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John Adams: An Interview with Aaron Jay Kernis
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for Peter Pastreich

EL DORADO

Part I. A Dream of Gold

JOHN ADAMS

♩=78

Marimba (Perc. 1)

Cabasa (Perc. 2)

High-hat cymbal (Perc. 3)

SYNTH. I

PIANO

HARP

VIOLIN II

BASSES

mp dolce

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John Adams
An Interview with Aaron Jay Kernis

IN 1977, at the age of seventeen, I traveled what seemed as far away as possible from my home in the mall-lined suburbs of Philadelphia to study musical composition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. I was assigned to work with composer John Adams for the second semester, and got to know his newly written Minimalist pieces, *Phrygian Gates* and *Shaker Loops*, through hearing first performances of them that year. I had already developed a keen interest in the Minimalism of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, whose music I'd discovered on an underground Philadelphia college radio station.

It was with great excitement that I came to know those early works of Adams's, for it was clear from the start that he was doing something special, pushing past Minimalism's inherent boundaries, molding its steady state, no-beginning-no-end quality into music with sensual surfaces and dramatic shapes that reflected romantic emotionalism instead of the purer, classical formalism of Reich or Glass.

Those early works, along with his first major success – the choral and orchestral *Harmonium* – have provided the cornerstone for one of the most rapidly ascendant careers in the world of new music. For the past fifteen years, Adams has produced a stream of distinctive and provocative compositions, including the high-profile operas *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (both in collaboration with director Peter Sellars and librettist Alice Goodman), and the instrumental works *Harmonielehre, The Chairman Dances, The Wound Dresser, Fearful Symmetries, Grand Pianola Music, Short Ride in a Fast Machine, Common Tones in Simple Time* and, most recently, *El Dorado*. Adams is the most performed of living American concert composers, and his works are as frequently enjoyed by enthusiastic, diverse listeners as they are reviled by modernist composers and critics. *Nixon in China* is already acclaimed as a classic of its time, while *Klinghoffer* – which deals with the death of a crippled Jewish American cruise-ship

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passenger at the hands of Palestinian terrorists — has been met with a more divided response that was somehow appropriate to its subject.

This interview took place last February in the newish, uncluttered house that Adams shares with his wife, Deborah O'Grady, and their two young children in Berkeley, California. Before our talk, we drove around the ruins of the 1991 Berkeley/Oakland Hills fire — his house barely escaped devastation — and passed scores of empty foundations just beginning to pulse with shockingly green, lush overgrowth.

AARON JAY KERNIS: I've always been struck by how *American* your music is — in its overall sound and its frame of reference. I wonder how you see your work now that multiculturalism is the current measure of artistic relevance.

JOHN ADAMS: Well, I've always said that what really interests me about a work of art is its ethnicity. The Frenchness of Debussy or Ravel, the Russianness of Dostoyevsky or the Italianness of Monteverdi or Verdi. I acknowledge the old saw that says art is a universal language. But it *is* and it *isn't*. Yes, you can appreciate a work of art strictly as a found object, without any cultural awareness, but what really interests me, what gives me great pleasure in a work of art, is its reference to the time and place and its social milieu. So it's given me a great deal of pleasure while composing to acknowledge through my composition that I am an American, living in the latter part of twentieth-century music, being inundated with American culture. And for better or worse this is reflected in my music.

KERNIS: What about political and social concerns, which have shaped your operatic and instrumental works increasingly, most recently in *El Dorado*?

ADAMS: I think that there's an eternal pendulum in the arts between art which is very introspective and very hermetic, and art which is socially engaged and reflects its historical milieu.

KERNIS: So you feel we're coming into a time now where the pendulum's swinging back toward engagement?

