughs’s experiments with recording his voice with tape recorders:

\[
\ldots \text{it [Heavy Metal] is a reaction, on my part, to Burroughs’ prose, his rhythm, his use of words, and also to his own style of reading. I really went through a heavy Burroughs period. I was very interested in his technique of cutting up and pasting back, which is a technique where he writes a conventional page of prose and then, in a kind of Cagean style, cuts it up, and kind of randomly reassembles it [\ldots] and then sort of makes a compilation of that.}\textsuperscript{20}
\]

Adams’s conflation of Cage and Burroughs is significant, indicating a loose understanding of their similarities and differences. The cut-up technique Burroughs devised had different aesthetic aims than the indeterminacy and chance procedures of Cage. Burroughs was preoccupied with examining human subjectivity, which he viewed as “internalized, intersubjective discourses which are in turn (mis)recognized as individual.”\textsuperscript{21} The cut-up technique, and the resulting reconfigured text, allowed Burroughs to subvert what he called the “Reality Script,” or entrenched systems of signification.\textsuperscript{22} The indeterminacy used by both Cage and Burroughs, while different, shares a focus on exploring human subjectivity and placing the reader or listener in a fundamentally new position of associative and interpretive possibilities.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{20} Adams interviewed by Charles Amirkhanian, April 18, 1973.

\textsuperscript{21} Todd Tietchen, “Language Out of Language: Excavating the Roots of Culture Jamming and Postmodern Activism from William S. Burroughs’ \textit{Nova Trilogy},” \textit{Discourse} 23, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 110.


\textsuperscript{23} For more information, see Daniel Belgrad, \textit{The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 253–54.
The ominous atmosphere and science fiction tropes and jargon that permeate both *Naked Lunch* and *The Soft Machine* resemble the type of tenebrous and anarchic sound world Adams’s crafts in *Heavy Metal* through his exposure to Cage, Stockhausen, and Burroughs.²⁴ Aside from the introduction, which draws from the aforementioned passage from *Naked Lunch, Heavy Metal* consists entirely of staggered and fragmented repetitions from the final paragraph from *The Soft Machine*. The text is recited, not sung, fitting with the shifts of blurry and fragmented imagery demarcated by Burroughs’s ubiquitous em dashes:

Think Police keep all Board Room Reports—and we are not allowed to proffer the Disaster Accounts—Wind hand caught in the door—Explosive Bio-Advance Men out of space to employ Electrician in gasoline crack of history—Last of the gallant heroes—“I’m you on tracks, Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin”—Couldn't reach flesh in his switch—and zero time to the sick tracks—A long time between suns I held the stale overcoat—sliding between light and shadow—muttering in the dogs of unfamiliar score—cross the wounded galaxies we intersect, poison of dead sun in your brain slowly fading—Migrants of ape in gasoline crack of history, explosive bio-advance out of space to neon—“I’m you, Wind Hand caught in the door”—Couldn't reach flesh—In sun I held the stale overcoat, Dead Hand stretching the throat—Last to proffer the disaster account on tracks. "See Mr. Bradley Mr.—“And being blind may not refuse to hear: “Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin, disaster to my blood whom I created.”²⁵

Despite the opaque language, subtle repetitions of short words and phrases make the above passage well suited as the textual basis for an avant-garde electronic work. For example, the following words occur multiple times: “Mr. Bradley,” “Mr. Martin,” “gasoline crack of history,” “disaster,” and “Explosive Bio-Advance.” These words, and their distorted iterations in *Heavy Metal*, provide the work an intuitive sense of repetition, a fact corroborated by the work’s form (Table 2.1).

²⁵ William Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 178. John Adams’s roommate in Cambridge, MA recited the text heard in *Heavy Metal* in a manner that deliberately sounds like the voice of Burroughs. Adams mentioned this aspect of the compositional process in the 1973 interview: “I roused him out of bed at about eight o’clock one morning when I had the studio and he croaks in a fashion very much like Burroughs.”
Table 2.1. Formal Layout of *Heavy Metal*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>BURROUGHS TEXT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:00–1:17 — Introduction (from <em>Naked Lunch</em>)</td>
<td>And I would like to remind you, Gentlemen and Hermaphrodites of the Jury, that this Great Beast... has appeared in this court on many previous occasions, charged with the unspeakable crime of brain rape... In plain English. In plain English, Gentlemen, forcible lobotomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:18–1:54 — Transition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:55–3:09 — Section I (from <em>The Soft Machine</em>)</td>
<td>Mr. Bradly Mr. Martin, disaster to my blood whom I created—Dead Hand stretching the throat—Last to proffer the disaster account on tracks. “See Mr. Bradly Mr.—” And being blind may not refuse to hear: “Mr. Bradly Mr. Martin, disaster to my blood whom I created”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:10–7:35 — Transition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:36–9:41 — Section II (from <em>The Soft Machine</em>)</td>
<td>Wind hand caught in the door—Explosive Bio-Advance Men out of space to employ Electrician in gasoline crack of history—Last of the gallant heroes—“I’m you on tracks, Mr. Bradly Mr. Martin”—I couldn’t reach flesh in his switch—and zero time to the sick tracks.—A long time between suns I held the stale overcoat—sliding between light and shadow—muttering in the dogs of unfamiliar score—cross the wounded galaxies we intersect, poison of dead sun in your brain slowly fading—Migrants of ape in gasoline crack of history, explosive bio-advance out of space to neon—“I’m you, Wind Hand caught in the door”—I couldn’t reach flesh—In sun I held the stale overcoat, Dead Hand stretching the throat—Last to proffer the disaster account on tracks. “See Mr. Bradly Mr.—” And being blind may not refuse to hear: “Mr. Bradly Mr. Martin, disaster to my blood whom I created”—Last to proffer the disaster account on tracks. “See Mr. Bradly Mr.—”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:42–11:54 — Transition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:55–13:04 — Section III (from <em>The Soft Machine</em>)</td>
<td>Think Police keep all Board Room Reports—and we are not allowed to proffer the Disaster Accounts—Wind hand caught in the door—Explosive Bio-Advance Men out of space to employ Electrician in gasoline crack of history—Last of the gallant heroes—“I’m you on tracks, Mr. Bradly Mr. Martin”—I couldn’t reach flesh in his switch—and zero time to the sick tracks.—A long time between suns I held the stale overcoat—sliding between light and shadow—muttering in the dogs of unfamiliar score—cross the wounded galaxies we intersect, poison of dead sun in your brain slowly fading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:05–13:45 — Closing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are three extended iterations of discrete portions of the final paragraph from *The Soft Machine*, punctuated by transitional passages without the voice, and an introduction provided by the fragment from *Naked Lunch*.

While Adams was aware of avant-garde principles and aesthetics, and their realization in influential works, he used this awareness to craft a sound world in *Heavy Metal* that is conventional, even predictable. The chaotic mood he creates serves to aurally illustrate the prose’s imagery in a manner similar to Milton Babbitt’s earlier use of electronics in his evocative and dramatically potent *Philomel* (1964), despite the differences in compositional methods behind the works. Indeed, in a 1983 interview, Adams described *Heavy Metal* as “a very violent piece, very strongly affected by the ambiance of those novels. There’s a lot of explosions and
chaotic sorts of Holocaust-type levels in it.” Furthermore, the text found in the majority of *Heavy Metal* suggests Adams had an instinct for utilizing material with non-systematic repetition. This interest takes on a minimalist orientation in his first professional commission: *Hockey Seen*.

**Hockey Seen (1972)**

No other work of Adams’s juvenilia better exemplifies his youthful awareness of minimalist musical conventions than the forty minutes of electronic music he composed for Nelson Goodman’s 1972 multimedia project *Hockey Seen: A Nightmare in Three Periods and Sudden Death*. To understand how Adams produced this large work, we first need to understand the commissioning organization.

The Graduate School of Education at Harvard University established Project Zero in 1967 as an extension of the philosopher Nelson Goodman’s work on a general theory of symbols. Project Zero was well established enough by 1972 to offer commissions to artists who could contribute to their educational goals. Adams was one such beneficiary. In the summer of 1972, he received funding to compose an “electronic score” for Goodman’s multimedia project *Hockey Seen*. Adams must have completed the work quickly, spending approximately seven weeks composing the score on the ARP synthesizer at Brandeis University before the premiere in August. Speaking in 1983, Adams described the overall effect of the theatrical collaboration as

---

28 I mention this curious phrase, “electronic score,” because it is described that way by the collaborators. No physical score of the music composed for *Hockey Seen* exists. All musical examples provided are transcriptions made by the author.
a “kind of terpsichorean tragedy.”

From Goodman’s perspective, *Hockey Seen* was an opportunity to put his philosophical ideas, most notably the idea of “worldmaking,” into practice. He felt both science and art offered means to comprehend the “worlds” we create around us. As he stated in *Ways of Worldmaking*:

...the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding, and thus that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology.

Evidence indicates Adams held little understanding of Goodman’s philosophical ideas while composing the music for *Hockey Seen* in 1972. When describing the project in 1983, the composer only remembered that he was commissioned by:

...a highly respected philosopher whose name is Nelson Goodman, who’s written many books on the philosophy of art. I wouldn’t know what field, whether he’s phenomenology or what. He’s a professor at Harvard, and he’s always writing articles in which he’s disputing Noam Chomsky or vice versa. He’s definitely a blue-ribbon philosopher and psychologist.

Adams’s primary goal while composing *Hockey Seen* was musically illustrating what he described as hockey’s primary features: “a certain profuseness of violence and intense activity.”

Period One, the longest movement of *Hockey Seen*, begins with a six-minute drone outlining the first five pitches of an overtone series on C-sharp (Fig. 2.1).


---

This static musical texture accompanies an austere slide projection alongside the choreography. Such an introduction may suggest Adams had some awareness of contemporaneous drone-based minimalism. A piercing referee whistle interrupts this drone after six minutes, creating a structural break that generates greater musical activity. The primary thematic material for Period 1 is an unusual passacaglia theme, which Adams referenced when discussing the work with Amirkhanian on KPFA in 1973 (Fig. 2.2).

![Figure 2.2. Hockey Seen, Period 1 Passacaglia Theme.](image)


Above and preceding this passacaglia theme is a motoric accompaniment of simple, tertian harmonies, reminiscent of contemporaneous minimalist music (Fig. 2.3). This texture, and the distinctive synthesizer timbre, also shares superficial correspondences with The Who’s “Baba O’Riley,” whose introductory passage was influenced by the minimalist composer Terry Riley.

![Figure 2.3. Hockey Seen, Period 1 Accompaniment.](image)


The song was released on the album *Who's Next* in August 1971, immediately before Adams began work on this piece. Adams has remarked on his general exposure to such popular music and the valuable pedagogical function it provided:

---

34 Ibid.
Back in the dorm room and at all-night parties of pot, scotch, whiskey, and unfiltered Lucky Strikes, we bored like weevils through the harmonic changes and textual minutiae of albums by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Bob Dylan, Cream, Jefferson Airplane, The Electric Flag, Country Joe and the Fish, the Beach Boys, the Doors, and of course, Jimi Hendrix. [...] I made more progress in my command of harmonic practice by reproducing these pop songs from memory at the piano than I ever did by my forced marches through the figured bass treatises.\textsuperscript{36}

Like the passage in \textit{Hockey Seen}, “Baba O’Riley” begins with an active surface of arpeggiation outlining simple, triadic harmonies with the eventual arrival of a repetitive bass motive (Fig. 2.4). Adams, by contrast, builds his accompaniment upon block chords.

![Figure 2.4. “Baba O’Riley” Introduction Surface Reduction.](image)

Without reading too much into putative or superficial similarities with “Baba O’Riley” specifically, we can discern that Adams composed \textit{Hockey Seen} with popular music conventions on his mind as a means to cultivate audience appeal: “It’s sort of a piece of pop music in a way. I realized that my audience wasn’t going to be the type of audience that would come to, say, a new music ensemble concert.”\textsuperscript{37}

Period 1 uses the passacaglia theme as a loose means to create a theme and variations form, with the final minutes serving as a recapitulation of sorts. Instead of drawing on the original passacaglia theme, however, Adams creates a new, serpentine chromatic descent (Fig. 2.5) based on discrete pitches, pairing it with a harsh upward ascent in the synthesizer’s upper

\textsuperscript{36} Adams, \textit{Hallelujah Junction}, 40.
\textsuperscript{37} Adams interviewed by Charles Amirkhanian, April 18, 1973.
register in which frequencies are elided into a smooth upward continuum; the result is a vertigo-like effect of aural disorientation.

Figure 2.5. Reframed Passacaglia Theme in *Hockey Seen*, Period 1 (Conclusion).

After this passage breaks off, Adams composes a final détente: a sustained bass pedal on G-sharp with an arpeggiation of the pitches B, A, and G-sharp, again suggesting a faint similarity to the iconic “Baba O’Riley” opening (Fig. 2.6).

Figure 2.6. *Hockey Seen*, Period 1 Final Texture.

Subsequent Periods of *Hockey Seen* indicate other minimalist influences, as Adams seeks to convey the sport’s kinetic energy and activity. For example, Period 2 begins with a percussive thematic motive (Fig. 2.7) that suggests the game’s violent impacts in a manner reminiscent of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Adams imbues this motive with an aggressive quality through a repetitive and dissonant play on registral displacement between the upper and lower voices. Also significant in this Period is Adams’s use of musique concrète elements, specifically crowd noises and the sound of a hockey puck skipping across ice. Adams subjects such “found sounds” to meticulous spatialization—perhaps suggesting correspondences to *Heavy Metal* and the Stockhausen interests that inspired it—and brings them back periodically to create a repetitive musical continuity.
Figure 2.7. *Hockey Seen*, Period 2 Opening Theme.

Period 3 again involves drones as a foundational background to the choreography. Unlike in Period 1, however the drone never ceases, serving as the harmonic foundation for the entire Period. Adams also favors a drone that is far harsher than the one we find in Period 1, which relies upon consonance through the first pitches of the overtone series. The chord Adams chooses for Period 3 is a B diminished seventh, a dissonant sonority providing the foundation for a dense web of short, pointillistic gestures subjected to electronic distortion effects to obscure easy pitch identification. Sudden Death is the final “Period” of *Hockey Seen* and also the briefest. Here, Adams creates a series of short, simple, and repeatable thematic motives that he can repeat and subject to unorthodox modulations. The overall effect of Sudden Death, like Period 2, is one of aesthetic confusion. Adams fuses several disparate musical ideas together into a composite that is irregular in overall architecture and aesthetically baffling. Although clumsy in execution, *Hockey Seen* was a valuable work in demonstrating to Adams the exciting possibilities minimalism offered when paired with other avant-garde influences.
Surprisingly, *Hockey Seen* met with critical success when it premiered.\(^{38}\) Even in the late 1970s, when Adams had already moved to the Bay Area and begun establishing himself as a minimalist/postminimalist composer, he still viewed the music positively. As an August 1979 letter to Goodman demonstrates, Adams found “[t]he music still seems well suited to the tone of the production” and that *Hockey Seen* carried with it “an undeniable cleverness and energy.”\(^{39}\) Further along in the letter however, Adams voiced some reservations, finding that *Hockey Seen* was too long to sustain the drama the collaborators sought. He singled out Period 1 as the weakest: “The music seems pompous and smacking of Hollywood. [...] I would not miss it if the whole of Period [1] were deleted (after the drone and opening whistle).”\(^{40}\) Despite this self-criticism, Adams found the other Periods compelling.

Only four years later, however, Adams was far more critical. As he explained: “It was just a desperately corny and embarrassing production, to which I contributed a great deal of desperately corny synthesizer music. I have no interest in hearing that on my seventy-fifth birthday!”\(^{41}\) What explains such a stark reversal? Part of Adams’s embarrassment about *Hockey Seen* could have stemmed from the overall sound quality. *Hockey Seen* would not have sounded “corny” in 1972, as many composers experimented with cutting-edge synthesizers like the ARP that the young Adams was also using.\(^{42}\) By the time of his reversal in the early 1980s, however,  

the synthetic timbres in *Hockey Seen* were widely associated with commercialized synth-pop music; the avant-garde had lost the exclusive claim to that sound quality they had enjoyed in the decade prior.\(^{43}\) In addition, Adams had received serious critical acclaim beginning in the early 1980s with his large-scale choral symphony *Harmonium* (1981) and created a succès de scandale at the East Coast premiere of *Grand Pianola Music* in June 1982 at Avery Fischer Hall.\(^ {44}\) Having established himself by 1983 as a major composer working within the minimalist and postminimalist styles and drawing on conventional orchestral and instrumental forces, perhaps Adams would have preferred to forget a work like *Hockey Seen*.

*Ktaadn* (1973–74)

*Hockey Seen* demonstrates that Adams’s engagement with tonality and modality and his adoption of gestures and conventions of musical minimalism began well before 1977, the year of his self-described “opus one.” Another work that reflects Adams’s interest in minimalism is his choral piece *Ktaadn* (1973–74). This was Adams’s first thoroughly indeterminate composition, drawing from both Cage’s methods and his love for Henry David Thoreau. Several of Cage’s works reflect his attraction to Thoreau, one of which, *Mureau*, Adams saw and heard at concert in 1971:

The tables and chairs had been cleared and the audience was clustered around on the floor, listening to Cage, who was seated at a table with nothing more than a typed manuscript, a microphone, and a reading lamp. His reading was from a long piece called *Mureau*, made by submitting passages from Thoreau’s journals to chance procedures via the *I Ching*.\(^ {45}\)

---


\(^{45}\) John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 84. Adams may have also been in attendance at a John Cage concert held in the Slosberg Recital Hall at Brandeis University on November 21, 1969.
The passages Cage selected from Thoreau’s Journal for use within Mureau derived from references the author made of music, silences, and sounds of the natural environment. Adams, a native New Englander, would likely have felt a special interest in Mureau and Thoreau. Also significant for Adams when composing Ktaadn was the environmental dimension of Cage’s aesthetics in the 1960s and 1970s, which drew from the influence of Thoreau. The most pronounced intersection between Adams and Thoreau, offering a strong link to the creative genesis of Ktaadn, comes from the 1970 publication and premiere of Cage’s Song Books.

There is a striking correspondence between the score for Ktaadn and one of the songs from Cage’s Song Books. The instructions for this song—Solo for Voice 3 from Volume I of the set—require the performer to consult a map of Concord, Massachusetts provided by Cage (Fig. 2.8). Performers trace a path from one point on the map, Fair Haven Hill (H7), to the other, “...the house beyond Blood’s” (B8),” by making their own decisions and turning the map so the selected path suggests a melodic line. The performer is free to set on this melodic line any of the text Cage includes on the score’s subsequent pages, culled from Thoreau’s Journal. With Adams’s Ktaadn, we observe a similar use of a map as a source of compositional invention. Inspired by Thoreau’s description of climbing Mount Katahdin in his book The Maine Woods, Adams obtained a map of the mountain that included the names of various Abenaki villages and bodies of water in the vicinity. He then drew a fifty-mile radius around the mountain’s peak,

---


48 Thoreau himself had noted and provided definitions for several of the Abenaki words he encountered on his journey. For a listing, see Henry David Thoreau, The Maine Woods (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1893), 430–35. Adams consulted Thoreau’s text for aid in translating some of the words he found and also drew upon George Stewart’s 1970 compendium A Dictionary of American Place Names.
basing his choice on the distance he imagined Thoreau might have been able to see on a clear day.

Next, he set each Abenaki name contained within the circle to a short modal melody and a non-pitched rhythmic cell. Adams composed all of the modal melodies in such a way that the entire work utilizes only the pitches between D and A.49

The vocal forces for Ktaadn are divided into two groups: singers and non-pitched speakers. Whereas the singers perform the aforementioned modal melodies set to Abenaki

words, the speakers, each of whom is paired with a singer to create a duo, recite the same Abenaki words as their partners, but in unrelated and uncoordinated rhythmic patterns and meters. Each Abenaki word is given a discrete module with repeat signs, facilitating the repetition required in performance. Such score design suggests awareness of Riley’s notational scheme for *In C* (1964) and related works. The words themselves are laid out in alphabetical order and the performing pairs may determine the order of the modules’ performance using various strategies, a few of which Adams suggests in his performance notes. Possibilities include rhythmic ordering, with words organized according to stresses or other rhythmic peculiarities; phonetic ordering, with words organized according to conspicuous vowel or consonant sounds; and syllabic ordering, with words organized according to the number of syllables in a word (shortest progressing to longest, or vice versa). What is most striking about *Ktaadn* is that it falls into the D Lydian mode between the pitches D and A, which Adams indicates with a key signature featuring F-sharp and G-sharp (Fig. 2.9).

