SKETCHES OF GRIEF:
GENESIS, COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICE, AND REVISION
IN THE OPERAS OF JOHN ADAMS

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ABSTRACT

Relying on hitherto unknown materials from John Adams’s private archive, this dissertation explores the compositional and revision histories of Nixon in China (1987), The Death of Klinghoffer (1991), and Doctor Atomic (2005). It focuses on Adams’s creative processes, which, sources show, were determined by the conceptual and ethical problems he and his collaborators, Peter Sellars and Alice Goodman, aimed to solve. Among these challenges included finding a means to articulate and reflect upon subjects of devastating magnitude, such as human rights abuses in Nixon, terrorism in Klinghoffer, and the events leading up to and aftermath of Hiroshima in Atomic. As a result, the musical strategies used to tell these stories shifted over the span of each opera’s creation. Musical sketches, detailed correspondence, and the original manuscript scores offer insight into not only Adams’s compositional practice, but also into how art can—and cannot—respond to tragedy.

The study also examines the centrality of revision to Adams’s creative enterprise. To this day, Adams revises the opera scores in relation to pressures ranging from the logistical to the ethical and political. As a result of its contentious subject, Klinghoffer saw three compositional overhauls over twenty years, representing the most acute example in Adams’s operatic output, if not the entire American repertory, of the marked role that critical voices, politics, and even catastrophe can play in the remaking of a score through time. Atomic and Nixon, too, have undergone revisions since their respective premieres. The operas thus can only be understood as products of revision, exhibiting processes of growth and change alongside the ongoing conflicts to which the works refer. Revision here is not necessarily corrective but rather a vital aspect of Adams’s compositional practice. Each draft is a combined singularity, part of an aesthetic that
denies empirical constructions of time, just as the minimalist aesthetic is concerned with the immediate moment. The relationship between the opera scores and ongoing events thus entails a nuanced definition of the minimalist experience, one that acknowledges a larger communal process—a lively, collaborative, and public dialogue—at play in the evolution of these works.
For my parents.

And for Paul.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In a sense, this project began on the night of October 1, 2005 as my father and I sat together in the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House, stunned, silent, withdrawn. Strange, harmonically tentative chords on chimes, gongs, and bells lingered in the stillness. Moments before, the opera house quietly pulsed in sound as a slow crescendo filled the space, chords sounding like light that stuns and then fades. The music became delicate and hushed. The quiet voice of a Japanese woman was heard. The curtain fell. And then all went silent. The audience emerged from the world premiere of John Adams’s *Doctor Atomic* (2005), the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer and the making of the atomic bomb. Taking in the stillness, the quiet fear that moved over us all, I could not help but wonder: how was it that this music, this noise, could be so evocative of the underlying terror and psychological stress surrounding the threat of nuclear annihilation? I was stirred, frightened, and profoundly curious.

That same year, I pondered the relationship between music and trauma in my UC Berkeley undergraduate thesis (2006). Several years later, as a Ph.D. student, I revisited the topic, wanting to explore it in the context of Adams’s three major operatic works: *Nixon in China* (1987), *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), and *Atomic*. In November 2012, the project took a fortuitous turn when I had the chance, thanks to Jason Wang, to meet Adams at a composer’s workshop in Seattle. Adams and I conversed at length about his operas, his compositional process, and the politics of *Klinghoffer*, in between discovering a mutual love for the mountains of California and New Hampshire. I also talked with him about the paucity of research on new music and the difficulties of gaining access to his full scores. As a result, he invited me to visit his home in Berkeley, CA where he kept not only his autograph scores but also dozens of boxes of letters, sketches, and research materials. Throughout the latter part of my graduate career, I
was fortunate enough to study his personal papers in depth—and thus the dynamic, collaborative processes that shaped *Nixon, Klinghoffer*, and *Atomic*. The project thus shifted from a distanced critical examination of the operas to a more intimate study of Adams’s compositional process in which primary source evidence became the focus. For this, I am ever grateful to Adams for his unwavering generosity, hospitality, and trust in opening his home and archive to me.

Support and inspiration were plentiful at Princeton. My advisor, Simon Morrison, has been an inexhaustible source of energy and support throughout this project. In addition to encouraging me to pursue archival work, his patience, imagination, and pleasure in helping me uncover the richness and depth in documentary material, not to mention his critical readings and attention to detail, have remained invaluable. Scott Burnham provided not only a sensitive reading but also contributed to an atmosphere of joyful intellectual energy at Princeton that fueled my motivation to complete the dissertation with pleasure. Kofi Agawu provoked me to think more deeply about critical approaches, in both his classes and in our conversations about a larger communal instinct at play in Adams’s compositional process. Wendy Heller has been a source of lively encouragement, generosity, and warmth throughout my graduate career. I am grateful to Barbara White and Thomas Trezise, both whom, in different ways, nurtured the deeper questions that underlie this work. I would also like to thank Darwin Scott and the Department of Music staff for their efforts to help me with a wide range of administrative details surrounding the project.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1980s, John Adams and his collaborators, director Peter Sellars and librettist Alice Goodman, have engaged real-life topics that are too divisive and unresolved to allow for ready representation. Their operas explore among the most contentious geopolitical challenges of our times—ideological conflict and human rights abuses in *Nixon in China* (1987), terrorism and radical Islamophobia in *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), and the threat of nuclear annihilation in *Doctor Atomic* (2005).¹ Adams, too, has taken on as a musical subject the grief of 9/11 survivors in *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2002). Although it is not a stage work, its status as a memorial piece based on documentary sources links it to the central aesthetic of his operas, namely the explication of recent historical events that have neither come to an end nor have been fully absorbed. The operas have provoked controversy and prompted both scholars and critics to contemplate how these representations are situated, especially since they are tied to delicate and contentious issues of recent social and political turmoil in which wounds are still fresh, protagonists still living, painful ideological debates still evolving, and nations, cultures, and individuals still grappling with the events Adams, Sellars, and Goodman put onstage.

The contemporaneity of Adams’s operas departs from most post-1945 American operas that have favored distant historical or mythical subjects drawn from novels, plays, or ancient texts.² To be sure, American opera composers writing in the post-WWII era have

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¹ Alice Goodman participated only in the initial stages of *Doctor Atomic*. When she left the collaboration in 2003, Peter Sellars took over the task of creating the libretto.

² Mark Blitzstein’s *Regina* (1948) and Carlisle Floyd’s *Of Mice and Men* (1970) are two classic cases of operas based on American literature. For a broad overview of trends in American opera, see Elise Kirk, *American Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) and John Dizikes’s *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). See also Anne Midgette, “The Voice of American Opera,” *Opera Quarterly* 23 (2007): 81-95; Lydia Goehr,
indirectly invested their works with contemporary socio-political narratives, such as McCarthyism in Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide* (1956) or cultural views on gender and sexuality in Aaron Copland’s *The Tender Land* (1954). The minimalist operas of Philip Glass have gravitated towards recent historical figures, including Albert Einstein in *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and Mohandas Gandhi in *Satyagraha* (1979), but from perspectives of non-narrative abstraction. Only Anthony Davis’s *X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1985) matches the visceral topicality of Adams, Sellars, and Goodman’s collaborations. This is not to say that operas about contemporary subjects with living protagonists have not existed in the past. The propagandistic operas of the French Revolution, for instance, used real-life figures to bolster the Revolution’s own mythology, reflecting events considered worthy to enter the chronicles of the nation. Opera buffa of the same era, with Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1787) as a classic example, relied to an extent on contemporary events as source material so social and moral commentary could operate fluidly and transparently. Likewise, German Zeitopern of the twentieth century used contemporary settings and characters, displaying satirical plots on themes of industrial development to reflect views of modernity, with Ernst Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* (1927) as a


defining case. The list continues, a reminder that opera has a long history of playing out contemporary politics onstage, creating vivid historical illusions, promises, or dreaded realities.

What separates the operas of Adams, Sellars, and Goodman from prior operatic explorations of contemporary topics is the effort to replace conventional theatrical representation with a simulacrum of immediate, lived experience—with a sense of being there, in the moment. With *Nixon*, which takes as its focus the historical 1972 Nixon-Mao summit, the creative team extracted their material straight from news headlines. The score itself suggests a series of headlines (the single-line textures), striking news images of Air Force One (the cinematic writing), clichés (Pat Nixon’s beloved high-school foxtrots), gestures of violence (percussive whips in the re-enactment of the agitprop ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*), and a set of intimate, overlapping portraits of private unrest (the motet-like imitation of voices suggesting simultaneous television broadcasts), all given an air of mysticism through Adams’s slow-moving, undulating harmonies. *Klinghoffer* charts another true story drawn from the headlines: the 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* cruise liner by Palestinian terrorists and the murder of a Jewish American passenger, Leon Klinghoffer, whose wife suffers the horror of learning of her husband’s death after she and the other passengers were safely rescued. The libretto and music play with different temporal relationships, shifting between in-the-moment re-enactments of the terrorist act (reflected in the jarring blasts of synthesized sound) and distanced reflections on the political and spiritual crises that gave rise to this particular historical event (represented in the searching obbligato lines and ritualistic Greek-style choruses). And yet, for all of its emphasis on immediacy, the opera grounds itself in antiquity, the libretto and music redolent of the Renaissance practice of *ars combinatoria*, of palimpsests etched onto the pages of allegory. In *Atomic*, the story of the moral quandaries of J. Robert Oppenheimer and the making of a weapon
thought to put an end to civilization, the libretto and score are themselves a kind of machinery, a churning progression of uneven textual and sonic quotations. Adams’s use of pre-existing texts, taped industrial war sounds, and spoken-word audio turns sections of the opera into partial documentaries, with the authentic experience and its operatized representation existing side-by-side. At the same time, archaic musical gestures, such as the chaconne and its associations with grief and searches for meaning, are the sphere through which Adams contemplates the crisis of conscience of the scientist who embodied the triumph and guilt of Hiroshima.

In a sense, Adams’s creative struggles reflect the stakes of each work. He faced, in different ways with each opera, the challenge of finding an adequate musical language for sensitive material. With Nixon, Adams confronted the risk of effacing historical context for the sake of the entertaining vignette (how can a jumble of headlines concerning the U.S. president’s 1972 diplomatic mission be translated into sound without masking the horror of Mao’s purges?). With Klinghoffer, it was the dilemma of integrating human atrocity into an intelligible history while commemorating the individuals who perished (how can the memory of Leon Klinghoffer be sanctified without disturbing the articulation of thousands of years of Middle Eastern violence?). While writing Atomic, Adams found himself up against a sense of iconographic inadequacy (how can Hiroshima be represented?). At the heart of each of these concerns was the question of the suitability of opera—the most elitist, decadent, self-indulgent art form in the history of western art music—for comment on street-level suffering. To what extent could opera be a bearer of recent history, specifically of recent violent history, and to what extent would Adams and his collaborators be defeating history to put opera in the service of something else?

These conceptual matters, along with the musical challenges presented to Adams by the subjects of Nixon, Klinghoffer, and Atomic, are the focus of this dissertation. Relying on hitherto
unknown materials from Adams’s private archive, this study examines the genesis of each opera and the composer’s rather agonized efforts to work out how this art form can be used to address events of living memory. What is more, Adams’s labors have not ended. The opera scores were drafted and performed, but he continues to revise them. His particular revision process is cumulative; modifications to the scores exhibit processes of growth and change alongside the ongoing events to which the operas refer. The operas are, in the truest sense, works-in-progress. Each draft is a combined singularity, an ever-evolving musical chronicle connected to a larger aesthetic that denies empirical constructions of time, just as the minimalist aesthetic is concerned with the immediacy of the moment.

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Adams maintains an ambiguous relationship to minimalism, yet his compositional process continues to be influenced by it. In the late 1970s, Adams followed a path opened up by the early minimalist composers, Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. These composers explored through sound nuanced elaborations of individual moments. More than a decade earlier, Riley, Young, Reich, and Glass pursued a direction initiated by John Cage and the experimentalists of the 1950s and 60s who produced music that reconceived musical time and thus the listening experience. Cage challenged the concept of musical teleology (competing poles of tension and resolution, of tonic and dominant, of “foreign” keys and “home” key) that had been the unquestioned norm for musical aesthetics since the beginning of common-practice tonality. Through chance-based methods of composition and the espousal on non-

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intention inspired by the Zen tradition, Cage laid the groundwork for the minimalist composers by defying goal-directed motion in music, drawing the listener into a place where each instant of performance is fleeting and unexpected.

Elaine Broad defines the minimalist aesthetic in music as embracing the very elements championed by Cage, namely “the conception of the non-narrative work-in-progress.” Wim Mertens likewise defines it as defying teleological progression towards tonal goals, resolution or closure. Timothy Johnson, too, has come to understand the aesthetic in terms of non-goal-oriented listening in which subtle changes in rhythm, texture, and harmony become the main events in a piece. Terry Riley’s *In C* (1964) is the classic example, seeming to suspend time altogether with its repetition of fifty-three short musical modules played in an order chosen by the musicians. La Monte Young’s *The Well-Tuned Piano* (1964-) features long-held tones, delicate fluctuations in tuning, and is, according to the composer, “still in progress.” Steve Reich’s *It’s Gonna Rain* (1965) superimposes tape loops that gradually move out of and eventually back into synchronization with each other. In each of these works, the composer seeks to establish alternative temporalities (or a-temporalities) through gradual processes that might be likened to capturing the exposure of time in a photograph.

The scholarship on musical minimalism tends to fall into several categories: first, treatments of the historical development of the style; second, studies of its aesthetic characteristics in the form of technical analyses of specific works; and third, cultural accounts of

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8 Timothy Johnson, “Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?” 744.
the phenomenon more generally. Adams’s role in scholarly accounts, if present at all, is usually limited to discussions of a “post-minimalist” approach, owing to the fact that he dilutes minimalist process-driven passages with other compositional techniques, such as the manipulation of musical gestures drawn from the pre-Baroque period to late nineteenth-century Romantic styles. Nevertheless, the dominant historical narrative presents the trend as a materialist and, for the most part, secular undertaking alongside developments in the visual arts. Through the study of familiar symbols (such as the American flag), artists such as Frank Stella and Jasper Johns called into question the nature of the relationship between art and consumer society, blurring boundaries between high and low and probing modernism’s conceptual emphasis on purity and innovation. Minimalist composers shared the common desire to dismantle preconceived notions of what art should be. They stressed simplification, the paradoxical presence of absence, and challenged the stronghold that serialism occupied in the

Despite the mutual antagonism between the serialists and minimalists, they shared in common a central tenet: the strict application of pre-compositional planning to determine as precisely as possible the outcome of the musical work. Whereas the serialists generated musical content through twelve-tone rows and their subsets (their inversion, retrograde, retrograde inversion, and algorithmic transpositions at the far reaches of all-combinatorial procedures), the minimalists designed and applied rigorous musical processes (additive and phasing procedures), seeking to make audible those processes in their rejection of traditional musical teleology. Both sought to transcend conventional modes of expression in a manner that was, according to Keith Potter, “essentially modernist.”

By the time Adams came onto the scene in the late-1970s, Glass and Reich, the “hard-core minimalists,” had already begun moving away from strict procedure, using more goal-directed harmonic motion, melodic development, and textural and timbral diversity. This transition, according to the scholarly record, corresponds with the end of a “pure minimalist” approach and the start of a “post-minimalist” one, with the dividing line at approximately 1974, the same year, coincidentally, that Adams first considered embracing the style.

Adams’s musical training to this point was wide-ranging, though generally classically oriented. Born in 1947, he grew up in New England, where his earliest exposure to music included touring jazz bands such as Duke Ellington’s at his step-grandfather’s dance hall in central New Hampshire. He played the clarinet in community bands and orchestras, as well as

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14 Elaine Broad clarifies this shift in “A New X?” K. Robert Schwarz, in *Minimalists*, discusses the shift between strictly the “minimalist” approach and a “maximalist” one. Potter, in *Four Musical Minimalists*, designates the style after the shift as “post-minimalist.” Kyle Gann, in *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 325-86, also refers to the style as “post-minimalist,” with the label eventually replaced by “totalism” in the 1990s.
the Boston Youth Symphony, mastering the repertory for that instrument, mostly Mozart and Brahms. As a teenager, Adams immersed himself in the recordings of Benny Goodman, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis, as well as the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Janis Joplin. He then went off to Harvard, where he completed his bachelor and master’s degrees in music composition in 1969 and 1971 respectively. His principal teacher was Leon Kirchner, a Schoenberg disciple who first exposed Adams to the rigors of academic serialism. Kirchner represented for the young composer “the unbearable dominance of intellectualism,” instilling in Adams the notion that composing was meant to be “a ferocious wrestling match with inner demons.” But in 1969, during his final undergraduate year, Adams discovered an antidote to Kirchner’s artistic standard: John Cage’s *Silence* (1961), a compilation of Cage’s lectures on music, Zen, and the *I Ching*. Adams found in Cage’s writing and proto-minimalist compositions a kind of freedom, “a much more communal, almost tribal creative process” than the one espoused by Kirchner at Harvard. The book crucially marked the next chapter of Adams’s life, illuminating a pathway to break free from the “small, constricted world of academia.”

In 1971, Adams left Cambridge with a master’s degree, abandoning the doctoral program in which he was enrolled. He loaded his Volkswagen Beetle and drove west, ending up at the Pacific Ocean where he soon found himself immersed in the Cage-inspired avant-garde scene of San Francisco. After spending a year working odd jobs in Berkeley and Oakland, Adams taught music composition at the San Francisco Conservatory from 1972-82. In his courses on analysis

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15 John Adams, personal journal, 1 August 1984.
16 Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Picador, 2008), 35. “In later years,” Adams noted, “I gradually came to understand that Kirchner had communicated to me his high standards of excellence and his deeply held artistic values.” Adams, personal communication with the author, 19 March 2016.
and composition, he covered topics ranging from how to consult the *I Ching* to how Debussy, in his early compositions, manipulated and concealed the half-diminished seventh chord derived from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*—a famous example of Bloomian “anxiety of influence.”

Adams, meanwhile, organized experimental music concerts with his students. On these occasions he presented his own work, such as *Lo-Fi* (1972) assembled from scrap metal and snippets of Liberace and Sinatra recordings channeled through a homemade modular synthesizer. He embraced the wild Bay Area avant-garde scene for several years but eventually found himself dissatisfied with it. “I began to notice that often after an avant-garde event I would drive home alone to my cottage on the beach, lock the door, and, like a closet tippler, end the evening deep in a Beethoven quartet.” He craved the expressive musical language of the metamorphosed 12-bar blues hymn of Duke Ellington’s “Black and Tan Fantasy” (1926), the powerful tonic-dominant-submediant chord progression and A-G-F bassline in the chorus of the Beatles’ “Let it Be” (1968), and the austere harmonic and timbral landscapes in the music of Sibelius. How to effectively integrate those musical worlds with the avant-garde seemed beyond reach. It was not until 1974, when Adams first experienced Reich’s *Drumming* (1971), a piece that explores the acoustic phenomenon of phase-shifting, that Adams saw “a possibility for a music which I could make a life in.”

He listened to Reich with “an almost childlike glee,” as if “the pleasure principle had been invited back into the listening experience.”

In 1977, Adams attempted his first composition in the minimalist style, *Phrygian Gates*, a 24-minute work for solo piano. The piece is Adams’s most rigorous process-based work, moving

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21 Adams, interview with Thomas May, 13.
through a set of pitch and rhythmic organizations with six of the twelve key centers of the circle of fifths as the “gates” through which the work’s palindromic organization unfolds. Minimalist techniques gave him the possibility for a new architecture of music, a grand canvas for exploring what he called “those Great Prairies of non-event.”  

But he soon found himself lukewarm to strict process, wanting to develop a musical style that allowed for more individual decision-making. Adams, too, continued to long for the kind of volatility and high drama found in, for instance, the augmented-sixth arrival on the dominant in the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (1808), or the misfired cadence, swept away by an octatonic rush, in the opening of Sibelius’s Tapiola (1926). “I could detect right off,” Adams recalled, “that minimalism in its classic embodiment was too chaste and pure for me, that I would have to find a way to make it more expressive and less bound to its procedures.”

After Phrygian Gates, Adams devised his own form of minimalism. He departed from the asceticism and rigor of the early minimalist style and followed instead an instinctive drive to create sweeping climaxes through contrasting melodic patterns, textural density, rhythmic figuration, and dynamics. Adams began mapping onto his minimalist scaffolds musical fragments drawn from the likes of Wagner’s Parsifal (the E-flat pedals and quasi-functional harmonic movement, such as the D-flat/D-natural to A-flat “Grail” progression) and Sibelius’s Fourth Symphony (the dark scoring and interlocking tritone pairs). A series of works resulted, Shaker Loops (1978), Harmonium (1981), Grand Pianola Music (1982), and Harmonielehre (1984-85). Adams, accordingly, became a highly intuitive composer, bound less by the labels

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24  Adams, interview with Thomas May, 13.
invented by critics and historians than simultaneously inside and outside those categories all at once. His creative practice required feeling out, over numerous drafts, the structures and textures of his musical ideas. He rarely knew where he was going when he began, “as if an architect were building on an empty site without a blueprint.”\textsuperscript{26} But at the same time, intuition alone was not enough.

By the time Adams started writing \textit{Nixon} in 1985, he found that the dramaturgical proportions of the Nixon-Mao encounter and the expressive demands of Goodman’s text gave shape to his compositional process. Later, while writing \textit{Klinghoffer} in 1989, he would discover that the text’s thematic undevcurrents of mourning, combined with the vast landscapes of maritime imagery, guided specific musical passages. In these moments, he re-embraced the solemnity and quietness of minimalism, its reinforcement of absence as permanent. Adams’s use of ready-made material in the \textit{Klinghoffer} score, including Orphic motifs of descent and the quiet re-imagining of Erik Satie’s \textit{Gymnopédie No. 1} as Klinghoffer’s body falls into the sea, imitates the sanctuary-like minimalist art installations that take the place of cathedrals, such as De Maria’s \textit{Broken Kilometer} (1979) or the Rothko Chapel. With \textit{Atomic}, Adams turned again to ready-made material, using the hushed, pre-recorded sound of a Japanese woman’s voice to evoke what happened at Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The performance and musical dimensions of these instances resonate a spiritualized view of minimalism, the consecration of empty presence. Cage was, of course, the progenitor of this type of composition, with \textit{4’33”} (1952) the ultimate proto-minimalist installation, itself often treated as a great shrine.\textsuperscript{27} For Adams, the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Adams, interview with Jonathan Cott in the liner notes to \textit{Harmonielehre} (Nonesuch 79115, 1985).
\item \textsuperscript{27} See Anna Chave, “Revaluing Minimalism: Patronage, Aura, and Place,” \textit{The Art Bulletin} 90:3 (2008): 466-486. Perhaps more so than Cage, whose quiet interest in Zen Buddhism guided his creative work, La Monte Young, Arvo Pärt, and Henryk Górecki viewed minimalism as an
\end{itemize}
spiritual aspect of minimalism seemed to prove useful as he met the challenge, particularly in *Klinghoffer* and *Atomic*, of finding a way to articulate and reflect upon catastrophe.

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Adams did not work alone but found his muse in Peter Sellars, a theater director who brought the spirit of avant-garde experimentation and the philosophy of art as a deep, moral commitment to society to their collaborations. The political, social, and historical motivation of each of Adams’s stage works belongs to Sellars (with the exception of *Atomic* whose mastermind was Pamela Rosenberg). Adams and Sellars rarely, if ever, communicate by letter or email, only by phone or in person; physical traces of their interactions hardly exist. Their discussions, though, are reflected everywhere in the manuscript scores, even if Sellars’s essential influence goes largely unmentioned. Sellars seldom writes his thoughts or teachings; rather they are captured in the memories of those who have been in his impassioned presence. His attraction to topics of death and loss stems in part from his embrace of the grace and humility of Buddhist thought: that suffering is in every aspect of human existence; its cure lies in knowledge, in the study of its causes. He calls this kind of work “the science of the heart,” which, he believes, explicit spiritualized practice, as the “research of truth through simple forms,” a quest for the essential. On the spiritual in the music of Young, see Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It*. See also Maria Cizmic, “Music, Mourning, and War: Henryk Górecki’s Third Symphony and the Politics of Remembering,” in *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 133-66; and “Transcending the Icon: Spirituality and Postmodernism in Arvo Pärt’s ‘Tabula Rasa’ and ‘Spiegel im Spiegel,’” *Twentieth Century Music* 5:1 (2008): 45-78.

manifests itself in direct ways through art, especially music.\textsuperscript{29} “Most of the history of art, over and over again,” Sellars maintains, “is about death.”

We’re a society that can’t really deal with it, but most of Bach’s music is about dying and how to die, and the meaning of death. The culture in Tibet is all around dying well. The science of the heart is totally understanding every day of your life in terms of death, because it’s your meditation on death that empowers your life. Death is the best guarantee against wasting time.\textsuperscript{30}

His projects openly broach the ever-present, pressing issue of trauma. And although Sellars is well aware of the dangers of trivializing obscenity onstage, the greater risk, in his view, is that of silence. “The absence of articulation,” he professes, “is what creates violence.”\textsuperscript{31}

Sellars (b. 1957) grew up in Pittsburgh in the 1960s. Since an adolescent, he has immersed himself in topics involving social injustice and human crisis, approaching art as a kind of moral and spiritual duty to society. In his teenage and college years, he built and maintained his own traveling puppet theater, writing and producing shows on themes tied to the politics and aftermath of the Vietnam War and the feminist movement, including poverty, homelessness, addiction, and rape.\textsuperscript{32} His early body of works emerged during a time when the study of the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Sellars, “The Question of Culture,” in \textit{Theater in Crisis?: Performance Manifestos for a New Century}, ed. Maria Delgado. (Manchester University Press, 2002), 127-43. The full quote is as follows: “We have to ask ourselves what our projects are doing. There’s a lot of pain, aggression, and violence behind our comfortable standard of living, and we’re shielded from it because we are in a materialistic culture, a culture that’s all about the effects. What we don’t want to know about is the causes…Our society doesn’t want to ask these questions, and in an era of social and political collapse so extreme, people need a way for communicating. The absence of articulation is what creates violence. The question of visionary prophetic engagement is what artists are here for, to see the fire on the mountain, to see the ring of flames, to understand the flames we’re feeling.”
\textsuperscript{32} Sellars commented on his early puppet productions, “When I was in high school I had a theater for five summers in Denver, Colorado where I did these shows for Denver housewives and their kids. I then took the same material to Harvard with me. Now the Denver housewives had no problem, but the Harvard Crimson wrote articles about this is so avant-garde. This is so
effects of human suffering and catastrophe (i.e. post-traumatic stress disorder) in the wake of Vietnam, and, more belatedly, the Holocaust, became of increasing interest in America. The type of politics he brings to his projects pays tribute to this movement, as well as to the work of Bertolt Brecht and Vsevolod Meyerhold in their didactic emphasis on motivating audiences to engage with social problems. “I want to make the audience work,” Sellars asserts, “because once they do that they have a stake in it. When an audience enters into a piece, they are left with no middle course—they have to face the issues.”

Just before graduating from Harvard in 1980, where Sellars staged as part of his senior thesis an abridged version of Wagner’s “Ring Cycle” for 25-foot-tall puppets, he embarked on a number of opera projects, including his infamous re-imagining of Mozart’s Don Giovanni set in present day Spanish Harlem (1980). Sellars was interested in transposition, using Mozart to make a political case about rampant inequality embedded in contemporary American society. By putting the poverty-stricken drug slums of Harlem on the operatic stage, he sought to underscore alarming. This is so difficult to follow. How can this be allowed? My problem is the Denver housewives entered that work directly. They just were there. And that's what art is about. It is about why do we live together? Is there any reason to live near, within any proximity of another human being? If there is, there must be something that's shared. That thing is culture. And therefore, the question is could we cultivate it so that it could become cultured culture?” Sellars, interview with Bill Moyers, Exploring the Avant-Garde: Peter Sellars. Films For The Humanities & Sciences, 1990, http://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/657755.

33 In the late 1970s, primarily as a result of the feminist movement and the return of Vietnam War veterans, researchers began to show widespread interest in the effect of acute violence on people. American clinical psychologist and Harvard Medical School professor Judith Herman was among the first to credit both the women’s movement and Vietnam for spurring major developments in this area and bringing to public awareness the breadth of the effects of war and domestic violence as human rights violations that “perpetuate unjust social order through terror.” See Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

oppressive class distinctions “on the edge of revolution.” It was, in part, an assault on the elitism and decadence that prevailed in American opera houses, attitudes that protected, in Sellars’s words, the “laziness and incompetence of most opera companies to confront the more important issues of our times.” Critics were appalled; one called his efforts “a vicious, bludgeoning account of interpersonal sadism.” As a result, Sellars became known as an irreverent iconoclast, a “destroyer of the classics.” What seemed to disturb audiences most about his de-classicization of opera was that it allowed the discord and violence in the music to be heard as though it were brand new, making audiences newly impressionable, newly observant to the “pain, aggression, and violence behind our comfortable standard of living.” It was a message that no one seemed to want to hear.

In the summer of 1981, Adams met Sellars at the Monadnock Music Festival in New Hampshire. The composer was visiting his parents in East Concord, NH and drove to the nearby Monadnock region to hear a performance of Shaker Loops (1978). Sellars happened to be there, staging a version of Haydn’s Armida. They had a vague awareness of one another. Adams had read about the radical theater director in The Boston Globe; Sellars knew of Adams from the New and Unusual Music Festival in San Francisco where he had heard a version of Shaker Loops. Sellars described Shaker Loops as music that “builds up these incredible sweeps of tension and then goes into astonishing release and then adrenaline-inspired visionary states: that

35 “Addiction is, after all, the theme of this opera,” Sellars noted, debatably, in his program note to Don Giovanni. The work premiered at the Monadnock Music Festival in September 1980.
36 Sellars, program note, Don Giovanni (1980).
37 Mikotowicz, 92.
39 Sellars, “The Question of Culture.”
40 Adams mistakenly notes the year of their meeting as 1983 in his memoir, Hallelujah Junction, 126. Archival evidence reveals the year to have been 1981.
is absolutely what you hope for in theater.”\textsuperscript{41} When Adams met Sellars at Monadnock, he knew he “was in the presence of a very rare spirit.”\textsuperscript{42} It was at this meeting that Sellars proposed to Adams the idea of an opera dramatizing Richard Nixon’s visit to China, launching what would become a lifelong collaborative partnership.

In 1985, Sellars introduced Adams to Alice Goodman (b. 1958). She was a friend of Sellars, a poet and former classmate at Harvard. Goodman had grown up in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she attended the prestigious Breck School and cultivated a gift for writing at an early age.\textsuperscript{43} Raised in a Reform Jewish family, she spent each of her Sundays as a child at the synagogue where she was shown films of the Holocaust. “The purpose,” she remembered, “was to cause this little group of progressive, middle-class Jewish children living in the middle of the U.S. to have a Jewish identity, to create a sense of us and them. And it seemed to me that this was the wrong idea altogether.”\textsuperscript{44} Encouraged by her parents and the local rabbi to pursue Jewish scholarship, Goodman instead went off to Harvard where she studied English and American literature and worked as a translator of plays into texts for Sellars’s productions. She then took up post-graduate work at Cambridge, where, in 1985, she received a phone call from Sellars asking if she wanted to write the libretto for \textit{Nixon} with music by Adams, a composer of whom she had never heard. “I had just been turned down for every junior research fellowship I’d

\textsuperscript{42} Adams, \textit{Hallelujah Junction}, 126.
\textsuperscript{43} Alice Goodman, interview with Susan Mansfield, “Has Her Life Been the Proverbial ‘Curate’s Egg’?” \textit{Andante Magazine}, 22 August 2005.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
applied for,” Goodman recalled. “I said at once that I’d do it as long as it paid as much as a junior research fellowship.”

Goodman produced a libretto for Nixon, a poetic translation of pedestrian language from the documentary records of Mao, Nixon, Kissinger, and Chou En-lai. Several years later in 1989, she took a similar approach to the Klinghoffer libretto, this time drawing on ancient biblical texts in addition to news sources. Although the creators anticipated controversy over Klinghoffer, the nature of the criticism was devastating. After the 1991 American premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the opera was accused of being pro-Palestinian, anti-Semitic, and even part of a Zionist plot. Jewish groups protested subsequent performances. The Klinghoffer daughters publicly denounced the work. “I knew when I wrote it,” Goodman later reflected,

that what I was writing was true. I always knew that there would be people who would be offended. What I didn’t anticipate was this very primitive critical reaction, saying that because Omar [one of the terrorists] has a beautiful aria with beautiful music, he is made to be the hero or because the Klinghoffers are depicted as old people with diseases speaking in a prosaic way, that they are being made fools of. The important thing for me was making everyone human. That doesn’t mean abdicating moral responsibility, or even abdicating judgment, but it did mean not putting a finger on the scales.

In the period that followed, Goodman stopped writing. She converted from Judaism to Christianity, eventually pursuing a degree in theology from Boston University. In 2001 she was ordained as a clergy member in the Church of England. Although she believed her writing career was over, she agreed to work again with Adams and Sellars on Atomic in 2003. She drafted a scenario but left the project a year into it, claiming that the collaborative arrangement had

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
changed.\footnote{Ibid. Goodman maintains this “had to do with the simple fact that John has gone from Nixon and Klinghoffer to become a very, very famous and powerful composer, and I’ve gone on to become a priest in the Church of England!”} Sellars took over the task of the Atomic libretto and, together with Adams, implemented a radical shift in strategy, assembling a patchwork of documentary text fragments and the poetry beloved by Oppenheimer. In the wake of Goodman’s departure, Adams’s compositional approach to the opera, too, shifted in a way that carried its own set of challenges and expectations.

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Nixon, Klinghoffer, and Atomic are by design heterogeneous in their genesis, as well as in the kinds of archival documents that bear witness to their creation. This dissertation is thus organized in three parts, one for each opera respectively. The materials that give evidence to Adams’s efforts are private documents housed at the composer’s home in Berkeley, CA and in a storage unit in nearby Emeryville. Over time and after delicate negotiation, Adams granted me access to examine them during extended periods throughout my graduate career. The project unfolded like detective work, with the aim to grasp the rationale for the operas and to chronicle their creation and re-creation. Thousands of pages of letters, diaries, research materials, annotated libretto drafts, hand-written musical sketches, MIDI software mock-ups, and the autograph manuscript scores are at once a record, an interpretation, a meditation on, and a re-enactment of the events represented in each work. The materials find Adams searching to turn the music of Nixon into newsiness, to encode violence in sound in Klinghoffer, and to sublimate the effects of radiation exposure in Atomic. They also represent a constellation of biographical
and technical evidence, revealing the nature of not only Adams’s daily working habits, but also the complex collaborative dynamics that shaped his most ambitious works to date.

Until recently, a large gap in the archival holdings, spanning from 1984 to 1991, raised the question of where some of the sketchbooks and journals, including those for *Nixon*, had gone. According to Adams, they had been missing for years, likely vanishing during a move between residences in 1991. In 2013, however, Adams opened his front door to find several large boxes that had been sent by the wife of late ethnomusicologist Fred Lieberman. To the composer’s surprise, they contained the missing materials, notably his musical sketches for *Nixon*. Adams had forgotten he loaned the materials to Lieberman, who housed them for nearly two decades while attempting to write an Adams biography, a project eventually abandoned. After Lieberman passed away in May 2013, his wife found the manuscripts and returned them, graciously, to their owner.

Part I, “The ‘Lost’ *Nixon* Sketches: Observations on the Genesis of *Nixon in China*,” examines these newly found sources, which offer insight into a period in Adams’s career that found him shifting from process-driven minimalism to a more eclectic and wide-ranging style. The documents include, among other things, personal journals, sketchbooks containing drafts of *Harmonielehre* (1984-85), *The Chairman Dances* (1985), and *Nixon*, as well as Adams’s annotated version of Goodman’s libretto. Sketches reveal that works written prior to *Nixon*, including *Harmonielehre*, in which Adams wrestled with the legacies of academic serialism and early minimalism, served as creative fodder for the diverse musical language he would develop

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48 Lieberman was on the faculty of the department of music at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His work with Lou Harrison and subsequent biographical study of Harrison inspired him to contact Adams about a similar biography project. Leta Miller, interview with the author, 2 July 2014.
in the *Nixon* score. He tested, as it were, the basic ideas for the opera in the sketches for *The Chairman Dances*, the immediate precursor to *Nixon*. Adams’s reinterpretation of the foxtrot, with its metric distortions to symbolize the hedonism of Mao’s mass repressions, reflects how he went about giving the politics of his score some clarity. Numerous drafts for Nixon’s “News” aria, too, show how Adams grappled with capturing the materiality of Nixon’s words by making the score like television headlines through exaggerated repetitions. Adams, in effect, took the conventions of opera and upended them, using minimalism as the link to piece together an array of musical styles to narrate the story of Nixon amidst his Communist hosts.

Part II, “The Politics of Revision: Twenty Years of *Klinghoffer,*” details the compositional genesis and extensive revisions made to the *Klinghoffer* score over two decades. Sketches show that the early phase of the opera’s musical development was less about politics or ethics than it was about a moment of heightened attunement in Adams’s career. By the time Adams started writing *Klinghoffer*, he had come to grips with the promises and problems of minimalism while fulfilling his own bent for lyricism. In the drafts, he tested and rejected various forms of expression linked to grief and mourning. Despite Adams’s efforts to craft an insightful, thoughtful response to the tragic event, the score highlighted for some the unavoidable disconnect between his creative environment and the real-life terror his opera re-interprets. Outrage ensued; Adams’s self-doubts of the past resurfaced. The revisions to the opera score responded to withering criticism and continued political and religious turmoil. Terrorism and Islamophobia have hardly, of course, come to an end. The numerous drafts of *Klinghoffer* suggest that for Adams the opera is likewise unending; a definitive edition might never be achieved. To view the score as a symbolic reflection of ongoing conflict, as a series of provisional texts engaged in a larger communal process—a lively, collaborative, and public
dialogue—destabilizes the concept of the fixed work, but it also forces us to re-inscribe it within the open space of its possibilities.

Part III, “Sketches of Grief: The Writing of Doctor Atomic,” examines the conceptual and musical processes that shaped the opera, including details of the commission, Goodman’s initial scenario, the assembling of the libretto, and the ethical implications of Adams and Sellars’s turn to verbatim documentary sources. Study of the archival material reveals that the creators struggled with their subject without reaching a final consensus about Oppenheimer or the consequences of the nuclear age. Adams experienced a number of creative blocks; he rarely trusted his initial instincts. For instance, musical sketches for his setting of John Donne’s “Batter My Heart,” in which Oppenheimer finds himself in the depths of spiritual turmoil, feature not the lament motif that marks the final version but rather a more aggressive portrait of broken rhythms and fragmented melodic outbursts. The Donne sketches indicate a creative process that is, in essence, indecisive, hovering in the space between the unstable, instinctive response that is the first draft and the “practice”—in Adams’s case, his reliance on the safety of convention and borrowed material. What is more, up until the spring before the opera’s October 2005 premiere, Adams had not yet conceived the finale. He found himself face-to-face with a kind of crisis of representation. His decision to emphasize pre-recorded sound, specifically taped voice, was influenced by his solution for On the Transmigration of Souls (2002), which features a tape of city sounds, short spoken phrases, and names of 9/11 victims. The turn to the documentary provided Adams a way to temper his role as sole-creator, to move beyond the immediate narrative of the atomic bomb. Discussion of the composer’s spiritual viewpoint is limited to this section of this dissertation. Sources show that points of intersection between Zen Buddhism (with its emphasis on the nature of human suffering, non-attachment, and death as
transmigration) and the aesthetics and techniques of minimalism influenced Adams’s creative outlook as he struggled to navigate how art can—and cannot—respond to tragedy.

As is often the case, the habit of writing and rewriting can signal an ongoing struggle with one’s creative impulses. Adams re-composed much of the Atomic score after its premiere, the result of casting issues and the fact that he composed the opera in relative haste. But also, in a sense, struggle was embedded in the subject itself. Adams faced a spiritual dilemma, the challenge of giving voice to mass death, to nothingness. The questions surrounding the use of the atomic bomb in Japan cannot be adequately answered; its musical response could never be entirely complete. The libretto, the score, the revisions, and the restagings all seek to solve problems that are never clearly identified or answered in the opera. Perhaps these problems are knowingly unsolvable, but the opera nonetheless bears the marks of struggle such that its success remains likewise uncertain.

The purposeful confrontation with the unsolvable, too, applies to East-West détente in Nixon and terrorism in Klinghoffer. The ongoing, conflicted nature of each of Adams’s opera subjects in combination with his incessant revisions keeps these works locked in the present, continually in-progress, engendering a wellspring of immediacy. It is a paradoxical effort, since even journalists fail to keep up with current events, and opera is nothing more than a genre freighted with past-ness. Adams and Sellars strive to make opera the kind of bearer of recent history that it had been in the eighteenth century while also making it relevant to the surreal, more-than-real world in which we currently live. In the 1970s, media replaced lived experience with its instantaneous simulacrum. Nixon documents that shift. Now, social media has, in a sense, attempted to erase the differences between lived experience and its representation. This has given the arts like opera a new task: to make some sense of the parade of illusions that is
everywhere around us, to get at the inherent paradox of events like Hiroshima or terrorism, events that seem to most people like nothing more than movies.
PART I
The “Lost” *Nixon* Sketches:
Observations on the Genesis of John Adams’s *Nixon in China*

Several days before Christmas in 2013, twenty-five years after the 1987 premiere of *Nixon in China*, John Adams received a shipment of boxes on the doorstep of his Berkeley, CA home. Inside, he found the musical sketches for *Nixon*, Alice Goodman’s libretto drafts, and half-a-dozen personal journals charting the creative block he experienced in the years prior to composing the opera. The archival materials had been lost for more than a decade; as a result, the details of the opera’s conceptual and compositional genesis were long unknown, or perhaps forgotten. Thoughtfully placed on top of the loose documents was a handwritten note from the wife of Fred Lieberman, an ethnomusicologist who had been a professor of music at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She explained that her husband had passed away several months before. While sorting through his things, she found the boxes filled with Adams’s manuscript materials and wanted to return them to their owner. Adams had forgotten he loaned the sketchbooks and journals to Lieberman in 1998 after agreeing to participate in a biographical study.¹ Lieberman secured an advanced contract for the Adams biography, attended concerts and premieres of Adams’s works, and recorded hours of intensive interviews with the composer. But

¹ This chapter expands material presented at the Society for American Music Annual Meeting in Sacramento, CA (2015) and at the Fourth International Conference on Music and Minimalism in Long Beach, CA (2013).

for reasons not entirely clear, Lieberman abandoned the project, having drafted not a single page of text. ²

The work Lieberman never started, or left behind, entails the study of a crucial period in Adams’s career that found the composer abandoning process-driven minimalism and embracing a more wide-ranging style. The documents Lieberman housed for more than a decade included Adams’s journals from the early 1980s, sketchbooks containing drafts of Harmonielehre (1984-85) and The Chairman Dances (1985), as well as three bound sketchbooks and nearly 200 loose folios of sketch fragments and longer continuous drafts for Nixon from 1985-87. Scattered in between the loose sketches were Goodman’s original scenario and numerous pages of her libretto draft with Adams’s musical annotations. Only on rare occasion did Adams date his sketches or offer clues about the motives behind his musical decisions. It is within the pages of his date-stamped journal entries that vital information surrounding the circumstances of his creative traces comes to bear.

Adams’s personal writings from 1983-86 offer a window into the composer’s inner world, one underscored by a restless, ongoing dissatisfaction with his creative practice. In 1983, a high stakes commission for the San Francisco Symphony (Harmonielehre) precipitated a creative block. The pressure Adams put on himself to write the next great masterwork paralyzed him. Since 1977, he had explored the techniques of minimalism but by 1983 became

² Leta Miller, interview with the author, 2 July 2014. Miller, a close colleague of Lieberman, assumed that there was some disagreement between Adams and Lieberman. She also suggested that Lieberman, who was infamously disorganized, was likely overwhelmed by the project. Miller noted that he disliked sorting through the nitty-gritty of Lou Harrison’s manuscript materials; she was the one who did the majority of analysis and grunt work for the co-authored Harrison books, while he provided the larger aesthetic and thematic threads. Miller commented that Lieberman was thrilled about the project with Adams. “But all of a sudden,” she said, “everything went quiet.” When asked about the sudden abandonment of the project, Adams recalled that Lieberman had health issues, which kept him from completing the project. John Adams, personal communication with the author, 10 June 2014.
disenchanted with its procedural rigor and lack of spontaneity. He also had an irrepressible drive for creative autonomy, to at once come to grips with and break free from his academic heritage instilled by his teacher at Harvard, Leon Kirchner, a Schoenberg disciple whose music depended, to an extent, on the energy generated from tone rows. Adams sought to forge a “genuine sonic identity,” a music that somehow integrated instinct with method.

Towards the end of 1983, Adams embarked on a re-evaluation of his musical language. His journals relate a tortuous eighteen-month dry spell as he wrestled with the composition of Harmonielehre, its title a reference to Schoenberg’s “Textbook of Harmony” and, by extension, to Adams’s own internal crisis of heritage and style. He sought a technique that would somehow situate minimalism’s austerity within a broader expressive frame marked by an array of influences, including the fluctuating tonalities found in the scores of Wagner and early Schoenberg. The act of working through this creative block resulted in the development of a new compositional technique. Adams turned the score of Harmonielehre into an exploration of texture with movement defined not by teleological cause-and-effect relationships, but rather in terms of denseness, the saturation of musical space. Just as Schoenberg elaborated Wagner, who in turn relied on the elaboration of harmonic nodes, so too did Adams elaborate a single cell into intricate tapestries of sound. The technique came firmly under his control with Nixon.

This chapter is chronological, moving from up-close descriptions of Adams’s musical sketches and personal writings from the 1980s to broader panoramas of the creative practices and collaborative contexts that shaped Nixon. It begins, however, with an overview of the opera’s larger themes: the historical backdrop and political stakes of Nixon’s 1972 diplomatic mission to China and the conceptual undercurrents that motivated Peter Sellars to devise the opera project.

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When Sellars courted Adams to write the music for the opera (between 1981-84), the composer found himself experiencing enormous outward success but great psychological unrest within. It was not until the spring of 1985, after Adams completed *Harmonielehre* and started composing *The Chairman Dances* (a separate orchestral response to images drawn from Goodman’s libretto for *Nixon*), that he had finally settled into a creative rhythm in which deeper relationships between successive drafts underscored a larger sense of connectivity to the final version. *The Chairman Dances*, a musical portrait of Mao and Madame Mao dancing to a licentious foxtrot (a “decadent” American dance deemed moribund and antithetical to the strategies of the Cultural Revolution), gave Adams a preliminary opportunity to try out ideas for *Nixon*. The score turned into a kind of minimalist elaboration of simple pioneer march licks transformed into American schmaltz, with political and historical contexts repeatedly, and intentionally, forgotten. In the process, Adams found that the surface materiality of the Nixon-Mao encounter, namely the media’s sacrifice of historical background for the entertaining sound byte, at once lent itself and gave shape to his new architecture of music. He and his collaborators sought to uncover that backdrop over the course of three acts, to find analogies between the erasure of historical context and the fractured recollections of opera’s conventions.

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During the week of February 21-28, 1972 when Richard Nixon met with Mao Tse-tung in Peking, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was burning out. Conversations between the president and Mao unfolded through interpreters.⁴ They talked about shared acquaintances, bonded over the rising Soviet threat, and made jokes about Henry Kissinger. For Nixon, the

historical stakes of the exchange were extreme: a tacit alliance between China and the U.S. would reshape the balance of power in the Cold War, ease U.S. concerns about communist expansion in East Asia, and make the U.S. defeat of Vietnam more viable. But little was said about these topics or the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution. Mao refused to engage the issues with any depth, speaking in vague terms. More important, it seemed, were the symbolic dimensions of the diplomatic gesture.

The unprecedented public relations aspects of Nixon’s trip, namely the president’s desire to be seen as a great world leader, made for an eight-day television extravaganza. American audiences tuned-in to a parade of dazzling images from China: the pomp of elaborate banquets, Pat Nixon’s tour of local attractions, and live entertainment, specifically a performance of Madame Mao’s socialist realist ballet The Red Detachment of Women. For the American public, the coverage dramatized the collapsing, or closing in, of the ideological divide that had separated the countries for more than three decades. “For once,” Kissinger wrote in his memoirs, “a White House public relations strategy succeeded, and performed a diplomatic function as well. Pictures overrode the printed word; the public simply was not interested in the complex analyses of the document after having watched the spectacle of an American President welcomed in the capital of an erstwhile enemy.”

The Nixon-Mao encounter centered on an anthology of images that added charisma, even heroism, to Richard Nixon and lifted American audiences up to a place that at once

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5 Ibid. MacMillan offers a comprehensive overview of Nixon’s foreign relations ambitions for China, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam. The price of rapprochement would be the re-unification of U.S.-backed Taiwan into China.
6 Henry Kissinger, White House Years (Little, Brown, and Co., 1979), 1054.
depersonalized their relation to the event and elevated their sense of participation in it.\(^7\) This narrow rendering of reality masked the real foreign policy nightmares of Nixon’s presidency: America’s involvement in Vietnam (including Kissinger’s secret bombing of Cambodia), tensions with the Soviet Union, and the silent comprehension of Mao’s appalling political persecutions. Those glittering photographs entailed an outward appearance of power, but behind them lay a deep vulnerability, an untold story of the darkness and paranoia of two political leaders, Nixon and Mao, each headed towards personal destruction.

Peter Sellars, the young theater director from Pittsburgh, found himself drawn to this type of simultaneity, to the paradox of how modern reality expresses itself, forcefully yet partially, through the American news media. “The official history that is on the network news,” Sellars maintains, “is not an adequate representation of the lives these people have led.”\(^8\) He was interested in taking familiar, manufactured images and harnessing out of them “the grip of real lives,”\(^9\) to uncover the conflicts and crises that drive people to do what they do. The result, Sellars avows, is an art of “more genuine spiritual and moral force.”\(^10\) Such can be achieved, according to Sellars, through the creation of overlapping moments, as in the multi-layered narration of theatrical and musical time and space. “The truth is never here or here,” he asserts, “but it’s in the dialogue of these things happening at the same time, hovering in between.”\(^11\)

\(^7\) Susan Sontag describes the false mysticism and power of the photographic image in On Photography (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 31. Peter Sellars was doubtless familiar with Sontag’s essay.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid.
Sellars had always brought this kind of Bakhtinian sensibility to his dramaturgical work. As a precocious fifteen-year-old performing marionette theater “on the streets” of Pittsburgh and Denver, he re-imagined the colliding ancient and modern chronotypes of the Japanese bunraku and Javanese wayang, as well as the Surrealist play scripts of Jean Cocteau, performed for Denver housewives and their children. While an undergraduate at Harvard, Sellars staged King Lear with Lear emerging out of a Lincoln Continental, Antony and Cleopatra in a swimming pool, and Mozart’s Don Giovanni in the drug-infested slums of present day Spanish Harlem. He used familiar symbols of American wealth and materialism to probe what he perceived to be a deep wound in the American psyche—the craving for superiority, to feel that we are all living a life of “Norman Rockwellian” perfection. Sellars found purpose in overturning “this strange desperate daydream.”

