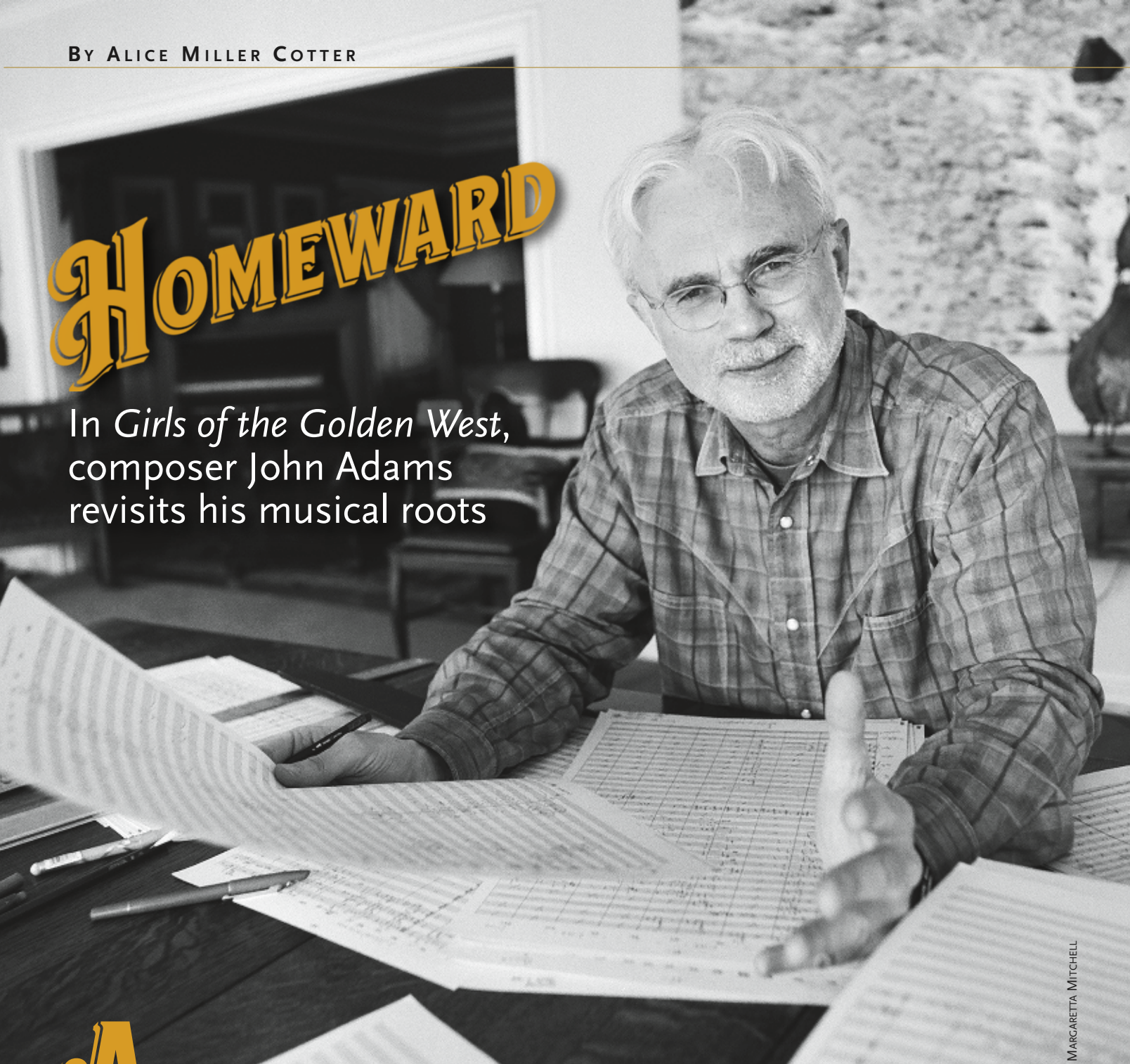


HOMeward

In *Girls of the Golden West*, composer John Adams revisits his musical roots



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Airplanes en route from the east to the west coast begin their descent just ahead of the Sierra Nevada range. They soar over the west-slanting mountain slopes above the canyons of California's wild rivers. On a more northerly route you might see Lake Tahoe and the ridges that extend from the Sierra crest to the valley by Marysville, California. Along one of those ridges is a small formation, Haskell Peak, beneath which rests John Adams' cabin, just north of Downieville. In the mid-19th century it was a treeless landscape, thousands of acres logged in the service of gold mining. Nearly two centuries later the scars of mining remain visible, but the trees have grown back and the rivers run clear. In 1976 Adams found himself here, ram-

