

JOHN ADAMS

The Chairman Dances (Foxtrot for Orchestra)

John Adams was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on February 15, 1947; he lives in the San Francisco Bay area. He composed The Chairman Dances as an offshoot of his opera Nixon in China. Lukas Foss led the Milwaukee Symphony in the world premiere on January 31, 1986. The score calls for two flutes (both doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, three percussionists, piano, harp, and strings. Duration is about 12 minutes.

John Adams is a native of Worcester, Massachusetts, and studied at Harvard with Leon Kirchner, though he has lived in San Francisco for most of his professional life. Now one of the best-known American composers, his fame began when he started writing music that was grouped with that of a number of other composers (Steve Reich, Philip Glass) who were called "minimalists." Adams's music has long since become far more elaborate than the works of his early contributions to the tradition, which were truly minimal in conception. Indeed, his music has made it necessary to ask at what point minimalist music of great variety ceases to be "minimalist" and becomes, if you will, "maximally minimalist." Nonetheless, the basic elements of that style remain: shifting meters over the pulsing rhythms, simple melodic lines overlaid into complex patterns, and bright orchestral sonorities.

Adams accomplished a remarkable feat by producing a successful opera, *Nixon in China*, using his enriched minimalist approach. Opera is often declared dead, and, in any case, few composers have ever dared to write an opera that specifically engages modern-day real-world situations. Berg's *Wozzeck* has a social conscience, as does Verdi's *Traviata*, and Beethoven's *Fidelio* is a powerful assertion of support for political freedom. But living persons have rarely been depicted in their own names on the operatic stage before *Nixon in China*. Yet *Nixon*, jointly conceived by Adams, librettist Alice Goodman, and director Peter Sellars has been produced widely and filmed for television. Since that first success, Adams has gone on to further operas and theater works of many types and has become one of the most important and successful of current American composers.

While working on the opera, Adams created a particular kind of music for a scene in the closing act in which Mao Tse-tung was dancing with his wife (the former movie star Chaing Chin).

I was thinking of Madame Mao's former life as a movie actress in the 1930s, and I thought the notion of movie music, specifically Hollywood movie music, might be a hidden key to her personality. You know, her public persona for Westerners was exclusively that of the shrill, unrepentant harpie of the Gang of Four. But we mustn't forget that she had a very different image as a young woman. She was, as far as we can tell, attractive, intelligent, and charismatic.

He completed the music as an independent concert piece, having decided that it was not suitable for the corresponding image of the Nixons dancing (they would have preferred something by Glenn Miller, he decided). Yet, when he was actually composing the last act,

I found that the music from *The Chairman Dances* was completely appropriate: Pat and Dick are dancing and reminiscing. It's a heartbreaking moment: they are in a sense mourning the loss of their youth and the simple life they lived when they were poor...it's as if they had danced to *The Chairman Dances* forty years before.

As a result, the concert piece, which is bouncy and buoyant, provides material

that appears in the opera in a more tender and wistful mood. Listeners who hear *The Chairman Dances* before seeing the opera will be struck by its evocative power in that context. And those who simply hear the concert work on its own can enjoy a modern composer's idea of a Hollywood foxtrot from sixty years ago.

PAUL HINDEMITH
Symphonic Metamorphoses on themes
of Carl Maria von Weber

Paul Hindemith was born in Hanau, near Frankfurt, Germany, on November 16, 1895, and died in Frankfurt on December 28, 1963. He composed his Sinfonische Metamorphosen nach Themen von Carl Maria von Weber in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1943. Artur Rodzinski led the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Society in the first performance on January 20, 1944. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, percussion (bass drum, small drum, snare drum, tom-tom, tambourine, triangle, small gong, cymbals, small cymbals, chimes, and glockenspiel), and strings. Duration is about 21 minutes.

In the early 1940s, Paul Hindemith came to the United States for what was ostensibly a visit, though it became a residence of many years. He was a well known composer, and he happily found a number of performances for his music, though he was also forced to teach students he felt were a waste of his time and energies. In order to continue his own creative work, he brought with him from Europe several plans for new pieces, one of which was a ballet based on themes by Carl Maria von Weber, to be choreographed by Leonid Massine.

Though Massine had made a successful dance piece about St. Francis out of Hindemith's *Nobilissima Visione* in England not long before, the two men had sharply contrasting artistic goals. The new score made no progress, and Hindemith dropped the project. But, as things turned out, the effort he had already put into the piece was not wasted. In 1943, the New York Philharmonic invited the distinguished foreign composer, now living in the United States, to submit a new work for performance. Hindemith turned back to the Weber excerpts and quickly produced one of his most popular orchestral works.