After graduating from Harvard in 1980, Sellars spent time in China where he studied the stylized gestures of classical Peking opera—and, by extension, the political ballets commissioned by Chiang Ch’ing (Madame Mao). The experience was eye opening. Classical Peking opera had been banned during the Cultural Revolution for its “feudalistic and decadent” overtones and replaced with eight model theatrical works (five operas, two ballets, and one symphonic rendering titled Shachiapang) to express Maoist doctrine, the life of the proletarian

13 Sellars, interview with Bill Moyers. “Americans are taught again and again that life is based on a series of external surfaces,” Sellars maintains. What eventually happens is that “inside, we feel inadequate. We feel that we don’t measure up to these images. Our family wasn’t that harmonious. Our surface is not that smooth, but also, our interior life is conflicted…We have no place to put this conflict…So then rage itself becomes repressed…and that explodes in violence that is classically American.”
14 Delgado, “‘Making Theatre, Making a Society,’” 205.
masses. As part of this campaign, Chiang enlisted a committee of composers and choreographers to re-engineer extant narratives on themes of revolutionary heroism and class struggle. She ordered artists to use an aesthetic code easily understood by the masses, one redolent of the distilled folklorism and neo-classical impulses behind the Soviet ballets shaped under Stalinist Socialist Realism. The resulting works, for which Chiang received credit, became known by proponents of her model as being saturated with her “heart’s blood.” And yet, paradoxically, they were absent of human agency.

Most specifically, Sellars familiarized himself with Chiang’s ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*. The ballet, adapted from a film released in 1961, follows the story of a young female guerilla fighter who joins the Communist Party’s Red Army Detachment and defeats her tyrannical landlord. The score is a strange co-mingling of diluted Chinese folk elements, including simple pentatonic melodies representative of “people-mindedness,” and Soviet ballet music, including the retrospective tonal syntaxes of the Soviet *Flames of Paris*, a ballet that likewise emphasizes revolutionary force in its display of the oppressed overturning their aristocratic oppressors. Sellars took great interest in this Sino-Soviet stylistic confusion, in the non-role of the artist, and in the irony of “revolutionary art” grounded in a stagnant aesthetic language. The result was an art of ideological chatter meant to not only “indoctrinate” the masses but also to displace the silence of millions of “class enemies” who either died or were subject to acts of torture under the direct orders of Mao.

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16 Beginning in the 1940s, Mao followed Stalin’s lead, adopting the motto that the arts were “cogs and screws” in the revolution and needed to be produced under the regulation of the Communist Party. See Richard King, *Art in Turmoil*, 5. See also Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 158-59.
Sellars drew abstract connections between Chiang’s propagandistic theatrical works and the public spectacle of the American media enterprise, with the coverage of the Nixon-Mao encounter being a prime example.\textsuperscript{18} Both engaged in a charade concealing the grim realities of political violence; both were ultimately empty of sincere content or expression. He left China wanting to explore this relationship between propaganda and news media, historic event and photo opportunity, public image and genuine feeling. “To put on those propagandistic ballets,” Sellars noted, “deals with the whole notion we have in the West that they [the Chinese] are propagandistic and we are just trying to tell the truth, when obviously everything on the front page of the \textit{New York Times} is sheer propaganda.”\textsuperscript{19} He planned to stage an American version of Chiang’s \textit{Shachiapang}, a programmatic symphony about a teashop proprietress who aids the army in resistance, in New York in the fall of 1981. But he eventually backed out of the project for moral reasons. “I just felt that I finally didn’t have the right to do the material, that people lived and died for,”\textsuperscript{20} Sellars said.

During the summer of 1981, Sellars re-focused his energies on a staging of Haydn’s \textit{Armida} (1784) set in 1970s Vietnam to be performed at New Hampshire’s Monadnock Music Festival. He saw parallels between America’s military involvement in Southeast Asia and Torquato Tasso’s episode recounting a Christian knight’s love affair with an Eastern enchantress who seduces him into attacking his Western comrades. “Both [the Crusades and the Vietnam War] were ‘holy wars,’ motivated by a feeling of moral superiority; both were classic East-meets-West encounters, and both ended badly for all concerned,”\textsuperscript{21} Sellars explained.

\textsuperscript{18} Sellars and Daines, “‘Nixon in China’: An Interview with Peter Sellars,” 12-13.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 12.
research involved reading Henry Kissinger’s memoirs, *White House Years* (1979), which prompted him to re-read Mao’s writings. He became possessed by the idea that Nixon’s 1972 visit to China had etched itself into the American sociopolitical landscape as a “mythic occasion.”22 This myth, according to Sellars, needed explication, for the historical and political contexts of China and the U.S. were so complex that to conflate them, as the American media did when Nixon met Mao, meant engaging in a farce. “In the middle of all of that,” Sellars recalled, “I thought, oh, there’s an opera waiting in there.”23 He soon began to ask himself, “Why does one have to go to an 18th-century opera to talk about these things? Why not talk of them in our own language in terms of words and music?”24 All he needed was a musical counterpart to put his ideas into sound.

The week before the premiere of *Armida* in the late summer of 1981, Adams happened to be at the Monadnock Music Festival to hear a performance of *Shaker Loops* (1978).25 When Adams and Sellars first met, they made an immediate connection. They spoke about music, about John Cage and Adams’s involvement in the avant-garde scene in San Francisco.26 Sellars talked about his recent journey to China, its turbulent history, politics, and art. He explained that the “adrenaline-inspired visionary states”27 of *Shaker Loops*, which Sellars had previously heard in San Francisco, created a dramatic experience that one could only dream of in theater.

“[Peter’s] words came in full paragraphs,” Adams reflected, “punctuated by sudden peals of a

23 Ibid. In his 1981 production of Handel’s *Saul* (1738), Sellars broached the topic of Richard Nixon and Watergate, additional evidence of his fixation on the topic.
24 Ibid.
25 Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 125. In his memoir, Adams claims 1983 as the year he and Sellars first met. Archival sources, however, reveal that it was 1981.
26 Ibid., 126.
laughter that was neither aggressive nor nervous, but rather the result of amusement at what his
words had managed to conjure.” 28 Soon into the conversation, Sellars proposed the idea of
collaboration on an opera about Richard Nixon. “Because I was working on this Vietnam stuff,”
Sellars recalled, “and had just come back from China and wanted to deal with Mao and the
Kissinger memoirs, I asked [John] what he thought of an opera about Nixon in China.” 29 Adams
shrugged it off, bewildered by the fact that Sellars wanted to work with someone who had hardly
written a note for voice, let alone an opera. Moreover, the topic left the composer unsettled. It
was impossible for Adams to separate Richard Nixon from the “bogeyman” who tried to draft
him for Vietnam. “What Peter was proposing only reminded me of all those bad TV comics who
did Nixon impressions hunching their shoulders and making the infamous two-handed V-for-
victory sign.” 30 The composer remained skeptical about the idea for nearly three years; but
something in Sellars’s proposal generated a spark that Adams eventually found he could not
shake.

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Adams’s initial meeting with Sellars came in the midst of a period of meteoric success
for the composer. *China Gates* (1977) and *Phrygian Gates* (1977), works characterized by pedal
points, unremitting pulsation, and the audible display of musical process (*à la* Steve Reich), put
Adams on the map. With *Shaker Loops*, Adams pushed his style into new territory, interrupting
the process-driven austerity and stasis of minimalism’s stripped rhetoric by incorporating
dynamic, directionalized motion (via modulation by common tone and contrasts in textural and

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28 Ibid.
29 Sellars, “Peter Sellars on Working with Adams,” 240.
melodic material) towards expressive pinnacles. Repeated cells and long harmonic planes derived from minimalist processes no longer determined structure; rather those processes recede into the background, creating the “incidental surface shimmer”\textsuperscript{31} characteristic of Adams’s post-1978 works. *Harmonium* (1981), a commission by the San Francisco Symphony, was Adams’s first statement for orchestra and voice. It further positioned him as a major player in the American classical music scene. He set poetry by John Donne and Emily Dickinson, following the expressive demands of the texts to generate the form of the piece. The first movement, set to Donne’s “Negative Love,” displays a process of gradual accretion, beginning with a single pulsating tone to create an illusion of negative space. Added tones steadily expand the sound into a constellation of interlocking instrumental lines with sweeping melodies above. Following the acclaimed premiere of *Harmonium* in April 1981, Adams spent that summer writing *Grand Pianola Music* (1982), a piece for piano, voice, and ensemble of winds, brass, and percussion inspired by an LSD trip from a decade prior.\textsuperscript{32} In the final movement, “On the Dominant Divide,” he exploited a rush of tonic-dominant chords (a progression antithetical to the non-teleological musical spaces of minimalism), but stripped them naked to their most “minimal” parts for parody effect. Adams’s muse was on fire; ideas came to him with “fluency and ease.”\textsuperscript{33}

After *Grand Pianola Music*, the successes of Adams’s public life gradually began to take a toll on his private one. He had become composer-in-residence at the San Francisco Symphony, held a Guggenheim fellowship, and was invited to work for extended periods in the seclusion of

\textsuperscript{32} The imagery that inspired the piece involved an “ever-expanding Steinway.” Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 117.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 121.
the Carl Djerassi ranch, an elite artists’ retreat south of San Francisco. As commissions poured in, the pressure Adams put on himself to write the next tour de force became unbearable. He stared at blankness. The rush of musical ideas that propelled Shaker Loops, Harmonium, and Grand Pianola Music thudded to a halt. When Adams attempted to put pencil to paper, his ideas knotted and seethed. He became easily distracted. He started to question the value of his success, worried that it would somehow hinder his creative and spiritual growth. The notion of a future as a composer, let alone a flourishing one, started to feel more and more out of reach. He sank into creative depression; a long period of wandering ensued.

In the winter of 1982, the C.G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles approached Adams about writing a score for a documentary film called Matter of Heart (1982), which charts the private life and philosophical outlook of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). Adams agreed to the project with the hope that it would give newfound momentum to his stalled creative energies. He used some of his commission money to spend time at Jung’s rural retreat on the shores of Lake Zürich. He found himself drawn to Jung’s theories, including the idea that one’s interior life—dreams, inner disturbances, and unconscious yearnings—constitutes actual reality. This compelling, if abstract, notion transformed Adams’s personal and professional life. Eventually, he would embark on his own Jungian analysis, an experience that prompted him to confront a stark interior truth concerning his complex relationship to his mentor, Leon Kirchner. Moreover, the foray motivated Adams to eventually take on the Nixon project. He began to view

34 Ibid., 122. Djerassi, a chemist and patron of the arts, set up a foundation and artist’s colony on his coastal redwood property to memorialize his daughter who had committed suicide several years before.
the characters as Jungian archetypes, a framework that shifted his perspective of the Nixon-Mao encounter from surface level conceit to one of psychological nuance and depth.

The appeal of Jung for Adams in this particular moment of his life was not unrelated to the fact that Jung, like the composer, had fallen into a creative crisis at the age of 37. Adams was intrigued by the fact that Jung later viewed his midlife breakdown not as an endpoint but rather as a new beginning. Jung’s impasse came at a fracture point in his relationship with his mentor-turned-rival Sigmund Freud. Whereas Freud viewed one’s dream life as a vehicle for conveying repressed sexual desires that could be pathologized and treated, Jung began to connect symbolic narratives found in mythology and world religions to images that emerged spontaneously in his own dreams and those of his patients. He became convinced that dreams offered a glimpse into what he called the collective unconscious, the part of the psyche that lies outside of conscious awareness and houses recurring images, which he later called archetypes. It was a profound discovery, but the split with Freud nonetheless found Jung in a state of inner turmoil. Jung called this period “the confrontation with the unconscious,” likening it to rivers of blood, to a war-torn landscape. As he began falling into this “creative illness,” he started to record his dreams and

37 On the split between Freud and Jung, see Stein, Jung’s Map of the Soul, 61-64.
38 According to Jung, archetypes are innate patterns of imagination, thought, or behavior found in myths and shared by all human beings. See Stein, Jung’s Map of the Soul, 233-34. The anima and animus, for instance, are two complementary archetypes representing female and masculine energies that form a link between conscious awareness and the collective unconscious. Symbols of the anima might include the Virgin Mary, a winged angel or witch, a full moon or animal figure; symbols of the animus might include knights or heroes, a band of criminals or Hades in the underworld. See Man and His Symbols, ed. C.G. Jung (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 177-95.
40 Lance Owens makes the point that historians and biographers have struggled to understand this episode in Jung’s life. It was referred to as a “creative illness, a period of introspection, a
imaginative experiences in what became known as The Red Book. He filled more than 200 pages with illuminated calligraphy and vivid paintings of dream images, such as elaborate winged figures and mandalas. The act of chronicling this material and observing the archetypal forces at play, Jung discovered, facilitated a profound process less about diagnosis and treatment than about self-discovery and wholeness. Jung called this process “individuation,” the gradual unification of opposites within the self. It formed the basis of his therapeutic approach.

Adams was captivated by Jung’s “dense, brilliantly intuitive revelations of human behavior,” but the film project proved challenging. Upon returning from Switzerland in the spring of 1982, Adams forced himself to sit at his piano each day with manuscript paper and sharpened pencils, but his musical ideas seized up like an engine without oil. Anything he put on the page felt stagnant and lifeless. With deadlines approaching, he began to panic. He resorted to familiar techniques found in Shaker Loops: sustained melodies above repeated expanding and contracting string figurations and long harmonic planes interrupted by inner voice oscillations. In the end, he found himself unsettled with the final product—“a score of stunning mediocrity,” as he put it.

Adams spent much of the winter of 1983 in retreat at the Djerassi ranch, where he composed the music for his next project, a collaborative performance piece called Available Light (1983), with choreography by Lucinda Childs and sets by Frank Gehry. He was inspired by

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41 Jung hid the book in a drawer for 30 years. When he re-opened the book three decades later, he wrote in its epilogue, “To the superficial observer, it will appear like madness.” It was then stored in a Swiss bank vault for the next 25 years. In 2009, the book was finally published and made accessible for study. Its contents, however, remain puzzling. See Corbett, “The Holy Grail of the Unconscious,” for a précis of the issues surrounding The Red Book.
42 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 120.
43 Ibid.
the ranch’s “dramatically steep green hills and fog-lined vistas,” later re-naming the score, without dance, *Light Over Water*. It was another high-pressure assignment that proved difficult from the start. Adams decided to write for synthesizer and tape, hopeful that this non-notated medium would somehow help him “regain the old insouciance.” He experienced ongoing technical difficulties but eventually found the vast sonic spaces made possible by the electronic format deeply satisfying. It also allowed him to send preliminary recordings to Childs so she could begin rehearsing her dancers. Almost immediately, however, she expressed that the dancers had difficulty “finding the pulse.” Adams wrote and re-wrote sections of the score, unsure whether or not to acquiesce to Childs’s concerns or to persevere with his original musical decisions. In one journal entry from the spring of 1983, he penned, “I have been possessed by a demon that does not want to experience completion, that wants the project (*Light Over Water*) to remain undone, unresolved.” In another, he confessed, “I experience real difficulties in concentration on my work. It takes an unnecessarily long time to finish the *LOW* score.”

Adams eventually completed *Light Over Water*, but his block soon became even more protracted.

As Adams’s artistic life floundered, his personal life was enriched by his future wife, Debbie O’Grady, “the depth and richness of whose soul and mind is a source of constant amazement for me.” They met in 1981 at the New Music America festival and found they had much in common, including an interest in Jung. In the spring of 1983, they began dating.

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44 Adams, personal journal (reflections on the previous year), 2 January 1984.
46 Adams, personal journal, 29 May 1983
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., personal journal (reflections on the previous year), 2 January 1984.
49 Ibid., personal journal, 3 May 1983.
“Eventually,” Adams recalled, “we found we were soul mates.”\textsuperscript{51} Still, his creative insecurities continued to haunt him. “Despite all the happiness and satisfaction all around me,” Adams wrote on May 7, 1983, “I have an amazing ability to linger on a violent, destructive wish. I need a technique. How can I get deeper into myself, get more in touch with real events going on within me? I guess I don’t give enough effort to the quest. It’s so easy to opt for convenient distraction.”\textsuperscript{52}

In June 1983, the composer began seeing a renowned Jungian analyst, John Beebe, in San Francisco. “I am going to examine my beast,” Adams wrote, “see when it reveals itself and try to analyze the motives for his appearances.”\textsuperscript{53} His foray into psychotherapy initially involved freeing himself from creative confusion. Yet as the therapy progressed, he confronted his conflicted relationship with his mother, as well as with his mentor Leon Kirchner. For the next two years, Adams kept detailed journals of his dreams, an important aspect of Jungian analysis, annotating his entries with commentary on how the symbolism of his dreams related to his external life. Within these pages, he wrote about the agonizing process of writing what would become Harmonielehre, a “terrible psychological thicket,”\textsuperscript{54} which led him to believe he may never compose again. Yet the act of working through this difficult period resulted in critical developments in his musical language, ones that proved essential to the creation of Nixon.

As early as September 1983, Adams convinced himself that his inability to move beyond the “old style, the repetitive texture and the diatonic harmonies”\textsuperscript{55} was the root of his creative malaise. He revisited the scores and writings of Arnold Schoenberg, “intent on trying to create a

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{52} Adams, personal journal, 7 May 1983.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 29 May 1983.
\textsuperscript{54} Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 120.
\textsuperscript{55} Adams, personal journal, 31 October 1983. Adams refers here to the style of Shaker Loops and Harmonium.
more complex music.” Schoenberg had long exerted a strong presence in Adams’s musical life. The rigid intellectual discipline with which the Austrian composer approached his art, specifically the working out of the twelve-tone row process from his previous experiments with free atonality, had become the dominant European influence on the American academic music establishment by the time Adams entered the academy in the late 1960s. In fact, much of Adams’s training involved the study of pitch and durational rows and their inversions, retrogrades and retrograde-inversions. Adams’s two teachers at Harvard, Earl Kim and Leon Kirchner, had both studied with Schoenberg in the 1950s. The experience had a profound impact on each of them. “Kim,” Adams noted, “was always cordial, but music was for him a kind of private devotional ritual, and one got the feeling that few—least of all he himself—were allowed into the inner sanctum of his personal pantheon.” Adams was closer to Kirchner, who encouraged the young composer to follow a more intuitive, expressive path. Nevertheless, Kirchner struggled to make his compositional instincts fit with the demands of rigorous method, ingraining in Adams the idea “that composing was meant to be a painful activity.” By 1983, Adams felt he needed some kind of method but soon would find himself faced with the same problems that had plagued his predecessors.

In September 1983, O’Grady and Adams learned they were going to have a baby. A month and a half later, they married in a simple ceremony in San Francisco. The events brought Adams happiness but also the new pressure of having to provide for a family. He had received another commission by the Santa Fe Chamber Music Society, later abandoned, scheduled for the

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56 Ibid., September 1983.
57 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 34.
58 Ibid., 35.
59 Adams, personal journal, 2 January 1984; here, Adams writes a “year in review” of 1983 in which he discusses learning about O’Grady’s pregnancy on September 24, 1983.
summer of 1984. The advance for it, combined with the San Francisco symphony commission, eased Adams’s financial worries. Creatively, though, he compared his efforts to “digging in barren, dusty soil, trying to see what fundamental thing I am doing wrong. It seems like everything’s been said already. Any attempt at a more dissonant usage comes up sounding incredibly trite.”

By January 1, 1984, having been stuck in the “horror and inertia of the non-beginning,” Adams had a revelation:

…I am back at Djerassi struggling again with what has by now become a problem of almost overwhelming perplexity: where to go from here in my musical language. The last day of the year suggests a surprising solution, paradoxically, in the direction of an even more diatonically organized harmonic language and resulting structure. On New Year’s Day, with Debbie’s tummy looking conspicuously round, I imagine an orchestra piece called Harmonielehre (The Book of Harmony).

Adams’s search for a more complex musical language had led him, paradoxically, not to the grueling atonal exercises of the Second Viennese School but rather to Schoenberg’s pedagogical writings, his lessons in tonal harmony. Harmonielehre (1910) is the title of Schoenberg’s treatise on the subject, written around the time that Schoenberg initiated the so-called “emancipation of dissonance.” Adams was intimately familiar with the textbook. He had studied it at Harvard and used it in his analysis courses at the San Francisco Conservatory. In the fall of 1983, the composer scoured its pages, absorbing Schoenberg’s filigreed descriptions of chord formations pushed to their limits. Adams carefully observed his reactions to Schoenberg’s militant call for...

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60 Ibid., 22 December 1983.
61 Ibid., 28 December 1983.
62 Ibid., 2 January 1984.
63 For instance, the chord of fourths and the whole tone hexachord found in Schoenberg’s Pelleas und Melisande (1905) are two representative examples described in Harmonielehre of a class of new chord types that suggested for Schoenberg tonality’s decline. See Ethan Haimo.
a new music free of the “pollutants” of the prevailing tonal musical culture. To Adams’s surprise, he felt a wave of emotions in defense of tonality. “It doesn’t seem as if a violent change in the language is a natural solution,” Adams wrote in his diary. “When things flow (and they are beginning to, if only in fits and starts) they come out of the ‘old’ language…Ironically, what seems to give promise is not dissonant but manically diatonic.”

During the winter of 1984, Adams kept in his car a cassette recording of *Gurrelieder* (drafted 1900, completed 1911), Schoenberg’s massive work for soloists, choirs, and orchestra set to poems by Jens Peter Jacobsen. The piano-vocal score for *Gurrelieder* was also a permanent fixture on Adams’s piano. Its musical language, though remarkably diatonic, is at once a tribute to and a break from Wagner. It was drafted prior to Schoenberg’s ventures into atonality, a period in which he embraced a triadic vocabulary punctuated by Wagnerian half-diminished seventh and augmented chords. But for reasons rather unclear, Schoenberg abandoned the project, only to pick it up years later. By the time he completed the orchestration in 1911, he had deserted tonality. Numerous changes to the score in its second phase of writing (i.e. transpositions and tempered cadential figures) suggest his increasing revulsion for formal-functional tonal processes, which, in his mind had, grown degenerate and sickly.

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64 Adams, personal journal, 28 December 1983.
65 Adams recalls the *Gurrelieder* anecdote in a journal entry dated January 24, 1984.
66 See Brian Campbell, “*Gurrelieder* and the Fall of the Gods: Schoenberg’s Struggle with the Legacy of Wagner,” in *Schoenberg and Words: The Modernist Years*, ed. by Charlotte Cross (New York: Garland, 2000), 31-64.
At the time, Adams, too, was unsure about tonality, puzzled by the looming presence of Schoenberg and Kirchner in his waking and dream life. Yet as he listened to Gurrelieder over and over in his car, he found himself mesmerized by Schoenberg’s syntax, particularly his techniques of elaboration: the gradual accretion of non-chord tones mapped onto pure triads, just as Wagner elaborated the most austere features of a chord. Adams was familiar with the concept of accretion, a central feature of the minimalist style (i.e. additive process). He used it in Harmonium, which builds from a single pulsating tone D into a massive wall of sound. In Gurrelieder, Schoenberg does something similar. The orchestral prelude begins with a shimmering E-flat major triad (a nod to the opening of Wagner’s Ring Cycle) with added tone C, above which the flutes play a repeated, descending melodic figure. Seventh and ninth chords gradually lace the sheet of sound. As the score unfolds, unresolved dissonances saturate the surface. There are moments in which chromatic lines traverse across contrapuntal planes, obliterating any notion of a distinct tonal center. Yet as the work comes to a close, the harmonies re-focus into C Major, a compositional choice read, anachronistically, as a striking homage to the tonal system to which Schoenberg would never return. This very musical trajectory, the idea of elaboration where the distinction between chord tones and non-chord tones slowly vanishes over long spans of music, would come to play a significant role in Adams’s developing musical language.

Throughout January 1984, Adams isolated himself in his studio attempting “to unravel the thread of what had become a perfect tangle of reasons as to why everything I was doing was

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67 Adams’s dream journals from throughout the winter and spring of 1984 discuss the presence of Kirchner and Schoenberg in his dream life. He also references Schoenberg and Kirchner in his dreams in Hallelujah Junction, 129.
wrong.”68 By the end of the month, he reported that musical ideas never came. He formally backed out of the Santa Fe commission. “Each day I hated what I’d done the day before,” Adams wrote with regard to the unwritten chamber piece. “So now it is no longer and I am at last face to face with the big orchestra piece and a year in which to write it.”69 It was a defining moment that impelled him to begin in earnest a re-evaluation of his compositional practice.

In February 1984, the composer started mapping out a foundation for an elaborate arrangement of harmonic fragments. His sketches present the image of an artist lost in the forest of his labors, unsure of where he was going but certain he would somehow find a way out. Throughout a 64-page Sichtation manuscript book, Adams created grids of scaffolds featuring simple trichordal structures elaborated in different ways. The cover page of the sketchbook (Fig. 1.1) shows the proposed title of the orchestra piece, Harmonielehre, and several jottings (added later in April and May 1984). While these annotations are hardly significant except in their sparseness, they reveal specific details found in the final setting, notably the use of B-flat to C as frequent neighbor-tone motion and pitch E as the sustained tone that dominates the first movement. Fig. 1.2a, however, is more suggestive, showing an assembly of fragments shedding light on the basic logic of Adams’s explorations. He built sonorities around a simple trichord on pitches C, D, and G, a 0-2-7 trichord.70 (Given that there is also an E-flat in the first measure shown, one could identify the base chord as a 0-2-3-7 tetrachord, an offshoot of the trichord.)

68 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 128.
70 This terminology is based on Allen Forte’s explanation of pitch-class sets. See Forte, The Structure of Atonal Music (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 1-3. The 0-2-7 trichord is an analytical topic explored by Catherine Pellegrino in her dissertation on formalist analysis in Adams’s pre-1989 works. See Pellegrino, “Formalist Analysis in the Context of Postmodern Aesthetics: The Music of John Adams as a Case Study” (PhD Diss., Yale University, 1999). She correctly notes that this trichord pervades Adams’s music from 1977-89 more than any other pitch-class group (except for major and minor triads). Pellegrino, 63.
Figure 1.1. John Adams, Harmonielehre sketchbook (January 1984).
Figure 1.2a. John Adams, initial sketch for Harmonielehre (February 6, 1984).
Figure 1.2b. John Adams, initial sketch for *Harmonielehre* cont’d (February 6, 1984).
The trichord has diatonic implications, though these are unrealized (C, the lowest note in the trichordal layer is, for instance, heard as a dissonance). Beginning with the first measure of the sketch (Fig. 1.2a), Adams filled in the trichord with pitches E-flat, B-flat and F to create a dissonant polychord—C minor pitted against B-flat and E-flat major. As the sketch unfolds, movement is defined not through teleological motion, but rather in terms of constantly shifting harmonic color around the base trichord, with modulation occurring by common tone or enharmonicism. Just as Schoenberg elaborated Wagner (who in his reliance on static harmonic nodes elaborated the most minimal features of a triad), so, too, did Adams elaborate a single cell.

As the sketch goes on into Fig. 1.2b, Adams began to explore texture, with movement determined by the degree of denseness: the amount the skeletal trichords are filled in and elaborated. The music follows a non-linear path in terms of functional tonal syntax with harmonies shape-shifting at a constant rate. There is no cause-and-effect relationship between the musical sections, as if Adams were feeling out the structure as he went along. The sketch is erratic, a puzzle of inward restlessness, belonging simultaneously to Wagnerian, Schoenbergian, and minimalist modes. After resting on tone C in the third to last measure of the final system (Fig. 1.2b), the music lands on a long repetitive stretch of oscillating F minor triads. The repeated triads, in light of what comes before, seemingly stop time, drawing the listener out of the tangle of harmonies and into the calmness of the present moment.

Although Adams deserted nearly all of the specific ideas shown in the initial draft, the early sketches for Harmonielehre represent the kernels of a technique that would define an important shift in his compositional practice and aesthetic. Though it would be another several months before he realized the full potential of the technique, the elaboration of trichords would provide him a means to weave together passages of wayward chromaticism and dissonant
polychordal writing with diatonic surfaces and long sections of uneventful harmonic motion. This combination created a novel sound that not only anticipated *Nixon* but also distanced Adams from both his earlier style and the asceticism of his minimalist forefathers.\(^{71}\)

Adams spent the months of February, March, and April 1984 laboring over additional drafts of *Harmonielehre*, all eventually discarded. On May 21, 1984, he wrote that he remained “in what continues to be the longest, darkest period in my memory.”\(^{72}\) An expanded quotation from his diary sheds light on his state of mind:

Last night I stayed up late reading Jung (Mysterium and MD+R’s).\(^{73}\) The lesson I am slowly learning from these readings (Jung, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer) is that

1.) I have last touch with my interior fantasy life and that this loss has manifested itself in my year-long inability to compose satisfying music.

2.) The “form” of my psyche is not whole, but rather has become discontinuous and even violently disrupted.

3.) I need to find a way to get back into the imaginative world of my childhood (like Jung did when he began building sand castles at the age of 37).

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\(^{71}\) The *Harmonielehre* sketches support arguments put forth by Timothy Johnson and Catherine Pellegrino with regard to Adams’s shift away from process-driven minimalism towards a more eclectic, “post-minimalist” style. Timothy Johnson, in “Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, Technique?” *Musical Quarterly* 78 (1994): 742-73, observes that *Harmonielehre* is more concerned with harmony and voice-leading than with process itself, indicative that Adams had indeed taken minimalism to new heights. Pellegrino, in her dissertation, “Formalist Analysis in the Context of Postmodern Aesthetics,” notes that Adams’s works from 1977-89 share repetitive, consonant, diatonic surface content. In works post-1989, she argues, he begins to move away from minimalist surface textures towards greater complexity and dissonance. Pellegrino suggests that in *Nixon* Adams developed a new attitude towards musical complexity in which he aimed to find a middle ground between minimalism and serialism. Yet Adams’s journals and sketches for *Harmonielehre* suggest that he was thinking about musical “complexity” far before composing *Nixon*.

\(^{72}\) Adams, personal journal, 21 May 1984.

This morning, while lying in bed, I was thinking about mandalas. I thought about Jung’s dreams and how often the imagery that he describes seems whole, rounded, even symmetrical. I thought about musical form and realized that for me this need for wholeness and unity is best expressed through form. It occurred to me that this may be the crux of my problem, not only musically but psychically as well. I wondered if drawing pictures of imagined forms might help. The greatest block that I encounter – and this has been going on for 8 months – is that all ideas I generate eventually die because I have no idea where they will go or what they will do.\footnote{Adams, personal journal, 21 May 1984.}

There is something deeply Romantic about Adam’s tortured creative process, at least as represented in his journals. His dream life was potent, the font for his art. Just as Jung had fallen into his own bout of madness, which he learned to accept and even to tap into as a source of creativity, Adams would soon learn that his agonized efforts contained the germ for his later work.

Just three days before the birth of Adams’s child, the composer came across a striking passage in Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy* (1968). The quote recounts Jung’s feeling of grace that accompanies momentary glimpses of God.\footnote{Ibid., 27 May 1984. Adams wrote, “Later, at the beach reading *Psychology and Alchemy* I was struck by [Jung’s] words (p. 7) ‘We must not forget that even a mistaken imitation (of Christ) involves a tremendous moral effort which has also the merits of a total surrender to some supreme value, even though the real goal may never be reached and the value is represented externally. It is conceivable that by virtue of this total effort a man may even catch a fleeting glimpse of his wholeness, accompanied by the feeling of grace that always characterizes this experience.’”}

Adams wrote, “Funny, because I had thought of grace as somehow being the theme of the piece which has eluded me for so long.”\footnote{Adams, personal journal, 27 May 1984.} The week before, Adams had sketched a long stretch of music called *Grace* (a title meant to replace *Harmonielehre*) in which oscillating G minor and E-flat major triads resonate the glistening surfaces of his earlier works (Fig. 1.3). The sketch suggests a regression. It also draws attention to the fact that Adams was wedded to minimalist, diatonic procedures, as if they were a part of...
his musical DNA. When Emily Adams came into the world at the end of May 1984, Adams returned to the notion of grace to describe the birth. “It was – and still is – an act of grace,” he wrote. “And I have become suddenly energized since that event…After months of languishing in a directionless depression I now find that I am running every which way, spending the energy in all directions and getting exhausted…tomorrow I go back to work on the piece. It should flow now. I have faith that it will.”77

In July 1984, Adams received a phone call from Sellars asking if he had given any thought to the opera about Nixon. Sellars talked about a potential librettist, one of his classmates at Harvard, Alice Goodman. He explained to Adams that although she had not formally established herself as a poet, her undergraduate translations of plays into texts for his productions made her well suited to the task. Adams told Sellars that he had indeed thought about the opera project. They talked about finding a way to “lift the story and its characters, so numbingly familiar to us from the news media, out of the ordinary and onto a more archetypal plane.”78 Adams later reflected that Sellars’s “restless curiosity and inexhaustible powers of absorption would take him in every direction imaginable. I also sensed that our collaboration would be just that—a shared voyage of discovery.”79

77Ibid., 4 June 1984.
78 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 135.
79 Ibid., 127-28.
Figure 1.3. John Adams, sketch for *Grace* (formerly *Harmonielehre*) (May 10, 1984).
In the period that followed, themes related to the Nixon-Mao encounter started to make appearances in Adams’s dream life, suggestive that the opera topic was beginning to stir something within the composer. On July 11, 1984, he recorded a dream in which he was at a summit meeting in an elegant, stately room. At a long table are seated the heads of state of the major nations. I notice how the US president and the Russian head of state are as far apart from each other as possible, each sitting at a far end of the table. The president of India (a man looking a little like Nehru) sits in the middle. The presentation of a gift is being made to the Chinese premiere. It is a cassette tape of folk music from his own country played on a Chinese violin. It is my job to put the cassette on. I turn on my cassette player and the music comes out the public address speakers at the four corners of the room. I am confused by this since I have not yet connected the tape recorder to the PA system. I don’t understand how this is happening, but I figure that the current is apparently jumping through the air from my cassette deck to the amplifier (like radio waves). Everyone in the room looks at the Chinese premiere to see his reaction to hearing this plaintive, emotional music. He looks upset. I realize he is now at the far left hand corner of the big table, where the US president was originally sitting. As I look at him, he begins to complain about how unhappy he has been on his trip to the US and how false life is here. The music reminds him of this. Looking closely at him, I see him transform from an old Chinese, looking like Chou En Lai, to a young American about 30-35 years old. He has hair that is coarsely cropped and he is humbly dressed, like a missionary or a Peace Corps worker. (Dressed like Peter Sellars was on his way to China.) Now the young man is telling us how, after many years in China, he has come back to America and is unhappy here because of the society’s artificiality and materialism.80

The dream is remarkable in a number of ways. The images depart from the usual cast of characters in Adams’s dream life (typically other composers, including the familiar symbols of his creative anxiety: Schoenberg and Kirchner). His description of encounters with figures (presumably Nixon, Mao, and Chou En-lai) whose words he would later set to music provided fleeting inspiration for the opera—the waves of Chinese folk music radiating through the air, the old man Chou En-lai transformed into an American around Adams’s age, and feelings of discontent about the materiality of American consumer society. The dream prompted Adams to begin thinking of the opera project as a solution of sorts to his creative paralysis, and not just

because it would give his technique the scaffolding in the form of a libretto. The dramaturgical and conceptual proportions of the story, namely the idea of moving beneath the public surfaces of the characters to the complex inner lives inhabited by them, seemed to suit Adams’s quest for a new architecture of music. By September 1984, he agreed to take on the project.

Adams, meanwhile, continued to struggle with abysmal feelings of impotence and blockage. He changed the title of the orchestral piece once again, this time to Love’s Body, breaking it into three movements: “The Anfortas Wound” (a reference to Wagner’s Parsifal, itself a derivation of Li Contes del Graal by Crêtien de Troyes about the Fisher King, Anfortas, whose wound caused by hubris led the kingdom to wither into a wasteland; the reference reflected Adams’s own creative crisis); “Movement of Water” (a nod to Goethe’s “Gesang der Geister uber den Wassen,” a poem set by Schubert three times and one that Adams associated with the “uncomplicated human warmth” of his father); and “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (a reference to a dream image in which Adams went to retrieve Emily out of her cradle to find not the baby but rather a ticking metronome). The images at first did little to stir his muse. Except for the title of the eventual second movement, “The Anfortas Wound,” which Adams retained in the final version, he had discarded all of his previous drafts. On October 14, 1984, he wrote, “I have found myself again still unable to begin the orchestra piece.”

The premiere was five months away.

In late October 1984, “the floodgates had been opened and nearly two years of pent-up energy and ideas came rushing forth.” After months of seemingly fruitless effort, a single

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81 Ibid., 1 August 1984.
82 Ibid., 14 October 1984.
83 Adams Hallelujah Junction, 130.
dream, combined with having heard a concert performance of Glen Branca’s work, inspired Adams to begin anew. The dream occurred the night of October 20, 1984:

Nighttime. I see a huge ship like a supertanker taking off from the water (probably the Bay) and, like a 747 or even a rocket ship, gradually ascending into the air. It falters once, losing altitude, but it regains its momentum and continues its ascent. As it lifts out of the water I can see the brown color of rust on the hull, but this is not a sign of decay; rather it is like the coating of oxidation on a heavy iron girder. Now I am in another ship, just like the one I watched. I am going to take off in it and I am standing in the cockpit behind the pilots. We lift off and then some faltering occurs. It’s frightening but the ship recovers and continues. I look out the window and see the lights of the city whizzing by beneath. I say, “they couldn’t be more than a few hundred feet below.” The ship is so huge it will take a long time to get far above the earth’s surface. The whole event is beautiful and thrilling. The supertanker taking off into the air is an image of immense power, the feeling I got from Branca’s concert last night. I was truly dumbfounded by the power and originality of the experience. But rather than be intimidated and feeling defensive and sterile (as I did, for example, after hearing the Schoenberg Piano Concerto) I was really liberated. I think the first ship taking off was Branca’s, and the second was my new piece.84

Adams found himself obsessed with how to harness musically the image of the supertanker, a promising symbol, in his mind, of the continued the power of tonality. The figure of Branca, on the other hand, carried a host of complex emotions for Adams. “He goes all the way with his feeling,” Adams wrote. “He doesn’t hold back like I do. As a result, there is something totally genuine about his work. I guess the core of my present battle is in trying to find out what it is I am feeling.”85 In an effort to gain clarity, Adams developed a strict composing schedule. He used

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84 Adams, personal journal, 20 October 1984. Another dream inspired the final movement, titled “Meister Eckhart and Quackie.” Quackie was the nickname Adams gave to baby Emily, who made a duck-like sound as an infant. In a journal entry from January 1985, he wrote: “Quackie, who is still too young to walk, rides on Meister Eckhart’s shoulders as they glide among the heavenly bodies. Quackie whispers the secret of grace into Meister Eckhart’s ear.” This passage ended up being printed at the head of the final movement of the engraved score.

85 Ibid., 21 October 1984.
hash marks on a calendar (one per measure of music composed) to keep track of his progress. He worked typical white-collar hours—from 9am to 5pm with a lunch break—ending early as a reward if he met his day’s goals. Despite his lukewarm attitude towards rigorous procedure, a disciplined schedule provided the structure and motivation necessary to complete

_Harmonielehre._

By the end of November 1984, the sketches for _Harmonielehre_ began to resemble the final version. Adams returned to the techniques explored initially, notably his experiments with elaboration, textural density, trichord formations, and the dramatic arc of the _Gurrelieder_ score—the migration through long sections of consonance, then through highly chromatic, dissonant passages, and then back again to consonance. _Harmonielehre_ begins with the hammering sound of a simple dyad, E-natural and G-natural, played _fortississimo_ and spread across all instruments. Even without the fifth, B, the forty pounding repetitions of the tonic and mediant cement the impression of E minor in the listener’s awareness. At m. 19, the introduction of tone D in the flutes enlarges the sound to an implied E minor seventh chord. This pitch-class collection, E-G-D, is, in essence, the building-block sonority to which Adams introduces additional non-chord tones. At m. 31, for instance, the interjection of B-flat in the E-G-D sonority shifts the aural emphasis from E minor to the tritone, E-natural and B-flat. (Adams would later use this dramatic effect, though transposed, in _Nixon_ at the moment Air Force One lands in China.) From here, the music oscillates between E minor seventh and half-diminished sonorities. The restless harmonies move through a series of chromatic episodes and finally settle on a new tonal center, brilliant E-flat major (a nod to Schoenberg and Wagner). At m. 438, a

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86 Adams, personal journal, 11 November 1984. On this same calendar, he wrote himself instructions such as, “Must complete 30 seconds a day of score, or 24 bars of 2/2 at half note=96.”
chain of E-flat major chords sound, their duration gradually diminishing with each passing measure. The single-line textures, articulation, and rhythmic pacing in this moment of the Harmonielehre score directly anticipate what Adams would later do in Nixon’s “News” aria.

Harmonielehre marked the end of an impasse. Adams’s journals and sketches from this period traverse long stretches of creative struggle. Through the process, he set the groundwork for the musical language developed in Nixon, specifically the elaboration of 0-2-7 trichords, the restriction of non-diatonic tones to the melody, the recurring contest between major and minor harmonies, and the presence of dissonant polychords. In other words, Adams’s “book of harmony” became the key to creating the score for the “little red book” of Communism. He had regained his confidence, emerging from “the dark night of the soul, when everything seemed lost.”

But then came new life in the form of a new project, a new musical language—and all that was needed.

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In December 1984, Sellars arranged a meeting with Adams and Goodman at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. where Sellars held a post as artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre. Goodman, who had traveled from Cambridge, England, immediately won Adams’s confidence with her knowledge of poetry and enthusiasm for the project. Over the course of three days, the trio surveyed hundreds of photos documenting Nixon’s visit to China,

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88 Sellars did not last long in the job. According to him, it was not a good fit. After just a few years, he was let go due to “poor ticket sales of his shows.” See Mikotowicz, “Director Peter Sellars: Bridging the Modern and Postmodern Theatre,” Theatre Topics 1:1 (1991): 87-98.
89 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 136.
as well as newsreels, press clippings, and magazine articles. They also compiled a reading list that included Mao’s poetry, the memoirs of Kissinger and Nixon, and biographies of Chou En-Lai and Mao. Sellars had already decided that a re-enactment of *The Red Detachment of Women* (performed for the Nixons on the last day of their visit) would have a privileged place in the opera. The politics of Mao’s standardization of dance as a set of state-sanctioned forms provided another conceptual layer to explore within the fabric of the project.

The creators had an over-abundance of material. Simplifying the narrative proved difficult. On the third day of sorting through source documents, the team held a passionate roundtable exchange and sketched out a rough idea for the opera’s structure. They determined the action would follow the basic trajectory of the historical event: Nixon’s carefully staged arrival at the Peking airport, his meeting with Mao, a banquet in the Great Hall of the People, Pat and Richard’s tour of local attractions, the performance of *The Red Detachment*, and a final banquet. It was also at this initial meeting that Goodman suggested the libretto be written in couplets, an effort, in Adams’s words, to create “a very tight internal structure.”

The creators left the meeting with copious notes and a sense of accomplishment, departing to their various locations around the globe to begin work on the opera.

Meanwhile, Sellars was in contact with David Gockley, the young, enthusiastic director of the Houston Grand Opera. Gockley, who had run the opera company since 1972, had an established reputation for making the Houston Grand a hotbed for new commissions and revivals, particularly of works by American composers. Gockley secured an almost

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91 Gockley’s commissions and revivals included Philip Glass’s *Akhnaten*, Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha*, and Marc Blitzstein’s *Regina*. World premieres of Thomas Pasatieri’s *The Seagull*, Carlisle Floyd’s *Willie Stark*, and Leonard Bernstein’s *A Quiet Place* took place at the Houston Grand Opera.
unprecedented $80,000 worth of grants from Opera America for the development of *Nixon*. Negotiations with co-commissioners, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, too, were in the works, giving Adams an added boost of assurance that the project was worthwhile.

In January 1985, Adams and Sellars met with Gockley and conductor John De Main in Houston. They covered logistics, such as the number of rehearsals and performers needed, as well as a rough timeline. Adams made several sparse jottings during the meeting (Fig. 1.4), making a note of the possibility of the National Opera of Brussels as an additional co-commissioner (this agreement never materialized). He also noted Mark Morris as choreographer for *The Red Detachment*, rehearsal dates (July 20-August 22, 1987) and dates of the premiere and run in Houston (October 9-November 7, 1987), as well as the opening at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (November 14 or 15, 1987). Logistics were beginning to solidify. Funding had been secured. The rehearsal dates and premiere were set. Adams had, at least for the time being, stabilized his creative insecurities. He was ready to launch into the opera project.

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Grand under Gockley. *Nixon in China* was Gockley’s fourth world premiere. See Matthew Daines, “Telling the Truth About Nixon: Parody, Cultural Representation, and Gender Politics in John Adams’s Opera ‘Nixon in China’” (PhD Diss., University of California at Davis, 1995), for a more detailed discussion of Gockley’s role in the making of *Nixon*.  
Goodman started writing the libretto in February 1985. By March, she sent Adams a synopsis (Fig. 1.5) and “some notes on the scenes” (Figs. 1.6a-c). Except for the setting of final banquet scene, later changed by Sellars to the bedchamber, the structure resembles almost exactly that of the final opera. Goodman’s “notes on the scenes” present a vivid portrait of the final synopsis, Goodman simply renamed the scene “the last night in Peking.”

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93 Sellars, interview with Matthew Daines, “‘Nixon in China’: An Interview with Peter Sellars.” *Tempo* 197 (1996): 16. Sellars explained the Act III change from the banquet to the bedroom: “The big shock, upon which there was a lot of comment—and for years it was a real tension point—was the first night of rehearsal in Houston, the first reading of the score. I was so moved by that third act, I said ‘this can’t be a stupid party scene.’ I changed the set and changed the entire conception just after we sang through the piece…The way it had originally been designed we had a big party scene—the tables were supposed to come back, the whole thing. We removed everything and I had them make those beds. That night I called Adrianne [Lobel, the set designer] from Houston and said ‘we need six beds that look like coffins.’ I had slept in Peace Hotel in Shanghai, that hotel where Noel Coward wrote *Private Lives*. The beds were exactly like coffins, it was an incredible feeling. I had a powerful image of that. That act is such a nocturnal scene, the music is so nocturnal, the sense of the sex of going to bed and at the same time of being laid to rest—those images. The night that that happened, John was shocked, Alice was shocked. John was resistant for years, really—he was nice about it, though.” In the final synopsis, Goodman simply renamed the scene “the last night in Peking.”
Nixon in China: Brief Synopsis

Note: The opera comprises three acts of equal length, divided by two intermissions. Act I is divided into three scenes, and Act II is divided into two scenes. Act III is not divided.

Act I
scene 1: The airport outside Peking (Nixon’s arrival)
scene 2: The Imperial City (Meeting with Mao)
scene 3: The Great Hall of the People (the first banquet)

Act II
scene 1: The Nixons view China
scene 2: The Peking Opera (‘The Red Detachment of Women’)

Act III
scene 1: The Great Hall of the People (the last banquet)

Figure 1.5. Alice Goodman, Nixon in China: Brief Synopsis (March 12, 1985).
Figure 1.6. Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China*: Some notes on the scenes (March 12, 1985).
Act II

scene 1: Snow has fallen during the night; as the scene opens the people of Peking are shovelling it off the stage, singing Chairman Mao's most famous poem, 'Snow'. The First Lady is ushered on by her party of guides. She wears her red coat and there is snow in her hair; she is perfectly graceful. She admires a chrysanthemum carved out of a turnip. She samples a spicy stuffed squash with chopsticks, and shakes the cook's hand. She asks people about their work and tilts her head a little to one side, listening to their replies, though she cannot understand them. She is taken to see a school—she was a teacher once, and to the Evergreen People's Commune—she once raised a prize pig. She is given a tiny glass elephant at the Peking Glass Factory. All this will be sung dialogue, Mrs. Nixon, the chorus, and possibly Mao, singing from the poster. Standing in the Gate of Longevity and Good Will, she sings her great aria: 'It's Prophetic'. She is suffering terribly. The President enters with his party of guides and takes the First Lady by the arm, pointing towards the Great Wall. Arm in arm, they proceed to view it. The President sings about the things that have always impressed him, and which he has never understood. Aria: 'The Yellow Cranes'. After they have left the stage, a phalanx of workers may well cross it, singing 'Snow' with interpolations from Mao's part in I.2.

scene 2: At the Peking Opera's performance of The Red Detachment of Women, the performance is to function as a masque in which the watching dignitaries are drawn on stage and the action takes shape around them. As the scene opens, the President and Chiang Ching, Mrs. Nixon and Chou En-lai, are just settling into their seats. Chiang Ching asks Nixon why he has not come before. The Red Detachment of Women takes place on a tropical island. The slave girl Wu Ching-hua (her singing will be executed by three contraltos singing in unison) is chained to a post. She has been sadistically tortured by a despotic landlord and is filled with hatred and bitterness. She escapes, is recaptured, and brought to the landlord. His defiance goes him to a fury. He orders that she be whipped to death. The Americans are getting excited. Sex and violence in China. Ching-hua is left for dead. As the thunder rolls and the tropical rain courses down, she slowly lifts her head, like a flower. She stumbles a few steps. The First Lady is by her side, smoothing her hair. The Red Army cadre Hung Chang-ching enters, disguised as a peasant. 'Don't be afraid', he sings, and Ching-hua jumps him in a duet about the sufferings of the peasants. (Note: Hung should be sung by three basses. Or, alternately, Chiang Ching can take his role entirely, and rise from his ashes in her own person at the end when he is dead. If this is done, the parts sketched for them here should be combined) He directs Ching-hua and the First Lady to the camp of the People's Army. The army is seen drilling, singing the 'March of the Women's Company'. They do a bayonet dance. Ching-hua and Mrs. Nixon, having overcome severe hardships, stumble onstage. They are welcome. Ching-hua pulls up her sleeves to show the red marks and sings of the tortures she has endured, taking her place in the fighting ranks. The Red Army moves to infiltrate and disrupt the landlord's disrupting feast. Overcome with excitement, the President leaps onstage and begins grappling with one of the landlord's guards. He has prematurely signalled the attack; in the confusion the tyrant escapes. Hung enters and copes with the change in strategy. The captured guards are to be killed outright and the cowardly landlord hunted down. Red flags wave over the manor. Grain is distributed to everyone. The array dances and sings. Hung and the women criticize the President for breaking discipline, and relieve him of the rifle he is carrying. He apologizes and declares his good intentions. Ching-hua is still upset. She joins in. Hung is conducting on the goals of the people's revolution. 'It is not personal revenge', he sings. Chiang Ching strolls onstage, singing brilliant variations on Hung's lesson. Ching-hua sees the light and criticizes herself. She begins to practise grenade-throwing. As the women continue with their drill, singing of the cohesion between the army and the

Figure 1.6b. Alice Goodman, Nixon in China: Some notes on the scenes cont’d (March 12, 1985).
peasants, they hear the clatter of galloping hooves. The President rushes in to warn them that the enemy is preparing an offensive. The Reds fight until they are out of ammunition, then with rocks and knives. Mrs. Nixon bandages the wounded, as well as she can. The Reds' courage strikes terror into the hearts of the enemy. But Hung is captured, and, after demonstrating his great-heartedness, his defiance, loyalty, and capacity for suffering, is burnt alive. A moment later Ch'ing-hua storms in and kills the cringing landlord and his minions. Then she hears of Hung's death. She is filled with bitterness. Mrs. Nixon urges her to turn her sorrow into strength. The Internationale is played. The chorus sings that the People's Revolution cannot be stemmed. The Nixons sing that the Silent Majority has found a voice. Chiang Ching, standing where Hung last stood, sings excerpts from her defense: 'I am without heaven and without law'. Her voice soars higher and higher. Chou En-lai remains in his seat.

