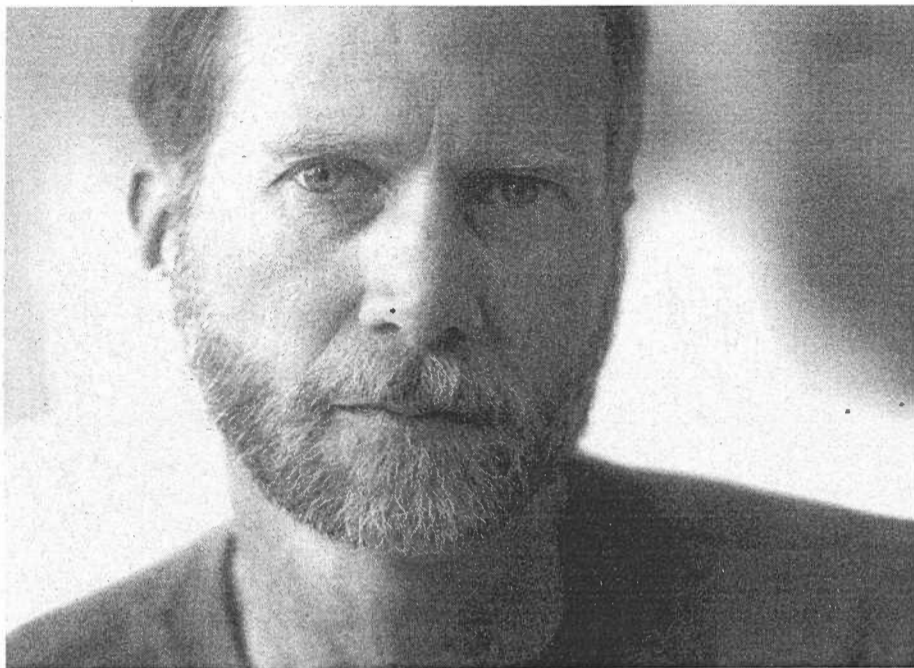


John Luther Adams Explores a New Landscape of Pure Harmony

ERASING THE LINES

BY KYLE GANN



MELODIES AND TEMPI ARE GONE: ADAMS'S MUSIC HAS BEEN REDUCED TO PURE HARMONY.

John Luther Adams has erased the lines in his music. In retrospect it seems an inevitable move. I'm speaking of the Alaska John Adams (not the *Nixon in China* one), who's suddenly got two and a half new CDs out. Two are on the Cold Blue label: an all-Adams disc called *The Light That Fills the World*, plus he's got the major work, *Dark Wind*, on a disc titled with the admittedly poetic last names of the composers: *Adams/Cox/Fink/Fox*. Even more recent is a disc on New World, a 75-minute piece called *In the White Silence*, conducted by Tim Weiss with the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble. And in the four Cold Blue works, Adams's familiar languorous melodies, repeating patterns, and conflicting tempi are all gone: The music is reduced to pure harmony.

Adams has always been one to remind you in his music of where he lives, the big, white, frozen, arctic expanses reflected in big, shimmering, seamless tonal canvases with few distinct landmarks. In fact, Adams has evoked the whiteness of snow in a remarkable number of pieces that contain only "white" notes, not a single flat or sharp, including *In the White Silence* and *The Farthest Place* (on Cold Blue). But heretofore his snow has always fallen from clouds of rhythm, in conflicting tempos of often four-against-five-against-six-against-seven; my early critical trope on Adams's music made it a cross between Morton Feldman and Henry Cowell, Feldman for the slow, sustained sonorities and Cowell for the thickets of cross-rhythm. Now any feeling of tempo is gone, and these large chamber works for mallet percussion, piano, solo strings, and sometimes synthesizers merely grow and morph in a near-featureless harmonic continuum.

Imagine: You've got to write a piece sans melody, sans counterpoint, sans rhythm, merely with harmony—and you don't get to use any sharps or flats. That's *The Farthest Place*—the music doesn't merely sustain, it seethes with fluttered chords of piano, marimba, and xylophone, whose shimmering somehow provides a convincing metaphor for Adams's overriding image: light on a brilliantly reflective surface. Another piece, *The Immeasurable Space of Tones*, is darker, its synth chords ever so slowly whirling around the circle of fifths, adding flats to the scale with a

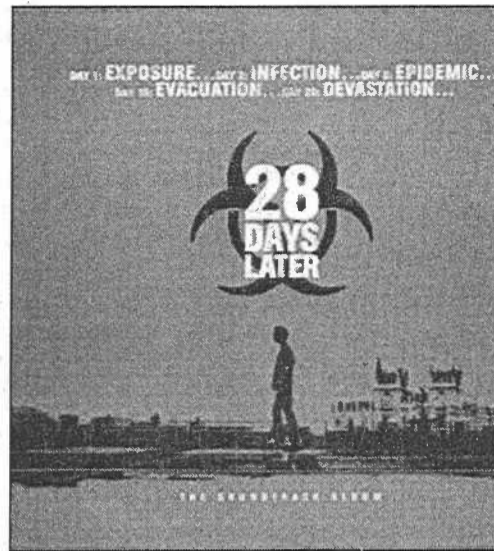
gradualness that might make a person with perfect pitch dizzy, all over tones deep enough to rattle every light fixture in my house.

Adams explicitly ties this development in his music to the history of abstract expressionist painting. He cites *Number 5, 1950*, the last painting by Mark Rothko to include lines across a luminous color field before the artist plunged into a world of pure color: "After this," a critic observed, "the lines disappear completely." The comment made Adams realize that the places he liked best in his previous music were those where "nothing happened."

Yet I find myself most seduced by *In the White Silence*, which despite its recent release is the earliest piece here (1998). It still contains events: The string orchestra plays mystic chords, then the harp enters with eight-note melodies, the celeste glides through scales at a faster tempo, a string quartet plays chorales of upward lines, and finally solo string melodies float beneath a repetitive celeste arabesque. This progression of textures occurs six times across 75 minutes, first with emphasis on intervals of a second, then with thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, and sevenths, a reliable Adams m.o. heard in earlier works as well. If you know what to listen for, these features help locate you within a vast, subtly repetitive, one-movement architecture.

I suspect that many new-music fans will prefer *The Light That Fills the World*, whose seamless continua exactly fit a common image of musical mysticism. But so far, I prefer *In the White Silence* for being less literal, a metaphor for eternity instead of a spun-off shard of the experience of eternity. Or perhaps simply because it's the most lusciously sensuous new recording I've heard in years. Besides, erasing the lines from your work, vanishing into nothingness, is a mark of one's late period, in Rothko's case a prelude to depression and eventual suicide. Adams was only recently a "young" composer—he just turned 50—and he's one of the most cheerful artists I've ever met. If he's erasing the lines now, what's he going to do for an encore? **V**

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