

## **Adams 'The Chairman Dances'**

**JOHN ADAMS (b. 1947)**

### ***The Chairman Dances (Foxtrot for Orchestra)***

John Adams belongs to the second generation of young American composers who, some 20 years ago, were working with a new concept of extreme simplicity in order to develop the system of composition now known as minimalism. Their aim was to structure the music in a straightforward and simple manner, harmonically and melodically, so that the result could be readily understood by trained and untrained listeners alike. Typically, a piece would begin with the simplest of musical materials, then would be put through various subtle shifts, combining constant repetition with gradual transformation. Rather than the clear cut, developed themes standard in the 18th and 19th centuries, minimalist music moves through what is known as 'phase shifting', where changes appear to be almost imperceptible. The result can be both hypnotic and austere, but at the same time totally fascinating. In the composer's own words, "There's nothing wrong with entertaining your audience."

*The Chairman Dances* depicts a scene taken from the libretto of the composer's 1985 opera "Nixon in China", which is set in the three days of President Nixon's visit to Beijing in February 1972, using one act for each day. The music is in fact not a part of the opera (which is both stylistically and instrumentally quite different from it), but rather a separate response - a purely musical one - to the irresistible image of a banquet at which a youthful Mao Tse Tung is dancing the foxtrot with his mistress Chiang Ch'ing, former B-movie queen and the future Madame Mao, the mind and spirit behind the Cultural Revolution.

Formally, *The Chairman Dances* is in three parts, A-B-A, with a persistent, chugging pulse in the basses marking the outer sections. The throbbing and coloristic flashes that begin the work give way to the dance theme proper in the strings, the piano eventually emerging both as participant and as a source of commentary upon the proceedings. The work 'runs out' instead of ending, as though in imitation of the hand-wound gramophone which had accompanied the dancing of the Maos in earlier, and perhaps less complicated and foreboding, times.

The piece involves a great deal of activity in the percussion section, requiring as it does the use of a large number different instruments. Also present are driving pulsating rhythms, phasing of harmonies and orchestral colors, and sudden shifts to jazzy cocktail music.

The work was premiered on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1986 in Milwaukee, conducted by Lucas Foss.

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