Act III

scene I: The Great Hall of the People; a banquet hosted by the Americans. After the silent energy of Act I and the manic intensity of Act II, Act III opens with a sense of desolation. Everyone is terribly, terribly tired. The Chinese are tired too; even Chou En-lai is exhausted; he has shrunk into himself. Chiang Ching gatecrashes this banquet. She is first seen standing just where she is most in the way of the waiters. After a few minutes, she brings out a box of paper lanterns and hangs them around the hall, then strips down to a cheongsam, skin-tight from neck to ankle, and slit up to the hip, signalling to the orchestra to play. They strike up a medley of American tunes, the same ones as at the first banquet. She begins to dance by herself. Mao is becoming excited. He steps down from his portrait and they begin to fox trot together. They are back in Yenan, on the Long March, dancing to the gramophone. The flashbacks that follow are like a set of home-movies. As Mao and Chiang Ching continue dancing Chou rises and begins to sing of his part in the Revolution. As he sings, he is no longer exhausted; his heroism becomes apparent. Aria: 'The Coming of Grace'. He emerges as the man who sees history, and, without claiming anything for himself, is truly historic, truly heroic. All at once his place in the opera becomes perfectly clear—he is the hero. The aria ends with a toast. He sits down. Then Nixon stands up. He is quite drunk. As Chou has sung of the Long March and the Sian Incident, he will sing of his time in the navy. Aria: 'Nick's Hamburger Stand'. He was stationed on a beautiful tropical island, in Bougainville, as a matter of fact. There he played poker. His buddies called him Nick Nixon. He gave a hamburger and a bottle of beer to every man in the flight crews, free. This banquet he is hosting is a little like that. He is really a Quaker, though maybe not a very good one, and a man of peace. It's the Pacific ocean after all. He remembers the war cemetery on Wake Island, one little cross after another. Guan stands where Tahiti once was. He remembers the wedding ring on the charred hand of a crewman whose body he carried from a burned-out bomber. He wrote home every day: Dear Pat, dear Pat. (She is stricken, and very moved) Finally he crosses to Chou, and they shake hands again, a long handshake. Mao and Chiang Ching are still dancing. The Spirit of '76 is waiting. The Nixons get on board.

Figure 1.6c. Alice Goodman, Nixon in China: Some notes on the scenes cont’d (March 12, 1985).
of the physical and emotional atmospheres of the opera’s action. Discrepancies between her notes and the final version are minor. The “Handshake Aria,” for instance, turned into the “News Aria.” Madame Mao’s aria, “I am the wife of Mao Tse-Tung,” was a later addition for reasons that will be addressed. Rather than end the opera with a toast followed by the boarding of the Spirit of ’76, as Goodman originally penned, the creators later decided the opera would conclude with Chou En-lai’s haunting reflection on the revolution, “The Coming of Grace.”

Goodman’s notes are significant for her evocative descriptions that suggest the co-presence of diegetic and non-diegetic music. She infiltrates her narrative with implied musical cues ranging from a ringing telephone to moments of near silence to swing-era dance music symbolic of Nixon’s America. For the final scene, she writes, “The Great Hall of the People; a banquet hosted by the Americans. After the silent energy of Act I and the manic intensity of Act II, Act III opens with a sense of desolation. Everyone is terribly, terribly tired.”94 She then describes the medley of American tunes played as Madame and Chairman Mao begin to foxtrot, the dance that both Soviet and Chinese Communist officials prohibited owing to its associations with decadent western licentiousness.95 The music puts the Maos into a nightmare dream space: “They are back in Yenan, on the Long March, dancing to the gramophone. The flashbacks that follow are like a set of home-movies.”96 Goodman’s writing proved to Adams that “she could move from character to character and from scene to scene, alternating between diplomatic

pronouncement, philosophical rumination, raunchy aside, and poignant sentiment.” He was immediately inspired to begin sketching the music he had already begun to hear.

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Prior to beginning Nixon, Adams had agreed to an orchestral commission for the Milwaukee Symphony. With deadlines for the opera approaching, he decided to write a section of the opera that could stand alone as an orchestral piece. In May 1985, he started drafting The Chairman Dances, originally titled That Night in Yenan, based on Goodman’s suggestive description of the final scene. Adams had a rough sonic image in mind. “Somewhere, very, very early on,” he recalled, “I made the decision to basically use what in essence is a 1930s swing band for the pit orchestra. I asked myself the question, ‘what kind of music would Pat and Dick Nixon fall in love to?’”

He made a preliminary mock-up of the instrumentation, wanting to recreate the sound of a dance hall with three trumpets, three trombones, and four saxophones. At the same time, he sought to fashion a sentimental series of snapshots representative of the feeling of lost youth.

Adams was highly systematic as he embarked on writing The Chairman Dances, monitoring his progress out of fear he may slip back into another creative block. By this point, he

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98 The specific passage from Goodman’s notes is as follows: “Chiang Ching gatecrashes this banquet. She is first seen standing just where she is most in the way of the waiters. After a few minutes, she brings out a box of paper lanterns and hangs them around the hall, then strips down to a cheongsam, skin-tight from neck to ankle, and slip up to the hip, signaling to the orchestra to play. They strike up a medley of American tunes, the same ones as at the first banquet. She begins to dance by herself. Mao is becoming excited. He steps down from his portrait and they begin to foxtrot together. They are back in Yenan, on the Long March, dancing to the gramophone.” Alice Goodman, “Some notes on the scenes,” 12 March 1985.
99 “This is how my parents fell in love,” Adams noted. “My father played in a jazz band and my mother’s stepfather owned a dance hall.” Adams, interview with Daines, “Telling the Truth About Nixon,” 58-59.
had discontinued his formal psychotherapy and likewise stopped recording his dreams. Instead, he wrote detailed accounts of his working habits and professional activities. The following is emblematic of his approach to *The Chairman Dances*—and, subsequently, to *Nixon*:

Decided to do a lock-in for 3 hours this a.m. Working on the fifth minute of the Milwaukee piece which I’ve tentatively named *Yenan Nights*, Fox Trot for Orchestra. What concerns me is the ever-enduring fight for concentration: what causes the break. So I thought I’d monitor it here:

- 9:30 – Begin work
- 10:47 – Saturation point reached. Need to walk around for a few minutes and rest. Not too bad for concentration. Some slippage: thought about a piece for Boston Pops (John Williams called yesterday). But otherwise was able to stay focused.
- 12:02 – Distraction. Short break. Probably brought on awareness of the time.
- 2:17 – Going for 2 more hours…will be a total of 5 hours today. Surprised at how well the a.m. went.
- 3:06 – Slight distraction and fuzziness. 3 min. break.

A strict work schedule had become essential to Adams’s creative life. With *The Chairman Dances*, he found himself more organized and efficient than ever before.

The initial sketches for *The Chairman Dances* (Figs. 1.7a-e) suggest that Adams had finally begun to relax into a creative practice in which deeper relationships between each draft underscored a tactile and acoustic resemblance to the final version. He expanded upon techniques explored in *Harmonielehre*. Fig. 1.7b shows his first pass at the material. In m. 1, Adams sketched a fragment featuring eighth notes that oscillate on pitches D, E, and A—a 0-2-7 trichord—with emphasis on major second E, an obvious link back to *Harmonielehre*. The skeletal trichord, though tonally incomplete, is the unifying element in the work, the flickering foreground that only when elaborated draws the listener’s attention to its austerity. The sketch (Fig. 1.7b) is a rare example of how Adams worked in the mid-1980s using an eight-track tape recorder (he shifted to MIDI in the early 1990s). Each number on the left hand side of the sketch...

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100 Adams, personal journal, 6 October 1985.
corresponds to a single track recorded on the piano. Later in the compositional process, he listened to the playback as he mapped out the orchestral layers.

After drafting the preliminary eight-track sketches, Adams sketched a large-scale harmonic reduction, dated May 8, 1985 (Fig. 1.7c, “Draft 2 – Harmonic Structure,” mm. 1-90). Its visual sparseness further confirms the basic arc of his method: a long stretch of music (124 measures) consisting of a single diatonic subset (the oscillating trichord) interrupted by non-chord tones. The stripped down textures, obsessive repetition, and absence of melody in this initial section call to mind Adams’s earlier minimalist practices, but here he applies them for dramatic effect. The trichord material seems to be the sterile surface of things, the landscape of Mao’s China stripped of emotional excess. There is also an implied Orientalist stereotype tucked into this moment in the score, one embedded in the simplistic tones reduced to primitive status. Yet the vacuity of sound here (redolent of Adams’s previous practices) seems to be less about the imagined cultural inferiority of the Asian Other robbed of its humanity than about Mao’s quest for power through primitive techniques of terror and mass persuasion. Mao was a supreme egoist with virtually no empathy for others. He embraced Marxism not for its ideals but as a means to power. The empty harmonic sound space might be likened to the emptiness of Mao’s impenetrable regime. Added non-chord tones (F# and C# in m. 3, as well as B natural in m. 9) and punctuating pitches (E and A in m. 5) in the upper voices momentarily disrupt the musical
Figure 1.7a. John Adams, *The Chairman Dances* sketches (May-November 1985).
Figure 1.7b. John Adams, *The Chairman Dances* sketches cont’d (May-November 1985).
Figure 1.7c. John Adams, *The Chairman Dances* sketches cont’d (May-November 1985).
Figure 1.7d. John Adams, *The Chairman Dances* sketches cont’d (May-November 1985).
Figure 1.7e. John Adams, *The Chairman Dances* sketches cont’d (May-November 1985).
Inertia; but the music continually retracts back into the static, silencing any outside articulations of defiance.

The absence of depth in the score is only enforced when the music becomes ear-splittingly bombastic. As the music goes on, the textures thicken, shifting into a decadent realm marked by the lilting rhythms of the foxtrot melody. Following the initial repetitive block (mm. 1-124), the harmonies expand and migrate through different modes of time reckoning into a kind of meta-diegetic space as Chairman and Madame Mao slip away into the nostalgic memories of their youth. Here, Adams toys with the notion that the foxtrot was in fact the music of Nixon’s youth, not Mao’s. He moves from one subject position to another, aligning the memories of the two leaders, signaling that they are one and the same, both despots, their minds molded from similar clays. A series of musical modules (bi-chords, major triads, seventh chords, augmented, and diminished chords), labeled A to H (Fig. 1.7d) marks this symbolic shift from actual to
virtual. Adams integrated these sonorities, later altered slightly, into the transition between the end of the repetitive stretch (mm. 1-124) and the start of the “Yenan Foxtrot” section (mm. 160-84). That he noted beneath the second system, “always something going” (i.e. the repetition of single, eighth note tones), suggests that he wanted to maintain this sense of rhythmic stasis as a bridge across conceptual worlds.

The lower portion of the sketch (Fig. 1.7d), beginning at m. 160, features the base foxtrot melody, a two-bar riff pattern in B minor. Here, the music moves into a diegetic space, the start of the “medley of American tunes,” to which Mao and Chiang Ching begin to dance. The melody repeats multiple times. Each time, Adams distorts the theme further, adding orchestral layers and increasingly dissonant sevenths, ninths, and suspended tones. The music builds to a climactic rush of saxophones, brass, and sharp percussive attacks. The action is now in Yenan, 1937, when Mao first met Chiang Ching, the beautiful movie actress and ardent Communist who would sit in the front row of Mao’s lectures.\(^{101}\) She seduced him with her looks and blatant sexuality. Later, of course, she would become Madame Mao, the architect of the Cultural Revolution and mass executioner of millions.

Although Mao was known for having “no rhythm in his being”\(^{102}\) and likely never danced to a foxtrot, swing-era jazz had a global impact in the 1930s, heard in America, Europe, Russia, and China. Adams used it to align Mao and Nixon, on the one hand, but also to ironize the hedonism of their arch-conservatism. Mao dances to the music of Nixon’s past, the music that the ideologues of the Cultural Revolution associated with debauchery and prostitution. Adams rendered falsely the lilting foxtrot pattern, whose rhythms—and thus symbolic associations of


\(^{102}\) Ibid., 192.
eroticism—are veiled by trembling pedal points. The melody moves in and out of phase with itself, overlapping, then dissolving, like a mash-up of 1940s Hollywood hits. The effect is less like television images being broadcast than fragments of memories smashing in on a relentless plain of present-ness. The swing band lick fades into brushstrokes. When the hum of the opening trichord formation returns in the final moments of the piece, lifting the listener out of the hallucination, its reappearance suggests that the repressed memories of the two leaders have not simply vanished; rather, the music haunts even more than before.

In the third and final draft, Adams wrote out a comprehensive eight-track score (based on the harmonic reduction), shown in Fig. 1.7e, “Draft 3 – 8 Channel Detail.” Upon listening to the playback, he made adjustments, seen in the erasures and corrections in the second system. He also included comments about cues for the orchestration. Once Adams completed the details of the eight-track score, he began orchestrating the piece by hand from start to finish. He then sent a photocopy of the pencil score to his copyist David Ocker in Los Angeles, who neatly copied it and sent Adams a version for proofing. Adams would listen to his eight-track recording while proofing, checking the score note-for-note by ear. He then sent revisions to Ocker who made the adjustments and mailed the final score to Adams’s publisher in New York.\(^{103}\)

Adams finished The Chairman Dances in late November 1985.\(^{104}\) He was satisfied with the result, altering little between the preliminary sketches and the final version (Music Ex. 1.1). In the end, though, Adams chose to weave only subtle traces of its themes into the fabric of

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\(^{103}\) Adams first established a professional relationship with Ocker while working on The Chairman Dances. With Klinghoffer, Adams switched to from eight-track to MIDI, using a software program called Digital Performer. Ocker now does all of his copying in a computer program called Score. Other than changes in digital technology, the back-and-forth process between Adams and Ocker, first established with The Chairman Dances, remains the same to this day.

\(^{104}\) Lukas Foss conducted the premiere with the Milwaukee Symphony on January 31, 1986.
Nixon. Later, he considered The Chairman Dances “a separate response.” Yet its composition was a critical rehearsal for composing the opera. Adams found a symbolic corollary between the gradual process of accretion, from simple to complex, and the opera’s underlying theme to uncover the disconnect between the media and the subjects it represents. The intentional emphasis on bourgeois romance and interpersonal relationships was meant to conceal political context, including the horror the purges, just as Mao’s propaganda machine and the American media concealed it. This conceptual and technical treatment would, in essence, become the dominant logic of the Nixon score.

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Adams began composing Nixon on December 6, 1985, just a week after finishing The Chairman Dances. With less than two years until the October 1987 premiere, he stuck to a strict work schedule, recording his progress with hash-marks on a calendar (Fig. 1.8). Gockley, Schirmer (his publisher at the time), and others set periodic deadlines. Adams was under pressure to complete a working piano vocal score in a year’s time so the singers could begin to learn their parts. The orchestration and performing parts were due six months after that. There would be little time for second thoughts, much less multiple drafts. Yet Adams had learned through the

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105 Adams, program note for The Chairman Dances, 1985, http://www.laphil.com/phlpedia/music/chairman-dances-john-adams. Several themes from The Chairman Dances, in Adams’s words, “make a dreamy reappearance in Act III of the actual opera, en revenant, as both the Nixons and Maos reminisce over their distant pasts.”
process of composing *Harmonielehre* that nothing but an immovable target date would spur him to action. He recalled, “I sat down one day and wrote *Nixon in China* at the top of a blank page of score. I figured that if I didn’t I’d never be able to write the opera.”

Adams received the first libretto installment for Act I, scene one in the summer of 1985. Goodman for the last year had been immersed in an assortment of sources (news magazines, tapes of television newscasts, memoirs, Mao’s writings, biographies of Nixon and Chou En-lai, and Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Rising Over China*, 1937, among other texts). She quoted verbatim some of the language found in the sources, but the majority she poeticized. (Chou’s

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speech in Act I, scene three, for instance, she crafted entirely from imagination.) Her typewritten
text (Fig. 1.9) was itself a revision of an earlier draft in which she cut and paste over other
sections of text. The first musical notes Adams put to paper were inspired by her lucid portrait of
the opening landscape, the Peking airfield where the Nixons’ plane was soon to arrive. He
launched the orchestral prelude with repeated ascending A minor scales, inspired by the
patterned repetitions in the final act of Philip Glass’s *Satyagraha* (1979).\(^{108}\) From the outset,
Adams seemed to be thinking in terms of rhythmic counterpoint and orchestral color, wanting to
impart in sound the subdued, shifting colors of the gray Chinese landscape. Each voice in the
preliminary rendering (Fig. 1.10a) is assigned to one of three muted instrumental groupings:
strings, brass, or percussion. He fleshed out the initial sketch in Fig. 1.10b, using his eight-track
to experiment with offsetting each voice in a series of colliding two-against-three metrical
patterns.\(^{109}\) Halfway into the sketch, however, Adams started over (Fig. 1.10c). He re-arranged
the voices according to register, with the ascending A minor eighth-note pattern in the top-most
voice and the slower-moving parts in the basses and celli below. In this subsequent draft, he
filled in the sound with an additional ascending A minor scale in dotted quarter notes played by
the violin. Added punctuating E octaves heard in the second half of m. 4 and staccato trombone

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\(^{108}\) Adams aimed to “summon up…the land and the people before [Nixon’s visit] 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.” Adams, interview with Porter, “*Nixon in China*: John Adams in
Conversation,” 28. He mentions the influence of Glass in a number of places, most readily in his
memoir, *Hallelujah Junction*, 144

\(^{109}\) For an examination of Adams’s use of metrical dissonance in the opera, see Timothy Johnson,
*John Adams’s Nixon in China*. Johnson argues that the metrical dissonance established at the
opening sets the symbolic tone for the drama, specifically ideological tensions between East and
West. While Johnson’s interpretation is convincing to an extent, it is limited in the sense that
Adams uses this overlapping technique in his instrumental works from this period (see, for
instance, the ascending scalar patterns found in the first movement of *Harmonielehre*, mm. 176-208).
Figure 1.9. Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China* libretto draft, Act I, scene one (circa late summer 1985). N.B. The draft includes the first-ever drawings of future painter Emily Adams. She would have been around a year old at the time.
Figure 1.10a. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for opening orchestral overture (December 1985).
Figure 1.10b. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, eight-track sketch for opening orchestral overture (December 1985).
Figure 1.10c. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, subsequent eight-track sketch for opening orchestral overture (December 1985).
Figure 1.10d. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, piano-vocal score for opening orchestral overture (circa winter 1986).
interruptions on tone A in m. 10 create a sense of rhythms tripping over one another, enlarging a strange sense of time. Little changed between the preliminary drafts and final version (Fig. 1.10d shows the finalized piano-vocal reduction), suggestive that Adams composed quickly and efficiently, impelled to keep pushing forward and only rarely looking back.

On December 11, 1985, just five days into writing Nixon, Adams noted in his college-ruled journal,

Ever since starting the sketches, I have been aware that the only way to treat this subject is with great simplicity. Simplicity can describe the Chinese best. The ahistorical, natural Chinese (the peasant, Confucian wisdom, etc.) and the rigid ‘simple’ dogma of Mao. It also allows for the homely emotions of Pat and Dick, and provides the possibility of irony and even parody.\(^\text{110}\)

The statement is striking upon first glance, essentializing a culture thousands of years old and a remote political ideology. The “simple dogma” to which Adams seems to refer here is not Chinese, but rather Communist. Even though Mao’s agitprop involved boiling down complex Marxist thought into slogans comprehensible to “the people,” the Chinese conception of Marxist-Leninism was multifaceted, anything but simplistic. The Communists talked behind closed doors, like they did in public, about class struggle and the suppression of “capitalist-roaders.” There was no distinction between inside and outside. Part of the opera’s conceptual underpinning involved re-enacting this collapse of boundaries between outer and inner, public and private.

Adams conceptualized these issues, perhaps naively, in the following terms:

[By Act III] 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.\(^\text{111}\)


The conceptual and structural arc of the *Nixon* score would thus involve a large-scale elaboration of “simple” peasant music transformed into warped American big band ditties and then into discordant contrapuntal reveries in which the consonant surface textures of the opening break down into increasingly dissonant ones.

Working chronologically, Adams next set the opening lines of Goodman’s libretto, the chorus of Chinese citizens who welcome the dawn and celebrate the common laborer: “Soldiers of heaven hold the sky / The morning breaks and shadows fly.” Curiously, Adams conceived the setting not from the perspective of four-part choral harmony but rather from that of a singular voice. He experimented with two rhythmic settings of the text (Fig. 1.11a). The first, in 3/2 meter, follows the scansion of “Soldiers of heaven” (short-short-short-long-short); the second unfolds in eighth notes separated by quarter-note rests in 9/8. The melody unfolds over an arpeggiated F minor triad, a kind of bugle line, emphasizing the interval of the minor third on the word “sky,” a feature he would retain in the next draft. In the next section of music (Fig. 1.11b), the D-flat major melody, set to the words “your master is the laborer who rules the world with truth and grace,” begins to rise and fall by whole and semi-tone, landing firmly in E minor on the word “grace.” This key area, E minor, would later become associated in the opera with the Chinese. Adams, however, discarded the draft, realizing the opening chorus demanded an approach driven by another focus, that of “simple” choral harmonies in a style representing the masses.
Figure 1.11a. John Adams, *Nixon in China* initial sketch for Act I, scene one chorus, “Soldiers of Heaven,” mm. 78-94 (December 1985).
Figure 1.11b. John Adams, *Nixon in China* initial sketch for Act I, scene one chorus, “Soldiers of Heaven,” mm. 95-120 (December 1985).
In the next set of sketches for the opening chorus (Figs. 1.12a-d), Adams drafted the music on large, loose manuscript sheets, which gave him more room to flesh out four-part choral harmony. He abandoned the melodic shaping of the initial draft, setting the words “do not mistreat the captive foe” homorhythmically, with harmonies gently rocking back and forth between F-sharp minor and F major. This rising and falling pattern comes to define the melodic profile of the chorus. Although the large X on the sketch seems to indicate the rejection of ideas here, he ended up retaining most of these features in the final version. In the final setting, Adams transposed the rocking pattern up a major third, so the shifts occur between B-flat major and A minor. At first glance, the music appears to have little, if any, overall or unified organization. Yet as he moved into the next section of music (Fig. 1.12b), “The people are the heroes now / Behemoth pulls the peasant’s plow,” he focused on the nuances of those choral harmonies, setting the words according to their rhythmic scansion. The harmonies sway between G-sharp minor and E major, with added emphasis on the major third relation. Adams took great care in setting the passage, writing in a December 12, 1985 journal entry,

Problem yesterday with ‘Behemoth,’ which I want to accent on the first syllable. American dictionary says this is ok as a second choice. I could go with it, even if people find it strange. Those two lines constitute the hook of the whole chorus.

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113 Adams, personal journal, 12 December 1985.
Figure 1.12a. John Adams, sketch for Act I, scene one chorus, “Do not mistreat the captive foe,” mm. 138-160, *Nixon in China* (December 1985).
Figure 1.12b. John Adams, sketch for Act I, scene one chorus, “The people are the heroes now,” mm. 161-180, *Nixon in China* (December 1985).
Figure 1.12c. John Adams, sketch for Act I, scene one chorus, “The people are the heroes now,” mm. 181-235, *Nixon in China* (December 1985).
Figure 1.12d. John Adams, piano-vocal score for Act I, scene one chorus, “The people are the heroes now,” mm. 160-174, *Nixon in China* (circa winter 1986).
Erasures on the staves suggest that he made several attempts to get the rhythms of the text right. Notes in the margins such as “fix” and “simplify” suggest that the setting would undergo another revision. Indeed, on the next page (Fig. 1.12c), a continuation of his triadic choral writing, he jotted a new rhythmic rendering of “the people are the heroes now,” one that anticipates the final setting (Fig. 1.12d). The stammered repetitions have a mind-numbing quality likened to the sounds of the Red Army marching *en masse*, an effect that Adams fashioned through a process of feeling out, over several drafts, the rhythms of the text.

In late December 1985, Adams started sketching Nixon’s Act I, scene one “News” aria (Figs. 1.13a-e). It was the first of several attempts to capture the president’s unsettled frame of mind. Goodman’s text follows Nixon’s thoughts as they wander from feelings of elation at the notion of being broadcast to millions to paranoia as the president ponders the stakes of his enterprise. The aria disrupts the chronological sequence of events, giving Adams room to explore the boundaries between public and private that underpin the conceptual apparatus of the opera. The metaphorical implications of Adams’s compositional decisions are vast. The big aria emphasis is rather traditional, and there is a sense in the sketches that Adams was searching to collapse traditional aria conventions (i.e. binary or *da capo* form) as a symbolic nod to the media’s erasure of historical background for the sake of a good camera shot. He originally conceived the aria in *da capo* form, but soon strayed from this idea, seeming to want instead to impart a more through-composed structure. His preliminary sketch (Fig. 1.13a) features not the repeated utterances of “news” on tone C that mark the final version, but rather a wandering sequence of broken rhythms and melodic leaps outlining crystalline B-flat major. The jagged contours of his setting seem to suggest the moment-to-moment fluctuations between Nixon’s
outward elation at being televised to millions and his inner unrest. Adams, however, abandoned the sketch, seeking to make it more like a set of headlines.

In Adams’s next draft (Fig. 1.13b), the general contour of the aria began to materialize. He discarded the triadic B-flat major melodic figures and fragmented rhythms in favor of a simpler approach: repeated tones on the word “News” that quicken as if to suggest the urgency of Nixon’s erratic thought patterns while smiling in front of the cameramen. Adams focused on melodic contour, emphasizing in the second half of the sketch downward intervallic leaps of a major sixth and a minor third on the words “news has a kind of mystery.” As the draft goes on and Nixon’s thoughts turn to despair, the pure triadic harmonies gradually disintegrate. For instance, in the moment Nixon sings of his private suspicion of the Chinese, “We live in an unsettled time. Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?” Adams called upon a 0-2-7 trichord on pitches B-flat, C and F (Fig. 1.13c). On the word “friends,” he added tones A-flat and D to create a polychord—B-flat Major against F minor—a sonority heard as a dissonance due to its brief presentation and the fact that it is preceded by less dissonant major and seventh chords. One could interpret the trichord formation as having a double function here. It creates a kind of text-music alliance merging the words “enemies” and “friends,” all the while serving as an important modulatory device to transition to the next section of music. Yet these kinds of close word-music relationships in the aria are highly inconsistent, suggestive that Adams used his ear rather than any pre-compositional strategy. At the same time, he relied, to an extent, on procedure, keeping in mind a long-range harmonic plan that did not center on tonal syntax or formal design but rather on a structure built around the gradual elaboration of repetitive, triadic surfaces into wayward dissonance alongside events in the text. This approach allowed Adams to negotiate—and, in a way, transcend—the problem of balancing instinct with method.
After completing a draft of the aria from start to finish, Adams re-copied the music on large loose manuscript sheets. Fig. 1.13d shows how he expanded upon the opening repeated tones on B-flat and subsequent disjunct melodic movement. Jottings on the lower half of the folio indicate he was thinking about a shift to the relative minor (G minor) as Nixon mentions the handshake with Chou En-lai. Yet still dissatisfied with the sketch, Adams started over. He re-worked the material in yet another draft, labeled “News – first draft” (Fig. 1.13e), even though by this point it was his third pass at the material. Here, he maintained the repeated tones, rhythmic pacing, and aspects of melodic contour of the previous draft but changed the key area from B-flat to A-flat major, the tonal area that establishes itself by sheer persistence in the final version. (C major is also emphasized at certain points in the aria, particularly as Nixon sings the word “listening.”) No written evidence reveals Adams’s motivation for the change in key; but from here on in the opera sketches the composer consistently linked A-flat and C major with textual references to the Nixons and the United States, suggestive that a larger metaphorical harmonic scheme was beginning to take shape in his mind. The draft, too, includes musical details found in the final version, such as the rapid-fire staccato A-flat major chords that anticipate Nixon’s erratic thought patterns, as well as an empty staff for Chou’s attempted interjections (at this point, Adams had not yet conceived them musically).

Within just over a week’s time (from December 28, 1985 to January 6, 1986), Adams moved from the first draft to the final version (Fig. 1.13f). Like a sculptor shaping a mound of clay, he had found his creative rhythm. Adams’s cumulative compositional process is indeed sculptural, bringing to mind the process of lost-wax casting in which the object—the eventual metal sculpture—was first shaped from a wax mold, an empty shape or the negative form,
Figure 1.13e. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act I, scene one, “News,” mm. 374-416 (January 1986).
Figure 1.13f. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, piano-vocal score for Act I, scene one, “News,” mm. 374-405 (circa winter 1986).
then filled with metal. A hard form emerges, and the wax, the initial idea, was lost. This notion that the original idea, or the negative form, has been lost to our senses, transformed into an object we can touch, has some resonance with the loss of meaning or depth of understanding in the media age.

Adams began work on Act I, scene two in late January 1986. The scene unfolds in Mao’s book-lined study, with Mao, Chou, Nixon, Kissinger sitting in armchairs and engaging in “open dialectical duets.” As the interpreter relays Mao’s philosophical and political commentary, Nixon struggles to hold his own. Kissinger sits in silence while Mao’s secretaries linger in the background. Goodman’s notes on the scene gave Adams a vivid point of entry into the musical setting: “Everything Chou sings in this scene quotes or harmonizes with something Mao has just sung. Mao’s part in the duet, then, is backed-up (the three contraltos sing in unison), echoed, expanded, embroidered. Nixon sings his part well, but the audience is to perceive that his voice sounds just a little reedy in his own ears compared with the compelling resonance opposite.”

Naturally then, Adams drafted Mao’s vocal part first. The initial sketch (Fig. 1.14a) outlines the melodic shape of Mao’s stammered utterance, “I can’t talk very well,” a reference to the chairman’s ailing health. Adams set the words to staggered quarter notes on B-flat, D-flat and E-flat that then fall onto G natural. An arpeggiated E-flat dominant seventh chord shimmers in the accompaniment. Constantly changing harmonies reflect Mao’s shifting conversational armory. Adams included on the lower portion of the page (Fig. 1.14a) a harmonic sketch for the instrumental opening of the scene, pitting G major against G minor, followed by a sudden shift to an E-flat dominant seventh chord transformed into G major. In the next sketch (Fig. 1.14b), he

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115 Ibid.
Figure 1.14a. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act I, scene two, “Mao’s Study,” mm. 30-38 (January 1986).
Figure 1.14b. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act I, scene two, “Mao’s Study,” mm. 36-138 (January 1986).
Figure 1.14c. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act I, scene two, “Mao’s Study,” mm. 506-528 (January 28, 1986).
Figure 1.14d. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act I, scene two, “Mao’s Study,” mm. 979-1019 (January 1986).
fleshed out Mao’s vocal line, playing with teetering third relations. The harmonies sway between
E-flat dominant seventh and G major chords. At the moments in which Mao expresses his
frustration with the U.S. diplomats, the chords overlap to create a dissonant bichord (E-flat
against G major seven), highlighting the fundamental clash of ideologies. Remarkably, the initial
draft resembles the final setting, suggestive that Adams continued to move through his sketches
with confidence and stamina.

As the sketches for Act I, scene two go on, Adams elaborated the score with vocal and
accompanimental detail. The chairman’s secretaries repeat everything Mao says in slower triadic
harmonies. According to Adams, the inclusion of the Maoettes “was a little whimsy I had early
on in the composing. In addition to them sounding like a backup group, I thought of how so
much of what Mao is reported to have said was repeated in this sort of aphoristic diktat by
millions of Chinese, almost like a catechism.” The Maoettes sing offset rhythms alongside
Mao, creating instances of temporal confusion that mirror Nixon’s own difficulties in
comprehending the dialectical exchange. But eventually, the Maoettes fade away as Mao’s
musical presence grows stronger, his song reaching into high tessitura (B4) with wide melodic
leaps against hammering minor triads. Fig. 1.14c, dated January 28, 1986, shows how Adams set
Mao’s criticism of U.S. foreign military policy (mm. 506-528). The music unfolds, according to
the score, “heavy and brutal,” as Mao sings,

Our armies do not go abroad.
Why should they? We have all we need:
New missionaries, business like,
Survey the field and then attack,
Promise to change our rice to bread,
And wash us in our brother’s blood.
And crucify us on a cross of usury.

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Mao refers to his worst fears of infiltration by Christian missionaries; the sharp edges of his rising falsetto line (with tones drawn from a G# minor collection) express the hollowness, the thinness of his authority. Nixon bloviates, and the music does, too, calling attention, in its bombast, to the emptiness of his rhetoric. For instance, the scene ends with Mao praising disingenuously Nixon’s book *Six Crises* (1962), written after John F. Kennedy defeated Nixon in the 1960 presidential election. The president’s response, “he reads too much,” an attempt at humility, unfolds against C major arpeggations. Nixon then wonders aloud if Mao’s studious habits are what gave the chairman his “iron constitution” (Fig. 1.14d). In this moment, Nixon’s melody moves through a series of long-winded leaps and falls. But soon enough, Mao and his secretaries drown out Nixon’s song with “Founders come first, then profiteers.”

In the next phase of composition, Adams mapped out a loose harmonic plan for a scene change between the second and third scenes of Act I. The Entr’acte, meant to set the stage for the first grand banquet, was never included in the final version. According to Goodman’s notes, the curtain would rise and Richard and Pat Nixon would walk into the Great Hall of the People “to the strains of a march,” a symbolic version of the Long March. The hall, adorned with American and Chinese flags, resembled a “snowy fields of table linens,” with place settings for 900 guests. After speeches by Chou En-lai and Nixon, the diegetic band would play “American favorites: ‘America the Beautiful,’ ‘God bless America,’ ‘Old Zip Coon,’ ‘Home on the Range,’ ‘She’ll be Comin’ Round the Mountain,’ ‘Jingle Bells.’” Rather than explicitly quote these tunes, Adams sought to create a vague feeling of big-band jazz by integrating jazz harmonies into the fabric of the Entr’acte and the unfolding action of the scene.

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The preliminary sketch for the scene change (Fig. 1.15a) shows a number of jazz harmonies organized into what Adams called “modules” labeled “A” to “Z.” Adams’s simple arithmetic, shown on the top left of the sketch, refers to the division of the Entr’acte into different sections. He then marked the number of bars and duration in seconds of each module. For example, the third measure shown, module “C,” begins at 17 seconds and lasts 2.5 measures. The harmonies outlined in the module move through E major and minor seventh chords, C major, and G major/minor sonorities (the lowest note in the final chord cluster is G natural, even though the marking appears as if it could be a flat). Adams then elaborated each module, adding a flat fifth and added sixth, tones that contribute to the jazziness of the harmonies. Other modules are built on bi-chords, such as in “module N,” which outlines an E minor triad over a G half-diminished seventh chord, with shared tones E and G, an obvious link to the blatant use of those key areas in the previous scene. In modules “O” and “R,” Adams rooted the harmonies in the 0-2-7 trichord (C, D, and G), adding a major and minor seventh to color its subsequent iterations. Finally, modules “X” “Y” and “Z” alternate between C major and A-flat major sonorities, the tonal areas linked to the Nixons and the United States. Over the course of 26 modules, Adams combined his signature harmonic language, namely his use of bichords and 0-2-7 trichords, with that of jazz stereotypically conceived. When he applied the harmonic modules to his eight-track draft, shown in Fig. 1.15b, titled “Scene Change to the Great Hall of the People,” Adams superimposed E major/minor harmonies over a lyrical cello line, with tones drawn from each of the module collections as they unfold through time.
Figure 1.15a. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, harmonic outline for Act I, scene three Entr’acte and entrance into the Great Hall of the People (omitted) (circa winter 1986).
Figure 1.15b. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act I, scene three Entr’acte and entrance into the Great Hall of the People (omitted) (circa winter 1986).
Figure 1.15c. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, piano-vocal score for Act I, scene three, mm. 1-34 (circa winter 1986).
Adams never did finish the Entr’acte music. The opera’s increasing length resulted in its abandonment. Instead, Adams would launch into the heart of the Act I, scene three banquet. Nevertheless, he incorporated elements from the Entr’acte into the final version of the scene, blending 0-2-7 trichords with added tones. The scene begins with a variation on the harmonies that ended the Entr’acte, modules “X,” “Y,” and “Z” alternating between C major and A-flat major (Fig. 1.15c). Adams, however, darkened the mood by inflecting A-flat major to minor in the instrumental introduction (mm. 1-6), drawing from tone collection G#, B, D# (the enharmonic equivalent of A-flat minor). A gentle lilt to octave A# shifts the harmonies to a resonant 0-2-7 trichord on G#, A#, D#, with an F minor seventh chord in the bass. By m. 7, he transposed the harmonies up a minor third to C minor. The music now alternates between the two key areas, A-flat minor and C minor as Pat and Richard Nixon enter the Great Hall of the People and sing “the night is young, a long, long trail unwinding towards my dreams.” The elaboration of the 0-2-7 trichord with added sixths, flat-fifths, and bi-chords, combined with the lilting rhythms of swing, gives the scene its distinctive musical quality. The scene, in effect, is an improvised embellishment of the trichord, with the sound of American dance music building to a climax as a kind of bridge across conceptual and cultural divides.

A transcription of a journal entry dated March 17, 1986 sheds light on Adams’s progress to this point:

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Adams, personal journal, March 17, 1986.

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Total opera: 135 min

Completed rough draft sketch

Opening: 8’  Needed: Air Force I arrival: 4 min
Nix. Aria: 7’
Act I, scene 2: 24’
Scene change: 3’
Act I, scene 3 [intro]: :50”

+/- 43’

I 62 min
II 38 min
III 35 min

Act I scene 3: roughly 15 minutes

Nix-Pat Duet: 4
Chou Speech: 4
Nix speech: 3
Finale: 4

Clearly, Adams was thinking about the opera’s composition in terms of duration: 135 minutes total with approximately 43 minutes drafted. Having written most of the music up to the start of Act I, scene three, he had only the remainder of that scene and the Air Force One music, a four-minute instrumental interlude, to add to Act I. With 18 months until the premiere, he was right on schedule.

In the final weeks of March 1986, Adams began sketching Chou’s Act I, scene three toast, “Ladies and Gentleman,” and on April 9, 1986 started the piano-vocal score arrangement for that scene. He patiently awaited Goodman’s libretto installments for the second and third acts, but they were slow to arrive. For the remainder of the spring 1986, he put the rest of Act I, scene three on hold, wanting to wait to get a feel for the texts of Acts II and III before drafting the Act I finale. During this time, he sketched the Air Force One arrival music and runway sequence featuring a cinematic build-up that climaxes on a bichord, an A major triad over an E-flat pedal, emphasizing the tritone. The appearance of the dissonant sonority breaks through the consonant surface, an important symbolic point of departure in the opera, the threshold over which Nixon crosses into unknown land.
Figure 1.16. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act II, scene one, “I don’t daydream” (August 1986).
Figure 1.17. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act I, scene three, “Cheers,” mm. 681-710 (August 1986).
By late August 1986, Adams finally received the libretto for Act II. The act features the most extensive development of Pat Nixon’s character, highlighting her optimism and trust in fate. Adams then sketched a rudimentary outline for Pat’s Act II, scene one aria, “I don’t daydream” (Fig. 1.16), establishing C major, G minor, and E-flat major as the central key areas around which the aria revolves. Once he determined the basic harmonic scheme (unusual for the composer), he returned to finish Act I, scene three. He picked up the banquet scene right where he left off in the moment the chorus begins its stuttered chant, “cheers, cheers, cheers, cheers,” in syncopated patterns. Although Adams had no pre-compositional map for this section, the framework of rhythmic and harmonic elaboration, once again, gave his compositional process a unified purpose. He worked strictly at his piano using his ear to work out the choral voicings, writing and re-writing many of them. Later, he recalled, “It was very difficult to compose the ‘Cheers’ chorus because of the constantly changing harmonies. Getting all those triadic relationships and their voicings right—the voicings were really hard—was difficult.”\(^\text{119}\) The difficulty of the task and multiple changes of Adams’s mind are graphically illustrated in Fig. 1.17, the rough harmonic sketch for “Che Che Che Che Che Cheers!” (mm. 681-710). The texture is dense, with recurring shifts between major and minor, modulation by thirds, and diminished seventh chords in 4/2 or 6/5 inversions. Nixon, Pat, and Kissinger repeat “Washington’s Birthday!” in F major. The chorus then takes another tour through a progression of seventh chords, finally landing on A-flat major just before Nixon completes the remainder of his speech, “Everyone listen…I opposed China.” As the scene comes to a close, the dialogue between characters begins to overlap against the clash of E major/minor and C major harmonies.

Figure 1.18. Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China* libretto draft, Act II, scene two (circa late summer 1986).
It ends with the sound of a terse C major triad, the key area associated with the USA, setting the stage for the C major chords that initiate Pat’s Act II aria.

By the end of August 1986, Adams had finished Act I in its entirety and embarked on composing the remainder of Act II—Pat’s tour of Peking and the re-enactment of The Red Detachment. Adams fleshed out the instrumental prelude and Pat’s vocal lines for “I don’t daydream” and “This is prophetic.” As he went along, he marked up Goodman’s libretto draft with specific musical details later expanded in the sketches. Fig. 1.18 shows Adams’s annotations for a section of The Red Detachment, the “triumphant” story of defeat and the rise of the peasant class with the aid of the all-female Special Division of the Chinese Communist Red Army. Before the revolution, the Chinese were separated into rich and poor, landowner and tenant. The rich landowners killed to preserve their positions. Only through the decimation of the most privileged classes did Mao come to seize power.120

In the Nixon libretto (Fig. 1.18), Pat compares Kissinger to Lao Szu, the evil landlord (Kissinger’s character doubles as Lao). The reference conflates the actions of the landlord and Kissinger’s human rights abuses in Cambodia. Richard and Pat are drawn into the action, responding to the whipping of the peasant girl, Cheng-hua. Pat shrieks, “They can’t do that…make them stop!” She and Richard run onstage and help the girl to her feet. The moment is striking, an artful distortion of fiction and reality, a play-within-a-play. The music here, a series of syncopated percussive whips, is a support mechanism for the narrative content, its acoustical resonance a subliminal pulse of violence. The peasant girl is beaten brutally, resisting the landlord to the very end.

120 See Chang and Halliday, Mao: The Untold Story, 586-97.

The original orchestral score for *The Red Detachment* was written in a late-nineteenth-century European idiom; melodic lines were mostly modal, colored occasionally with pentatonic scales. Traditional Chinese percussion instruments offered local color, but there were otherwise few nods to the Chinese context of the ballet. It was meant to be didactic and privileged pantomime. For the most part, Adams retains the harmonic and rhythmic palette of the rest of the *Nixon* score. He knit together a montage of textures, beginning with the Maoettes narrating in an upbeat style of lilting rhythms and simple triads. The landlord sings in an elaborate falsetto against relentless rhythms and displaced dissonances. Snippets of the anticipatory Act I runway
music emerge from time to time through the scrim, only to transition to another block of pulsating triads. A violent storm sequence ensues, a symbolic cleansing of the peasant girl’s blood. Here, Adams embellished a series of A minor triplets that repeat over shifting meters (Fig. 1.19), the sound of pelting rain (mm. 372-396). The music moves into a thunderous sequence of pounding C minor triads that morph into C# minor, followed by a chromatic chiasmus of clashing sonorities. As the weather settles, the textures gradually thin; the absence of sound washes out the bloody landscape. The music suddenly turns into a sublime reverie in E-flat major, the hushed arpeggiations punctuated by a watered-down romantic melody as the Red Women’s Militia enters and parades its banners. The Maoettes take over with a worker’s song, “Flesh rebels, the body pulls those inflamed souls that mark its trials into the war.” Here, the tonic-dominant harmonies echo the original Red Detachment score.

The earliest libretto draft featured a haunting final chorus, later cut from the opera, at the end of the re-enactment of The Red Detachment. In Goodman’s draft (Fig. 1.20), labeled “Old” by Adams, she wrote the chorus from the perspective of Mao’s militia, the same one that wrested control from local warlords and liberated the peasant class during the Chinese Civil War. These events would set the stage for Mao’s terror-driven regime as the despot of the People’s Republic of China. Goodman captured the spirit of the first wave of the Chinese Communist Revolution with “the dusky fruit” and “the grapes of wrath” as symbols of man’s inhumanity to man. Death was celebrated as the spirit of the revolution. The scene would end with the chorus singing “The lion’s dead / out of his skull / the people crawl / in search of —,” followed by the piercing scream of Madame Mao on the word “Hell!” The deletion of the militia chorus remains a mystery, given its elevated poetic tone. No musical sketches for it seem to exist. Yet the
Chorus: Their opened eyes
Spy the red wall
Of their travaile
The mother’s trial
Revolution
Is the true vine
Whose dusky fruit
These women ate
The grapes of wrath
Have set the teeth
Of the new age
Grimly on edge
The dirt is stiff
With the well off
Deceased, we laugh
To see how life
Stirs in the head
The bees are glad
The lion’s dead
Out of his skull
The people crawl
In search of---

Chiang Ch’ing: Hell!

End of Act II
The wounded landlord throws away his cane and scrambles offstage as the Red Women's Militia charges across the courtyard. Madame Mao is triumphant.

Chiang Ch'ing: What are you gaping at? Forward Red Troupe! Annihilate This tyrant and his running dogs!

Nixon: Oh no!

Chiang Ch'ing: Throw off those stupid rags! Advance and fire! Fix bayonets! The worms are hungry! Must the fruits Of victory rot on the vine?

The mercenaries are routed. In the confusion Lao Szü vanishes. The red flag rises over the mansion. Peasants push through the broken gates, weeping for joy.

Pat: Is Henry okay?

Nixon: Christ, he's gone.

The granary has been opened. The President takes on the task of distributing grain to the hungry peasants. Meanwhile, the Company, led by Hung, severely rebukes Ching-hua and disarms her. She is deeply distressed. For a moment Madame Mao, standing in medias res, seems almost left out.

Chorus: Are you one of us? You are what you choose. Your paradise Begins and ends In open wounds And self-abuse Where your heart is. Your sacred heart Is rotten meat; Your little treasure Your precious flower Your sweet revenge. Nothing can change Without discipline. Give me that gun.

Nixon: A long, long life to Chairman Mao! Here's one for you, and one for you.

Pat: We expected so much from you! I hope you've learned your lesson now.

Chiang Ch'ing: I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung Who raised the weak above the strong When I appear the people hang Upon my words, and for his sake Whose wreaths are heavy round my neck I speak according to the book. When did this total-nation last Expose its daughters? At the breast Of history I sucked and pissed, Thoughtless and heartless, red and blind,
Figure 1.22. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act II, scene two, “I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung,” mm. 785-819 (fall 1986).
draft is part of the singularity of the opera, belonging to its essential fabric, its erasure perhaps metaphoric for the media’s erasure of the dark historical undercurrents of the story.

In the end, the opera creators concluded Act II with a traditional exit aria. Goodman supplied a new version of the Act II finale (Fig. 1.21), withdrawing the militia chorus and adding an aria of near-comical force for Madame Mao, “I am the wife of Mao Tse-Tung.” The aria (Fig. 1.22), a defining centerpiece in the final version, was modeled on Mozart’s D minor “Queen of the Night” aria from The Magic Flute (1791). As with Mozart’s queen, Madame Mao’s piercingly high coloratura amplifies her perceived power and authority. Adams’s reliance on traditional da capo form separates the aria from the other numbers in the opera, creating a distance, a kind of formal remove, from the emotional content of Nixon’s wandering vocal lines. In Adams’s version, set in B-flat minor/major, he executed the da capo form falsely by emphasizing the tritone (E major), rather than the tonic, in the reprise. The aria’s structure momentarily destabilizes, a striking representation of Madame Mao’s distorted sense of reality. Soon, the music returns to its home key, a quasi-restoration of the convention. Adams made clear in Nixon’s “News” aria that the da capo form was a deadened mode of expression. But here, its overt use disturbs the opera’s sequence of action, highlighting the ruthlessness of Madame Mao’s pursuits.

Goodman completed the libretto in December 1986, nearly two years after starting it. That same month, she sent Adams a draft for Act III, later altered. In this earlier version (Fig. 1.23), the action unfolds at the final banquet (later changed to the bedchamber) in a series of intimate portraits of the Nixons, Maos, and Chou En-lai. It was important to Goodman that
Act III, scene 1

It is the last night in Peking. Inside the Great Hall of the People everything is as it was on the first night, except for the relative positions of the flags. The members of the chorus sit at their tables and the dignitaries sit at their tables. President Nixon is hosting this banquet. He is very, very tired: the lights do not flatter him. The First Lady looks fragile and heavily powdered. Madame Mao is smaller than they had remembered her. And Chou En-lai seems old and quite worn out. Only Chairman Mao appears at his best, full of the joy of youth and the hope of revolution, in his poster on the wall. Dr. Kissinger is impatient. He scratches the back of his neck, his nose, and his ear. The food is a long time coming.

**Kissinger:** Some men you cannot satisfy.

**Nixon:** That's what I tell them.

**Kissinger:** They can't say you didn't tell them.

**Nixon:** It's no good.

You lipstick's crooked.

**Pat:** Is it? Oh.

There isn't much that I can do,

Is there? Who's seen my handkerchief?

**Chou:** Please accept mine.

Chiang Ch'ing: I've heard enough.

Madame Mao pushes back her chair and stands up. She is wearing a cheongsam. Chairman Mao begins to sing from his poster:

**Mao:** The grass upon the house top dies.

In public squares it flourishes

In the rich dirt between the tiles.

Our heads will bruise the dirty heels

Of the departing Japanese.

Our heads are numbered with the grass.

Chiang Ch'ing: Who chose these numbers?

She walks over to the band and picks up a piece of sheet music. She is wearing high heels.

**Kissinger:** All of us.

(aside) Doesn't she like the people's choice?

**Nixon:** Now for a solo on the spoons!

(aside) I like it when they play our tunes.

Chiang Ch'ing: This should be better. Hit it, boys!

She pulls a cardboard box from behind the dais and begins to decorate the hall with paper lanterns, rearranging the potted palms, stepping back to admire the effect. The music has changed. It's a foxtrot. She seems to be dancing by herself.

**Pat:** O California! Hold me close.

The President and Mrs. Nixon take to the floor and begin to dance. He is engagingly diffident.

**Mao:** I am no one.

**Chou:** We fight, we die.

And if we do not fight we die.

Kissinger: That's how it goes.

Mao: I am unknown.