ADAMS: I definitely do. I see evidence of it in a lot of artists and composers who are younger than I am. I think that we're emerging from a period, particularly in music, where formalism has been

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the persuasive aesthetic. Call it modernism or whatever, but we all recognize the period from 1950 to 1970 to be one governed by a fixation on materials, form and method. Now, this doesn't mean that other kinds of art didn't flourish within this period, but within western Europe, the very small limited world of western Europe, America and possibly Japan, that kind of art gained an immense amount of prestige—composers starting with Webern and the Darmstadt composers (Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, Donatoni, etc.), and in this country people like Babbit and Carter and so forth. And we must also include John Cage in this. There's an enormous formalist engine running John Cage's work as well, as you can see by reading his essays and lectures.

KERNIS: I've tended to include Reich and Glass in that camp as well . . .

ADAMS: Yes, that's always a very amusing discussion about early Minimalism because both Reich and Glass and even people on the cusp of that, like La Monte Young or Morton Feldman, had their coming of age during the high period of formalism, and yet they were trying to break through—particularly Glass and Reich. They were trying to break through that formalism to a new kind of expressivity. But it's funny to see—even in Glass's most banal and pop pieces like *Songs for Liquid Days*, this strange kind of little motor going along that still harkens back to the process-oriented pieces of the Sixties.

KERNIS: When did your music begin to move away from that? All your pieces from the very beginning were reacting to and moving away from the strict processes of early Minimalism in some sense, but *Shaker Loops* and the piano pieces were still rather formalized.

ADAMS: Well, I think I had a tremendously productive disaster in 1978, which was a string quartet called *Wavemaker*. It was a piece in which I attempted to dictate every element of the composition through various equations or arbitrary procedures.

KERNIS: So this was serialized?

ADAMS: No, it wasn't totally serialized, but it was an attempt to use some kind of procedural etiquette that existed outside of the needs of the music and would imprint its laws onto the musical material, which I think is very much what serialism is about and certainly what other forms of compositional, or precompositional, routines are about. And the piece was a disaster. Both expressively and formally, *and* emotionally, I think, as well. The lesson I learned from it was that music, the primal material of music, has powers

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within it and within its relationships that have a life of their own and which a composer — a really sensitive composer — has to be intuitively aware of and must have freedom enough to acknowledge and to follow. In other words, I think that to try willfully to atomize the elements of music, as people tried to do in the Fifties — whether it was John Cage or Boulez or Xenakis or Milton Babbit — to just knock it down into these discrete atomized elements and then impose some external set of laws on it, almost always produces a very gray and uninteresting emotional experience.

KERNIS: You feel that even with Boulez?

ADAMS: Yes, I find that with Boulez what's interesting is usually his sense of color and his phenomenal gift of orchestration, but I feel the emotional range of Boulez is extraordinarily limited. With all this immense equipment and this huge power of technique that's being brought to the act of composition, in comparison to a couple of bars of a Mahler symphony, it's unbelievably pale. And I feel that the reason for that is his unwillingness to follow the genetic personality of the music itself, of the materials. You know, it *is* very much like an embryo. Once that sperm reaches the egg, there is an entity. I mean, I'm not going to get into . . . I don't want to start sounding like a pro-lifer here, but we know that a human being's personality — his or her emotions, his likes or dislikes — or whether he's left-handed or right-handed, physical appearance: it's all there from the moment of conception. And I feel that when you take a group of notes together, or some harmonic organization, or a rhythmic pulse, anything like that, that the music has its own personality, immediately, and then the really creative composer follows the implication of that material. Which is why I say that when I start a piece I genuinely don't know where it's going to end. A lot of people are shocked to hear that, they feel it's an indication of some sloppy —

KERNIS: Fatal flaw? —

ADAMS: Yes. Here's somebody who's just finger-painting, or doing sand drawings, or playing with mudpies. In fact I may have a deeply held notion of where I want a certain piece to end up, but frequently by the time I'm a couple of minutes into it, I've discovered that this is a totally different person. This isn't the little girl with blond hair that I wanted to have — it's a boy with hyperactive glands or something. So I have to obey the special nature of that personality.

KERNIS: Generally speaking, that personality has become less "Minimalist" than it was when you started out.

