VIOLETTING THROUGH AUGUST’S END (OR THE SUNSET IN WATER, THE CARILLON-CHIME IN SQUARE): AN ORIGINAL CHAMBER OPERA AND A CRITICAL ESSAY ON THE TRAJECTORY OF AMERICAN MINIMALIST OPERA

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When the dust settles, John Adams’s *Nixon in China* and Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach* may stand as the most important operas of the latter twentieth century. The critical essay portion of this thesis examines the trajectory of minimalist opera, from its beginnings with Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach* through the more romantic operas of John Adams, Steve Reich’s multimedia opera *The Cave*, David Lang’s musical-influenced *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, and finally the post-minimalist operas currently being staged by young composer Nico Muhly. It examines the differences between the more abstract trajectory established by the early Glass operas and the plot driven trajectory established by operas more commonly associated with John Adams, most significantly *Nixon in China*. Additionally, the aforementioned pieces are compared and contrasted with the author’s newly composed chamber opera *Violetting through August’s End (or the sunset in water, the carillon-chime in square)*.
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PART I

A CRITICAL ESSAY ON THE TRACE CTORY OF AMERICAN MINIMALIST OPERA
Chapter 1

Contextualization of *Einstein on the Beach* and *Nixon in China* in the Operatic Repertoire

Borrowing its name from the visual arts movement, “minimalism” emerged in New York’s downtown scene in the mid-1960s. Originating with composers La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, minimalism grew as a reaction against the modernist music championed by Milton Babbitt and Elliot Carter along with their European contemporaries, namely Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Standing in contrast to the state-funded institutions that allowed modernism to flourish, minimalism grew out of a do-it-yourself mentality that included composers organizing their own concerts in lofts and warehouses. The movement has grown significantly from its humble beginnings with Glass and Reich both achieving international fame and recognition. Additionally, their music has transcended classical music borders, with both composers being cited as influential by a number of pop and rock artists.

The critical essay portion of this thesis examines the trajectory of minimalist opera, from its beginnings with Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach* through the more romantic operas of John Adams, Reich’s *The Cave*, David Lang’s *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, and finally the post-minimalist operas currently being staged by young composer Nico Muhly. It examines the differences between the more abstract trajectory established by the early Glass operas and the plot-driven trajectory established by operas more commonly associated with John Adams, most significantly *Nixon in China*. Although these two operas are now considered essential works in the 20th century classical music canon, subsequent minimalist operas (including even Glass’s later operas) have largely eluded attention. Indeed, the discourse on minimalist opera is rather limited, especially newer works from the past twenty-five years. This paper addresses the
significance of these two masterworks of the latter half of the 20th century’s operatic repertoire. These works are not just significant to minimalist music but are arguably the two most recognizable works of all post-1950 operas. The effects of these works on subsequent minimalist operas is made apparent through historical and musical analysis.¹

1.1 Philip Glass and Einstein on the Beach: A Brief Background

Philip Glass (b. 1937) stands as one of the most prolific and successful composers of the late 20th century. Of composers still working within the framework of the classical concert hall, he is perhaps the most recognizable and financially successful. Not coincidentally, he is also one of the most criticized living composers. It would be easy to say this is a result of his overwhelming popularity but that would not be entirely accurate. Even in the 1960s, when he was at the very beginning of his career, Philip Glass was the subject of many unflattering concert reviews. In his introduction to Music by Philip Glass, Robert T. Jones describes a concert he attended in 1969:

The easiest sort of review to write, of course, is a vicious review, the kind that demeans its victim and drips venom on whatever it disapproves of or fails to understand. Glass and Serra provided a first-rate target. Still, I’ll say this for myself: I was not dishonest. I hated every note Philip Glass played that evening, hated every screen image created by Richard Serra, and I heartily wished them both a speedy exit from their professions.²

While Robert T. Jones’s opinion has changed since then, a number of critics’ opinions have not. Despite the incessant criticism or perhaps because of it, Glass’s music continued to grow in popularity. Even if a number of people didn’t quite enjoy the music, it was something

¹ It should be noted that this paper doesn’t examine the effects of Einstein on the Beach and Nixon in China on contemporary opera composers outside of the minimalist aesthetic (e.g., Thomas Adés, Jake Heggie, etc.).
new, fresh, exciting, and even controversial. As Jones later notes, “the ‘underground’ press began to lionize him as enthusiastically as the ‘establishment’ press continued to deride him.”

