

TIMOTHY A. JOHNSON, *JOHN ADAMS'S NIXON IN CHINA: MUSICAL ANALYSIS, HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES* (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2011). ISBN 978-1-4094-2682-0, xv+278pp, £55.

Premiered in Houston in October 1987, American composer John Adams's first opera, *Nixon in China*, has been hailed as one of the major musical stage works of the twentieth century. Ever mindful of prevailing musical styles and influences, Adams combined the more radical repetitive elements of minimalist opera (as heard especially in Philip Glass's ground-breaking *Einstein on the Beach*, composed some ten years previously) with conventional tonal and post-tonal practices of early twentieth-century Europeans such as Debussy, Ravel and Sibelius. In doing so, Adams struck upon a formula that was simultaneously popular and challenging.

Yet the key to the success of this opera arguably lies in the story itself rather than the music *per se*. While the idea of setting an opera in the present day was certainly not new, the notion of situating a dramatic plot in a specific recent historical event was as bold as it was innovative. This musical-dramatic synthesis prompted some critics to view *Nixon in China* as a worthy successor to George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), generally considered to be the first truly 'American' opera.

Timothy A. Johnson's impressive monograph examines both the musical content and dramatic design of *Nixon in China*. A key element in unlocking the opera's meaning lies in the way in which it combines the general and the specific—the universal and the particular—with the way in which individuals are portrayed, such as Richard Nixon and Mao Tse-tung. The opera's *dramatis personae* appear as if they are being inexorably swept along by history's strong tide. Adams, librettist Alice Goodman and producer Peter Sellars manage to infuse Nixon's visit to China in February 1972 with 'deep historical and political meaning' (1); but the composer also moves beyond previous minimalist operas by portraying 'the changing and conflicting emotional states of each of the principal characters' (1). *Nixon in China* therefore manages successfully to balance the subjective and objective within its dramatic timeframe.

The main aim of Johnson's monograph is to 'show that both the music and the ideas are richer than they ... appear' on the surface, and that 'the historical depiction in the opera is accurate yet enriched' by Goodman and Adams (2). Indeed, much of what transpires in this study may be seen as an attempt to elucidate the precise connections and disconnections between the opera's representations of fact and fiction. Johnson draws on first-hand accounts by Richard and Pat Nixon, Henry Kissinger (the US's national security advisor at the time) and the diaries and reflections of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, his second-in-command Chou En-lai, secondary source material culled from biographical accounts and historical narratives of the event, and the extensive research that went into planning the opera. Johnson argues that this level of research

'helped Adams, Goodman and Sellars to create an opera that would reflect the historical record but surpass its historical foundation' (5).

Part I of the book focuses on visual representations in the opera, beginning in chapter 1 with the Chinese landscape. This is an appropriate place to start since the opera opens and closes with such depictions. Johnson points out that Adams contrasts the American and Chinese view of the landscape in order to highlight more general differences between the two nations: what Richard and Pat Nixon look upon when they first arrive as 'a colorless, poor, barren landscape' is seen by the Chinese people as 'the beauty and bounty of the land' (22). Johnson then fast-forwards to Premier Chou En-lai's soliloquy at the end of the opera, where he views the dawn rising from his bedroom balcony in order to show how Adams provides 'a fitting close to the harmonic structure of the opera as a whole' (27).

Chapters 2–4 look at state ceremonial functions, such as the landing of Nixon's airplane *The Spirit of '76*, the US delegation's meeting with Mao and his entourage in the Chairman's book-filled study, and Pat Nixon's tour of China. These moments have perhaps drawn closest comparison with the notion of 'CNN opera'—a term which Adams has dismissed. One can nevertheless view *Nixon in China* as the first in a line of operas that take important recent historical moments, media events or characters as their starting point (other operas might include Michael Daugherty's *Jackie O* (1997), Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Anna Nicole* (2011), or indeed Adams's second opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991)). Johnson argues that opera, unlike news broadcasts, in general highlights 'the actions, emotions, feelings and motivations depicted in the opera through music' (5), although he doesn't offer a more broad-based comparison between *Nixon in China* and other media-based operas.