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ADAMS: I was really excited when I heard my first Minimalist pieces. Before that, I'd felt really awash. I felt like I'd been born with this desire to create music and I'd just been born in the wrong time. I had no interest in the twelve-tone system, I had no interest in atonality or aperiodicity, and this seemed to be what was in the air. I heard several pieces: I heard *In C*, then I heard *Drumming* by Steve Reich, then I heard several Glass pieces – I can't remember which they were – and I was tremendously excited and encouraged by this because here was a music that was interesting on a formal level, that was interesting on an intellectual level, but had all the vitality and communicative power of jazz or rock. I found it almost irresistibly attractive. I was drawn to this music like poles of a magnet. After I got to know it, in a certain sense I was let down by some of it because many of these pieces that were so charming on first encounter became rather vacuous on repeated encounters. I must say that unfortunately 90 percent of that music I feel that way about now. But maybe that's why I'm a composer. Maybe that's why we choose to become creative people, because we feel that innate dissatisfaction with something that we're drawn to, so we want to make it right ourselves.

KERNIS: To push past where others have gone, past the labels? What about the "Minimalist" label?

ADAMS: People often apologize when they bring up the M-word; they feel it's an embarrassment to bring up the term. But I think that labels in art are perfectly okay – we use them all the time. We talk about Impressionist painting, or Gothic architecture, or Elizabethan sonnets, and that helps to orient ourselves, and we know the moment we mention Impressionist painting we're talking about a certain array of techniques. So if I say "Minimalist music" to you, or even if I say it to an average concert-goer, by now they may know it's going to involve repetition in some way, it's going to involve regular pulse, it's going to involve tonal harmonies, probably with slow harmonic rhythm and rather large architectural expanses. And that's perfectly helpful.

KERNIS: Provided that it isn't applied where it's no longer the case.

ADAMS: Yes. For someone to call me a Minimalist composer now, which I must say rarely happens anymore, would be wrong. But if someone says that there are elements of Minimalism in my music, then I think that's perfectly accurate.

KERNIS: Is Minimalism ultimately a dead end?

ADAMS: I think Minimalism was a wonderful shock to Western

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art music. It was like a bucket of fresh spring water splashed on the grim and rigid visage of "serious" music. I can't imagine how stark and unforgiving the musical landscape would be without it. But I think that as an expressive tool the style absolutely had to evolve and become more complex. This is inevitable in art. Monteverdi, Mozart, Hemingway, Le Corbusier . . . they all brought about revolutions in simplicity, *une révolution en douceur*, but then they were immediately followed by a second, more complex generation.
KERNIS: In the first part of *El Dorado* there's a sort of layering going on that I don't think I've heard in your music before: one layer of activity ceases or fades just after a new layer begins; tension is raised with the introduction of each new strand. It reminds me of the complex layering found in rock formations.
ADAMS: Well, it's a totally different way of building musical architecture. It's not *durchkomponierte*—like the Germans say, "through-composed." It's as far away from, let's say, a Bach idea of *Fortspinnung*, where a whole movement will be basically built on a single gesture. And, you know, a lot of Glass's and Reich's music is built in that way, and that's one of the really admirable things about it. It has that kind of Baroque thoroughness to it. But, yes, I think your perception of *El Dorado*, and to some extent some other recent pieces, is correct, and could probably go for *Fearful Symmetries* as well. There are events that come up over the edge of the horizon, and become center stage for a while, and then recede as something else comes over, and what was previously front-page gradually becomes back-page news.
KERNIS: Sometimes there will even be a dramatic change that takes the place of the slow burn of material.
ADAMS: What's exciting is that we liberate ourselves from the Germanic notion of what a piece of music *should do*. This is something that I think has tyrannized a lot of serious composers in the last century. I remember being very young and reading Hindemuth's book, *A Composer's World*, and I remember being very upset and intimidated to read that "a composer sees the entire piece in a flash. And all aspects of its form and structure are revealed to him." It's as if some archangel must come down and smite the composer on the head.
KERNIS: Though it can happen.
ADAMS: Sure it can happen, but the great thing is that artistic creation takes all kinds.
KERNIS: You may see simply the foundation, and not anything else.