In the early 1970s, Glass started his own ensemble, the Philip Glass Ensemble, and built a reputation playing shows in the lofts and art galleries of New York’s SoHo district. During this time, Glass’s main source of income was from his side jobs as a plumber and a taxi driver. Despite working two jobs, Glass managed to accomplish a great amount of composing and performing. In addition to his own shows, Glass’s incidental music for the Mabou Mines Theater Company brought his music to a larger audience—still not a massive amount of people, but by the mid-70’s he had built a devoted cult following.

Einstein on the Beach, a work considered by many to be Glass’s crowning achievement, was conceived in 1973 following a performance of Robert Wilson’s Life and Times of Joseph Stalin, a twelve-hour work premiered over the course of an entire evening. Glass, who was working on Music in Twelve Parts at the time, began meeting with Wilson on Thursdays in the spring of 1974 with Christopher Knowles, a neurologically impaired teenage poet and artist, joining on occasion. Glass subsequently set to work on the composition in the winter and spring of 1975, completing the music in the fall. With financial and administrative concerns being handled by Robert Wilson’s Byrd Hoffman Foundation, Glass and Wilson were free to start auditions and casting in November of 1975. Rehearsals were started shortly thereafter, lasting from December to April of 1976. The rehearsals, taking place five or six days a week, were divided into distinct areas—music, dance, and staging—with three hours allotted to each on a daily basis.

Following a two-month hiatus, the ensemble reconvened in France to rehearse. The premiere, held at a festival in Avignon in August, was met with much the same reception as it

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3 Glass, Music by Philip Glass, viii.
later would be: a mixture of jeers and applause. The originality of the work, however, could not be denied. As Glass later noted, “[a]lmost immediately, it was clear that Einstein on the Beach was the event of the festival.” The tickets for the remaining performances sold out quickly. At subsequent European performances, people were known to wait outside the theater, hoping that a dissatisfied attendee would leave early and give them their ticket stub. When the opera was later staged at the Opéra Comique in Paris, people took to sneaking into the orchestra pit during performances.

Most importantly, the success at the Avignon Festival convinced other festivals to book the work, thus enabling Glass and Wilson to start a four-month tour throughout Europe, where it was greeted with a similar combination of praise and contempt. The question of how to stage the work in America still remained, with the lack of government-funded organizations to support art proving the greatest difficulty. In Glass’s view, the desire for new works was no greater in Europe than it was in America. The issue laid mostly in the opportunity to see new works in America, a situation exacerbated by the lack of state support. Despite the concerns, the work’s reputation had preceded it and Einstein on the Beach received its American premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The management at the Met, looking for a way to capitalize on their “dark” night, decided to use Einstein as a means of filling the house on nights where it went unused. The performance, initially scheduled for one night, was expanded to two performances after the first show quickly sold out. The premiere again proved to be a sort of minor scandal with more conservative operagoers leaving soon after the start. Despite this, the work was generally considered to be a success artistically, if not financially. After an extensive tour of Europe, the creators were $90,000 in debt and Glass returned to driving a taxi to support himself. He would later relate a tale of a wealthy female getting into his cab, seeing his name

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4 Glass, Music by Philip Glass, 49.
displayed, and subsequently asking him whether he knew that he had the same name as a famous composer.\textsuperscript{5}