During his all-too-brief forty years, Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) almost single-handedly created German romantic opera with *Der Freischütz*, *Euryanthe*, and *Oberon*. His works contained characters that embodied honor and nobility, love and sacrifice, thus representing the highest ideals of a humane German culture. In 1943, at a time when German culture seemed to have been overwhelmed by barbarism, Hindemith, then teaching at Yale, paid homage to his great predecessor among German composers by turning some little four-hand piano pieces by Weber into a brilliantly elaborated, playful symphonic score.

Hindemith was an active performer, a distinguished violist, who wanted to write music that would “sound” in performance, yet that also grew out of a carefully balanced interrelationship between melody, harmony, and counterpoint. After sowing his artistic wild oats in a series of youthful works that pleased advanced musicians but outraged conservative ones (including the Nazis, who banned his music), Hindemith settled into a maturity lasting some three decades. His compositional style offered a remarkable consistency in its neo-classical approach, its careful dissonance treatment, and an increasing sensitivity to orchestral color.

For the *Symphonic Metamorphoses*, Hindemith chose themes mostly from Weber's four-hand piano music, with the exception of the second movement,

which drew upon material written as incidental music to Schiller's *Turandot*. Hindemith did not consider any of this material to represent the very best work or most typical elements of Weber's style, so he used it quite freely and made whatever alterations he deemed appropriate for his own musical purposes.

The opening Allegro offers a vigorous and concise working out of two different Weberian themes. The Scherzo offers a touch of *chinoiserie* (of course, Schiller's play, drawn from Gozzi's fairy tale, was set in China) with the principal material in the flute and a slightly exotic—certainly for Hindemith—percussion ensemble. The Andantino in 6/8 becomes more and more florid as it progresses, with an extended passage for the flute comprising most of its latter part. The March, the score's finale, stays very close to the Weber original at the beginning, but then Hindemith extends and builds it to a powerful climax.

MODEST MUSSORGSKY ***Pictures at an Exhibition*** **(orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)**

Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky was born at Karevo, district of Pskov, Russia on March 21, 1839, and died in St. Petersburg on March 28, 1881. He composed Pictures at an Exhibition as a suite of piano pieces in June 1874. Maurice Ravel made his orchestral transcription in the summer of 1922 for Serge Koussevitzky, who introduced the Ravel version at one of his own concerts in Paris on October 22, 1922. Ravel's orchestration calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, bells, triangle, tam-tam, rattle, whip, cymbals, side drum, bass drum, xylophone, celesta, two harps, and strings. Duration is about 35 minutes.

Mussorgsky's music is the triumph of genius over technique. Though he had possibly the least formal training of any of the Russian "Five" (also known as the "Mighty Handful"—five nationalist composers also including Cui, Balakirev, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov—who sought to create a purely Russian musical style) and was certainly regarded as little more than a dilettante by composers of far greater polish, Mussorgsky had a burning originality that at times was able to conquer both his lack of technique and a sad addiction to the bottle that led to an unstable life and an early demise. Mussorgsky's genius expressed itself most directly in opera, for he had the ability to translate verbal and physical gestures into extraordinarily imaginative, lifelike music. Few of his purely instrumental works are ever performed, and even those that are heard (like the famous orchestral piece *Night on Bald Mountain*) were created originally for an opera.

The single exception to this rule is the suite *Pictures at an Exhibition* for solo piano, one of the great achievements of romantic keyboard music and of Russian nationalism. Even here, Mussorgsky was inspired by a kind of dramatic event. The exhibition in question was a real one, a memorial showing of works by a talented architect named Victor Hartman, who had died at the age of 40 in July 1873. Mussorgsky, both an admirer and a close friend of the artist, wrote an obituary describing Hartman's first important work, the reconstruction of several buildings for an All-Russian Manufacturing Exhibition: "In his hands a clumsy prison-like building where wine had previously been stored took on an artistic, even graceful appearance, both inside and outside, in the Russian style."

The news of Hartman's death shocked Vladimir Stasov, critic and spokesman for a whole generation of Russian artists and friend to both Mussorgsky and Hartman: "He was the most talented, the most original, the most enterprising, and the most daring of all our architects...For me, so much hope and anticipation perished with him!" At Stasov's initiative, a special exhibition

of Hartman's work was put together in St. Petersburg, where it opened in mid-February 1874. The show included both architectural plans and diverse drawings and paintings with scenes of everyday life and different human types. Sometime in the first month after it opened, Mussorgsky visited the exhibition. It had a powerful effect on him. On June 12 or 19 (the date is not certain) he wrote to Stasov with good news: "Hartman is boiling as *Boris* boiled." This was his way to say that he was deeply involved in composition and that it was going well. Clearly he had already discussed a Hartman project with Stasov, since he offered no other explanation. But he continued: "Sounds and ideas have been hanging in the air; I am devouring them and stuffing myself—I barely have time to scribble them on paper...My profile can be seen in the interludes...How well it is working out."

