

STRIKING GOLD



PETER NEWARK WESTERN AMERICANA / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

*Premiering at San Francisco Opera on November 21,
John Adams' *Girls of the Golden West*
takes an unflinching look at the California Gold Rush.*

In the summer of 1851, a 32-year-old New Englander named Louise Amelia Clappe arrived with her physician husband in the remote Northern California mining town of Rich Bar, about 200 miles northeast of San Francisco on the north fork of the Feather River. Thoroughly educated, she was immediately struck by this alien world; the majesty of its landscape stood in contrast to the hard-scrubbed and often brutal life she faced. Those gold-obsessed miners! They were filled with vim and violence—hard workers who gambled, brawled, and got hammered at the end of the day. Poor Louise! How ridiculous that she should have to use “a

coarse diaper for a table napkin,” she wrote in one of many letters to her sister back East, “and an old shovel as a grill to cook on.”

Yet, she declared, “this strange life fascinates me.”

Published under the pseudonym “Dame Shirley,” her collected letters have come to be regarded as a cornerstone of 19th-century California literature and now have been set to music by composer John Adams. *Girls of the Golden West* reunites him with director and librettist Peter Sellars and receives its world premiere this month at San Francisco Opera. “I wanted not to just sit on my laurels this year,” says Adams who turned 70 in February. “I wanted to

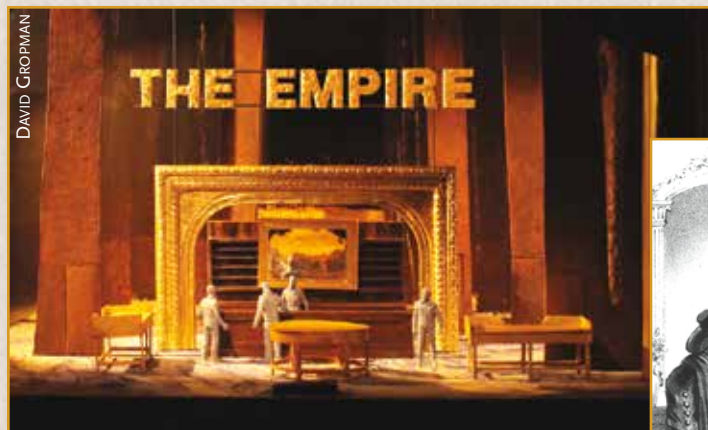
come out with a major work. It made for chaos”—he spent a solid six months on the road, conducting or attending a worldwide array of 70th birthday programs—“but I’m glad I did it.”

Like Dame Shirley, Adams is a transplanted New Englander—thoroughly educated at Harvard—who migrated to California and had his life cracked wide open by the change. He described California’s seductive and mind-bending effects in *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life*, his 2008 memoir. He also depicted them musically in *The Dharma at Big Sur*, a 2003 orchestral work that explodes with light, as if recreating Adams’ first gaze at the Pacific in 1971. Yet unlike Dame Shirley, he never left California. Adams became a dyed-in-the-wool Berkeley-ite and, since 1979, the owner of a cabin in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, down the road from Rich Bar and the town of Downieville where much of the action in *Girls of the Golden West* unfolds. He has spent summers there with his wife and children, hiking the hills and valleys; his cell phone is loaded with photos of whitewater and bluffs. And to his delight—like Leoš Janáček composing *The Cunning Little Vixen* or Benjamin Britten writing *Peter Grimes*—he now finds himself “writing something in my own backyard, a California opera” based upon the real words and stories of the people of the Gold Rush.

Sellers has given Adams quite a storyline, weaving the libretto from a trove of period sources: miners’ diaries, newspaper accounts, speeches, poems, the observations of Mark Twain, and original Gold Rush song lyrics. But Shirley’s effervescent prose is a critical through line and key inspiration for Adams’ endlessly coloristic score, to be conducted at the War Memorial Opera House by Grant Gershon. The composer marvels at her words, recalling how she raises her eyes up and sees “the never-enough-to-be-talked-about sky of California...like an immense concave of pure sapphire.”

“Aah, it gives me the goose pimples,” he practically moans. “It’s such beautiful language.”

Shirley’s words will be sung by the extraordinary young soprano Julia Bullock who makes her San Francisco Opera debut.



Left: *Prospectors in the Sierra Nevada, 1849*

Top and right: *The bars of gambling saloons were a meeting place for settlers of different ethnicities, seen in both David Gropman’s Act I set and in an 19th-century engraving.*

Her opulent voice can evoke the moon emerging from behind a cloud, and she has a way of turning every aria into its own dramatic world. She first sang for Adams in 2014 at an audition in New York; he immediately offered her major roles in three productions of his works, including this one. “I think my learning curve has had to be high, just because of the people I’m working with,” she says of Adams and Sellers. “The vocal demands that John puts on his singers are really high, but it actually has encouraged me to not fret about my voice so much, to just kind of lay out the material in a very clear and direct way so it becomes about the storytelling. I don’t think John knows the positive impact that singing his music has had on me over the past year.”

