traditional discourse, to call into question its gestures and procedures from the inside, and to imagine from that vantage point the possibility of other narrative schemata.


New Topicality

Another way in which "high art" traditionally differed from "popular culture" was in its aspirations to "transcendence" or "timelessness" or call it what you will—that is, its claim to inhabit an "autonomous" realm, "beyond good and evil," "disinterestedly" pursuing the beautiful, rather than the good or the true. The derisive quotes surround what were increasingly viewed as a bunch of clichés, mostly inherited from German Romantic philosophy; the derision was timely, given the way in which popular culture had responded to the social pressures of the 1960s in a fashion that seemed to leave high culture not only high but dry. The autonomy of art seemed in danger of shading into irrelevance and its disinterestedness into moral indifference. Such was the view, at any rate, of a group of determined artists who forcibly invested the high-art genres with topical relevance (or, to put it the other way around, interjected high-art projects into contemporary political and social debates) beginning in the 1980s. The one who attracted the most attention was Peter Sellars (1958–), a prolific stage director who followed a series of controversial updatings of traditional operas (notably Mozart's) with a pair of original works in which he teamed up with two artists he had known as students at Harvard in the 1970s: the composer John Adams (1947–), not to be confused with John Luther Adams on p. 540, and the poet Alice Goodman (1958–). The works they produced together, Nixon in China (1987) and The Death of Klinghoffer (1991), established what was hailed as a veritable new genre. Some was christened this genre "CNN opera," after the Cable News Network, the first all-news-all-the-time venture on cable TV because of the way it monumentalized stories taken from the daily headlines using high-art methods; these works were consequently open to the sort of lively, at times aggravated, political debate and critique from which traditional art genres (save in totalitarian societies) were usually exempt. The genre certainly justified itself in terms of the notice—or notoriety—that it attracted. Adams, in particular, was launched by Nixon on a spectacular career. The downside came out in 2001, when a performance of choruses from The Death of Klinghoffer, which dealt head-on with Islamic terrorism, was cancelled by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center, amid charges and countercharges of censorship on the one hand, and moral insensitivity on the other. The interview with Adams below was conducted long in advance of that dénouement by Andrew Porter (1928–), a critic known both for his enthusiasm for Sellars's work, and for his hostility to minimalism, the stylistic milieu from which Adams's work was perceived to derive.

Andrew Porter: Nixon in China is an unusual opera in many ways. One of the most striking is that, so far as I know, it's the only opera ever written about
people who are still alive. Whose idea was it to write an historical opera about the historical present?

It was Peter Sellars's idea. I think actually two different ideas converged in Peter's mind at about the same time. In the early 1980s he was interested in staging The Red Detachment of Women, which is a ballet that has a rather long history in 20th-century China, but which Madame Mao Zedong herself reshaped and rehabilitated in order to express the goals of the Cultural Revolution. The other idea was the actual story of the trip to China, especially as seen through the eyes of someone who was there, in this case Henry Kissinger. Then, when we enlisted Alice Goodman to write the libretto, we all seriously began reading the source material, and as you can imagine, it was just staggering how much literature there was on this event ...

AP: Yes, it generated everything, didn't it—those newsreels, documentaries ... ?

JA: Oh yes, and now the opera seems to have generated its own pile of material as well! So, we read a great deal, everything from the Ladies' Home Journal to Mao's poetry to Nixon's own memoirs to hagiography of Chou En-Lai and Mao himself.

AP: It has turned out to be an important meeting for relations between countries.

JA: Well, you know it's interesting that every time Nixon in China has been produced, some public event has just happened, or is happening: the week of the Houston première was Black Monday on the New York Stock Exchange; when it was playing in Amsterdam, Reagan and Gorbachev were meeting in Moscow; and now here in Edinburgh we're just finishing up the debris of the [1988] Republican National Convention. So there always seems to be something that's tangentially related to this subject going on in the world, which maybe suggests that this is the proper thing for opera to do. It was certainly the case in Verdi and Wagner's time. Opera addressed hotly debated issues that people thought about all the time.