The originality of the \textit{Einstein on the Beach}, however, could not be denied. The outlandish nature of the work was evidenced not only in the innovative music, but perhaps even more so by the unconventional concept. From the outset, Wilson and Glass knew two things: the work should be between four and five hours long, and it would be based on the life of a historical figure. After debating the merits of selecting Chaplin, Hitler, and Gandhi, they decided on Einstein for his familiarity and his lack of a polarizing nature. Set in four interconnected acts, the opera lasted five hours with no intermission. Despite later efforts to cut the time, Glass and Wilson have never managed to stage a performance of \textit{Einstein on the Beach} that lasts under four hours and forty-five minutes. The lack of an intermission was alleviated by the invitation for audience members to wander in and out of the performance freely, a convention adopted from 20\textsuperscript{th} century avant-garde theatre. More shocking than the length or unrestricted audience movement was perhaps the lack of a plot. That the work should even have had one never occurred to either Wilson or Glass. In this way, the influence of Brecht, Genet, and Beckett is apparent. Glass himself acknowledged the influence of Beckett, particularly \textit{Play}:

\begin{quote}
As theater music, \textit{Play} had an equally crucial effect on my thinking. I found, during my many viewings, that I experienced the work differently on almost every occasion. Specifically, I noticed that the emotional quickening (or epiphany) of the work seemed to occur in a different place in each performance—in spite of the fact that all the performance elements such as light, music and words were completely set.\textsuperscript{6}
\end{quote}

Wilson further noted the break with traditional theater:

\begin{quote}
In the past, theater has always been bound by literature. \textit{Einstein on the Beach} is not. There is no plot—although there are many references to Einstein—and the visual book can stand on its own. We put together the opera the way an architect would build a building.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{5} Glass, \textit{Music by Philip Glass}, 53. \\
\textsuperscript{6} Glass, \textit{Music by Philip Glass}, 35.
The structure of the music was completely interwoven with the stage action and with the lighting. Everything was all of a piece.\(^7\)

Instead of a plot, the work is designed around three scenes (Fig. 1.1); these three scenes—Train, Trial, and Field/Spaceship—become the cornerstones of the piece, each appearing in altered guises three times over the course of the four acts. (In the score, the Field/Spaceship scenes are referred to as Dance scenes.) The recurrence of the images implies a sort of development, with each occurrence becoming more blurred and abstract than its previous incarnation. The separation of the acts was done by way of “knee plays,” so named because, like knees, they are a joint which links similar elements. The knee plays, five total, serve as brief musical interludes that allow for scene changes in addition to opening and closing the work. The music mirrors the dramatic structure, a fact reflected in the change in the ensemble size, sometimes featuring the full ensemble and chorus while at other times reducing the ensemble to an a cappella choir or mere solo violin.

\textit{Knee Play I}

\textbf{ACT ONE}  
a. (Train 1)  
b. (Trial 1)

\textit{Knee Play II}

\textbf{ACT TWO}  
c. (Field/Spaceship 1)  
a. (Train 2)

\textit{Knee Play III}

\textbf{ACT THREE}  
b. (Trial 2)  
c. (Field/Spaceship 2)

\textit{Knee Play IV}

\(^7\) Tim Page, Liner notes to Einstein on the Beach, Michael Riesman and the Philip Glass Ensemble, Elektra Nonesuch 7559-79323-2, CD, 1993.
ACT FOUR

a. (building from Train)
b. (bed from Trial)
c. (interior of earlier Spaceship)

Knee Play V

Figure 1.1. Structure of Einstein on the Beach.

The sung text didn’t push the plot forward but instead consisted of numbers and solfege syllables. The numbers and solfege, later considered a hallmark of the opera, were initially just memorization aids, but they were later incorporated into the actual libretto. Additional spoken texts were supplied by choreographer Lucinda Childs, actor Samuel M. Johnson, and neurologically impaired artist and poet Christopher Knowles, then just a teenager. The additional texts reference the 1976 trial of Patty Hearst, the Beatles, Carole King’s 1971 hit song “I Feel the Earth Move,” David Cassidy, the oft-covered song “Mr. Bojangles,” and the lineup on New York’s WABC radio station circa 1974, among other things. The combination provided for a piece that could be considered an exercise in excess. Tim Page notes, “Einstein sometimes seemed a study in sensory overload, meaning everything and nothing.”