![Figure 2.9. Ktaadn Lydian Pitch Content.](image)

The use of such limited modal pitch collections in a modular notational format points to a tension for Adams with complete indeterminacy in performance. The rhythms and pitches are fixed, and a tempo for the work is prescribed, as is a requirement for accompanimental periodic sounds or drones. Due to the wide-ranging number of syllables in a given word, diverse rhythmic and

---

51 The modality of *Ktaadn* offers one clear example of Adams refashioning an element from his experimental practices to fit within his newly adopted minimalist language. *China Gates* and *Phrygian Gates* are the most obvious results of this development, with their explicitly modal conception. The conspicuous repetition found in *Ktaadn* is similarly a latent minimalist feature that Adams would explore to great effect in the late 1970s and early 1980s.
52 The tempo Adams set for *Ktaadn* is \( \text{♩}=104–32 \).
melodic combinations arise. Sometimes a word with many syllables will be repeated only once or twice, as we observe with the word “Abacotnetic” (Fig. 2.10).

![Melodic combination for Abacotnetic](image)

**Figure 2.10. Ktaadn, “Abacotnetic” Singer Module.**
Transcription of *Ktaadn* manuscript in the John Adams Papers, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives, San Francisco, CA.

The corresponding speaker module is also short and consists of only a single statement of the word (Fig. 2.11).

![Melodic combination for Abacotnetic](image)

**Figure 2.11. Ktaadn, “Abacotnetic” Speaker Module.**
Transcription of *Ktaadn* manuscript in the John Adams Papers, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives, San Francisco, CA.

A different configuration is exemplified by the word “Allagash” (Fig. 2.12).

![Melodic combination for Allagash](image)

**Figure 2.12. Ktaadn, “Allagash” Singer Module.**
Transcription of *Ktaadn* manuscript in the John Adams Papers, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives, San Francisco, CA.

Here, the constituent syllables are broken up, gradually accumulating across the module towards complete enunciations of the word at the end, a feature not found within the corresponding speaker module that is far shorter (Fig. 2.13).
Figure 2.13. *Ktaadn*, “Allagash” Speaker Module.
Transcription of *Ktaadn* manuscript in the John Adams Papers, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives, San Francisco, CA.

Using this framework to examine every Abenaki word found in *Ktaadn* yields three categories: either simple or complex treatments of the words and a third, intermediary class (Table 2.2).

“Simple” here designates a module tending to be shorter and with little, if any, syllabic distortion. “Complex” modules feature far greater length, fragmentation, and intricate designs that can become quite elaborate. This distinction between simple and complex only matters for the singers, as all speaker modules consist of a single enunciation of an Abenaki word.

Table 2.2. Diagram of Abenaki Words in *Ktaadn*. 

![Diagram of Abenaki Words in Ktaadn](image-url)
There is strong evidence that Cage’s and Thoreau’s interests in environmentalism influenced Adams while writing *Ktaadn*. The unpublished manuscript of *Ktaadn* includes a short epigraph on the score’s first page:

I will never forget the thrill I received the day I met the officials of the Great Northern Paper Company and received from them the deed to the mountain I had purchased. It had taken me twenty-eight years to obtain the first 6,000 acres on the mountain, but it was worth it.\(^5\)

These are Percival Proctor Baxter’s words, printed in the *Bangor Daily News* on May 3, 1938. After his tenure as the Governor of Maine from 1921 to 1925, Baxter dedicated the next three decades of his life to protecting Mount Katahdin and the surrounding wilderness, using a great deal of personal wealth to acquire over 200,000 acres that he subsequently deeded to the state. That land became Baxter State Park, established in 1933 and was dedicated to the cause of conservation, eschewing roads, electricity, or other modern amenities, in keeping with Baxter’s desire to maintain the land in a state that was “forever wild.”\(^5\) This epigraph reflects Adams’s awareness of the history surrounding Mount Katahdin and Baxter State Park. The composer felt a personal connection to this locale that transcended an abstract desire to compose a work that simply appropriated Abenaki words within the mountain’s vicinity, suggesting that environmentalism and conservation were an underlying stimulus for the work. Cage’s contemporaneous environmentalism drawn from Thoreau, as well as the broader pushes for progress in environmental legislation and conservation efforts in the 1970s, all had a likely influence on the writing of *Ktaadn*.

At the work’s premiere, *Ktaadn* pushed audiences to the brink with boredom, leading to Adams’s disenchantment with the work. While pairing consonance and modality with

---


indeterminacy in a manner similar to Riley and other minimalists may have provided a more listener-friendly sonic result, other problems became apparent. Due to the indeterminate performance time, for example, Adams recalled: “The result was a congenial but resolutely uneventful chaos of communal mumbling. I was hard put not to acknowledge the tedium that set in at about the fifth minute—once the audience realized that things were unlikely to change.”55 Indeed, just such a complaint arose in George Kauffman’s review in the Berkeley Barb of the Ktaadn premiere in May 1974: “While it was a bit too long, the ending was magnificent.”56 Although Ktaadn was less confused, clumsy, and derivative in terms of its compositional integrity than works such as Heavy Metal or Hockey Seen, Adams still ran into problems in the realization and execution of his indeterminate piece. Despite a move towards greater originality as a young artist, the sonic result still turned out to be less than satisfying.

“Christian Zeal and Activity” from American Standard (1972–73)

Some readers may be familiar with “Christian Zeal and Activity” as a standalone and relatively conventional work for chamber orchestra and tape that Adams includes in his current list of compositions available for performance. The original form of “Christian Zeal and Activity,” as conceived in 1973, however, was a single movement within a larger work entitled American Standard that involved experiments with notation and the aesthetic possibilities of incorporating political messages into music. Each movement of American Standard explores a single compositional parameter while borrowing from topics and styles from well-known American vernacular musical traditions of past eras. As Adams explained in 1973, the first movement, entitled “John Philip Sousa,” explores rhythmic construction, drawing upon traditional march gestures. The third movement, “Sentimentals,” explores the relationship

between melody and harmony by reworking Duke Ellington’s *Sophisticated Lady*. Adams dedicates the second movement, “Christian Zeal and Activity,” to the compositional parameter of voice leading. In this movement, he takes Arthur Sullivan’s hymn “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and displaces or staggers the anticipated voice leading, overlaying the music with a radio broadcast concerning religious fundamentalism.\(^{57}\)

Throughout *American Standard*, one can detect the influence of Cornelius Cardew, Christian Wolff, and other politically engaged composers of the 1970s. The 1970s also saw Charles Ives achieve greater coverage and status as a canonical composer for his exemplification of American individualism and self-expression. It is doubtless the young Adams would have been aware of Ives and the model his experimentation with polystylistic layerings of American vernacular material could provide.\(^{58}\) While Adams was a strong partisan for Cage’s ideals at this time, he also voiced an interest in Cardew’s work with the experimental Scratch Orchestra in England. Adams guided the rehearsals of the San Francisco Conservatory New Music Ensemble in the egalitarian spirit of Cardew, and he wore his politics on his sleeve:

> The first thing I’m doing is trying to lower my profile as “director,” “conductor”, “changer de faire” and so on and so forth. I’m beginning to find conducting a sort of swinish occupation and I try to do as little of it as possible. What I do is I play. I just consider myself one of the group and we try to operate in the chamber music tradition. [...] The second thing I’m trying to do is to relegate a lot of the decision making process, which you come across in any new piece of music, to a kind of democratic council.\(^{59}\)

Adams’s egalitarianism extended to the instructions he attached to his scores of the era. The LP liner notes that accompanied the recording of *American Standard*, released under Brian Eno’s Obscure Records label in 1975, specifically resemble those for Wolff’s *Burdocks* (1970–71). Wolff indicates that an ensemble performing *Burdocks* should “gather and decide” or select “one

\(^{57}\) Adams interviewed by Charles Amirkhanian, April 18, 1973.

\(^{58}\) For more information on the historiography of Ives criticism and reception from the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, see David Paul, *Charles Ives in the Mirror: American Histories of an Iconic Composer* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 72–110.

\(^{59}\) Adams interviewed by Charles Amirkhanian, April 18, 1973.
or more representatives to decide” which sections of the composition to play and in what order. Adams echoed this directive in *American Standard*, stating that any ensemble problems are “to be worked out in standard American fashion: proposal, debate and vote.” Adams may have also been drawn to Wolff’s ongoing interest with deconstructing and rearranging vernacular music, particularly worker songs and political tunes, in the 1970s. In *Wobbly Music* (1975–76), for example, Wolff sought to connect the musical and political, drawing on three workers songs to craft a work extolling a collective social consciousness. Earlier pieces such as *Accompaniments* (1972) and *Changing the System* (1973–74) too fall into this political period of composition for Wolff, as he sought to represent a “kind of revolutionary noise.” There is little evidence of Adams inscribing in *American Standard* a similarly explicit and partisan political subtext. He does, however, focus on collective performance, indeterminacy, and borrowing extensive passages from vernacular musical traditions and subjecting them to rearrangement.

In a manner similar to *Ktaadn*, “Christian Zeal and Activity,” the second movement of *American Standard*, relies on a modular scoring format to control the musical continuity. The instructions specify that the ensemble should divide itself into four groups based on instrumental range, with each group containing at least one instrument with long sustaining capacities. Within each of these four groups, a designated leader provides cues to determine when the musicians move from one pitch to another. The score for “Christian Zeal and Activity” is consists of four notated staves without barlines or time signatures that are grouped into five large modules that

---


61 John Adams, liner notes to *Ensemble Pieces*, San Francisco Conservatory New Music Ensemble, Obscure Records 2, LP, 1975. Most intriguing about *American Standard* is that Adams includes what he deems optional “extra materials,” such as film, tape, video, speech, mime, or dance. In this particular LP, the first movement utilizes a snare drum roll, the second incorporates a radio talk show, and the third employs a trap set. Writing in 1992, Fritz Hennenberg described this work as involving a kind of “musical documentary style,” cultivated by the inclusion of these extra sound elements. For more information, see Hennenberg, “Zurück und in die Zukunft: Anmerkungen zu John Adams,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 153, no. 3 (1992): 24


take up two pages (almost like systems in conventional notation). Within a given module, Adams sometimes uses long stems to connect notes meant to sound simultaneously amongst the groups (Fig. 2.14). The effect is an indistinct or hazy alignment between the individual musical parts, with occasional points of unity. The visual quality of the notational scheme Adams uses, in which indeterminacy is mixed with fixed points of coordination, suggests correspondences to Morton Feldman’s similar experiments in the 1960s with solid vertical lines indicating sounds meant to occur at the same time.64

![Figure 2.14. Christian Zeal and Activity, Excerpt from Module 1.](image)

The resulting sonic effect of “Christian Zeal and Activity” is similar to these kinds of Feldman scores, with the amoeba-like quality of Adams’s musical continuity pushed and pulled by the dialogue between unity and indeterminacy. The overall form of “Christian Zeal and Activity” takes on a vaguely arch-like quality, with the greatest amount of indeterminacy occurring in the fourth module (Fig. 2.15).

![Figure 2.15. Christian Zeal and Activity, Module 4.](image)

The fourth module contains only a single long stem, leaving the bass instruments in the lowest module to oscillate freely while the other pitches float above.

---

Perhaps the greatest influence on “Christian Zeal and Activity” was Gavin Bryars, the British minimalist who composed *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet* in 1971 for tape and ensemble. As early as March 1974, Adams’s close contact with Bryars resulted in the San Francisco Conservatory New Music Ensemble performing an entire concert of English experimental music, including an original commission from Cardew. Adams invited Bryars to conduct this concert and included *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet* on the program. Bryars’s work is clouded in moral ambiguity, in Cecilia Sun’s examination. On the one hand,

Bryars’ accompaniment for the old man’s tune—complete with gloriously clichéd suspensions and a consequent phrase that opens with a hackneyed descending-fifth sequence of altered dominants—is surely a perfect example of sentimentality.

On the other hand, Bryars subjects this sentimentality of the source material to tape looping that can come across as cold, mechanical, or clinical. “Christian Zeal and Activity” uses a scheme similar to *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, pairing an accessible and unobtrusive instrumental texture with a “found sound” element (the pre-recorded tape part) based on religious subject matter. The crucial difference between these two works is that Adams takes an explicitly ironic approach when handling his found sound material by pairing it with another person’s music. Rather than composing original music and using the found sound material in a manner that could be read as sincere, Adams pairs his deconstruction of Sullivan’s hymn “Onward, Christian Soldiers” with a radio debate between an atheist and Christian fundamentalist. The debate between the radio host and his caller gradually grows more and more heated until the host ends the discussion exasperated and demanding to not have any more calls on religion (Appendix B). Where one could intuit pathos, sentiment, or homage in *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, it

---


66 To hear Amirkanian’s complete review of this concert on KPFA, see http://radiom.org/detail.php?et=interviewMusic&omid=AM.1974.03.22.c1.


68 Ibid., 111–12.
would be difficult to perceive such sensibilities in “Christian Zeal and Activity.” Adams favored an ironic and irreverent spin on Bryars’s original idea.

**Composing in the Twilight**

Stephen Dedalus reappears in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, his oft-quoted desire to escape from the “nightmare” of history suggesting the kinds of issues young composers like Adams faced in the postwar musical climate. The sheer number of compositional approaches one could adopt arose at a dizzying pace in the 1960s and 1970s and sometimes in conflict with one another. Cage, welcoming such diversity, would opine that artists found themselves without a mainstream; instead there was a plurality of streams or even a delta or ocean in which all were adrift.\(^\text{69}\) At the same time, a growing preoccupation in the 1960s and 1970s with the weight of the Western art music tradition engendered a profound anxiety that was difficult to ease. These cultural contexts explain why we find the young Adams of the 1970s willing to embrace a seemingly disparate array of often conflicting aesthetic and compositional choices in a short period of time. They explain how he could so quickly switch from mimicking Cage and Stockhausen in *Heavy Metal*, to writing a strange and clumsy composite work like *Hockey Seen* that fuses popular music conventions, minimalist topics, and musique concrète. The overwhelming number of influences in Adams’s mind as a young artist in the 1970s also explains why he would recycle Cagean influences with a work like *Ktaadn* and then abruptly shift to deconstructing vernacular music and using alternative notational schemes to experiment with indeterminacy in “Christian Zeal and Activity.”

Minimalism is a recurring fixture within this diverse catalogue of juvenilia. After “Christian Zeal and Activity,” the story of Adams’s attraction to minimalism continued with

\(^{69}\) For more information, see Mark Hutchinson, “Introduction: Beyond the Delta?,” in *Coherence in New Music: Experience, Aesthetics, Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–22.
works such as *Grounding* (1975), a fifty-minute piece for live electronics involving an elaborate part for the composer’s homemade synthesizer. Adams described this work as a “loosely structured process piece” that set passages from G. Spencer Brown’s *Laws of Form* and Saraha’s *Treasury of Songs*.\(^{70}\) Aside from the allusion to minimalist “process music” guiding the aesthetic of *Grounding* is the composer’s prominent role as a synthesizer player, suggesting parallels with the ongoing, do-it-yourself, electronic music aesthetic most conspicuously exemplified by Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and others.\(^{71}\) A final piece of juvenilia worth mentioning is *Onyx* (1976), a thirteen-minute electronic work that also reflects Adams’s early awareness of minimalism. Described by Adams as a four-channel “tape study,” *Onyx* consists of shifting consonant triads performed on the composer’s synthesizer alongside a perpetual accompaniment of buzzing cicadas.\(^{72}\) This obscure piece’s unobtrusive quality arises from a lack of stark dynamic contrasts and from Adams’s organizational approach. He structures the music according to large sections based on simple oscillating harmonic sequences amongst a compact gamut of pitch materials, eliding them with common tone relations to obscure sectional breaks. The musical texture comes across as improvisatory, suggesting correspondences with contemporaneous electronic keyboard works disseminated by Riley and others during the 1970s.

These pieces of juvenilia demonstrate there was never a neat-and-tidy break at which point Adams simply converted to the style with which he is now often associated. Yet in constructing his own narrative of compositional development, he frequently marked 1977 as the watershed year in which he composed his “official opus one,” describing *China Gates* and

\(^{70}\) Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 72. Information is also found in Adams interviewed by Vincent Plush, 50.
\(^{71}\) Adams interviewed by Vincent Plush, 50. Reich’s built his Phase Shifting Pulse Gate between February 1968 and the first months of 1969 with help from engineers at the Bell Laboratories. The instrument has been described in meticulous technical detail by Reich and was unveiled in May 1969 with a performance of *Pulse Music*, written specifically for the new instrument. For Reich’s description of the background surrounding the building of this instrument, see *Writings on Music*, 38–41. See also K. Robert Schwarz, “Steve Reich: Music as a Gradual Process Part II,” *Perspectives of New Music* 20, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1981–Summer 1982): 227–29.
Phrygian Gates as the “most strictly organized, rigorously ordered works I ever composed. They also demonstrated the fruits of my initiation to Minimalism.”73 When did this initiation to minimalism actually begin? As the composer’s juvenilia prior to 1977 indicates, a great deal of struggle took place with myriad avant-garde influences, and minimalism had been one of them at least five years before he produced a self-described “mature” composition. Although minimalism won out as Adams’s preferred compositional approach, it only came about through several years of intensive experimentation.

---

CHAPTER 3
FROM POLARIZED CAPACITORS TO CELESTIAL GEAR SHIFTS: A HISTORY OF
JOHN ADAMS’S GATING PROCEDURE

Jorge Luis Borges offered a unique perspective on artists’ relationship to the past:

In the critic’s vocabulary, the word “precursor” is indispensable, but it should be
cleansed of all connotations of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that every writer
creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it
will modify the future.¹

A crucial insight in the above quote is that artists, responding to their precursors, do so through a
process of creation; they construct a distinctive view of their precursors through whom they can
craft their own identities. Before Adams established a sense of creative stability with China
Gates and Phrygian Gates in 1977—a pair of works he considers his true opus one—he had
spent a great deal of time mimicking and exploring the styles of other composers.² By 1977, he
had selected minimalism as his preferred stylistic domain and was joining a club filled with
elders with whom he would have to contend as a second-generation member. What would his
identity be within this group? Would Adams emulate an experimentalist such as La Monte
Young and focus on highly conceptual approaches to music making? Perhaps Adams could
adopt the affable hippie flavor of West Coast minimalist improvisation exemplified by Terry
Riley? There was also the commercial model of Philip Glass, who was using his brand of
minimalism to cultivate crossover appeal with popular music audiences. Last, there was Steve
Reich, the most “classical” minimalist, who wrote conventionally notated works for ensembles
and employed great precision in his contrapuntal and harmonic structures, creating tightly
organized musical works that could also appeal to audiences.³

² John Adams, Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux,
2008), 88.
This chapter argues that Adams was drawn to Reich, potentially seeing him as a figure worthy of emulation and a precursor who could help guide his compositional development as a second-generation minimalist. In this situation, just as Borges described, a version of Reich manifested that had the possibility of assisting Adams in channeling his prior fascination with electronics into a new technique for composing music for acoustic instruments, which he first employed in 1977 with *China Gates* and *Phrygian Gates*. He termed the technique “gating,” and it held great importance to his emerging career, offering a way to distinguish himself from his then-famous minimalist predecessors Riley, Reich, and Glass. In Adams’s case, the rigid structure underlying an electronic gate served as a metaphor for a new method of composition in which he would infuse the cold, hard-edged logic with an intuitive expressive dimension. As we will see, Adams adapted the technique to suit music for large ensembles in a manner similar to Reich’s adaptation of his phasing technique in the years prior. Both procedures allowed their respective composers to move beyond the confines of electronic mediums and cultivate broader popular appeal.

This chapter provides a historical and analytical account of gating’s genesis and early development, explaining the procedure itself and its origin in Adams’s electronic practices, its initial use in *China Gates* and *Phrygian Gates*, and its expansion for use in large ensembles. The chapter traces this development chronologically, examining Adams’s innovations with his first three large-ensemble works: *Shaker Loops* (1978), *Common Tones in Simple Time* (1979–80), and *Harmonium* (1980–81). In this stylistic development of gating between 1978 and 1981, we will find each successive manifestation of the gating technique generating its own idiomatic but meaningful musical grammar that is internally consistent within each composition.
The Gating Procedure

Gating allows for movement between keys, modes, or other pitch collections without common-practice tonal conventions. As Adams explained in 2005, the technique originated in his prior work with non-tonal, electronic music:

A “gate” is a module, an electronic circuit that is either in one of two states, positive or negative, and on command it flips instantaneously to its opposite state. As I often did in those days, I would take something from wave theory or from electronic technology and make a musical “analogy.”

The analogy Adams developed between gating and a module or electronic circuit is not merely a vague metaphorical conceit. His background in music composition prior to 1977 suggests that he possessed more than a superficial awareness of the theories and techniques guiding electronic music synthesis.

A score from Adams’s juvenilia that demonstrates his technical proficiency in electronic music synthesis is *Schedules of Discharging Capacitors* (1975–76). In this work, Adams applied bandpass filters to oscillators, which meant that only frequencies within a prescribed range could be heard—they are allowed to “pass” through the filter. A score based on clock time prescribes these operations, providing a literal “schedule” of events (Fig. 3.1). Adams reproduced an excerpt of the score in his memoir *Hallelujah Junction*, and it may be the earliest extant score exemplifying his description of gating.

---


5 The only known performance of *Schedules of Discharging Capacitors* occurred on January 17, 1976 at the Western Front, a performing arts center in Vancouver, Canada. For more information, see Keith Wallace, *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993). See also Joan Murray, *Canadian Art in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1999), 174.