The meeting in Chairman Mao's study allows Johnson to compare the 'harmonic instability' and grouping dissonances in Adams's music with 'Mao's ill-health, the generally nervous feelings of the principals in the scene, and the chaotic energy of the photographers' (54). Nixon is speechless with excitement. Mao, on the other hand, is literally speechless because he is suffering from a sore throat. Chapter 3 focuses on Pat Nixon's grand tour; this allows Johnson to draw some important connections between this scene and previous ones, especially the shared use of tonal regions in the Chinese chorus in Act I Sc. 1. Johnson also makes the point that Adams's use of harmony becomes simplified for the First Lady's visit to the Evergreen People's Commune, suggesting the musical portrayal of a simpler, agrarian lifestyle (69). Later Johnson emphasizes the symbolic importance of the sun in the opera. During Pat Nixon's visit to the Ming Tombs, 'the sun begins to set, metaphorically suggesting the burial of past animosity between the two nations' (73).

Part II deals with the principal characters and their musical characterization. As Johnson points out, opera is an ideal catalyst for providing the private thoughts of individuals; the audience 'is privy to the inner mind of the character, whose thoughts ... are completely unheard by the other characters in the opera' (79). Implied in this comment is an important distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music, a subject that has received significant scholarly attention in opera and film.¹ Johnson does not attempt to frame the opera in terms of its 'singing' or 'mute' voices however, although such an inquiry may have yielded some interesting insights.

Part III covers themes relating to national and cultural identity, while the final chapter, 'Détente', attempts to draw together the opera's main strands. American idealism and Chinese isolationism are symptoms of the two countries' 'differing approaches to foreign relations' (163). Johnson observes that whereas 'America's liberty turned it outward to spread its roots and branches, China's reverence for the ancestors turned it inward' (175). He suggests that by 'addressing the issue of the political spectrum in a multidimensional way, and especially by exploring Nixon's and Mao's position in the spectrum, the opera engages this aspect of Nixon's trip to China in a rich and meaningful way' (191). The two countries' respective economic systems provide the focus for chapter 13. In the scene when a discussion takes place about China entering the international stock exchange, 'the harmony becomes more complicated ... with the added dissonance reflecting Mao's cautious stance' (203). This prompts Johnson to conclude that Adams and Goodman's portrayal of America and China in the opera is, on the whole, 'even-handed' (213).

As may be seen from the foregoing summary, the central aspect of Johnson's study involves close readings of the relationship between Adams's music and Goodman's libretto, often drawing to the surface aspects of word-painting and musical representation of the text. The problem with such literal comparisons is that they can end up giving the impression of a relatively shallow one-to-one relationship between the two—the music simply 'supports the text' or vice versa. One is therefore left wondering whether Johnson's emphasis on (often) straightforward parallelism between the words and music indicates that very little lies underneath the surface of Adams's opera?

Clearly this is not the case, but Johnson's approach does rather undermine the layers of ambiguity that underscore the opera's rich design. Such ambiguities add

¹ See, for instance, Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991) and Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).

layers of interpretative meaning to a work that are sometimes glossed over in his analysis. For example, there are times when Adams's setting lies in contest or conflict with the libretto or its scene settings. This is seen at the very beginning of the opera. Johnson hears the opening, with its 'calm ascending A aeolian scales [as creating] a warm, hopeful, open feeling' (17–18), but it is difficult not to hear beneath this relatively calm veneer a sense of nervousness, anxiety and even dread. On one level the music is 'setting the scene', but it also simultaneously represents the uncertainties and insecurities that preoccupy the thoughts of Nixon and Mao. Johnson later identifies the metrical dissonance at work in the opening as foreshadowing 'the conflict between Western and Chinese thoughts ... featured in the opera' (19), but this conflict is already there in the music's linear and vertical motion.

The main difficulty in grasping the importance of Johnson's impressively detailed and thorough examination of *Nixon in China* lies in his use of analytical methodology. Harald Krebs's research in the area of rhythm and metre, and especially neo-Riemannian approaches to harmony, form the backbone of Johnson's understanding of this work. Johnson starts off by outlining Krebs's notion of metrical 'consonance' and 'dissonance', which is then divided into 'displacement dissonance' and 'grouping dissonance' (8). He then develops a shorthand method to indicate such levels of metrical displacement, for example 'D6 + 1', which describes a 'syncopated pattern of quarter notes, offset by an eighth note' (8). In addition, Johnson explains that displacement dissonance may be 'positive' or 'negative' depending on whether the displacement dissonance starts on the anacrusis (negative) or after the initial downbeat (positive). Metrical grouping dissonance is displayed in terms of the ratio between conflicting pulses; thus 'G3/2' indicates 'with the meter articulated by quarter notes, a pattern of dotted quarter notes' (9).