Thus Glass and Wilson’s opera became a metaphorical look at Einstein’s life rather than a concrete one, allowing for a poetic rather than literal interpretation of his life. This portrait (a central idea in Glass’s other early operas) of Einstein replaced any traditional idea of plot, narrative, and development without entirely eschewing facts and chronology, which are both used throughout the work. Glass himself has said that “[t]he point about Einstein was clearly not what it ‘meant’ but that it was meaningful as generally experienced by the people who saw it.”

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9 Glass, Music by Philip Glass, 33.
As in Beckett’s *Play*, the abstract nature allows audience members to personalize their experience with the work. Glass further elaborates about the process:

Fundamental to our approach was the assumption that the audience itself completed the work. The statement is no mere metaphor; we meant it quite literally. In the case of *Einstein on the Beach*, the “story” was supplied by the imaginations of the audience, and there was no way for us to predict, even if we had wanted to, what the “story” might be for any particular person.\(^\text{10}\)

This concept and approach separated *Einstein on the Beach* from other contemporary operas; consequently, the opera opened wide the door to operatic possibilities. Page notes that “[B]y its own radical example, *Einstein* prepared the way—it gave *permission*—for much of what has happened in music theater since its premiere.”\(^\text{11}\)

1.2 *Einstein on the Beach*: A Musical Analysis

If the concept and theatrical aspects of *Einstein on the Beach* were drawn from the avant-garde theater of the 1950s and 1960s, the music still seemed to be something entirely fresh and new to most audiences. Prior to *Einstein’s* premiere in 1976, minimalism had only enjoyed a limited exposure in the lofts of New York’s SoHo district. As a result, much of the music and its techniques were new to many concert-going audiences even though they had already been in use for a decade.

Minimalist music, not necessarily unlike earlier genres of music, relies heavily on processes. With the exception of drone-based works by La Monte Young (b. 1935), most early minimalist works drew on processes that relied heavily on constant pulses, excessive repetition, and neatly organized manipulation of patterns. This is evident in the early tape works of Steve Reich, where phasing plays a central role. Notably, *It’s Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Piano Phase*

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\(^{10}\) Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 35.

\(^{11}\) Page, Liner notes, Philip Glass Ensemble, Nonesuch, CD. 1993.
(1967) feature phasing, a process where two identical patterns—in the case of Reich, either speech fragments or small melodic units—with marginally different tempos are superimposed, growing gradually out of sync with each other until the patterns become synchronized once more. (Fig. 1.2) The gradual shifting of each pattern serves as the crux of both works.

![Figure 1.2. Phasing in Steve Reich’s Piano Phase.](image)

Reich also uses another technique that involves the gradual addition or subtraction of notes to a repetitive pattern. Referred to as block additive process by Daniel Warburton, this technique is featured in a wide variety of Reich pieces including earlier works like Drumming (1970-71), the seminal Music for 18 Musicians (1976), and the infamous Four Organs (1970), through his 1980’s pieces like Sextet (1985) and Eight Lines (1983). As Reich himself has noted, the process can be best described as “replacing rests by beats” although the converse certainly holds true as well.12 (Fig. 1.3) Although similar to linear additive process, block additive process is distinguished by its appearance over an unchanged meter. This process, though more typically associated with Reich, is present in Knee 1 of Einstein. Beginning at rehearsal 1b, a three-

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measure unit is slightly altered at each new reiteration. The altos and baritones, singing numbers, start to drop one number at each subsequent occurrence, beginning with the first beat of the third measure. At the next repetition, the first beat of the second measure is dropped while the first beat of the third measure is restored. Predictably, the next iteration has no singing on the first beat of the first measure while the second and third measures are presented completely.