6 There is a strong possibility that Ingram Marshall’s contemporaneous *Non Confundar*, in which the amplitude of the wind instruments triggered the filters and tape delay, altering their timbre, influenced Adams’s *Schedules of Discharging Capacitors*. The specific reference to both this piece and the influence shared between Marshall and Adams in the 1970s can be found in Edward Strickland, “Ingram Marshall,” in *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 202.
Figure 3.1. Score Fragment from Schedules of Discharging Capacitors.


The score indicates that the performer must make precise changes to the ability of the capacitors to store and discharge an electrical charge (the capacitance value); the most elaborate changes appear in oscillator 2 between 3:00" and 5:00". Adams’s use of the standard symbol for electrolytic polarized capacitors in the oscillator parts of the score indicates that he adjusted the capacitance values to precisely alter the oscillation rate and change the frequencies audiences would hear. The bandpass filters would allow Adams to select specific frequencies from the composite signals resulting from the six oscillators. Sudden “flips” into new and opposing sonic “states” would result from “commands” that altered capacitance levels.

---

7 For an introduction to the circuits most likely used by Adams for Schedules of Discharging Capacitors, see Paul Horowitz and Winfield Hill, “Oscillators and Timers,” in The Art of Electronics, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 425–31. This piece shares similarities to the second example Reich gives in his essay “Music as a Gradual Process” of how listening to or performing a piece of process music resembles “turning over an hour glass and watching the sand slowly run through to the bottom.” See Steve Reich, Writings on Music: 1965–2000, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 35–36. While Adams uses bandpass filters to emphasize particular frequencies in an imperfect way as he makes adjustments, the instantaneous alteration of electrical capacitance according to arbitrary Farad indications in the “schedule” constituting Schedules of Discharging Capacitors allows for complete and impersonal control. As a performer, Adams relegates himself to the
The layout of Adams’s score for *Schedules of Discharging Capacitors* may have shaped his thinking as he transferred the concept of gating from an electronic context to an acoustic one in his first instrumental work, *China Gates*. Indeed, in a 2005 interview, he spoke of an “image” of gating as an abrupt musical change:

The musical image of “gating” was very simple: a sudden change of state, for instance, a change of tonality or a change of texture or a change of speed or rhythm or whatever. What made it different from, let’s say, a Beethoven modulation was its completely unprepared and nonlinear nature. The sudden, unprepared change would produce an expressive shock to the listener.⁸

In *China Gates*, an austere diagram published alongside the score indicates the work’s sudden and unprepared changes in mode, bearing a vague visual resemblance to the schematic layout for the *Schedules of Discharging Capacitors* manuscript (Fig. 3.2). In both *China Gates* and *Phrygian Gates*, Adams notates these changes in mode with double bar lines and the relevant key signature change, making it visually similar to conventional modulation indications. Like a schedule for the performer, the graph illustrates the proportional shifts resulting from the piece’s titular “gates.” In fact, multiple authors have shown how the graph reflects the palindromic and symmetrical formal design of the four modal areas in *China Gates*.⁹

![Figure 3.2. China Gates Graphic. Source: John Adams, *China Gates* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1983).](image)

---


Adams softens the inherent abruptness of the gating procedure in *China Gates* by juxtaposing closely related modes. In the first section, the alternation between A-flat Mixolydian and G-sharp Aeolian sounds like a pivot between parallel major and minor keys. The play on enharmonically spelled common tones between the two modes is especially pronounced in Figure 3.3, where the change in mode is articulated only by the descent of the pitch C to B-natural in the right hand between m. 15 and m. 16 and the E-natural appearance in the left hand at m. 19.

![Figure 3.3](image-url)

**Figure 3.3.** *China Gates*, mm. 13–19. Gate shift from A-flat Mixolydian to G-sharp Aeolian. Source: John Adams, *China Gates* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1983).

Yet the gate shift is announced in the bass register, as the two modes’ shared tonic—now spelled as G-sharp—sounds on the downbeat of m. 16. Throughout the final section of the piece, which pairs the more contrasting combination of F Lydian and F Locrian, hushed, gong-like articulations in the bass register indicate each the gate shift.

Unlike *China Gates*, *Phrygian Gates* moves through a gating sequence outlining the circle of fifths in the form of what Adams termed a “modulating square wave with one state in the Lydian mode and the other in the Phrygian mode.”¹⁰ This formal design facilitates opportunities for gate shifts with great contrast, as Adams pivots among contrasting modes with

---

“tonics” a fifth apart, and it allows for latitude in the overall sonic quality of a given modal section. For example, the gate shift from B Phrygian to G-flat Lydian (Fig. 3.4) arouses surprise due to multiple musical factors altered simultaneously. The block chords up to m. 401 give way to a sparse figuration in m. 402, which centers on four pitches foreign to the preceding mode. Meanwhile, a sudden registral change also occurs, as the wide range of the block chords in the B Phrygian zone give way to a restricted registral space in the G-flat Lydian zone.


These gate shifts in *Phrygian Gates* delineate sections of music exhibiting such diverse textures, timbres, and registers that the work resembles a sequence of brief character studies. Unlike the shorter *China Gates*, which calls attention to “details of dark, light, and the shadows that exist between,” *Phrygian Gates* juxtaposes the Phrygian and Lydian modes in a large-scale dialogue.

The brief period from *Schedules of Discharging Capacitors* to *Phrygian Gates* shows that, by the time Adams used the gating procedure on acoustic instruments, he was already interested in expanding its application. After finding this wellspring of expressive potential for

---

11 Kyle Fyr acknowledges one could argue for *China Gates* as a proving ground for developing some of the formal strategies used in *Phrygian Gates* in “Proportion, Temporality, and Performance Issues in Piano Works of John Adams,” 152. Alternatively, one could argue *Phrygian Gates* was an experiment to see what extremes Adams could take the small-scale formal strategy of *China Gates*. The former seems the most likely. Besides the expanded
gating, Adams next sought to expand the procedure to encompass music for a large ensemble. The problem was how to accomplish this end. To understand how gating developed after 1977, we might look first to the career of Reich, who served as an important role model for Adams.

Reich as Model for Adams

Adams was drawn to Reich’s music at least as early as 1974, the year he recalls having heard a performance of Drumming by Reich’s ensemble in the Bay Area.\(^{12}\) He also claims to have organized a performance of Reich’s Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ in the 1970s by the San Francisco Conservatory New Music Ensemble; it was likely among the first performances of Reich’s music by an ensemble other than his own.\(^{13}\) Interviews from the 1980s also illustrate the importance of Reich’s work in Adams’s development. Speaking with Charles Amirkhanian in 1981, Adams acknowledged that the music he composed before 1977 was “definitely more indebted to the style and the compositional rigor of the minimalist movement, particularly Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley” than was his later body of work.\(^{14}\) By 1983, he no longer referenced Glass and Riley. In that year, Adams raved about Music for Eighteen Musicians, however, describing it as his favorite piece by Reich: “Nothing that I have heard of any other minimalists lately has done anything for me at all,” he added.\(^{15}\)

---

\(^{12}\) Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 89. While Adams’s claim is difficult to corroborate conclusively, an article in the Berkeley Barb for August 9–15, 1974 indicates Reich performed in the Bay Area during the year Adams cites. It is likely that Adams would have heard an earlier live performance of Reich’s music when he came in November 1973. Joanna Brouk interviewed Reich in November 1973 for the KPFA program Ode to Gravity, with the broadcast date on December 12, 1973.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 89. This claim is also difficult to corroborate, although confirmed performances by the San Francisco Conservatory New Music Ensemble during the 1970s indicate that Adams programmed Reich and other minimalist composers. The one verifiable performance of Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ involving Adams that I have been able to locate occurred on April 15, 1977.

\(^{14}\) John Adams interviewed by Charles Amirkhanian, October 30, 1981, Ode to Gravity.

\(^{15}\) Adams interviewed by Vincent Plush, 70.
Adams admired Reich’s success with audiences as much as he admired Reich’s music on its own terms. As Tom Johnson’s reviews during the 1970s attest, Reich had a growing impact on contemporary classical music throughout the decade. Noting the standing ovation at the *Drumming* performance on December 3, 1971 in New York, Johnson wondered whether it was because “the simple white-note scales were refreshing to ears grown weary of dissonance... or perhaps it was because the music had spoken directly to the senses.”16 By June 1975, a growing sumptuousness in Reich’s work signaled to Johnson that a stylistic shift was underway. Describing the performance of segments from what would become *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, Johnson noted, “Over everything is a pall of lushness, which seems closer to Ravel or Mahler than to *Come Out* or *Music for Pieces of Wood.*”17 In a May 1976 review following the premiere of *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, Johnson also referred to Reich’s commercial success and audience popularity. Deutsche Grammophon had recorded much of his recent work into a “sleek, well-marketed product,” and, in Johnson’s estimation, Reich had emerged as “the main representative of the new wave of classical American music.”18 Adams noticed these East Coast trends, and he weighed Reich’s work against his own. In 2008 he recalled, “In contrast to the anarchic ‘happenings’ I’d been creating with my students and friends, Reich’s music used precision and balanced counterpoint to create a sound world that was expertly controlled, musically engaging, and sensually appealing.”19 Similar descriptions of control and accessibility in Reich’s music appear throughout Johnson’s reviews for *The Village Voice* in the 1970s.

The ECM release of *Music for Eighteen Musicians* in 1976 was a milestone in Reich’s career. Robert Hurwitz, who first worked at ECM before moving to Nonesuch Records in 1984,

described the enthusiasm that greeted the album as a “genuine breakthrough for new music, and it proved to many of us contemporary music could appeal to more than just a small, specialized audience.” 20 Tim Rutherford-Johnson describes the ECM release of Music for Eighteen Musicians as discovering, quite by accident, a diverse audience:

...one that was educated, curious, young(er), and spiritually and/or socially conscious. [...] This new audience... was attracted to influences from pop and rock, world music, and exotica, as well as minimalism and noise: the vestiges of the avant-garde, but in a digestible format.21

Robert Fink has likewise written of the crossover appeal of Music for Eighteen Musicians, which led critics of the 1970s to conceive of minimalism as “classical music with a beat.”22 From a vantage point two decades later, Adams wrote: “He [Reich] didn't reinvent the wheel so much as he showed us a new way to ride.”23 Adams’s own development in the late 1970s suggests that there was more to this statement than praise of technical ingenuity and innovation: Reich had offered Adams a path forward in his own career.

Adams’s efforts to apply his gating technique to large ensembles of acoustic instruments between 1978 and 1981 parallel Reich’s earlier application of his own signature technique, phasing, into new contexts after its initial use in tape works.24 Just as Reich first used phasing in a work scored for a large, homogenous ensemble with Drumming in 1971, so did Adams apply his gating procedure in a homogenous string septet with Shaker Loops in 1978. Just as Reich

24 Writing in 1996, Reich described his impetus behind developing instrumental techniques out of electronic musical procedures during the 1960s and 1970s: “If the ideas I discovered with tape loops could not be transferred in some way to musical instruments, then those ideas would be nothing more than a gimmick.” This perspective mirrors the approach Adams took when translating his gating procedure from electronics to acoustic instruments. For more information, see Reich, “My Life With Technology,” Contemporary Music Review 13, no. 2 (1996): 17.
built new rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic augmentation processes out of phasing with *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ* in 1973, so did Adams refine and develop the gating procedure with *Common Tones in Simple Time* in 1979–80.\(^{25}\) Last, just as Reich synthesized his past achievements with phasing when composing *Music for Eighteen Musicians* in 1976, so did Adams synthesize all of gating’s potential applications in the choral symphony *Harmonium*, composed between 1980–81. In the process, Adams sought to expand his music’s appeal to concert audiences, mirroring Reich’s own transition from the experimental fringe to the mainstream of contemporary classical music.

**The First Attempt: Shaker Loops**

In 1978, Adams conceived *Shaker Loops* in a modular scoring layout that suggests correspondences to *Schedules of Discharging Capacitors*, that work of juvenilia from which the earliest traces of the gating procedure derive. As a college student, Adams was exposed to the possibilities of modular scoring through his contact with Terry Riley’s *In C*, and he had written an entirely modular score with the choral work *Ktaadn* (1973–74). Adams described his approach to modular scoring in *Shaker Loops* as “more complicated” than Riley’s approach with *In C* due to the greater control granted to the conductor of a *Shaker Loops* performance.\(^{26}\) *Shaker Loops* grew out of an unsuccessful string quartet project entitled *Wavemaker*, which itself bore the influence of electronics. As Adams explained:

> I began with a weak idea of long sustained chords floating in space that neither evolved nor had any particular charm in themselves [...] I also misunderstood the


essentially contrapuntal nature of string-quartet writing. Rather than treating the
group as four individual, independent voices, I tried to make them behave like one
of my synthesizers.27

Indeed, after the Wavemaker premiere on August 26, 1978 at the Cabrillo College Theatre in
Santa Cruz, a reviewer described the piece as “inspired by electronic waveform patterns.”28

Although Adams chose to discard Wavemaker, he adapted some of its material into the last two
movements of Shaker Loops.29 More than half the score for Shaker Loops is modular, with
“Shaking and Trembling” (movement 1) comprising twenty-six modules, “Loops and Verses”
(movement 3) comprising eleven, and “A Final Shaking” (movement 4) comprising fifteen.30

Adams’s performance guidelines and organization of musical materials in the modular
score for Shaker Loops treats the homogenous ensemble of strings as if it were a living
synthesizer or gate-shifting device, a reflection of what composer Ingram Marshall once
described as Adams’s “electronic ear.”31 The score reads like a schematic or blueprint,
suggesting the triggering of loops and gates in the studio.32 The conductor—in the first
performances, this would always have been Adams—assumes much authority, having the
discretion to spontaneously signal the movement from one large module to the next, each

---

27 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 90.
29 Rebecca Jemian, “Rhythmic Organization in Works by Elliott Carter, George Crumb, and John Adams:
Rhythmic Frameworks, Timepoints, Periodicity, and Alignment,” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2001), 178.
30 Shaker Loops is a longer piece when performed from its modular score. Adams stipulates in the 1978
version that the work’s length should not exceed thirty minutes. Oddly, the December 1978 performance by the San
Francisco Conservatory New Music Ensemble with John Adams conducting lasts 33:50. The only commercially
released performance from the modular score, performed by the Ridge String Quartet, lasts 28:46. By contrast, the
average performance time of the revised version from 1982 is much shorter, averaging 25:22.
32 For a similar examination Steve Reich’s Violin Phase in terms of how the materiality of tape recording
technology was essential to the piece’s composition, performance, and reception, see Joseph Auner, “Reich on Tape:
The Performance of Violin Phase,” Twentieth Century Music 14, no. 1 (February 2017): 77–92. This argument is
briefly suggested by Potter in Four Musical Minimalists, 181 when referring to Reich’s “first, obvious transitional
solution to the application of phasing techniques ‘indigenous to machines’ to instrumental music” in the pieces Reed
Phase, Piano Phase, and Violin Phase. For a broader survey of minimalist whose experiments with technology
inspired and influenced their work for acoustic instruments, see Richard Glover, “Minimalism, Technology, and
Electronic Music” in The Ashgate Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music, ed. Keith Potter, Kyle Gann,
and Pwyll ap Siôn (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 161–80. See also David Schwarz, “Listening Subjects: Semiotics,
Psychoanalysis, and the Music of John Adams and Steve Reich,” Perspectives of New Music 31, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 46
indicated by a number in a square on the top left of each system. The conductor also has control over indicating when individual instruments should move to their specific submodules, indicated in the score by small numbers in circles over their parts.\(^33\) While performers sometimes have latitude in determining when they move to a given submodule, there are also tutti passages where they must move together, such as submodule 1 in Figure 3.5.

![Figure 3.5. Shaker Loops, I: Shaking and Trembling, module 14. Source: John Adams, Shaker Loops (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1983).](image)

Contrasting sharply with In C, Shaker Loops takes away much of the performers agency to move through the material at their leisure, placing that authority instead in the hands of the conductor. As a result, this modular score treats the individual modules as if they were loops triggered by the conductor’s spontaneous impulses.\(^34\) The changing timbral, registral, articulatory, textural,

---

\(^33\) This terminology is drawn from Adams performance notes that accompany the modular 1983 edition of the Shaker Loops score.

\(^34\) Adams explained in 1987 that the titular “Loops” in Shaker Loops refers to the piece’s construction through the use of small melodic fragments that are “repeated over and over again as if they were put onto a tape and loop and there are seven different tape loops—one for each instrument.” William Sethares and Godfried Toussaint describe early Reich works such as Clapping Music as exhibiting an “algorithmic” quality in “Expressive Timbre and Timing in Rhythmic Performance: Analysis of Steve Reich’s Clapping Music,” Journal of New Music Research 44, no. 1 (2015): 13. From this perspective, we can understand modular scoring as a notational algorithm in which an unambiguous sequence of modules specifies how the performers traverse through the music. The instructions and rigid rules dictated by modules create an algorithmic process that, when executed in performance, proceeds through a well-defined and deterministic system. This same algorithmic structure provided by modular notation relates well to Glass, with works such as Two Pages exhibiting similar features. For more information, see Wesley York, “Form and Process,” in Contiguous Lines: Issues and Ideas in the Music of the ’60’s and ’70’s, ed. Thomas DeLio (Lanham, MD: University Press of American, 1985), 81–106. See also Potter, Four Musical Minimalists, 288–92.
and dynamic qualities produced within these modules are analogous to the synthetic variables provided by filters, oscillators, and controllers on a synthesizer. An explicit inclusion of electronic music verbiage even finds its way into the performance instructions. As seen in Figure 3.6, Adams explains that violins 1, 2, and 3 are to “vary the amplitude envelope” according to the conductor’s cues.

![Figure 3.6. Shaker Loops, III: Loops and Verses, module 3 (Excerpt). Source: John Adams, Shaker Loops (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1983).](image)

This technical jargon makes more sense when we remember Adams’s early work in electronics: amplitude envelopes are crucial in electronic music synthesis, and Adams would have been aware of them. He alludes to more than dynamics, however, emphasizing also how variability of attack, sustain, decay, and release influence the perception of a sound’s timbre. Even the modules’ notational structure resembles technical diagrams or blueprints of sequential “inputs.” No module in *Shaker Loops* contains more than five submodules, creating a deeply compartmentalized score built on a systematic design in which no more than five new inputs can occur. This restriction creates a definitive endpoint for a given module and establishes each as a discrete unit with an internal “schedule” of inputs based on the number of submodules. Art critic Lawrence Alloway’s reference to modules as a means of organization that provides a “visible

---

35 Adams claims to have been fascinated by envelopes while a student. See *Hallelujah Junction*, 198.
skin” and offers a “factual display” of a work of visual art applies likewise to the notational scheme designed for the original modular score for *Shaker Loops*.³⁶

Beyond the score’s notational design, two salient examples from the first three movements will demonstrate how Adams explored gating’s possibilities for a large ensemble technically. In the first movement, “Shaking and Trembling,” eight gate shifts occur, each appearing at the end of a module and leading into the next (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Gate Shifts in *Shaker Loops, I: Shaking and Trembling*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gate</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1# → 1 b</th>
<th></th>
<th>Gate</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>0 → 2 b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gate 2</td>
<td>1 b</td>
<td>5 b</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gate 6</td>
<td>2 b</td>
<td>1 #</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gate 3</td>
<td>5 b</td>
<td>2 b</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gate 7</td>
<td>1 #</td>
<td>3 #</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gate 4</td>
<td>2 b</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gate 8</td>
<td>3 #</td>
<td>5 b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These gate shifts exhibit differing degrees of contrast. For example, the first gate, occurring in the move from module 6 to 7, is relatively subtle, owing to the plentiful common tones on both sides of the shift (Fig. 3.7). Only the semitone descent from B-natural to B-flat and from F-sharp to F-natural signals that a change in harmony has occurred.

![Gate Shift Diagram](image)

Figure 3.7. Harmonic Change in Gate Shift 1 from *Shaker Loops, I: Shaking and Trembling*.

Also subtle is the lack of any abrupt timbral, textural, registral, articulatory, or dynamic changes. The fourth gate shift in the first movement, occurring at the move from module 18 to 19, best demonstrates how changes in such variables can affect the character of a gate (Fig. 3.8). As in the first gate shift, common tone relations soften the harmonic change here. Module 18 contains the pitches C, G, F, A, and B-flat, all of which but the last carry over into module 19. Only the semitone ascent from B-flat to B-natural in the third violin gives any semblance of harmonic  

change. The gate shift creates dramatic force, however, through the sudden, unprepared dynamic and articulatory changes.

Figure 3.8. *Shaker Loops, I: Shaking and Trembling*, modules 18–19.

Such gate shift types signal Adams’s growing ability to infuse his procedure with finer gradations and shading.

In the second movement, “Hymning Slews,” Adams used the gating technique within a conventionally notated framework rather than a modularly scored one.\(^{37}\) He also employed gating in this movement in a distinctive way by composing twelve understated gate shifts that contribute to the movement’s static and placid character (Table 3.2).