AP: Yes, but it never did quite in this direct way. I remember writing when the opera first came out that the meeting of Nixon and Chou En-Lai was comparable operatically to the meeting of Wotan and Erda, which is one of the meetings that did change the history of the world as told in Wagner's Ring, or perhaps, in Verdi's Attila, the meeting between Atilla at the gates of Rome with Pope Leo—the barbarian horde turned back from the gates of Rome, and history again turning on a meeting. Those were allegories, I suppose, of real meetings that were happening, whereas you have chosen real people.

JA: Yes, they're real people, but yet they're not. One of the things about the story that I found so appealing and why I enjoyed composing it, was the opportunity to move, during the course of three acts, from the plastic cartoon versions of public people that
the media always present us with, to the real, uncertain, vulnerable human beings who stand behind these cardboard cutouts.

**AP:** Your Richard Nixon and Pat Nixon certainly do have inner lives—characters of their own. To what extent did you invent this for them, or to what extent did you deduce or find it in memoirs?

**JA:** There is hardly anything in this opera which is invented. Virtually everything—even in the third act, which most people assume is poetic license—is based on things which Nixon said in his memoirs or that Pat said in interviews.

**AP:** Then let me put it another way. Have you used this material critically or not? One of the sharpest criticisms I’ve heard about Nixon, even from people who’ve enjoyed it very much as a music drama, has been that it produces so favorable an impression of Richard Nixon. I think a lot of people are upset that you seem to present a rather well-meaning man rather than a liar and crook.

**JA:** Well, first of all I don’t believe that Richard Nixon was a completely mendacious and hopelessly evil person. What we were trying to do with our operatic Nixon was not only to use the historical Richard Nixon but also to try to develop an archetype of an American public leader. One of the principal things that interested me was the typically American sense of assumed superiority. These Americans were coming to China with the tacit assumption that American culture is by far the better one. And that we were bringing progress and democracy and sound marketing principles, and Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln and Walt Disney to this backward culture. In a sense, what happens in the wonderful scene where Mao and Nixon actually confront each other, is that Nixon—who thinks that by reading a briefing the night before, he can know everything he needs to about China—of course falls completely on his face when he actually encounters the real Mao Ze-dong who is, to my mind, a far more powerful figure. Beyond that, I think that Nixon’s cruelty to Pat was something that we focused on quite a bit, because we felt that this typifies the American idea of what a woman should be. The issue of sexual politics is threaded throughout this opera, both in the relationship between Pat and Dick, and that between Chairman and Madame Mao.

**AP:** If you are in Nixon in China trying to some extent to criticize what Americans expect, but you present what they do expect, isn’t it a type of satire which can backfire?

**JA:** But I don’t view this as a satirical opera at all. There are elements of satire in it. We hitched up with the word “heroic” at one point, which I somewhat regret—now we’re stuck with it—but I think that Alice wanted to use the term “heroic” partly to distinguish the opera from being a satire.

**AP:** Yes, it’s not satire, but it could fairly be called an epic opera.

**JA:** Yes, and of course you know these people did think of themselves as heroes. Nixon saw himself as an astronaut stepping onto the moon, and certainly Mao considered himself as a hero.
But surely Mao and Chou En-lai were heroes?

I believe so, yes.

I'm sure one of the things that people listening to this opera over the air are noticing is that the style develops as it goes along. You don't continue as you begin which—thank heavens!—in this style is something I'm grateful for. Were you conscious of this yourself?

I'm not exactly sure what you mean? Do you mean that the musical style ...

... becomes more intricate, less repetitive; the blocks become smaller; the interlocking of blocks becomes closer, the working out is tighter ...

I think that the style reflects what's going on poetically. The opening is very repetitive but what I was trying to summon up was the land and the people before all of this event occurred. It seemed to me when I thought of the Long March and of the vastness of the country, and the millions and millions of people, that the repetitive quality of these ascending A minor scales was a perfect way to set that tone. Whereas in Act III we've traveled a great distance and we're no longer talking so much about landscape and simple peasants, we're talking about very complicated human dynamics. We're talking, for example, about the incredibly complicated relationship between Chou En-Lai and Mao, and between Madame Mao and Mao, and hence I thought that the music had to emotionally reflect that, so it's much more complicated music.

Did you start at the beginning when you composed?

Yes. I sat down one day and I wrote Nixon in China at the top of a blank page of score and I started. I figured that if I didn't I'd never be able to write the opera!