Figure 1.3. Block additive process in Reich’s *Drumming*.

Linear additive process, then, is made distinct by the lack of a steady pulse. The technique is readily heard in Glass’s music from the 1960s on but one of the most identifiable examples of the technique can be found in Frederic Rzewski’s *Les Moutons de Panurge* (1969). (Fig. 1.4) Early Glass examples include *Two Pages*, *Music in Fifths*, and *One Plus One*. Here, notes are added or subtracted to the repeating pattern but the meter or pulse is altered at each new reiteration of the initial figure due to the added note(s). As Glass notes, “A musical grouping or
measure of, say, five notes is repeated several times, then is followed by a measure of six notes (also repeated), then seven, then eight, and so on.” The effect is, at times, similar to the additive rhythms found in Messiaen’s works, especially *The Quartet for the End of Time*. This linear additive process is used throughout *Einstein*, an obvious example being the violin part from the first trial scene. (Fig. 1.5) A variation on the additive process combines it with harmony, allowing for a more audible additive process as one cycle of the process coincides with one occurrence of the harmonic progression.

![Figure 1.4. Linear additive process in Frederic Rzewski’s *Les Moutons de Panurge*.

Figure 1.4. Linear additive process in Frederic Rzewski’s *Les Moutons de Panurge*.

![Figure 1.5. Linear additive process in the violin part in the Trial scene from *Einstein on the Beach*.

Figure 1.5. Linear additive process in the violin part in the Trial scene from *Einstein on the Beach*.

First used by Glass in *Music in Twelve Parts* (1971-74), the cyclic structure is another process used frequently in *Einstein on the Beach*. Similar to phasing, the process features two patterns superimposed against one another. However, rather than juxtaposing the same pattern at slightly different tempos, cyclic structure consists of two different patterns of disparate lengths. Depending on how long each pattern is, they will eventually come back together, completing a cycle.¹³ The first example in *Einstein* can be found in the first Train scene. (Fig. 1.6) Here, a

pattern \( x \) consisting of three beats is set against a pattern \( y \) consisting of four beats. As a result, four repeats of \( x \) is equal to three repeats of \( y \).

Figure 1.6. Cyclic structure in Train.

While these three processes form the rhythmic basis of the opera’s materials, a similar short list of themes, totaling nine in all, serves as the melodic and harmonic foundation of the work. As Milos Raickovich notes in his analysis of Einstein, these themes can be associated with entire sections of the opera due to their reliance on repetition.\(^\text{14}\) (A catalog of the themes, as labeled by Raickovich, can be found in Appendix A.) With the exception of the final Spaceship scene, the scenes tend to retain the same themes over the course of the opera. The knee plays, instead of being based off any single source of material, draw musically from individual scenes in addition to having their own distinct theme, Theme in C. While the arrangement of the themes

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within the opera is not as strict as the overall dramatic structure, there are still some tendencies Raickovich notes in his analysis.\textsuperscript{15} (Fig. 1.7) Most noticeably, a certain sequence of themes is heard three times, although it is not presented in its entirety at the last iteration. This sequence is highlighted in the diagram by the diagonal lines. The knee plays borrow from the Trial and Train scenes as only one theme, Theme in d, originates in the Dance (Field/Spaceship) scenes. As a result, the Theme in d, given its appearance only twice, can be considered a dividing point in the opera. Although broken into four acts, the appearance of each scene and its mutations three times suggests a three-part work. The placement of the Theme in d in the Dance scenes divides the opera. This is further established by three appearances of the major thematic sequence.