---

\(^{37}\) *Hymning Slews* was composed last, despite its placement as the second movements of *Shaker Loops*. See Jemian, “Rhythmic Organization in Works by Elliott Carter, George Crumb, and John Adams,” 178.
Table 3.2. Gate Shifts in *Shaker Loops, II: Hymning Slews*.

| Gate 1 | 4# → 3# | Gate 7 | 5# → 3 b |
| Gate 2 | 3# → 4# (D½) | Gate 8 | 3 b → 3# |
| Gate 3 | 4# → 5# | Gate 9 | 3# → 4# |
| Gate 4 | 5# → 3 b | Gate 10 | 4# → 3# |
| Gate 5 | 3 b → 2 b | Gate 11 | 3# → 2 b |
| Gate 6 | 2 b → 5# | Gate 12 | 2 b → 3# |

The lack of contrast arises from two techniques that reinforce one another. In the first, Adams focuses on common-tone relations between the two modal areas that will constitute a given gate shift. For example, the first gate in “Hymning Slews” (Fig. 3.9) is almost imperceptible, as the harmonics on D-sharp in the first cello and B-natural in the bass at m. 6 carry across the gate into m. 7. The surrounding texture enhances the effect by emphasizing the common tones A, C-sharp, E, G-sharp, and B. The effect is a seamless gate with the dramatic effect dampened. In the second technique, the gate shift is articulated by glissandi that slide to pitches of the new key immediately after the shift has occurred.

---

Figure 3.9. First Gate Shift in *Shaker Loops, II: Hymning Slews*, mm. 6–7.
Adams often has these glissandi move from or to pitches common to both sides of the gate shift. The striking timbral effect does not disturb the static continuity because the pitch material has been prepared before the gate shift occurred. The sixth and seventh gate shifts (Fig. 3.10) occur in close proximity to one another in mm. 29–31. The sixth gate shift, which takes place at m. 30, is articulated by a glissando in the first cello beginning on D-sharp, a pitch enharmonically shared by the previous modal area of two flats.

![Figure 3.10. Sixth and Seventh Gate Shift in Shaker Loops, II: Hymning Slews, mm. 29–31. Source: John Adams, Shaker Loops (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1983).](image)

The effect is anticipated by the emphasis on D-sharp by the second cello and viola, which hold E-flat/D-sharp across the gate shift into m. 30. When moving into the next gate shift at m. 31, the glissando gesture in the first cello moves by semitone from a harmonic on F-sharp into G-natural across the gate while the second cello continues its tremolo on D-sharp into its enharmonic equivalent E-flat on the other side of the gate shift in m. 31. This is an avoidance of the usual character of the procedure that exudes dramatic shock through unprepared shifts to different modal areas, as seen in Phrygian Gates. “Hymning Slews” suggests far greater correspondences to the subtlety found within China Gates.
The third movement, “Loops and Verses,” remains conventionally notated for seventy-seven measures before moving into modular scoring for the remainder of the movement. In the modular portion of the movement, the gate shifts result from a sequence of tempo changes in which Adams—having himself in mind as the conductor of these earliest performances—sought to exercise his personal control and flexibility to shape the dramatic trajectory. After a long span of proportional tempo modulation from modules 4 through 6, the piece arrives in cut time. Shown in Figure 3.11, the ensemble-wide tutti on a trochaic rhythmic motif in module 7 gathers energy as the tempo drastically increases.

Upon reaching the tempo climax at the end of module 7, the gate shift into module 8 engenders a sudden drop in tempo (Fig. 3.12). The dynamic level remains the same, creating a sense of temporal distortion as a new accelerando begins.

---

38 This desire is confirmed in Adams, interviewed by Amirkhanian, October 30, 1981.
The same process occurs again in module 8 with another abrupt tempo decrease in the gate shift to module 9 (Fig. 3.13), emphasizing a sense of physical resistance arising from the procedure. Once again, no discernable dynamic change arises from the gate shift, with Adams instead using the gradual accelerando across module 9 to warp the perception of meter and pulse.

The trochaic rhythmic motif heard in modules 7–9 continues into the gate shift from module 9 to 10, but the texture becomes transparent and thin (Fig. 3.14). Here, Adams creates a gate without harmonic alterations, relying instead on only a dramatic shift in tessitura.
Shaker Loops illustrates Adams’s developing ability to craft structurally important moments through gating for dramatic purposes and achieve the effect of sudden shifts into new and opposing sonic states through timbral, registral, and harmonic juxtapositions. He does not, however, render gating in as rigid, strict, or as systematic a manner he had in China Gates or Phrygian Gates. Reich’s handling of phasing in Drumming is similarly intuitive, drawing on a wider range of musical techniques that made phasing no longer “the principal structural device” as found in earlier pieces such as Violin Phase and Four Organs.\(^{39}\) In Potter’s estimation, the expansion beyond “pure phasing” in Drumming suggests:

an impatience not only with the limitations of a technique... but also with being tied exclusively to any highly rigorous approach to a single technical procedure, no matter how imaginatively that technique was explored and set in new contexts.\(^{40}\)

This sentiment likewise explains the position in which Adams found himself while composing Shaker Loops. We can sense his eagerness to explore the limits of gating while seeking to avoid the trap of technical rigidity.

Shaker Loops, as conceived in 1978, demonstrated that a more flexible use of gating could provide additional modes of dramatic expression beyond those found in China Gates or Phrygian Gates. A problem remained, however. Adams discovered that the “grammar” of


\(^{40}\) Potter, Four Musical Minimalists, 211.
modular scoring made *Shaker Loops* performances problematic when anyone other than he himself conducted the piece, resulting in “troubling” effects on the overall shape and harmonic movement.\(^4^1\) This outcome had the undesirable effect of marring the energy and dramatic thrust of the gate shifts he crafted.\(^4^2\) To solve the problem and allow his gate shifts to remain fixed from performance to performance, Adams would need to adjust or eliminate entirely the indeterminacy of modular scoring.\(^4^3\) Conventional notation would come to take precedence, removing a significant amount of Adams’s spontaneous authority as the conductor in favor of a stricter score. *Common Tones in Simple Time*, his next project and first orchestral work, provided an opportunity to try and solve this issue.

**Towards a Subtler Gating: Common Tones in Simple Time**

With *Common Tones in Simple Time*, Adams made his second attempt at expanding the gating procedure in a work for large ensemble. In this piece, he focused on exploring the subtlest gate shifting possible, now incorporating elisions of modal areas through common-tone relations to create imperceptible transitions, or relying on functional harmonic relationships that provide smooth transitions between modal areas, again through common tone relationships.\(^4^4\) The result is a work defined by a simple, unobtrusive, and restrained character that contrasts sharply with

---


\(^{4^2}\) This did not prevent Adams from disseminating the modular version of the score. *Shaker Loops* was programmed, along with *Phrygian Gates*, into a concert series sponsored by the Reich Music Foundation at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum on January 17, 1979. It is worth noting the involvement from members of the Steve Reich and Musicians ensemble in the concert. For a review, see John Rockwell, “Concert: San Francisco Composers,” *The New York Times*, January 19, 1979.

\(^{4^3}\) My use of the word indeterminacy is more general and is not meant to suggest that, during this period in the 1980s, Adams was rigorously applying Cagean ideas of indeterminacy in either *Shaker Loops* or *Common Tones in Simple Time*.

the earlier *Shaker Loops*. Indeed, the lack of dramatic contrasts within *Common Tones in Simple Time* is enhanced by the overall lack of timbral contrast throughout the work, despite the wider array of instrumental colors in Adams’s palette. Writing in his 2008 memoir, Adams described *Common Tones in Simple Time* as a strange piece in which the large orchestra and two grand pianos wove a “mild and tranquil tapestry of sound that was the epitome of nonteleological form.”

Even decades earlier, in 1983, Adams was ambivalent about *Common Tones in Simple Time*, viewing it as a practical, pedagogical undertaking that was crucial in his compositional development:

> I think I was getting my orchestral feet wet very carefully. I think I made some mistakes in it, and—ironically enough, many of the mistakes I made weren’t orchestration mistakes. They were compositional mistakes, in terms of, I don’t think there was enough drama or enough interest in the piece, but it provided the necessary first step.

The “necessary first step” was expanding gating from the homogenous septet setting of *Shaker Loops* to the heterogeneous orchestra.

In *Common Tones in Simple Time*, Adams often notates straightforward key signatures but emphasizes pitch content and timbral similarities that will create perceptual ambiguity. The musical result of this process are sequences of modal elisions so subtle that they can hardly be considered gate shifts at all. For example, it is doubtful whether one can perceive mm. 255–92 as falling squarely into the E Locrian mode, as suggested by Timothy Johnson. The notated change of key signature into one flat occurs over seventy measures earlier at m. 184. While this key signature, and the pitch collection Adams employs, would suggest an E Locrian modal area,

---

the pitch content emphasized in mm. 255–92 does not confirm such an understanding (Fig. 3.15).

Beginning in m. 254, Adams focuses on the semitone interval between E and F-natural through a thin texture provided by the clarinets and flutes.

Figure 3.15. Common Tones in Simple Time, mm. 254–59.

D first appears in m. 262 (Fig. 3.16) in the second flute and harp, but this pitch still does not distinguish the Locrian mode.

Figure 3.16. Common Tones in Simple Time, mm. 260–65.
Adams withholding the telltale lowered fifth that would make the Locrian modal area clear. Adams avoids both B-flat and B-natural until m. 293, at which point muted trumpets enter on B-natural (Fig. 3.17). This confirms E Phrygian, but no key signature change appears.

While it might be reasonable to retrospectively infer an E Phrygian orientation in mm. 254–92, the absent fifth scale degree undermines certainty. When B-natural does appear, we find it in a single, obscured instrumental voice as the typical metallic and bright tone of the trumpets are dampened by the use of mutes. This understated moment at m. 293 is the most explicit indication of E Phrygian. Adams has stretched the gating procedure, subjecting an event that would have occurred instantaneously in Shaker Loops to such extreme diffusion that it is almost imperceptible. He achieves this effect through a focus on common tone relations between modes, avoiding distinguishing pitches to create perceptual ambiguity.

Elsewhere in the work, Adams creates smooth, yet discernable gate shifts by deploying functional harmonic movement within the modal areas he chooses. The third and final section of Common Tones in Simple Time offers three examples of this practice. The most important gate shift found in the work appears at m. 702 (Fig. 3.18) and serves as a structural marker signaling the third section. At this moment, Adams generates a gate in m. 701 through the bass register’s sudden appearance, which was previously absent in the work. This moment reveals the full scope of timbral diversity within the piece and suggests a long-range timbral drama that unfolds over the course of the work.\(^{48}\) It is primarily this major registral change that first initiates what will

\(^{48}\) For more information on timbral drama as a means of shedding light on a composer’s motivations, or the possibility of timbre as a means of articulating form, see David Code, “Hearing Debussy Reading Mallarmé: Music
become a clearer pattern of functional harmonic movement throughout the remainder of

*Common Tones in Simple Time.*

Figure 3.18. *Common Tones in Simple Time,* mm. 698–703.

Indeed, the harmonic content shared among the modal areas on either side of the gate from D Dorian into B-flat Lydian acts to dampen the dramatic sense of arrival. Adams obscures the Dorian sensation leading up to the gate shift by almost completely removing the crucial pitch B-natural. Only the first clarinets indicate Dorian through their *pp* tremolo on C and B-natural, which is removed in m. 699. Once again, Adams creates ambiguity by withholding a crucial pitch that could clarify a specific modal area. Once the gate shift arrives at m. 702, the absence of B-natural or B-flat in the previous two-and-a-half measures allows the D Dorian common tones to shift seamlessly into B-flat Lydian. The harp and metalophone parts best demonstrate this, as the block chord’s pitch content does not change across the key signature change.

The newfound anchoring on a modal “tonic” provided by the bass after the B-flat Lydian arrival in m. 702 makes clearer the functional harmonic relationships that ensue. In mm. 702–818 (Table 3.3), a sequence of gate shifts oscillates between B-flat Lydian and D Ionian by way of tertian harmonic relationships connecting those modal areas.

Table 3.3. *Common Tones in Simple Time* Gating Sequence, mm. 702–818.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B♭ Lydian</th>
<th>D Ionian</th>
<th>B♭ Lydian</th>
<th>D Ionian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 702</td>
<td>m. 745</td>
<td>m. 774</td>
<td>m. 797</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This sequence exhibits the characteristics Joseph Straus uses to define a tonal axis, in which overlapping major and minor triads create seventh chords that function as referential sonorities and embody a conflict or polarity between one another.49 At m. 819 (Table 3.4), the arrival of a vaguely E Ionian modal area briefly disrupts this tonal axis before bringing us to the final arrival point of the work in A Lydian/Ionian beginning at m. 833.50 From here, the oscillating tertian

---

49 Joseph Straus, “Stravinsky’s ‘Tonal Axis’,” *Journal of Music Theory* 26, no. 2 (Autumn 1982): 265. While there are no “cadences” in the traditional sense in mm. 702–97, these two modal areas do qualify as discrete harmonies that have a “palpable identity and centricity” of their own.

50 It is difficult to definitively state which modal area is most clearly perceived in mm. 819–32 and Johnson avoids categorizing this passage entirely. While the bass register focus on E seems the most logical, the piano arpeggiations outline a C-major triad. Heightening the ambiguity is the appearance of C-sharp, G-sharp, and D-sharp during this passage. Since this final part of *Common Tones in Simple Time* is the most functional in terms of
gating sequence resumes between the “tonic” in A Lydian/Ionian and the contrasting F Lydian modal area.

Table 3.4. Common Tones in Simple Time Gating Sequence, mm. 819–Mod. 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E Ionian</th>
<th>A Ionian</th>
<th>F Lydian</th>
<th>A Lydian</th>
<th>F Lydian</th>
<th>A Lydian</th>
<th>A Mixolydian/ Ionian</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 819</td>
<td>m. 833</td>
<td>m. 873</td>
<td>m. 885</td>
<td>m. 910</td>
<td>m. 917</td>
<td>Modules 1-3</td>
<td>Module 4</td>
<td>Module 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also worth briefly mentioning that the shift in m. 873 to F Lydian again demonstrates Adams’s prolongational approach that dampens the gate shift’s dramatic effect (Fig 3.19).

![Figure 3.19](image)

Figure 3.19. Common Tones in Simple Time, mm. 872–77.

The change of key signature occurs in the middle of the measure and is imperceptible due to the common tones. The repetitive figures in the percussion best demonstrate this elision of shared pitch content as the major second pattern between A and B in the crotales and glockenspiel carries over seamlessly from A Ionian into F Lydian. The arpeggations in both pianos outline an A major triad, which makes for parsimonious voice leading into F Lydian due to the avoidance of F-sharp in the preceding measures.

---

predictable harmonic movement, I opt for the most normative hierarchy, in which the shift to E in m. 819 functions as a secondary dominant that brings the piece to rest in A Lydian/Ionian.
Five modules of indeterminate length for the entire orchestra (notated as single measures) conclude *Common Tones in Simple Time* and retain the centricity on A Mixolydian/Ionian, but with one, final functional harmonic gesture.\(^5\) In modules 4 and 5 (Fig. 3.20), the gongs, basses, pianos, and harps articulate the pitch D, which creates a plagal cadence back to A in module 5. At this point, Adams removes any distinction between A Mixolydian and Ionian, leaving only a perfect fifth interval between A and E.

This cadential gesture signals Adams’s interest in using pitch centricity and functional harmonic relationships to craft a nuanced sense of closure, unlike what is found in the earlier *Shaker Loops, Phrygian Gates, or China Gates*. The result is a work that ends according to the rhetorical closure described by Patrick McCreless, which “involves both the importation of *conventions*...”

---

\(^5\) The reason for this ambiguity between A Mixolydian and Ionian derives from the cello and bowed crotale modules, which contain both G-natural and G-sharp. The five modules that conclude *Common Tones in Simple Time* begin after m. 973. Adams chose not to leave the modules’ lengths up to the conductor’s discretion, relying instead on clock time to approximate how long they should last. This is a subtle, but crucial, difference in the way the modules are handled in performance when compared to *Shaker Loops*. Standardizing the modules according to clock time rather than allowing conductors or performers to shape their execution through indeterminacy solved the problem of drastic fluctuations.
that dramatize and call attention to closure, and the exceeding of already established internal norms in a work as a way of signaling closure.”

Reich, when composing *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* six years earlier, in 1973, similarly engaged in a new emphasis on musical harmony while crafting ambiguous cadential gestures in the piece. Adams was, in all likelihood, influenced by Reich’s example: he knew *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*, having heard a performance in 1974 and then subsequently conducted the piece himself while working at the San Francisco Conservatory in 1977. The crucial difference is that Reich relied upon rhythmic processes to highlight the harmonies. In the case of *Common Tones in Simple Time*, Adams made no special effort to dictate the sequence of gate shifts according to rhythmic processes. Instead, the original gating procedure, like phasing in *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*, was refined to an almost unrecognizable state.

With *Common Tones in Simple Time*, Adams had applied the gating procedure within a work scored for diverse orchestral ensemble, and he attempted to rectify the problems of modular indeterminacy by restricting its use to an expressive gesture at the work’s conclusion that instilled it with greater architectural coherence. He decided, however, not to use the same bold, dramatic contrasts found in *Shaker Loops*; and perhaps as a result, *Common Tones in Simple* 

---

52 Patrick McCreless, “The Hermeneutic Sentence and Other Literary Models for Tonal Closure,” *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 46–47. Pellegrino lists *Shaker Loops* as exhibiting aspects of rhetorical closure, but this is a difficult position to hold. Every movement glides into the next, and the ending of the piece, while static, is brief and unprepared. The listener is not able to anticipate the point of closure that is imminent. Pellegrino is ambivalent about the closure in *Phrygian Gates* particularly, conceding that there often does not appear to be a logical way to account for the haphazard way in which Adams ends pieces. For more information, see Pellegrino, “Aspects of Closure in the Music of John Adams,” 168–69.

53 See footnote twelve and thirteen.


55 The first modules appear in the upper half of the cello part alongside conventionally notated material for the rest of the orchestra at m. 939—bowed crotales enter with their own set of modules beginning at m. 954. The instructions allow the performers to play the modules in any order, but at a slow tempo and within the dynamic range *pp* to *mp*. Adams specifies that the pitches should be played on the *A* string at the end of the fingerboard, near the bridge. Additionally, the movement from one pitch to another in each module should be done by glissandi and the final note in each always held longest. Adams still stresses particular pitch material in the overall modules’ shapes, despite giving the performers latitude to move at their own discretion.
Simple Time was less successful than Adams’s other works from the same time.\textsuperscript{56} The “mistakes” Adams alluded to in his discussion with Plush in 1983 are now clearer. While no orchestration problems materialize with Common Tones in Simple Time, the drama and spectacle of the earlier Shaker Loops had been lost. With his next work, Harmonium, Adams would attempt to integrate and apply what he learned from experimenting with the gating procedure, creating a work that would do for him what Music for Eighteen Musicians had done for Reich in 1976.

**Summa: Harmonium**

Adams’s explanatory note in the score for Harmonium indicates what was new in this piece in comparison to Shaker Loops and Common Tones in Simple Time. Shaker Loops, the first and least polished attempt to use gating within the context of a large ensemble, illustrated its dramatic potential. Common Tones in Simple Time, the second and more refined attempt to fit gating within a large ensemble setting, allowed Adams to explore gating’s more subtle application while also showing him that he was unlikely to cultivate audience appeal through a work that virtually eliminated the expressive power of gating. For Adams, the most important realization when composing Harmonium was that slowing down the rate of harmonic change (i.e., gating) could “accomplish the effect of a kind of celestial gear shifting.”\textsuperscript{57} His choice of words is significant, revealing how far the composer had come since he conceived of the gating procedure five years earlier through his work in electronic music. By blending numinous and mechanistic imagery (“celestial gear shifting”), he alluded to gating’s expressive scale and

\textsuperscript{56} There were only two major performances, aside from the 1979 premiere at the San Francisco Conservatory. The first occurred during the 1980–81 Oakland Symphony Season. The only mention made of this work is found in Blake Samson, “An Analysis of San Francisco, Oakland Symphony Seasons,” The Petaluma Argus-Courier, September 3, 1980. The second performance involved The Los Angeles Philharmonic, who performed Common Tones in Simple Time at UCLA’s Royce Hall on October 3, 1981. For the review of this concert, see Daniel Cariaga, “2nd Showcase Concert at Royce,” The Los Angeles Times, October 5, 1981.