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Figure 1.23. Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China* libretto draft, Act III (November 1986).
“everyone had a voice,” with Act III representing the culmination of her vision.\(^{121}\) Nixon muses over his time in the Pacific during the war. Pat recalls her letters to him, the poverty of her childhood, and the early years of their marriage. Madame Mao reflects upon her difficult upbringing, her years as an actress, and her love affair with Mao. The opera ends with a poignant portrait of Chou En-lai reflecting on the Long March and the epic feat of Mao’s revolution, of the famines and purges, and of having blood-soaked hands. The final act is a labyrinthine journey of personal history, with memories and reflections colliding into one another like the simultaneous transmission of television broadcasts.\(^{122}\)

Upon receiving the Act III installment, Adams felt the opera was too long. He cut portions of the text, specifically a soliloquy, shown in Fig. 1.23, in which Mao reflects on his mortality and the impermanence of his regime:

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The grass upon the housetop dies.  
In public squares it flourishes  
In the rich dirt between the tiles.  
Our heads will bruise the dirty heels  
Of the departing Japanese.  
Our heads are numbered with the grass.
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This eerie poetic daydream, omitted, is part of the opera’s underlying makeup. And yet, as with the Act II militia chorus, its absence in the final version reinforces the metaphorical absence of depth in the drama between Nixon and Mao. Goodman never approved of Adams’s cuts to the

\(^{121}\) Goodman, program note for *Nixon in China*, 1986. “It would be an heroic opera—that would be the character of the work—and an opera of character—that had become inevitable—and the heroic quality of the work as a whole would be determined by the eloquence of each character in his or her own argument.”

\(^{122}\) According to Adams, “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.” Adams, interview with Porter, “*Nixon in China*: John Adams in Conversation,” 26.
libretto. It finally reached completion, but she would never let go of her anger towards Adams for altering her words.\textsuperscript{123} She later remarked about the opera’s collaborative difficulties:

> I discovered a fair amount about the nature of collaborative work. Choruses which I loved had to be cut for the greater good, and arias were composed and inserted. We disagreed violently about one thing and another, and while some of these disagreements were resolved, others were amicably maintained. There are places where the music goes against the grain of the libretto, and places where the staging goes against the grain of both. My Nixon is not quite the same character as John Adams’s Nixon, and they both differ slightly from Peter Sellars’s Nixon, not to mention James Maddalena’s. My view of the Cultural Revolution is not the same as theirs, and theirs are not the same, I suspect we disagree about peace and progress. We have done our best to make our disagreements counterpoints; not to drown each other out, but like the characters in the opera, each to be as eloquent as possible.\textsuperscript{124}

Ultimately, the opera was a refraction of Adams, Sellars, and Goodman’s limited perspectives of the historical situation. In this sense, the opera enacts its own problem. It criticizes the simple-mindedness of the media construction of the Mao-Nixon summit, but Adams, Sellars, and Goodman themselves had only partial knowledge of the historical context of the summit, and next to no knowledge of China (with the exception of Sellars who spent several months there). The result sounds as though it were filtered through an addled consciousness: Nixon’s perhaps or that of an anonymous media personality.

Musically, *Nixon* ends far from where it begins. Act III displays fewer repetitive structures, emphasizing contrapuntal writing in a distinct chamber idiom. The orchestra, too, has an increased dramatic role. In the work’s final moments, after Chou En-lai reflects on the

\textsuperscript{123} This tension has continued throughout their working relationship on *Klinghoffer*—and the early stages of *Atomic*. By the premiere of *Klinghoffer*, Adams and Goodman were only communicating through public interviews. Adams, personal communication, 17 June 2013.

\textsuperscript{124} Goodman, program note for *Nixon in China*. 

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Figure 1.24. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, sketch for Act III, Chou En-lai, “I am old and cannot sleep forever,” mm. 921-938 (January 1987).
revolution, the orchestra sustains G minor, fading to silence as the outline of an E-flat augmented triad drifts off in the upper register of the violins (Fig. 1.24). By the time Adams finished sketching the opera in January 1987, his renderings resembled almost precisely the final version, suggestive that, by sheer willpower, he had maintained his creative stamina throughout the composing process. He had found a balance between his intuitive responses in the first draft and the structuring of those responses in musical practice, whether it meant the systematic addition of non-chord tones to a base trichord or a more symbolic structuring involving the gradual shift from simple minimalistic textures to more complex, elaborate ones. It was a compromise that freed him from his creative crisis to pursue a new, more stylistically diverse direction. In this respect, *Nixon* was both an initiation into the writing of an opera and a soundtrack of emancipation.

The final push to complete *Nixon* was a grueling process. During the month of February 1987, Adam busied himself with the piano-vocal score, which he submitted to David Ocker for copying on March 4, 1987. Two days later, on March 6, 1987, with just seven months until the premiere, Adams embarked on the arduous task of orchestration. From March through June, he put hash marks on a calendar (Fig. 1.25) representing measures of orchestration completed. On June 23, 1987, he completed the Act I orchestration. Several days later, Adams began the orchestration for *The Red Detachment* (Act II, scene two), skipping over Act II, scene one, so Mark Morris could start rehearsing his dancers. He completed the Act II, scene two orchestration on August 4, 1987 and on August 6 started in on Act II, scene one. On September 1, 1987, Adams wrote, in a state of panic, “1145 bars remaining.” He finished Act II, scene one on September 5, with 938 bars of Act III to go. For the next month, he worked day and night.
Figure 1.25. John Adams, *Nixon in China*, calendar showing measures of orchestration completed (June 1987).
Exhausted, Adams completed the Act III orchestration on October 3, 1987 at 1:15pm with only two weeks to spare before the Houston world premiere.

The opera was met with mixed reception. John von Rhein of the *Chicago Tribune* called it “an operatic triumph of thought-provoking beauty.” Martin Bernheimer of the *Los Angeles Times* commended “the subtle civility of Alice Goodman’s couplet-dominated libretto.” From a more critical perspective, Donal Henahan of *The New York Times* called it “fluff,” “a Peter Sellars variety show.” Marvin Kitman quipped in April 1988, “There are only three things wrong with *Nixon in China*. One, the libretto; two, the music; three the direction. Outside of that, it’s perfect.” Adams and Sellars ruefully admitted they needed to stage the opera many times before they “got it right.”

After the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 Sellars restaged Act III, setting it at Chou’s funeral with his ghostly presence hovering above the action. Adams revised the work in 1998 for the 2000 English National Opera production in London, fixing transposition errors he found in the original score. Nearly a decade later, in 2009, when Adams conducted the premiere of *Nixon* at the Metropolitan Opera, he saw first-hand even more wrong notes, incorrect tempo markings, and passages that were simply unplayable for performers, mistakes overlooked in the past, but ones that he nonetheless felt obliged to go back and fix. Most of the corrections were mundane discrepancies between the conducting score and the performing parts. Moreover, since

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127 Donal Henahan, quoted in Gurewitsch, “Still Resonating From the Great Wall.”
128 Marvin Kitman, quoted in Gurewitsch, “Still Resonating From the Great Wall.”
129 Sellars noted in an interview with Matthew Daines, “Like any great piece, it just keeps growing as you realize its depth and dive deeper into its layers.” Daines, “Telling the Truth About *Nixon,*” 100.
technology had changed over the years, Adams made the effort to update the sound of a 1980s Yamaha synthesizer for an up-to-date synthesizer. In 2010, after a year of work making hundreds of edits to *Nixon*, Adams and his publisher Boosey & Hawkes produced a newly engraved score and parts, a process that demanded significant effort on Adams’s part. The revisions made to the *Nixon* score over the years do not substantially change the piece or its meaning; rather they are logistical and corrective. Most of all, they are demonstrative of the value Adams places on “getting his works right,” a task that is, in his words, “expensive and time consuming, but worth it because when I’m gone I want to leave behind the very best version I created.”

Adams’s sense of dissatisfaction with his works continues to this day. His sketches and journals from the early 1980s represent the worst of his discontent, not so much with his teachers or contemporaries but rather with himself. Only through crisis did Adams discover his voice, his creative art, as if there was somehow poetic justice in struggle. Perhaps Fred Lieberman felt it was too soon to touch the material; perhaps it still is. Adams revealed that Lieberman’s interviews in the early 2000s motivated him to write his memoir, *Hallelujah Junction*, published in 2008. The composer decided he needed to tell his story on his own terms. Yet as time has passed, Adams has grown to acknowledge the importance of letting his diaries and sketches tell a different story. The Lieberman materials, once lost and now found, ask us to hear Adams’s first opera and the processes leading up to it in a new way, just as the historical event to which *Nixon* refers continues to be reframed and rethought through time.

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130 Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013.
131 Ibid., 15 January 2014.
In the fall of 1989, amidst the urban garden scenery of his North Berkeley, CA home, John Adams began his second opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), a poetic reinterpretation of the 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* cruise liner by the Palestine Liberation Front and murder of Jewish-American passenger Leon Klinghoffer. Within a year, he completed the piano-vocal score, drafting the opera at a distance from the events it concerns. Its composition came after a period of disabling self-criticism that limited Adams’s musical output in the 1980s. By 1989, he had come to grips, first in *Nixon in China* (1987) and then in *Klinghoffer*, with the promises and limitations of serialism and minimalism, practices with which he had harbored a love-hate relationship. With *Klinghoffer*, he composed to Alice Goodman’s text with “a kind of pure, gut intuition,”¹ exploring an increasingly chromatic style paired with keening lyricism. That Adams had conquered his creative paralysis and continued to push his musical language into new territory is all the more striking given the high stakes of the project: an opera about the seemingly never-ending Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This chapter attends closely to the opera’s genesis and compositional development, as well as to the controversies that precipitated its fractious history of revision. Between 1991 and 2011, *Klinghoffer* saw three compositional overhauls—the most obvious example in Adams’s operatic output of the role of politics, critical voices, and current events in the remaking of a score through time. To this day, he adjusts the score in response to pressures, both external and

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¹ Portions of this chapter were presented at the Fourth International Conference on Music and Minimalism in Long Beach, CA (2013), the Society for American Music in Little Rock, AR (2013), and the Princeton-Columbia-Penn-Cornell Graduate Student Consortium at Princeton University (2012).

internal, engaging in a process that negates the concept of a final draft, a *Werktreue*. At present, a definitive edition remains elusive, a notion that challenges critical readings of the work. Moreover, what makes *Klinghoffer* contentious is itself in a constant state of revision, debated anew in political, historical, and religious fields with each passing year and decade. Yet it is precisely this mutability, of both the score and of the politics the opera represents, that keeps *Klinghoffer* increasingly provocative.

Following the first American performances in 1991, critics felt that *Klinghoffer* was composed too soon after the 1985 hijacking, that it inappropriately converted real-life pain into not only beautiful song, but also profit, and that it was too evenhanded despite that it was also denounced for emphasizing both anti-Semitic and anti-Palestine stereotypes. In response, Adams cut a scene criticized for setting unequal ground on which Jewish Americans would be indentified in the course of the opera. But even with the deletion, the controversy silenced the work from American opera houses for the next twenty years. *Klinghoffer* lived on elsewhere and in other formats: it was made into a film, staged abroad, and shown in semi-staged concert versions at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (2003), the Curtis Institute (2005), and the Juilliard Opera Center (2009), and not without controversy.² Yet it was not until the summer of 2011 that

² The 2009 Juilliard performance aroused debate. The school's president, Joseph W. Polisi, responded to a letter to *The Juilliard Journal* that protested the opera as "a political statement made by the composer to justify an act of terrorism by four Palestinians." Polisi wrote: "Unlike you, I do not see this work as a ‘justification’ of an act of terrorism, but rather a profoundly perceptive and human commentary on a political/religious problem that continues to find no resolution. Such an extraordinary work of art like this must continue to live, no matter how horrific its basic story. I respect your right to protest the opera's topic, but Juilliard and its kindred artistic institutions have to be responsible for maintaining an environment in which challenging, as well as comforting, works of art are presented to the public. You end your letter with the word ‘shame.’ I believe the ‘shame’ for Juilliard would more likely have occurred if we had not the vision and the courage to present artistic works which we believe to be transformative compositions, worthy of presentation by our students and of reflection by our audiences. If we had decided against producing Adams's opera in an effort to not offend
a fully staged version of *Klinghoffer* returned to the American stage at the Opera Theater of St. Louis. In preparation, Adams made alterations to the score. Some were pragmatic; others were connected to the politics of the work’s fraught compositional history. Due to unplayable parts in the St. Louis version, he re-revised the score for the 2012 English National Opera production, marking the opera’s third major overhaul.

Despite the extensive revisions, *Klinghoffer* still provokes protest. Adams continues to be accused of anti-Semitism; performances have been boycotted; critics have called for the work’s postponement, even prohibition. The latest episode of the controversy took the form of protests at the Metropolitan Opera in 2014. Hundreds of people, most never having seen the work (including former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani), gathered to argue that the opera “glorified terrorism” in light of growing anti-Semitism in Europe and the rise of Islamist terrorist organizations such as Isis. The continued controversies, something the creators seemingly wanted initially, have been devastating to Adams. The earliest debates stalled his creative energies; it took him more than a decade to warm up to the idea of writing another opera, *Doctor Atomic* (2005). But in another sense, the controversies have given him the opportunity to re-think the work alongside critical voices and unfolding current events. The opera, viewed from this perspective, is a concatenation of different socio-political contexts, less a snapshot of a given historical instant than a chronicle of a larger communal process—a lively, collaborative, and public dialogue.

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audience members, we would have ignored our mission as an institution and community that teaches and enlightens through the wonder and power of the arts.” Joseph Polisi, “Letters to the Editor: ‘On The Death of Klinghoffer,’” *Juilliard Journal*, February 2009.
The *Klinghoffer* project dates from 1986, a period of escalated Palestinian tensions against the Israeli occupation known as the First Intifada. In 1986, Adams, Sellars, and Goodman were finalizing *Nixon in China* (1987). Sellars, meanwhile, was working with film director Jean-Luc Godard on a cinematic adaptation of *King Lear* (1987).³ The film, in which Sellars played a principal role, transposes Shakespeare to the site of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear explosion, which killed thousands of Ukrainians, poisoned the land, and hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the set of the film, Sellars and Godard talked broadly of current events, including the 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* and its media coverage as a form of anesthetized entertainment (CNN, the 24-hour news cycle, was nascent).⁴ Sellars was drawn to the event precisely because it was “so vastly overplayed for melodrama in the press and became swollen out of proportion.”⁵ He considered opera an ideal vehicle for examining this conceptual problem and embarked on the project in collaboration with Adams, Goodman, and commissions from six American and European opera companies.⁶

In the fall of 1987, just after the world premiere of *Nixon*, Adams spent several days at the Berkeley Public Library immersed in microfilm news reports detailing the October 7, 1985 *Achille Lauro* hijacking. In a spiral bound notebook (Fig. 2.1), he took meticulous notes on the reported acts of the four hijackers and subsequent responses by Yasser Arafat, Ronald Reagan,

⁵ Peter Sellars, interview with Linda Winer, “Opera Out of Terrorism: Peter Sellars, John Adams and Alice Goodman, the creators of *Nixon in China*, are at it again with *The Death of Klinghoffer*,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 September 1991.
⁶ The original commissioners included La Monnaie (Brussels, Belgium), San Francisco Opera, Opéra de Lyon (France), Los Angeles Opera, Glyndebourne Festival Opera (East Sussex, England), as well as the Brooklyn Academy of Music.
Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti, and Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi.\textsuperscript{7} The terrorist event involved members of a militant faction of the PLO that had split in 1983. One faction was loyal to Arafat, headed by Muhammed Abbas. The other was against Arafat and backed by Syria. Initially, it was unclear to which faction the Achille Lauro hijackers belonged. Details took days, even weeks, to come to light in the press. It was believed that the attack on the Italian cruise liner was a purported retaliation mission coming “less than a week after Israeli sects bombed PLO headquarters in Tunisia” (Fig. 2.2). Several days later, however, sources suggested the hijacking had been pre-meditated prior to the Tunisian bombing. According to reports, the leader of the terrorist group, who claimed association with the Palestinian Liberation Front headed by Muhammed Abbas, had traveled on the cruise liner before, posing as an agent for a related shipping line and gathering information to plan the attack.

On October 7, 1985, four Palestinian terrorists used stolen passports to board the Achille Lauro in Genoa. They waited to carry out the hijacking until the majority of passengers had disembarked for an excursion in Alexandria. 119 passengers and crew remained onboard. The terrorists forced the Captain to direct the liner to Tartus, Syria. While at sea, they attempted to single out Israelis. None were onboard, so they zeroed-in on a group of Americans. After failing to negotiate the release of 50 Palestinian prisoners, one of the hijackers shot and killed Leon Klinghoffer while his wife Marilyn and the other passengers, including a group of British

Figure 2.1. John Adams, research notebook for *The Death of Klinghoffer* (fall 1987).
John Adams, research notes for *The Death of Klinghoffer* (fall 1987).
Figure 2.3. John Adams, additional research notes for *The Death of Klinghoffer* (fall 1987).

dancers, were on the deck above. The hostage situation lasted two more days. On October 9, 1985, Arafat sent Muhammed Abbas, a member of the PLO Executive Council (and later tried for his involvement in the hijacking), onboard to persuade the terrorists to give up on the condition that they would be taken to an undisclosed country. The hijackers agreed, were taken off the ship in Port Said and put on a plane headed to Tunis. On October 10, 1985, Reagan demanded that the terrorists be restrained and prosecuted. United States jets intercepted the plane and forced it to land in Italy. Adams saw “an irresistible dramatic impulse” in the tensions between Palestinian radicals—“soldiers fighting for their ideals” (Fig. 2.3)—and the presence of an American, a Jewish American, in their company.  

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Klinghoffer’s body washed ashore in Damascus, Syria on October 15, 1985, scourged by salt water. After identification, the body was flown to Washington D.C. in a coffin draped in an American flag. Marilyn Klinghoffer and her two daughters, Lisa and Ilsa, met the plane in their state of grief and buried Leon in their hometown, Kenilworth, New Jersey. Just four months later, Marilyn died after a lengthy struggle with cancer. The terrorists meanwhile had been taken into custody by the Italians and stood trial. Klinghoffer’s killer, Molqi, who denied the murder charges, was given a 30-year sentence. Two of the other hijackers were given prison terms of 24 and 15 years each. The fourth terrorist was tried separately as a minor, eventually granted parole in 1991. Klinghoffer’s daughters expressed outrage at the sentences and called on Reagan to extradite the Palestinians. However, the presiding Italian judge stood by his verdicts, maintaining that the hijackers were tried and convicted on the premise of “extenuating circumstances,” notably “that they have grown up in the tragic conditions that the Palestinian people live through” (Fig. 2.3). The humanitarian implications of this final judicial assertion struck Adams as vital to the story, motivating him to want to examine the complex set of factors that compelled the terrorists to commit this act of horror.

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10 Ibid., 133.
11 “Italy Sentences 11 in Hijacking of Achille Lauro,” *The New York Times*, 13 July 1986. To this day, the Klinghoffer daughters remain incensed by the court ruling, which allowed for the release of two of terrorists in 2000 and 2004. Molqi, their father’s murderer, was released early in 2009, on the basis of good behavior. “Achille Lauro Murderer Released in Italy,” *Israel Nation News*, 30 April 2009.
12 Through his research, Adams came to understand that there was in fact great uncertainty about the motives of the hijacking and about why Leon Klinghoffer, a Jewish-American in a
During the year following Adams’s initial foray into research for the opera, he, Goodman, and Sellars immersed themselves in a diverse range of texts. Adams recalled, “I read the Old Testament for the first time since I was in Sunday school, and read many books on the history of the Middle East, the foundations of Zionism, the Balfour Declaration, Theodore Herzl, etc. And I read a great deal of Edward Said’s writing.”

Goodman and Sellars, too, engaged these texts, in addition to portions of the Koran and its interpretations. They also consulted an English translation, made especially for their purposes, of the memoirs of Gerardo de Rosa, the real-life Italian captain of the Achille Lauro. As with Nixon, Goodman would take words from the chosen materials and weave them into a poetic interpretation. Adams recalled that after the initial reading period, “we all felt independently of one another that the situation like any complicated political situation in the world is much too complex to fall into one easy answer or another.”

Despite the convoluted nature of the story and its conflicting interpretations, a single theme recurred in the collaborators’ discussions and correspondence: the notion that Leon Klinghoffer was a kind of crucifixion figure. Adams noted in one interview that Leon “was wheelchair, was chosen as the target. “Whether [the terrorists] thought there was some moral advantage to choosing him rather than someone else is anyone’s guess,” Adams said. “But in looking at this story, one finds that neither side is beyond reproach. Nor can either side be completely condemned. And that upset a lot of people because many people, particularly American-Jews, much more so than European-Jews, felt that this was just an obscene and reprehensible act and there was no way that these terrorists should be given anything but complete, unconditional condemnation. And, of course, we didn’t do that. [But] we certainly don’t let the terrorists off the hook morally—they murdered a defenseless old man, after all—but we do try to examine what their backgrounds were, what the forces were that brought them to this moment.”

Adams, interview with Beverly, “John Adams on Klinghoffer and the Art of Composing.”

Ibid.
Ibid.
Goodman, too, maintained that she had in mind all along an “apocalyptic religious tableau,” featuring “rows and rows of saints and holy people in a double circle, and then in the center, the figure of Christ.” Sellars cited as inspiration the Persian Ta’ziyeh, Javanese Wayang Wong, Greek tragedy, and Bach’s Passions, each “made up of multiple layers” and all religious. The opera would thus become a kind of palimpsest, a real-life story impressed onto the pages of allegory.

Continually on Adams’s mind were the musical implications of the research materials consulted. Among the jottings in his research notebook are rough rhythmic outlines, notes on orchestration, and timings for each act and scene (Figs. 2.4a-b). Adams experimented with layered, offset rhythmic patterns of quarter note and dotted eighth configurations that metrically shift between 2/4 and 5/8. He then re-wrote the same pattern in 3/4 and 3/8 (Fig. 2.4a), the version that ended up becoming the rhythmic prototype for the opening of the Chorus of Exiled Jews. More suggestive in the research notebook are nebulous traces of the imagined orchestration. It appears that Adams had a rough sonic image in mind. Figure 2.4b shows his rendering of the orchestration for the opening measures (marked as “page 1”), an unruly wall of sound featuring an array of synthesizers acting as a kind of continuo with mallet percussion,

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15 Ibid.
16 Alice Goodman, quoted in Malitz, “Front Page to Opera Stage.”
18 These types of rhythmic constructs are characteristic of Adams’s style leading up to this point. The sense of rhythmic contrast created by shifting patterns over long stretches of music creates a tension that Timothy Johnson, in John Adams’s Nixon in China: Musical Analysis, Historical and Political Perspectives (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), argues is ideally suited for representing the political crises at the heart of Adams’s dramatic works. On the one hand, the fact that Adams jotted these rhythms alongside his notes on the devastating reports surrounding the Achille Lauro incident supports Johnson’s view. On the other, Adams’s more lighthearted works such as Grand Pianola Music (1982), too, make use of metrical dissonance, creating an interpretive dilemma surrounding the composer’s techniques of musical representation. See the author’s critique of Johnson’s methodology in Twentieth-Century Music 10:2 (2013): 291-97.
flutes, and a corps of strings beneath a double chorus. Adams’s jottings echo the scoring of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, composed for flute, oboe, strings, continuo, and double choir. The model of Bach, Adams later noted, gave him a way to make the *Klinghoffer* score “more articulated structurally than *Nixon*.” It also gave him a blueprint for shaping the catastrophe of the drama, Klinghoffer’s murder as crucifixion.

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*Figure 2.4a.* John Adams, rhythmic sketches for *The Death of Klinghoffer* (fall 1987).

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20 Curiously, Adams relies on an earlier musical corpus whose religious texts have been read as anti-Semitic and sanitized accordingly. See Michael Marissen, *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism and Bach’s St. John Passion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
Figure 2.4b. John Adams, notes on instrumentation for *The Death of Klinghoffer* (Fall 1987).
In the late summer of 1988, after more than a year of reading on the topic, Adams, Sellars, and Goodman met in Amsterdam to discuss the *Klinghoffer* scenario. They had tentatively settled on the idea of the work, in Sellars’s words, as “a multi-layered drama of individuals, not personalities, unfolding in a spiritual landscape; an evocation, an illustration, a meditation.”\(^\text{21}\) Over the course of three legal pad pages, Goodman drafted the proposed first act’s sequence of events (Figures 2.5a-c), elaborating details drawn from news sources and Captain De Rosa’s memoirs. The action alternates between, on the one hand, the real-life reported declamations of specific individuals whose arias and recitatives would range from impassioned rage to introspective calm and, on the other hand, reflective choruses whose themes Goodman would draw from the depths of religious history. Goodman’s sketch begins with a chorus, followed by a scene in which the terrorists board the ship alongside “Massa in swim trunks.” (Giovanni Massa was the real-life name of the first officer of the *Achille Lauro*; Goodman later changed his name to Giordano Bruno.\(^\text{22}\) A brusque interaction ensues between Massa and the terrorists, followed by Massa’s conviction that the events to come will lead to many deaths.


\(^{22}\) Adams, interview with Beverly, “Klinghoffer and the Art of Composing.” In response to Beverly’s interview question, “Why was the First Mate’s name changed to Giordano Bruno?” Adams recalled, “I wasn’t very happy with that solution actually. His name was Giovanni, I can’t remember, Giovanni something [Giovanni Massa]. We had been advised to take out an insurance policy to prevent ourselves against possible libel suits. There was a very remote possibility that someone might sue. We had to be careful about using the names of living persons. Apparently no one could locate this person, the First Mate to get his permission. So in the end we couldn’t use his real name. And [for] Alice, ‘Giordano Bruno’ scanned perfectly. I wasn’t really crazy about it because I thought it might tempt some listeners to read more into the name than is really there.” Giordano Bruno was the name of a sixteenth century philosopher, astrologer, mathematician, and poet.
Figure 2.5a. Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, original scenario (1989).
Figure 2.5b. Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, original scenario cont’d (1989).
Figure 2.5c. Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, original scenario cont’d (1989).
The Captain sings his first speech, followed by an exodus of passengers from the dining room to the tapestry room amidst broken glass and bags. The terrorists ask to see passports with the aim to separate Americas, Israelis, and Britons. A Sea Chorus unfolds, a nod to the “Sea Interludes” of Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes* (1945). The Captain launches into his second speech as coffee, sandwiches, and blankets are brought to the bridge above. Rambo, the most aggressive of the four terrorists, states to the Americans, “We have studied you.” A scene featuring a woman with her grandson ends the first part of the action, and a solemn second chorus initiates the next series of events. Mamoud, now on the bridge with the Captain as Arab music plays on the radio, argues with Massa and relays a story about his youth in which his brother is beheaded. The Captain and Mamoud are “vaguely moved” by the birds that fly above them. A third chorus begins, and the hijacking is underway. Tartus refuses the ship to dock; the terrorists threaten Syria to “give the international powers ½ hour, then start killing people.” The passengers are in the hot sun, terrorized by Molqi who states, “We will kill you all.” The Desert Chorus sets the stage for the opera’s first appearance of Leon Klinghoffer, whose wheelchair won’t go up the stairs. Leon utters several words and is then shot in the head by Molqi, who, covered in blood, says “American kaput.” The Captain relays this over the radio and then begs the terrorists to kill him next. Mrs. Klinghoffer, unaware that her husband has been killed, sings a relief aria, followed by the “Aria of the Falling Body.” The ship then heads to Port Said where negotiations with Abu Kaleb take place. A chorus unfolds relaying the story of Ishmael and Abraham, symbolic of the shared heritage of Muslim and Jewish religions. The first act ends with “a strange process of disembarkation” during which Massa embraces Mamoud. The Captain then tells Mrs. Klinghoffer of her husband’s murder, and she sings, “You embraced them! Even I wanted to die.”
The creators intended for the second act to encompass the aftermath of the event, including the capture of the terrorists, the United States interception of the plane headed to Tunis, the trials that resulted in the sentencing of the Palestinians, and the rage the Klinghoffer daughters expressed over the verdicts. Among the first sections of music Adams composed for the opera during the fall of 1989 was the “Ballet of the Interception of the Planes,” a virtuosic Toccata in the key of A minor with imitative interludes. The toccata’s materiality was meant to throw listeners for a loop, the way an unexpected twist of fate might do to spectators watching the interception from an airstrip. Sketches for the music show how it moves through a series of elevating chromatic effects. Adams’s choice of A minor was perhaps a nod to Bach’s Violin Concerto in the same key, specifically the third movement, which begins with a descending A minor scale, just as Adams began his Toccata. But eventually, the creative team determined that the scenario needed to be scaled back; they cut the entirety of the second act, splitting the material from the Act I scenario into two separate acts. The Toccata was thus omitted. Except for Adams’s sketches for the Interception Ballet, no other documents surrounding the proposed Act II exist.

There were surprisingly few dramatic re-workings of the Act I scenario. Although the sequence of events does not align perfectly with the final version, it follows the basic contours of the opera’s final structure. Curiously, the deleted Rumors scene, a domestic exchange between friends of the Klinghoffers in their New Jersey living room, is absent from the initial scenario, suggestive that it was a later addition. The music for the scene, however, was among the first to be composed, indicative that Goodman and Sellars incorporated it soon after fleshing out the initial synopsis. Moreover, the team decided early in the process that a shift between past and present tenses in the libretto would help establish dramatic tension between in-the-moment
action and distant ceremonial reflection. The events relayed by the ship’s captain, first officer, passengers, and the British dancing girl would be set in the past tense, bearing witness to the details of the hijacking from the perspective of its aftermath. Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer and the terrorists would sing in the present tense, imparting in-the-moment experiences of pleasure and terror, passion and rage. Typical of Adams, Sellars, and Goodman’s collaborations, new words are seldom found in the narration; everything is couched in borrowed language. For all the emphasis on the immediacy of the news headlines, the opera grounds itself in antiquity, most specifically in the seven “quasi-Aeschylean” choruses that speak from outside of the diegesis. Adams later commented that the interplay between event and reflection allowed for “a constantly shifting scale of closeness and distance…At one moment you feel as though you’re right there on the deck under the blistering sun with the rest of the passengers, and a moment later you feel like you’re reading about it in some very ancient text.” At the same time, the creators envisioned an artistic experience that would make news by being about the news, with enactment and representation joined as in a Mobius strip.

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The compositional genesis of *Klinghoffer* can be approached from the manuscript sketch materials on one hand and epistolary evidence on the other. Only on rare occasions did Adams date his documents or hint at the circumstance of his creative traces; thus both types of evidence are necessary for tracing the chronology of the opera’s composition. One can assume that numerous letters between Adams and Goodman were exchanged during the writing of the opera,

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since Goodman faxed Adams the libretto page-by-page as she wrote it. However, only a single written exchange from October 1990 survives in the archival collection. According to Adams, he destroyed the majority of Goodman’s letters, the result of vicious arguments over words versus music. The lone letter, though, is among the most evocative documents in the archive; its contents will be described later.

Adams began composing *Klinghoffer* in the late summer of 1989, three months behind schedule due to the fact that Goodman rarely kept her promised delivery dates. When he finally received the first libretto installment, the opening choruses, he worked quickly and efficiently. The composition of the opera moved through four stages: from rough sketches made at the piano to a developed piano-vocal score, followed by a MIDI mock-up, and finally the hand-written orchestration, the autograph. The order in which Adams wrote the scenes is, for the most part, sequential. Aside from several isolated sheets, he sketched virtually all the vocal lines and rudimentary harmonies in six, spiral bound Judy Green Music manuscript books, each containing 76, 12-stave manuscript pages. Remarkably, the sketchbooks cover the opera in its entirety, as well as musical material eventually discarded. The sketches are written in pencil on two or three instrumental staves and on one or more vocal stave, almost always without key signatures. Often, Adams penciled-in the text in full; other times he sketched just a few words here or there alongside the music. Most significantly, the sketchbooks show how Adams at once sought to incarnate his immediate musical impressions of the *Achille Lauro* event and to reconcile breaking news with the archaism of his allusions to Bach and Greek-style choruses.

The first sketchbook in the series of six includes Adams’s initial draft of the three-part Prologue: the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians, the Rumors scene, and the Chorus of Exiled Jews.

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The sketches illustrate how Adams composed the vocal lines first, using them to generate contrapuntal and accompanimental detail (Figs. 2.6a-c). On the first folio of Sketchbook No. 1 (Fig. 2.6a), Adams sketched a preliminary setting of the opening couplet for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians, “My father’s house was razed in 1948 / When the Israelis passed over the street,” an intentionally provocative incipit. Rather than the tolling F minor triads of the final setting, Adams marked the opening with a descending orchestral arpeggiation, an F minor seventh chord. It appears as if he paid little attention to the scansion of the text; on the next stave, he set each syllable to straight eighth notes in the outline of a D minor seventh chord. The lack of rhythmic variation suggests that he was driven initially by harmonic content (i.e. arpeggiation of juxtaposed keys, presumably over long stretches of music). In a sense, the initial draft for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians mimicked his approach to the opening music for Nixon, an orchestral overture composed from an instrumental standpoint rather than a vocal one.
Figure 2.6a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, initial sketch for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians (Sketchbook No. 1).
Figure 2.6b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, subsequent sketch for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians, mm. 1-17 (Sketchbook No. 1).
Figure 2.6c. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians, mm. 1-25 (Sketchbook No. 1).
Adams soon shifted his strategy. Given its stakes, *Klinghoffer* seemed to necessitate a treatment that emphasized the urgency of the text. “We’re talking about an event that came to us over the contemporary media in all its banal and deadly unpoetic manner,” Adams later noted. “The language of the media has that ugly, loud, aggressive tone that is so devoid of feeling and emotion. So to express these stories in this archaic form of the couplet gave it a wonderfully mythic quality.” Rather than work against the rhythms of the text, as Adams often did in *Nixon*, he tried in his next draft (Fig. 2.6b) to let the words drive the musical content. On the topmost stave of the folio, Adams sketched a rhythmic variation of the opening phrase, playing with the scansion of the text “house was razed” (the text is absent but implied). He set the words to a long-short-long pattern, a dotted-eighth- to sixteenth- to quarter-note figure. Beneath that, he sketched a tone collection centered on F Lydian, exploring its transpositions in the following two measures. The second full system shown in Fig. 2.6b features the tolling F minor triads found in the final setting. Next, Adams experimented with an altered rhythmic arrangement of “My father’s house was razed,” beneath which he notated a more approximate transcription of the phrase’s iambic rhythms. The visible erasures suggest that he worked through several attempts setting the phrase. Though Adams would invert the melodic contour in the next draft, he retained the basic rhythmic blueprint developed here. Moreover, there is a predictive element in his setting of “when the Israelis passed over the street” (shown in the third full system), a whole-tone crawl from F to B-natural, the outline of a tritone. The momentary dissonance of B-natural sounding against the F minor triads with an added flat-sixth prefigures Adams’s pointed use of

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26 Adams, interview with Beverly, “John Adams on Klinghoffer and the Art of Composing.”
27 Ibid. In this interview Adams discusses his familiarity with notions of *affekt*, as discussed in Albert Schweitzer’s work on Bach. F minor/Lydian is a key area Schweitzer connects to death and lament. For Adams, the key area doubtless seemed an appropriate tonality for a chorus on the subject of displacement and loss.
the tritone later in the chorus as the text shifts focus from the beauty of summer nightfall to a jarring portrait of rage over homeland lost.

The preliminary renderings shown in Figs. 2.6a-b are miniature displays of how Adams developed his initial strategy of letting the text guide the music. Fig. 2.6c (mm. 1-25), the third page of Sketchbook No. 1, is the culmination of that strategy. It represents the third draft, a version remarkably close to the final setting. As opposed to the sketched fragments of Figs. 2.6a-b, the draft is continuous, meaning that Adams sketched the entire Chorus of Exiled Palestinians from start to finish. The confidence of his hand is notable; only minor scribbles and erasures can be found throughout its 247 measures. He composed the chorus one word or phrase at a time, seldom looking too far forward and hardly looking back. It was a process reflective of a certain type of presence—meditative, somber, always intimate—with the material. For Adams, this was the intuitive process at work.

Next, Adams composed the Rumors scene in Sketchbook No. 1. The scene was intended as a kind of comical “satyr play” to alleviate, if momentarily, the weight and intensity of the opening Chorus of Exiled Palestinians. The Rumors, the fictional friends of the Klinghoffers, are ordinary middle-class Americans. Goodman’s text is intentionally mundane, engaged in a level of everyday conversation that reflects life in suburban America. In the libretto, Alma and Harry Rumor chit-chat about the Klinghoffer’s imminent cruise, things they purchased on a similar cruise the previous year, and the social life of their thirty-year-old unmarried son, Jonathan. The scene, according to Adams, was meant as a commentary not on American Judaism but rather on American consumerism. It was supposed to set the context, in his words, “for the mindset of
some American tourists.” Critics would later come to view the scene as an offensive display of anti-Semitic stereotypes.

The preliminary draft for the Rumors scene is continuous, from beginning to end, with remarkably few erasures or alterations, suggestive that Adams composed the scene fluidly with little second-guessing (Figs. 2.7a-c). The initial sketch (Fig. 2.7a) unfolds in rapid eighth notes, moving through a number of tonalities related by a third, and finally settling in glittering C major (a key area historically associated with naïveté and simplicity, the very characteristics Adams and Goodman were later accused of ascribing to the Rumors). The scene brings Leon and Marilyn indirectly into the first act; otherwise, they do not enter the drama until Act II. Here, we learn that Leon had a stroke and that Marilyn, too, has cancer and is counting her days. More significantly, we learn of their appreciation of companionship and of their limited time together. Alma’s virtuosic vocal lines (Fig. 2.7b, mm. 97-102), accompanied by diminished seventh harmonies, relay a sense of intuition and intelligence about the Klinghoffers whose presence in the opera is otherwise short-lived and often misunderstood —

ALMA
The Klinghoffers
Will never manage all the stairs,
Those little ladders! Marilyn
Is so brave. She’s a saint…

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28 Ibid. Adams continued, “An important element in the opera is the bitterness and anger that these Palestinians felt against not only Jews but against Americans. They see our wealth, our affluence, and what appears to them as a kind of lazy presumptiveness. So in a certain sense, the scene set up an important background against which this terrible tragedy took place.”
Figure 2.7a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for the Rumors scene, mm. 1-16 (Sketchbook No. 1).
Figure 2.7b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for the Rumors scene, mm. 93-107 (Sketchbook No. 1).
Figure 2.7c. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for the Rumors scene, mm. 440-54 (Sketchbook No. 1).
The text acknowledges Marilyn’s frailty and approaching mortality. Although Leon was physically disabled from a stroke, he was otherwise healthy. It was Marilyn who was convinced she would be the first of them to die. Alma’s description of Marilyn’s courage and fortitude intuits what is to come, for it is Marilyn’s final aria of rage and sorrow that ends the opera as she stands alone, grief-stricken after learning of her husband’s murder. It is no coincidence that Alma’s enraged manner of tone in her final lines after she glimpses a newspaper headline about Arafat—

ALMA
…I’m sick to death
Of reading about misery.
It’s never-ending. God knows why
I still get angry, but I do.
You wash your hands and go on through.
—mimics Marilyn’s song of fury at the opera’s end. The striking musical resemblance between Alma’s final lines (Fig. 2.7c) and those of Marilyn at the end of the opera (Fig. 2.8), both set to the quiet drone of strings that fade to nothingness, binds their individual expressions of pain. Alma’s presence in the opera is thus one of premonition, a nod to the memory of the Klinghoffers. Her voice carries their emotional burden in a way that balances the dramatic weight of the work. When the scene was removed, that weight fell solely onto the shoulders of Marilyn.

The Rumors scene would lead directly into the Chorus of Exiled Jews. Adams dedicated seven manuscript pages to rough sketching, in addition to a continuous draft, for the chorus, also drafted in Sketchbook No. 1 (Figs. 2.9a-c). He called upon church modes and chorale-style textures as a way to invoke a solemn, meditative, even spiritual mood. Goodman wrote the chorus as a dialogue between the Promised Land and the Daughter of Zion. Adams, in turn, set it as a love song between a chorus of tenors and female voices. The initial sketch, shown in Fig. 2.9a, contains a series of fragments featuring vivid three-part harmonies, G minor over C pedal tones, carrying the song, “I am an old woman, I thought you were dead.” Gentle waves of dissonance and resolution are marked by the steady oscillation between second-inversion G minor triads and tone clusters built on major seconds that revert back to the original triad. Beneath these jottings, Adams sketched a second version of the same setting, this time adding a fourth part, sung by the tenors. He later omitted the part, placing the expressive energies of the tenors into a singular call sung in unison over A-flat major and C major harmonies on the words “Oh daughter of Zion, when you lay upon my breast I was like a soldier.” This call and response exchange between male and female voices became for Adams the driving musical impulse of the chorus.
Figure 2.9a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, initial sketch for the Chorus of Exiled Jews (Sketchbook No. 1).
Figure 2.9b. John Adams, The Death of Klinghoffer, subsequent sketch for the Chorus of Exiled Jews (Sketchbook No. 1).
Figure 2.9c. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for the Chorus of Exiled Jews, mm. 1-19 (Sketchbook No. 1).
Whereas Adams composed the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians from a textual standpoint, setting the rhythms of the words one musical note at a time, and the Rumor scene from one of harmonic prolongation, he composed the Chorus of Exiled Jews through a process of careful attention to the symbolic effects of the words and their corresponding harmonies. Fig. 2.9b shows his subsequent sketch for the Chorus of Exiled Jews. At the top of the folio, Adams made a note of the melodic contour that would come to shape the opening lines, “When I paid off the taxi I had no money left.” Most significant here are the four-part harmonies that accompany the next phrase, “and of course no luggage. My empty hands shall signify this passion, which itself remembers.” This reference to the post-Holocaust existence of the Jewish people is among the more poignant allusions to loss in the opera. Adams experimented with tone painting in his setting of the word “empty” on open fifths G and D, a representational motif of loss, particularly after the sounding tone cluster on F, G, and C that precedes it. Over the course of a number of drafts, he carefully worked out this sense of closing-in and opening, of rocking back-and-forth between closed tone cluster and open fifth, an effect that contributes to the chorus’s solemn tone. Adams then fleshed out these initial sketches in a continuous draft, the first page shown in Fig. 2.9c, retaining in the final version the orbiting tone clusters around G minor.

Sketchbook No. 2 contains a series of drafts that Adams likely sketched around the same time as those in Sketchbook No. 1. Its contents include a complete draft of the discarded “Ballet of the Interception of the Planes.” The sketchbook also contains a preliminary fragment for the “Aria of the Falling Body,” a scene nearing the end of Act II in which the terrorists drop Klinghoffer’s body into the sea (Fig. 2.10). The location of the fragment in Sketchbook No. 2 implies that the aria was on Adams’s mind in the opera’s early compositional stages. His jottings, “Gymnoped for…,” refer to Erik Satie’s *Trois Gymnopédies* (1888). Adams, too,
perhaps had in mind Hellenic dithyrambs and other forms of expression linked with Greek barefoot dances, some having associations with lament, with searches for meaning. The fragment (Fig. 2.10) shows a rudimentary chord construction in the key of F minor, the same key, curiously, as the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians. Several months later, Adams returned to the aria (in Sketchbook No. 6), changing its tonal center to G minor, the key area associated with the Chorus of Exiled Jews and Marilyn Klinghoffer (G minor is also the key that ends the opera). That he later altered its tonality in accordance with other notable symbolic tonalities in the opera suggests that the notion of metaphorical tonality is something he worked out as he went along.

Adams also used parts of Sketchbook No. 2 for trying out ideas to be inserted into the continuous drafts found in Sketchbook No. 1. The first page of Sketchbook No. 2, for instance, shows sections of instrumental music written for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians (Fig. 2.11). It features a jagged bassline and repeated G minor triads, intended as a brief interlude leading into the text, “Of that house, not a wall in which a bird might nest was left to stand.” He made a note in Sketchbook No. 1 of precisely where to place this music (Fig. 2.12). Adams also used Sketchbook No. 2 as a site to work out specific details of the Chorus of Exiled Jews, including the sustained G pedal tones and rhythmic figures that accompany the opening lines, “When I paid off the taxi” (Fig. 2.13). In other words, he used Sketchbook No. 2 as a kind of overflow workspace to experiment with musical fragments to be inserted into his continuous drafts.
Figure 2.10. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch fragment for the Aria of the Falling Body (*Gymnopédie*) (Sketchbook No. 2).
Figure 2.11. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians, mm. 106-115 (Sketchbook No. 2).
Figure 2.12. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians, mm. 75-115 (Sketchbook No. 1).
By the end of October 1989, Adams completed the Prologue in its entirety. He was anxious to get started on Act I, scene one, but the next libretto installment was nowhere to be seen. Adams recalled,

Alice decided to write all the [Act I] chorus texts first and then go back and start with the dramatic portion. That kept me in a holding pattern once I’d sketched the opening chorus, waiting for her to get to the actual action. I can’t recall how long it was before I finally received the Captain’s opening monologue, but it was an agonizingly long time. I think Alice was more comfortable with the chorus texts because they were sheer poetry, whereas doing the actual narrative was very difficult to get going. But when I finally was able to read Captain da Rosa’s memoir and see how expertly she transformed it into the libretto I realized what a brilliant achievement she’d done. No wonder it took her so long to get it up and running.  

Once Adams received the Captain’s opening text for Act I, scene one, “It was just after one fifteen,” he let the text’s scansion guide his setting, drafted in the final pages of Sketchbook No. 2. In the uppermost system (Fig. 2.14), he marked orchestral cues for strings that shimmer on an ominous F# minor arpeggio and an oboe solo that would accompany the Captain’s recollections of the tragedy. The Captain’s vocal line dominates the remainder of the draft. Adams notated crude renderings of harmonic structure that vary in degrees of fullness, from a single

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29 Adams, personal communication with the author, 19 March 2016.
Figure 2.14. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch for Act I, scene one, “It was just after One Fifteen” (Sketchbook No. 2).
Figure 2.15. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch for Act I, scene one, “As I believe now, one detail awakened my anxiety,” mm. 113-124 (Sketchbook No. 2).
pitch to three or more simultaneous ones. The most extensive harmonic rendering, however, occurs 117 measures into the draft (Fig. 2.15) at a crucial moment in the drama when the Captain recalls first noticing one of the hijackers: “As I believe now, one detail awakened my anxiety. The man gave me a *komboloi* [a string of worry beads]. He was the last one in line to shake my hand.” Adams composed a detailed block of music, set between the word “anxiety” and “komboloi.” The passage features a downward spiraling chromatic progression outlining a tetrachord. This Orphic/Ovidian motif of descent would later return in the opera at the moment of Klinghoffer’s death. Adams, it seems, possessed in advance some kind of structural plan. In fact, the recurring pattern would become the totemic element of score, reflecting Adams’s effort to make his opera a concatenation of ancient and modern texts about mourning.

As with Sketchbooks Nos. 1 and 2, Adams worked through Sketchbooks Nos. 3 and 4 simultaneously, using No. 4 as a space for testing out ideas inserted back into the continuous drafts of No. 3. The order of contents in Sketchbook No. 3 is remarkably consistent with the chronology of the opera’s action. Adams picked up where he left off in Sketchbook No. 2 (in which he drafted the first 294 measures of Act I, scene one), sketching the remainder of the first scene through m. 616, including Molqi’s terrifying lines, “Give these orders.” The scene closes with the Ocean Chorus about primordial man prior to constructs of race and nation. Adams’s initial sketch for the Ocean Chorus (Fig. 2.16) seems to have been driven by his desire to strike a ritualistic tone, hence the return to chorale-style texture. In his next draft (Fig. 2.17), a more developed rendering, two things leap to the eye. First, the initial subsection, “Is not the ocean itself their past?” begins with a distorted tonal focus, cadencing loosely in G minor over open...
Figure 2.16. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, initial sketch for the Ocean Chorus (Sketchbook No. 3).
Figure 2.17. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, subsequent sketch for the Ocean Chorus (Sketchbook No. 3).
fifths on F and C. Second, and more curious, it appears that Adams began the composition of the chorus with an almost single-minded use of a system of metaphorical tonality, linking the tonal areas of G minor and F minor with characters and textual imagery associated, respectively, to Jewish and Palestinian identities. The conflation of the two tonal areas at the outset of the Ocean Chorus is of great symbolic import, representing both Jewish and Palestinian identities as one and the same. Neither G minor nor F minor should, however, be understood as tonics that exert control over large stretches of music. Rather, Adams begins the chorus with their joint resonance, then moves through a series of other simultaneous tonalities that work in the same harmonic manner and perform a parallel metaphorical function.

Sketchbook No. 3 includes a draft for Act I, scene two that begins with Mamoud’s “Now it is Night,” in which the terrorist tunes-in to a local radio station, sings of his love for music, and recalls memories of his mother and brother. Adams made rough sketches for Mamoud’s vocal lines in Sketchbook No. 4; he then fleshed them out in Sketchbook No. 3. Yet for reasons not entirely clear Adams halted work in the middle of Mamoud’s song and skipped over nearly 200 measures, including the Captain’s stirring comments to Mamoud, “I think if you could talk like this sitting among your enemies peace would come.” It is possible Adams skipped ahead due to the fact that these parts of the libretto were still under construction. Yet what he drafted next in Sketchbook No. 3, the scene in which the Austrian woman hides fearfully in her stateroom, “I Kept My Distance,” is significant precisely for its out-of-order-ness (Fig. 2.18). Its placement in the sketchbook suggests that it was somehow set apart from the other scenes, not just chronologically but also in terms of its representational mode, one foreign to the music of the opera thus far.
Figure 2.18. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch for Act I, scene two, “I Kept My Distance,” mm. 249-61 (Sketchbook No. 3).
Adams borrowed extensively from Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) and *Moses und Aron* (1930-32), namely the technique of Sprechstimme and a Pierrot ensemble. He also borrowed passages of the ethereal-turn-manic violin solo from the first movement of Schoenberg’s Chamber Symphony No. 1, Op. 9 (1906); its characteristic melodic leaps trail alongside the Austrian woman’s monologue. Adams, however, made no effort to disguise his borrowings, as if he wanted to manifest onto the surface of his opera the aural unruliness, even comical madness of Schoenberg’s Freudian nightmare music. For Adams, the Austrian woman was meant as a kind of “in-joke” about Schoenberg, “a Viennese Jew whom this woman probably would have loathed,” Adams noted. “Because, you know, although she thinks she’s being subtle, she can’t let out the fact that she does not particularly care to socialize with the Jews [onboard].” In the libretto, “the company of idiots” reflects this sentiment. Read critically, this recourse to faux-Expressionism and its linking of an anti-Semitic character with Schoenberg’s most “Jewish” work, *Moses und Aron*, is no less essentializing than giving the Jewish characters a klezmer accompaniment. But the reference has further connotations. Schoenberg’s Moses, deemed by Daniel Albright as “God’s clown,” is a song-less figure whose musical speech has pitch indications, but he lacks the means to communicate his vision.

30 Notably, Adams’s next work post-*Klinghoffer* was his Chamber Symphony (1992), modeled after Schoenberg’s Op. 9. For Adams, Schoenberg held a long fascination. Adams played in the clarinet section of the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s American premiere of *Moses und Aron* in 1966. A number of Adams’s works, such as *Harmonielehre* (1985) and his Chamber Symphony were explicitly devoted to Schoenberg’s musical models.