The harmonic language of Einstein is tonal, as is perhaps evident by the labeling of the themes. However, the tonality is not necessarily traditional. Although Raickovich notes the use parallel fifths as a divergence from traditional tonality, the practice of using parallel fifths could easily be shown in select Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven pieces, and this is to say nothing about the convention’s increased usage over the course of the Romantic period, eventually culminating in a complete disregard for the prohibited use of parallel fifths by the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century by composers like Debussy and Schoenberg. So while not entirely new, the usage of parallel fifths in Einstein on the Beach is prevalent. The use of parallel fourths, an inverted parallel fifth, is apparent at the outset of the first Train scene while the Theme in f-E, described below, contains parallel fifths in the organ bass line.

The frequent use of the pentatonic scale is also important to note. A number of themes draw upon it, and its usage results in an ambiguity with regard to tonal centers. Here, as elsewhere in the opera, the use of the pentatonic scale results in implied triads. As Raickovich points out, the Theme in C could potentially be in A minor or it could be heard as a modulation

\textsuperscript{15} Raickovich, “Einstein on the Beach: A Musical Analysis,” 35.
The Theme in Eb from the Train scene is similarly replete with incomplete triads. The collection used—E, F, Ab, Bb, C—only allows for two complete triads, those of Ab and Fm. As a result, the implied tonic and dominant sonorities are both missing a third while the submediant is lacking a fifth.

Other chord progressions feature odd modulations. One of the more distinctive modulations, found at rehearsal 59 in Train, progresses from F minor to E major within the span of five measures. (Fig. 1.8) While the first two chords can be considered i and VI in F minor, respectively, the subsequent three are pretty clearly heard as a IV-V-I progression in E major. The shift between F minor and E is abrupt due to the lack of a pivot chord and the rather distant nature of the two tonal areas; they only contain three common tones, four if the raised leading tone in F minor is included. Furthermore, the sudden shift occurs not once but twice as the theme is repeated a number of times, causing a sudden shift from E back to F at the end of the progression. Consequently, although the harmonies are triadic, they do not function traditionally. Indeed, much of *Einstein* defies roman numeral analysis, due to the frequent and odd modulations.

![Figure 1.8. Reduction of Theme in f-E.](image)

The Theme in f-D similarly displays sudden shifts. (Fig. 1.9) Although the first three chords are squarely in F minor, the final D major chord of the progression is not. Unlike the final three chords of the Theme in f-E, the last chord of the Theme in f-D has no context. D major has no function within F minor, although it could be considered a V/ii in the parallel key, F major. However, this seems to be a contrived explanation. Raickovich has argued that it could be interpreted as a half cadence in a new key in G minor or G major; however, there is no G minor chord in the Train scene that suggests such an interpretation.¹⁷ Instead, it leads back to F minor at

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the end of nearly all its repetitions with the exception of the last iteration, which leads to a brief transition towards Knee 2 centered on Bb and Eb sonorities. The chord does not function “properly,” and as a result could be interpreted as an idiosyncratic chromatic mediant. The disappearance of the bass beneath the chord further suggests its anomalous nature. Almost as soon as the shift to the D major sonority occurs, a shift back towards F minor follows.

![Figure 1.9. Theme in f-D.](image)

This is, of course, to say nothing about the orchestration, which was certainly unconventional for the time. Although used by Glass for years, the instrumentation—consisting of solo soprano, solo tenor, sixteen-member SATB choir, solo violin, two electric organs, piccolo, three flutes, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, and bass clarinet (the woodwind parts are all handled by three players)—was not standard fare in operas. The use of saxophones and electric organs, mainly associated with jazz and rock respectively, was not without precedent but certainly not widespread in classical music. Their usage in *Einstein* helped popularize the instruments, resulting in their usage in *Nixon in China* and numerous other works by later minimalists.

1.3 John Adams and *Nixon in China*: A Brief Background

Born a half-generation after Philip Glass and Steve Reich, John Adams began composing at age ten and later matriculated at Harvard University, where he studied under Roger Sessions,
Earl Kim, and David del Tredici (the latter prior to his shift back to tonal composition).