And then you wrote a scale of A minor?

Yes.

And then wrote "x 23" or something?

Yes ... I did!

Then you came to do the ballet, and I wondered whether you'd listened at all to the music of The Red Detachment of Women?

I am a little nervous about too much research when it comes to the creative act. I think it's good to have something suggested, but if you get too close to your model I think that your original muse gets offended. I had seen not The Red Detachment of Women, but a film of another Chinese ballet which was very similar to it called The White Haired Girl. But what I recalled from my one and only exposure was that the music was a strange misapprehension, basically of Russian ballet music. It sounded a little bit like a committee had tried to reconstruct by memory a Glinka or perhaps a Tchaikovsky ballet, but there was a tremendous confusion of styles. This was just perfect for me, because stylistic confusion has been one of the fuels that have run my creative engine for years.
A difference between your music and that of, say, Philip Glass and Steve Reich is that their later instrumental music sounds to me as though it was written for the small ensembles with which they first worked, and has now been transferred into a full orchestra sound, whereas it seems to me that your music has been conceived in orchestral colors right from the start.

What you must remember about me is that I never had a small ensemble period like Reich or Glass did. I’ve always been an orchestral composer. The synthesizer is a wonderful instrument for me because it does give a sense of spaciousness and massiveness. I’m a composer who works at the piano like Stravinsky and Copland.

I wonder if there are any who don’t!

Well there are plenty who claim they don’t. I also use an eight track tape recorder. I don’t use it in the initial stage. I wrote Nixon in China as a piano vocal score—I had to because the singers had to start learning it—and then I went back and orchestrated it. In the orchestration stage I always use an eight-channel tape recorder because I’m able to lay down various tracks of counterpoint, which helps me. I would say that it’s created my style—the use of technology—and it’s allowed me to develop a very active and very thick and rich texture which I think a lot of minimalist music often lacks.

Nixon in China is now making its way around the world. Are you meanwhile thinking of what the next opera might be?

Yes, we’re beyond thinking. Actually Alice is hard at work on the libretto of the next opera, and I’ve been doing a great deal of reading. The subject matter for the new opera is hardly less volatile than Nixon in China. It’s going to be about the hijacking of the Italian cruise liner the Achille Lauro, and part of that story is the execution of the American Leon Klinghoffer who was confined to a wheelchair. There is a certain similarity to Nixon—it’s very remote but it’s an important one—which is that the opera focuses on Americans abroad, tourists I guess you could say, and the way in which Americans are caught up in world events without really understanding or anticipating what’s going to happen to them. I’m an American composer. I’m a very American composer both stylistically and in my attitudes toward my own culture, and I feel that to write an opera about the Palestinian struggle or about Islam versus Judaism is something that is completely outside of my experience, but to write an opera about an American confrontation with those forces is something which I can do, and indeed I think this is one of the strongest things that Peter Sellars does as well.

Whose idea was the subject?

Oh, it was Peter’s again, and I suspect that the subject was suggested to Peter by [the French-Swiss filmmaker] Jean-Luc Godard. Peter and I were talking shortly after he had met with Godard and
Godard had been talking about terrorism as a form of theater, and that suggested to Peter this idea, and then we all took it up.

AP: *Do you have to talk to the survivors and participants?*

JA: This is a very complicated question, and we actually have legal people researching it to find out what our rights are and what their rights are, because of course it’s a very volatile issue. It’s one thing when you use a public character like Nixon or Mao—you are in the United States protected by the Constitution with public people, in fact there was a very recent Supreme Court decision confirming that—but when you use people who are, theoretically at least, private people then you have much greater possibility of a libel suit.

AP: *So you’re researching not only into the American side but into the terrorists’ side as well, I suppose, because they will have to be presented, and you will have to get inside their thoughts in some way or invent them?*

JA: Yes, this is one reason why writing operas is becoming an obsession for me. I am really hardly interested in anything else at the moment except opera, and one of the reasons is that it commands your attention on every level.