bling in places where there were no trails over mounded diggings left by gold miners. "I am in my own spiritual territory now," he wrote of the High Sierra in a journal during the summer of 1984.

Adams, who is 70, has composed dozens of orchestral and chamber works, two large-scale oratorios, and five operas that engage topics as wide-ranging as the Nixon-Mao encounter, terrorism, the New and Old Testament, nuclear weapons, ancient Indian folklore, and, now, the experience of women in the mining camps of his beloved Sierra. His musical idiom—subtle and com-

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Creative collaborators John Adams and Peter Sellars over the years: from the 1988 Edinburgh Festival rehearsals for *Nixon in China*; a 1987 press conference with *Nixon in China* librettist Alice Goodman at Houston Grand Opera; together again for the 2005 world premiere of *Doctor Atomic* at San Francisco Opera.

plex—is as expansive as the glacial erratics and valley floors of the Pacific Rim. It's also an ideal vehicle for staging histories that continue to inform the present.

In each of their collaborations, Adams and director Peter Sellars chose operatic subjects that seek to make sense of our current world. The interlacing of real blood and larger mythological significance frames the contexts of *Nixon in China* (1987), *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), and *Doctor Atomic* (2005). For each opera the creators extracted material from news headlines and documentary sources, as well as from ancient and allegorical texts. Adams' scores themselves embrace this tension between immediacy and antiquity. His music can at once suggest striking headline imagery (the exaggerated repetitions of Nixon's "News" aria) and evoke opera's conventional past (the aria as a space for atemporal introspection). Interlocking rhythms and pulsating strings make us conscious of the here and now. But then Adams, too, calls upon archaic musical gestures—ritualistic choruses in *Klinghoffer*, the lament motif in *Doctor Atomic*—to give scope and meaning to the action and characters onstage. His opera texts and music play with the paradox of memory, namely the way the past is updated as new realities unfold.

Many tributaries have informed Adams' compositional approach: a lifetime of listening to jazz, musical theater, and pop music; the models of Wagner, Schoenberg, and Cage; and the landscapes that occupy his memory. He told me, "You know, I can't really think about my music in terms of time's arrow or some sort of evolution that makes perfect sense. I don't even think that Stravinsky's evolution made perfect sense. It went in all these crazy directions. He discovered something and got influenced by Bach and then by Webern and then by Gesualdo." In early works like *Shaker Loops* (1978) Adams began mapping onto his minimalist scaffolds musical fragments drawn from the scores he was teaching or conducting at the time—Mahler, Sibelius, late Beethoven. He became a highly intuitive composer, bound less by labels devised by critics than inside and outside those categories all at once. It was opera, however, that gave his musical style a larger frame.

While composing *Harmonielehre* (1984–85), an orchestral commission by the San Francisco Symphony, Adams developed a harmonic technique that would propel the writing of *Nixon in China*. He realized the potential of the technique in the expressive dimensions of Alice Goodman's libretto. The score for *Nixon* explores the elaboration of consonant surfaces into dissonant reveries alongside events in the text. "You tell everything about the emotional and psychological personality of your characters and about the direction of the action through your use of harmony," he said.