Following his college studies, Adams became disillusioned with serialism and turned to tonal composition. Inspired by a 1974 performance of Reich’s *Drumming*, Adams began incorporating minimalist procedures into his works. *China Gates* (1977) and *Phrygian Gates* (1977-1978), two of Adams’s earliest works from this period, both show clear minimalist tendencies. The repetitive nature and constant pulse, at times reminiscent of Philip Glass, coupled with Adams’s newfound interest in conducting Reich’s works, resulted in his being labeled as a minimalist although, like Glass and Reich, he didn’t care for the term. During this same period, he also wrote the string septet *Shaker Loops* (1978) while teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. This work, while still showing a clear Reich influence, also displayed a distinctly American sentiment revealed in passages that reflected a sound reminiscent of Samuel Barber. The piece was later republished for string orchestra and premiered under Michael Tilson Thomas in 1983. Adams’s appointment as the new music advisor for the San Francisco Orchestra under Edo de Waart resulted in his composing more orchestral works, which continued to display minimalist procedures combined with great expressivity, something absent from the works of Glass and Reich. *Common Tones in Simple Time* (1979), *Harmonium* (1981), and *Harmonielehre* (1985) followed, gaining Adams a notable reputation.

Still, it was the original septet version of *Shaker Loops* that caught the ear of Peter Sellars, a theater director known for stirring up controversy. Also a Harvard alumnus, Sellars gained a reputation as an undergraduate student for his offbeat productions. While still at Harvard, he staged a version of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* with marionettes. Subsequent Sellars-led efforts resulted in a production of Handel’s *Orlando* set on Mars, with the American Repertory Theater in 1981 and a 1984 production of Mozart’s *Così fan Tutte* set in a cheap diner
prior to an imagined invasion of Nicaragua headed by President Ronald Reagan. By the time he approached John Adams at the Monadnock Music Festival in New Hampshire, Sellars was already being derided as an *enfant terrible* by some and lauded as a genius by others. Following the performance of *Shaker Loops*, Sellars immediately approached Adams with the idea of writing an opera, already knowing that he wanted it to be titled “Nixon in China,” a suggestion Adams was initially unreceptive to, due to what he regarded as the lack of myth in a story on Nixon. After sporadic collaboration over a number years, however, Adams acquiesced to Sellars’s idea under the condition that the libretto had to be written in verse, leading to Sellars’s selection of Alice Goodman, yet another Harvard graduate, to write the libretto.

The subsequent libretto, written between early 1985 and late 1986, dramatized Richard Nixon’s monumental 1972 visit to China. The music was begun in the summer of 1985 while funding for the opera was secured through David Gockley of the Houston Grand Opera. The opera was premiered in Houston at the newly opened Wortham Theater Center. Not unlike *Einstein on the Beach*, the work received mixed reviews following its premiere, with John von Rhein calling it “arguably the most significant American opera of the decade”\(^\text{18}\) while Marvin Kitman later sarcastically remarked that “There are only three things wrong with *Nixon in China*. One, the libretto; two, the music; three, the direction. Outside of that, it’s perfect.”\(^\text{19}\) Despite the mixed reactions, the opera managed to outperform both Verdi’s *Aida* and Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio* at the box office that year. Time has been kinder to the opera, and it has enjoyed a wide popularity, being performed throughout Europe, in addition to a recent production at the Metropolitan Opera in 2011, complete with the original staging.

