

The Wound-Dresser, for Baritone Voice and Orchestra

John Adams

Yes, John Adams started out as a minimalist — but wait! It has been a long time since he graduated from that description to become one of America’s most widely performed composers of concert music, a distinction he achieved thanks to a style in which musical richness and stylistic variety are deeply connected to the mainstream impetuses of classical music. He grew up studying clarinet and became so accomplished that he performed occasionally with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. At Harvard he studied composition with a starry list of teachers that included Leon Kirchner, Earl Kim, Roger Sessions, Harold Shapero, and David Del Tredici. Then, armed with a copy of John Cage’s book *Silence* (a graduation gift from his parents), he left the “Eastern establishment” for the relative aesthetic liberation of the West Coast. He arrived in California in 1971 and has been based in the Bay Area ever since. During his first decade there Adams explored an evolving fascination with the repetitive momentum of minimalism, but by 1981 he was describing himself as “a minimalist who is bored with minimalism.”

Among Adams’s most internationally acclaimed works are his operas, which characteristically address the personal stories behind momentous political or historical events: *Nixon in China* (1987, which considers Richard Nixon’s historic 1972 meeting with Mao Zedong), *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1990, inspired by the hijacking, five years earlier, of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro*), *I Was Looking At The Ceiling And Then I Saw The Sky* (1995, a “song play” set in the aftermath of the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake), and *Doctor Atomic* (premiered in 2005, involving the testing of the first atomic bomb). *A Flowering Tree* (2006), returned to more classic operatic territory, setting a South Indian folktale that

involves personal transformations and moral choices, and his most recent opera, *Girls of the Golden West* (2017), found inspiration in the California Gold Rush. In some of these scores, as in many of his instrumental compositions, one finds the confluence of popular and classical styles, the mixing of “high” and “low” that reflects the breadth of Adams’s catholic inspiration and comprehensive language.

From 2003 to 2007 Adams succeeded Pierre Boulez as composer-in-residence at Carnegie Hall, and since 2009 he has been creative chair of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In addition to his activities as a composer, Adams has grown increasingly involved in conducting, and has led many of the world’s most distinguished ensembles in programs

IN SHORT

Born: February 15, 1947, in Worcester, Massachusetts

Resides: in Berkeley, California

Work composed: 1988, on a commission by Carillon Importers on behalf of Absolut Vodka, with assistance from The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra through a gift from Daniel and Constance Kunin

World premiere: February 24, 1989, at Ordway Music Theater in St. Paul, Minnesota, by baritone Sanford Sylvan and The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 14, 2010, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Thomas Hampson, baritone

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 4, 2010, at the Barbican Centre in London, England, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Thomas Hampson, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

that mix his own works with compositions by figures as diverse as Debussy, Stravinsky, Ravel, Zappa, Ives, Reich, Glass, and Ellington. The New York Philharmonic spotlighted him in a Composer's Week dedicated to his music in 1997, but for many listeners his most memorable connection with the Orchestra was the unveiling of his *On the Transmigration of Souls*, a meditation on the attacks of September 11, 2001, which was premiered at the outset of the 2002 season. The recording, on the Nonesuch label, was honored with Grammy awards for Best Classical

Recording, Best Orchestral Performance, and Best Classical Contemporary Composition, and the work garnered a Pulitzer Prize for its composer. Adams will return — as composer and conductor — at the end of the Philharmonic's 2018–19 season.

In 2008 Adams published *Hallelujah Junction*, a compelling book of memoirs and commentary on American musical life. In it he shares that *The Wound-Dresser* “began as a plan to set prose cameos from Walt Whitman's account of his Civil War days in [his prose collection] *Specimen Days*.” Adams

In the Composer's Words



Ward K of the Armory Square Hospital in Washington, DC, during the Civil War

Walt Whitman spent the better part of the Civil War years in Washington, DC, living in a series of small, unfurnished rooms, all the time supported by the meager salary of a federal clerkship. His sole, consuming passion was his self-appointed task of ministering to the tens of thousands of sick and maimed soldiers who crowded the hospitals in the surrounding area, many of them little more than unheated and unventilated canvas tents hurriedly constructed by the unprepared Army of the Potomac. Virtually every

day, barring his own illness or ever-increasing exhaustion, Whitman rose early and went to the hospitals, going from ward to ward to visit with the sick and wounded young men. For those who were unable to do so, he wrote letters home. For others he provided small gifts of fruit, candy or tobacco. He dressed the wounds of the maimed and the amputees and often sat up throughout the night with the most agonizing cases, almost all of whom he knew on a first-name basis. It was surely no poetic exaggeration when he later said that during these years many a young soldier had died in his, Walt Whitman's, arms. ...