\textsuperscript{57} John Adams, Composer’s note to Harmonium, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Associated Music Publishers, 2006).
dramatic potential while reminding us of the technique's basis in simple “shifts” between alternate states.\footnote{The poetic description of gate shifts in Harmonium as “celestial” connects to Fink’s description of minimalism as exemplifying a recombinant teleology that abandons the “human scale” of classical teleology. For more information, see Fink, Repeating Ourselves, 43–44. Beethoven’s short cantata Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt also had a significant influence on the conception of Harmonium. A concrete reason for this interest in Beethoven’s cantata derives from his setting of the two Goethe poems, in which they are combined to create a dramatic whole. Beethoven was not the first composer to combine these two Goethe poems. The much younger German composer Peter Josef von Lindpaintner composed such a setting between 1810 and 1811. More information can be found in Fred Büttner, “Meeres Stille und glückliche Fahrt: Theodor Göllner zum 70. Geburtstag,” Musik in Bayern: Halbjahresschrift der Gesellschaft für Bayerische Musikgeschichte 58 (1999): 13. Beethoven’s divorcing the poems from their original metrical schemes in Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt, and his use of textual repetition to generate dramatic momentum, must have been particularly striking to Adams. For information on Beethoven’s divorcing of the poems from their original metrical schemes to reinterpret the words in a musical setting, see Theodor Göllner, “Meeresstille: Goethes Gedicht in der Musik seiner Zeit,” in Musicology humana: Studies in Honor of Warren and Ursula Kirkendale, ed. Jörg Riedlbauer, Siegfried Gmeinwieser, and David Hiley (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1994), 553.}

Most crucial for Adams when composing Harmonium was finding a way to generate gate shifts with varying degrees of dramatic gradation within a single work that demanded a wide range of expression due to the inclusion of text. In the preface to Harmonium, he wrote:

One way was to bring in a new key area almost on the sly, stretching the ambiguity out over such a length of time that the listener would hardly notice that a change had taken place (you find yourself in a new landscape but you don’t know how you got there.)

This comment describes the gating found in Common Tones in Simple Time, with subtle, often imperceptible, movement into new modal areas. In his preface, Adams continued by explaining a different approach, which “was to introduce a sudden change of key for all the available power of surprise and heightened emotional tension that it might provide.”\footnote{Adams, Composer’s note to Harmonium. Adams ran into two dead-ends when seeking texts for Harmonium. Adams first set out to use the poetry of Wallace Stevens contained within the collection Harmonium (1923), but the idea never took off. Adams did choose to retain the title Harmonium to avoid naming the work after any one of the poems he finally chose. See Adams interviewed by Amirkhanian, October 30, 1981. Wallace Steven’s frequent invocation of composers, musical vocabulary, and instruments into his poetry was almost certainly a motivating factor for Adams. For an in-depth investigation into the musicality of the poems contained within Stevens’s Harmonium, see Mary Alfano, “A Certain Order of Forms: The Music of Harmonium,” (PhD diss., Fordham University, 1986). Adams also considered setting portions of Ezra Pound’s Cantos, but found “I kept running up against these insoluble problems of dealing with his language and my language.” See Adams interviewed by Vincent Plush, 53. Keeping in line with the conspicuous musical elements in Steven’s Harmonium, the sophisticated incorporation of music into Pound’s Cantos was what likely attracted Adams to attempting a setting of the poems. More information can be found in Ira Nadel, The Cambridge Introduction to Ezra Pound (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63–85.} The parallel here is with Shaker Loops, a work filled with sudden, unprepared gates that generate forward momentum and
energy. To be sure, *Shaker Loops* contains its share of subtlety, too, but it is not explored to such expressive ends as found with *Harmonium*. Another distinction between *Shaker Loops* and *Harmonium* is the presence of text in the latter. In devising this choral symphony, Adams realized that he did not have to rely on his intuitive sense of pacing to determine when gate shifts would occur. By setting texts with readymade dynamic contrasts and expressive impacts, he effectively delegated this authority to the poets as if they were librettists providing a scenario for his gates’ “dramatis personae” to musically reflect. With the outline of the musical landscape provided *a priori*, Adams could insert his gating procedure with greater ease.

*Harmonium* consists of three movements: the first sets John Donne’s poem “Negative Love,” while the second and third set Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” and “Wild Nights.” Examples from each movement of *Harmonium* will demonstrate how Adams situated his gates in the musical architecture as a nuanced and flexible compositional technique. To begin, we will look at two examples from the first movement.

I never stooped so low as they
Which on an eye, cheek, lip, can prey;
Seldom to them which soar no higher
Than virtue or the mind t’admire,
For sense and understanding may
Know what gives fuel to their fire:
My love, though silly, is more brave,
For may I miss whence’er I crave,
If I know yet what I would have.

If that be simply perfectest
Which can by no way be expressed
But negatives, my love is so:
To all which all love, I say no.
If any who deciphers best
What we know not, ourselves, can know
Let him teach me that nothing: this
As yet my ease and comfort is,
Though I speed not, I cannot miss.⁶⁰

---

In Adams’s setting of Donne’s “Negative Love,” we find a gate shifting sequence that repetitively cycles through the lines “My love, though silly, is more brave, / For may I miss whene’er I crave, / If I know yet what I would have.”61 This passage appealed to Adams due to its capacity to “say something ultimately positive by a curious kind of conceptual inversion.”62 This “conceptual inversion” to which he alludes in the poem is a larger rhetorical strategy in the apophatic theological practice, which claims God’s epistemic unknowability. Bojan Bujis explains: “we can know that God is; with respect to his essence, we can not know what he is and thus we can only know what he is not.”63 While the evasiveness involved in expressing what something is by what it is not is deeply esoteric, the conceptual inversions in Donne’s rhetoric provided an analogy for Adams’s gating, insofar as it involved mechanistic flips into new and opposing sonic states. We see Adams attempt to musically reflect such rhetorical and conceptual inversion in mm. 239–310 (Table 3.5), as the gates oscillate between E-flat Lydian and E Aeolian, using the common tone G as a fulcrum to shift between the modal areas.

Table 3.5. Harmonium, I: Negative Love Gate Shift Sequence, mm. 239–310.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E♭ Lydian</th>
<th>E Aeolian</th>
<th>E♭ Lydian</th>
<th>E Aeolian</th>
<th>E♭ Lydian</th>
<th>E Aeolian</th>
<th>E♭ Lydian</th>
<th>E Aeolian</th>
<th>A♭ Lydian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mm. 239-54</td>
<td>mm. 255-66</td>
<td>mm. 267-79</td>
<td>mm. 280-86</td>
<td>mm. 287-92</td>
<td>mm. 293-98</td>
<td>mm. 299-304</td>
<td>mm. 305-10</td>
<td>mm. 311</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The length of each section shrinks to only six measures beginning at the arrival in E-flat Lydian at m. 287. Throughout this gate shifting sequence, Adams adds new orchestral voices alongside the choir to enhance the momentum. The energy from this gate shifting sequence culminates in a conflicted modal space at mm. 305–10 in which G-sharp clashes against the G-natural and F-sharp of E Aeolian that we would expect in the mode (Fig. 3.21).

61 Ibid., 224.
62 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 111. The evasive inversions Donne employs derive from apophatic theology.
Figure 3.21. *Harmonium, I: Negative Love*, mm. 311–17.

This tension is released after arriving in A-flat Lydian in mm. 311–12. A sudden textural reduction into a churning continuum in the strings serves as an interlude to the second half of the
movement and Donne’s poem. Adams’s repetition of those three lines in “Negative Love” in mm. 239–312 aurally communicates to the audience the opacity resulting from Donne’s apophatic poetics. The gating procedure’s pivot between two modal areas sharing a common tone allows the music to mimetically reflect the titular “negatives” the poem’s speaker will examine in the ensuing lines.64

Adams similarly uses gating to highlight the dramatic and expressive highpoint of the poem in his musical setting:

To all which all love, I say no.
If any who deciphers best
What we know not, ourselves, can know
Let him teach me that nothing...65

In Adams’s setting, the preceding measures before the crucial word “nothing” remains in D-flat Lydian (Fig. 3.22). Adams generates a gate shift across mm. 500–501 into the word “nothing” that moves to the distant modal area F-sharp Phrygian.

Figure 3.22. Harmonium, I: Negative Love, mm. 497–506.

The gate shift, when broken down to the two constituent harmonies (Fig. 3.23), lacks common tones. Only the pitch D-flat in m. 500, enharmonic to C-sharp after the gate shift at m. 501, allows for parsimonious voice leading.

---

Figure 3.23. Gate Shift Harmonic Change in *Harmonium, I: Negative Love*, mm. 500–501.

Whereas the earlier gate shifting sequence at mm. 239–310 reflected an ongoing, dialectical approach to the apophatic elements of Donne’s prosody, this gate shift is a singularity, marking an important expressive and architectural point. As the negatives described in Donne’s poem reach a climax, this gate shift reflects the culmination.

In “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” the second movement of *Harmonium*, Adams slows the gate shifts and obscures them in a manner similar to his practice in *Common Tones in Simple Time*. Keeping in line with the imagery invoked by Dickinson’s poem, as the speaker’s life moves by through the carriage ride, Adams adapts the gating procedure to accommodate the poetic content. Abrupt and sudden gate shifts accompanying a slow, funereal poem dealing with the inexorable movement of a soul towards eternity would be jarring.

> Because I could not stop for Death,  
> He Kindly stopped for me;  
> The carriage held but just ourselves,  
> And Immortality.

> We slowly drove, he knew no haste.  
> And I had put away  
> My labor, and my leisure too,  
> For his civility.

> We passed the school where children played  
> At wrestling in a ring;  
> We passed the fields of gazing grain –  
> We passed the setting sun.

---

66 Adams describes his treatment of the poem as if it were “a vastly slowed-down film sequence” in *Hallelujah Junction*, 113.

67 William Franke has argued that Dickinson’s exploration of negation in prosody is best understood as a form of negative theology or “apophatic discourse.” This could provide an additional explanation for how Adams arrived at these three texts for *Harmonium* and how they are thematically connected. See also “The Missing All”: Emily Dickinson’s Apophatic Poetics,” *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 61–80.
We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.

Since'tis Centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses’ heads
Were toward eternity. 68

An example of how Adams employs the gating procedure in setting this text is seen in mm. 103–18. In mm. 103–05 (Fig. 3.24), Adams thins the texture to only the chorus, which intones a C-sharp minor-seventh chord for an indeterminate number of repetitions. The brief move into D-flat Mixolydian at m. 106 is parsimonious in terms of voice leading through the available common tones heard in the previous three measures.

Figure 3.24. Harmonium, II: Because I Could Not Stop for Death, mm. 103–09.

68 Emily Dickinson, Poems by Emily Dickinson, ed. Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1948), 168–69. Adams’s setting of “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” does not include the fourth stanza: Or rather — He passed Us — / The Dews drew quivering and Chill — / For only Gossamer, my Gown — / My Tippet — only Tulle —. While the fourth stanza was omitted as early as 1890 in the Todd-Higginson edition, Poems by Emily Dickinson, other changes to select words in the version indicate that Adams worked from Martha Dickinson-Bianchi and Alfred Hampson’s Poems by Emily Dickinson, first published in 1937. Adams claims he “unwittingly” used the Bianchi-Hampson version in Hallelujah Junction, 112–13, suggesting he would have preferred to set the entire poem had he been aware. For more information on the history of early editions of Dickinson’s work, see Martha Nell Smith, “Dickinson’s Manuscripts,” in The Emily Dickinson Handbook, ed. Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 118–22.
At m. 108, we move through an unambiguous and static D-flat Ionian modal space emphasized by the unchanging viola triad, which carries over into an ambiguous mode on F in m. 112 (Fig. 3.25) generated by the arrival of the cello and bass on the pitches and A-flat and F-natural, respectively.

![Figure 3.25. Harmonium, II: Because I Could Not Stop for Death, mm. 110–18. Source: John Adams, Harmonium, 2nd ed. (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 2006).](image)

The melodic ascents by the harp and flutes at m. 117 bring sharper focus, suggesting Aeolian or Phrygian, but the constant avoidance of the pitch G-flat or G-natural prevents clear identification of the mode. Such ambiguity allows Adams flexibility in eliding modal areas into one another to prevent abrupt changes in the overall musical continuity. This stretching of the gating procedure in an orchestral setting appeared in Common Tones in Simple Time, but Adams uses it here for textual illustration.

Adams’s musical setting of “Wild Nights” in the final movement of Harmonium reflects the untamed, primal energy of Dickinson’s poem by harkening back to the striking gate shifts found in “Negative Love.”
Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile – the winds –
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass –
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
Ah – the Sea!
Might I but moor – tonight –
In thee!⁶⁹

What is perhaps the most dramatic gate shift in the entirety of Harmonium occurs across mm. 142–43 in “Wild Nights,” as Adams moves from G Lydian to B Ionian (Fig. 3.26). The dramatic thrust arises from the combination of a stark harmonic shift alongside simultaneous changes in instrumentation and texture. The woodwinds, absent in the preceding measures of G Lydian, are suddenly introduced after the B Ionian gate shift at m. 143 (Fig. 3.27.), emphasizing the higher tessitura alongside the violins. The rhythmic patterns of instrumental voices, particularly in the brass, change abruptly as they move from the syncopated web of G Lydian into B Ionian at m. 143. Timbrally prominent Trombone glissandi dominate the texture after m. 143, while French horns and trumpets serve an accompanimental role, articulating trichords and tetrachords of B Ionian pitch content.⁷⁰ The foreground and background split also appears in the woodwinds and percussion.

⁶⁹ Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition, Vol. 1, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998), 269. As David Reynolds explains, the poem intensifies the contrasting amorous and divine images through “reconstructive fusion” in which the sacred and profane are bound together to create greater expressive intensity. Most notable is the repeated phrase “Wild Nights,” which Reynolds describes as “a simple but dazzling metaphor that communicates wild passion—even lust—but simultaneously lifts sexual desire out of the sebacious by fusing it with the natural image of the night.” So too do we find this fusion in the third stanza with the line “Rowing in Eden,” which couples sexual passion with a religious archetype. For more information, see David Reynolds, “Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture,” in The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 188–89.

⁷⁰ The overall effect of the gate shift is enhanced by the sudden removal of the chorus, which was locked in a dense contrapuntal web of rhythmic syncopations on the words “done” and “with,” in mm. 136–42, reaching a point of practical incomprehensibility.
Figure 3.26. *Harmonium, III: Wild Nights*, mm. 136–42.
Figure 3.27. *Harmonium, III: Wild Nights*, mm. 143–48.
After the gate shift at m. 143, flutes, oboes, crotales, harp, and celesta also lock into repetitive, periodic rhythmic cells with arpeggiation of B Ionian pitch content. The sophisticated blending of harmonic change with alterations in the overriding rhythmic pulse and registral coloring provides the same sense of a physical change to the gate shift as observed in the tempo modulations during the third movement of *Shaker Loops.*\(^71\) In the case of *Harmonium,* the gate shift, by creating dramatic modulatory momentum, aurally reflects the climactic second stanza of “Wild Nights,” an expression of the nineteenth century trope of God as a pilot or shipwright.\(^72\)

*Harmonium* had both the desired critical and aesthetic impact for Adams. The work was an immediate success, quickly finding its way into the choral-orchestral repertoire. In the summer of 1982, the Grant Park Music Festival in Chicago programmed *Harmonium.*\(^73\) Leonard Slatkin conducted this local premiere, later performing the work with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in both St. Louis and New York City in 1984.\(^74\) *Harmonium* also quickly made its way to Europe: Kenneth Montgomery conducted a performance with the Dutch Radio Orchestra on October 29, 1982 in Hilversum, and a performance with Dennis Russell Davies and the West German Radio Orchestra occurred in Cologne in 1983.\(^75\) Although many performances materialized, Adams was less confident about recording the work. In October 1981, he felt discouraged due to the financial feasibility and logistical concerns presented by such a large work. He was also skeptical about obtaining funding, stating it would “depend on massive foundation support, because no major record label is going to fund a work like this, even if it is a

---

71 See figure eleven.
75 “Permíere in Muziek-op-vier,” *De Waarheid,* October 29, 1982. See also, Adams interviewed by Vincent Plush, 54.
big audience success.” According to Adams, it was Reich who introduced Harmonium to Manfred Eicher in either 1982 or early 1983, which led to the 1985 ECM Records release. Adams was quickly gaining visibility with important individuals in the music business, particularly at ECM and later Nonesuch Records. This network of contacts returns us to the relationship between Adams and Reich and illustrates how much had changed.

**Adams Composing Through Reich**

By 1981, Adams had developed a way to brand himself through a distinctive compositional technique that would distinguish him from his minimalist forbearers. Reich’s development in the 1960s may have served as road map or guide, offering Adams a way to structure his own growth as a composer. Specifically, Adams was seemingly attracted to Reich’s adaptation of his phasing technique and his ability to innovate based upon an original basic principle. It was perhaps Reich’s prior compositional trajectory that guided Adams beyond the confines of the electronic medium in which gating originated and cultivate broader popular appeal. If so, emulation proved fruitful and provided Adams with an outline for how we could innovate upon the basic principles underlying his gating technique. By 1981, gating for large ensembles no longer relied on the indeterminacy—and accompanying problems—presented by the idiosyncratic modular scoring in *Shaker Loops*. Neither did gating create a subdued musical landscape lacking drama, as found with *Common Tones in Simple Time*. In both cases, we found the gating technique generating distinctive musical grammars that compelled Adams to tinker and adjust his technique when devising subsequent works. In *Harmonium*, Adams proportioned the repetitive minimalist textures and specific gate shifts, with the resulting musical grammar

---

76 Adams interviewed by Amirkhanian, October 30, 1981.
creating both shocking and imperceptible alternations in modal areas from the same compositional technique. The resulting flexibility was put in the service of crafting a choral symphony of “celestial gear shifting” that derived from the innovations that preceded it, beginning five years earlier with the manipulation of polarized capacitors.
CHAPTER 4
JOHN ADAMS RECOMPOSING IVES AND DEBUSSY

In 1910 Ferruccio Busoni penned an epilogue entitled “The Realm of Music” to his 1907 essay collection *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music*. In it he describes a celestial reservoir from which music arises:

Innumerable are its voices; compared with them the murmuring of the harp is a din; the blare of a thousand trombones is a chirrup. All melodies heard before or never heard, resound completely and simultaneously, carry you, hang over you, or skim lightly past you. [...] Listen, every star has its rhythm and every world its measure. And on each of the stars and each of the worlds, the heart of every separate living being is beating its own individual way. [...] Unthought-of scales extend like hands from one world to another, stationary and yet eternally in motion.¹

Such a conception of music reads like a modernist repackaging of Pythagorean metaphysics or Boethian medieval cosmology.² His perspective was prescient. Six years later, Carl Jung offered a similarly all-embracing conception of the human condition in his 1916 essay “The Structure of the Unconscious.” In it, Jung describes a collective unconscious that contrasted with the individualized unconscious proposed by Freud:

...the unconscious contains all those psychic components that have fallen below the threshold, as well as subliminal sense-perceptions. Moreover, we know, from abundant experience as well as for theoretical reasons, that besides this the unconscious contains all the material that has not yet reached the threshold of consciousness. These are the seeds of future conscious contents. [...] we have every reason to suppose that the unconscious is never quiescent in the sense of being inactive, but presumably is ceaselessly engaged in the grouping and regrouping of so-called unconscious fantasies.³

Jung’s collective unconscious, like Busoni’s realm of music, contains all psychic phenomena, including what has and has not reached the threshold of consciousness. Likewise, it exists in

---

perpetual motion, as material is recycled, recombined, and reformulated in an unconscious symphony of “fantasies.”

Busoni produced another short essay in 1910, “The Value of the Arrangement,” in which he defended his programming of transcriptions and arrangements, arguing for their value as equal to that of original compositions.4 Such a perspective aligns with his ruminations about the realm of music where all the melodies that have ever existed occur simultaneously. Why would it be less meaningful for a composer to select one of these innumerable voices and express it in a new way? During the late 1980s, when John Adams began just such a project of selecting music from the past for recomposition, Busoni’s work was among the first subjects he chose. In 1989, Adams produced a reduced orchestration of Busoni’s Berceuse Elegiaque, itself an orchestration of the Berceuse No. 7 for piano from Busoni’s 1907 Elegien collection.5 Adams shared Busoni’s outlook on the value of orchestrations, transcriptions, and arrangements. In a 1999 interview, he defended a set of arrangements of Conlon Nancarrow’s music for player piano by Yvar Mikhashoff:

I felt that Yvar Mikhashoff’s arrangements of the Nancarrow were not simply orchestrations; they were a revivifying of the music [...] Mikhashoff’s orchestrations turn them into something far more creative, I think, than Nancarrow ever imagined. It was a tremendous inspiration to me because it was rhythmically complex and yet, at the same time, it was very colorful and, most important, it was very accessible.6

Adams’s idea of recomposing as a means of “revivification” is reminiscent of Busoni’s “realm of music”: a melody already lodged within the collective unconscious of Western art music is

---


5 Adams also orchestrated two late Liszt piano pieces in the late 1980s: Le lugubre gondola (1882) and Wiegenlied (1881). For more information, see Malcolm Miller, “From Liszt to Adams (I): The Wiegenlied Transcription,” Tempo 175 (December 1990): 23–26. For the subsequent article that examines the other Liszt transcription, see Miller, “From Liszt to Adams (II): The Black Gondola,” Tempo 179 (December 1991): 17–20.

brought back and expressed in a new way. For Adams, this process took its most conspicuous form in two ambitious, yet largely unknown, recomposition projects focused on works by Charles Ives and Claude Debussy.