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ADAMS: Absolutely. So I'm experimenting with new ways of creating form that I suppose are in a sense more influenced by cinema, by techniques of cutting and editing in a studio, whether it's with film or with tape, and also mixing. If you've sat behind a really complex, state-of-the-art studio-mixer, with fade-ins and fade-outs and cross-fades and returns and sends, you've experienced a totally different approach to how musical events can arise and live with each other and then disappear. The concept of fading in and fading out simply didn't exist in Bach's day because it hadn't been suggested by a device that did that. What's exciting about the twentieth century in particular is that we're so often inspired by machines. I'm sure that the repetitive style of Minimalist music would never have been thought of without the tape recorder. Tape loops and all the little techniques that composers started experimenting with in the early Sixties suggested pulsation and suggested a type of structural development that was based on looping and repetition.
KERNIS: Periodicity.
ADAMS: Right. But there *was* one composer who understood mixing before mixers were invented. Ives.
KERNIS: He's more like a blender.
ADAMS: [Laughter] There's something wonderful about *Three Places in New England*, and particularly the *Fourth Symphony*, where all sorts of different musical gestures are existing in this magical console. Ives's compositional technique in effect involves fading one channel up and then fading it down a little bit while another channel fades up, and there's a wonderful sense of a kind of cosmic mixer.
KERNIS: Most of those elements emerge from the American Ur-music: hymns, march tunes, heavily syncopated ragtime rhythms. It's a kind of stew – it makes me think of our society – full of half-remembered bits of familiar tunes.
ADAMS: One of the burdens that we still carry in this country is the sense of cultural inadequacy. So many Americans still feel intuitively that "Culture" comes from Europe. The classical music industry and the big traveling art shows reinforce this assumption. "Culture" with a capital C is something you acquire, like good table manners, and in the case of famous paintings by van Gogh or Rembrandt, can be bought and possessed for enormous sums. This may be one of the reasons why Americans tend to embrace popular culture with such zeal. They feel that popular culture is genuinely American. We can put Elvis on a postage stamp because everyone

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thinks Elvis is cool. But when it comes to embracing our serious American art – and there's a great deal of it in this country – Americans become very uncomfortable, and they're not quite sure if it's the real thing or not. And this is why the classical music industry in the U.S. is continually having to import what they feel to be the real thing from Europe. This can be the case when we suspect that the real thing in new music is Lutoslawski or Boulez or Berio, or whether it's the latest East German conductor with a Watts Line to Brahms. Somehow American culture is not quite bona fide unless it's pop culture.

KERNIS: This is clearly part of the reason that the classical music establishment is completely out of step with the art of our time. There's so little willingness to allow any kind of innovation to work its way into the system, unless its been somehow certified by the mainstream marketers, i.e., unless its audience is to a certain extent guaranteed.

ADAMS: It's an industry.

KERNIS: I used to think that orchestras, opera houses and the like represented artistic ideals that were quite separate from commercial realities. To me it's only seemed like an industry lately.

ADAMS: I don't know. Joe Horowitz says in this book *Understanding Toscanini* that the classical music industry started a lot longer ago than we realize. It started in the Thirties, when Toscanini was turned into an idol, although there were even cases before that of European stars coming to this country and being treated as if they held the key to culture – that Americans were simply too roughhewn, too unsubtle to appreciate. And now marketing has become intensely important, and culture has become a function of market mentality, with the result that you have orchestras and opera companies and art museums operating on enormous budgets, like corporations. They're not profit-making – although they behave like profit-making corporations – but they try. It's become even more severe during the Eighties, with the advent of the Reagan era; nowadays it seems like every aspect of our lives is dictated by the profit motive. If something can't pay for itself, it's simply not viable in this culture. So we seem to have brought back a notion that I thought was dead by the turn of the century – which is that of social Darwinism. It exists in our attitudes toward less fortunate people – whether they're immigrants, or whether they're just helpless people in our society. And it exists in our attitudes toward the arts as well.