Given opera as a compositional platform, Adams shifted his working methods accordingly. "I discovered that I was driven by the literary impulse. I can't work unless I have a great text," he said. For *Klinghoffer*, Adams let Goodman's imagery of the Achille Lauro event guide the music. He composed specifically to the rhythms of her poetry, always sketching his harmonies first and then setting one word, one phrase at a time. For Adams, this was "the intuitive process at work," reflective of a certain type of presence—contemplative, always intimate—with the material. A decade later while writing *Doctor Atomic*, he, too, closely followed Sellars' libretto, a compilation of documentary sources. The result was a woven tapestry of taped industrial war sounds, swirling musical particles, and darkly hued harmonies that lend the words of J. Robert Oppenheimer and Edward Teller a sense of ambiguity-turned-certainty about impending atrocity. In *El Niño* (2000), *A Flowering Tree* (2006), and *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* (2012), Adams likewise spent his creative energies feeling out the shapes and structures of the texts. He recalled, "Tammy Mumford, who sang in *Other Mary*, sings a passage at the very end describing Mary going into the sepulcher and not finding Jesus. She told me that ending a phrase on 'sepulcher' was the perfect syllable for her to sing that low D-flat. I thought, you know, these things matter so much."

Over the last decade Adams' musical textures have become denser, more complex. In a series of works—*City Noir* (2009), *Absolute Jest* (2012), *Other Mary* (2012), *Saxophone Concerto* (2013), *Scheherazade.2* (2014)—he sustains tension in a manner that departs from earlier styles, saturating his scores with otherworldly orchestral colors and

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fierce lyrical passages. Formal structures get lost in themselves. But in *Girls of the Golden West* (2017), the text—drawn from letters, newspaper sources, and original folk songs of the early 1850s—imparted another musical agenda. “What makes this opera unique for me is the influence of the Gold Rush lyrics, because structurally they’re as simple as can be,” Adams said. “You can’t take language this simple and this frank and set it to overly complex music. It needs to have music that respects its own simplicity. My first impulse was that the sound and the orchestration should be as simple and as homely as the tools these miners used. It wouldn’t have been right to evoke their lives with lavish orchestration or with the sort of high-tech electronic sound world I created for *Doctor Atomic*. I wanted someone banging on a cowbell and the orchestra playing just really simple, stark music. So that ended up being a very large aspect of the piece’s DNA.”

Adams’ embrace of musical simplicity in *Girls of the Golden West* recalls his own descriptions of composing his first opera. “Ever since starting the sketches for *Nixon in China*,” he wrote in December 1985, “I have been aware that the only way to treat this subject is with great simplicity...the ‘simple’ dogma of Mao...the homely emotions of Pat and Dick.” The structural arc of *Nixon* would entail a large-scale transformation of “simple” music—ascending scales and patterned repetitions—into more complex contrapuntal layers. In *Nixon*, he found a dramatic counterpart to his developing style. In *Girls of the Golden West*, he found a dramatic counterpart to a musical language that, in a sense, was like a return home.

Adams’ intimate knowledge of the Sierra inspired more than musical productivity in *Girls of the Golden West*. It encouraged him to observe new details about both the structures of his music and the topography of his Northern California homeland. “You look at the mountain range or the Pacific Crest Trail and you see these ups and downs and flat areas and jagged shapes, and you’re reminded that this is what musical form is: shapes, not in space but in musical time,” he said. Adams originally intended to start the opera with an orchestral panorama inspired by William Brewer’s description of the view from atop Mount Shasta: “a perfect wilderness of mountains extending all the way to the Pacific,” Brewer wrote in the 1860s. But it ended up being the sharp and witty words of Dame Shirley, the pioneer woman whose letters describe the natural beauty of the Sierra and the harsh life of the mining camps, that motivated the composition from beginning to end. “I love Dame Shirley,” Adams said. “I feel like I know her so well: her humor, her incredible humanity, her ability to see something good in a person, the way she describes the Empire Hotel and the crooked boards, the sign and the food that they eat.” She was the muse that got him going.

The etymological origin of the word music stems, of course, from the ancient Greek Muses who represented the arts, inspiration, and all embracing knowledge. It’s no coincidence that the Muses were also the daughters of Memory (Mnemosyne). Through the Shirley letters, Adams located deep in his own memory an old wisdom acquired through years of hiking the crest between the Sierra Buttes and Mount Elwell. “I had to really use my imagination when I wrote *Nixon in China*,” he said, “but I didn’t have to here.” For him, music and memory exist side by side, over the diggings and through the trees. 🌻

From top to bottom: Adams conducting at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.; with Sellars at a rehearsal for Girls of the Golden West; Adams near his cabin by Haskell Peak, circa 1976.



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