This chapter examines Adams’s *Five Songs of Charles Ives* (1989–90) and *Le livre de Baudelaire* (1994), illustrating how he inscribed his compositional sensibilities into the recompositions of others’ music. Adams emphasized elements he found intriguing in Debussy’s and Ives’s works when reconstituting their chamber music in an orchestral setting, exploring unrealized expressive potential in the original sources, allusions to the music of other composers, and traits suggestive of minimalism. Other modernist composers, including Webern, Zemlinsky, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Berg, and Bartók, have attracted similar scholarly attention for their capacity to transform existing music, creating new pieces of often surprising originality. Adams’s recompositions might appear similar to such works, but the similarities are less pronounced upon close inspection. I will conclude by returning to Jung and Busoni, pointing to their influence as a motivation for Adams’s interest in reworking past composers’ music and noting his deviations from the larger twentieth-century practice of recomposing past music.

**Five Songs of Charles Ives (1989–90)**

In the *Five Songs of Charles Ives*, Adams built an orchestral song cycle from independent songs published in Ives’s well-known *114 Songs* collection. The songs he selected display three

---


8 The *Five Songs of Charles Ives* was a commission by the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, who premiered the work in November 1994 at the three-day festival “American Transcendentalists.” John Adams not only conducted these concerts, but also discussed the relevance of Emerson and Thoreau to the music of Charles Ives. Adams had two of his original pieces also included on the program: “Christian Zeal and Activity” from *American Standard* and *The Wound-Dresser*, the latter a setting for baritone and chamber orchestra of selections from Whitman’s titular poem. For a review of the festival, see Alex Ross, “How Ever Did You Do It, Mr. Ives?,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 1994. Information on the festival can also be found in the concert brochure for the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra’s 1994–95 season in Leon Levy BAM Digital Archive 1994.01684. A brief
features that would appeal to a composer rearranging the work of another. First, these songs, originally written for voice and piano, contain expressive potential that Adams could realize with expanded orchestral forces. The results are orchestral songs with an intensity of expression beyond the bounds of the original material. Second, these songs often involve allusions to other music, allowing Adams to explore their intertextuality when rewriting the past. Third, these Ives songs exhibit repetitive qualities that allowed Adams to craft a “minimalist” reinterpretation in which those qualities receive greater emphasis than they had in the original. In each recomposed movement, we find Adams making decisions that fall into these three categories, allowing us to observe him “analyze” Ives as he reconstitutes the music in an orchestral medium.

Adams made several changes when recomposing “Thoreau,” the first of the Five Songs of Charles Ives. Ives’s original song is unmetered, contains a single barline, and does not provide a tempo designation. Adams, in his version, opts to move between the meters of 2/8, 3/8, 4/8, 5/8, and 6/8, and he prescribes a specific tempo (♩ = 66). These changes dampen the free-flowing sense of time in the original and result in greater forward momentum. A more conspicuous alteration is Adams’s excision of the introductory, spoken narration found in Ives’s version (Fig. 4.1), a passage from Thoreau’s Walden that serves as a brief dramatic monologue with piano accompaniment. Each color corresponds to one of four aspects that make up the basic texture: red and green for the two oscillating chords, while yellow and blue indicate the highest and lowest pitches that punctuate through the chords.


Would it not have been more dramatically effective, considering the sustaining capacity of orchestral instruments, to keep the *Walden* narration intact? One rationale for Adams’s removal of this passage is expressive: by leaving out the narration, he could emphasize the piano writing he reconstitutes for the orchestra. Without the text’s extramusical imagery, the new timbral contrasts from the woodwinds in mm. 1–11 place the repetitive oscillation between the two chords at the fore of listeners’ attention (Fig. 4.2) with the added benefit of highlighting a passage suggestive of minimalist repetition.

Figure 4.2. *Five Songs of Charles Ives: Thoreau*, mm. 1–11 (winds and piano).
While piccolos, clarinets, and oboes alternate between the chords, the strings underneath are muted and hushed (Fig. 4.3). Note Adams’s use of the bowed crotales’ sustaining capacity on A-sharp, which provides a silvery drone over the opening measures that the pianist punctuates on downbeats.\(^{10}\)

“Down East,” the second of the *Five Songs of Charles Ives*, draws upon thematic material from Lowell Mason’s hymn tune “Bethany,” best known in the United States through its connection to the text “Nearer, My God to Thee.” This feature, which H. Wiley Hitchcock argues is the “nostalgic, pervasive source of the entire composition,” would have appealed to Adams’s interest in American vernacular music and the expressive possibilities of recomposing a heavily intertextual piece.\(^{11}\) Ives’s song divides into two parts: the first is a chromatic and dissonant foil to the second, which is primarily consonant and diatonic. As Starr notes, however,

---

\(^{10}\) It is also possible Adams felt that beginning the *Five Songs of Charles Ives* with the narration in “Thoreau” would be too didactic or create dramatic expectations for the audience that would not be appropriate.

the stylistic contrast is not absolute, as allusions to Mason’s hymn in the second section combine with references to the complex dissonance and chromaticism of the first.\footnote{Larry Starr, \textit{A Union of Diversities} (New York: Schirmer Book, 1992), 138.}

Adams uses his orchestral forces to heighten the effect of the expressive structure Starr describes. Within the dissonant first section, in mm. 4–7 (Fig. 4.4), he passes the short, two-eighth-note motif of the original piano accompaniment among the violins, violas, and clarinet (in red).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.4.png}
\caption{\textit{Five Songs of Charles Ives: Down East}, mm. 4–7. Source: John Adams, \textit{Five Songs of Charles Ives} (King of Prussia, PA: Theodore Presser, 1990).}
\end{figure}
The quasi-antiphonal or stereophonic effect of minute timbral shifts across the orchestra furnishes the musical texture with greater forward momentum. Adams’s notational scheme reflects this newfound momentum, with dotted lines in his score indicating metrical subdivisions suggested by his orchestration. By dispersing this eighth-note motif, and its mixture of major- and minor-second intervals, across the violins, violas, and clarinet in mm. 4–7, Adams subtly creates a more propulsive accompaniment than is found in the original. In the B section, by contrast, Adams adopts a conventional approach to orchestrating the accompaniment in relation to the vocal melody, seeming to hide his own voice in favor of creating an orchestral song as Ives may have rendered it himself.

The recomposed orchestral version of “Cradle Song,” the middle movement in Adams’s *Five Songs of Charles Ives*, elaborates upon the “Sognando” (“dreamy”) expressive indication in the original source. The brevity and simplicity of the song, with its folk-like lilt and cadence, reinforce the exploration of vernacular music references throughout the *Five Songs of Charles Ives*. Also important is the strophic form of “Cradle Song,” which provides a repetitive quality to match the vernacular ambiance. Adams seeks to “fill in” the calm, childlike lullaby topics implied in the original “Cradle Song,” employing only the string section of the orchestra in his recomposition, indicating the use of mutes to create a reserved and unobtrusive orchestral backdrop. In this new string accompaniment (Fig. 4.5), Adams incorporates two techniques common to his compositional practice to provide his interpretation of Ives’s “Sognando” indication: harmonics and glissandi. For example, harmonics in the celli and violas in mm. 4–5 and mm. 8–9 (highlighted in red) have no equivalent gesture in the original piano

---

13 This song by Ives could itself be considered a miniature attempt at recomposing the cradle song genre, although it is too brief and homogenous in tone to qualify as exhibiting the topics elaborated by Burkholder and Starr in the composer’s more heterogeneous and dense pieces. For more information on this subject, see Lawrence Starr, “Charles Ives: The Next Hundred Years—Towards a Method of Analyzing the Music,” *Music Review* 38 (May 1977): 101–11. “Cradle Song” does, however, express such Victorian concepts as childhood innocence, which makes this work a unique entry into Ives’s corpus. For more information, see David Metzer, “‘We Boys’: Childhood in the Music of Charles Ives,” *19th-Century Music* 21, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 77–95.
accompaniment; the chromatic sliding through glissandi embellishes the original. While these harmonics and glissandi are heard only in brief flashes, the compact, strophic structure of the song ensures listeners will hear them repeatedly with each subsequent verse. These airy string effects emphasize the higher tessitura of Ives’s original piano part and illustrate expressive dimensions of the poetry, particularly the references to the winds, trees, leaves, and rivers.

The sustaining capacities of the string instruments in Adams’s recomposition allow for a musical texture that attempts to mimetically “flow” alongside the imagery, avoiding the natural decay that occurs in Ives’s original piano writing.

Adams’s recomposition of “At the River,” stands out principally for its conservative approach; there are few changes that would suggest Adams’s creative intervention. Indeed, the recomposed song sounds as if it could have been written by Ives himself in a manner similar to what we find in the B section of “Down East.” The selection of “At the River” serves to
recapitulate the network of references to American music that are a crucial aspect of Ives’s aesthetic. It also reinforces an overarching intertextual theme within the Five Songs of Charles Ives that links them as a song cycle, as the prior movements “Down East” and “Thoreau” both feature allusions to other music.14 “At the River” incorporates material from Ives’s Fourth Violin Sonata and alludes to the tune and accompaniment of Robert Lowry’s hymn “Hanson Place,” as well as Lowry’s text, commonly known as “Shall We Gather at the River.”15 Adams’s recomposition intensifies the expressive potential of the text by virtue of new instrumental timbres. As Hitchcock explains, Ives’s “At the River” features repetitions of the first line of Lowry’s poem formulated as a question: “Shall we gather at the river?”16 The interrogative quality at the close of the song receives a corresponding reflection in the piano accompaniment by a conspicuous lack of cadential closure. Adams’s orchestra rearticulates this already-heard music, imbuing it with a new expressive immediacy by using a diverse timbral palette of orchestral instruments.

Ives’s “Serenity” would naturally appeal to Adams’s minimalist sensibilities. The piano part consists of a perpetual two-chord oscillation that, as Douglass Green states, constitutes the entire harmonic substance of the song (Fig. 4.6).17

Figure 4.6. “Serenity” Chords.

In addition, the vocal part encompasses a small range of pitches, and subtle syncopations in the melody provide rhythmic interest in an otherwise austere musical texture.18 In his recomposition,

Adams highlights the ethereal qualities of Ives’s musical texture and the poetry he set, again incorporating harmonics and glissandi in the strings (Fig. 4.7). Adams uses both techniques in the recomposition to infuse Ives’s original piano music with a new timbral veneer (highlighted in red).

Figure 4.7. Five Songs of Charles Ives: Serenity, mm. 1–16 (voice and strings). Source: John Adams, Five Songs of Charles Ives (King of Prussia, PA: Theodore Presser, 1990).

As in “Thoreau,” woodwinds provide new timbral contrasts to the chord oscillation, pairing piccolos and clarinets with the piano while muted violins and violas provide additional support (Fig. 4.8). Beginning at m. 5, Adams chooses to tie the clarinets’ pitches of the second chord over into the next measure, creating a novel dissonance with the surrounding continuity that

holds to Ives’s original. These changes result in an orchestral song both familiar and new, a recomposition in which Adams explores the expressive possibilities of amplifying the repetitive swaying between Ives’s original chords.

Figure 4.8. *Five Songs of Charles Ives: Serenity*, mm. 1–8 (woodwinds and strings).

The choice to conclude the *Five Songs of Charles Ives* with Ives’s “Serenity” creates a logical ending for the recomposition project. “Thoreau,” the first song of the set, begins with a brief sequence of oscillation between two chords. In “Serenity,” a similar pattern occurs, but this time it dominates the entirety of the song, deepening the intertextuality and allusion that permeates this cycle. Adams acts as a mediator of these songs, highlighting their network of references to older music. Such textural echoes and intertextual linkages suggest Adams sought
out these particular songs and organized them in this order to create a new and unique continuity. The result is a song cycle linked through correspondences asserted by Adams the recomposer.

**Le livre de Baudelaire (1994)**

Roughly four years after engaging with Ives, Adams recomposed Debussy. *Le livre de Baudelaire* is Adams’s recomposition of four of the five mélodies constituting Debussy’s song cycle *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire* (1887–89): “Le Balcon,” “Harmonie du Soir,” “Le jet d’eau,” and “Recueillement.”

The original songs were composed early in Debussy’s career and are pieces of ostensibly “small-scale” chamber music for voice and piano. Throughout the 1880s, however, the young Debussy was caught up in the ongoing symbolist obsession with Wagner that had been initiated by Charles Baudelaire with his 1861 essay “Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris.”

Debussy’s Wagnerian obsession led to trips to the 1888 and 1889 Bayreuth Festivals, and analyses by Denis Herlin and Robin Holloway reveal in the piano writing of the *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire* a chromatic and contrapuntal density indebted to Wagner’s music dramas. Moreover, these chromatically and polyphonically dense accompaniments in the *Cinq poèmes* suggest an underlying orchestral scope, and it was perhaps this quality that made them appealing to Adams as a subject for recomposition.

---


22 Denis Herlin, “From Debussy’s Studio: The Little-Known Autograph of *De rêve*, the First of the *Proses lyriques* (1892),” *Notes* 71, no. 1 (September 2014): 11. For Holloway, the Strauss-like exuberance and complex
Adams, with an orchestral palette at his disposal, could offer a “realization” of the latent orchestral qualities of Debussy’s original piano writing, performing another analysis through the act of recomposition. Adams’s recourse to new timbres beyond those of the piano would allow him to place new emphases on the recurring, Wagner-inspired leitmotifs that permeate the original music Debussy composed. The repetition Debussy employed, derived from Wagner’s influence, was an ideal means for Adams to explore a repertoire with which he was fascinated and, in so doing, perhaps suggest aesthetic kinship with his predecessors. By recomposing Debussy’s mélodies to heighten these repetitive, Wagnerian elements, Adams could underscore stylistic correspondences between his own postminimalist musical language and the work of two major figures in Western art music. As we will see, however, there are times in which Adams takes the opposite approach, recomposing in a style intended to sound indistinguishable from that of a young Wagnerian at the end of the nineteenth century. Adams’s curious flexibility (or inconsistency) when recomposing Le livre de Baudelaire lends the song cycle a paradoxical quality; even in a single movement, Adams the postminimalist sometimes appears to impose his aesthetic interests onto the recomposition, while at other times attempting to recompose in the style of Debussy, who was himself composing these Baudelaire settings under the spell of Wagner.

“Le Balcon,” the first mélodie of the Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire, bears strong resemblances to Wagnerian music dramas, as Holloway explains: “Le Balcon derives from those scenes in the Wagner operas where a leitmotif becomes an accompaniment, an omnipresent and fully-thematic support to a free vocal line, forming an overall structure at once rhapsodic and tightly knit.”23 This leitmotif is heard in the first measures of Debussy’s piano part and pervades piano part suggest that the song has the feel of an orchestral transcription. See Holloway, Debussy and Wagner, 43. This sentiment of the piano as corresponding to the Wagnerian orchestra is echoed in Eric Jensen, Debussy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 153.

23 Holloway, Debussy and Wagner, 43.
the entire song in slightly altered iterations and fragments, which affords Adams the opportunity to subject it to diverse timbral contrasts through his orchestral scoring. In so doing, the recomposed “Le Balcon” sharply distinguishes and explores the relationship between melody and accompaniment. From the first measures we find this approach (Fig. 4.9), as a solo French horn and the entire cello section sound the leitmotif in mm. 1–2 (highlighted in red). This combination dominates the texture as the more fragmentary internal lines of Debussy’s original accompanimental counterpoint are dispersed amongst violas, basses, clarinet, and bassoon.

Figure 4.9. Debussy (left) - Adams (right) Comparison of “Le Balcon,” mm. 1–2.

Whenever possible, Adams (in the guise of a postminimalist) finds a way to highlight the leitmotif within the overall orchestral accompaniment (Fig. 4.10). In mm. 45–46, the piercing
timbre of the piccolo sounds the leitmotif, followed by the bassoon response in mm. 49–50. The bassoon elides into another statement by the clarinet in mm. 50, which itself gives way to yet another restatement by the flutes and oboe in mm. 51–53 (highlighted in red). Adams is analyzing and exploring Debussy’s Wagnerian influences, using juxtaposed instrumental groups to draw attention to the frequency with which the leitmotif occurs.

Hearing the Wagnerian-inspired leitmotifs of Debussy refracted through Adams’s orchestral palette could serve as an aural reminder of historical precedents established in the late romantic era that feed into stylistic conventions of minimalism.

Adams’s treatment of “Harmonie du Soir” in *Le livre de Baudelaire* mirrors that of “Le Balcon”: again, he has enhanced the expressive intensity of the source while also drawing attention to its repetitive qualities. The form of Baudelaire’s poem and of Debussy’s setting both provide a solid foundation from which to attempt such a project. The poetic structure of “Harmonie du Soir” relies on a repetitive pattern in which the second and fourth lines of each quatrain become the first and third lines of the next.24

The season is at hand when swaying on its stem
Every flower exhales perfume like a censer;
Sounds and perfumes turn in the evening air;
Melancholy waltz and languid vertigo!

Le violon frémit comme un coeur qui s’évapore ainsi qu’un encensoir;
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

Every flower exhales perfume like a censer;
The violin quivers like a tormented heart;
Melancholy waltz and languid vertigo!
The sky is sad and beautiful like an immense altar.

Le ciel s’est noyé dans son sang qui se fige...

The violin quivers like a tormented heart,
A tender heart, that hates the vast, black void!
The sky has drowned in his blood which congeals...

Un coeur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Du passé lumineux recueillent tout vertige!

A tender heart that hates the vast, black void
Gathers up every shred of the luminous past!
The sun has drowned in his blood which congeals...

Le soleil s’est noyé dans son sang qui s’évapore ainsi qu’un encensoir;
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir;

Your memory in me glitters like a monstrance!

Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige
Chaque fleur s’évapore ainsi qu’un encensoir
Les sons et les parfums tourment dans l’air du soir;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!

Chaque fleur s’évapore ainsi qu’un encensoir;
Le violon frémit comme un coeur qu’on afflige;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!

As a result, the recurrent imagery takes on differing shades of meaning according to its shifting context.26 Debussy’s musical setting emphasizes this structure, as he repeats the melodic material

---

24 Nicholas Routley has argued that the poetic structure of “Harmonie du Soir” resembles the pantun, a Malay poetic form. For more information, see “Debussy and Baudelaire’s *Harmonie du Soir*,” *Musicology Australia* 15 (1992): 77.


26 Arthur Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 82. Debussy used a single line from Baudelaire’s “Harmonie du Soir” as the title for a future work within the *Préludes* Book One: “Les sons et les parfums tourment dans l’air du soir.” This is an approach Debussy had previously taken with *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*. In that case, Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem provided the titular extramusical imagery Debussy sought to illustrate musically. See Roger Nichols, “Debussy’s Two Settings of *Claire de lune*,” *Music & Letters* 48, no. 3 (July 1967): 229–35. Debussy also orchestrated the second and fourth songs of the 1895.
attached to a given line whenever it recurs. Like “Le Balcon,” “Harmonie du Soir” also features a leitmotif (Fig. 4.11); sounded at the beginning, it weaves its way throughout the mélodie (highlighted in red).

Figure 4.11. Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire: II. Harmonie du Soir, mm. 1–3.
Source: Claude Debussy, Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1904).

Debussy’s use of circularity, repetition, and recurrence reinforce one another in this compact mélodie, particularly in places such as mm. 27–31 and mm. 39–43. These four-measure passages are the paired setting of Baudelaire’s line “Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir” (Fig. 4.12).

Figure 4.12. Debussy (left) - Adams (right) Comparison of “Harmonie du Soir,” mm. 27–31.
Source: Claude Debussy, Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1904).
Source: John Adams, Le livre de Baudelaire (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1994).

In these passages we find layers of musical and textual recurrence stacked atop one another: the repeating Wagnerian leitmotif permeates the piano accompaniment while the text and melody collection Proses lyriques in 1901, as well as his Trois ballades de Villon in the same year he originally wrote them for voice and piano.
recurr. Adams does not, however, overemphasize the repetitive qualities of the accompaniment, favoring instead an orchestration approach in which solo instrumental voices pass the leitmotif around (Fig. 4.13).

![Figure 4.13. Debussy (top) - Adams (bottom) Comparison of “Harmonie du Soir,” mm. 39–43. Source: John Adams, Le livre de Baudelaire (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1994).]

These recomposed passages, rather than sounding like those of a late-twentieth-century-minimalist, suggest that Adams is adept at “putting on” compositional personas; in the case of “Harmonie du Soir,” he relies on conventional orchestration approaches to melody and accompaniment that would evoke for listeners the stylistic sensibilities of a nineteenth-century French Wagnerian.
The third movement of *Le livre de Baudelaire* is a recomposition of Debussy’s “Le jet d’eau,” a mélodie with a unique combination of repetitive qualities. For example, in Figure 4.14, the initial rhythmic scheme in the piano features a repetitive, motoric sequence of repeated major second dyads (highlighted in red).

Figure 4.14. *Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire: III. Le jet d’eau*, mm. 1–11.
In Adams’s recomposition, flutes, clarinets, and celesta emphasize this aspect of the accompaniment in relation to the underlying harmonies, which the bassoons articulate (Fig. 4.15).