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KERNIS: The dissipation of people's sense of generosity, or compassion, of getting beyond one's own needs, one's own family's needs?
ADAMS: Exactly. And it's very shortsighted in the arts, because anyone with a historical grasp of art history knows that virtually all the great art in both the West and the East was brought about by largesse. Beethoven, the great "free" man, the man who mythically broke the bonds of the aristocracy, was actually never more than several hundred feet from his caretakers, who were Austrian nobility, Count Lichnowsky or Rasoumowsky or whoever. These highly cultured Viennese aristocrats knew that they had an immense talent in their midst and they were smart enough to support it. But if Beethoven had been forced throughout his life to make his works economically "viable," we wouldn't have his music today.
KERNIS: Clearly many visual artists have been able to survive and even flourish in our economic system.
ADAMS: It's a different thing, because a painting or piece of sculpture can be bought and sold. It's a commodity. Whereas music, and particularly poetry, have little or no commodity value. Poetry can't even be used on an entertainment level, the way classical music can be turned into Muzak. It's an art form that simply can't be commodified.
KERNIS: There's a certain kind of commodification one can apply to Glass's music, I think. My friends and I talk about him – even look up to him – as a success story, a phenomenon unique among composers, but at the same time I can't help thinking, "Is there any art here, any substance?" I'd certainly felt there was, up until *Einstein on the Beach*, but his commercial success has led to work that's often seemed the product of a composing factory.
ADAMS: Glass's career signals a kind of violent swing of the pendulum in the way the public views a composer, and vice versa. For so much of this century artists have participated in a myth about themselves – that they are outlaws. We all love to use Kafka as an example, as an expression of the artist as a loner, as an outsider, as someone who never earned any money from his work and stayed on the outside of society, at least artistically. It's become a kind of *de rigeur* status for the artist that he or she be unknown, unappreciated, unrewarded throughout most of his or her life. If a composer behaves in another way, and handles his or her business affairs well, and is savvy about finding markets for his music, we immediately make a puritanical judgment: that person must be more interested in money than in art. Again, if we look at history –

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KERNIS: Look at Mozart particularly—
ADAMS: Yes, history constantly contradicts, or at least muddies, these perceptions. You mention Mozart. It would never have occurred to Mozart to write a piece that wouldn't appeal to his public and wouldn't earn him some money.
KERNIS: He nearly refused to work on anything that was *not* a commission.
ADAMS: That's what makes the three last symphonies so unique. The musicologists can't seem to find a commission for them. But virtually all other 620 pieces that he wrote were written on some sort of commission. Verdi—an amazingly sharp and shrewd businessman. So were Stravinsky and Strauss.
KERNIS: It's some early Romantic notion of the poor, starving, half-mad composer that still is retained within the audience's mind, the unreality of the Composer whom you wouldn't want to bring home to dinner, who turns into the Mythic Figure upon demise.
ADAMS: It's the "starving artist in the garret" syndrome. That myth gives the listener some sense of importance. If you and I can go to a concert and we can open up the program notes and discover that this wonderful piece we're hearing was not appreciated in its day, even *spurned* in its day, that makes us feel terribly important. It reinforces our sense of the composer as hero.
KERNIS: It makes the audience's relationship to the performer, usually the soloist, even more important.
ADAMS: It becomes a heroic relationship. And of course there are cases that bear this myth out. There's Ives and there's Webern, and J.S. Bach, none of whom had a great following in his day. But in our day people have a strangely puritanical attitude about composers, and I think Philip Glass has been a tremendously refreshing figure to have on the horizon because he has refused to take any of the normal accepted routes. He's always carved out his own niche, and as a result of that he has an enormous audience. Now, part of this large audience has to do with the simplicity of his message, the simplicity of his work, and that's a whole other realm, one I have very strong criticisms of, but I can only admire him for his willingness to bypass all of the conventional routes to becoming known as a composer. He has retained his own copyright, he's been his own publisher, he created his own ensemble to play his pieces, even his first operas were virtually self-produced. That's a remarkable model for us; I'm one generation younger than he is, not even quite that, and his career has been a great inspiration.