There are no grand divas in the *Girls of the Golden West* cast; all the singers are in their 20s and 30s. San Francisco Opera General Director Matthew Shilvock likens them to the young Gold Rush characters they depict: “people of big emotions, of big ambitions, on the cutting edge of life and making exploratory strides in the world. This is a cast that’s exploring John’s new music together, just as their characters were exploring the Northern California frontier. You feel the energy of possibility. I think it’s one of the most exciting casts that we’ve assembled.”

Bullock has been a muse for Adams in composing his new work. But the very idea of the opera belongs to Sellers who was asked several years ago to direct a La Scala production of Puccini’s *La Fanciulla del West*. Based on the 1905 David Belasco play *The Girl of the Golden West* (Belasco’s father was a forty-niner), it takes place in a Gold Rush mining camp and saloon.

Sellers, who might have been an investigative reporter in another life, began sleuthing through 19th-century source materials and was turned off by the opera’s sugar-coated approach to history. Puccini’s opera left out the juicy stuff: the fact that Gold Rush miners were white, black, Chinese, Mexican, Hawaiian, French, Egyptian. They came from everywhere in search of the new El Dorado. What’s more, some had recorded their experiences, touching on themes that continue to drive political discourse in the 21st century: matters of race, immigration, and vigilante justice, not to mention the whole question of who is a “real American.” Turning down La Scala, Sellers wondered if a “real” Gold Rush





Left: The 1853 felling of a giant sequoia by settlers in Calaveras County was an inspiration for the action and set of Act II of *Girls of the Golden West*.

Below: Conductor Grant Gershon confers with composer John Adams

opera might be in the cards and proposed the idea to Adams who was intrigued. Since 2005's *Doctor Atomic*, another San Francisco Opera world premiere and commission which Sellars served as librettist and director, the composer had been hunting for his next operatic subject. He had considered the rise and fall of Lyndon Baines Johnson, as well as the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco, Texas, even visiting the site of that violent siege with the late novelist Denis Johnson. But for one reason or another, these and other ideas all "shriveled up," Adams says. Not this one. This Gold Rush idea was pay dirt and Dame Shirley's letters would be the pure gold in Sellars' glittering cache of documents.

Girls of the Golden West (note that "Girls" is plural, as Shirley is one of several female protagonists) is the fourth opera by Adams to be staged by San Francisco Opera. (The others are *Nixon in China*, which premiered in 1987 at Houston Grand Opera with Sellars directing; *The Death of Klinghoffer*, first staged in 1991 at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels with Sellars directing and co-commissioned by San Francisco Opera; and *Doctor Atomic*.) As is typical for Adams and Sellars, their latest work operates on multiple levels. Its texts and exuberant period costumes and sets carry the very smell and feel of the 19th century. Its potent political subtext connects past and present. "We are evoking a certain period of American history," Sellars comments, "but this opera also carries the DNA of our period right now."

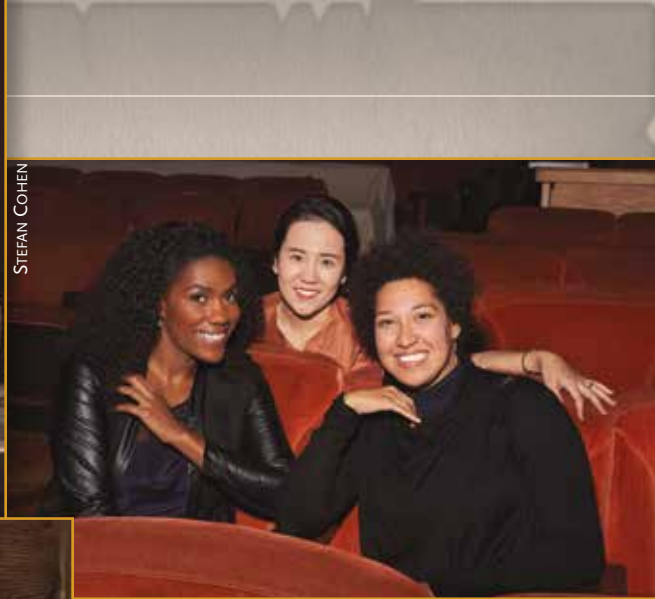
And then there is its timeless, mythic element. In 1851, the same year that Louise Clappe arrived in Rich Bar, Richard Wagner was embarking on his *Ring* cycle: "I don't want to make too much of the connection, but there is another opera about people obsessed with gold," Adams says, laughing. It isn't a huge leap from *Das Rheingold* to the Gold Rush and "the original bubble economy" of the Sierra Nevadas, driven by "fake news" stories about the fast riches to be made, "where you would just stoop over and scoop up a nugget," as Adams puts it. He wonders whether the Bay Area's current economic cycle with techies as the new