In that view, he was certainly right. Composing at a terrific pace, Mussorgsky finished the work by June 22—fast work indeed for so elaborate a score. The suite was immediately hailed by the composer's friends, particularly Stasov, to whom the composer dedicated the piece, since he had organized the Hartman exhibition that was its inspiration. While his friends admired it enormously, few people played the suite; it is fiendishly difficult. *Pictures* was not even published until five years after the composer's death. It only became famous and popular in the brilliant orchestral guise created by Maurice Ravel in 1922 at the suggestion of conductor Serge Koussevitzky.

The various "pictures" are linked here and there by references to the opening **Promenade**, which, as Mussorgsky reported, was his own self-portrait; he imagined himself "roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and at times sadly, thinking of his departed friend." He labeled it as being "in the Russian style," which is immediately evident.

The music representing each image is so vivid that no explanation is required, though the listener might care to know something about the original pictures (fewer than half survive today, but we have Stasov's description of the exhibition to tell us about the others).

The Gnome was a grotesque drawing for a child's toy. As Stasov said, "It is something in the style of the fabled Nutcracker, the nuts being inserted into the gnome's mouth. The gnome accompanies his droll movements with savage shrieks." **[Promenade] The Old Castle** depicted a landscape of markedly Italianate cast with a troubadour singing his lay. In Ravel's version there is an extended solo for saxophone, one of the most famous passages for that instrument in the orchestral repertory. **[Promenade] Tuileries**, a Parisian scene, showed children quarreling at play in the famous gardens, an image perfectly captured in the taunting musical figure (the universal children's cry of "Nyah, nyah!") that begins the scene and returns again and again throughout. **Bydlo** is the Polish word for "cattle"; Hartman's picture showed a heavy ox-cart lumbering along. **[Promenade] The unlikely sounding Ballet of unhatched chicks** consisted of designs for an 1871 ballet entitled *Trilby* (not related in any way to George du Maurier's sensationally popular novel of 1893) with choreography by Petipa and music by Gerber. Petipa always included a scene with child dancers. In this case the children were dressed as canaries "enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor, with canary heads put on like helmets."

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle: Mussorgsky himself owned Hartman's drawings of "A rich Jew wearing a fur hat" and "A poor Jew: Sandomierz." He transmuted these into a single movement contrasting the arrogance of wealth to the cringing obsequiousness of poverty (Mussorgsky himself evidently invented the names given to the two personalities). **[Promenade]** Hartman's lively drawing of **The Market at Limoges** becomes a brilliant scherzo, for which he even imagined some of the conversation of the shopping housewives, for he entered bits of their dialogue in the margin of the score: "Great news! M. de Puissanceout has just recovered his cow...Mme. de Remboursac has just

acquired a beautiful new set of teeth, while M. de Pantaloon's nose, which is in his way, is as much as ever the color of a peony."

The scherzo ends with dramatic suddenness in the powerful contrasting scene of the **Catacombs (A Roman Sepulchre)** in Paris. Mussorgsky noted in the margin: "The creative spirit of the dead Hartman leads me toward skulls, apostrophizes them—the skulls are illuminated gently from within." The mood is continued in the passage headed *Con mortuis in lingua morta* ("With the dead in a dead language"), in which Mussorgsky himself becomes our guide through the city of the dead with a ghostly version of his **Promenade**. **The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga)** evokes the fearsome witch of Russian fairy tales, though Hartman's drawing was of a clock in fourteenth-century style, shaped like Baba Yaga's hut with cocks' heads and standing on chicken legs. Mussorgsky's music suggests rather the witch's wild flight in a mortar in chase of her victims. Her ride brings us to the powerful finale of the suite, **The Bogatyr Gate (at Kiev, the Ancient Capital)**, described in Stasov's review of the exhibit as "unusually original," a design for a series of arched stone gates to replace the wooden city gates (though in the end they were never built) to commemorate Tsar Alexander II's escape from an attempted assassination. Mussorgsky filled his musical image with the perpetual ringing of bells large and small, recreating the sounds heard around a Russian public monument, and Ravel has seconded him in this, capping off the score with sonorous fireworks.