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KERNIS: It was really very striking this year to see the brilliance, in many ways the calculated brilliance, of John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles*, because it was so beautifully targeted for the Met audience, it worked like a charm; people were highly moved and entertained by it. They loved it. Certainly there are a lot of important musical issues in the work worth discussing: Is there any depth to the music? How could serious composers and listeners take seriously anything that's so retro? But one couldn't dispute how beautifully it worked for that audience.

ADAMS: It was a huge success. It sold out nine performances. It makes me look like a failure by comparison! But even the concept of targeting a work at an audience is not *entirely* without some historical context. You can tell from Mozart's letters to his father that he quite often knew where he was going and for whom he was going to play, and in a sense he targeted the type of music he was writing. It was much the same with Handel and Verdi. You can't tell me that the *Rite of Spring* wasn't targeted – for a very sophisticated Parisian audience that at that particular time was very jaded and looking for something tremendously *outré*, and got it. So I think that, again, this in itself is not a problem. The question is just one of value. One can have a piece that's targeted that has still an immense amount of value, like the *Rite of Spring*, or one can have a piece that is simply full of froth, full of devices, and basically panders to its audience. If one truly panders to one's audience, and gives them exactly what one knows they're going to like, so that there are no surprises, then I think you have a piece to which history will not be kind.

KERNIS: Do you have any new opera plans?

ADAMS: Yes, a new one is in the works, but I would like to make it less of an "opera"; in fact, I want to get out of the opera industry, such as it is, so that I'm not beholden to its values and decision-making, which I think are predicated on values that have nothing to do with my work. I would really like to do something that's small, flexible, inexpensive and has real bite to it. I'd love to write something like the *Three Penny Opera* or something that I can maneuver outside of the big centers of artistic power in the country and reach a much wider audience with.

KERNIS: What about *The Death of Klinghoffer*? I'm curious how you dealt with the influences of Arabic or Semitic music in the opera.

ADAMS: I felt that the worst sin I could commit in *Klinghoffer* was

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Orientalism, to try to imitate Hebraic or Arabic music in doing this. To do that would be worse than anything in *Turandot*. But on the other hand I really wanted to achieve a sense of "otherness" about the Palestinian terrorists. If I was going to achieve something dramatically I would have to create the feeling of what it would be like having a gin and tonic on the deck of this luxury liner and *suddenly*, instead of on the front page of the *New York Times*, here—*in real life!*—is a Palestinian with a Kalichnikov rifle shouting at you to get up or else you'll be shot. Suddenly you're overwhelmed with a sense of terror, and there's someone as alien to you as if he were from another planet threatening your life. For this I needed to develop a music that really *did* sound different, that sounded alien. And how I did that was to use different musical modes and a whole different harmonic palette, mostly octatonic scale procedures which I massaged into my own particular compositional style. You'll note that when the Palestinians are singing there tends to be a lot more chromaticism. There's also a lot more ornament here than in any other music I've ever written. The opening Palestinian chorus is *very* ornamental. I think ornament is a tradition that was largely banished from both architecture and music during the modernist period. It's funny, we've had an explosion of interest in early music performance, and everyone is encouraged to ornament their work. It's also beginning to reappear in architecture now, after years of being viewed as an aesthetic sin beyond the pale. I've always found Mies van der Rohe and the "box" school of architecture to be really tiresome. I welcome ornament and I'm trying to find ways to bring it into my own music. It's not easy: I'm a New Englander, and a Guatemalan shirt is a major event for me in terms of brightening up my rather dour wardrobe!

KERNIS: How do you think your work is seen by other composers?

ADAMS: I take my own share of lumps. A lot of my composer colleagues feel that my work is not really in the noble avant-garde tradition.

KERNIS: What would you have to do to be part of it at this point? Would you want to be? And does an avant-garde still exist?