31 Adams, interview with Beverly, “John Adams on *Klinghoffer* and the Art of Composing.”

32 The notion of Schoenberg as an icon of musical Jewishness is one that has in fact been challenged by Klara Moricz in her book, *Jewish Identities: Nationalism, Racism, and Utopianism in Twentieth-Century Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008). Moricz argues that there is no one essential way to be a Jewish composer or to write like one, which makes Adams’s reference even more puzzling.

The articulate narrator, Aron, however, communicates with ease, though he conveys messages only secondhand through retrograde and retrograde inversion melodies. In a sense, Moses’s inability to speak—his loneliness, silence, and withdrawal—reflects the insurmountable challenge given to Schoenberg to find an adequate means for representing Moses’s unification with God. In the end, Schoenberg was forced to leave the opera incomplete. It is possible that Adams turned to Schoenberg for guidance in seeking an adequate technique to represent the darker sides of the human condition. In this respect, Adams may have been confronted with a sense of muteness himself, a kind of writer’s block, in the face of finding an appropriate musical means for expressing an event too overwhelming to know.

The remainder of Sketchbook No. 3 contains developed drafts for Mamoud’s “Those Birds Flying Above Us,” the Night Chorus, and a segment of the Hagar Chorus, all drafted in the order in which they appear in the opera. A comparison of two drafts of Mamoud’s soliloquy, “Those Birds Flying Above Us,” shows how Adams moved between Sketchbooks Nos. 3 and 4. The two sketches shown in Figs. 2.19 and 2.20 (mm. 344-354) share a number of features, including accompanimental alternations between G minor, augmented tone clusters, and F# major harmonies, as well as the basic melodic contour of the vocal line. They are both striking for Adams’s meticulous treatment of the rhythms of text. However, Adams excised in the second draft, fleshed out in Sketchbook No. 3, a number of rhythmic details, including several of the eighth and sixteenth note figures that marked Mamoud’s previous utterances in the opera. He replaced them with ascending triplet figures, ones that seem to be linked metaphorically to the

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34 The work, too, speaks to Schoenberg’s own Jewish identity crisis, for it was written just prior to his official return to Judaism in 1933 after many years as a Christian convert, in part a result of increasing anti-Semitism in Austria at the turn of the century.
birds whose lack of desire for revenge, violence, and war liberates them to live in a state of
grace. Goodman’s libretto unfolds as follows:

Those birds flying
Above us, these landing
On the ship’s railing,
Not migrating.
—Doesn’t the earth belong
To them?—revisiting
Their lands, carrying
Traces of mist
From their latest
Approach to the crest
Of the firmament,
Their shadows burnt
On a cloudfront
In circles of brightness,
In witness
Leaving a trace
Of dust on the cloud.

The symbolism of birds, combined with the triplet figures, suggests the spiritual as opposed to
the material. The image of St. Francis of Assisi, often represented preaching to the birds, comes
to mind, as do the poems of Mary Oliver, whose vivid descriptions of birds call attention to our
place “in the family of things.” Adams’s second draft of this setting, with its emphasis on the
gentle, rocking triplet figures, has a softening effect. He seemed to have carefully worked out his
choice of rhythms according to the lyricism of the text, a guiding principle that took precedent
over rhythmic continuity in the first draft.

35 See, for instance, Mary Oliver’s “Wild Geese,” in New and Selected Poems (Boston: Beacon
Press, 1992), 110.
Figure 2.19. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch for Act I, scene two, “Those Birds Flying Above Us,” mm. 344-354 (Sketchbook No. 4).
Figure 2.20. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for Act I, scene two, “Those Birds Flying Above Us,” mm. 344-356 (Sketchbook No. 3).
In addition to Mamoud’s soliloquy about the birds, Sketchbook No. 4 contains a continuous draft of the Captain’s Act I, scene one speech, “It was just after one fifteen,” which Adams had previously sketched in part in Sketchbook No. 2. It seems that he returned to the scene to write out the continuous draft while awaiting the next installments of Goodman’s libretto. However, after copying out 108 measures of the Captain’s speech (out of 254 measures), Adams stopped abruptly and turned to draft the missing 200 bars of music from Act I, scene two (including the remainder of Mamoud’s “Now it is night” and the Captain’s “I think if you could talk like this,” skipped over in Sketchbook No. 3). This sudden shift in compositional procedure—from tidy notation to messy sketching—suggests that he received those parts of the libretto later than their chronology in the opera would imply.

The remainder of Sketchbook No. 4 contains drafts for Act II, scene 1A, which includes Leon Klinghoffer’s first utterance in the opera. Adams sketched a fragment of this passage at the start of Sketchbook No. 5 (Fig. 2.21a), jotting D minor seventh arpeggios in steady septuplets over octaves in the bass. In the third system of that sketch he notated Leon’s first remarks in the opera, “I have never been a violent man.” Adams fleshed out the passage in Sketchbook No. 4, altering the accompaniment slightly so the emphasis would be on the downward movement of open fifths. The aural effect is that of ominous military horn calls; Adams enhanced this effect in the final version with a series of snare drum rhythms, evoking the sound of battle. In the sketches, however, the words and music are rather unmarked. Adams’s setting is tantamount to Leon’s description of himself, “I’m a person who’d just as soon avoid trouble.” He worked with the short-short-short-long rhythms of the syllables, set against a sheet of monochrome sound, the repetition of D minor arpeggiations.
Figure 2.21a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, initial sketch for Act II, scene 1A, “I’ve never been a violent man,” mm. 177-189 (Sketchbook No. 5).
Figure 2.21b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, subsequent sketch for Act II, scene 1A, “I’ve never been a violent man,” mm. 190-202 (Sketchbook No. 4).
Figure 2.21c. John Adams, The Death of Klinghoffer, sketch for Act II, scene 1A, “I’ve never been a violent man,” instrumental sequence, mm. 243-49 (Sketchbook No. 4).
As the music goes on, the harmonies become more complex. A sudden shift from D minor to B minor with added punctuations of tone C natural prefaces Leon’s plea to the terrorists, “I came here with my wife. We both have tried to live good lives. We give gladly, receive gratefully, love, and take pleasure in small things.” Fig. 2.21b shows a page from the draft in which Adams colored Leon’s rather plain music with increasingly dissonant harmonies. As Leon sings the word “suffer,” Adams, with no preparation, swings the music into arpeggiated G-flat seventh and ninth chords over an E-flat bass. This sudden harmonic jolt draws attention to the word “suffer,” setting the stage for what is to come.

In an instrumental passage following Leon’s utterances, Adams superimposed clashing sonorities related by minor second or tritone on top of one another (Fig. 2.21c). The music builds to a dissonant climax, then leads directly into the fierce outburst of Rambo, the most bloodthirsty of the terrorists, “You’re always complaining of your suffering.” Adams sketched Rambo’s lines in the final pages of Sketchbook No. 4, using the scansion of Rambo’s ferocious words to guide the setting (Fig. 2.22). Rambo’s melodies are lifeless and unflattering, remaining within the confines of the interval of a tritone. Adams sketched virtually no harmonies for Rambo’s part, the most virulent, anti-Semitic part in the opera, intentionally curbing the musicality of his song.

Sketchbook No. 5 is the most straightforward of all the manuscript books in terms of chronology and completeness of the drafts therein. Other than containing several rough sketches for Leon’s “I’ve never bee a violent man” at the start of the sketchbook (then fleshed out in Sketchbook No. 4), the individual subsections seem to have been drafted according to the
Figure 2.22. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch for Act II, scene 1A, Rambo “You are always complaining of your suffering,” mm. 275-321 (Sketchbook No. 4).
main events in the drama. Sketchbook No. 5 includes Act 2, scene 1B in its entirety, including
the British Dancing Girl’s “I must have been hysterical” and the out-of-body call of Omar (the
youngest of the terrorists) to violence, “It’s as if our earthly life were spent miserably.” The
sketches then move through the entire Desert Chorus, an evocation of the collective Palestinian
experience. Next comes Act II, scene 2A, which includes Marilyn Klinghoffer’s rhapsodic
hymning of Leon and the imagined dialogue between the two, “My One Consolation,” followed
by the instrumental music marking Leon’s death. The sketchbook ends with a portion of
Mamoud’s “Every Fifteen Minutes One More Will Be Shot.”

Remarkably, Adams incorporated an impressive amount of detail in each of the drafts
found in Sketchbook No. 5, making meticulous renderings in terms of harmonic specificity,
dynamics, and duration marked in minutes and seconds. The sketches closely resemble the final
settings, suggestive that the composer worked quickly and resolutely, letting the text guide his
musical decisions. Two significant issues, however, stand out the pages of Sketchbook No. 5.
First, Adams worked through two vastly different drafts of Marilyn’s aria, “My One
Consolation,” altering the tonal focus in the second draft in a manner that confirms his use of a
system of metaphorical tonality. Second, and perhaps more significant, Adams omitted 17
measures of music that represent Klinghoffer’s death, a matter that sheds light on the rationale of
the score. These two issues will be examined separately below.

The first draft for Marilyn’s “My One Consolation,” shown in Fig. 2.23a, displays how
Adams developed a specific symbolic reading of Goodman’s text. While the opening of the
sketch is striking for its variance from the final setting, the way in which Adams shifted in and
out of tonal focus here set the stage for the episode’s representational organization. Adams
Figure 2.23a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, initial sketch for Act II, scene 2A, “My One Consolation,” mm. 1-14 (Sketchbook No. 5).
Figure 2.23b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, subsequent sketch for Act II, scene 2A, “My One Consolation,” mm. 1-14 (Sketchbook No. 5).
started the sketch with a dyad, A# and D#, over openly voiced octaves on E with added fifth B. He set the first six measures of text, “My one consolation is that Leon has gotten someone to take him down to the hospital,” within the interval of a perfect fifth, G# and D#. As Marilyn sings these words, the music drifts into G minor, just after she sings the name “Leon.” G minor is never fully realized as a tonic; rather, the triad fades in and out, overlapping with other dissonant sonorities. Adams sketched roughly half of the setting in this manner and then stopped abruptly. He started again (Fig. 2.23b), this time abandoning a number of elements from the initial setting, specifically the tonal haze of the opening. Adams replaced the opening measures with the hushed resonance of a single tone G, dovetailing the end of the Desert Chorus with the start of Marilyn’s song. As noted throughout, the tonal realm of G minor has metaphorical associations with the Chorus of Exiled Jews. Although G minor is implied here, Adams simultaneously invokes the realm of F minor, the tonal area linked to the Palestinians. Marilyn sings Leon’s name on E naturals over an F minor triad with added tones G and B-flat, a harmonic effect resulting in the quiet clash of the metaphorical tonalities, G minor and F minor. Here, Adams alludes to the act that would end Leon’s life, for this harmonic fragment, the F minor triad with added tones, returns just prior to Leon’s death and then spirals into a chromatic descent. Through the process of working through these two drafts, Adams developed a clear vision for investing the mention of Leon’s name with a specific key area, G minor, and consequently obfuscating it with the intrusion of F minor as the moment of his death approaches.

The other significant discrepancy that leaps to the eye in Sketchbook No. 5 is the omission of 17 measures of music representing the murder of Leon. The missing music is part of an instrumental passage totaling 34 bars, coming approximately 90 measures into Marilyn’s aria, “My One Consolation.” In the final version, it features a repeated descending chromatic line
pitted against ascending triads that build to a fortissimo climax, followed by the hushed resonance of single tone C. The music suggests the shape of the chiasmus (cross shape), a significant gesture given Bach’s use of a symmetrical chiastic design to represent the crucifixion in his setting of the *Credo* from his *Mass in B Minor* BWV 232. The identification of the allusion seemed to be a kind of game, one sanctioned and even encouraged by the composer. Adams commented that “Klinghoffer is more intuitive and less self-consciously organized, although I do think that it’s very obvious that the parallel between the Bach Passions and any number of sacred [works] is quite evident to anybody that takes the time to look at it.” Adams wanted the game to be discovered. Strangely, though, the chiastic music is nowhere to be found in the sketchbooks. Adams drafted nearly half of the instrumental passage and then halted abruptly as if to contemplate how to proceed. It is possible that this was the most challenging passage Adams had yet to draft; it happened to be the moment in the work that presented the overwhelming task of representing the actual death of an innocent man and the afterlife of his transfigured soul. By this point, the creators had likely decided that Klinghoffer’s death would be depicted offstage. The music would perform the lion’s share of the representational work. There is, too, the possibility that Adams sketched the missing music elsewhere, perhaps on loose sheets; though, these are nowhere to be found in the archival collection.

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36 Adams was doubtless familiar with this representational device. A number of scholars have examined Bach’s use of the chiasmus in the *Credo*. See, for instance, Jasmin Melissa Cameron, *The Crucifixion in Music: An Analytical Survey of Settings of the Crucifixus between 1680 and 1800* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006). Bach also used the chiasmus shape in a number of fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The F minor fugue, for instance, moves chromatically in two directions and calls upon chiastic symmetries, as does the B minor fugue, which covers all twelve semitones in this manner. See David Ledbetter, *Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier: The 48 Preludes and Fugues* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 81-82.

37 Adams, interview with Beverly, “John Adams on Klinghoffer and the Art of Composing.”
The music Adams did sketch leading up to Leon’s death, however, reveals a kind of logic that in many ways defines the score. In his first pass at the material, he jotted six measures of chromatically ascending triads, shown in the second system of Fig. 2.24a. The triads begin the instrumental crawl to Leon’s deathbed, a musical portraiture of the soul about to take flight. On the next page of the manuscript book (Fig. 2.24b), Adams transposed the triads up a major second. He retained these rising sonorities up to m. 80 in the final version (Act II, scene 2A, mm. 70-80). What comes next in the sketch, though, is where Adams seemed to have questioned his strategy. Beginning in m. 81 (Fig. 2.24b), he sketched series of registrally static four-note chords (mm. 81-86), a purgatorial gesture, abandoned in the next draft. It is in the subsequent sketch that Adams began to formulate the chiastic pattern (Fig. 2.24c). He wrote out a series of chromatically descending two-note, then three- and four-note sonorities, over which he would superimpose the ascending triads. The labored ascent in the lower register combined with falling chromatic figures carve out an image of the cross, symbolic of crucifixion. These two linear motions involve a series of dissonances; the top-most voice descends from D natural in m. 70 to E-flat in m. 72 while the lower voice ascends from G to C, outlining a rising chromatic tetrachord by the middle of m. 71. The line then ascends by whole and half step for the remainder of the pattern. After moving through all twelve semitones, Adams began the chiastic pattern a second time, though a semi-tone higher and just over an octave above from where it previously ended. The pattern descends chromatically from E natural in m. 73 to F in m. 76, then begins again on F# a register above. Adams altered the length of each iteration, using either all twelve semitones or just a portion of them, but never letting a single recurrence repeat in the same way.
Figure 2.24a. John Adams, The Death of Klinghoffer, initial sketch for Act II, scene 2A, Leon’s death, mm. 68-75 (Sketchbook No. 5).
Figure 2.24b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, subsequent sketch for Act II, scene 2A, Leon’s death, mm. 76-86 (Sketchbook No. 5).
Figure 2.24c. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Act II, scene 2A, Leon’s death, mm. 70-82 and 99-109 (mm. 83-98 missing) (Sketchbook No. 5).
The point at which Adams stopped sketching the instrumental sequence (m. 82, Fig. 2.24c, verso) was in fact a logical place to pause. This is precisely where the music in the final version begins to swell in intensity, building to a violent climax before trailing off into near silence. He picked up the music again starting in m. 99 (Fig. 2.24c, recto), the moment in the drama immediately following Leon’s death in which the viola line quietly ascends into the ether. Beneath, the orchestra softly drones on a bi-tonal resonance, G major over F minor, a blend of the symbolic tonalities that connote Jewish and Palestinian suffering. In the next measures (mm. 101-103), the music settles on a D minor chord. That Klinghoffer’s death culminates in D minor is another symbolic nod to the muse of Bach, whose D minor fugue, with its recurring lamento-bass, has come to epitomize musical manifestations of grief.

Although the location of the 17 measures of missing sketch material remains a mystery, it is most probable that Adams had a preconceived frame for how Leon’s death music would unfold. He had already drafted a number of iterations of the descending chromatic pattern, heard during moments such as the Captain’s memory of man who gave him the komboloi in Act I, scene one (Fig. 2.15). That Adams expanded upon the pattern to represent the murder suggests that he possessed in advance some kind of structural plan for these seemingly separate blocks of music.

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38 In response to Beverly’s interview question, “I noticed this descending chromatic scale that comes back from time to time in Klinghoffer, so that wasn’t intentional?” Adams replied, “Well, I don’t know…it’s been a long time and I’ve forgotten some of the things I did. However, I do know that there are certain harmonic shifts and melodic designs, which tend to reappear off and on during the work, particularly shifts from major to minor. Then of course there’s the Aria of the Falling Body, with its long descent that keeps going up again and then coming down. That conceit of ‘falling’ is very much a common device in Bach’s tone painting. I don’t know if you’ve ever read Albert Schweitzer’s book on Bach, but he makes a great deal of Bach’s use of intervallic relationships for certain states of emotion.” Adams, interview with Beverly, “John Adams on Klinghoffer and the Art of Composing.”
The sixth and final sketchbook, which includes sketches for the remainder of Act II, provides examples of each kind of process Adams had developed throughout the composition of the opera. He used a system of text-generated rhythmic organization in Mamoud’s “Every Fifteen Minutes;” employed pre-existing musical models in the Aria of the Falling Body; emphasized chorale-style textures in the Day Chorus; relied on scansion to guide the vocal line in the Captain’s “Mrs. Klinghoffer, Please Sit Down;” and highlighted metaphorical tonalities in Marilyn’s “You Embraced Them.” The sketchbook, as with No. 5, is unproblematic in terms of chronology; its contents follow the closing scenes in the order of the opera. A final examination of the processes that shaped two vital moments in the second act—the Aria of the Falling Body and Marilyn’s closing song, “You Embraced Them”—sheds further light on Adams’s compositional practice in *Klinghoffer* and the presence of a subtext that, when read critically, offers insight into the work as a whole.

Adams’s approach to the Aria of the Falling Body was distinct. Whereas many of the other scenes laid precedent on the text as a means to determine musical structure, the vocal lines in the aria seem to have been laid, at least initially, over a pre-inscribed composition modeled on the textures of Satie’s *Trois Gymnopédies* (1888). A comparison of the sketches for Falling Body with the *Gymnopédie* reveals how Adams adopted and then rejected Satie’s musical language. Fig. 2.25a shows Adams’s re-working of the sketch originally penciled in Sketchbook No. 2 (Fig. 2.10). In both renderings (Figs. 2.10 and 2.25a), Adams mapped onto his score Satie’s gentle undulations between bass note and chord. As with Satie’s *Gymnopédie* No. 1, which features alternating major seventh chords, one “tonic,” the other “dominant,” Adams alternated seventh chords with an added a ninth, thus joining the reference to another work, Debussy’s *La cathédrale engloutie* (1910). In doing so, he created an effect of stable dissonance. Two critical
alterations, however, separate the rough sketches. First, Adams changed the tonal center of the aria from F minor, the key associated with the Palestinians (Fig. 2.10), to G minor (Fig. 2.25a), the key associated with the Jewish Exiles—and the key he would end up using to conclude the work. Second, Adams changed a descending series of sixths drawn from the G minor scale, an allusion to both the descent music that marked Leon’s death and to the simple modal melodies that give Satie’s *Trois Gymnopédies* their antiquated formality, to feature instead falling octaves, creating a musical portrait of a body sinking into the sea. With the steady alternation of simple G minor triads with added tones, Adams would establish the kind of harmonic stasis present in Satie’s music, a stasis symbolic of the stillness and solemnity of the dead.

The ways in which Adams strayed from Satie’s model suggest not an attempt to erase its traces but rather the extent of the presence of a subtext inherent to the drama. Adams’s reworking of Satie took a number of forms. On a level of minutiae, Adams modified Satie’s suggested tempo, *Lent*, often interpreted as 50 to 55 beats per minute. Adams’s sketch (Fig. 2.25a) calls for a slightly faster tempo: a quarter note at 70 to 72 beats per minute. The final setting unfolds with a quarter note at a stately 58 beats per minute. According to Sellars, Adams was insecure about writing sentimental or heartfelt music; it was the singers who convinced
Figure 2.25a. John Adams, The Death of Klinghoffer, sketch for Act II, scene 2C, Aria of the Falling Body (Sketchbook No. 6).
Figure 2.25b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, subsequent sketch for Act II, scene 2C, Aria of the Falling Body, “May the Lord God and His creation be magnified…” mm. 8-20 (Sketchbook No. 6).
Figure 2.25c. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch for Act II, scene 2C, Aria of the Falling Body, “souvenirs which would be taken….” mm. 35-45 (Sketchbook No. 6).
him to slow it down. In addition, Adams modified Satie’s meter. Instead of a slow waltz in triple time, Adams set the music in common time, alternating quarter and half notes in the bass parts. The effect is a warped illusion of triple meter. As the music goes on, the pattern alternates between duple, quintuple, and sextuple meters, emphasizing an asymmetrical design. Whereas Satie’s austere melodies in the Gymnopédie repeat symmetrically, the descending melodic pattern at the outset of Falling Body never once repeats in the same way. Adams did, however, allude to Satie’s symmetry in his final setting, for the descending pattern returns just over midway through the episode. But rather than have the second half of Falling Body be a mirror image of the first, the music becomes highly chromatic, its own separate universe. The second half echoes the music of Leon’s death. The setting became one in which the presence of Satie quickly transformed into non-presence, just as Leon’s soul vanished into a distant realm. In other words, Adams framed the aria so that his own musical voice, with chromatic punctuations and bi-tonal resonances, emerged at the end. Such was Adams’s neoclassical way of passing off old as new. But it was also a kind of musical burial, a ceremonial homage to not only Satie’s musical

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39 Sellars noted in Malitz, “Front Page to Opera Stage,” “John’s major thing is that he is made to feel, by all these music critics and by the academic music establishment, terribly guilty for how heartfelt his work is.” Sellars continues, “The most beautiful things that John writes are given in the score these absurdly fast tempo markings, I mean just appalling, because he writes something utterly beautiful and then gets embarrassed and says, ‘Well, no I can’t show that much sentiment,’ and so he makes it fast to get through it. In this opera, for example, the Aria of the Falling Body is this perfectly amazing thing, but it happens click-click-click according to John. It takes the performers to get him to agree to inch back, to allow him to face what he’s written.”

40 Scholars have argued that the proportions of the Gymnopédie triptych were governed by the Golden Section. See Steven Moore Whiting, Satie the Bohemian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 74. See also Courtney S. Adams, “Erik Satie and Golden Section Analysis,” Music & Letters 77 (1996): 245 and Alan Gillmor, Erik Satie (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 87-89.

41 The presence of symmetrical design can be found in other places in the opera, including the placement of the Hagar Chorus at the center of the opera. This chorus tells the story of the birth of Ishmael by Hagar and Abraham, a narrative found in both the bible and Qur'an. For this reason, and because it refers to time before Israel and Palestine, it is the only chorus that is not part of a pair.
corpus whose anti-teleological musical structures might be likened to the dead, but also to Leon Klinghoffer.

With the basic outline of the instrumental continuum pre-established, Adams, in his next sketch (Fig. 2.25b), began setting the text. Against the Orphic descent pattern in the upper parts of the accompaniment, the words “May the Lord God and His creation be magnified in dissolution” follow an ascending path set to tones drawn from a G minor collection. The juxtaposition of shapes—descent in the accompaniment with ascent in the vocal line—once again creates the illusion of the cross. In the next phrase, “Nothing is lost but the sea level,” Adams emphasized a rising tetrachord (A, B-flat, C, and D). He then used a rising D minor scale to reflect musically the subsequent part of the phrase, “had risen fast against the sea wall.” On the words “sea wall,” the music drops an octave, back to the D where it began, only to begin its slow ascent once more. Even though D minor is treated as a kind of local tonic, Adams attenuated any sort of cadential imperative by keeping the alternation of G minor and C minor seventh chords pedaling beneath. He thereby eliminated any sense of prolonged consonance or dissonance, letting the music exist instead in a perpetual state of motionlessness.

Adams continued setting the text in this fashion, with the rising and falling of the vocal line like the waves of the sea. Curiously, the sketch breaks off 47 measures into the aria, roughly halfway through. The last section of music composed in this initial draft (Fig. 2.25c, mm. 35-45) happens to be where Adams started moving the harmonic palette from the G and C minor vamps to areas outside of Satie’s model, including a series of harmonies that pit G major seventh chords against tone A-flat. At this crossroads, however, Adams ran into several problems that prompted him to start over. The text certainly did not present an obvious structure in terms of repetition or
symmetrical design. However, his excisions and substitutions in the next round of sketches draw attention to moments in the text that may have guided his subsequent decisions.

When Adams began again (Fig. 2.26a-c), he retained the basic features from the initial text setting. The inert soundscape of the Gymnopédie seemed appropriate for the opening phrase, “May the Lord God and his creation be magnified,” with its strong sense of the religious, the eternal. Adams began, however, to shift musical strategies once Goodman’s text turned to earthly topics: “Locked bureau drawers / had their locks broken / The souvenirs / which would be taken / Fetched not a cent / as for the papers / No instrument could find the sleepers / Whose things these were.” Presumably, these items belonged to victims of the Holocaust. It seems here that Goodman conflated Leon’s death with the mass death of the Jewish people, each, according to Adams, murdered “for the class of people [they] happened to fall into.”

At this moment in the text, Adams implemented a series of new musical elements (Fig. 2.26b): rising figures in both the lower and upper parts of the accompaniment that alternate in their movement between whole and half steps (the pattern does not follow the full octatonic scale, but Adams drew tones from an octatonic collection). The music swells to a dissonant climax, drafted in the measures excised in Fig. 2.26c. Adams substituted the crossed-out dissonant tone clusters with a fully chromatic treatment that summons the abysmal chromatic descent symbolic of Leon’s death. After a brief return of the opening G minor vamp, the music begins a steady ascent, building to a hushed climax near the end with the haunting sound of a synthesizer reaching the outer limits of its register, A8. The aria concludes nowhere near to where it began, with the quiet sounding of D minor juxtaposed against E minor trailing off into nothingness.

42 Adams, interview with Beverly, “John Adams on Klinghoffer and the Art of Composing.”
Figure 2.26a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for Act II, scene 2C, Aria of the Falling Body, mm. 1-15 (Sketchbook No. 6).
Figure 2.26b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for Act II, scene 2C, Aria of the Falling Body, “souvenirs which would be taken….” mm. 35-39 (Sketchbook No. 6).
Figure 2.26c. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, continuous draft for Act II, scene 2C, Aria of the Falling Body, “souvenirs which would be taken…” mm. 40-45 (Sketchbook No. 6).
As far as once can judge from the sketches, the Aria of the Falling Body required increased effort by Adams, evident both in the rejected drafts and in the composer’s own comments about the aria in a letter to Goodman. “The Falling Body really gave me an immense amount of trouble,” Adams wrote in October 1990. “I didn’t feel that the poem was overly obscure, not after living with it for a month or so, but I felt it was somehow distant and hieratic and it took me a very long time to warm to it. My musical solution is a long shot. I am not sure it works.” The letter presents the first written evidence of the composer’s self-doubt with *Klinghoffer.* Moreover, his comments about the aria being “distant and hieratic” draw attention to not only the distinct quality of the aria in the fabric of the opera as a whole, but also to Adams’s struggle to craft a meaningful representation of death.

By the fall of 1990, Adams had composed all but the final moments of the opera, Marilyn Klinghoffer’s “You Embraced Them.” The task of orchestration loomed. Singers awaited their vocal parts. Meanwhile, the final scene remained unfinished. Adams wrote the finale swiftly but not without aggravation. Fig. 2.27a shows his initial vocal setting against hammering dyads, C and E-flat. The erasures on the folio indicate a number of re-workings. As the draft goes on (Fig. 2.27b), the sketches become more and more sparse, finally petering out into a series of aggravated scribbles. He never did finish the sketches for the scene, drafting 183 measures out of 238. “Part of this,” Adams wrote to Goodman,

was because I really didn’t know what was supposed to follow it until I’d almost finished setting it. I didn’t know whether I was going to have a big, powerful epilogue to set, necessitating a further cranking up of the emotional energies, or whether there would only be a short pithy scene, or nothing at all. About half the way through, when you were in England and not communicating, I just decided to forget about it, and proceed as if there would be no epilogue. Now, I am very uncertain. I like very much the little ‘tail’ you wrote, and I think it might, if the right tone were found, end the opera in a very moving way. On the other hand, the

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43 Adams, letter to Alice Goodman, 11 October 1990.
Figure 2.27a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, sketch for Act II, scene three, “You Embraced Them,” mm. 1-14 (Sketchbook No. 6).
Figure 2.27b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, subsequent sketches for Act II, scene three, mm. 83-105 (Sketchbook No. 6).
The letter implies that with only six months before the premiere, Goodman and Sellars were still working out dramatic details. Adams was in an awkward position. He was also sensitive to the ethical dimensions of representing Marilyn who, in real-life, suffered beyond imagination. By giving her the last word, an articulation of fury, Adams could, in a sense, pay tribute to her suffering.

Something more than straightforward frustration with Goodman can be drawn from Adams’s remarks made during the final phase of the opera’s composition. According to Adams, certain revisions to the text had in fact been necessary:

There are occasionally things that I can’t set, either because the words don’t sing (better I should say that I can’t figure out how to make them sing) or else the musical design at the moment just can’t embrace them…In Marilyn’s final aria, the homely evocation of the happy couple sitting around the fire just didn’t work, given the intensity I’d built up, so it had to go. I managed to set all the charming little body parts, the liver, the spleen, spinal column, muscle tendon, gizzard and gall bladder. But thirteen lines of text that all end in the letter “n” makes for very unattractive singing.

The bareness of the sketches (Fig. 2.27b) suggests a kind of apathy on Adams’s part towards this passage of text. This visual austerity only continues throughout the sketchbook until the pages gradually become a blank void. “I really have felt all along in this project that I was a hostage (rather fitting, don’t you think?) to your text,” he wrote to Goodman.

At one point I had a batch of choruses for Act I but no idea of how they would relate to the unfolding of the action…I ended up having to trash everything I’d written for these choruses once I received the balance of text. Now I am paying the price in lost time for that delay…It puts me at a truly unfair disadvantage. Peter’s response is always ‘Oh, you’ve written a masterpiece, and having to struggle with Alice’s late delivery only makes it all the better.’ Suffering is

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
certain…but I can think of other ways I’d rather suffer. Perhaps Peter’s right, and that punishment is good for the soul, but I’d so love to try out a different style of ‘collaboration.’

The following week, Goodman replied to Adams, writing,

Although in the end I cannot prevent you from making your cuts, however hasty and coarse and ignorant I think them…I am equally one with the dead when it comes to your music. You cut my libretto; I cannot cut your music whatever I think of it. It is in your interest that the libretto should be as good as I can make it, and it is in my interest that the music should be as good as you can make it. You cannot improve my work any more than I can improve yours.

The collaborative tension between Adams and Goodman doubtless manifested itself into the fabric of the finale, a song of rage.

In late October 1990, Adams worked out the final composition of “You Embraced Them,” producing a draft of the aria, “Marilyn Angry” (Fig. 2.28), which he used as a template to insert into his MIDI software program. The notion of the “rage aria” has antecedents, of course, in eighteenth century opera seria, with fast-paced music mimicking the racing palpitations of a heartbeat. Adams began the aria in this manner. Pounding C minor triads set the tone of Marilyn’s woeful wrath. From there, he made a symbolic gesture to the memory of Leon Klinghoffer. Nearing the end of Marilyn’s song, shown in Fig. 2.29, he gently manipulated the tonal area of C minor via stepwise motion to D minor, the key area linked to the moment of Leon’s death. Above these sonorities, Marilyn sings, “I grieve as a pregnant woman grieves for the unseen long imagined son” (mm. 206-209). Following a striking oscillation between D minor and E-flat major on the words “suffering is certain,” Adams shifted the music back to D minor as Marilyn utters, “The remembered man rising from my heart into the world to come…”

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46 Ibid.  
47 Goodman, letter to John Adams, 16 October 1990.  
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Figure 2.28. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, MIDI score for Act II, scene three, “You Embraced Them,” mm. 1-17.
Figure 2.29a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, piano-vocal score for Act II, scene three, “You Embraced Them,” mm. 206-221.
Figure 2.29b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, piano-vocal score for Act II, scene three, “You Embraced Them,” mm. 222-238 (finale).
In the next phrase, “It is he whom the Lord will redeem when I am dead,” the music quietly settles into its resting tonality, G minor, the key of the Exiled Jews and the key of Leon’s departing soul in the Aria of the Falling Body. Marilyn’s simple statement is prophetic, revealing an acceptance of her own unavoidable death at the moment she mourns her husband’s: “If a hundred people were murdered and their blood flowed in the wake of this ship like oil, only the world would intervene. They should have killed me. I wanted to die.” The word “die” sounds and then fades on G against the hushed drone of open fifths, G and D. All goes silent, and we are left with the resonance of Marilyn’s grief (Fig. 2.29). “This was the most important single musical moment that I had ever written,” Adams remembered.

By the end of October 1990, Adams had completed the piano-vocal score, a fleshed-out version of the sketched vocal settings. Figs. 2.30 and 2.31 show the first pages of the piano-vocal score for the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians and Chorus of Exiled Jews, written on large upright folios of 20 staves, mostly bi-folios. Adams supplied the text in full, as well as accompanimental details including indications for clefs, key and time signatures, and some cues for orchestration. He always wrote in pencil, making adjustments along the way. While drafting the piano-vocal score, Adams worked for the first time with a MIDI platform, entering the score into a software program. Before Klinghoffer, he used an eight-channel tape recorder to record himself playing instrumental parts on the piano and then using the tape as a mixer for experimenting with orchestral layers of sound. The new MIDI technology replaced the eight-track method; its synthesized instruments and samplers gave Adams a sonic realization that emulated the sound of a full orchestra. MIDI, too, granted him the ability to send preliminary sound files to his collaborators. Adams noted, “This new step, the MIDI stage, is stupefyingly laborious.”

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48 Adams, quoted in Malitz, “Front Page to Opera Stage.”
Figure 2.30. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, piano-vocal score for the Chorus of Palestinian Exiles, mm. 1-19.
Figure 2.31. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, piano-vocal score for the Chorus of Exiled Jews, mm. 1-18.
but in the end it affords me the freedom to try out complex and often wild ideas and see whether or not they work…As a result I managed to make most of my mistakes alone, at home, not in the opera house with a hundred people waiting around drumming a thousand anxious fingers.”49

On October 22, 1990, Adams enclosed in a package to Goodman a copy of the piano-vocal score and a MIDI tape of the Prologue, fragments of Acts I and II, and dance music that was in fact never included in the score. In his letter he explained,

…there is a fragment of dance music which I have not completed (in fact not even notated). I hope to finish that and add the epilogue when I get to them in the orchestration…Please, before you fire off any more salvos, remember that this vocal score is unproofed and has many mistakes that will be corrected as my copyist and I move through the entire opera a second time…I’ll also change Giovanni Massa to Giordano Bruno, although it strikes me as a bit precious. You’ll also notice lots of wrong notes in the music.50

With roughly six months before the premiere, the opera remained in rough form. An epilogue was still in the plan. The orchestration was not yet complete. The final push, Goodman noted, “struck terror in both our hearts,”51 adding to the deterioration of their relationship. “It seems quite obvious,” Adams wrote to her, “that we’re worlds apart in what we view as opera. At the moment I am not really interested in pursing an understanding with you, in any case. I’ve labored more than you’ll ever know to make your text and my music work together harmoniously.”52

Following this correspondence, they stopped speaking. Eventually, they would only speak to each other through interviews.53

In the months between October 1990 and February 1991, Adams made a frantic effort to complete the orchestration, putting hatch marks on a calendar to account for measures of

50 Adams, letter to Alice Goodman, 22 October 1990.
51 Goodman, quoted in Malitz, “Front Page to Opera Stage.”
52 Ibid.
orchestration completed. Figs. 2.32, 2.33, and 2.34 show three folios of the autograph score—the cover page, the first page of the Prologue, and the Aria of the Falling Body—each representative of the physical labor involved in “the final, most physically punishing stage.” Each folio contains 500 to 1000 notes, vocal lines, and, in places, dramatic instructions written out by Adams in pencil on vellum, a material that could be easily photocopied. Using his word processor, Adams printed out titles and credits, then cut-and-paste them directly onto the vellum folios. Any edits to the score, including transposition errors, involved erasing and re-writing the pencil notations, a process that was both tedious and time consuming.

Adams completed the orchestration at his Berkeley, CA home on February 12, 1991, just weeks after U.S. and allied forces started attacking the forces of Saddam Hussein in a campaign to drive Iraq from Kuwait. CNN broadcast round-the-clock instantaneous coverage from the front lines of the Gulf War. Americans saw footage of bloody body parts from cameras placed on bombs as they struck Iraqi targets, some of them civilian. Moreover, Iraq’s historical support of Palestinian militant groups, in combination with an Iraqi missile launch on Israel the day after initial U.S. air strikes on Baghdad, added fuel to Israeli-Palestinian friction. While Adams never claimed to know the realms of the Islamic world with any authority, the burst of intense American activity in the Middle East and the up-close, if not perverse, media coverage called attention to the inescapable disconnect between his quiet creative environment on the west coast of the U.S. and the ongoing real-life political violence his opera re-interprets.

54 Adams, quoted in Malitz, “Front Page to Opera Stage.”
Figure 2.32. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, cover page of the 1991 autograph.
Figure 2.33. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Chorus of Exiled Palestinians, mm. 1-8 (1991 autograph).
Figure 2.34. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Aria of the Falling Body, mm. 1-14 (1991 autograph).
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*Klinghoffer* premiered without incident at the Theatre Royale de la Monnaie in Brussels on March 19, 1991. Critics emphasized the opera’s timeliness given that the guns and bombs of Operation Desert Storm had fallen silent just three weeks prior. American journalist John Rockwell lauded the opera’s “introspective beauty;” other American critics in attendance noted its humanity, cathartic effect, and non-sensationalist tone. Sellars, in response to the initial reception, commented,

> The American press treated it very well, which was surprising and impressive to me. The British were predictably dense about it. The Germans were really split between “Why is this happening in state-subsidized theaters?” and “This is pretentious.” The French actually waxed poetic about it, though Liberation felt it wasn’t “left” enough.

Only a single review condemned the work. Manuela Hoelterhoff of *The Wall Street Journal* accused the opera of “turning the sport killing of a frail old Jew in a wheelchair into a cool meditation on meaning and myth, life and death. And without a penny of subsidy from the PLO.” Hoelterhoff described Sellars’s program note as “repulsively amoral and culturally pretentious.” The entire historical event, in her words, was “another example of the small-minded viciousness festering among Muslim thugs.” At the time, the review was anomalous, going for the most part unnoticed. But Hoelterhoff’s remarks represented an antagonism that would only escalate in the months and years to come. *Klinghoffer* continued on as scheduled at

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.

On September 5, 1991, the night of the American premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, heightened racial tensions between the African American community and the Orthodox Jewish community permeated the streets of Brooklyn. The week before, the Crown Heights race riots had broken out in Brooklyn after a car in the motorcade of Hasidic rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson ran a red light and killed a young African American child.61 Black protesters carried out a series of anti-Semitic acts, including the murder of a Jewish visiting student. For three days, rioting carried out primarily by African Americans ensued, with stores looted, dozens of Jewish Americans injured, and more than 200 cases of burglary in Jewish homes. The riot, according to one historian, was “the most serious anti-Semitic incident in American history.”62 Although Adams, Sellars, and Goodman anticipated controversy, no one could have predicted the fraught atmosphere in Brooklyn at the time of the American premiere. “I must have been out of my mind to think that an opera that opened with a ‘Chorus of Exiled Palestinians’ would be received in Brooklyn with placid equanimity,”63 Adams later commented.

New York critics of the Brooklyn performance unleashed an outbreak of antagonism. They were unsettled by Adams’s representation of the Palestinians, music that, in the words of Edward Said, “[sears] the spectator’s consciousness with the terrible sadness of it all.”64 Hostile critics condemned the fact that Leon Klinghoffer was presented as apolitical, ordinary, and

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62 Ibid.
63 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 163.
64 Said, Music at the Limits, 135.
materialistic, whereas the terrorists were presented as highly political, passionate, and driven. These alleged offenses were most noticed in the Rumors scene, which interrupted the majestic calm of the opening choruses with what was perceived to be an inappropriate display of anti-Semitic stereotypes. Even though Goodman’s text makes no explicit reference to the Rumors being Jewish, Edward Rothstein of The New York Times viewed the scene as “agit-prop,” representative of American anti-Semitic attitudes, set to music that, as Rothstein put it, “bubbles along like a theme song from a 1950s TV show.”65 Contrary to the seeming historical depth given to Palestinian suffering, Rothstein felt the Klinghoffers were represented as “little more than variations of the offensive Rumors: narrow in their focus and vision, singing primarily about their physical condition, revealing the simple-minded historical blindness that the avant-garde has long attributed to the bourgeoisie.”66 In another review, Leon Wieseltier, writing for The New Republic, called the opera “a cheap and self-satisfied attack by a self-styled American avant-garde upon the ordinariness and the philistinism of the American bourgeoisie tricked out as the study of a tragic clash in Zion.” Wieseltier targeted the Rumors scene as introducing this “peculiar manner of discourse.”67

Adams’s elegiac musical representation of the Palestinians, Mamoud’s lyrical soliloquy about the birds, and the Rumors scene were not the only aspects critics found troubling. Sellars’s staging, Goodman’s libretto, and Mark Morris’s choreography, too, were suspect to additional

66 Ibid.
charges of “evenhandedness,” the inappropriate neutralization of difference. In the original production, singers took on more than one role, amplifying non-specificity. The part of the first officer, for example, was also a terrorist. This neutralized visual representation was important for Sellars because “the incident itself,” Sellars told a Los Angeles Times reporter in September 1991,

was not pro-anything. It was just a sad deadlock, a total tragedy where nobody comes off particularly well. It can’t be seized by one side or the other. But it’s pretty clear that the issues are on top of everyone’s mind in the world. They won’t go away. Obviously, America plays a large role in it, and, as Americans, we’re hypersensitized to the situation. We felt that the chance to treat it in a non-sensationalist manner was very interesting—and could actually be useful.68

Morris’s choreography, only minimally connected to the action, functioned as a kind of neutral pulse, finding its most solemn resonance in the Aria of the Falling Body as dancers symbolically depict Klinghoffer’s death by wrapping his body in a long, white shroud. Goodman’s text, too, was careful to create a balanced picture of the situation, giving the same amount of attention, first, to the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians to tell their story of displacement and then, to the Chorus of Exiled Jews to tell theirs. Some found this neutrality noble, even courageous. But the tendency to move through historical specificity to universality, to erase differences and to emphasize shared experiences of suffering between a number of separate victims, including Palestinian ones, enraged those whom, in reality, had to survive the horror of the act.

Most incensed by the opera were Marilyn and Leon Klinghoffer’s daughters who anonymously attended the 1991 American premiere in Brooklyn. To them the production appeared anti-Semitic, “historically naïve and appalling.”69 Lisa and Ilsa Klinghoffer have continued to express their views in response to subsequent productions, commenting in 2014,

68 Sellars, interview with Linda Winer, Newsday, 1 September 1991.
“the murder of our father is still our nightmare, and not something to be used as a tool to provide entertainment and make political statements.”

Lydia Goehr calls this kind of aesthetic exploitation of reality “the musicality of violence,” “the idea of a spectacle that beautifies terror,” a concept Theodor Adorno spent his lifetime working out under the condition of the negative dialectic. This notion, “the transmutation of violence into eloquence,” as Goehr refers to it, happened to be the conceptual idea that first intrigued Sellars to explore the aesthetic displacement between media representation and the terrorist act itself. Sellars knew all along that it was a conceptual vision that would provoke protest. But in no way did he or his collaborators intend to make an “excuse for evil.”

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70 Roya Nikkhah, “English National Opera faces protest over ‘pro-terrorist’ hijacking opera,” in The Telegraph, 19 February 2012. In 2014, the day before the opera’s New York Metropolitan Opera premiere, the Klinghoffer daughters released the following statement, printed in the program: “Over the years we have been deeply distressed with each new production of Klinghoffer. Critical views of Israel permeate the opera, and the staging and props of various productions have only amplified that bias. To have it now produced in New York—in our own backyard—by the country’s most prestigious opera company is incredibly painful. We have always been strong supporters of the arts, and believe they can play an important role in examining and understanding significant world events. Klinghoffer does no such thing. It presents false moral equivalencies without context and offers no real insight into the historical reality and the senseless murder of an American Jew. The opera rationalizes, romanticizes and legitimizes the terrorist murder of our father.” Lisa and Ilsa Klinghoffer, “The Death of Klinghoffer’ and injustice to our father’s memory,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 19 October 2014, http://www.jta.org/2014/10/19/news-opinion/opinion/op-ed-death-of-klinghoffer-an-injustice-to-our-fathers-memory.

71 Lydia Goehr. “The Musicality of Violence: On the Art and Politics of Displacement,” in Elective Affinities (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 171-203. Goehr makes explicit “a deep problem inherent in the very idea of using art to mourn humanity’s crimes,” 172. She pays particular attention to Klinghoffer and its extreme violence in that it “inclines us to cancel out the pain for the sake of the song,” 180. Her arguments echo Benjamin and Adorno, notably their theses that “the more beautiful the artwork, the more concealed the barbarism.”

72 Ibid., 180.

The 1991-92 reception of *Klinghoffer* was devastating to Adams. He and Goodman responded defensively at first. They offered no apology to the offended victims or individuals, instead claiming that they treated the Klinghoffers and the Jewish people with sympathy and dignity. Goodman, who was born and raised Jewish but converted to Christianity shortly after *Klinghoffer*, remarked,

> Anyone who attends this opera with an unprejudiced mind will perceive that it does honor to the destiny of the Jewish people and to the memory of Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer. To those who come prepared to see and hear only what they want to see and hear, nothing one can say is of any use.\(^74\)

In interviews leading up to the Brooklyn performances, Adams consistently stated, “the opera presents a balanced picture of both Jewish and Palestinian concerns.”\(^75\) But after the Brooklyn uproar, the Los Angeles and Glyndebourne productions were canceled. The Jewish Information League staged a protest of the opera’s San Francisco run in the fall of 1992. In response, Adams and Goodman deleted the Rumors scene from all future productions. To date, the scene has not since been performed on a major stage. It remains withdrawn from publication and commercially unrecorded. Never again did Adams permit the audiences to hear his magnum opus in full.

In 2005, Robert Fink, in a study of the opera’s early reception, staunchly defended *Klinghoffer*.\(^76\) He countered attacks of the opera’s alleged anti-Semitism, arguing that the criticism had more to do with culturally conservative Jewish critics, whose identities as Jewish Americans were threatened during the Reagan-Bush administration, than it did with the creators’ alleged intent (or non-intent) to offend. Fink situated the criticism in light of sensitivities surrounding the proposed amendment to the Israeli Law of Return in 1988-89, in which far-right

\(^{74}\) Allan Kozinn, “Klinghoffer Daughters Protest Opera.”
\(^{75}\) Ibid.
religious factions argued for the de-legitimization of Jewish (mostly American) converts by non-Orthodox rabbis. “The portrayal of American Jews,” according to Fink (the italics belong to him), “was offensive and upsetting to New York Jewish audiences because it reflected perfectly their worst nightmares about their own conflicted identity as Jews back to them.”77 Moreover, he contends that the Rumors scene reflects not anti-Semitic satire but rather a historically accurate depiction of traditional Jewish ethnic humor (not unlike the shtick-ey humor of *Seinfeld*), meant as a “counterpoise to terror’s deadly glamour the life-affirming virtues of the ordinary, of the decent man, of the small things.”78 Fink’s contextualization is convincing in his emphasis on the cumulative weight of religious politics at the time of the Brooklyn premiere. But he overlooks the fact the non-Jewish audience members, too, found the opera problematic. The work failed to resonate with not only contemporary religious discourses but also aesthetic and ethical ones, too.79

The deletion of the Rumors scene reflects Adams’s sensitivity to his audiences and critics. In 1995, he stated,

Many people who saw this scene felt it made fun of American Jews and therefore was anti-Semitic. For those listeners, it sent the wrong message, making it very difficult for them to take the rest of the opera seriously. They really felt they were being dished out a political tract that sympathized with the Palestinians and ridiculed the Jews. So, we took it out, and I don’t regret its loss, since it was alone a half-hour long and it did not really integrate well into the structure of the rest of the opera. So I don’t miss it.80

77 Ibid., 196.
78 Ibid., 206.
79 Debates about trauma and the ethics of representation were in full swing in 1991. The Rumors scene could have easily been read negatively in light of issues entirely separate from Jewish identity politics, such as debates over the “limits of representation,” which Saul Friedlander, Dominick LaCapra, and Thomas Trezise, among other scholars, have attempted to address. See, for instance, Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
80 Adams, interview with Beverly, “John Adams on Klinghoffer and the Art of Composing.”
Adams echoed this sentiment in his 2008 memoir, writing, “The comedy of the Rumor family now seems in retrospect to be inappropriate and served only to obscure the seriousness of the rest of the opera.”81 Nevertheless, the painful politics of the controversy affected Adams personally. Discouraged to embark on another labor-intensive opera project that would potentially yield another personal attack, Adams spent the years following Klinghoffer focused on chamber and instrumental works and the development of his international conducting career. Goodman, purportedly unable to obtain work, abandoned writing and converted to Christianity.82 Sellars fled to Europe. The 1991-92 controversy, which the creators once fearlessly anticipated and even deemed essential to their conception, silenced the opera from American stages for nearly two decades.

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In the fall of 2000, Adams received a screenplay from Penny Woolcock, a British filmmaker who proposed to make a cinematic adaptation of the opera. She envisioned the film as a kind of docu-drama, an approach contrary to the symbolic, ritualistic tone of Sellars’s original production. Woolcock’s film emphasized, even celebrated, explicit Jewish and Palestinian identities.83 Adams agreed to the collaboration, and at the request of the film’s producer, Channel Four Television in London, cut more than 20 minutes of music from the score. He removed three of the seven choruses, particularly those embracing abstract symbolism: the Ocean Chorus, about primordial man prior to race and nation; the Hagar Chorus, about

81 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 164.
83 Paradoxically, the film version, released in 2003, was banned from a festival in the West Bank because Palestinian authorities perceived it as pro-Israeli. Despite this controversy, it went on to win numerous awards, including the Prix Italia and the Official Selection of the Sundance Film Festival in 2003.
Israel; and the Desert Chorus about the collective Palestinian perspective. Adams also cut a
portion of the Captain’s monologue in Act I, scene one, as well as several lyrical lines belonging
to Mamoud. Moreover, Adams eliminated the Captain’s muddled lines beneath the Austrian
woman’s Sprechstimme, also in Act I, scene two, a change likely made for dramaturgical
reasons. The revisions were, for the most part pragmatic, but their implications were nonetheless
tied to Woolcock’s desire to clarify the abstraction that was so criticized a decade prior. Even
though the cuts were intended for the film only, directors of future stage productions would
follow Woolcock’s lead and, sometimes against Adams’s wishes, render permanent the revisions
made for the film only.  

