



John Adams's Nixon in China: Musical Analysis, Historical and Political Perspectives

By Timothy A. Johnson

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John Adams's opera, *Nixon in China*, is one of the most frequently performed operas in the contemporary literature. Timothy A. Johnson illuminates the opera and enhances listeners' and scholars' appreciation for this landmark work. This music-analytical guide presents a detailed, in-depth analysis of the music tied to historical and political contexts. The opera captures an important moment in history and in international relations, and a close study of it from an interdisciplinary perspective provides fresh, compelling insights about the opera.

The music analysis takes a neo-Riemannian approach to harmony and to large-scale harmonic connections. Musical metaphors drawn between harmonies and their dramatic contexts enrich this approach. Motivic analysis reveals interweaving associations between the characters, based on melodic content. Analysis of rhythm and meter focuses on Adams's frequent use of grouping and displacement dissonances to propel the music forward or to illustrate the libretto.

The book shows how the historical depiction in the opera is accurate, yet enriched by this operatic adaptation. The language of the opera is true to its source, but more evocative than the words spoken in 1972—due to Alice Goodman's marvelous, poetic libretto. And the music transcends its repetitive shell to become a hierarchically-rich and musically-compelling achievement.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

'Note by note, line by line, Timothy Johnson crawls across what is perhaps the greatest conventional (opera-house) opera of the late 20th-century, and also grounds it in aspects of political context not well-remembered today. It's an impressive and thorough analysis of not only the music, but the historical gesture.' Kyle Gann, Bard College, USA, author of *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* 'In summary, Johnson's book provides a thorough and cleverly organized account of Adams's *Nixon in China*. Even those who are already very familiar with the opera will likely find their knowledge of its historical and political contexts greatly expanded by Johnson's writing.' *Music Theory Online* '... Johnson has written a very successful book. It is an admirable first step in the analysis of *Nixon in China* and will hopefully spur an academic conversation for some time to come.' *Notes* '... Johnson's book is by far the most comprehensive investigation of the opera to date, exceeding previous inquiries in analytical and historical breadth... Johnson's attention to musical detail is extraordinary. Together with well researched historical and political anecdotes... he provides another perspective on the historical event through musical analysis, making connections that inevitably enrich the listening and viewing experience... [Johnson] has produced an essential contribution to the literature on Adams that demonstrates the depth of his engagement with Nixon and asks us to hear these parts of the story in a new way. While it is hard to imagine a more comprehensive account of the opera, Johnson's book points to future critical readings of Nixon and Adams's operas more generally that integrate musical analysis with the socio-political and historical themes central to these important stage works.' *Twentieth-Century Music* 'There is much in Johnson's exegesis to confirm the view that operas possess the quality to capture important historical moments and bring them colourfully to life, and his study of *Nixon in China* demonstrates this in a number of insightful and illuminating ways.' *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland*

About the Author

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Users Review

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