ADAMS: I don't know. At this point, the notion of "style" is a lot more confusing than it was even ten years ago. I think ten years ago people had an idea of what it meant to be a serious composer. Nowadays, I sense an aura of confusion and ambiguity. But this is not necessarily a bad thing. What could be more tiresome than another generation of junior Berios? For me what's really a challenge is to

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create a music that uses the syntax, uses what I would call a syntactical lingua franca that can communicate to a wider audience of culturally aware people. I consider the availability of all the world's music via recorded technology to be a vast watershed in the evolution of Western art music. Americans of my generation were the first to be constantly bombarded by recorded music from our earliest childhood. You can't tell me that this phenomenon hasn't had a huge effect on composers.

KERNIS: I recently heard Elliott Carter say that in his earlier years—his twenties to forties, I presume—he listened to as many recordings of jazz, popular and "serious" music as he could lay his hands on . . . but the numbers are vastly different.

ADAMS: The numbers *are* different. I have difficulty believing that Elliott Carter has embraced popular music with quite the zeal that I have. Frankly, I rue the day Carter turned his back on American vernacular music and elected to be a European avant-gardist. But to get back to what I was saying, it occurred to me very early on in my compositional career that tonal harmony and regular pulsation were not artificial constructs—that they weren't something devised by a theorist, but rather were universal phenomena, like magnetism or gravity. If we acknowledge these phenomena—tonality and pulsation—we can see evidence of them in all music, not just Western art music, but popular music and ethnic music from all over the world. And it seemed to me that one of the reasons for the vastly shrunken audience of twentieth-century art music was because this lingua franca, this grammar that allows me to talk to you and you to know what I'm saying, was being systematically deconstructed and broken down and destroyed by composers. What I have been trying to do is to find a means of utilizing this fundamental grammar in a coherent, comprehensible way, and yet make it new, make it fresh, make it a shock, a joyous shock.

KERNIS: And to make it very physical, viscerally compelling as well?

ADAMS: Right. I think the richer your palette is, the more exciting your music is. A hundred years from now people will look back on the serial experiment as a rather odd tributary of the mainstream. People will be amazed that it had so much prestige in its time, because it really produced so few indisputably great pieces of music. It will be viewed as a form of Mannerism, a hot-house creation with a very tiny audience. I don't know about you, but my encounters with Milton Babbit's music have left me cold. I'm a

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relatively well-educated and well-prepared musician, so I bring to my experience of listening to Babbit quite a bit more than the average listener, and yet it strikes me as very gray and largely incomprehensible. So what does that mean if I can't appreciate it? Does it mean that I'm a dunce? Or does it mean that a hundred years from now there'll be a new race of people with huge ears and giant cortexes migrating down from the tundra in northern Canada who will listen to Babbit instead of Madonna?

KERNIS: How much more of the influence of popular music do you think we'll see?

ADAMS: I'm inclined to think that this has a way to go before another generation comes in and says something very different. I suspect that another generation or two, at least in this country, will be heavily influenced by popular music – not necessarily well-known popular music. It seems to me that younger composers now seem to take a lot of inspiration from marginal –

KERNIS: Alternative –

ADAMS: Alternative rock, different kinds of underground music –

KERNIS: Which has a relatively small audience –

ADAMS: In itself it does, but it still has that kind of thrust and power that good pop music has. And this is probably a good thing, because I think that the serious music establishment has utterly burned itself out. I've sat on several panels in the last year or two – where everyone else in the room has won a Pulitzer Prize – and all the pieces that come in to be surveyed are within a certain polite context of orchestral works or chamber music. There's just nothing shocking or powerful or commanding in any of the ideas.

KERNIS: It's just more business as usual.