The Klinghoffer controversy resurfaced in full force when the Boston Symphony
Orchestra, following 9/11, canceled a scheduled performance of a selection of the opera’s
choruses. The decision was made out of respect to a chorus member who lost a relative in one of
the hijacked planes. Richard Taruskin, in a December 2001 New York Times op-ed piece,
“Music’s Dangers and the Case for Control,” lauded the cancellation as an “exercise of
forbearance.” He publicly denounced the opera and Adams personally for “romanticizing
terrorists,” and, by implication, romanticizing the perpetrators of the attacks on the World Trade
Center. Consistent with his enjoyment of the role of agent provocateur, Taruskin declared
Adams and Goodman’s deletion of the Rumors scene as an admission of guilt, a change
“obviously made,” he wrote, “in response to the very criticisms the opera’s defenders claimed to

84 Tom Morris, most specifically, was influenced by Woolcock’s film in his production at the
85 Adams was in London rehearsing the singers in Woolcock’s film when he received word of
the September 11 terrorist attacks. He writes in his memoir, “There was a momentary thought of
canceling the sessions, but then a collective sense of commitment to the project took over, and
the recording sessions went forth in a mood of intense determination and the sober realization
that the themes embedded in the opera were no longer simply abstractions to be suffered only by
people in the Middle East.” Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 260.
be unwarranted.”  

To this, Adams was stunned and in one interview called Taruskin “a true passive aggressive, his article a rant, a riff, an ugly personal attack, and an appeal to the worst kind of neo-conservatism.”  

The criticism, this time around, was yet another blow to the composer. After 9/11, and the resulting attack by Taruskin, *Klinghoffer* was never read or performed in the same way.  

When Adams learned in 2009 that the Opera Theater of St. Louis (OTSL) wanted to mount a fully staged version of *Klinghoffer*, the first on the American stage in nearly twenty years, he found himself unnerved by the suggestion. The most recent bout of controversy remained unsettling; the thought of reviving *Klinghoffer* held little appeal. Adams was also preoccupied with conducting engagements, as well as finalizing his orchestral work *City Noir* (2009) and sketching new works, such as *Absolute Jest* (2012). But OTSL general director Timothy O’Leary and artistic director James Robinson, both staunch defenders of *Klinghoffer*, persisted in their drive to restage the opera. They planned to prepare the community for the opera with numerous ancillary events, including inter-faith discussions with religious and political

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86 Taruskin, “Music’s Dangers and the Case of Control.”
87 Anna Picard, “‘It was a rant, a riff, and an ugly personal attack’; as his most controversial opera opens in London, Anna Picard asks John Adams what all the fuss is about,” *Independent on Sunday*, 13 January 2002.
88 Ruth Sara Longobardi, in “Re-producing *Klinghoffer*: Opera and Arab Identity before and after 9/11,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 3:3 (2009): 273-310, examines pre- and post-9/11 semi-staged versions of the opera in relation to shifting Arab identity politics. She discusses the original Sellars production from 1991, notably its effort to produce an ambiguous Arab subject. The 2003 productions (Penny Woolcock’s film and the semi-staged version at the Brooklyn Academy of Music) rely on documentary-style imagery that explicitly situates the Palestinian terrorists. This highlighting of race, she argues, is emblematic of the post-9/11 era. These different productions, she shows, respond to events and conversations about terrorism and national identity in a way that says more about contemporaneous values than about the historical past. While Longobardi makes an important point, she somehow overlooked the fact that Woolcock’s film was conceived before and filmed during 9/11 and is thus not fully representative of post-9/11 politics.
89 James Robinson, interview with the author, 6 February 2012.
leaders. O’Leary and Robinson, like Woolcock, sought to create a conceptually “clearer” production. They also requested a number of revisions to the score, including the reduction of instrumental parts to make the production more financially feasible for their modest-sized orchestra.\(^90\)

Adams agreed to the changes and in 2011 produced an entirely new score. Not surprisingly, the scene portraying the Rumor family is absent, and when Robinson asked Adams about the possibility of performing the deleted scene, Adams replied, “absolutely not. Let’s just not even go there.”\(^91\) Adams also took the opportunity to carry out two significant modifications he had always wanted to make, “things that were emotionally vague now made clear.”\(^92\) First, Adams softened the scene featuring the Austrian woman hiding from the terrorists in a stateroom whose expressive utterances unfold in Sprechstimme. Second, he reduced the electronic synthesizers in the scoring to a bare minimum, a modification that would accommodate both the financial requests of OTSL and the continually changing technology of synthesizers and samplers.\(^93\) Undoubtedly these changes were pragmatic; but each of the latter modifications, however, has a specific critical history worth mentioning.

In the case of the role of the Austrian woman, Adams’s use of Sprechstimme in the work was criticized in a number of sources, including in an essay by musicologist Sabine Feisst, for its abrasive, anti-Semitic tone.\(^94\) Adams, in the 1991 version, pitted the Austrian woman’s muddled

\(^{90}\) Maggie Heskin, interview with the author, 2 August 2012. According to Heskin, Adams’s editor at Boosey & Hawkes, Timothy O’Leary made the requests directly to Janice Susskind, publishing director of Boosey & Hawkes in London. Susskind was the first to contact Adams about the revisions.

\(^{91}\) Robinson, interview with the author, 6 February 2012.

\(^{92}\) Ibid.

\(^{93}\) Ibid.

diction against the melodic lines of the articulate, Aron-like Captain (Figs. 2.35a-b). Their monologues unfold simultaneously, resulting in a duet that defies intelligibility—

**AUSTRIAN WOMAN**
I kept my distance. That seemed best.
There was a burst of shooting just
As I was stepping out of the tub.
I froze. My heart began to throb
Violently. I had to lie
Down on the bathmat for a few
Minutes until I felt composed . . .

**CAPTAIN**
Mock us. Do you see what I mean?
I mean that a cruise liner is
Not a hotel, that happiness
Rests in the knowledge that one may
Pack one’s suitcase and go, or go
Leaving the suitcases behind.
An imitation of a grand . . .

. . . Even if one were going to die
One would avoid the company
Of idiots. During the war
I felt the same. I have no fear
Of death. I’d rather die alone,
If I must, though I’d hate to drown.

. . . And to be all that kept the air
Above the water. We had more
Darkness about us than the night.
The days were empty. My first mate
And I scarcely exchanged a word
In passing. But I was not bored.

Press, 2009), 173-192. Feisst argues that the character is an “arrogant Austrian snob” and that the musical allusion is “anti-Semitic.”
Figure 2.35a. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, piano-vocal score for Act I, scene two, “My heart began to throb violently,” mm. 263-70.
Figure 2.35b. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, piano-vocal score, Act I, scene two, “The bathwater I left,” mm. 271-79.
The sounding effect is violent. The Austrian woman’s jarring speech-song clashes against the Captain’s lyrical song about the sea vessel “rich in paradoxes,” a grand hotel and a giant steel prison. The resulting texture is a collision of individual expressions of pleasure and pain into a kind of abstractionist cacophony, giving the scene its raw, visceral edge.

Robinson of OTSL viewed problems with this scene from the outset. He recalled too much going; the conflicting texts and thick scoring rendered the elocution unintelligible. When Robinson mentioned this to Adams in 2009, the composer expressed that he, too, felt the Sprechstimme set against the Captain’s song was a bit abrasive for the ceremonial tone he otherwise sought in the work. But rather than remove the Captain’s lines altogether, as he had done for Woolcock’s film in 2001, Adams simplified them in range and melody, making them more like recitative than song. The revision, shown in Music Examples 2.1 and 2.2, illustrates how he also reduced the instrumentation, replacing the original trio of synthesizer lines with harp and a single keyboard part. Without the harsh resonance of the synthesizers and uneven contours of the Captain’s lines, the sounding surface of the scene with the Austrian woman is gentler, some of its chaos and horror removed.

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95 Robinson, interview with the author, 6 February 2012.
The 2011 re-orchestration of the opera was primarily practical. As with *Nixon*, technology had changed since 1991. Continual developments in software and the instruments have forced Adams to update his scores over the years. The removal of the majority of electronic synthesizers, *à la mode* in the early 1990s, was a way for him to “modernize the sound”\(^9\) for a 2011 audience. Adams minimized three synthesized keyboard parts down to one keyboard sampler and added a harp to fill in those harmonies, adjustments that quiet the work as a whole, limit the at times violent orchestral action, and adhere more to the calm soundscape Adams envisioned for the St. Louis production. Fig. 2.36 shows the original 1991 orchestration based loosely on the instrumentation for Bach’s St. Matthew Passion. Fig. 2.37 shows the 2011 version, featuring the changes requested by OTSL for a more performer-friendly and cost-effective orchestra. Figs. 2.38 and Music Example 2.3 are emblematic of the detail involved in Adams’s 2011 re-working. These examples show the 1991 and 2011 settings of the Captain’s monologue in Act I, scene one—

If, as some think, a life at sea
Differs in real terms from one spent
On shore, it’s in the element
Of comprehensive solitude…

The 2011 version (Music Example 2.3) illustrates how a singular MIDI keyboard maintains the right hand of the original Keyboard 1; the harp takes over what was once Keyboard 2; the first

\(^9\) Adams reflected in his memoir, “*In Nixon in China*, I wrote for a two-manual Yamaha synthesizer, the Electone…For *The Death of Klinghoffer*, I went much further, virtually basing the orchestration on an ensemble of four MIDI-controlled synthesizers, a total of five keyboards, and one mallet-controlled synthesized percussion instrument. The problems arising from this heavy technical requirement have plagued me and the piece ever since. They are not generic instruments that basically stay unchanged over many years. Beethoven might compose for pianoforte, but he would certainly recognize his music played two hundred years later on a modern Steinway. The new electronic instruments, however, are like software operating systems. They morph on an almost yearly basis, requiring constant upgrading and modification.” Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 207-08.
Figure 2.36. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, orchestra (1991 autograph).
**ORCHESTRA**

2 Flutes (1st dbl. Piccolo)
2 Oboes (2nd dbl. English horn)
2 Bb Clarinets (2nd dbl. Bass Clar)
2 Bassoons (2nd dbl. Contrabassoon)

2 Horns in F
2 Trumpets in C
2 Trombones

1 Percussion (timpani, and 3 octave MIDI mallet controller)
1 Keyboard Sampler (5-octave keyboard controllers with volume & sustain pedals)

Harp

Strings (8-8-6-6-4)

Chorus (SATB): Minimum of 24 voices (with sound Amplification)

**Figure 2.37.** John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, orchestra (2011 revision).
Figure 2.38. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Act I, scene one, “If, as some think, a life at sea,” mm. 34-39 (facsimile of 1991 autograph).
violin takes over what was once Keyboard 3. The harmonies remain, for the most part, unchanged; the arrangement of parts is what distinguishes the revision from the original.

The re-orchestration was made in part due to economic pressures, but it can also be viewed in light of another history. Taruskin’s 2001 critique targets, among other things, Adams’s electronic instrumentation. He accused the composer of misappropriating “the long, quiet, drawn-out tones” in Bach’s St. Matthew Passion that accompany Jesus and differentiate him as numinous.\footnote{Taruskin, “Music’s Dangers and the Case for Control.”} In Klinghoffer, Taruskin writes, “there is a comparable effect...occasionally spelled out by electronic synthesizers...that [accompanies] virtually all the utterances of the choral Palestinians or [singing] terrorists.”\footnote{Ibid.} What Taruskin does not mention is that this effect also accompanies the non-terrorist characters throughout the score, a point that Fink has made well-known in his essay, “Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights.” Adams’s 2011 re-scoring in no way eliminates but certainly quiets the sounding surface of these drawn-out synthesized parts. But whether or not Adams made this revision in response to Taruskin’s claim is up for debate.

It took Adams almost a year to make the changes. According to his editor, Maggie Heskin at Boosey & Hawkes, the revision process “was arduous, frustrating, and deeply emotional, given the nature of the opera’s reception history.”\footnote{Heskin, interview with the author, 2 August 2012.} That Adams insisted on making the changes on his own, refusing any assistance or outside help, added to the onerous nature of the task. Heskin further commented,

John wanted to be in control of the entire process. But it was an opportunity for him to really look at the whole piece again, which composers do not like to do. Once they finish something they’re over it and onto the next thing, and then the
next. These operas are like their children, but they also don’t like to go back and redo them. It’s almost like you can’t go back and redo your child.\footnote{Ibid.}

The revisions this time around, responding to withering criticism, as well as technical and financial concerns, caused the self-doubts of Adams’s past to resurface. He often second-guessed his original efforts, writing and re-writing alternative material. He marked virtually every page of the proofing score with edits, both large and small. Fig. 2.39 shows several measures from the 2011 revision for the Aria of the Falling body, with notes for Heskin (“Maggie”) indicating octave transposition errors and a request to soften the attacks of the MIDI part. The biggest challenge, however, involved finding the right balance with the new instrumental arrangement. Adams wanted the work to be performed; he wanted it to be playable, affordable, and reflect up-to-date technology. But the process was arduous.

When the OTSL rehearsals began in the spring of 2011, the revised score turned out to be virtually unplayable for the single keyboard player. The orchestra did its best, and although some parts went unheard, the performances went on, and Klinghoffer in St. Louis received critical praise.\footnote{Opening night took place on June 15, 2011. Critical reactions were consistently positive. See, for example, John von Rhein, “St. Louis brilliantly reaffirms ‘Klinghoffer’ a landmark American opera,” in Chicago Tribune, 21 June 2011; Sarah Bryan Miller, “‘Death of Klinghoffer’ is powerful night at the opera,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 16 June 2011; Mike Silverman, Associated Press, “St. Louis makes strong case for ‘Klinghoffer,’” Deseret News, 22 June 2011; Steve Smith, “Klinghoffer Returns, to Be Debated Anew,” The New York Times, 17 June 2011.} When Adams learned of the problem, he took it upon himself to re-revise the score yet again, adding one of the keyboards back into the orchestration. This process took an additional three months during the fall of 2011, a period originally slotted for the writing of The Gospel According to the Other Mary (2013).

\footnote{Ibid. Heskin’s job involves the coordination, engraving, proofing, and distribution of Adams’s orchestral scores and performing parts. She works closely with Adams on his revisions, making sure all the changes are implemented correctly in the score and parts.}
Figure 2.39. John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Aria of the Falling Body, mm. 40-43 (2011 revision).
It is tempting to want to determine overtly causal connections between Adams’s revisions and the public criticisms. But it seems more reasonable to suggest that for whatever reason—whether Adams wanted to afford listeners a new opportunity to explore and revise their musical and dramatic assumptions about the piece, or if he was responding to economic pressures, or if he just plainly heard the work differently over time—these revisions and Adams’s sensitivity to critical feedback signal a fundamental collaborative utterance at play in the evolution of the opera—among composer, audience, critic, director, musicologist, and current event. This dynamic, communal dialogue is the visceral nub and essence of the score, of the controversies precipitating the changes, and the controversies provoked by them, keeping the work relevant, in the news, and out of the museum of failed contemporary operas.

But for audiences unaware of the Rumor family, the heightened expressivity of the Austrian woman, or the intensity of synthesized sound in the original score they, of course, will never get to experience certain qualities that once shifted the dramatic weight of the work, such as the lyrical and momentous orchestration that accompanies Alma Rumor’s moments of insight into violence and suffering, moments that critics conveniently overlooked, but ones that nonetheless musically and dramatically integrate into the unfolding drama that dominates Act II. With the erasure of the Rumors, we miss the emotional charge that comes from this kind of individual expression, and the opera’s prologue now unfolds with the Palestinian and Jewish Choruses, one after the other. By confronting the conflicts between different victimized groups in this uninterrupted way, those singular utterances of terror and pain formerly heard in the songs of Alma Rumor and the Austrian woman now find even stronger resonance in Marilyn
Klinghoffer’s final song of rage that closes the opera.\textsuperscript{102} Perhaps this was a way for Adams to counter charges of neutrality or evenhandedness, for as the final curtain falls, it is the image of Marilyn’s pain, not that of her husband or of the Palestinians or Jewish people, that we are left with to contemplate.

\textsuperscript{102} Lydia Goehr calls this the “displacement of individuals.” She writes, “Adorno uses the term ‘Vergleichung’ when difference and individuation are displaced for the sake of universal sameness...he writes of how violence, in false and reactionary modes, can befall an individual the moment it appears as ‘the surmounting of individualism,’ when atomization (the alienation of individuals) and leveling (the loss of individuality) come jointly to characterize a society. His point is not about defending individualism per se, but about retrieving the sense of an individual’s concrete experience through critique of the many dimensions of its destruction under the violent conditions of modernity.” Goehr, \textit{Elective Affinities}, 187. Goehr mentions this displacement in regard to Marilyn Klinghoffer, although she questions whether this means the work takes her side. It is this author’s sense that with Adams’s recent revisions, the work’s dramatic weight shifts even further to Marilyn’s side.
On January 14, 2000, Pamela Rosenberg, the soon-to-be general director of the San Francisco Opera, presented to John Adams the idea of an opera commission about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the creation of the atomic bomb.\(^1\) Rosenberg wanted an American version of Goethe’s Faust, drawing connections between the European myth and Oppenheimer’s decision to take on the role of director of the Manhattan project, a “modern-day pact with the devil.”\(^2\) Adams initially balked at the offer, unsure he could face the labor involved in writing another grand opera. But after a period of consideration, the composer found himself allured by the moral quandaries of Oppenheimer, who, like the Greek Titan Prometheus, presented atomic fire to humankind.\(^3\) The atomic bomb was at once attractive and repulsive, the legend of its invention and use suitably fraught for the operatic stage. Once he accepted the commission, Adams

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\(^{1}\) Portions of this chapter were presented at the American Musicological Society Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh, PA (2013), the Fourth International Conference on Music and Minimalism in Long Beach, CA, (2013), and at GAMMA-UT at the University of Texas at Austin (2010).

\(^{2}\) Pamela Rosenberg initially pitched the idea to John Adams over the phone in the late fall of 1999. On January 14, 2000, she and musical director Kip Cranna formally presented the idea to Adams at the San Francisco Opera House. The January date comes from a timeline produced by Kip Cranna on March 16, 2004 and reproduced in Ryan Ebright, “Echoes of the Avant-Garde in American Minimalist Opera” (PhD Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014). This timeline includes details found neither in Adams’s archival materials nor on the official Doctor Atomic website (www.doctor-atomic.com).

\(^{3}\) The comparison of Oppenheimer to Prometheus is the thematic undercurrent of Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin’s American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer (New York: Knopf, 2005).
brought onboard his longtime collaborators, director Peter Sellars and librettist Alice Goodman. Together, they embarked on the opera project that became *Doctor Atomic* (2005).

The question of how to bring the bomb—and thus Hiroshima—to the stage formed the basis of the conceptual and musical challenges presented to Adams and his creative team by the Oppenheimer story. Initial research for the opera alerted Adams, Sellars, and Goodman to the deep disjunctive structures of the bomb’s complex historiography. Most striking were the conflicting moral perspectives that scientists, biographers, and historians faced in determining not only the efficacy of the bomb’s use in Japan, but also whether Oppenheimer belonged with the guiltless or the tragic Promethean mortals who dared to play with fire. Coming up with a way to represent these ethical quandaries found the opera collaborators at cross-purposes. Goodman responded by drafting an absurdist science fiction scenario but eventually abandoned the project. In the wake of her departure, Adams and Sellars turned to documentary sources for the libretto, finding that the language of collage—of cutting, removal, and addition—was in fact an apt way to re-enact the disjunctive structures of the subject itself.

Adams strained to make the assemblage of fractured texts musical. Sketches indicate a creative process that hovers in the space between the unstable, instinctive response that is the first draft and the “practice”—in Adams’s case, his reliance on the safety of convention and borrowed material. In other words, he seemed to be groping towards a sound world that straddled a line between intuitive outburst and careful packaging. As the libretto became burdened with references, the score likewise became a progression of uneven sonic quotations. After a while, however, Adams got stuck. Although he was no stranger to giving expression to acts of acute human crisis, as seen in *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), searching for an appropriate musical response to the horror of Hiroshima found him at a loss for his own creative language. Desperate,
he sought shelter in borrowings, turning to the musical strategies he used in *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2002), a 9/11 memorial piece that features text and sound fragments drawn from documentary sources. In a sense, the turn to the use of borrowed musical material in the opera gave Adams an opportunity to shy away from having to take a strong moral stance on Oppenheimer, the bomb, and Hiroshima. But it also allowed him to summon a community of other voices to speak somehow to the “unspeakable”\(^4\) nature of the topic, raising the question of whether or not an artist alone can respond effectively to tragedy.

Sources show that Adams and Sellars each struggled separately with their subject without reaching a final consensus about the meaning of Oppenheimer the man or the event that made real the most nightmarish imaginings of the Cold War, much less the consequences of the atomic age. The messy process of creating the libretto and score seems to reflect not only their attraction to ambiguity and the ethics of collage as a form of documentary practice, but also a fundamental indecision about the subject, mirrored in Adams's incessant revisions to his score. The opera was performed but continues to be revised. In a sense, *Atomic* remains unfinished, a work-in-progress. Ultimately, the libretto, the score, the revisions, and the restagings all seek to solve problems that are never clearly identified in the opera, problems that are perhaps purposefully and knowingly unsolvable. Nevertheless, the opera still bears the marks of struggle such that its success remains likewise undefined. In other words, the fraught compositional history of *Atomic* reflects not simply the circumstances of the commission or the conflicts between the creative personalities but instead reveals the very tensions at the heart of the subject whose implications have, in fact, not come to an end.

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When Rosenberg approached Adams about the Oppenheimer project in 2000, it had been nearly a decade since he had composed *Klinghoffer*, a work whose controversial history continued to shadow over him. Moreover, the collaborations with Sellars and Goodman on *Nixon in China* (1987) and *Klinghoffer* had been tense and emotionally exhausting; in Sellars’s words, “it’s a miracle no one killed each other.” After *Klinghoffer*, the creative trio dispersed. Adams spent the remainder of the nineties focused on orchestral works and his international conducting career. Goodman left her writing career behind and became a Church of England curate. Sellars carried on and continued to stage works throughout Europe, feeling as if he had been “run out of the American opera scene.” Until Rosenberg’s proposal, Adams thought a commission from a major American opera house seemed a near impossibility. Despite his initial reluctance, Rosenberg persevered to convince the composer of its merits. She threw out counter-proposals. “It wouldn’t have to be Oppenheimer,” Rosenberg explained. “We could think of all kinds of subjects. I mean, you could go off and do something on cloning or there are all sorts of subjects that would lend themselves. This just would be my idea for it.” Eventually, he agreed to give the Oppenheimer opera some thought.


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5 Peter Sellars, personal communication with the author, 30 March 2013.
6 Ibid.
7 Rosenberg, interview with Crawford, “*Doctor Atomic*: The Making of an American Opera.”
8 In an interview with the author on June 17, 2013, Adams recalled, “The first book I read was Richard Rhodes’s book, to use a *New York Times* adjective, his ‘magisterial’ work, and it is a great work, and I’ve since become very good friends with him, and I’m deeply grateful for that work.”
discovery that a chain reaction in uranium could lead to a massive explosion. At the time, it was beyond Szilard’s imagination that such a finding in combination with a team of scientists and an arms race with the Germans would lead to the successful testing and use of a nuclear weapon. By 1945, 8,750 top-secret workers had been recruited to work on the first atomic bomb project directed by Oppenheimer at a site near Los Alamos, New Mexico. Many of the scientists were concerned with the ethical dimensions of their work, horrified by the thought that the weapon might be used on civilian populations. Others were driven by the prospect; some were morally ambivalent. By the time the bomb, nicknamed “The Gadget,” was ready for testing in New Mexico’s Jornada del Muerto desert (Oppenheimer code-named the site “Trinity” after John Donne’s sonnet, “Batter My Heart, Three Person’d God”) Germany had surrendered. Yet there was pressure to test the weapon before President Truman would tell Stalin about the secret technology in Potsdam on July 17, 1945. (Unbeknownst to Truman, Stalin had in fact known about the Manhattan Project since 1943 via Klaus Fuchs, a German physicist and spy who reported to the Russians directly from Los Alamos.)

Despite bad weather, “The Gadget” detonated successfully in the early morning of July 16, 1945. “When it went off, in the New Mexico dawn, that first atomic bomb,” Oppenheimer recalled, “we thought of the legend of Prometheus, of that deep sense of guilt in man’s new powers, that reflects his recognition of evil, and his long knowledge of it.”9 Meanwhile, the Pacific War continued on, as barbaric and bloody as it began. The Truman administration was impatient to end the “smashing, burning, killing, [and] dying.”10 Two weeks after the Trinity test, Truman called for “the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces” with an alternative

10 Ibid., 698.
of “prompt and utter destruction.” Japanese Prime Minister, Baron Kantaro Suzuki, responded with silence. By this point, there was little question in Truman’s mind that the atomic bomb was the “eminently suitable weapon” to end the war.

On August 6, 1945 at 8:16 a.m., Little Boy exploded in Hiroshima, killing 80,000 people upon impact and another 60,000 by radiation poisoning in the months following. Three days later, on August 9, 1945, a B-29 named Bock’s Car dropped Fat Man on the port city of Nagasaki, with casualties totaling 140,000 by the end of 1945. As Rhodes describes,

The world of the dead is a different place from the world of the living and it is hardly possible to visit there. That day in Hiroshima the two worlds nearly converged...Only the living, however inundated, can describe the dead; but where death claimed nine out of ten, or closer to the hypocenter, ten out of ten, a living voice describing necessarily distorts. Survivors are like us; but the dead are radically changed, without voice or civil rights or recourse.

Rhodes neither broaches the complexity of Oppenheimer’s feelings about Hiroshima nor does he foreshadow the harrowing saga that stripped Oppenheimer of his security clearance after Edward Teller told the FBI he believed Oppenheimer’s opposition to the H-bomb was on “direct orders from Moscow.” Rather, Rhodes ends his account with a probing analysis of the disturbing implications of nuclear weaponry, citing Oppenheimer’s concern for the future:

It did not take atomic weapons to make war terrible...It did not take atomic weapons to make man want peace, a peace that would last. But the atomic bomb was the turn of the screw. It has made the prospect of future war unendurable. It has led us up those last few steps to the mountain pass; and beyond there is a different country.

11 Ibid., 692.
12 Ibid., 693.
13 Ibid., 715.
15 Oppenheimer in a commencement address delivered in 1946, quoted in Rhodes, The Making of the Atomic Bomb, 778.
On the other side of the mountain was nothingness. The path to resist it involved a maze the world entered in 1945, and one out of which most national and world leaders continue to struggle to find a way. Oppenheimer attempted to address the nightmare he created, but the psychology of the nation turned against him in a McCarthy-ite attack of paralyzing magnitude. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, few knew what to say or how to talk about the bomb. Aversion and denial took its place; the thought of complete destruction silenced even the most intelligent voices. This muteness infiltrated into Cold War politics. Even though nations and leaders used the threat of nuclear weapons in order to not use them, the need for a political method to address the moral dimensions of the technology was met, up until the end of the twentieth century, with hollow disinclination.  

Adams found himself absorbed by the topic. He started paying close attention to daily headlines about nuclear weapons (in 2000, some 30,000 nuclear warheads existed worldwide, a positive statistic; the number had been over 60,000 in 1980). At the time, the media highlighted the possibilities of nuclear stockpiling in North Korea, Iran, and Iraq and the proposition of a more robust U.S. national missile defense system supported by, among other politicians, Governor George W. Bush. Adams came to realize that the threat of mass extinction had “dominated the psychic activity” of his adolescence. “The mushroom cloud was a sinister consort to my young thoughts,” Adams reflected,

16 Until recently, even the United Nations did not have a system in place for confronting the moral dimensions of weapons of mass destruction. Jonathan Schell writes at length about this issue in The Unfinished Twentieth Century: The Crisis of Weapons of Mass Destruction (London: Verso, 2001).
a source of existential terror that seemed permanently factored into every one of life’s decisions, the ultimate annihilator of any positive emotions or hopes. I had come of age during the era of heated rhetoric and skittish paranoia that typified the Cold War, and the small-town, rural idyll of my childhood was always clouded by the absurdities of air-raid drills, ‘family’ bomb shelters, arsenals of nuclear warheads, and the chatter of politicians invoking the evils that lurked behind what Churchill with his gift for epithets had so evocatively dubbed the ‘Iron Curtain.’

The urgency of the topic surmounted any sense of intimidation by the laborious realities of writing another grand opera. “It was a theme,” Adams noted, “worthy of my time.”

In the fall of 2000, Adams pitched the idea to Sellars, who, enthused, shared it with Goodman. To Adams’s surprise, Goodman expressed interest in writing the libretto. The collaborators were busy in their individual pursuits at the time: Sellars was preoccupied with his duties as artistic director of the Adelaide Festival in Australia, a position from which he resigned in late 2001; Goodman was engrossed in her new job as Church of England curate; Adams was immersed in composing an orchestral work, Guide to Strange Places, and American Berserk for solo piano, both written in 2000 and 2001. Yet they each agreed to read up on the topic, starting with a shared bibliography.


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19 Ibid.
ed. Michael Stoff, Jonathan Fanton, R. Hal Williams (1991), among other titles. The selections themselves are significant for their diversity in genre (autobiographical accounts, letters, government documents), as well as the moral positions conveyed therein. Each provided a kind of Rashomon effect, a multitude of stories and opinions, often contradictory, about the bomb. A brief survey of these selections marshals evidence towards the complexities of chronicling the bomb’s creation and the moral conundrums this created for scientists, historians, and artists alike.

The autobiographies of Edward Teller and General Leslie Groves presented Adams, Sellars, and Goodman with the most conservative view of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a triumphant military success. In Teller’s account of his “lone” battle to build the H-bomb, he argues that “the legacy of Hiroshima” must be understood as a reminder of America’s superior modern power. The exploitation of nuclear weapons, in Teller’s view, was the surest way to safeguard the security of the United States. His tale ends with a condemnation of disarmament measures and the post-war attitude of his former colleague, Oppenheimer, who sought to implement arms control. In a similar vein, Groves’s Now it Can Be Told seeks to overturn the “misinformed conjecture” of horror after Hiroshima that led many Americans “to feel embarrassed or discomfited by their country’s greatest single scientific success.” The account, also autobiographical, outlines Groves’s duties as army general manager of the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos from 1942-46 and the methods of operations there. These respective

narratives of military heroism left a strong impression on the opera creators, prompting them to
develop in their earliest conceptual sketches a cynical critique of America’s developing military
to

In a considerably different light, Oppenheimer’s letters provided for the creative team the
most penetrating view into the physicist’s changing relationship with science, technology, and
military power.\textsuperscript{25} Buried within them are kernels of Oppenheimer’s proclivity for philosophy,
ancient languages, and poetry—in Adams’s words, his “labyrinthine complexity.”\textsuperscript{26} But
Oppenheimer’s wartime letters, particularly his correspondence with his brother Frank, bear no
evidence of his moral anguish over the implications of the bomb. On the contrary, they show that
Oppenheimer was no less affected than others by the demands of the war, the excitement and
temptation of scientific discovery, and the influence of deadlines and pressing duties. Only after
Hiroshima, in speeches and in other public forums, did Oppenheimer express vague echoes of
remorse over the nightmare he helped create and then later attempted to control.

Oppenheimer had in fact, for years, defied biographers and historians. In 2001, the year
Adams, Sellars, and Goodman were enmeshed in their research, a detailed account of
Oppenheimer’s life had yet to be written. Thomas Powers later attributed this gap in the literature
to “the curse of Oppenheimer.”\textsuperscript{27} “Aspiring biographers,” Powers wrote, “came to loathe the
company of the man and dropped their projects.” The greatest difficulty for scholars such as
Martin Sherwin, who spent 25 years attempting to write Oppenheimer’s life and legacy, seemed
to lie in the problem of capturing the mercurial complexity of the physicist whose brilliance,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{25} Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections, ed. Alice Kimball Smith and Charles Weiner
\textsuperscript{26} Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 274.
2005.
\end{flushright}
charismatic personality, and greatest accomplishment (the bomb and its use), followed by public humiliation and the tormented final years of his life eluded conventional storytelling.\textsuperscript{28} Historians found themselves torn between understanding Oppenheimer as either a tragic victim with a price to pay for what he had created or as a hero of profound scientific achievement, a legislator, as it were, of humanity’s future. The task was made even more formidable by the scarcity of evidence for Oppenheimer’s conflicted thoughts about his invention. Only a few of his thoughts are on record.\textsuperscript{29} Recollections of friends and family, including Oppenheimer’s brother Frank and fellow physicists Robert Serber and Isador Rabi, testify to the depression that took over the latter part of his life and the feeling that he somehow deserved public ruin.\textsuperscript{30} The 1953-54 hearing at which Teller testified against his former colleague, stripping Oppenheimer of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid. In Powers’s review of a number of Oppenheimer books released in 2005, he discusses the long, harrowing genesis of Bird and Sherwin’s account, \textit{American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer} (2005), which took a quarter of a century to complete, due precisely to the subject’s difficulties and the lengthy process of conducting more than one hundred interviews with people who knew Oppenheimer. For Powers, this was the first book that embodied in a complete form the challenges and complexities of “a half-century’s effort in writing the history of the atomic bomb.”
\item Oppenheimer’s conflicted feelings about the bomb can be traced to the following remarks. In a farewell speech as Oppenheimer exited Los Alamos in October 1945, he commented that the pride in the bomb “must be tempered with a profound concern. If atomic bombs are to be added as new weapons to the arsenals of a warring world…then the time will come when mankind will curse the names of Los Alamos and Hiroshima.” In another instance, Oppenheimer stated in an address given to the American Philosophical Society, also in October 1945, “We have made a thing, a most terrible weapon that has altered abruptly and profoundly the nature of the world…a thing that by all the standards of the world we grew up in is an evil thing. And by doing so we have raised again the question of whether science is good for man.” That same month, Truman invited Oppenheimer to the White House to celebrate the physicist-hero who helped end the war. Oppenheimer privately confessed, “Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands.” Later, the President was heard to mutter, “Blood on his hands, dammit, he hasn’t half as much blood on his hands as I have. You just don’t go around belly-aching about it. I don’t ever want to see that son-of-a-bitch crybaby scientist in this office ever again.” Quoted in Bird and Sherwin, \textit{American Prometheus}, 329, 323, and 332.
\item These remarks are drawn out in interviews by Sherwin and filmmaker Jon Else and featured in the documentary, \textit{The Day After Trinity: J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb}, DVD, dir. by Jon Else (Image Entertainment DVD, 1980).
\end{enumerate}
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his security clearance, achieved, in the words of Rabi, “just what his opponents wanted to achieve; it destroyed him.”

_The Manhattan Project: A Documentary Introduction to the Atomic Age_, a collection of declassified government documents published under the Freedom of Information Act in 1991, presented the creators with the most immediate account of the inner workings of the Manhattan Project. The anthology begins with Albert Einstein’s letter, dated August 2, 1939, informing Franklin Delano Roosevelt that the Nazis were likely creating a nuclear weapon. This letter launched the Manhattan Project, the largest, most expensive project in military history kept secret from all but a few informed individuals (not even Truman knew about it until after the death of FDR in April 1945). The collection of documents also includes private memos about whether or not to inform the Kremlin of the project (this infuriated Stalin, who already knew about the project), as well as the Declaration of Trust between FDR and Churchill. Most unsettling for the opera creators were documents surrounding the latter part of the project: the Trinity test, Japanese target selection, the radiological effects of the bomb, the Franck report (the official document submitted to the President of the United States recommending that the bomb not be used on civilian populations), and a transcript of a perverse conversation between Groves and a military doctor, Colonel Rea, about the blistered, radiation-poisoned bodies on the streets of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The documents gave the most direct view into the complexities of wartime politics, the moral unrest experienced by scientists such as Leo Szilard and Robert Wilson, and the violence of the events and aftermath of Hiroshima. There was so much to say about the subject; and yet, still, there was nothing to say.

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31 Bird and Sherwin, _American Prometheus_, 551.
On February 1, 2002, two years after Rosenberg’s initial proposal, Adams formally committed to the opera project provisionally subtitled “An American Faust.” The composer met again with Rosenberg and Cranna in San Francisco, where they discussed, among other things, preliminary budgets and timelines, possible co-commissioners, and that Sellars and Goodman were to come onboard. “Peter was part of the equation very early on,” Rosenberg recalled, “and John was very clear and adamant that he wanted Alice Goodman.” Though thrilled with the idea of Sellars as director, Rosenberg had reservations about Goodman. She reminded Adams that Goodman had backed out of two other Adams-Sellars collaborations, I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky (1995) and El Niño (2000), leaving Adams “in the lurch twice.” Adams defended his collaborator, telling Rosenberg that Goodman had been in the midst of turmoil in her family life. This time would be different, he assured her. Yet Adams had private doubts about Goodman, too. “I knew Alice had it in her to do something really great,” he noted. “I just had to see for myself if she could do it.”

Throughout the spring of 2002, Adams started thinking about the musical language for the opera. From the outset, he knew he wanted to explore the musical resonances of physics and

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32 Kip Cranna, timeline, reproduced in Ebright, “Echoes of the Avant-Garde.”
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid. Rosenberg recapitulated Adams’s defense of Goodman: “[John explained] she had converted to becoming an Episcopal priest. And had moved from Boston—they wouldn’t ordain her in Massachusetts, so she moved to England, where she was ordained, and then was given a parish, and there were all kinds of things going on with her, you know, with her husband and things. So he said, ‘It was just that she could not focus. There was just too much going on.’ But he said, ‘That’s all fine now. She’s got her parish in the south of Birmingham.’”
36 Adams, interview with the author, 17 June 2013.
the music of science fiction films. For inspiration, he turned to Edgard Varèse. The remote inner spaces evoked by Varèse in his spectral tapestries, such as *Hyperprism* (1923), a sonic rendering of the movement of light particles, and, later, his use of raw acoustic material in *Deserts* (1955), itself an apocalyptic study, gave Adams a model for thinking through the compositional and performance dimensions of a work about man’s relationship to science and technology.

Also among the initial muses for the Oppenheimer project was, dichotomously, Mozart. Sellars imagined, for instance, a domestic scene after *Così fan Tutte* (1790) that involved a weirdly comedic “fiancée swap” between the Oppenheimers, Tellers, and the Native American Maid. Sellars also drew links between *Don Giovanni* (1787) and Oppenheimer, namely the notion of a protagonist emblematizing forces beyond his control: Eros in Don Giovanni’s case, Pandora in Oppenheimer’s. Moreover, the central paradox of *Don Giovanni*—the assignment of the most appealing music to the least appealing character—grabbed Sellars, who encouraged Adams to study the score. Fig. 3.1 shows Adams’s notes on the vocal ranges of *Don Giovanni* made after a phone call with baritone Gerald Finley, for whom Adams wrote the part of Oppenheimer. Also scattered throughout Adams’s research file for the Oppenheimer opera are

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37 Ibid., 18 June 2013. “I vaguely remember I was influenced early on by Varèse,” Adams recalled. “Varèse seemed to be the perfect post-nuclear composer in a work like *Deserts*, a nuclear winter landscape. I compose a lot that way. I have other models in mind. I think a lot of artists do. So it was a combination of Varese and science fiction music, the music of some catastrophic sci-fi movie, which was the opening. I am not rigidly exclusionary about letting my influences inhabit my works. Such was the case, for instance, with Ives’s *The Unanswered Question* in *On Transmigration of Souls*, and, in a much bolder way, Beethoven in *Absolute Jest*."

38 The detail about *Così* is also found recorded in Rosenberg’s notes on the early synopsis, noted in a July 6, 2002 email and reproduced in Ebright, “Echoes of the Avant-Garde,” Appendix 5.

39 Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013. Sellars knew Mozart’s music intimately. He became famous for staging Mozart’s operas in provocative contemporary contexts, including *Così fan Tutte* in a diner on Cape Cod, *The Marriage of Figaro* in the Trump Tower, and *Don Giovanni* in Spanish Harlem.

![Figure 3.1](image.jpg)

**Figure 3.1.** John Adams, notes made after a phone conversation with Gerald Finley on the vocal ranges of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. 
ethos of Don Giovanni’s character. Allanbrook’s analysis, derived from her familiarity with Soren Kierkegaard’s view of Giovanni as a “primitive life force,” focuses on the music’s licentiousness versus the text’s virtuousness. It seemed to provide Adams creative fodder for working through the realities of portraying Oppenheimer, whose drive to understand the glittering energy of the stars led to him feel as if he had “known sin.”

In June 2002, Adams, Goodman, and Sellars met in Santa Monica, CA to draft the preliminary scenario for the Oppenheimer opera. They had each spent the previous year immersed in their research and had an abundance of material to discuss. Adams recalled that the meeting “was definitely a free form thing. Peter would have an idea and then Alice would counter it or more likely shoot it down, and I had a lot of ideas. I was particularly interested in the scientific aspect of it.” Their initial impulse was to cast the story as a riotous, violent Bacchanalia that would begin in the Los Alamos desert in 1945 and end in 1953 with Oppenheimer’s security hearing.

40 Kierkegaard remarked in Either/Or (1843) that the chief issue in Don Giovanni “is not desire in a particular individual but desire as a principle…The expression of this idea is Don Juan.” Kierkegaard then related this to music: “Don Juan continually hovers between being idea—that is, power, life—and being an individual…But when he is conceived in music, then I do not have the particular individual, then I have a force of nature.” Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Vol. 1, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 85 and 92. Allanbrook expands Kierkegaard’s discussion of Don Giovanni, a man who adopts the manners of each society in which he finds himself just as he ignores their moral codes. Allanbrook formulates his character as “placeless, chameleon-like, inarticulate, and empty.” Giovanni’s “force of nature,” Allanbrook shows, culminates in his one solo aria, “Fin ch’han dal vino.” Mozart sets it to a contredanse, the “classless, danceless” dance, a nod to the inauthentic disposition of his character. Wye J. Allanbrook, Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 220 and 253.

41 Oppenheimer wrote in an essay published in Technology Review (1948), “In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.” Quoted in Bird and Sherwin, American Prometheus, 388.

42 Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013.
Figure 3.2. Alice Goodman, *Doctor Atomic* original scenario (June 2002).
Goodman sketched a grotesque portrait of black humor, a narrative of the bomb as a symbol of American heroism overturned so a world of unmitigated horror, excess, and carnality could not only be seen but also heard (Fig. 3.2). Twisted juxtapositions of the comic and serious and haphazard combinations of fact and fantasy were integral to the hedonism of her apocalyptic representation. Against a post-nuclear backdrop featuring “monsters in the desert,” the sketch foregrounds gender politics, splitting the chorus into “men of science” and “women of numbing work.” Desires of the flesh dominate those of the spirit. The actors in the tale are anxious, overwhelmed, forced to swill cocktails to numb the pain of it all. “This is our Hitchcock movie—smooth, sharp, paranoid, sexy,” Goodman wrote. The drama climaxes in a “Hiroshima celebration—fucking like bunnies,” with sex and death conflated, savagery dominating. Goodman took refuge in cynicism, insisting that her characters, even the most deeply introspective and morally conscientious ones such as Oppenheimer, express “no indignation at the end.”

The genre of the 1950s science fiction film provided an entrance of sorts into the diablerie of nuclear holocaust. Goodman likely knew Susan Sontag’s essay, “The Imagination

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43 The conflation of sex and death most readily connotes Freud’s theory of the death drive pitted against the drive for life (later coined Thanatos versus Eros), first proposed in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920). Goodman also refers to the baby boom on site in Los Alamos, a fact that General Groves emphasizes in his account, Now It Can Be Told.

44 When speaking with Adams about the sketch, he recalled, “I don’t know how the science fiction thing came in. I suspect it was because the way I first learned about atomic bombs as a kid was watching science fiction movies in my local theater. Those were the days before they were on television when we went to a theater in Concord, New Hampshire and saw some movie about a monster appearing out of nowhere in the Nevada desert after a nuclear test. Somehow that became a riff. Our first sketch included a sort of absurdist scene, a post-nuclear landscape with monsters. I thought it would be entertaining. Later we knew we had to get more serious.” Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013.
of Disaster,” which examines how science fiction films enable a detached view of catastrophe, inviting audiences to escape from real-life terror and to reflect upon it. For Sontag, the convergence of a “largely debased commercial art product and the most profound dilemmas of the contemporary situation” made the genre an effective medium in which “lurk[ed] the deepest anxieties of anxieties of contemporary existence.” At the same time, Sontag cautioned, “the imagery of disaster in science fiction films is above all the emblem of an inadequate response.”

Like the science fiction film, Goodman spared us the actual horror by drawing attention to Hiroshima and Nagasaki through the guise of monsters rather than confronting the fact that these bestial acts were in fact not those of sci-fi fantasy creatures but of our own human species.

The distortion of the historical record continues in Goodman’s Act II, in which she juxtaposes America’s rising military power and Oppenheimer’s downward fall from the grace of the American government. The sketch portrays Oppenheimer’s decline as a “big fresco of un-American activities,” an image implying a multitude of religious connotations, as well as musical and theatrical opportunities that would swell, enlarge, and expand the horribleness of it all. The act unfolds with Oppenheimer’s HUAC hearing, represented as a kind of crucifixion, with a chorus of accusations led by the southern senator George Hickenlooper. After a Pacific explosion at Bikini Atoll, the sketch ends with a solemn chorus about King Judah, the head of the Bikini Islands tribe, whose displaced people became refugees of the atomic era. The image, too, refers to the eleven Old Testament monarchs of the ancient land of Israel, the Kings of Judah, an

47 Ibid., 224.
48 Art Spiegelman employed this tactic forcefully in his comic book about the Holocaust, Maus: A Survivor’s Tale (New York: Pantheon, 1992). For a compelling critique of Maus, see Dominick LaCapra, “‘Twas the Night Before Christmas: Art Spiegelman’s Maus,” in History and Memory After Auschwitz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 139-179.
allusion to the morality tale told in the Hebrew Bible: when sinful kings were in power, Judah became a violent wasteland; when honorable kings reigned, the kingdom prospered.\textsuperscript{49} Goodman perhaps drew parallels between the Kings of Judah and the perilous relationship between Oppenheimer and Teller, both Jewish, with Oppenheimer as the honorable voice of reason and Teller as the sinful proponent of nuclear arsenal.

No written evidence of Sellars’s role in the meeting exists, although, according to Adams, his role was one of urgent brainstorming and sustained belief in the virtue of the project.\textsuperscript{50} Adams, though, took detailed notes. His handwritten remarks, shown in Figs. 3.3a-b, follow the basic contours of Goodman’s sketch, although they are decidedly tamer, leaving out the hedonistic references to sex and terror that contribute to the shock value of her rendering. Adams made note of the gendered divisions of labor, as well as the Bacchanalia, the “party scene,” following Hiroshima—a “wild jubilation with moments of awful recognition”—suggestive that he was, for the most part, committed to Goodman’s approach. Moreover, Adams’s notes indicate he was already thinking about specific character interactions and musical details. For instance, he incorporated references to “bad weather at Trinity,” as well as exchanges between Oppenheimer and Kitty (with Oppie “at his most hawkish” and Kitty “disgusted, angry”) and Oppenheimer and Groves (i.e. “Oppie and Groves strung out”). Adams, too, jotted thoughts on the instrumental fallout sequence, a “long, soft musical ostinato with fragments of dialogue, interspersed radio transmissions, and scientists taking bets.” This would become the extended countdown in a series of orchestral clocks, each racing to zero.


\textsuperscript{50} Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013.
Figure 3.3a. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, notes on original scenario (June 2002).
On the morning of June 30, 2002, Adams, Sellars, and Goodman drove from Santa Monica to San Francisco to present the preliminary scenario to Rosenberg and Cranna. Sitting at a roundtable in an executive office at the San Francisco Opera House, Sellars raced through the scenario with enthusiasm. Goodman interrupted sporadically to correct or punctuate his remarks. Adams remained somewhat more reserved. Rosenberg took exhaustive notes at this meeting, attempting to capture Sellars’s manic style: “Men of Science; Boys at Work: enthralled with the cosmic splendor of advanced physics; Richard Feynmann [sp. Feinmann] dazzle of ricochet and surprise; discussion moving at incredible pace: science taking off!!! Incredible concentration of brilliance.” Rosenberg’s notes continue in this exclamatory fashion (capitalization belongs to Rosenberg): “5:00 a.m. bomb!!! THE WORLD LITERALLY CHANGES AT THIS MOMENT.” She found the scenario’s co-mingled historical and imaginary modes irresistible. “It was very exciting,” Rosenberg recalled. “I mean, at that point,

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52 Rosenberg, email to co-producers, 6 July 2002, reproduced in Ebright, “Echoes of the Avant-Garde.”
53 Ibid.
the second act was to be 1954, the House Un-American Activities [Committee], and the Bikini Island tests…and sort of the whole Technicolor kind of aesthetic of 1954, and Tupperware.”

On July 7, 2002, Rosenberg sent Adams the preliminary commissioning agreement for the opera “on the subject having to do with J. Robert Oppenheimer.” The agreement outlined a schedule of delivery that gave Adams, Goodman, and Sellars a reasonable timeframe to develop the libretto, music, and staging. Several back-and-forth exchanges between Adams, Rosenberg, and Cranna ensued. They negotiated details such as casting and Adams’s preference to have the San Francisco Opera as lead commissioner, with other opera companies drawn in as co-producers of the physical production. Adams also requested to drop the “American Faust” subtitle, feeling that the Oppenheimer story exceeded Goethe’s myth in its complexity. “Forget Faust – the bomb itself is an archetypal myth that we live with, of destruction and what science can do. And Oppenheimer himself represents another American archetype, of the scientific genius,” he told Joshua Kosman of the San Francisco Chronicle later that year. Rosenberg

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55 The opera did not have a name at this point. The preliminary commissioning agreement, dated July 7, 2002, is housed in Adams’s archive.
56 The commissioning agreement, written and negotiated by Kip Cranna, included the following deadlines: the preliminary vocal score due May 1, 2004, the final vocal score due January 1, 2005, the full orchestral score due April 1, 2005, the orchestral parts due May 1, 2005, and the world premiere slated for September 2005 (the actual date of the premiere was October 1, 2005). The agreement outlined a payment schedule according to the delivery timetable, as well as information about potential co-commissioners (yet to be determined as of the signing date), guidelines for timing (“no more than three and one half hours”), singers and orchestra size (“no more than twelve principals, forty-five choristers, and an orchestra of 3-3-3-3, 4-3-3-1, 2 percussion plus timpani, harp, keyboard, and strings comprising a maximum of 12-9-7-6-5, plus additional instruments as mutually agreed”). Also included in the initial agreement were terms and conditions regarding the services of Adams’s publisher (Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.), copying of scores, granting of copyright, and assigned credits to Goodman and Sellars.
57 Joshua Kosman, “Opera gives Adams new commission / Work will focus on Oppenheimer,” San Francisco Chronicle, 12 December 2002. The rhetoric Adams uses in his rejection of Faust refers to his affinity for Jungian psychology, a field that has long exerted a strong, even spiritual, influence on the composer’s creative efforts. For a critique of Adams and the vague archetypal
acquiesced to the composer’s requests. On October 9, 2002, Adams signed the commissioning agreement, formally launching the opera project that would become *Doctor Atomic*.  