The Wound-Dresser is a setting for baritone voice and orchestra of a fragment from the poem of the same name. As always with Whitman, it is in the first person, and it is the most intimate, most graphic and most profoundly affecting evocation of the act of nursing the sick and the dying that I know of. It is also astonishingly free of any kind of hyperbole or amplified emotion, yet the detail of the imagery is of a precision that could only be attained by one who had been there.

The Wound-Dresser is not just about the Civil War; nor is it just about young men dying (although it is locally about both). It strikes me as a statement about human compassion of the kind that is acted out on a daily basis, quietly and unobtrusively and unselfishly and unflinchingly. Another poem in the same volume states its theme in other words: “Those who love each other shall become invincible ...”

added that the texts, which involved Whitman's service in military hospitals, "made me think of the stories I had heard from San Francisco friends, many of them gay, who had lost partners and loved ones to the plague of AIDS that, in 1989, was still devastating the country." They also related to "the memory of a more personal story, that of the long, slow decline of my father from Alzheimer's disease" and "my mother's struggle and the devotion with which she nursed him." Instead of setting *Specimen*

Days, he chose "The Wound-Dresser," a poem "that is both graphic and tender, perhaps the most intimate recollection of what Whitman experienced in his years of selfless work as a nurse and caregiver in the hospitals that surrounded wartime Washington."

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet (doubling piccolo trumpet), timpani, synthesizer, and strings, in addition to the baritone soloist.

Remembering a Muse

Baritone Sanford Sylvan, who performed the World Premiere of *The Wound-Dresser*, died on January 26, at the age of 65. John Adams, who described Sylvan to *The New York Times* in its obituary as his muse, shares this remembrance of the singer:

I met Sanford (Sandy) Sylvan in Brooklyn some time in 1985. He came down from Boston to sing for me at the recommendation of [director] Peter Sellars, who was certain he was the ideal person to create the role of Chou En-lai in *Nixon in China*, which I was just beginning. There was no way of disguising the fact that it was an "audition" — quite possibly the one and only time Sandy submitted to such ignominy — but he handled it with great dignity and generosity. I knew intuitively after the first few seconds that what I was hearing was absolutely unique: a voice of pure, unforced resonance, liquid and luminous. "Luminous" — can a voice project light? It seems that his could. And then there was his way with words, especially with the way we Americans speak. It was exactly what I was looking for because, to my mind, if there were to be a genuinely "American" opera, it would have to inhabit the peculiar rhythms and cadences and inflections we hear daily. No trilling Handelian "r"s, and no pompous extruding of vowels or lip-splitting exaggeration of consonants.

And all this so he could be a Chinese premier! So moving was his Chou En-lai that it seemed natural that a Whitman text would follow, and *The Wound-Dresser* was the result. Here — in Whitman's frozen-in-time vision of caregiving, of suffering, mercy and love — not just Sandy's voice, but his deep, complex soul came to the fore. No greater privilege could a composer receive.



Baritone Sanford Sylvan (second from left) and John Adams (seated at piano), with members of the original *Nixon in China* cast in 1987: soprano Trudy Ellen Craney (Madam Mao), tenor John Duykers (Mao), and soprano Carolann Page (Pat Nixon)

Text

John Adams's *The Wound-Dresser*

from the poem by Walt Whitman (1819–92)

Bearing the bandages, water, and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass, the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again.

I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
One turns to me his appealing eyes — poor boy! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.

On, on I go (open doors of time! open hospital doors!),
The crush'd head I dress (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage away),
The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard.
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side falling head,
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump,
And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.
I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.
I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand (yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame).

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad.
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)