While there can be no doubt that such metrical layering (or 'stratification', to use Catherine Pellegrino's term) is central to Adams's rhythmic language, one wonders whether Krebs's model is suitably transparent in this context, given that there is some expectation that readers will be familiar with these theories. Could most of Johnson's key observations not be made without recourse to such dense analytical discourse and technical language?

Johnson's use of neo-Riemannian theory to chart connections 'from one chord to another' (9) becomes even more intractable to the lay reader. While the basis of neo-Riemannian theory is relatively easy to grasp—it seeks to clarify connections between triadic patterns and shifts within and between harmonic 'regions'—Johnson's description of harmonic transformations in Adams's opera soon becomes difficult to follow, unless one is fully conversant with neo-Riemannian terminology. Thus, by p. 10, Johnson can state that 'for example LP and PL, both common transformations in Adams's

music, hold an inverse relationship. Thus an LP transformation requires a PL transformation to return to the initial triad, whereas any transformation used singly requires the same transformation to return to the initial triad' (10–11); or, later, when Johnson discusses Adams's use of bird song in Act III: 'this presents a PL transformation as a bichord, moves by P transformations to C minor over E minor and then by PL and LP transformations to E minor over C minor' (28).

Johnson does draw some important general points from such in-depth explication, such as the roles of C major and E minor (or major) in providing 'metaphorical representations of the two nations' in the opera (see, for example, pp. 38 and 65), but the question remains whether the majority of Johnson's most observant and illuminating analytical points about the opera (of which there are many) could not be made without reference to neo-Riemannian terms and symbols. The analysis becomes clearer when this theory is set out in tabular form and described, such as with Nixon's 'News' aria (93–97). Given Johnson's emphasis on neo-Riemannian harmonic constraints it would have been interesting to ascertain whether such an approach is supported either through the study of sketch material pertaining to the opera, or from comments made by the composer regarding his compositional processes. There are no real *a priori* reasons why this method should be applied over and above any other analytical approach, other than on the basis that Adams continues to compose in an essentially 'triadic' manner, and Johnson does not try to make a strong case for using it either.

Inevitably, such formal analysis takes the reader away from more overarching concerns relating to the dramaturgical relationship between sound and image in the opera. This is arguably where Johnson's study falls short. We never really get to understand *Nixon in China's* importance in relation to twentieth-century opera in general or minimal and postminimal opera in particular. A number of scholars have attempted to frame the development of this genre during the second half of the twentieth century in terms of its attempts to eschew or subvert traditional operatic concepts. Nicholas Till, Jelena Novak and Paul Gomes Ribeiro have characterized this shift by using terms such as 'post-dramatic' and 'post-operatic' in their research.² The notion of 'CNN opera' is also linked to this research, but Johnson steers clear of providing a post-operatic context in which *Nixon in China* could be understood. Likewise the reception

² See, for example, Nicholas Till, 'Investigating the Entrails: Post-Operatic Music Theatre in Europe', in Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout (eds), *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 34–46, or Jelena Novak, 'From Minimalist Music to Postopera', in Keith Potter, Pwyll ap Sion and Kyle Gann (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music* (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2013), 129–40.

history of the opera and differences in staging between various productions of the opera is also largely ignored.

The inclusion of 'Listening Examples' throughout does reinforce the impression that this book is designed primarily as a course textbook, enabling students studying the opera to move through it scene by scene, note by note. Although the listening examples have a clear pedagogic value, they prevent the author from engaging with wider aesthetic and hermeneutic issues, which would have provided the monograph with greater depth and scope.

Johnson's study certainly contains a very valuable analytical commentary on Adams's opera, and a number of interesting historical and political perspectives are offered on the work. As Kyle Gann observes in his comments printed on the jacket cover, 'note by note, line by line, Timothy Johnson crawls across what is perhaps the greatest conventional (opera-house) opera of the late 20th century'. 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.

Pwyll ap Sion

Bangor University