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Rosenberg, unbeknownst to Adams, remained skeptical that Goodman would actually deliver a libretto. In December 2002, just after formally announcing the commission, Rosenberg met with Goodman in London to check on her progress. “She didn’t show me anything she’d written, because she hadn’t written anything yet,” Rosenberg recalled. “I thought, Okay, just once she finally sits down—you know, this kind of thing, it’ll be there, and she will just write it. So I came back and I reassured John.” Yet by the end of February 2003, the libretto was still nowhere in sight. Despite another visit to London (Goodman again declined to show Rosenberg any written material), Rosenberg returned somehow convinced that the libretto would soon be in progress. She even agreed to change Goodman’s deadlines. Adams, however, was less optimistic. “She’s gone underground,” he told Rosenberg. “She hasn’t answered one email.”

In April 2003, nearly a year after the initial planning meeting in Santa Monica, Adams received a letter from Goodman stating that she would be withdrawing from the project because


58 The October 9, 2002 signing date differs from Cranna’s timeline (reproduced in Ebright), which gives the date of November 9, 2002. The signed document with the October 9, 2002 date is located in Adams’s archival files and is considered the definitive date.

59 Rosenberg, interview with Crawford, “*Doctor Atomic*: The Making of an American Opera.”

60 Ibid. Rosenberg commented on her second visit to check on Goodman: “By February [2003], though, [John] was really, really anxious. I mean, he was really getting upset…He said, ‘I can’t even reach her.’ So again, I had to go to England, because we needed to negotiate a co-production that we were doing [with the] English National Opera. So I said, ‘I’ll talk to her again.’ So I did. And again, I was reassured. Naively. And I came back, and I said to John, ‘you know, she just has not been able to get to it.’ I agreed with her, then, that we would change her deadline, so she had to get the whole thing in by the first of June [of 2003].”

61 Ibid. Adams, quoted by Rosenberg.
she found the scenario “really anti-Semitic.” The accusation shocked Adams. “It was just a completely bizarre statement to make,” Rosenberg later commented, “because at no point was there any intimation, any Jewish theme at all. You know? Oppenheimer’s Jewish, Teller’s Jewish—a lot of scientists are Jewish…But we weren’t debunking any of them, we weren’t going after anyone.” The worst part, Rosenberg mentioned, was that Goodman “never explained. It was just—it was completely off the wall.”

Goodman did eventually offer a public explanation. In 2004, she told the London Telegraph, “I wasn’t there just to put John’s ideas into words. Now, I feel my role has diminished; the parameters have narrowed. And it’s not unconnected with the fact that John is now the most famous, most performed living composer in the world…and I’m a curate in Kidderminster.” The following year, Goodman changed her tune, informing Tom Service of The Guardian that she left the project because she

found that the structure John and Peter had got together with me was really anti-Semitic, with Oppenheimer as the good blue-eyed Jew and Edward Teller as the bad limping one with the greasy hair, and a host of virtuous native Americans pitted against the refugee physicists out in the New Mexico desert. I couldn’t see how it could be anything but deeply offensive.

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62 Adams, interview with the author, 17 June 2013. According to Adams, he destroyed the letter. Rosenberg, however, confirmed its existence: “At some point—I can’t remember; I think it was March, or the beginning of April [2003], I’d have to ask John—she sent John a very bizarre letter and said that she was withdrawing because it was an anti-Semitic project.” Rosenberg, interview with Crawford, “Doctor Atomic: The Making of an American Opera.”


64 Ibid.

65 Goodman, interview with Michael White, “God’s opera writer,” Telegraph, 8 February 2004. The quote continues: “John is sensitive and highly strung, and I can be very disagreeable, but he always trusted me to do what was right. We had what I would call a polyphonic collaboration where we were thinking/feeling/doing things that weren’t quite ad idem and didn’t have to be.”

66 Goodman, interview with Tom Service, “This was the start of a new epoch in human history,” The Guardian, 29 September 2005.
Adams, infuriated, responded, “her preposterous reason for not being able to deliver a libretto strikes me as speaking more about her own private preoccupations than about the reality of the Oppenheimer story.” The exchange, a painful blow to the composer, would end their working ties once and for all.

Goodman waited until June 2003 to submit her formal resignation to the San Francisco Opera. Adams needed to resolve the situation quickly. He had more than a year’s worth of musical ideas, many of which he would eventually discard, a large amount of research material, and ten months until his first deadline. He briefly considered another librettist, a “poet in Princeton,” whose name he declined to mention. But rather than bring onboard a new collaborator who would have had to adapt to Adams’s creative rhythms and to whom Adams would have had to brief on more than two years of research, he convinced Sellars to assemble a libretto from the research material they had already compiled.

The decision to confine the creative act to largely borrowed material was part of a trend. Adams had compiled a collage libretto for El Niño with Sellars in 2000. Two years later, after receiving the commission from the New York Philharmonic for On the Transmigration of Souls (2002), Adams returned to the notion of the collage, weaving together borrowed melodies and a tape of city sounds, phrases taken from the memorial wall at Ground Zero, and the names of 9/11 victims into a documentary-mosaic. Although Adams and Sellars had been proponents of Goodman’s approach all along—“I really thought she’d turn that absurdist sketch into something

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67 Ibid. Adams, interview with Tom Service, “‘This was the start of a new epoch in human history.’”
69 Adams, interview with the author, 2 January 2013.
of high elevated poetic tone,” Adams recalled—the subject, in his words, “required a greater degree of sobriety. We knew we had to get more serious.”

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Over a series of meetings in London in June 2003, Adams and Sellars executed a reactionary shift away from Goodman’s original scenario, producing a storyline that favored the literal over the allegorical. They softened the original political message of the opera—a negative critique of American military policy—and focused instead on a new set of issues that involved a deeper engagement with questions of memorialization and mourning. Around this time, Sellars began to publicly articulate issues surrounding the “crisis of representation” that has long plagued Holocaust studies. “How to make a Hiroshima piece or a Holocaust piece—that’s a really serious question,” Sellars told Alex Ross. “Art can’t get above itself. It has also to recognize its own limits.” In another iteration, Sellars asserted, “Because the sheer horror [of Hiroshima] by itself, art is not up to that. There is nothing you can put on a stage or in a painting that matches the suffering of those people.” The only way to get around this representational conundrum, in Sellars’s view, was to use the “real” words of the “real” people who were there. “You cannot generalize,” he commented. “You’ve got to keep things as specific to the minute, as down to the wire, as possible.”

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70 Ibid., 18 June 2013.
71 Ibid.
72 For a critique of the debates surrounding the “crisis of representation,” see Trezise, “Unspeakable.”
75 Sellars, quoted in Ross, “Countdown.”
The use of ready-made material for the Oppenheimer project was an approach more germane to minimalism and its present-ness than introspective interpretation. Adams was familiar with Steve Reich’s use of taped and looped documentary footage in his minimalist tapestries *Come Out* (1966), a response to the 1964 Harlem Riot, and *Different Trains* (1988), a piece of interlaced Holocaust survivor testimonies. Scholars and journalists have attempted to explain these works in diverse terms. In one sense, the calming present-ness of minimalism can serve as a balm for past horrors or a kind of “blank slate,” allowing listeners to process their own feelings about tragedy.76 In another sense, minimalism’s emphasis on repetition can bring the experience back to life, serving as a conduit for political commentary on brutality and violence.77

More recently, Amy Lynn Wlodarski has explored the problems that shroud working artists like Reich who have relied on documentary sources to not only confront sensitive topics but also assert a kind of moral authority on those topics.78 To be sure, Adams’s turn to the use of

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78 Amy Lynn Wlodarski, “The Testimonial Aesthetics of Different Trains,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63:1 (2010): 99-141. Her examination of Reich’s use of recorded Holocaust testimonies in *Different Trains* responds to a generation of scholarship that has ascribed moral value to various representational modes based on their proximity to “facts.” Philosopher Berel Lang, who Wlodarski does not cite, is one such scholar who argues that when it comes to representing catastrophe “the facts speak for themselves.” A staunch supporter of Adorno’s oft-misunderstood claim, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Lang takes up the ethical flaws of figurative discourse as a means for confronting historical violence. For Lang,
documentary collage, first in *Transmigration* and then in *Atomic*, gave him seemingly objective access to the subjects, allowing him to shy away from having to make a moral statement about the tragedy. His strategy was, of course, nothing new. Commemorations of catastrophe, including 9/11, have habitually taken a documentary tone. But more than anything else, sources show that Adams’s reliance on the documentary in *Transmigration*, and subsequently in *Atomic*, was the result of not only an underlying tepidity about making a big artistic statement that might reveal unpleasant truths, but also of being at a loss for his own creative language. His solution for *Transmigration*—the summoning of a collective of other voices to speak to the unimaginable nature of the event—ended up exerting an enormous conceptual, technical, and even spiritual influence on *Atomic*. Thus a brief foray into the creative processes that shaped *Transmigration* is essential for understanding the presence of the documentary in the opera.

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For instance, subsequent musical responses to 9/11 in works by Michael Gordon and Steve Reich have called upon witness testimony and personal accounts. Gordon’s *The Sad Park* (2006) is a 30-minute work written for the Kronos Quartet and built from the pre-recorded commentary of preschoolers in Gordon’s son’s nursery school class who witnessed the 9/11. Reich’s *WTC 911* (2010), also written for the Kronos Quartet, uses sampled lines from fire department workers, voices from air traffic controllers, and neighborhood residents.

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Although the documentary ended up becoming the primary focus of *Transmigration*, Adams’s reliance on pre-existing texts was an afterthought. Once he accepted the commission from the New York Philharmonic in January of 2002, he experienced an artistic block, for it was not at all obvious to him how art should respond to the event. Unsure how to move forward, Adams revisited a notebook he began in 1994 with detailed notes on readings of Buddhism and Zen practice (Fig. 3.4). The notebook was also a personal journal, and eventually it became a sketchpad of ideas for *Transmigration*. Even though Adams does not align himself with any specific spiritual tradition, he has maintained an interest in Buddhism over the years. He recalled,

I come from a generation where an awareness of different spiritual traditions was a part of our upbringing. I grew up in a Unitarian tradition in New England and then in college read Kerouac and Ginsberg, and so it was obvious, especially when I came to California, that I would be exposed to Buddhism. I wouldn’t say it has been a guiding principle in my music like Christianity has been for Arvo Pärt or Judaism for Steve Reich. But for *Transmigration*, I found something deeply comforting in those teachings.  

Much later, Adams would return to the teachings of Buddhism for inspiration and comfort as he struggled to find a musical language for the atomic bomb.

In his college-ruled notebook with entries dating from 1994 to 2002, Adams outlined writings by Yasutani-Roshi, Charlotte Joko Beck, and Heinrich Zimmer that emphasize in different ways the fundamental precepts of Buddhism, including notions of non-attachment, of death as transmigration, and of mindfulness as a means to appease suffering. Adams paid

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80 Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013.
Figure 3.4. John Adams, notebook on Buddhist writings and ideas for *On the Transmigration of Souls* (1994-2002).
Commentary onZen by Yonetsu - Roshi
Mumonkan (a Gateless Barrier) by Mumon Kanzan
48 Koans
1. "Every koan is a unique expression of living, individual Buddha-nature which cannot be grasped by bifurcating intellect."
2. All points to a burning force before his parents were born, to his Real Self.
3. The aim of every koan is to liberate the mind from the traps of language.
4. 'Language fits over experience like a straight jacket.' - William Butler Yeats

Figure 3.5a. John Adams, notes on the Zen koan (January 11, 1995).

It is essential to take a time to become familiar with this practice now.
1. How else will you have the confidence and strength to do it when a moment of death (yourself or others) arrives?

Figure 3.5b. John Adams, additional notes on the Zen koan (January 11, 1995).
special attention to writings on the Zen koan, a paradoxical statement or question about tangible, down-to-earth objects, such as a dog or tree, designed to exhaust the rational mind and thus leave it open for an intuitive response. Adams’s notes on the koan are taken from Yasutani-Roshi’s commentary on the Mumonkan from *The Gateless Barrier*, a collection of 48 koans compiled in the thirteenth century and re-printed in *The Three Pillars of Zen* edited by Philip Kapleau.

“Every koan,” Adams copied (Fig. 3.5a), “is a unique expression of living, indivisible Buddha-nature which cannot be grasped by the bifurcating intellect…All point to a man’s face before his parents were born, to his real self…The aim of every koan is to liberate the mind from the snare of language.” Adams then wrote, citing a quote by William Golding, “Language fits over experience like a straight jacket.” The notes culminate in a final observation (Fig. 3.5b): “It is essential to take the time to become familiar with this practice now. How else will you have the confidence and strength to do it when the moment of death ([for] yourself or others) arrives?”

When death arrived with the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, imagery of building-bound airplanes and ash-covered rubble permeated our awareness faster than could be absorbed emotionally. For Adams, when it came to thinking about how to begin to respond to the event so soon after it happened, the koan seemed an appropriate place to start with its emphasis on the confines of the analytical mind for understanding things that are beyond comprehension, in this case 9/11. For the first month after accepting the *Transmigration* commission, he immersed himself in not only the language of the koan but also material surrounding the event.

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Adams soon came into contact with Barbara Haws, historian and archivist for the New York Philharmonic. She shared with him photographs she had taken from Ground Zero in the days following the attacks (Fig. 3.6). Adams was moved by the quiet grief expressed in the “missing” signs, namely messages posted by victims’ families such as “I love you” or “we miss you.” He also studied the wording found in the *New York Times* “Portraits of Grief” series, borrowing phrases from passengers on American Airlines Flight 11 (noted by Adams, mistakenly, as UA #11). He copied these phrases in the same notebook alongside the Buddhist teachings (Fig. 3.7),

**Figure 3.6.** Research for *On the Transmigration of Souls*: missing persons signs at Ground Zero (photograph by Barbara Haws, September 2001). Reprinted by permission.
discovering that the language of the messages, not unlike the koan, was in his words, “invariably of the most simple and direct kind. No one stunned by the shock of a sudden loss like this has the time or inclination to speak or write with eloquent or flowery language. Rather one speaks in the plainest words imaginable.”

There was a spiritual quality in the reticence of these shared expressions. Yet not wanting to impose any one spiritual agenda on the work, Adams soon shifted away from an explicit Buddhist response —“a lousy idea,” he later admitted—to what he termed a “memory space” featuring sampled recordings of short phrases and names of victims read by Adams, his children, and several friends.

“I always intended to use people with New-York-sounding accents,” he reflected. “I was just using my voice and my family’s voices as a sketchpad, but I never got around to finding anyone else to do it. Ultimately, I found it very touching to have my 18-year-old daughter Emily and my son Sam who was 16 at the time read

84 Adams, commentary about “On the Transmigration of Souls,” posted on the New York Philharmonic website, September 2002, http://www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html. The quote continues, “When we say ‘words fail’ in situations like this, we mean it. So I realized that one of the great challenges of composing this piece would be finding a way to set the humblest of expressions like ‘He was the apple of my father’s eye,’ or ‘She looks so full of life in that picture.’” In the same interview, Adams commented on his choice of text: “Finding the right text to set is half the challenge to creating such a piece. In the case of ‘Souls,’ I realized immediately that this event—‘9/11’—was already so well documented, the drama so over-described and the images so overexposed that I didn’t really need to worry about an ‘exposition’ of my material. Every listener hearing this piece will already know the story. So, in a way, that kind of ‘numbing familiarity’ gave me a certain freedom to work with the materials.”

85 Adams, interview with the author, 2 January 2013.

86 Ibid., 17 June 17 2013. In another source, Adams reflected, “Suddenly, the recordings took on this emotional core, and it became a very interesting thing. The piece is not about the towers falling, or politics, or who did it, or the violence. It’s really just about loss. Having my family on the soundtrack suddenly amplified for me exactly what the piece is about,” interview with Daniel Colvard in The John Adams Reader, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2006), 201.
Figure 3.7. John Adams, notes for *On the Transmigration of Souls* (February 2002).
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Texts for “Souls”

(except where noted, phrases come from missing persons posters photographed by Barbara Haw, archivist for the NY Phil)

1. “Missing…”
2. “Remember me. Please don’t ever forget me.”
3. “It was a beautiful day.”
4. “Missing: Jennifer de Jesus.”
5. “Missing: Manuel Damotta.”
6. “I see water and buildings… “…” (Quoted in numerous sources… last words of flight attendant on AA #93)
7. “We will miss you. We all love you. I’ll miss you, my brother.”
8. “Jeff was my uncle”
9. “you will never be forgotten”
10. “Looking for Isaias Rivera.”
12. “She looks so full of life in that picture
13. “it feels like yesterday that I saw your beautiful face…”
14. “I loved him from the start.”
15. “You will never be forgotten.”
16. “I miss his gentleness, his intelligence, his loyalty, his love.”
17. “Shalom!”
18. “Remember”
19. The daughter says: “He was the apple of my father’s eye.” (NY Times “Portraits in Grief”)
20. The father says: “I am so full of grief. My heart is absolutely shattered.” (NY Times “Portraits in Grief”) Rome Lissó
21. The young man says “…he was tall, extremely good-looking, and girls never talked to me when he was around.” (NY Times “Portraits in Grief”)
22. The neighbor says: “She had a voice like an angel, and she shared it with everyone, in good times and bad.” (NY Times “Portraits in Grief”)
23. The mother says: “He used to call me every day. I’m just waiting.”
24. The lover says: “Tomorrow will be three months, yet it feels like yesterday since I saw your beautiful face, saying, ‘Love you to the moon and back, forever.’” (NY Times “Portraits in Grief”)
25. The man’s wife says: “I loved him from the start. I wanted to dig him out. I know just where he is.” (NY Times “Portraits in Grief”) Lissó

Figure 3.8. John Adams, text for On the Transmigration of Souls (spring 2002).
these lines.” His solution for the *Transmigration* text, a nearly final draft shown in Fig. 3.8, was thus a conflation of the two conceptual threads—the koan and the “memory space”—meditating on a broad range of documentary material that ultimately moved the work beyond the immediate narrative of 9/11 into a broader contemplation on loss.

The notion of self-effacement, the escape from oneself as Promethean creator, extends to the technical structures that scaffold the piece. Adams subjected the sound samples to external, almost Cageian procedures in which he randomly placed pre-recorded fragments into an algorithmic digital processor. His reliance on an outside compositional apparatus was a Buddhist response of sorts—the emptying of the ego, the release of the self—even as it left him vulnerable to accusations of abdicated responsibility. He commented at length on the technical components of the process:

> These are the names; each one of these is a sample, and on the sample is the name of one of the victims. I put each sample assigned to a key map so that when I was composing the piece I could locate any voice or any word or phrase like ‘Windows on the World’ and ‘we miss you’…There was no musical magic behind it; it was just random. ‘We love you, Chick.’ The words ‘Port Authority’ never ended up being used. About the street sounds recorded in New York City, I went there and walked around late at night with a DAT recorder and got some of those sounds. I processed them and put them into various sound processors, granulators. Granulating is kind of like a distortion, it’s a digital process where you have an algorithm that can selectively chop up a sample. To use a metaphor, it’s like taking a sound and putting it into a coffee grinder. It’s a wonderful effect.

In a sense, the computer did parts of the composing, as if Adams wanted to at once erase his elocutionary presence and to impress it, a tension that lies at the heart of the work.

From a legal perspective, the use of documentary material was by no means a straightforward solution to the problem of representing catastrophe. The artistic use of the names

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87 Adams, interview with the author, 17 June 2013.
88 Ibid.
of deceased and living persons for *Transmigration* required the navigation of legalities, a process that also impacted how Adams and Sellars went about the libretto for *Atomic*. The same attorney Adams used for *Klinghoffer* determined that the use of names of the deceased is generally free from legal restrictions. The use of names of living persons and their messages to the deceased, however, proved far more complex. Over six pages of dense text, Adams’s attorney outlined the intricacies of the fair use act, notably that the use of these names would be permitted as long as they were not connected to the sale of goods during that person’s lifetime. *Transmigration*, the attorney noted, was questionable in this regard, falling into a gray zone. Individuals might take offense to the fact that Adams received a commission and royalties for the work. The attorney’s remarks prompted Adams to forego any such names or references to living persons. Adams did, however, move forward with using several phrases written by living family members whose memorial messages he found online (as shown in Fig. 3.7). The attorney made the final recommendation that Adams contact those family members, given that they wrote those messages under extremely personal and painful conditions. Yet rather than contact these people, Adams re-cast fragments of their messages. As far as he knows, no one objected to his use of the texts.

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89 Document produced by Brown Raysman Millstein Felder & Steiner, LLP, 28 April 2002, located in Adams’s *Transmigration* research file.
Figure 3.9. John Adams, preliminary jottings for *On the Transmigration of Souls* (February 2002).
The text for *Transmigration* had seemingly been settled. Now, Adams had to face the music. Preliminary jottings in Adams’s notebook show modal arrays and scales, including a modified octatonic collection (Fig. 3.9). These early notes indicate that he settled on the idea of grounding the work in the key of D minor, a symbolic choice since it is the key area associated with Leon Klinghoffer and his impending murder by a Palestinian terrorist in *Klinghoffer*. Nevertheless, Adams’s first musical sketch on manuscript paper is remarkably barren (Fig. 3.10). Like a paper tomb, a living document of writer’s block, the sketch shows open fifths notated messily on D and A in the alto and treble clefs, the dyad he ended up using to launch the quiet orchestral and choral opening. The sketch is striking for its emptiness, its silence indicative of Adams’s initial response to the event, to the muteness that so often accompanies shock. But its barrenness is also suggestive of a momentary impasse.

After his unsuccessful attempt to put pen to paper, Adams turned to pre-existing material for musical inspiration. He called upon Charles Ives’s *The Unanswered Question* (1908) to help him construct the void. Adams’s expanded variation on Ives’s trumpet melody, shown in Fig. 3.11, surfaces from time to time through the patchwork score. Nowhere does Adams transcribe the trumpet melody exactly; rather he explores its contours and intervallic relationships,
specifically Ives’s “questioning” intervals of the rising major seventh and falling minor third. Adams’s borrowing did not stop at with Ives’s trumpet melody. He also took the hymn from The Unanswered Question and put it into a software program called Digital Performer. “It’s an interesting program because it’s basically made for film editing so you can squeeze or expand things,” Adams commented. “I put the hymn in and then superimposed it over the taped voices, kind of like a medieval Parody Mass. Like an abstract artist, I just threw stuff at it and that’s why when you hear the Ives it sort of peaks out of the maze.”90 The references to Ives function as a kind of musical koan, a nod to the inexplicability of what happened that day. “Of course,”

90 Adams, interview with the author, 17 June 2013. Ives’s interest in spiritual matters, particularly the transcendental philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau, had always been an attraction for Adams, given Adams’s New England upbringing and his sense of connection with the natural world. In fact, it is no coincidence that Adams’s next work following Transmigration was a more fleshed-out homage to Ives, My Father Knew Charles Ives (2003).
Adams commented, “9/11 and all the loss of those people and loss of any people, anywhere in the world, from a sudden violent act is an unanswered question.”

In its final form, *Transmigration* is a concatenation of borrowed elements with nearly every measure haunted by the ghosts of 9/11 or the musical past. The autograph score is literally, in Adams words, a “mixing board,” a cut-and-paste document of found elements that fuse tape and real-time performance (Fig. 3.12). As in Varèse’s *Deserts* (1955), the blending of tape and live acoustics gave renewed impetus to the dehumanization of art. It redefined the relationship between the composer and his work by letting machines do part of the composing, abating the need for performers, the social aspect of music-making. In *Transmigration*, the taped sections invite the listener to engage in a fabricated act of memory. The resulting oscillations between taped and human voice, presence and absence, inside and outside, living and dead gave Adams a way to treat the text and music in a manner that suggested emergency, with all of the fragmented historical references colliding into the present moment. As with visual collage, any illusion of depth that might have otherwise been presented through a single frame vanishes as the music draws our attention to disparate sounds on the same shallow plane.

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91 Adams, interview with Daniel Colvard in *The John Adams Reader*, 198. This was certainly not the first time Adams would borrow from other composers. In his work *Harmonielehre* (1984–85) Adams turned to Schoenberg’s *Gurrelieder* (1911) and Sibelius’s Fourth Symphony (1910-11) as models. Likewise, Adams’s *Chamber Symphony* (1992) is modeled after Schoenberg’s Opus 9 (1906). *Naïve and Sentimental Music* (1997–98) takes its cue from Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony (1915). With *Transmigration*, he sought not an explicit model but rather, in his words, “a guardian angel” for helping him to find a way to respond to tragedy. See Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 266.

92 Ibid., 227.


In the end, the influence of Buddhism in *Transmigration*, though concealed, remains an undertow, hiding in the simple language of the text and Ives’s Transcendentalism. Adams, in effect, worked from the outside-in. He took shelter in borrowings, concealing his own lack of creative inspiration and unwillingness to take a political, ethical stance on the events of 9/11. But looked at from a more generous perspective, Adams pulled together a collective of other voices to speak to the unimaginable nature of 9/11. When he won the Pulitzer Prize for *Transmigration* in April 2003, it initially came as a shock to the composer who remains conflicted about the piece. Nevertheless, the prize was a symbolic endorsement for Adams and Sellars to move forward with the documentary in *Atomic*.

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During the summer of 2003, Sellars re-immersed himself into the life of Oppenheimer and culture of Los Alamos. He filled an entire room in his house with books on the subject. He flagged salient passages in declassified transcripts, memoirs, interviews, letters, and made a precise timeline leading up to the Trinity test and Hiroshima. And yet, despite the emphasis on documentary source material, “classified documents that were meant to be buried alive forever,” he aimed for poetry. In July 2013, Sellars reflected,

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94 Adams, interview with the author, 17 June 2013.
96 Cranna, interview with Crawford, “*Doctor Atomic*: The Making of an American Opera.”
97 Sellars’s quote continues: “And now that very thing that President Truman was not allowed to read—because the security apparatus kept it away from the President of the United States—is being sung in the clear light of day by chorus and orchestra...which again offers some hope for the world.” Sellars, “Thoughts About *Doctor Atomic*,” transcribed by Cranna at San Francisco Opera’s *Doctor Atomic* workshop, 30 October 2004, http://www.doctor-atomic.com/interview_sellars.html.
in the spirit of all that documentary at heart is also fiction. What John and I were looking for—what you always hope for—from, for theater, is poetry, of course. Because you don’t want to simply descend to a kind of literalism and literal-mindedness. So it was very important to find what the poetic voices could be that could go up against the documentary material. And that was serendipitous in the sense that, you know, just historically speaking, Oppenheimer was carrying around in his jacket pocket during that night of the crucial testing at Alamogordo both Baudelaire and the Bhagavad-gita.98

Sellars, too, came across the work of Muriel Rukeyser, a social activist whose life intersected with Oppenheimer’s (she had been in school with Robert’s brother, Frank) and whose poems written in the late 1940s expressed hope for post-war regeneration. Rukeyser’s poetry would become the “voice that would let the women [of the opera] speak,”99 specifically Kitty Oppenheimer and the Oppenheimer’s fictional Native American maid, Pasqualita.

To save time, Sellars incorporated research for the libretto into the fabric of a course he would teach called “Cultural Dimensions of International Conflict” at the UC Berkeley School of Journalism in the fall of 2003. “For practical purposes of research and debate,” Sellars noted in his syllabus, “the 2003 course will focus on the under-reported programs of U.S. nuclear testing in the Pacific Islands during the 1950's and their aftermath, creating a body of material across the semester that will eventually become an opera by John Adams.”100 The seminar would also

99 Ibid. According to Adams, “Peter chose Rukeyser because she was writing during the time of the Manhattan Project, and her own political commentary on the matter and passion about social justice were all the sorts of things Peter cares deeply about.” Adams interview with the author, 2 January 2013.
100 The remainder of Sellars’s course description is as follows: “Artists and Journalists are the communicators in a society, conveying crucial information that ultimately shapes attitudes and aspirations, and impacts directly on the substance and quality of a democracy. This seminar will explore tensions, limitations and possibilities inherent in the ways in which both artists and journalists gather and make news. The class will develop working models for collaboration and exchange, inviting each profession to test and deepen the other. We will consider the ongoing notion of journalism as entertainment in the context of traditional strategies of cultural practice as the last refuge of free speech.” “Cultural Dimensions of International Conflict” course description, http://journalism.berkeley.edu/program/courses.descriptions/sem/3/.
explore the notion of the artist as witness to the grim uncertainties of the nuclear age. Kenzaburo Oe’s novel *A Personal Matter* (1969), the story of a young man’s struggle to make sense of the Hiroshima bombing and the birth of his brain-damaged son, would be among the works discussed. Sellars found himself drawn to the fact that Oe uses the word “Hiroshima” only once. It would be important to Sellars, then, that the word be used only once in the opera.

Meanwhile, Adams embarked on new research for the project, immersing himself in the language of technical handouts. He hoped to find musical inspiration for translating nuclear fission into sound. Among the sources he consulted were progress reports printed out from a website (www.atomicarchive.com), such as a “Memorandum On Test of Implosion Gadget,” “The Chain-Reacting Pile” by Enrico Fermi, and “Expected Damage of the Gadget” by Hans Bethe, each signed-off by Oppenheimer on February 16, 1944. Adams, too, reviewed the Manhattan Project Science Panel’s report to the Interim Committee, drawn from the same website. His annotations highlight the report’s “Top Secret Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons.” The document, authorized by Oppenheimer on June 16, 1945, declares, “We [scientists] have no claim to special competence in solving the political, social, and military problems which are presented by the advent of atomic power.” The statement, itself a defense against moral culpability, is striking given Oppenheimer’s later stance on the issue. Curiously, Adams attached the document to a copy of “ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile]—The Case for and Against, Interview with Edward Teller” (*U.S. News & World Report*, 1969) in which Teller denounces Oppenheimer for taking a public position against nuclear stockpiling. Furthermore, Adams filed away dozens of newspaper clippings about more recent developments

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101 Ross, “Countdown.”
102 Printouts of each of these documents are located in Adams’s *Doctor Atomic* research file.
in nuclear and post-war politics, including a *New York Times* story about the United States Senate’s unsealing of the closed-door McCarthy transcripts in May 2003.103

Adams did not work alone. He relied for assistance on Loretta Notareschi, a doctoral student in composition at UC Berkeley, who accessed additional books for Adams (checked out under her name), including *The Los Alamos Primer* co-authored by Robert Serber and Richard Rhodes (1992), *Racing for the Bomb: General Leslie R. Groves, The Manhattan Project’s Indispensable Man* by Robert Norris (2002), and *Critical Assembly: A Technical History of Los Alamos during the Oppenheimer Years, 1943-1945* by Lillian Hoddeson (1993).104 Moreover, the filmmaker Jon Else, who proposed the idea of making a documentary about the creation of *Atomic*, shared with the composer previously unseen interview transcripts with physicists Robert Wilson and Isador Rabi. These transcripts were part of Else’s research for his award-winning documentary film “The Day After Trinity” (1981).105 Adams’s wife, Debbie O’Grady, too, immersed herself in the topic. She, Adams, and Sellars conversed at length about the Jungian undercurrents of the Oppenheimer story, specifically the tensions between the masculine drive for power and the feminine wisdom located in the Native American dimensions of the story.106 Adams later acknowledged, “Without Debbie’s encouragement to move forward with Peter’s libretto, I probably wouldn’t have pursued it.”107

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104 Interlibrary Loan and Bancroft Library printouts for these books (checked out under Notareschi’s name) are located in Adams’s *Doctor Atomic* research file.
105 Else’s film, *Wonders Are Many: The Making of Doctor Atomic*, was intended as a sequel to Else’s *The Day After Trinity: J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb*.
107 Adams, interview with the author, 6 June 2014.
Throughout the summer of 2003, Sellars and Adams met periodically at a café on Bancroft Way in Berkeley to discuss the books and documents in which they had each been immersed. It soon became clear that the original timeframe for the opera, which began in the Los Alamos desert in 1945 and ended with Oppenheimer’s Atomic Energy Commission hearing in 1953, was far too ambitious. It needed to be scaled back. Sellars anticipated what always happens—I mean, it happened in *Klinghoffer*, it happens in most of our pieces—is by the time we get halfway through the planned scenario John has three hours of music. And so, that’s where we stop…we start to realize what the volume of music is going to be, then inevitably we reshape the piece itself. Usually, we get to about the intermission of our original plan. Those are all things that you can never tell because it really depends on where John wants to spend time musically.\(^{108}\)

To compress the material, Sellars turned to antiquity, aiming to establish, in his words, “very, very strict classical unities of time and place…like a Greek tragedy where everything takes place within a single day.”\(^{109}\) It seemed at first a convenient way to contain the material, but the task proved no less challenging.

When it came to representing Oppenheimer, the aforementioned “curse of Oppenheimer”\(^{110}\) created not a roadblock but rather an opportunity for Adams and Sellars to explore his inner world, if not through his exact words then through the poetry he loved. Donne’s *Holy Sonnet*, “Batter My Heart,” provided a means for accessing this seemingly secret, private realm. “You hear the emotional pain in this bleeding phrase [“batter my heart”],” Sellars commented, “and it’s one man in front of eternity.”\(^{111}\) It was a compelling notion: through the music and words assigned to him, Oppenheimer would become not only a prophet but also a poet. It was also a misleading one. Adams later disclosed,

\(^{108}\) Sellars, interview with Ebright, 23 July 2013.  
\(^{109}\) Ibid.  
\(^{111}\) Sellars, interview with Else, *Wonders Are Many.*
We projected emotions onto Oppenheimer that may not have been there at the time. We know that after the war he suffered a very predictable depression, which I think any sane human being would have experienced after that kind of pressure. And obviously, it was amplified by the realization that the atomic genie was out of the bottle... But I acknowledge that the torment you find in ‘Batter My Heart’ is a kind of metaphysical projection on a character who was a highly sensitive person. But at that very moment it’s unlikely he actually felt that way. I think he was excited, and he was probably terrified that it wouldn’t work. But we know from Frank Oppenheimer, who was himself a very sensitive and humane person, we know from Frank’s description that when it went off they were just ecstatic.\textsuperscript{112}

The quotation suggests that despite Adams and Sellars’s emphasis on the documentary, neither of them seemed to be engaged in a strict historiographic exercise. Rather, they worked quickly with their first impressions from the sources at hand, following, in Sellars’s words, “a very kind of freewheeling streak of operatic behavior—the permission that opera gives you—to show something that would not appear in a documentary film.”\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{112} Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013. The full quote continues: “So you know, the work is a work of poetry. \textit{Doctor Atomic} is a work of poetry, and in terms of timelines and who felt what when, it’s as compacted as the plutonium sphere is. When Oppie sings ‘Batter My Heart,’ which is an expression of the most tortured feeling of loss, of loss of one’s innocence, of loss of one’s soul, of loss of one’s moorings, moral moorings, it isn’t just Oppenheimer who’s voicing these feelings. It’s the human race. It’s anyone who has any sensitive care about humanity. It’s also Oppenheimer on a more cosmic scale. Later on in life, as you’ve probably read in the amazing book by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, \textit{American Prometheus}, he was tormented by the FBI, who followed his movements and monitored him as if he were a Soviet spy. And we know from his essays written in the 50s and 60s that his despair was more over the stubbornness and the reluctance and the paranoia of other human beings who insisted on creating this horrible Cold War setting. So, when people come to me and say Oppenheimer didn’t feel guilty at that time and none of these scientists felt guilty because they thought they were in a battle against Hitler to save civilization, I say yes, that is the case for the immediate aftermath of Trinity, but later Oppenheimer came to understand the terrible destructive force that the bomb embodied, and he suffered in an existential way from this awareness. It’s always a risky business because we’re working with historical characters, and we’re trying to be faithful to who they were and what the power politics were at the time, but at the same time, we’re also creating poetic figures in the same way that Shakespeare would use Henry V or Julius Caesar, but not be tediously exact.”

\textsuperscript{113} Sellars, interview with Ebright, 23 July 2013.
Sellars happened to be well suited to the act of assembling. Writing, he claims, is impossible for him.\(^{114}\) “What I do best,” he said, “is assemble. I take things made by writers and statements by people, and I organize, splice, and re-work those documents. With *Doctor Atomic*, I took statements and changed the tenses and dovetailed lines into a long cut-and-paste text. And then John did the rest.”\(^{115}\) Perhaps the appeal of collage for Sellars seemed to lie in the ways it complicated boundaries, conflating conventional distinctions between abstract and literal, emotional and intellectual, wholeness and fragmentation, all resonating the deep moral ruptures embedded in the historiography of the bomb. Sellars wanted to leave it to the audience to determine whether or not Oppenheimer was a hero or victim, vulnerable or impervious, spiritually broken or sound. Collage gave him the ability to draw one’s attention to numerous perspectives on the narrative at once. Yet, as with *Transmigration*, the final result flattened out the perceptual plane into a series of fluctuating focal points in a way that abandoned any sense of depth.\(^ {116}\)

By September 2003, Sellars assembled his first pass at the libretto (Fig. 3.13). He compiled nearly 30 loose sheets beset with cut-and-paste source quotations from Teller’s memoirs and Oppenheimer’s letters, as well as annotated declassified documents (drawn from *The Manhattan Project: A Documentary Introduction*) on target selection, Groves’s treatment of scientists of uncertain loyalty, and Leo Szilard’s petition stating his moral opposition to the use of the bomb on civilian populations. Sellars juxtaposed these historical documents with Muriel

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\(^{114}\) “It’s the hardest thing I could ever do.” Sellars said in an interview with the author, 29 March 2013. He continued, “Transcriptions of my talks never get them right. Maria Delgado wanted to publish a collection of my talks, but I never let them be published. Somehow the transcriptions did violence to the spirit of what I was trying to do. I like instead to build off an audience. You can’t capture this in words. So, my relationship to writing is non-existent.”

\(^{115}\) Sellars, interview with Else, *Wonders Are Many*.

\(^{116}\) On the notion of decentralization in collage art, see Copland, “Merce Cunningham and the Aesthetic of Collage.”
Rukeyser’s poem “Am I in your light?” assigned to the role of Kitty. He also included a proposed duet between Oppenheimer and Teller set to Rukeyser’s “To be a Jew in the Twentieth Century” (1944) (Fig. 3.14), which broaches the subject of embracing or denying one’s Judaism, a topic that connected Teller and Oppenheimer throughout their lives.\(^\text{117}\) For Sellars, the poem seemed to capture a sense of shared humanity between the opera’s protagonists. He also included a long passage from Rukeyser’s “Dream Singing Elegy” (1949) (“Then word came from a runner, a stranger: ‘They are dancing to bring the dead back in the mountains…’”), about the ritual symbolism (i.e. Ghost Dance or dream singing) that helped Native Americans cope with defeat and displacement in the 1870s. “Dream Singing Elegy,” later assigned to Pasqualita (the Oppenheimers’ fictional Native American maid), suggested for Sellars “a meeting of different cosmologies. One cosmology is about gathering invisible forces to create an atomic bomb

\(^{117}\) Teller was born in Budapest, Hungary, into a Jewish family in 1908. He left Hungary in 1926 in part due to the political climate, which instilled an early animosity for Communism and Fascism. He fled Nazi Germany in 1933 through the help of the International Rescue Committee, first going to England, then Copenhagen, and finally the United States in 1935, taking a professorship at George Washington University. After becoming a naturalized citizen in 1941, he became an ardent loyalist to the U.S. government and devoted his career to developing nuclear weapons that would protect the United States from Communist forces. Having escaped the Nazis and successfully becoming an American citizen, Teller never felt like he had to hide his Jewish heritage. See Walter Sullivan, “Edward Teller is Dead at 95; Fierce Architect of H-Bomb,” *New York Times*, 10 September 2003. Oppenheimer, on the other hand, was less comfortable as a Jew and never advertised his Jewish identity. Isador Rabi speculated, “Oppenheimer was Jewish, but he wished he weren’t and tried to pretend he wasn’t …The Jewish tradition, even if you don’t know it in detail, is so strong that you renounce it at your own peril. [This] doesn’t mean you have to be Orthodox or even practice it, but if you turn your back on it, having been born into it, you’re in trouble. So that poor Robert, an expert in Sanskrit and French literature.” Sherwin and Bird, *American Prometheus*, 76.
First of all, let me say that I have no hope of clearing my conscience. The things we are working on are so terrible that no amount of protesting or fiddling with politics will save our souls.

July 2, 1945

The soul is a thing so impenetrable, so often useless, and sometimes so embarrassing that at this loss I felt only a little more emotion than if, during a walk, I had lost my visiting card.

We spoke also of the universe, of its creation and of its future destruction; of the great idea of the century, that is to say of progress and perfectibility, and generally all the forms of human infatuation. On this subject His Highness lavished an inexhaustible fund of subtle and irrefutable wit and wisdom, and he expressed himself with a suavity of diction and dryness of wit which I have not found in any of the most famous conversationalists of humanity.

I think that the world in which we shall live these next thirty years will be a pretty restless and tormented place; I do not think that there will be much of a compromise possible between being of it, and being not of it.

August 10, [1931]
Figure 3.14. Peter Sellars, Doctor Atomic cut and paste libretto, Act I, Muriel Rukeyser, “To Be a Jew” (omitted) (September 1, 2003).
and another cosmology is about gathering invisible forces to create the corn-growing season in the Rio Grande desert basin.” Curiously, the poetry of John Donne is absent in the earliest draft, suggestive that “Batter My Heart” had not yet become the opera’s centerpiece, or that it was so firmly part of the plan that it did not require mention.

After Sellars completed the draft of Act I, he and Adams created a streamlined plot structure (Fig. 3.15). It outlines a series of events in the 48-hour window before President Truman was to meet with Stalin about the new atomic technology. The pressure to test the bomb the night before the Potsdam conference created a dramatic window of anxiety, suspension, and anticipation. Bad weather delayed the test, and it was during those moments that Oppenheimer and his team of scientists questioned the larger moral implications of their research and applied technologies. When Sellars and Adams presented the revised plot and Act I libretto to Rosenberg and Cranna in September 2003, Rosenberg was thrilled. She recalled, “The way [Peter] read that libretto to us—I, at the end of it, was in tears. And not because I was freaked out and thought, Oh, my God, it’s going to be a disaster. This was going to be an evening with the kind of intensity and ambiguity—everything that it needs to be.”

Throughout the fall of 2003, the libretto went through two major revisions. In the first, Sellars truncated the texts for Act I into a revised 18-page document, dated December 1, 2003, adjusting the tenses to the present as he went along to create a continuous narrative (Fig. 3.16a-b). Deleted from the draft are various comments by Groves on the likelihood that Communist scientists were on site in Los Alamos. Significantly, Sellars added a passage by the French Symbolist poet Baudelaire (“Long let me inhale, deeply, the odor of your hair…”) to be sung.

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118 Sellars, interview with Ebright, 23 July 2013.
Figure 3.15. Peter Sellars, *Doctor Atomic* revised plot structure (September 2003).
by Oppenheimer in a love scene with Kitty. A duet set to Rukeyser’s “The Motive of All of It [was loneliness]” would then unfold between Oppenheimer and Kitty. The draft also includes the first mention of Donne’s “Batter My Heart,” which would end Act I, not as the exit aria of the final version, but rather as a duet between the chorus and Oppenheimer (Fig. 3.16b). “To Be a Jew” survived this round of revision; yet Adams and Sellars removed it in the next revision. Given the controversy over the anti-Semitic privileging of Jewish stereotypes in Klinghoffer, its deletion was doubtless an attempt to ensure no further debate on the matter. No musical sketch for the duet exists.

By January 1, 2004, Sellars delivered to Adams a solid working draft of Act I, having subjected it to additional modification (Fig. 3.17a-b). To Act I, Sellars added an opening chorus drawn from Atomic Energy for Military Purposes (1945) by Henry De Wolf Smyth. The passage (“matter can be neither created nor destroyed but only altered in form”) offers a concise briefing on the developing weapon (as will be seen, the source was later criticized for its use of outdated scientific thought). For easy reference and for assessing the permissions needed, Sellars number- and letter-coded each source (Fig. 3.17b): Teller’s memoir (#19) (also marked “M” for “memoirs” and highlighted in blue), a declassified wiretap transcript (#26), Oppenheimer’s comments drawn from a declassified memo on Szilard’s petition (#1), and a long excerpt of Szilard’s letter belonging to the public domain.120 The jumble of texts here represents a moment

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120 As with Transmigration, navigating copyright for the text sources proved to be far from straightforward. Sellars compiled a neat file of photocopied title pages for each source, ordered according to their number code. Adams and his publisher, Boosey & Hawkes, assessed the copyrights that needed to be cleared. Except for the use of Teller’s memoirs, permissions were, for the most part, granted. Wendy Teller, the daughter and owner of the rights to Teller’s memoir, declined authorization until just months before the premiere. “She probably assum[ed] that anything having to do with Teller and Oppenheimer,” Adams speculated, “would damn the former while lauding the latter.” Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 277. After a series of email exchanges between Adams and Wendy Teller, she finally agreed to the use of several passages,
in the opera’s first scene, later revised, in which Oppenheimer and Teller discuss Szilard’s petition and Oppenheimer’s view that “the nation’s fate should be left in the hands of Washington officials.” The January 2004 draft also included a partial collection of texts for Act II drawn from Rukeyser’s “Easter Eve 1945,” the Bhagavad-Gita, as well as source quotations by the Manhattan Project’s meteorologist (Jack Hubbard) about the dire weather in the hours before the test. Passages from Baudelaire (“Oh yes, Time has returned; now Time reigns absolute…”) and Rukeyser’s “Dream Singing Elegy” would lead into the countdown. Act II became, in effect, a compendium of longer texts stitched together into a kind of hallucinatory dream space.

Ultimately, Adams had a heavy hand in shaping the Atomic libretto. After Sellars finished the cut-and-paste draft, he sent it to Adams who then did “a huge winnowing job because usually what Peter sent was just way, way, way more than I needed. I basically took what Peter gave me and put it into sort of faux verse, which allowed me to organize it musically.”

A page of Adams’s “faux verse” (Fig. 3.18, a passage from the Act II countdown) illustrates how he moved sections of text, re-wrote lines to clarify and condense, and noted ideas about the musical treatment. “Begin chorus glissandi,” for instance, refers to the sonic anticipation of the detonation; “musique concrete” indicates the soundtrack that would provide the background hum

accepting a pro-rata royalty. Still, she pronounced the libretto “anti-science” and refused to attend the world premiere. Adams commented in an interview with the author on January 2, 2013, “I sent her a copy of the libretto and she wrote back and gave permission and I said would you like to come to the premiere, and she said no, I hate opera. But she said she still has her father’s piano, the one that had been hauled up the dirt road to Los Alamos.”

Adams, interview with the author, 2 January 2013.
Figure 3.16a. Peter Sellars, *Doctor Atomic* cut and paste libretto, Act I (December 1, 2003).
Figure 3.16b. Peter Sellars, *Doctor Atomic* cut and paste libretto, Act I finale (December 1, 2003).
...The end of June 1945 finds us expecting from day to day to hear of the explosion of the first atomic bomb devised by man. All the problems are believed to have been solved at least well enough to make a bomb practicable. A sustained neutron chain reaction resulting from nuclear fission has been demonstrated; the conditions necessary to cause such a reaction to occur explosively have been established and can be achieved; production plants of several different types are in operation, building up a stock pile of the explosive material. Although we do not know when the first explosion will occur nor how effective it will be.

Even if the first attempt is relatively ineffective, those who look toward that event will be highly encouraged as the devastation from a single bomb is expected to be comparable to that of a major air raid by usual methods.  

13.2. A weapon has been developed that is potentially destructive beyond the wildest nightmares of the imagination; a weapon so ideally suited to sudden unannounced attack that a country's major cities might be destroyed overnight by an ostensibly friendly power. This weapon has been created nor by the devilish inspiration of some warped genius but by the arduous labor of thousands of normal men and women working for the safety of their country.

Figure 3.17a. Peter Sellars, Doctor Atomic libretto draft, Acts I and II (January 1, 2004).
Peter Sellars, *Doctor Atomic* libretto draft, Act I, scene one (January 1, 2004).
of radiating atoms as the opera comes to a close. Moreover, Adams took the liberty to add text he discovered through his own research.

I found that beautiful thing about the dodecahedron, the description of the sphere, online somewhere. It was a description of the plutonium sphere. That was an example of finding deep poetry in physics, which is what I thought Oppenheimer was all about. He had an almost erotic reaction to the laws of physics and that’s something that I really wanted to get in the opera.\(^\text{122}\)

Sellars welcomed Adams’s input, giving him the space to add and remove text where needed to suit the music. Nevertheless, the pastiche is coarse, the seams exposed jarringly. Each part, shifting between in-the-moment historical impressions and distanced reflection through poetry, speaks with a separate, disunified voice. It became the music’s responsibility to bring these disunities into focus, to convert the illusion of flatness into something of greater cohesion, gravity, and depth.

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The bricolage approach to the libretto steered Adams into a new compositional mode. He conflated his own version of minimalism (i.e. repeated figures, rhythmic ostinatos, and the defiance of goal-directed motion) with a study of historical texture. As Adams worked to find analogies between the two representational media of text and music, he turned to opera history, riffing on opera convention as defined by Mozart and Wagner. Mozart’s \textit{Don Giovanni}, as noted, provided a model of sorts for using music as a vehicle for the artistic fashioning of desire, in this case, the pursuit of scientific and technological advancement. As in the dramatic arc of the Mozart-Da Ponte operas, Act I would present the tangled psychological/spiritual mess, and Act

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 18 June 2013.
The radio connection with the control tower is out of order, and no one really knows when the bomb will go off or where to look for it.

**Oppie:**

To what benevolent demon do I owe the joy of being thus surrounded with mystery, with silence, with peace and with perfumes?

O beatitude! That which we generally call life, even when it is fullest and happiest, has nothing in common with that supreme life with which I am now acquainted and which I am tasting minute by minute, second by second!

No! There are no more minutes, there are no more seconds! Time has disappeared; it is Eternity that reigns now!

**Teller:**

The scientists are standing around in the dark and munching candy bars as we wait for some divine revelation to tell us when the shot will go.

**Chorus & Kitty:**

Million-armed, the sun and moon your eyeballs, Fiery-faced, you blast the world to ashes,

**Kitty:**

The nets of this night are on fire with sun and moon pouring both lights into the open tomb. Whatever arise, it comes in the shape of peace, fierce peace which is love, in which move all the stars, and the breathing of universes, filling, falling away.