The First Symphony by John Corigliano (1938–) was another milestone of the new topicality. First performed (by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra) in 1989, when the AIDS epidemic was still largely associated with the gay community and with issues of civil rights for homosexuals, it quickly went around the world in performances by more than 100 orchestras. It uses collage and allusion devices like those associated with Alfred Schnittke (see p. 501), and contains parts for virtuoso piano and cello soloists. It established the composer as a spokesman for an interest group, which was still an unusual role for a classical musician, even though the disproportionate representation of homosexuals in the creative arts was a long- (if not very openly) acknowledged fact. The text that follows was written as an Op-Ed piece for the *New York Times* in the aftermath of 9/11, the terror attack on the World Trade Center that also impinged forcibly, as noted above, on the reception of John Adams’s work. Corigliano’s piece inspired controversy because of the way in which he linked the perspectives of various minority groups (or “others”) with the one to which his name had been attached, and used the perspective of minority rights to inveigh against what he saw as the unjust hegemony of modernism within the world of musical composition. Some hailed the piece as courageous; others denounced it as opportunistic.

“Today we are all Israelis.” Is this the closest analogy to the way we live now: shaken by terror, reeling from loss, amazed by hatred, wondering desperately if ours are to be the next deaths? No.

I remember reading, almost 20 years ago on another airliner, the first *New York Times* article about GRID, or gay-related immunological disorder: the only term they had, in those days, for AIDS. That plane, unlike the doomed jets two weeks ago, arrived
safely. But the world in which it landed—the 1980's world of New York, of gay men, of the arts—was comparably devastated. With equal surgical precision, the plague slipped through America’s proud medical-industrial defenses to slay thousands.

I was startled and moved, then, after the recent disaster, to see on so many senators’ lapels the AIDS ribbon—that single loop of red that was for years our lone badge of grief—transformed into a tricolor insignia of everything America lost on Sept. 11. The Israeli analogy is true and apt. But what I thought that Tuesday morning was, “We are all AIDS sufferers now.” Of course, a virus is not a jihad: one is a force of nature, the other an act of will. But our responses to each vary less than you might think. As in the early stages of AIDS, we are still searching to define an enemy so that we can understand and defeat it. But even now we can name certain patterns of mind that identify those who hate us, that make their hatred possible.

One such pattern is fundamentalism, which is as distorting to Christianity as it is to Islam. It is also not confined to religion. Fundamentalism is easy to spot when the Rev. Jerry Falwell blames homosexuals and supporters of gay rights for provoking divine retribution in the form of the World Trade Center attack—as well as AIDS. It’s horrifically unmissable when Osama bin Laden bids Muslims everywhere to murder Americans for the glory of Allah. Wasn’t Nazism, too, fundamentalist: a cult devoted to the purity of German identity? True enough, you may say, but the toxicity of religious extremism is old news. Besides, what has all this to do with New Yorkers, with artists: secular urbanites as likely to turn for spiritual solace at a time like this to their museums, their concert halls, as to their churches and synagogues?

Art, too, suffers its own fundamentalisms, and as we work to respond to this tragedy we must not forget them. Orthodoxy of purity, of hierarchy, of rigidity—theories of music, for example, that politicize its smallest materials, the order of its every pitch—still hold sway over much of our musical life. These orthodoxies are more than nuisances. They support a vision of art as a god devoted to the glory of its priests rather than the other way around. They define music not by what can be added but by what must be subtracted. Dogma drives out free interpretation. Correctness supplants generosity. Religiosity—a fundamentalism of aesthetics—oppresses a true art of the spirit: the only art we need.

Few of my students in the 1990’s heeded such dogma. They chose instead to embrace all the sounds around them as well as the new ones they had yet to dream; to name passion, vision, breadth and clarity as music’s highest values. Was it the presence of the AIDS tragedy that revealed the academic and political world of this or that musical “ism” as sterile and arbitrary? Or was it simply growing up in American society, the greatness of which cannot be separated from its diversity?

American pluralism remains the most resonant political idea of our epoch. All people of all races, classes and genders have value, can speak truth, deserve respect. The question, and the challenge, is to fuse them all into a society as rich as it is coherent. This political idea has artistic implications. It is too late for a fundamentalism of a master system, just as it is too late for an ideology of a master race. As we respond to the tragedy of Sept. 11, as well as to that of tomorrow, we must struggle to reconcile—imaginatively, flexibly, compassionately, intelligibly—our titanic richness of musical resource with unmistakable structural order. Our nation—the world—demands no less.