Figure 4.15. *Le livre de Baudelaire: III. Le jet d’eau*, mm. 1–9.

Adams also interjects a new gesture with no equivalent in Debussy’s piano writing: brief major second tremolos (highlighted in blue) from the violins and violas provide understated
syncopations and a new contrapuntal dimension in contrast to the regular pulse provided by the woodwinds and celesta. For listeners, the recomposed “Le jet d’eau” comes across as a reinterpretation of Debussy from the perspective of a minimalist interested in exploring expressive uses of repetition with orchestral forces.

Baudelaire’s poem employs a recurrent sextain that, in Arthur Wenk’s analysis, serves as a fixed point and allows the reader to examine the titular fountain from differing perspectives.27

My poor mistress! your lovely eyes
Are tired, leave them closed and keep
For long the nonchalant pose
In which pleasure surprised you.
In the court the bubbling fountain
That's never silent night or day
Sweetly sustains the ecstasy
Into which love plunged me tonight.

The sheaf unfolds into
Countless flowers
In which joyful Phoebe
Puts her colors:
It drops like a shower
Of heavy tears.

Thus your soul which is set ablaze
By the burning flash of pleasure
Springs heavenward, fearless and swift,
Toward the boundless, enchanted skies.
And then it overflows, dying
In a wave of languid sadness
That by an invisible slope
Descends to the depths of my heart.

The sheaf unfolds into
Countless flowers
In which joyful Phoebe
Puts her colors:
It drops like a shower
Of heavy tears.

Oh you whom the night makes so fair,
How sweet, bending over your breast,
To listen to the endless plaint
Of the sobbing of the fountains!
Moon, singing water, blessed night,
Trees that quiver round about us,
Your innocent melancholy

Tes beaux yeux sont las, pauvre amante!
Reste longtemps, sans les rouvrir,
Dans cette pose nonchalante
Où t'a surprise le plaisir.
Dans la cour le jet d'eau qui jase
Et ne se tait ni nuit ni jour,
Entretient doucement l'extase
Où ce soir m'a plongé l'amour.

La gerbe épanouie
En mille fleurs,
Où Phoebé réjouie
Met ses couleurs,
Tombe comme une pluie
De larges pleurs.

Ainsi ton âme qu'incendie
L'éclair brûlant des voluptés
S'élance, rapide et hardie,
Vers les vastes cieux enchantés.
Puis elle s'épanche, mourante,
En un flot de triste langueur,
Qui par une invisible pente
Descend jusqu'au fond de mon coeur.

La gerbe épanouie
En mille fleurs,
Où Phoebé réjouie
Met ses couleurs,
Tombe comme une pluie
De larges pleurs.

Ô toi, que la nuit rend si belle,
Qu'il m'est doux, penché vers tes seins,
Découvrir la plainte éternelle
Qui sanglote dans les bassins!
Lune, eau sonore, nuit bénie,
Arbres qui frissonnent autour,
Votre pure mélancolie

27 Wenk, Claude Debussy and the Poets, 77–78. Mira Levy-Bloch reinforces this understanding, describing the refrain in “Le jet d’eau” as heightening expressive and symbolic intensity of the physical movement of the lover, the water fountain, and ecstasy. For more information, see Levy-Bloch, “Le mouvement de l’imagination baudelairienne: Le jet d’eau,” Dalhousie French Studies 16 (Spring–Summer 1989): 55.
Is the mirror of my love.
The sheaf unfolds into
Countless flowers
In which joyful Phoebe
Puts her colors:
It drops like a shower
Of heavy tears.

Est le miroir de mon amour.
La gerbe épanouie
En mille fleurs,
Où Phoebé réjouie
Met ses couleurs,
Tombe comme une pluie
De larges pleurs.  

Debussy conveys Baudelaire’s architecture by returning to the same melodic material and accompaniment of sequential arpeggiation at each textual refrain. These repetitive features allow Adams to craft new timbral juxtapositions to highlight the cyclical, self-referential qualities in Debussy’s piano writing, as we have seen in earlier movements. The effect in the recomposed “Le jet d’eau” is one of constancy, provided by the text, accompaniment, and vocal melody, yet also change, offered by the new and shifting tapestry of orchestral colors.

“Le jet d’eau” is a unique mélodie within the Cinq poèmes and, by extension, Le livre de Baudelaire because Debussy also recomposed it as an orchestral song. The standalone orchestrated Le jet d’eau arrived in 1907, well into Debussy’s mature impressionist style. Why would he revise and expand such a youthful work steeped in the Wagnerian aesthetic he had left behind? It is possible that Debussy, recognizing the orchestral style of the piano writing, felt that this particular song was “too important to be confined to the recital room,” as Richard Smith has suggested. Whether Adams was aware of Debussy’s reworking of “Le jet d’eau” is unclear, but a comparison between the openings of their respective versions demonstrates their differing approaches. As seen in Figure 4.16, Debussy thickened his original texture and slightly lengthened the beginning when expanding it to encompass orchestral forces. Le jet d’eau has

---

29 Debussy slightly altered Baudelaire’s original refrain to remove the reference to the Greek nymph Phoebe. This is a decision Bradford Robinson ascribes to its qualities as an “arcane invocation.” Bradford Robinson, “Preface,” in Claude Debussy, Le jet d’eau: Chant et orchestre (Munich: Musikproduktion Höflich, 2009).
30 Evidence indicates that André Caplet “refurbished” the orchestration of Debussy’s original 1907 version in 1922. For more information, see Williametta Spencer, “The Relationship Between André Caplet and Claude Debussy,” The Musical Quarterly 66, no. 1 (January 1980): 129. I compare only Debussy’s orchestration with the version contained in Adams’s Le livre de Baudelaire. For further reading on the Caplet-Debussy relationship, see Matthew Brown, Debussy Redux: The Impact of His Music on Popular Culture (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 70–71.
little rhythmic correspondence to the original piano part until m. 11, suggesting Debussy was keen to soften the unresolved major second chord oscillation (highlighted in red) by burying it under orchestral strings.

Figure 4.16. Le jet d’eau, mm. 1–4.
(figure cont’d.)
Figure 4.16, mm. 5–8. (fig. cont’d.)
Figure 4.16, mm. 9–12.

Adams’s opening for “Le jet d’eau,” as already seen in Figure 4.15, adheres closely to the sparser piano version and the pulsating major-second dyads.
These competing reinterpretations of “Le jet d’eau,” composed at opposite ends of the twentieth century, may recall Busoni’s vision of an ongoing and dynamic realm of music. Debussy reframed his early mélodie, originally written in a French Wagnerian style of dense polyphony and chromaticism, into a new orchestral work reflecting a different personal aesthetic. Adams’s recomposition of “Le jet d’eau” is an additional elaboration upon the original, with his orchestral song exhibiting traits of a minimalist gloss. Just as Busoni described, melodies “already heard” in a perpetually shifting and unconscious symphony of “fantasies” play themselves out in a dialogue across the twentieth century. Such intertextual fantasies become even more apparent in “Recueillement,” the final movement of Le livre de Baudelaire.

“Recueillement,” Debussy’s fourth mélodie in the original cycle, exhibits what Robin Holloway describes as a “fascinated doodling around the Tristan chord” beginning in mm. 5–11 (Fig. 4.17).32 Four conspicuous statements of Tristan-esque material occur in these measures, each differing slightly from one another, and are highlighted in blue, red, yellow, and green.

---

32 Holloway, Debussy and Wagner, 44–47.
Adams’s access to orchestral instruments meant he could rewrite this “doodling” to make the correspondences to Wagner more apparent (Fig. 4.18). The thematic similarity becomes clearer as Adams reconstitutes Debussy’s original piano part in instrumental combinations similar to the opening measures of *Tristan und Isolde* (colors correspond to those in Figure 4.17).

Figure 4.18. *Le livre de Baudelaire: IV. Recueillement*, mm. 5–11.
Adams juxtaposes oboes and bassoons in m. 6 with a solo French horn supported by flutes and clarinets in m. 8, and then combines the entire chamber group in mm. 10–11. Adams’s use of woodwinds, especially the oboe, clarinet, and bassoon, adheres closely to the instrumental timbres heard at the beginning of the Vorspiel to Tristan, which creates an immediate timbral link for listeners familiar with the opera as they hear this recomposition of “Recueillement.”

Another passage in “Recueillement” where Adams emphasizes Debussy’s Wagnerian impulses appears in the piano in mm. 29–35 (Fig. 4.19).

Figure 4.19. Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire: IV. Recueillement, mm. 29–35. Source: Claude Debussy, Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1904).
Debussy builds to a climax in mm. 32–34 by employing a brief sequence of wide, downward yearning leaps in the right hand of the piano (green) while a chromatically ascending bass (yellow) provides forward momentum from mm. 29–30. Upon reaching mm. 32–34, Debussy pairs a chromatic descent (red) in the higher tessitura with a simultaneous ascent in the bass (blue), alluding to Wagner’s “Magic Sleep” leitmotif. Adams fascination with this short passage in “Recueillement” is natural: he had already quoted the same leitmotif in 1984 with *Harmonielehre* and in 1991 with *The Death of Klinghoffer* (Fig. 4.20).

![Wagner, “Magic Sleep” Leitmotif](image1)

![Debussy, “Recueillement”](image2)

![Adams, “Ocean Chorus” from *The Death of Klinghoffer*](image3)

Figure 4.20. Wagner-Debussy-Adams Comparison of “Magic Sleep” Leitmotif.

When recomposed by Adams, the Wagnerian intertextuality in Debussy’s original piano part comes into sharper relief as the string section provides newfound momentum and emphasis to the ascending and descending chromatic lines (Fig. 4.21). The recomposition, particularly through the heavy use of strings, places listeners within a sound world reminiscent of large-scale

---

Wagnerian music dramas, differing significantly from the original chamber setting for only voice and piano in Debussy’s song (colors correspond to those in Figure 4.19).

Figure 4.21. *Le livre de Baudelaire: IV. Recueillement*, mm. 29–35.
In this moment in *Le livre de Baudelaire*, listeners also hear multiple levels of musical intertextuality: Debussy alludes to Wagner, while Adams alludes to both composers and to his own past.

A curious feature of *Le livre de Baudelaire* is that it does not include Debussy’s fifth and final mélodie in the *Cinq poèmes*, “La mort des amants.” What could explain this creative decision by Adams? One compelling idea is that Adams wished to end the recomposition project on his terms: with an orchestral song that reflects upon influence in the history of Western music through allusion and stylistic imitation. By leaving out “La mort des amants,” a poetic reflection upon the inevitability of death, Adams inevitably reshapes the meaning of Debussy’s mélodies as a unified whole.34 The result is an orchestral song cycle that could reflect his historical concerns and interests. As Helen Abbott and David Evans explain, the focus in “Recueillement” is anxiety and uncertainty about the future:

...although the personified ‘Douleur’ [grief/sorrow] goes unspecified, it may be read, in the context both of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and the *Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire*, as the anguish of the post-Romantic artist standing at the end of an era, sensing that a period of aesthetic stability may be over.35

As a composer enamored with the romantic tradition during the twilight of the twentieth century, Adams perhaps felt an anxiety similar to the subject in Baudelaire’s poem. Closing *Le livre de Baudelaire* with a recomposition highlighting layers of intertextuality over more than a century of musical history could provide a remedy to such pessimism.

---


Adams Composing Through Others

Both *Five Songs of Charles Ives* and *Le livre de Baudelaire* are musical works infused with concerns about history and influence. As recompositions, they also serve as manifestations of Busoni’s “realm of music,” that vast space of constant flux and abundance containing interpenetrating melodies both heard and unheard. John Habron has argued that Busoni’s realm of music is essentially postmodern in orientation: “The realm can be read as a picture of the inevitable intertextuality of creative work and the way in which one text implicates every other.”36 Busoni’s rejection of the modernist faith in progress over the past is best exemplified in his willingness to engage with pre-romantic musical sources under the pedagogical doctrine of “Young Classicality.”37 He believed he could reinvigorate the musical tradition and provide a direction for the future by synthesizing earlier styles through his compositions, transcriptions, arrangements, and orchestrations.38

Adams appears a kindred spirit to Busoni. His approach to recomposing *Five Songs of Charles Ives* and *Le Livre de Baudelaire* exhibit little of the self-aggrandizing, Freudian struggles found in recompositions from other twentieth century composers and described by Joseph Straus.39 Instead, we find Adams gently imprinting his own perspective upon the original sources through his use of the orchestra. Observing Adams’s recomposition process is like hearing Busoni’s realm of music at the end of the twentieth century. The music “already heard” is before listeners’ ears again, but altered in instrumentation and emphasis to create a recomposed space that is partially familiar, partially unfamiliar, of the past and present alike. Straus’s view of recomposition as an agonistic competition derives from Harold Bloom’s work on the poet’s relationship to the past, enumerated in *The Anxiety of Influence*. For Bloom, belated

36 Habron, “Sonorous Air,” 47.
37 For more information on Busoni’s “New Classicality,” see Tamara Levitz, *Teaching New Classicality: Ferruccio Busoni's Master Class in Composition* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1996).
poets are caught up in an Oedipal struggle with poets of the past as they attempt to establish creative identities.\textsuperscript{40} For Straus, Bloom’s literary theories regarding influence have much to tell us about the evolving relationship between a composer and the past, but Straus focuses only on repertoires from earlier decades of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{41} How might we explain this difference between Adams and earlier modernists? What can Straus’s premise regarding composerly intentionality in recompositions tell us about similar undertakings from a composer working later in the twentieth century?

The influence of Jung provides a compelling explanation for the character of Adams’s recompositions. Individuation, the collective unconscious, and archetypes are all concepts to which Adams was exposed in the 1980s. In fact, he was involved with the C.G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles during this period, composing film music for two Jung documentaries: \textit{Matter of Heart} (1985) and \textit{The World Within} (1990).\textsuperscript{42} The Jungian understanding of the creative impulse, in David Cooper’s estimation, matches well with what we have observed in Adams’s approach to recomposition: “The clash between something deeply felt (unconscious) and something sanctified by the collective status quo (collectively conscious) fosters the drive to “revise” and “elaborate,” a drive that we can call the creative response.”\textsuperscript{43} Adams elaborated upon and revised the work of Ives and Debussy, probing for potential correspondences he might share with their

\textsuperscript{40} Harold Bloom, \textit{The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry}, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14–16


stylistic gestures, conventions, and sensibilities. Such undertakings allowed Adams to determine what could inform and enhance his own style when composing original music. We can, for example, find the work done in *Five Songs of Charles Ives* resurfacing years later in his 2003 orchestral piece *My Father Knew Charles Ives.*\(^{44}\) We can also see Adams engage with Debussy in the years preceding *Le livre de Baudelaire* with the 1989 piano concertino *Eros Piano.*\(^{45}\) In both cases, the desire to revise and elaborate came from an intensive study of material from the past, but did not result in an agonistic struggle to assert mastery over it. Approaching recomposition as a Busonian act of elaboration and revision allowed Adams to articulate his own stylistic conventions while cultivating a sense of balance and integrity in relation to his predecessors.

---

\(^{44}\) While drawing on the three-part form of *Three Places in New England,* Adams also includes brief narrative indications, particularly in the first movement, “Concord.” The extended trumpet solo in this movement not only harkens back to Ives’s iconic trumpet solo in *The Unanswered Question,* but also refers back to choices Adams made in the earlier song recompositions such as “Thoreau” and “Down East.” The second movement of *My Father Knew Charles Ives,* entitled “The Lake,” strongly suggests some of the other Ives songs to which Adams was almost certainly exposed during the 1990s as he selected particular songs to recompose. Most notable is Ives’s “Remembrance,” which draws on material from *The Pond,* a short chamber orchestra work in which “the sound of Ives’s father was embodied in the trumpet as if wafting over the pond.” For more information, see Stuart Feder, “Charles Ives and Henry David Thoreau: ‘A Transcendental Tune of Concord,’” in *Ives Studies,* ed. Philip Lambert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 168. Feder made this point earlier with the psychoanalytic biography *Charles Ives: My Father’s Son,* 314. In Adams’s “Lake,” this role is taken up by the oboe and clarinet and a similar narrative underpins the quiet, shimmering musical texture. In *The Pond,* Ives indicates “A sound of a distant horn O’er shadowed lake is borne, my father’s song.” Adams explains the autobiographical nature of “The Lake,” in terms similar to those of *The Pond.* For more information, see Adams, *Hallelujah Junction,* 230. This was the dance hall in which Adams’s parents met for the first time, which is corroborated in a number of sources. For example, see Joshua Kosman, “Symphony Premieres Adams’s Splendid *Ives,*” *The San Francisco Chronicle,* May 2, 2003. Further information is also available in Michael Steinberg, “My Father Knew Charles Ives,” in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer,* ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2006), 206–07.

CHAPTER 5
EPILOGUE

T.S. Eliot, in his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” described how new works of art and the “existing monuments” of the past engage in a dynamic relationship in which the former change our conception of the latter:

...what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered...¹

Such a dynamic occurred in each of the stages of Adams’s creative life chronicled in this dissertation. His juvenilia from the early and mid-1970s, while sometimes lacking in originality, drew upon monuments of the very near past in an attempt to find a creative path forward. Pieces such as Heavy Metal and Hockey Seen, while struggling to maintain a unique musical integrity, are graceful failures that emphasize Eliot’s point: creating a “really new” work of art is challenging and cannot be done through simple imitative invention. Among the pieces of juvenilia surveyed, a work such as “Christian Zeal and Activity” from American Standard comes closest to Eliot’s definition of a “really new” work of art that, if ever so slightly, altered the existing order of avant-garde compositions that preceded it. In the case of “Christian Zeal and Activity,” the alteration of the existing order involves the very model upon which Adams likely based the piece: Gavin Bryars’s Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet.

By 1977, Adams found a firm footing as a second-generation minimalist through the introduction of a new technique, “gating,” which he would subsequently expand when creating large-scale works. These concert works allowed him to distinguish himself from his minimalist

elders Terry Riley, Philip Glass, and Steve Reich. The period that encompasses *Shaker Loops* (1978) to *Harmonium* (1981) represented a fascinating span of intense creative activity, with Adams groping towards a flexible use of the gating technique as he expanded the instrumental forces at his disposal. With the choral symphony *Harmonium*, he created a summa of everything he had learned and synthesized it in the musical fabric. The result is a “really new” work of art in the sense Eliot describes. Upon hearing the unique depths of expression Adams achieves in his settings of Donne and Dickinson in the early 1980s, it is difficult to not hear preceding musical settings by Benjamin Britten (*The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 1945) and Aaron Copland (*Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 1950) in a different light. On the level of genre too, a similar effect occurs. The sense of scale and scope in *Harmonium*, as well as its synthesis of minimalist repetition and pulsation with nineteenth century romantic conventions, compels listeners to reconsider and hear earlier choral symphonies—by Mahler and Beethoven especially—in a new way, if ever so slightly.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Adams was an established composer, less concerned with staking out territory and making a name for himself. As a result, his focus shifted from concerns with contemporaries to explorations of the more distant past and how he fit within the larger historical narrative of Western art music. This self-reflexivity about posterity, influence, and the importance of the past in the present led to a self-assured series of orchestration projects. Orchestrations, transcriptions, and arrangements are, by their nature, conspicuous alterations of the past; in Adams’s case, he took small-scale songs by Ives and Debussy and turned them into large-scale orchestral songs that could reflect his own aesthetic concerns. A natural side effect of

---

these orchestrations is that they cast the original material in a new light as Adams emphasized features not found in the original scores. *Five Songs of Charles Ives* and *Le livre de Baudelaire* conspicuously assert themselves into the existing order Eliot describes, with Ives and Debussy no longer heard in exactly the same way. By composing through others, Adams has been able to contribute to the rich field of historical monuments that constitute the Western musical tradition.
ABBREVIATIONS


Carr, Martha. “*Harmonium Introduced at Powell Hall.*” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 14, 1984.


______. “From Liszt to Adams (I): The *Wiegenlied* Transcription.” *Tempo* 175 (December 1990): 23–26


Charles Amirkhanian: Good evening and welcome to Ode to Gravity. This is Charles Amirkhanian and my guest tonight is going to be John Adams, the director of the New Music Ensemble of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Welcome, John. Could you say a little bit about your background before you came out to San Francisco? You haven’t been out on the West coast all that long.

John Adams: I came out a year ago—August. Before that, I had been at Harvard for six long years. I studied with Leon Kirchner, Roger Sessions for a little while, and Earl Kim.

CA: Was that philosophy or English or was that music?

JA: That was music.

CA: One never knows what composers are studying these days. Then what happened after that?

JA: I had been occupied in a lot of different areas in Boston. I had been freelance playing around town as a clarinetist and had done a lot of conducting. I had studied conducting with Mario DeBarnum and gradually got into composition—straight composition as you may call it—and then went from there into electronic music. There was nobody in Boston at the time—this was between 1968, 1969, and 1970—that was really doing a great deal of electronic music, so I was sort of alone, which was nice because I had all the studio time I wanted. But when it came to critical response or any type of audience it was very difficult to dig it up. I found my best audiences were high school kids; I was going around and doing free lecture demonstrations for high school. Eventually I decided it was time to make a move and I had some friends out here, particularly Ivan Tcherepnin, who ironically, as soon as I got here, went back to Harvard to teach. But Ivan and a few other people coaxed me and I came out.

