

# To Groove Or Not To Groove

BY KYLE GANN

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Once a Minimalist, then a Romantic, sometimes a Downtowner, now an Americana Symphonist.

*photo: Christine Alicino*

Ten is the number of monumentality: at least over at Nonesuch Records, which has released a 10-disc set of Steve Reich, one of the Kronos Quartet, and is now releasing one of John Adams in coming weeks. The Kronos had a lot of unknown repertoire chomping at the bit to be heard, while Reich gives a feel of being near the end of a unidirectional career—and therefore one predictable in trajectory if still incomplete. The Adams case is very different. Besides the fact that he is only a little over 50 yet, it's almost shocking to see a record company attempt to sum up a career whose direction still seems a mystery even to its protagonist. Once a minimalist, then a romantic, sometimes a Downtowner, now an Americana symphonist, more recently neo-Schoenbergian, Adams has played the Hamlet of late-20th-century American music. Only we're never sure whether he's going to avenge the death of modernism or the murder of new music's audience.

This massive CD set is not going to clear things up. Put on Disc 1, you'll hear the shimmering tremolos of *Shaker Loops* (1978): Adams was the first composer to separate minimalism's textures from its logic and sculpt them capriciously, though smoothly enough to not quite sound arbitrary. Jump to disc 8, and the Western-pastoral consonance of the much later *Hoodoo Zephyr* sounds like a plausible MIDI-electronics continuation. In between, though, we hear the bittersweet romanticism of *The Wound Dresser*, located somewhere between Berg and Barber. Disc 9, meanwhile, gives us a Sondheimish musical about an earthquake, *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, whose settings of tough street talk are a little self-conscious. And on and on, aesthetic whiplash between each band and the next.

Adams has acknowledged a schizophrenic split in his music between his "dark, introspective, 'serious' " works on one side, and the other evoking what he calls "the Trickster, the garish, ironic wild card." That Jekyll and Hyde division still doesn't do justice to the variety of strategies here. There is, however, an identifiable stream in his output that I call his "busy" music, heard in *Lollapalooza*, *Slonimsky's Earbox*, the Chamber Symphony, *Gnarly Buttons*, the Violin Concerto. These pieces, mostly recent, seem obsessed with details of a consistent musical language and devoid of themes, repetitions, rhythmic grooves, or memorable images. Lots of academic pitch-set jugglers have written music fitting that non-description, of course, but Adams is the first to do so from a standpoint of accessibility and tonality. The busily jerky counterpoint of these pieces, in fact, sounds remarkably like tonal Schoenberg, and in some cases (the Violin Concerto, notably), like Schoenberg, period.

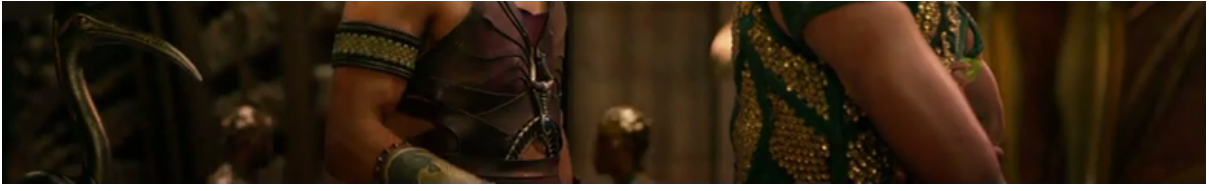
On the other hand, Horatio, other and mostly earlier pieces, like *Christian Zeal and Activity*, *Harmonium*, *El Dorado*, and *Grand Pianola Music*, value stillness enough to remind you that Adams found his original direction when his parents gave him a copy of John Cage's book *Silence*. If there's no common thread here, one can at least trace a circuitous path. Adams seems, quite justifiably, loathe to have remained an epigone of Reich and Glass; paraphrasing Picasso, he wanted to be a composer, not a minimalist. Once the commissions started rolling in, though, it's as though he got into the habit of composing for composing's sake, without anything of his own to say. The technique is unimpeachable, but the results are sicklied o'er with a pale cast of thought.

Having heard all these discs, do I like Adams's music? I can't think of another composer for whom that question is so difficult to answer, which may be enough to admire about him. This monument is hardly his tombstone; his *Naive and Sentimental Music*, which I heard premiered in Los Angeles in February, is *not* included here, and I thought that his best piece since *Harmonielehre*, reminding me much of the Copland Third Symphony. My favorite moment in his output remains the big, Beethovenian theme in the final movement of *Grand Pianola Music*– *BA DUMDA DEE DUM*– a work that every other commentator has dismissed as ironic, satirical. But for one stunning moment, Hamlet suddenly knew what was in his heart and said it boldly, unflinching and unashamed.

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