ADAMS: It's simply become a world that a truly vibrant, imaginative, outrageous young composer wouldn't even know about, wouldn't even dream of sending his tapes to . . . because they'd never get listened to. So I think it's good to just say goodbye to that whole establishment, and forge out, look for new audiences, either through recordings or through alternative performance spaces, not depend on the institutional classical music world, whether it's the operatic world or the orchestral world. We know it can be done. We've seen extraordinary cases – not only Glass, but the Kronos Quartet, Laurie Anderson, John Zorn. You can go back much earlier – Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington. But those people are already such classical figures in American culture that it's hard to even understand what outlaws they were at the

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beginning of their careers. But that's really exciting, because if one can maintain one's real integrity and still have the generating impulse be honest and creative, then taking new routes and not being afraid to exploit the various kinds of media that American culture offers—whether it's recordings or performance spaces or publications—I think this is a bona fide means of getting one's work into circulation. And it's certainly better than waiting around for the classical music industry to discover you, because if they do discover you, the most they're going to do is treat you as a pendant to enhance their prestige. You may get a Pulitzer or a commission, but neither is going to help to make your work a part of the culture. I think there's a natural growth tendency in a capitalist society. We always hear about growth. One of the great cases of an idea growing and losing its identity as it grows is PBS, which now has hardly any real power. It's abdicated all its power to be controversial and change people's thinking, because it's become so enormous. And as a result we have a television network which, in its infancy, was an immensely powerful element in American culture and which now purveys the blandest kind of fare, whether it's British melodrama or "Live from Lincoln Center," or MacNeil-Lehrer (the Dour Hour), which has this panache of being really insightful and critical but in fact is so bland as to be almost innocuous.

KERNIS: Public TV has recently come under attack for airing the controversial "Tongues on Fire," and we were all, in some sense, for the last few years, since Mapplethorpe, feeling under—

ADAMS: Pressure from the far right—

KERNIS: Under attack, and it's infuriated me that some composers feel that they're exempt from this because music is abstract and because they're not trying to do anything controversial. I know I've felt the sense of growing oppression—it may be growing only inside my own head, but it's palpable.

ADAMS: The other art forms, or many other art forms, have been far more socially confrontational for a long time than music has. "Serious," or shall we call it "art" music, has largely, as you say, been so self-absorbed or formalist for the last fifty years that it has almost completely bypassed controversy. Other art forms are more naturally drawn to political statement, like photography or literature.

KERNIS: And dance lately, especially since gender politics and texts have been added to the mix.

ADAMS: Yes. And I think it's good that this is happening, because

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the arts have become the last bunker against this vast submersion into totalitarian attitudes toward morality. To me the term "family values" – that's something that has all the chill and oppressive tone of something from Mussolini's Italy or Nazi Germany. "Family values" really means not *family* values, but brokered values, values that are handed on from upstairs down. It's a code word for racism, homophobia, xenophobia and authoritarianism. George Bush is a man who ought to know better. With Ronald Reagan we thought, "Oh God, no, the country's elected Reagan!" but at least we knew what he stood for. But Bush is a person who espouses whatever value he thinks will get him elected. His is a kind of pure, totally corrupted opportunism.

KERNIS: And in recent months he's practicing it even more.

ADAMS: Yes, he's trying to skirt the abortion issue – now you see it/now you don't – hoping that people have such short attention spans that they won't catch on. And this issue of the attack on the arts in this country is probably a good thing, in a way, because among other things it makes artists realize that people really *do* pay attention to them. What a wonderful thought – that someone is actually *scared* of your work of art.

KERNIS: But the trend seems to be in the opposite direction. I've looked at works by composers younger than myself recently on a couple of panels, and I've been disturbed by the nearly total absence of the influence of popular music, Minimal music, world music – of anything at all that would indicate a desire to explore or redraw or merely question the status quo, whether it's that of their own teachers at universities or conservatories, or of the entrenched new music or classical establishments.

ADAMS: You're sitting in the wrong room. That's just what I said about my experiences – *we're* sitting in the wrong room. Unfortunately there's power and money dispensed and we know those people who spend their lives shaking hands and making sure that they get on those panels, because that's the only way – through the "old boy network" – that they're going to get their own works promoted.

KERNIS: But it is still sad to see a whole generation of younger composers begin with such complacent and wholesale adoption of the values-that-be.

ADAMS: Don't forget – Ravel never won the Prix de Rome. Year after year . . . he wanted it so badly. And he never got it. . . . And imagine who the people who *did* win it were!

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