CA: What’s it like working at the Conservatory?

JA: It’s very busy. It’s a quickly expanding place. The stories I hear about what the place was just three or four years ago are unbelievable. Most of this is due to President Milton Sulkin. You’re overworked, but it’s a pleasure. The students are very enthusiastic. I, particularly having come from a university environment, really like working at a conservatory because you’re dealing directly with the music-making element and it’s really a great pleasure.

CA: Are the people that study at the Conservatory mostly interested in learning how to play instruments or do you have composition majors as well?

JA: We have a few composition majors and I would say that some of them are really remarkable; as good, or even better, than most of the composers that I encountered at Harvard.

CA: Do they write in traditional styles?

JA: Some of them do, some of them don’t. We did a piece by one of my students on our January concert—Richard Mathias—which was a type of chance thing. It was a remarkably beautiful
Other students tend to write in slightly more traditional styles. A lot of the students in the composition seminar are really interested in twelve-tone music, so there is no *au courant* style that governs the student body.

CA: Why don’t we begin with some music and listen to one of your pieces, which is called *Heavy Metal*. Tell me about this piece.

JA: It’s a sort of setting. I say “sort of setting” because you can’t hear all of the words of a final passage from William Burroughs’s *Soft Machine*. It’s on the very last page of the book and it is a reaction, on my part, to Burroughs’s prose, his rhythm, his use of words, and also to his own style of reading. I really went through a heavy Burroughs period. I was very interested in his technique of cutting up and pasting back, which is a technique where he writes a conventional page of prose and then, in a kind of Cagean style, cuts it up, randomly reassembles it, and then makes a compilation of that.

CA: The results are always fantastic.

JA: The results are amazing.

CA: Maybe it’s the way he does it, but it works, whatever it is.

JA: Well of course, it’s also the prose he begins with. If you read *Naked Lunch*, his first book, which doesn’t have any of this cut up technique, it’s almost the same feeling. He just was a profound enough individual to understand his own technique and draw it one step further.

CA: Now is this his voice that we are going to hear?

JA: No, this is not his voice. It is the voice of a friend of mine at Cambridge who has a voice just like William Burroughs. I roused him out of bed at about eight o’clock one morning when I had the studio and he croaks in a fashion very much like Burroughs. The actual setting is done principally on the Buchla synthesizer with a couple of passages on the ARP synthesizer and a great deal of concrète sound and primitive percussion instruments. *Heavy Metal* is a three or four way pun. It’s also the name of one of his characters. I think it’s Heavy Metal Willy, the Uranian Kid.

CA: Let’s listen now to *Heavy Metal* by John Adams

[Heavy Metal plays]

CA: You just heard *Heavy Metal* by John Adams; a resetting, or decomposition, of William Burroughs’s last page from *The Soft Machine*. John Adams is the director of the New Music ensemble at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. We are going to be talking about some of his pieces and some that were played recently by the conservatory ensemble. What’s your instrument, John?

JA: Originally the clarinet. I started out with my father as my first teacher.

CA: Was he a clarinet professor somewhere?
JA: No, he’s not. Not at all. He’s from a small town in New Hampshire and the two of us played in the local band. I don’t play the piano very well as some of my students will attest, but I try to whack away when I have to teach a course in it.

CA: Have you done pieces for standard instruments as well as your tape pieces?

JA: Yeah, I wrote a piano quintet in 1970 that was played at the Marlboro Festival in Vermont and a few other pieces—sort of juvenilia.

CA: Who played the piece at Marlboro? Some of the heavies?

JA: No, not some of the heavies. Not to impugn Marlboro’s integrity, but it’s sort of a funny place. They attract, or they give these fellowships to, young composers, generally people in their twenties or thirties, who go up for a period of usually four weeks. The attraction is, number one, the prestige, and number two, the hope that you’re going to get a great performance. What happens is you get up there and you have to beg people to do your piece. I almost didn’t get my piece done because it was a quintet for piano and strings and string players were willing to do it, but I couldn’t find a pianist. Finally, I found one gentle soul who said he’d try it. I don’t blame them, really. They are tremendously overworked. I’ve never seen anything like it.

CA: One has the impression that these were all great artists from the records that they issue from the Marlboro Festival; the idea that you can simply take a piece there and that the crème of the American concert scene will be playing it in a number of days.

JA: I’ve never seen, or heard, such string playing in my life. It’s just amazing.

CA: It is.

JA: But I don’t get off too much on virtuosity, so I found myself out in the woods more often than not.

CA: Well that’s interesting because it might mean that when you program for the New Music Ensemble, you would tend to program better for students than somebody else who might expect a certain absurdly high level of playing on an instrument. I don’t know. How does that relate to your program?

JA: I have a sort of ethic or philosophy that I’ve developed in the course of this year. Not so much about programming, but about what to do with a group of players. The first thing I’m doing is trying to lower my profile as “director,” “conductor”, “changer de faire” and so on and so forth. I’m beginning to find conducting a sort of swinish occupation and I try to do as little of it as possible. What I do is I play. I just consider myself one of the group and we try to operate in the chamber music tradition. If it’s not possible, I stand up and I wave my arms. The result is, perhaps at this point, not quite as precise as if I conducted, but I think it’s a much better situation. The second thing I’m trying to do is to relegate a lot of the decision-making process, which you come across in any new piece of music, to a kind of democratic council.

CA: In other words, if the composer leaves something up for grabs, everybody gets to choose?
JA: Well, we talk about it.

CA: That’s fair.

JA: We very often hold our first couple of rehearsals just sitting down on the floor and talking. Of course, as we get towards concert times, more and more decisions come up and I have to become a little more despotic, but hopefully that eventually won’t happen. Some of this is inspiration from the Scratch Orchestra in England—Cardew and people like that. Some of it is a direct result of my reading of John Cage and I think some of the first examples of this activity took place when we started to prepare Burdocks by Christian Wolff—he says right in the directions “the group should gather and decide or choose members to gather and decide.”

CA: One of the most exciting experiences that I’ve had recently was when I was in London and I heard the Scratch Orchestra play Burdocks. It was amazing. It evidently is a piece that can go on as infinitely long as you want, is that right?

JA: Well, it is a scratch piece in that sense. One of the definitions of scratch music is that it’s feasibly interminable.

CA: I see. Could you tell everyone what the Scratch Orchestra is? You might know more about it than I do.

JA: Well, I know not a great deal about it, but I’ve been corresponding with some people in England. What I gather about it is that it is a collection of people who come together—some of them are not even necessarily musicians—and play, but they also compose. Each person keeps a notebook with a composition in it. Now some of the scratch compositions don’t bear any resemblance to conventionally notated music at all—they are pictures. They look like a little kindergarten book. It’s an experiment in social activity. I have a feeling that a lot of the scratch performances don’t involve music, that is, organized sound, in any way; I think it’s a tremendously important thing because I think music is gradually losing its feeling of compartmentalization of authority and underlings. It’s losing the whole “conductor-performer” trip, the dictating by the composer, the blueprint, the “Frankenstein monsters” Cage described in 1954 or so in the lectures on indeterminacy.

CA: David Amerim was recently here at KPFA and went through a very heavy rap about the conductor and the same thing that you are talking about. I think it must be pretty much in the air that people want conductors to be like everybody else; just fine musicians who can keep time and to be more a part of their activity, rather than the despot.

JA: I think it’s a peculiarly American development...

CA: You think so?

JA: ...which is very nice.

CA: What about Ferving?
JA: Well, what about them? They’re despots.

CA: Yeah, maybe so. Great despots.

JA: Well, it’s the Napoleon trip, or the Bismarck, or whatever...

CA: You don’t think there’s room for both?

JA: ...monarchy. No, I don’t there is room for both, not in new music.

CA: What about when you play Beethoven?

JA: Conductors will always stay around as long as we want to hear Beethoven, certainly. There’s no question about that. Orchestras will stay around. But let me give you an example: we have a situation where, in this country, the critics, including our own famous bunch at The Chronicle, keep complaining that they never hear any great new music for orchestra. Well, they blame that on Mr. Ozawa. It isn’t really Mr. Ozawa’s fault because there isn’t any great music being written for orchestra anymore. Composers do not compose for that type of setup. It’s impossible to compose a piece that involves chance or involves locational displacement of musicians, or all of the different styles and activities that we do.

CA: Unless you are already famous for doing that. For instance, Stockhausen can get away with it because he is well known for doing it and he gets his pieces performed

JA: Yes, but only on a limited scale.

CA: Yeah, true. I’m not knocking him. I think its great that he can spend two years working on a piece. I wish I could.

JA: Given an orchestra. The thing is that whole thing of authority I think is really going to change a great deal. Of course, this means, and I found this happening with my students at school—here I am calling them my students—that they have to learn to take on a tremendous amount of creative responsibly and sometimes they balk at it. They want to go into a rehearsal, sit down, take out their axe, look at the music, and rehearse and have somebody tell them that they’re going too fast or where the beat is. When they come into our rehearsals and they have a strange piece of notation in front of them, they realize that they have to just sit and make their own creative decisions and their own aesthetic decisions as to whether what’s coming out is good or bad.

CA: Has it worked?

JA: I think it has worked. I think Burdocks, that we have a tape of here, is an excellent indication of how well it works. Incidentally, Burdocks is a collection of ten different performing activities. Of the two that we are going to hear, one involves timbre and there’s virtually no interpersonal communication in it. The second one, section seven, involves precise coordination of attacks interfaced with its opposite, and number seven did take a conductor.

[Burdocks plays]
CA: You just heard a performance of Burdocks, parts five and seven from a ten-part work by Christian Wolff, the American composer. Our guest tonight on Ode to Gravity is John Adams, who directs the New Music Ensemble at the San Francisco Conservatory. We’ll be talking with him now about a piece called American Standard which, I take, is a tape composition?

JA: No, it’s not. It’s a composition written for the New Music Ensemble that was given its first performance on the same program with Burdocks.

CA: What’s the title about?

JA: Well, there are three pieces in the composition: there’s a march, a hymn tune, and a jazz tune. So, in a sense, they’re American standards—indigenous musical forms.

CA: I kept thinking of an American eagle and a flag when I hear “American Standard.” It’s beautiful.

JA: Sure, that’s fine.

CA: How do you score these things out? How do the people get together to play the march for instance?

JA: Well, it’s sort of funny in its scoring because everybody plays on the same part to begin with. The march is a series of about three hundred beats. What I’ve done is I’ve taken the conventional march rhythms and accentuated or exaggerated them by stripping them of their melody and harmony.

CA: Fantastic idea.

JA: There is one chord, which the players play: a B-flat 4/2 chord. And its repeated—I don’t know how many times, like sixty times or so—and then they have an option of deviating from that chord, either going up or down and then I introduce corny march rhythms so on.

CA: On instruments, playing on the same...?

JA: Any instruments.

CA: Oh, but playing on one of the tones of the B-flat 4/2 chord?

JA: No. That B-flat 4/2 chord is what I call a “constant” and it’s notated slightly different and they keep returning to the “constant” and they deviate from it.

CA: They play melodies on each instrument?

JA: No, they just play...

CA: ...the rhythm?
JA: They just play a note and then when they deviate from the constant, it is either indicated they go up, at any interval they want, or down. It turns out to be an awfully difficult piece because there are no bar lines in it. The reason I didn’t want any bar lines is I wanted a single pulse—somewhat a la Terry Riley—except this is a kind of “plodding pulse.” Someone said it sounded like a returning army that had just been whipped in battle.

CA: Did you find that students and people who performed this piece got confused by having to think of tones as well as keeping within the rhythms that you prescribed?

JA: They’re getting pretty good at that now.

CA: I think that might be tough.

JA: It is tough. It’s very hard. Especially when I have a very conventional rhythm like four sixteenth notes going up with just arrows pointing. It gets to be hard. I couldn’t believe one girl’s part: I went over to look at it after we had been rehearsing it for about a month and it was C-sharp, D, E-flat. She had written out every single note.

CA: Oh my gosh.

JA: But that made her feel comfortable and that’s perfectly permissible.

CA: How about the other two parts?

JA: The other two parts?

CA: “Hymn Tune” and “Jazz Tune.”

JA: The hymn tune is called “Christian Zeal and Activity.” It’s a title that I stole out of an old Methodist gospel or hymn tune book. It’s an arrangement of a popular hymn tune. Ironically enough, I discovered that the composer for it was an English composer: Sir Arthur Sullivan. But its still an American standard. The technique here is to displace the voice leading, to sort of stagger the voice leading. You can sort of recognize the hymn, but because of the fact that I delay or anticipate voice-leading, it sounds strangely like Mahler. Perhaps it’s because of my really good viola players that are playing, but it has a certain “Adagio” of the Fifth Symphony kind of quality to it.

CA: Why don’t you explain what voice leading is.

JA: Well, if you have a four-part chorale, each voice moves to a triad, or a doubling of the triad of the following chord. For instance, if you go from one to the dominant, those pitches that are in the tonic have to move and they have to move in a certain fashion. So according to conventional voice leading, you avoid certain things like parallel fifths and so on and so forth. Here I’ve delayed them. One or three voices will move and the last one will stay behind. It begins to sound like suspensions in Bach, but of course some of this is sort of irrational and it comes out dissonant.

CA: Do you want to talk about the last part now?
JA: Yeah, the other thing about the hymn tune is that there is a further bit of Americana in that there’s an interview that I took off a talk show of a preacher arguing, and it’s actually quite a touching experience. It’s also funny, and kind of disturbing.

CA: It’s played by means of tape in the middle of the performance?

JA: Yes.

CA: Will we be able to hear it in this recording?

JA: Yes, I’ve dubbed it on so that it’s intelligible.

CA: Great.

JA: The final one is called “Sentimentals” and it’s an arrangement or reworking of Duke Ellington’s Sophisticated Lady. Here the technique is separating melody from harmony. I love the tune and in no sense am I parodying here. I’m just spreading it out and taking it apart, so there are passages where there’s nothing but harmony and passages where there is nothing but melody.

CA: Let’s listen now to American Standard. It sounds like a fascinating piece. The composer is John Adams and the performers are members of the New Music Ensemble from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

[American Standard Plays]

CA: You just heard American Standard by John Adams and it was just performed by the New Music Ensemble at the San Francisco Conservatory on March 22, 1973 in one of their regular concert series. John Adams has also composed an extensive tape piece called Hockey Seen, which runs for forty minutes and we have time for a portion of it on the program tonight. Could you describe the part we are going to hear, John?

JA: I was commissioned last summer by the Harvard Summer School to write an electronic score for a production that was the product of a lot of different minds, including some of the people involved with the Boston Bruins. Boston is an absolutely insane town for hockey. I like the sport myself. I’m not nuts about it, but it is a remarkable sport, especially when it is played in Boston—you get all those Irish people swearing at the opponents and so on. The idea here was a multimedia show. You have to understand that multimedia is big doings for Boston, so this was a big thing, to actually bring in electronic music to a production.

CA: Did you do it at the Boston Bruins game?

JA: No. We did it at a regular auditorium in Cambridge. It involved a troupe of eight dancers I think, and a pretty elaborate slide projection technique that involved photographs and drawings of hockey. I think there were six or seven projectors that kept fading in and fading out. It was quite an elegant idea. I didn’t really understand what I was getting into when they finally told me it was forty minutes. I had already cashed the first half of my commission check. It was really insane. I had to do this in a period of about seven weeks. I did it entirely on the ARP synthesizer.
at Brandeis University. I’m greatly indebted to them for allowing me to use it. It’s an amazing machine, the ARP. It’s not quite as flexible as the Buchla or the Moog, but it has a certain quality to its components that are very polished and quite beautiful. It’s sort of a piece of pop music in a way. I realized that my audience wasn’t going to be the type of audience that would come to, say, a New Music Ensemble concert. There were a lot of people there that were into hockey and were interested in seeing how a couple of artists could transform the experience. The actual show was structured just like a hockey game in three periods and a sudden death overtime. I think I reacted, number one, to that specification of audience by making the music somewhat tonal. Secondly, I reacted to my notion of the game, which is a certain profuseness of violence and intense activity. This is “Period One” that we are hearing. A lot of this sounds not at all like hockey here. It sounds more like a very strange version of a Russian symphony or something. This is the passage where there is a very austere projection of hockey players coming. And then there’s a dance. The whole first movement is actually passacaglia with variations.

CA: Far out. Let’s listen to “Period One” of Hockey Seen by John Adams.

[Hockey Seen Plays]

CA: That was “Period One” from Hockey Seen by John Adams. John is the director of the New Music Ensemble at the San Francisco Conservatory and is our guest tonight on Ode to Gravity. We’ve heard on this program a number of his compositions, as well as the New Music Ensemble performing excerpts from Burdocks by Christian Wolff. Thank you very much, John. It’s been a pleasure talking with you and especially hearing your music, and may you come back and do some more with us at KPFA. We’d like to hear any other performances you do that are worthy of broadcast.
Dave: Hello, East Bay. You’re on the air. Hello, line six?

Caller: Good morning, Dave.

D: Good morning.

C: Good morning. Well, how man was created.

D: So, what’s your theory?

C: Well, according to the Bible, Adam and Eve are the original parents. They were the first two human beings that had intelligent, breathing—our minds and so on. The point is they were the first two intelligent human beings that were created by God in the Garden of Eden.

D: Now you say, “according to the Bible.”

C: Yes.

D: So, you must be putting an awful lot of weight in the Bible, eh?

C: Well, I believe that it’s God’s word and it’s placed here for our use for the purposes of saving our souls and drawing us closer to God and revealing God’s truth about his creation and future life and so forth.

D: What would you say to me if I told you I believe it’s a book that was written by people long after the fact and sometimes with just a lot of distortions and everything else? Would you call me a heathen?

C: What?

D: If I said it was just a book?

C: Well it’s more than a book. It’s a masterpiece. It’s the mind of God. It contains the mind of God—the state of man and the way of salvation and the happiness of believers. You see if you reject the word of God, then there is no hope at all for you. You might as well just put a gun to your temple and pull the trigger...

D: I don’t think that’s true.

C: ...jump off a bridge. I mean, if you deny God and deny the fact that the Holy Bible is God’s revelation to mankind, then...

D: Who is God? Is God a person to you?

C: God is the Supreme Being, the creator of the universe.
D: Yeah, but you’re not telling me anything.

C: He’s a spirit. He can’t be seen, you know, with a human eye—the naked eye—but he exists. He’s always been.

D: But he must be able to speak if that’s the word of God.

C: Oh, you’re able to contact him through prayer. If you’re not able to reach him in any other way, it takes diligent Bible study and prayer. When a person becomes very ill physically or disturbed mentally in some way or a kind of misfortune where there is no possible help or aid for them or no way to find a solution to the problem, whatever it may be—it could be physical, it could be mental, it could be emotional, it could be financial, it could be something domestic, or something regarding a job or something where a person feels that prayer is a way of reaching our creator, our father.

D: Let me ask you a question sir.

C: Yes sir.

D: I don’t have any financial problems. I don’t think I have any physical or emotional problems. I’m not losing my job.

C: Mhmm.

D: So, why do I need God then, if what you said is true?

C: Well, you see, it’s necessary to, what we call, “be saved.” There are “saved” individuals and there are “unsaved” people.

D: May I respectfully submit, sir, that, in other words, instead of saying “believing for me” is what you should say, because a belief is an invention. You’re not going to tell me you have the answer.

C: Yes, I do. You asked me your question...

D: No, you don’t. No sir. You don’t have the answer for me any more than you can tell me what section of the city to live in. You can’t tell me how to think.

C: You see, I’m a preacher and I read the Bible every day. And I pray from it and I read all the Scriptures.

D: Alright, but I don’t care to have you preach to me. Do you follow me?

C: No, I don’t mean that. I’m just saying that...

D: You’re trying to convince of something but you’re not convincing me.

C: Convince you, what? How to be sure...
D: You would convince me if you said, “God is for me. And this is the way I live.”

C: God is for everyone, regardless of...

D: No he’s not!

C: ...your nationality or your race or your color or your creed. He’s the creator of all people.

D: Alright. I was just trying to teach you something in semantics, if I may be a little pedantic.

C: You’ve heard of the Psalms of David—King David in the Old Testament?

D: Hey, I don’t want to get into a religious thing here now. Okay?

C: Don’t get...

D: No, no, but that gets so boring. Look, I mean don’t get into this stuff. This is not a forum. Bob, don’t get me any more calls on religion, please.
VITA

Michael Palmese, from Ocala, Florida, is a PhD candidate in musicology at Louisiana State University. He earned a Bachelor of Music in composition at Georgia Southern University in May 2012, graduating from the Honors Program summa cum laude and receiving multiple scholarships and grants. He earned a Master of Music in musicology in May 2014 at the University of Miami, writing his thesis on Arnold Schoenberg and fin-de-siècle Vienna. Michael has presented his research at both national and international conferences and has published articles and book chapters on music and literature from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.