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**Figure 3.18.** John Adams, *Doctor Atomic* “faux verse” (spring 2005).
II the quasi-resolution, with the music swaying between the kinetic energy of continuous song in the recitatives and stasis in the arias. Adams enriched and opened up the score in the conventional arias, moments of contextualized introspection. Other parts of the score, namely the panicked rush to disaster, combine single-line ostinatos with borrowed musical quotations, replicating the surfaces of a visual pastiche. He often called upon the orchestration techniques found in Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* (1876), with its massive brass section supporting the unfolding action. Like Wagner, Adams devised illustrative motifs consisting of tiny musical particles, whether a single chord or interval, that unfold not as a linear development but rather as a kind of connective tissue portraying the sense of mythic or “tenseless” time of the bomb that continues to haunt the past, present, and future.\(^{123}\)

Adams’s compositional process itself became a series of tests to see how music could—and could not—take on the events leading up to and aftermath of Hiroshima. Working under rushed circumstances to meet contractual deadlines, he made many of his initial musical decisions in haste. He relied at first on his immediate impressions, often erratic and scattered. Though the more he contemplated how his music suited (or failed) to suit the subject, the more he second-guessed his efforts. Often, he wrote numerous substitute drafts, only later to repackage his original ideas. The sketches for the opening of Act II, Kitty’s aria set to Rukeyser’s poem, “Easter Ever 1945,” present a prominent example of Adams’s indecisive compositional tendencies. It was the first music he composed for the opera in November 2003. He had been commissioned to write a piece for the New York Philharmonic and decided to write “Easter Eve”

as a stand-alone aria that would fulfill both the commission and set piece for the opera.\textsuperscript{124} His first pass at setting Rukeyser’s poetry proved a terrible struggle. The rhythms of the text departed from the neatly structured, rhyming couplets of Goodman’s librettos. Adams described some of Rukeyser’s poetry, particularly “Easter Eve,” as “impenetrable.”\textsuperscript{125} He proceeded from his initial impressions of the poem, beginning \textit{in media res} with “peace…but fierce continual flame” (Fig. 3.19), a text fragment suggesting the unexpected grace and hope that can arise after death and destruction. The upward melodic motion on “but fierce” is evocative of one’s faith in rebirth, of the symbolism of Easter. This became the thematic core of the first draft. It was an idea, though, that Adams soon questioned; his dissatisfaction with the poetry (and, by extension, with Sellars for choosing it) caused frustration. He, too, worried that the treatment would have little connection or bearing on the rest of the score, yet to be drafted. “I spent most of the time writing alternative material,” he reflected. “Eventually, I’d gone back to the original idea.”\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{124} “Normally, I compose sequentially,” Adams commented. Beginning with Act II “was a very unusual situation. I was just starting \textit{Doctor Atomic}, and I got a call inviting me to conduct the New York Philharmonic in three concerts—with Audra McDonald as the soloist. The plan was that she would sing some Ives and some ragtime. [The NY Phil] asked me if I would write a piece for the program. I couldn’t do it because I was committed to composing \textit{Doctor Atomic}. Then I realized, I’ve got part of a libretto fleshed out here, and we already had this one soliloquy, so I asked him what he thought if I jumped ahead and wrote that scene for Audra to sing. So he said yes, and everything worked out. The irony is that it’s very hard to jump into the middle and set a musical standard for the work, and then go back to the beginning. I think it will be okay where it is, but I may want to go in and change it a bit. It’s natural to start at the beginning and go to the end because works are very organic. For me at least, what comes up at the beginning kind of forms the genetic makeup of the piece.” Adams, interview with Thomas May on the making of \textit{Doctor Atomic}, \textit{San Francisco Opera Yearbook} (2005-06).

\textsuperscript{125} Adams, interview with the author, 2 January 2013.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
The opera, Adams decided early on, would be born out of mechanized sound. Between November 2003 and May 2004, while composing intermittently “Easter Eve,” Adams envisaged a rough sonic landscape, like that of the Los Alamos terrain, for the orchestral overture. No hand-written sketches exist for the opening; Adams drafted a patchwork of pre-recorded sounds on his computer in Digital Performer. Later, he would collect snippets of industrial sounds from the Library of Congress and elsewhere—the hum of atoms colliding in the inside of a cyclotron, the roar of airplanes, military voices, pounding machinery, and a clip of Jo Stafford’s 1940s love song, “The Things We Did Last Summer.” By the summer of 2005, he collected enough material to piece together a two-minute electronic sound collage with references pinpointing the historical moment, July 16, 1945. The juxtaposition of sounds of atoms colliding inside of a cyclotron with the external roar of war machinery would become central to the opera’s aesthetic, blurring the relationship between interior and exterior, foreground and background, before and after. In the final version, the two-minute static of the opening soundscape dissolves and the orchestra enters with a din of pummeling rhythms, fractured meters, and jolting repeated figures. The abrupt
orchestral appearance marks a clear shift in musical narration from pre-recorded sound to live-acoustics in which the narrative focus is on the experience of time. The sound of the timpani represents the passage of time, the tick of the “doomsday” clock. Adams altered its duration, shortening it from a dotted-quarter to a dotted quintuplet figure. The effect is a shift in the listener’s perception of the way time passes—it seems to speed up. A rising minor ninth in the trombone and tuba punctuates the texture as the opening chords clash and reposition themselves, each time with altered rhythmic articulation against the shifting pulse. To the listener, the musical fragments sound unassimilated, fractured, and unabsorbed into any set or straightforward context. At the same time, the churning of war machines points towards a single, intractable end.

Adams split the creative process between half computer-generated repetitions and half old-fashioned pencil sketching. The pencil sketches reflect a creative practice of feeling out, over numerous drafts, the structures of the fractured libretto. He started hand-sketching the vocal lines (sometimes in tandem with a rough harmonic footprint) for Act I, scene one in the winter of 2004. The first page of Adams’s sketchbook (Fig. 3.20) shows a rhythmic idea and mode collection loosely centered on F# major, a tonality associated historically with triumph over struggle, the spirit’s overcoming of adversity. F# major, however, makes only fleeting appearances in the opera, suggestive that these preliminary wanderings did not get Adams very far. Subsequent sketches differ from the spliced, interrupted quality of the sketches for “Easter Eve.” Instead, they knit together large continuous sections of the scene’s disjointed texts.

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127 Sellars, quoted in Ross, “Countdown,” 60.
128 Adams described the process of writing this passage: “When I read, I imagine images and somewhere, very far back in the mind, a musical kernel, a nucleus develops. In this case, the kernel is frighteningly dark.” Adams, interview with Jesse Hamlin, “Playing with Fire,” San Francisco Chronicle, 25 September 2005.
Figure 3.20. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, preliminary modal jottings (winter 2004).
Figure 3.21. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, sketch for Act I, scene one chorus, “The End of June 1945” (winter 2004).
The absence of erasures in Adams’s setting of the opera’s opening chorus, “At the end of June 1945” (Fig. 3.21) and subsequent passages suggests that the composition of the first scene was reasonably straightforward, perhaps due to the fact that Adams called upon a recitative-like style moving in single-line textures rather than lyrical song.

Adams’s text setting for the opening chorus was the result of his search for a mechanistic “newsreel” effect. The composer commented,

In the very opening gestures that are in quotation marks and then in that hard driving chorus, “The end of June 1945,” I was mimicking the typical newsreel music of the 1940s. Because in those days when people went to the movies there would be these news trailers: “the progress of the war,” “women are on the production line,” and “B52s,” etc. There was always this kind of busy restless ostinato music, and Stravinsky used it in the Symphony in Three Movements. That first movement has that same kind of driving energy.¹²⁹

For the orchestral accompaniment of the opening chorus, Adams did in fact borrow the irregular rhythms, static blocks, and rapidly descending scales in the winds and strings from the first movement of Stravinsky’s Symphony in Three Movements (1945). The general relationship between the scores, notably Adams’s blatant reference to the symphony’s Orphic scalar patterns (Fig. 3.22), described by Sellars as the “Stravinsky emergency music,” goes beyond musical quotation. Adams’s description of newsreel images derives from Stravinsky’s own remarks about the symphony. The first movement, Stravinsky told Robert Craft, was “inspired by a war film, this time a documentary of scorched-earth tactics in China.”¹³⁰

The third movement, in Stravinsky’s words, was “a musical reaction to the newsreels and documentaries that I had seen of goose-stepping soldiers. The square march-beat, the brass-band instrumentation, the grotesque

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¹²⁹ Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013.
¹³⁰ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, Dialogues (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 52.
crescendo in the tuba—these are all related to those repellent pictures.”¹³¹ Though Stravinsky’s comments cannot necessarily be taken at face value, they left an imprint on Adams, who used Stravinsky to situate the opera within a sphere of wartime anxiety.

Throughout the spring of 2004, Adams sketched the majority of Act I, scene one. He applied the model of Mozart only in an abstract sense, borrowing the same grouping of male voices used in *Don Giovanni*: lyric baritone (Oppenheimer), bass (Teller), and tenor (Robert Wilson, the young scientist). The scene unfolds as a dialogue between the three characters. Teller and Wilson express their troubled thoughts about using the bomb on civilian targets, and Oppenheimer admonishes them. Adams used figurative melodic gestures drawn from both whole-tone and chromatic pitch collections to locate the characters and their music in an atmosphere of moral uncertainty. A salient example can be found in the musical treatment of Teller’s opening lines, adapted from his memoir: “First of all, let me say that I have no hope of clearing my conscience. The things we are working on are so terrible that no amount of protesting or fiddling with politics will save our souls.” In his sketch, Adams paired the text with jottings on orchestration—a deep, steady drone in the tuba on low E-natural with G Major and augmented triads in the winds and strings sounding above. The harmonies move slowly; each subtle shift of pitch is a major event, an elaboration of slow-moving particles. In contrast to the “Stravinsky emergency music” of the previous passage, the sounding effect of these spectral harmonies is unfamiliar, strange. Teller sings a melody that moves along eerily with notes drawn from a whole-tone collection (D-flat, E-flat, F, G, A, B), its tonal elusiveness evocative of Teller’s mixed feelings about the bomb’s use on Japan (feelings that contradict his later role as maker and proponent of the hydrogen bomb). Adams alluded to this contradiction musically. As

¹³¹ Ibid., 50.
Teller utters the words, “The things we are working on are so terrible…” the music strays from the tonal haze of the whole-tone set towards more a defined collection, a four-note tetrachord (0-1-3-4) on B, C, D, D#, suggestive of an octatonic pattern. This sway between the two pitch collections lends the passage an amplified sense of ambiguity-turn-certainty about impending atrocity.

In the next section of music composed, Adams explored Oppenheimer’s erotic attraction to physics and its musical equivalences. He set a passage for female chorus that he had found online: “We are the centers of the twenty triangular faces of an icosahedron interwoven with the twelve pentagonal faces of a dodecahedron…” The text refers to the geometric shape of the plutonium core, the atomic nucleus (a fissile isotope) that when struck by a slow-moving neutron splits into smaller parts and releases massive amounts of energy. A self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction results, with additional neutrons splitting further nuclei at a rapid, uncontrolled rate, driving a massive explosion. Adams aimed for a musical translation of this very process. The initial sketch (Fig. 3.23) shows a meandering vocal line, to be sung quietly in unison. He parsed the music, measure-by-measure, into different pentatonic modes. Each bar features altered combinations of semitones and whole tones evocative of particles moving through three-dimensional space. The floating quality of the sung syllables lends the passage an ethereal elegance. A low C pedal drone, around which the melody orbits, grounds the music in a suspended state. No tonal or goal-directed impetus drives the passage; the sound and its changing
orientations simply exist in time, just as matter simply exists in the physical universe. As the music goes on, Adams brings into focus a recognizable triad, a soft, glowing A-flat major chord, upon which the women’s hushed voices land as they sing the final syllable of “icosahedron.” Though the triad has no functional tonal presence, its arrival via pentatonic stepping-stones sounds like a flash of light, a release of energy that activates the next chain of swirling musical particles.

Adams worked swiftly at the piano, sketching the remainder of the first scene in the subsequent pages of his bound manuscript book. His preliminary draft of the final part of the scene (Figs. 3.24a-b), in which Teller reads Szilard’s letter about a petition to Washington, demonstrates how Adams used specific words to guide his syllabic settings. For instance, as
Teller sings, “And this only increases our responsibility in this matter” (Fig. 3.24a), Adams employed a series of ascending intervals (a rising perfect fifth, augmented fourth, and minor sixth drawn from the F Lydian mode), emphasizing the urgency of Szilard’s request. Adams then contrasted Teller’s setting with that of Oppenheimer, whose flattening reply, “I think it improper for a scientist to use his prestige as a platform for political pronouncements,” follows a stepwise ascent from F-sharp to C, a tritone with diminished-seventh harmonies below. As the sketch goes on, the music alludes back to the ethereal textural layers of Adam’s encryption of nuclear fission. Adams made a note of the obbligato horn solo that would echo the pentatonic patterns of the prior choral passage and trail alongside Oppenheimer’s lackluster remarks, “the nation’s fate should be left in the hands of the best men in Washington” (Fig. 3.24b). The juxtaposition of the horn solo (symbolic of Oppenheimer’s attraction to physics) and the uninspired vocal line (symbolic of Oppenheimer’s bureaucratic obligations) establishes a tension in Oppenheimer’s character that would run throughout the course of the opera.

In the final moments of Act I, scene one, Adams called again on the ambiguity of the whole-tone scale as Oppenheimer relays the list of potential Japanese targets: “It was agreed that psychological factors in selecting the targets are of great importance. Kyoto: double-A target. An intellectual center. Nagasaki: a secondary target. Yokohama. Nagoya. Fukuoka. Hiroshima.” In between Oppenheimer’s sung comments, the chorus chants the names of the cities. In the
Figure 3.24a. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, initial sketch for Act I, scene one, mm. 324-38 (2004).
Figure 3.27b. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, initial sketch for Act I, scene one, mm. 339-58 (2004).
sketches, Adams noted the pulse of the harp and timpani on tone F while the strings hold a C-sharp-diminished triad above. The music is quiet and atmospheric, the action slow and contemplative. When Oppenheimer sings “Hiroshima,” a dissonant clash of D-flat-minor triad and C-sharp augmented chord sounds, as if one hears the anguish in Oppenheimer’s heart. Then the dialogue moves on. Adams would return to this same “Hiroshima” chord at the end of the opera.

In the spring of 2004, Adams began composing Act I, scene two, a domestic scene featuring Oppenheimer and Kitty together in their bedroom. Having removed the proposed duet between Oppenheimer and Teller, “To be a Jew,” Adams and Sellars replaced it with Kitty’s “Am I in Your Light?” (also by Rukeyser). As the opera’s first set lyrical piece, as well as the first entrance of a solo female voice, Adams sought to create a complementary musical atmosphere to the rigid, mechanistic quality of the first scene. As with the setting of Rukeyser’s “Easter Eve,” which begins Act II, Adams moved through multiple sketched drafts, ripping out pages of musical fragments from his notebook as he tested ways to “make the text flow and sound natural.” One such page (an early sketch of the aria) ended up becoming the basis of the final setting (Fig. 3.25). Adams used stepwise motion (D-flat to E-flat) to reflect the sense of questioning on the word “light?” and then a falling third figure for Kitty’s re-phrasing of the question. Drawn out harmonies, a series of slowly-shifting open fifths rotating around D-flat and A-flat, create a an alternative sense of temporality, unhurried and spacious. The music takes its time; each word explores another area of the lyric-mezzo range with the harp and celesta punctuating subtle changes in rhythm and texture. The sounding surface, gentle and quiet,

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132 Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013.
contradicts the agonized compositional processes that shaped it, drawing attention to the fact that Adams’s creative practice was not the same as the experience it renders.

By June 2004, Adams began working through several drafts of the Act I finale, the much-celebrated centerpiece of the opera, “Batter My Heart,” set to Donne’s *Holy Sonnet*, in which Oppenheimer explores the inner reaches of spiritual unrest. At the start of the preliminary sketch (Fig. 3.26), Adams outlined a descending tetrachord around a harmonic cluster in the mode of D minor, which in the final setting establishes itself as an unstable yet implied tonic through its sheer insistence. (Significantly, D minor resonates with Adams’s other works that confront moments of human crisis—in both *Klinghoffer* and *Transmigration*.) The outset of the initial sketch for Oppenheimer’s song, beginning with the words “Batter My Heart,” features not the four-note lament motif that marks the final version but rather a more aggressive portrait of broken rhythms and fragmented melodic outbursts interspersed with two-note sighing figures that reiterate in patterns of stepwise ascent. Finding a way to get into Oppenheimer’s inner world of grief and torment (a realm, as noted, projected by Adams onto Oppenheimer) demanded a space for Adams to think through the realities of these emotions. According to Adams, the first image that came to him was that of battering.¹³³ For him, the anguished melodic and rhythmic contortions in the sketch seemed to reflect what he knew of the messiness and moment-to-moment fluxes of angst and unrest. It was a response that, unlike the other scenes he had already composed, seemed to flow out of him with a kind of natural ease. Perhaps this was a symptom of the poetry, to which Adams very much related; this may also have been due to the fact

¹³³ Ibid. He commented, “I think probably the first image I thought about was of battering. So I suspect the first thing that came up was the Ba-ba-ba-ba-bum, the batter music, but obviously you can’t set a poem like that to agitated fast music. It would have been ridiculous.”
Figure 3.26b. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, subsequent sketch for Act I finale, “Batter My Heart” (2004).
that the aria unsettles chronological time, giving the composer more flexibility to explore his intuitive responses to the subject. Adams, however, second-guessed these efforts, and dissatisfied with the jaggedness of his first draft resigned himself more fully to the shopworn contours of the lament.

In Adams’s next sketch (Fig. 3.26b), the aria as we know it began to take shape with the downward melodic segment of C to B-flat to A to G comprising the start of the final vocal setting. “How the chaconne came out,” Adams reflected, “I have no idea, but it was just one of those wonderful moments that you hope for when you’re composing when an outrageous idea comes, and even though your first thought is ‘oh I can’t do this, this is over the top,’ you end up knowing it’s right.” Adams’s crossed-out markings indicate that he initially questioned the idea. One can see through the scrawl on the page that he maintained some continuity with the first sketch, incorporating the sighing figures and implied harmonic framework; other features, such as the varied rhythms and ascending repetitions, however, disappear. Within the boundaries of the antique device of the lament, he could play with its continuities all the while preserving something of the coarse angst of his initial sketch. In the final version (Music Example 3.1), Adams pitted this historical mode against his diluted personal expression, generating a kind of tension that bridges the discrete parts of the preliminary sketch as private document with the surface of the lament intended for public display. The Donne sketches are further indications of Adams’s tendency to question his creative instincts, even when they present themselves boldly, to explore alternate options, and then to re-package his original ideas within the confines of representational convention.

134 Ibid., 18 June 2013.

After Adams completed the sketches for Act I, he input them into a MIDI software program, Digital Performer, where he mapped out the orchestration. This part of the compositional process was unique in the sense that he skipped the piano-vocal score phase all together, a phase that had previously been the link between his rough pencil sketches and the orchestration. Adams recalled,

With *Nixon*, *Klinghoffer*, *Ceiling Sky*, and *El Niño* the first thing I did after the sketches was to make a crude piano-vocal score by hand, and it was so because I’m not any kind of pianist. Frequently, it wasn’t anything but a bunch of repeated chords. I did it so the singers could start learning their parts. In the course of orchestration, I would then flesh things out in a software program so I could hear what was going on. Finally, I’d do a detailed orchestral score by hand. But with
Doctor Atomic, because the nature of the music was so different, and there simply wasn’t enough time, I went straight from the sketches to the MIDI realization.\(^{135}\)

The elimination of the piano-vocal phase had a number of implications. MIDI was at once a crutch and a facilitator. On the one hand, it seemingly saved Adams time, allowing him to hash out the orchestration quickly and to alter large sections of the score. On the other hand, this enabled his tendency to revise. More problematic, his reliance on MIDI resulted in innumerable mistakes that later required time-consuming repair.\(^{136}\)

Throughout the fall of 2004, Adams input the sketch material into Digital Performer according to instrument groupings and metrical structures. He noted, “It’s where I would organize everything and decide the meters, which allowed me to hear how things balance. Then I’d make a really crude printout, which looks almost indecipherable, but I know how to read it.”\(^{137}\) Fig. 3.27 shows Adams’s MIDI realization of the brass orchestration in a passage from Act I, scene one. Following a series of playbacks, he manipulated the placement of the harmonies, note lengths, and melodic shapes. Once satisfied with the sounding surface, he printed out the MIDI score in its entirety. From the MIDI printouts, he copied out by hand the full orchestral score and vocal parts. Red lines on the MIDI mockup represent the number of measures of orchestration he could fit on a 12x17 inch manuscript page (Fig. 3.28 shows the hand-written orchestration of the music shown in the MIDI mockup, Fig. 3.27). Other jottings, such as “new

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\(^{135}\) Ibid., 17 June 2013.

\(^{136}\) Ibid. Adams spent an entire year after the San Francisco premiere fixing wrong notes and rhythmic slips, errors he would typically catch in the piano-vocal phase.

\(^{137}\) Ibid. Adams went on to say, “But it’s just crazy—sometimes there are so many arbitrary sharps and flats. Frequently, the computer will look at a quarter note and decide it’s a 1/64\(^{th}\) note late and then give you a 1/64\(^{th}\) note rest and then an insane group of notes. But I always know that it’s just a bunch of quarter notes.”
Figure 3.27. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, MIDI printout for Act I, scene one, mm. 264-85 (2005).
Figure 3.28. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic* Act I, scene one, mm. 264-69 (2005 autograph).
material,” served as a record of modifications made between the computer realization and the hand-written orchestral score.\textsuperscript{138}

Adams’s commitment to the old-fashioned act of crafting the autograph score by hand seemed to give his restless compositional process a unified purpose. He commented,

There are several reasons I do it by hand. One is I just feel like I have more conscious control. Because when you’re working in Sibelius or some similar notation software you’re so involved in the technology and exactitude that you can’t stand back and see musical issues. But when you’re doing it by hand, and maybe it’s because I started out that way, it’s like having a compositional omniscience that I can’t attain if I just stay inside the software world.\textsuperscript{139}

It was a labor-intensive process. Often, Adams would produce four to five manuscript pages per day (out of 639 total). He found that the density of the orchestration left him with little room on the page, which forced him to write out the vocal parts separately.\textsuperscript{140} As he worked through the orchestration for Act I he periodically sent his copyist, David Ocker, photocopied sections of the hand-written score and vocal parts.\textsuperscript{141} Ocker created a digitized score and would send proofs to

\textsuperscript{138} Adams remarked on this stage of the process, “Well, just imagine what it was like when Wagner wrote a score like Meistersinger. I mean it’s such a testament to the intellectual thoroughness of those guys that they wrote knowing it would be engraved and it had to be right. Without MIDI I couldn’t say what it would sound like with this weird orchestration.” Ibid., 17 June 2013.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 2 January 2013.

\textsuperscript{140} Adams recalled, “If I’d put all the vocal lines in the full score, I would have only gotten about two bars per page.” Ibid. Whereas the Nixon and Klinghoffer scores included all of the vocal lines in the orchestral manuscript (the conductor worked straight from its facsimile), the hand-written manuscript for Atomic would be turned into a computer-generated version, an additional process that was not without its troubles.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. “I’ve been working with David for 25 years now,” Adams reflected in 2013. “He was Frank Zappa’s copyist and actually Frank Zappa wrote a clarinet concerto for him. He has a really great aesthetic sense, and he figures out exactly where to place the text. He works at night. So if a catastrophe or emergency comes up at 2pm, I’m in trouble because he’s sound asleep. He knows my music really well. He knows when I’ve made a mistake and intuits things, and he doesn’t bother me with minutiae. He just does it. If I’ve done something stupid, he’ll get in touch, but he knows that in the proof reading process I’ll catch things.” Adams continued, “He uses a program called Score, which compared to Sibelius, is a much more visually beautiful
Adams, who then checked it against the MIDI playback. “There’s no better tool for proofreading than your ear,” Adams commented. Ocker would then make any corrections and send the score electronically to Adams’s editor, then Holly Mentzer, at Boosey & Hawkes. From the computerized score, Mentzer would extract the parts, proof those, and have the parts printed directly from the software.

By now, it was January 2005; the premiere was ten months away. Act II remained incomplete. The singers were anxious to learn their parts. Even though Adams skipped the piano-vocal phase, he still had to find a way to produce a piano-vocal score. He had re-negotiated his contractual deadlines the San Francisco Opera many times over (the original May 1, 2004 deadline for the piano-vocal score had long passed), and yet he was still behind. He started looking for somebody to create the piano-vocal score from the MIDI mockup and orchestral manuscript. The task was given to Scott Eyerly, a composer, librettist, and faculty member at Juilliard. Eyerly took it on in stride, but the project proved arduous. He had innumerable questions for Adams about discrepancies in the MIDI and manuscript scores. Adams replied promptly and in detail, but the proofing process was tedious. By the end of March 2005, Eyerly completed a draft of the piano-vocal score for Act I, six months before the premiere and around the time that rehearsals for Atomic were about to begin.

During the spring of 2005, Adams, in a state of panic, was hard at work composing the countdown of Act II. He worked primarily in his MIDI platform, leaving virtually no hand-written sketches behind. For the countdown, MIDI proved to be an ideal sketchpad where Adams could explore musical time over other formal matters. He wrote forty-five minutes of music to program. Publishers don’t like to use it anymore, but thankfully my editor at Boosey & Hawkes knows how to use it.”

142 Ibid.
re-create twenty minutes of historical time, toying with the relationship between what Adams
called “clock time” and “stage time.” The countdown, in his mind, would become a collision
of timepieces in sound:

There’s one clock in the brass notes, another clock in the woodwinds, several
clocks in percussion sections; the strings have their own clock. And they go
independently of each other as if you had 20 different clocks, and each one is
racing towards zero. And the conductor is given this awesome task of increasing
the tempo and at the same time keeping everyone exactly in coordination and in
synch.

The music for the countdown seemed to come quickly to Adams. In MIDI, he played with
rhythmic augmentation and diminution to create a perceived experience of time that slows,
expands, and finally seems to stop. Irregularly placed chords highlight the effect. An echo of
“Batter my heart”—two measures of a sustained E minor sonority in the violas—anticipates
Oppenheimer’s final lines in the opera, “Lord, these affairs are hard on the heart” (mm. 365-77).

But soon after this point in the composition, Adams found himself at a standstill.

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Until May 2005, Adams and Sellars had planned an epilogue based on a declassified
transcript dated August 25, 1945. The transcript charts a phone conversation between General
Groves and Colonel Rea, an army doctor, about mass death by radiation in Japan and the
potential public relations crisis it might incite if the American public knew the details of
Hiroshima’s aftermath. The epilogue would follow an orchestral interlude originally titled

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143 Adams, interview with Else, Wonders Are Many. The concept of time in Atomic has been a
trending topic in recent scholarship. See Yayoi Uno Everett, “‘Counting Down’ Time: Musical
Topics in John Adams’ Doctor Atomic,” in Music Semiotics: A Network of Significations in
Honour and Memory of Raymond Monelle, ed. Esti Sheinberg (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012),
263-73; see also Robert Warren Lintott, “The Manipulation of Time Perception in John Adams’s
Doctor Atomic” (MA thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2010).

144 Adams, interview with Else, Wonders Are Many.
“Fallout in the Jornada del Muerto,” a radioactive haze of slowing-shifting dissonant tone clusters (Adams later renamed it “Rain Over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains” and moved it earlier in Act II). Adams envisioned the music morphing into a steady deep drone as the opera’s action moved ahead several weeks after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Groves would sing a headline interspersed with his own commentary:

‘which fatally burned 30,000 victims during the first two weeks following its explosion…Radioactivity caused by the fission of the uranium used in atomic bombs is taking a toll of mounting deaths and causing reconstruction workers in Hiroshima to suffer various sicknesses and ill heath.’ …This is the kind of thing that hurts us—‘The Japanese, who were reported today by Tokyo radio, to have died mysteriously a few days after the atomic bomb blast, probably were the victims of a phenomenon which is well known in the great radiation laboratories of America.’

Colonel Rea would then downplay the seriousness of radiation, calling the report “good propaganda,” saying,

You yourself, as far as radiation is concerned, it isn’t anything immediate, it’s a prolonged thing. I think what these people have, they just got a good thermal burn, that’s what it is…You will have to get some big-wig to put a counterstatement in the paper.

“Is there any difference between Japanese blood and others?” Groves would ask. “As far as I can make out, no,” Rea answered.

The transcript exhibits a kind of perversity remnant of Goodman’s original scenario. The destructive energy she invoked became an invisible undercurrent for Sellars, who probed the transcript as a kind of devastating revelation about the cynicism of the American military enterprise. It helped him access “the place that’s darkest and weirdest and most tormented

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146 Ibid.
Is there any difference between Japanese blood and others?

**Rea:**

As far as I can make out, no.

**Epilogue**

**Pasqualita & Kitty:**

Dreamers wake in the night and sing their songs.
In the flame-brilliant midnight, promises
arrive, singing to each of us with tongues of flame:
“We are hopes, you should have hoped us.
We are dreams, you should have dreamed us.”
Calling our name.

**Kitty:**

Time comes into it.
Say it. Say it.

The universe is made of stories,
not of atoms.
and painful, and out of that create some kind of antidote serum. Going into that zone of highest toxicity and trying to create something that’s actually life-giving is part of what art can do.”¹⁴⁷

The “life-giving” material, though, Sellars found in Rukeyser. The dialogue between Groves and Rea would then shift into a reflection on hope drawn from Rukeyser’s “Dream Singing Elegy” (Fig. 3.29). The women of the opera would have the last word—“the universe is made of stories, not of atoms.”

Adams and Sellars never did work out the dramatic or musical details of the epilogue; no musical sketches for it seem to exist. At some point in the spring of 2005, he and Sellars abandoned the idea. “I just felt that I didn’t want to end this opera with ennobling comments or a kind of snarky, negative political tone,”¹⁴⁸ the composer reflected. Adams, uncertain how to move forward, knew as he did with Transmigration that there was pressure on him to come up with a sensitive response to painful material. It was at this point that he revisited his notebook on Buddhist writings for ideas. Rather than incorporate overt political commentary about the bombing, he seemed to draw insight from a particular passage in his notes on the koan: “Become one with the bomb, the Holocaust. There is no escaping it. If you fall into poverty and throw away your grumbling, then your life will not be a burden to you. If you are rich, live with your riches. All this is the functioning of Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature has the quality of infinite adaptability.”¹⁴⁹ For Adams, no declassified document or passage from a memoir could capture this elusive concept. He decided instead to let the music tell the story, turning to pre-recorded sound and the quiet solemnity of minimalism to acknowledge that what happened in Hiroshima was not a nightmare but a reality.

¹⁴⁷ Sellars, interview with Hamlin, “Playing with Fire.”
¹⁴⁸ Adams, interview with the author, 18 June 2013.
In June 2005, Adams went to the Library of Congress in search of sound material to use for the opera’s opening sound collage and for the finale. He filed listening requests for post-war news broadcasts in Japanese and other military sounds from the Pacific (Fig. 3.30). He incorporated some of this material into the opening soundtrack. But for the ending, it didn’t seem quite right. By mid-summer 2005, with just months until the premiere, the composer re-read John Hersey’s “Hiroshima,” an account of the aftermath at Hiroshima featured in the August 31, 1946 issue of the New Yorker (the story later turned into a book of the same title). Hersey quoted a woman shortly after the bombing. She was covered in ash with a dead child in her arms and calmly uttered, “I can’t find my husband. Kazuo, come over here! Mr. Tanimoto, please help us. Please, may we have some water?” Like a koan, her quiet words after catastrophe moved beyond...
any one personality or the event itself; they lay outside the realm of the intellect. Adams was drawn to the phrase because it brought the technological military violence of the war back to the personal. “It couldn’t be more personal than a mother looking for a glass of water for her child,”150 he commented. Adams hired a young Japanese woman, an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, to whom he paid a small fee to make a recording of several phrases in Japanese, quotes from survivors that he found in Hersey’s narrative. Adams reflected,

I left it Japanese because I thought to suddenly go from this enormous explosion and the kind of giddy excitement that preceded it to this very simple statement, not a statement, but this expression of a human, specifically a mother, speaking in this language that nobody understood was a very eloquent way of ending it.151

As with the countdown, no hand-written musical sketches for the final moments of the opera exist, indicative that Adams, working under extreme pressure, composed directly in Digital Performer. Other than several annotations on his libretto draft, the MIDI mockup and autograph score are the only documents that bear witness to his last-minute efforts.

In the end, the detonation became a musical imagining of the colors, some never before seen, of the blast from the quiet reaches of a bunker nearly two hundred miles away. Adams had written to Richard Rhodes, wondering if the explosion could have been seen from there. “People would have noticed a dawn coming from the entirely wrong direction,”152 Rhodes responded. As a result, Adams picked up where he had left off with Oppenheimer’s final line (“Lord, these affairs are hard on the heart”), a confrontation with questions of the heart, building the quiet orchestral palpitations into a massive crescendo. A brief flash of dissonant sound, reminiscent of the chord that marked the word “Hiroshima” in Act I, washes over the opera house like a momentary burst of light. Then nineteen harmonically tentative chords toll on gongs of

150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
152 Rhodes, quoted in Ross, “Countdown.”
differently tuned high resonances, an allusion to the “chords of death” in the postlude of Stravinsky’s *Requiem Canticles* (1966). Oppenheimer had heard the world premiere of *Canticles* just a few months before his own death; it was played at his memorial at Princeton University’s Alexander Hall on February 25, 1967.\(^{153}\) Adams used the reference to metamorphose Trinity into Hiroshima, the moment of Oppenheimer’s symbolic death. The music is delicate and hushed; the sounds are like strange, spectral singing bowls. Then the quiet voice of a Japanese woman is heard, and the action is now on August 6, 1945.

The pre-recorded voice of the Japanese woman is the opera’s only explicit representation of Hiroshima, sounded in a language that does not fully belong to the opera. It was an artistic decision similar in tactic to Alain Resnais’s treatment of the Japanese language in his 1959 French film *Hiroshima mon Amour*. The unfamiliar sound of Japanese near the end of the film suggests the element of incomprehensibility of what happened at Hiroshima; the use of the Japanese language is linked to the audience precisely through what they do not understand.\(^{154}\) Similarly, Adams’s use of the Japanese woman’s voice at the close of *Atomic* suggests that the impossibility of ever fully understanding the event must pass through the multiplicity of the languages—or voices—the opera speaks, opening up a history directed to those who view it from the perspective of another important past.

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\(^{154}\) Cathy Caruth emphasizes this point in her analysis of *Hiroshima mon Amour* in *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 44-45.
The world premiere of Doctor Atomic took place on October 1, 2005 at the War
Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. The performance was celebrated citywide as a part of a
greater commemoration of the 60th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The overflow
audience included Oppenheimer’s descendants and members of the U.S. Department of Defense.
People who had never been or seldom went to the opera attended. Scientists, historians, college
students, school groups, families, and even children were among the viewers. The topic
especially captivated the attention of those who had lived through the Cold War whose own fears
of nuclear attack had not yet been completely processed. As the final curtain fell and those
strange chords lingered in the stillness, the audience was forced in some way to cope with
themselves as witnesses of catastrophe. A delayed, muted applause ensued. Several weeks after
the premiere, one middle-aged woman recalled her immediate experience coming out of the
premiere:

I was frightened into my bones and realized how I had been in denial about
nuclear weapons my entire life. I did duck and cover in my third grade class. My
feeling was that if it happened it was going to be a fire drill with a little drama. It
wasn’t until after seeing Doctor Atomic that I realized the horror and terror and
devastation of nuclear war. No one talked about it, not even my parents, and it
wasn’t until now that I realize how bad it was.155

A young college-aged man who had never seen an opera before Atomic expressed a similar
sentiment: “The fear that overcame the opera house was amazing. I experienced confusion and
almost illness at the end and asked myself, ‘Did that really happen?’ Yes, that really did
happen.”156

Critical reactions to the world premiere were mixed.157 The overall tone was that of
praise and respect; critics around the country noted Atomic as among the most important classical

155 Margaret Kitchin, interview with the author, 5 November 2005.
156 Patrick Sheehan, interview with the author, 6 November 2005.
157 For a critique of the opera’s more recent reception, see Fink, “After the Canon,” 1065-1088.
music events of 2005, if not the decade. Other reviews attacked Sellars’s libretto for “lacking narrative drive and characterization” and Adams’s music for “falling flat.” Mark Swed of the Los Angeles Times wrote about the opera’s “anything but ideal cast and balance problems.” Some found the roles of the women grafted on and artificial, especially in the second act. Adams took the remarks to heart. As with each of his previous opera projects, he knew his choice of topic exposed him to attention-getting criticism. And yet when that attention was negative, he flinched. He attributed the problems with the music to the troubled libretto. But as much as he wanted to blame the text, he had to have known that he had assigned himself an immense task, fraught with politics and freighted with ethical conundrums, for which he had no clear creative strategy from the start. The opera that was improvised into existence would be rethought in dialogue with his critics.

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160 Ibid.


163 The composer reflected, “I think Peter really enjoyed making the libretto. It was a harder job for me to make it musical. When we did it with El Niño it was easier because it was a real oratorio and you could have chunks of text a la Handel. No one felt El Niño had ‘libretto’ problems. But Doctor Atomic is terribly controversial because of the libretto and the mixture of very high blown poetry by John Donne and the Bhagavad-Gita set right next to the chatter of a bunch of scientists sitting around muttering something like ‘is this thing going to work or not?’ So to this day I don’t know whether it succeeds as a libretto or not.” Adams, interview with the author, 2 January 2013.
After the October 2005 premiere, the opera required a software-assisted re-write. The rushed assembly of the libretto and score led to countless mistakes in the orchestration and corresponding parts. Upcoming performances in Amsterdam and Chicago (both in 2007), as well as at the Metropolitan Opera in New York (2008), prompted Adams to spend a year correcting the score. In 2006, he took his red pen to the autograph and began the edits. It was a daunting task—the stack shown in Fig. 3.31 is Act I alone. He flagged instances such as misplaced chord clusters in the harp beneath which Kitty sings her soliloquy “Easter Eve 1945” (Fig. 3.32), as well as misunderstood tempo markings and problems with the orchestration. With hundreds of changes to make and not wanting to deface the autograph, Adams turned to a copy of the computer-generated score produced by Ocker, circling wrong notes, measures to be deleted, and other errata. He scribbled instructions, directed to Ocker, such as “move to treble clef” and “hold for full note value,” (Fig. 3.33 shows Act II, scene three, “At the Sight of This”). Moreover, the composer felt pressured to correct a mistake in response to a UC Berkeley physicist, Marvin Cohen, who complained that several lines of the libretto, “Matter can be neither created nor destroyed,” drawn from DeWolf Smyth’s *Atomic Energy for Military Purposes*, “are what science believed in the 19th century—and they’re no longer considered to be true.” In response, Adams modified the musical setting to, “*We believed that* ‘matter can be neither created nor destroyed.’” The adjustments, all relatively slight, are primarily corrective. While they do not substantially change the piece, they document the immense labor Adams put into working out the kinks of an opera written in haste.

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Figure 3.31. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, Act I (2005 autograph) (photo: June 2014).
Figure 3.33. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, revision for Act II, scene three, “At the Sight of This” (2006).
The part of Kitty Oppenheimer went through numerous iterations. Adams originally wrote the part for Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, but illness forced her to cancel just months before the world premiere. To the shock of the classical music community, she died of breast cancer in the summer of 2006. Adams adjusted the part for Kristine Jepson, who took over the role for the San Francisco run. For subsequent performances in Amsterdam and Chicago, Adams re-composed the part for soprano. In his words, “it was where it seemed to be going all along.”

Soprano Jessica Rivera, with whom Adams had worked successfully on Flowering Tree in 2006, performed the role. Except for several contour and range modifications, the revised part for Kitty’s “Easter Eve” aria only differs slightly from the original (Fig. 3.34). Adams also added nearly 70 measures of new music for Kitty set to a passage from Rukeyser’s “Dream Singing Elegy” composed specifically for the soprano range (Fig. 3.35). It was the same passage of text that Sellars had planned to include in the original epilogue, meant to capture Kitty’s drunken prophetic state:

Dreamers wake in the night and sing their songs,
In the flame-brilliant midnight, promises
Arrive, singing to each of us with tongues of flame:
‘We are hopes, you should have hoped us,
We are dreams, you should have dreamed us.’

In the revision, Adams placed the music just before the detonation, giving Kitty the last word in the opera, just as Sellars had originally intended. “She [Kitty] had kind of disappeared into the woodwork, and that was kind of a dramatic hole,” Adams noted. The added lines, he hoped, would offset the “synthetic quality” critics found problematic in her role. For Sellars, though, the

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165 Adams, interview with the author, 2 January 2013.
Figure 3.34. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, revision for Act II, scene one, “Easter Eve 1945” (2007).
addition was meant to balance the dramatic energy, “the spiritual struggle of it, rather than just the sheer materialism and cold calculation that usually frames these stories.” Adams made further adjustments to Kitty’s part for the New York Metropolitan Opera production in 2008. Without consulting the composer, Penny Woolcock, the director of the Met production, had hired mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke. This casting choice obliged Adams to readjust the part back to mezzo-soprano for this production only, a task that was unduly frustrating. The role of Kitty thus went through several mutations, shaped specifically for each performer who brought her song to life.

During the San Francisco performances, Adams felt that the tremulous surface of the orchestra dominated the vocal lines. In 2006, he was given the opportunity to re-think the orchestration through the lens of a compressed symphonic form. Conductor David Robertson proposed a co-commission by the BBC Proms and Carnegie Hall for a symphonic adaptation of the opera, the Doctor Atomic Symphony (2007). Distilling the opera’s musical themes took Adams longer than anticipated (the scheduled March 2007 premiere in St Louis was postponed due to missed deadlines). The premiere, performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in August 2007, unfolded over four-movements, lasting 45-minutes, with themes drawn from the overture, the first scene of frenzied anticipation, the sensuous music of Kitty and Robert Oppenheimer in their bedroom, the panicked countdown, and the finale at Trinity. Andrew Clements of The Guardian complained about its length, writing, “Without the narrative and text to provide a spine, the result is all surface, lacking in rigour and any genuinely striking ideas.” The negative review likely impelled Adams to go back and abbreviate the score further. “I just felt it

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168 Sellars, interview with Ebright, 23 July 2013.
169 Adams, interview with the author, 2 January 2013.
was a little wandering and diffuse and needed to be much more compact as an orchestral work,” he explained. Adams cut the adagio (based on the music of the bedroom scene), thinned the orchestration throughout, and removed another ten minutes of music. The symphony as it now stands is 25 minutes with no interruption between movements.

For Adams, the brevity and compactness of The Doctor Atomic Symphony became its own kind of unified nucleus around which the silent voices of the opera sing. He implemented much of the stripped-down orchestral writing of the symphonic version back into the opera score for the 2008 Metropolitan Opera production, thinning out the orchestration so the vocal lines could more fully sound. A comparison of a passage for strings in the original overture (Fig. 3.36a) and the same passage in the opera revision (Fig. 3.36b) illustrates the sheer reduction of sounding tones. The blue post-it note on Figure 3.36a, directed to copyist David Ocker, discloses that the strings are in fact the same for both the symphony and the revised opera.

By the time Atomic premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 2008, it was in its third reincarnation. Mistakes in the original score had been ironed out. Kitty, having gone from mezzo to soprano and back to mezzo, was given more of a voice with new music. The orchestration had been reduced and tightened. Adams restored the original sound collage to the start of Act II, which he had removed for the San Francisco, Amsterdam, and Chicago performances. Each of these additions, he hoped, would add a greater sense of continuity to the work. Moreover, for the 2008 production, he approved Woolcock’s request to use subtitles for the Japanese woman’s voice at the end, a decision that undermines the original artistic intent of the finale. Woolcock

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171 Adams, interview with Scheinin, “‘Greatness’ is not composer Adams’ concern.”
Figure 3.36a. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, original overture, mm. 38-45 (2005 autograph).
Figure 3.36b. John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, revised overture, mm. 38-45 (2007).
seemed to be responding to audience concerns over the incomprehensibility of the Japanese language. After the 2005 San Francisco performances, some expressed uncertainty about what Adams and Sellars did artistically at the end. Dramaturge Wolfgang Willaschek, who was in residence during the world premiere of *Atomic*, received a letter from one audience member who found the finale perplexing. Willaschek’s response, however, captures the profundity of Adams and Sellars’s achievement:

I never talked to John or Peter about the concrete reasons for this ending with the Japanese voice, because you have to know, artistic decisions depend on many different reasons. And these reasons have not so much to do with “genius inspiration,” but with different structures, forms, ideas, musical lines and other things. Sometimes a composer searches for a long time to find a solution. Sometimes he needs partners. Sometimes he has to be alone. And sometimes he comes up with the idea—and no one else except him can say if this solution is right or wrong. Interesting for you is that in the score of *Doctor Atomic* you can’t find the Japanese text. There is only a line, which shows, how long the tape with the voice of the Japanese woman is, when it has to start and when it has to end. This text is a simple question of a woman who is asking for a glass of water for her children shortly after the bombing of Hiroshima. Peter Sellars, I think, made the proposal, not to use a translation of this Japanese text, not even in our Supertitles. I remember very well how the audience reacted, how I reacted, when they and I heard this voice the first time. Of course, each of us, I think, has the imagination, that this voice has something to do with the bombing of Hiroshima. But then I think, everyone is impressed and touched by the silent and calm voice. How could and can someone react in this way? Maybe we expect a cry or a shout, but there is no word, no voice for it. May be you know the exciting and terrible cry on the painting “The Scream” by Edvard Munch. It is a painting of course, but you understand, that there is no voice, no sound for it. I thought about this painting, when I heard the voice of the Japanese woman the first time. Another thing is that it seems to be, what we call in German, *ein offenes Ende, eine offene Frage*, which means an open end. I don’t know if this makes any sense to you. I think we can’t come to an end with this story and with the consequences of this story today. And I think for Peter and John this voice was the best stylistic device to create an atmosphere that we survivors can understand in one second what really happened in the moment of the bombing. To repeat the real bombing is not possible, and I think would be totally wrong. To use one of the deepest secrets of opera—by this I mean the impression of a human voice, of one human voice—shows much better the consequences of this unbelievable incident. And it seems to be that it is a part of this secret not to know the correct words, if you are not a Japanese man or woman. Of course, the Sound Department has the tape, and Japanese people will understand the sentence word by word. But even if someone
can’t understand Japanese, I think, he will understand very well, what this woman tries to say: finding words for something, which can’t be impressed in words.  

That Adams gave in to pressures from Woolcock to bring the abstraction of Hiroshima into clearer focus was perhaps a response to the conundrum of trying to represent a historical and scientific achievement that remains unending. Even though questions surrounding nuclear arms might be less difficult in the present day than they were in the nascent Cold War, Adams seemed to realize they could not be adequately answered in the opera. Perhaps his acquiescence to the critics, to audience members, and to Woolcock gave him the sense of resolution and affirmation that he found neither in the subject matter nor within himself. To this day, the opera about Oppenheimer and the bomb, the opera that sought to be a bearer of a moral reckoning about the atomic age, remains incomplete. Adams’s continued sense of dissatisfaction with Atomic, a symptom of the overly ambitious nature of the subject, will likely keep him returning to the autograph with his red pencil, as if he wanted it to bear the immediate impression of the next nuclear emergency.

EPILOGUE

In a sense, the complex, messy creative processes that resulted in *Nixon in China, The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Doctor Atomic* reflect a lack of consensus among the creators, a fundamental indecision about the subjects at hand. The collaborative nature of each opera goes beyond the creators, commissioners, production teams, and critics. The topics themselves, each high-stakes in nature, contain multitudes of conflicting moral perspectives. The creators struggled separately with the subjects, each reaching and bringing to their collaborations different conclusions about the meaning of the Nixon-Mao encounter, of the terrorists who hijacked the *Achille Lauro*, and of Oppenheimer the man. Adams's incessant revisions to his scores and the various restagings all seek to clarify or elucidate problems that are hardly identified in the operas, if at all. Critics often frame the problems of the works in terms of moral culpability (i.e. accusations of the creators’ ambiguous positioning on the Cultural Revolution in *Nixon*, terrorism in *Klinghoffer*, and nuclear weaponry in *Atomic*). Yet Adams, Sellars, and Goodman went into each project knowing these problems were unsolvable, just as historians, scholars, artists, and citizens continue to struggle with making sense of the contentious, sensitive subjects reflected therein. The works bear the marks of their creative struggles.

The notion of creative struggle is in keeping with Sellars’s artistic vision, namely his ongoing preoccupation with searching for or questioning the unsolvable. Sellars wanted the operas to create a cathartic experience, to become a force for change. For him, opera is a source of quasi-religious revelation, an emotional agent for presenting a subject from a number of perspectives in an effort to leave the audience questioning while also moving them to action. The act of creating—and experiencing—art of this scope involves unavoidable struggle, an outlook
that relates to his interest in Buddhism, specifically the notion that life is suffering and its antidote is the understanding of the root causes of that suffering. “Until doing work that is as hard as solving poverty,” Sellars asserts, “you have no moral standing as an artist. Until there is a bitter taste, there is not much joy. The difficulties in the score are where there is joy.”¹

Adams, however, wanted something else. Opera gave him a sprawling platform for the possibility of a twenty-first-century synthesis of old and new, ancient and modern, traditional and innovative. His musical voice developed first through minimalism and the re-evaluation of the power of tonality. With Harmonielehre, he experimented with pitting long, drawn-out tones, trichordal writing, and Reich-inspired repetition against the harmonic language and orchestration of Wagner, Mahler, Schoenberg, and Sibelius. This new architecture of music, which attempts to join the Austro-German tradition with populist Americana and vast minimalist structures, is ambivalent at best, sometimes longing to embrace everything and other times longing to be adrift in isolation. The monumentality of Adams’s opera subjects, each fraught with moral and ethical ambiguities, gave this musical ambivalence a larger scope. Through the process of setting Goodman’s poetry for Nixon and Klinghoffer and Sellars’s pastiche libretto for Atomic, Adams found a dramatic counterpart to his eclectic style.

Adams may never be completely satisfied with the operas. A deep-seated frustration—with himself for tackling fundamentally hubristic topics that may not altogether turn out successful, with his collaborators for working so often at cross-purposes, and with his compulsion to want to go back and revise the works after their premieres and publication—plagues his creative life. For him, the operas are anything but fixed, perfect resolutions to the complex, turbulent, and sometimes painful processes that preceded them. Yet this persistent

¹ Sellars, “Peter Sellars on Art, Ethics, and Opera,” lecture at Princeton University, 30 March 2013.
sense of discontent, “even inferiority,” he admits, leading to revision after revision, has been the generative force of many of his musical ideas.

Adams often refers to the fact that Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony went through three major revisions over five years. He commented, “It’s one of the most heartening and encouraging things a composer can hear. You can’t figure out how any one person could take that banal thing, rework it, and create the absolute masterpiece that Sibelius made it. It’s a wonderful example of the composer’s will to make something right.” For as long as Adams is around, he, too, will attempt to make his operas “right.” In all likelihood, the scores will continue to develop alongside pragmatic concerns such as casting or changes in technology. Adams intends to revise Atomic yet again for future productions, an indication that the work remains very much alive, if frustratingly so, in his musical imagination. As for Nixon, the score is settled for the time being. Klinghoffer, though, may keep evolving alongside debates on terrorism and the age-old political and spiritual crises the work openly confronts. But what each of the operas has to say as it changes through time deserves to be heard. At performances of the new scores for Klinghoffer in St. Louis (2011) and London (2012) respectively, a roaring ovation filled the theater as Adams took the stage for what ended up being a hero’s welcome. Undoubtedly, Adams, with an even newer score in hand, will experience the same thing when Atomic makes its next debut.

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2 Adams, Hallelujah Junction, 22.
4 Adams, interview with the author, 17 June 2013.
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