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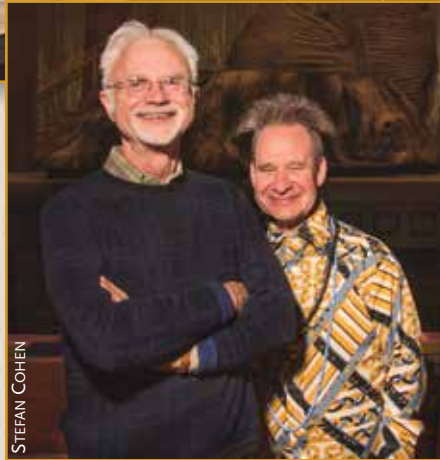
forty-niners is driven by similar expectations. “When I read about Uber or Facebook being valued in the billions of dollars, I think that’s expressive of some completely irrational part of the human collective psyche,” he says.

Yet Adams himself has grown obsessed with gold, or at least the Gold Rush. His shelves at home are lined with books about 19th-century California history, and he has spent much of the last two years digesting Sellars’ source materials. The librettist panned and sifted, isolating the essentials. There’s Dame Shirley, of course, but also Mark Twain’s *Roughing It* and *The Gold Rush Diary of Ramón Gil Navarro*, an Argentinian-Chilean entrepreneur with a poetic streak who sized up gold’s fatal allure thusly: “You turn the mine into your lover and give it your soul, your thoughts and your existence, as if it were a young girl who had driven you crazy.”

As the *Gold Rush* turned ugly and “outsiders” were stripped of their claims, Navarro became one of its victims. In the libretto, his story overlaps with another historical account, that of a young Mexican woman named Josefa Segovia who worked as a waitress in Downieville. Harassed by a drunken white miner on July 4, 1851, she stabbed him in self-defense and was summarily put on trial by a mob of forty-niners who hanged her the next day from a bridge over the Yuba River.

Adams had known for years about what he calls “the Downieville tragedy.” “There’s a plaque right in town,” he shrugs. He passed the story along to Sellars who wove it into his storyboard. The *Gold Rush* song lyrics—largely pulled from a 1850s compendium called *Put’s Original California Songster*—injected additional local material into the proceedings.

In their time, the lyrics were sung to popular melodies like “Pop Goes the Weasel” and “Camptown Races.” That wasn’t going to work, so Adams wrote his own propulsive tunes. He calls them “kind of upbeat and at times rowdy.” In later scenes, they are infused with an aggressive energy that he found “almost shocking” when the male chorus sang through parts of the score during August rehearsals.



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Left to right: From an August tech rehearsal for Act II, soprano Julia Bullock with crew and chorus; composer John Adams and librettist/director Peter Sellars; “Golden Girls” J’Nai Bridges (Josefa Segovia), Hye Jung Lee (Ah Sing), and Bullock (Louise Clappe).

Songs and choruses alternate throughout the work: “It’s a bit of a show,” Adams says. “I certainly wasn’t going to depict such a spartan, simple, almost crude life with extravagant Straussian orchestration. So I started out with an orchestra that should sound just as simple and slightly rough-edged as I would imagine life would be out there. I added an accordion and a guitar, just to give it a little flavor.”

He doesn’t tip his own hat too much, so Bullock helps him out. “John writes great tunes,” she says, describing his melodic lines as “crystalline, truly some of the most beautiful lyric material you can imagine.”

And, as always, Adams writes for the dance.

Every one of his operas has dance at its center; his music cannot stand still. And here, neither can the forty-niners who after

being on their knees all day leap to their feet as a way of reclaiming their humanity. Choreographer John Heginbotham has created a wild ten-minute fandango to crown the miners’ Fourth of July celebration. We also get to meet Lola Montez, the Irish actress, dancer, and courtesan, who spent a portion of the 1850s in Gold Country. Lorena Feijóo, former principal dancer with San Francisco Ballet, here enacts the “Spider Dance,” Montez’s salacious calling card.

In the end, opera is about storytelling and Adams knows how to tell a tale.

“Narrative gives him this forward motion that just totally electrifies the music,” says Sellars. “I just think of John as making a movie with music—with close-ups, wide shots, and fast cutting. His sense of music is cinematic in the sense of being all-enveloping and completely about this incredible speed and momentum and intoxicating emotional life. And humor, which you get all the time with John.

“So am I am excited to be doing this project?” Sellars asks. “I am thrilled and grateful to whatever stork dropped this opera down our chimney.” ☀

Richard Scheinin is a writer for the Bay Area News Group. He has written for GQ and Rolling Stone magazines and is the author of Field of Screams: The Dark Underside of America’s National Pastime (W.W. Norton), a history of baseball.



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