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Like the earlier Glass and Wilson opera, *Nixon in China*’s title also references a famous person and a location, but the concepts behind the two operas are vastly different. While *Einstein on the Beach* could be considered an exceptionally abstract look at Einstein’s life, *Nixon in China* is a much more literal examination of its titular character. Even before writing a single word, Alice Goodman intensively researched Nixon’s 1972 trip, with assistance from both Sellars and Adams. The resulting libretto drew from a number of newspaper clippings from the period, in addition to the journals of Mao Tse-Tung. The story, while following the events of the trip, also allows for insight into the thoughts of the characters. In this sense, the opera has an external to internal trajectory, opening with a very public scene showing the Nixons’ arrival in China on the *Spirit of ’76* and concluding with Chou-en Lai’s musings over the current state of affairs in China. This is further reflected in the contrast between Nixon’s “News has a kind of mystery” aria in Act I and Pat’s “This is prophetic” aria in Act II. While the “News” aria highlights the pageantry of politics, Pat’s aria is contemplative, allowing for an inward view of a highly visible public persona. Adams has noted that:

> For much of that (“News” aria) I want you to feel that the flashbulbs are popping in your eyes and you are constantly having to shake hands with the next person so that the disassociation of your deeper self from your “other” oriented self is so profound that it causes you to stop and think: these people are controlling our lives; these people have their fingers on the button as it were, and they are able to start wars, or do good things and bad things. What kind of reasoning, what kind of sober reflection of judgment can a person who is constantly under this pressure of judgment have?20

The contrast in extroverted and introverted scenes contributes to a sense of myth in the opera. While working on the opera, Adams realized that the story being presented displayed a clear connection with myths and their origins as set in a modern world. This theme is highlighted in the staging. Unlike most operas, the set does not strive to be illusionary. The dimensions of sets

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and props, including the descending plane in Act I, were intended to be realistic rather than overblown. Additionally, the outfits worn by the characters in the original production were the same (or rather close) to the outfits actually worn during the 1972 trip, down to the pins on lapels. This striving for realistic characteristics within the opera is an attempt to showcase real humans amidst a media circus.

For Sellars, the opera was not unlike *Einstein on the Beach* in its drive to leave some room for ambiguity. If the point of *Einstein* was that it was meaningful regardless of what it meant\(^\text{21}\), the point of *Nixon in China* was not so open-ended. In the opera, Nixon is not portrayed as a stereotype or a mere caricature of the disgraced former president, but as a complex and multi-faceted character, as are the rest of the characters (with the exception of Henry Kissinger). Nixon is neither good nor bad; rather, the character is designed to be ambiguous, which allows for audiences to fashion their own ideas about him, in effect forcing them to confront issues rather than indulging them with answers to the questions posed. This rejection of a single interpretation to the work arose from Sellars’s disdain for this tendency in earlier operas, notably those of Strauss and Puccini.\(^\text{22}\)

While the work does allow for multiple interpretations, it doesn’t do so in the same way as *Einstein*. Instead, Sellars and Adams present the audience with an open-ended question that centers on specific themes. As Sellars has said, “*Nixon in China* is about moral ambiguity and historical consciousness, it is also about a generational crisis, it is also people who built the world—what do you do after you built the world, what are you left with? These are real questions.”\(^\text{23}\) He later goes on to say, “I think these are dealt with very profoundly in *Nixon.*”\(^\text{24}\)

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\(^{22}\) Daines, “Telling the Truth about Nixon,” 76.
\(^{23}\) Daines, “Telling the Truth about Nixon,” 74.
\(^{24}\) Daines, “Telling the Truth about Nixon,” 90.
This combined with the theme of conflict between public and private lives forms a basis for *Nixon in China*. This is not even to mention the peripheral issues of gender and the question of what it means to be an American.

Still, other things in the opera have a more prescribed interpretation. Sellars has pointed out one theme: the inability of audience members to understand the state of Chinese people and Chinese culture, a common ground shared with Richard and Pat Nixon, which is related to the conflict between public images and private lives. As Sellars has said, “What the opera finally gets to the point of is that all night long you have had this illusion that you understand China—‘here we are, it’s an open book, etc.’—then the second act begins to imply with Pat that there are certain things that she will never know.”

Sellars goes on to note the political implications in other sections of the opera—notably during Act II, scene ii—stating, “Kissinger is the man who authorized the secret bombing of Cambodia, and that rape is the bombing of Cambodia. It’s about Henry Kissinger taking it upon himself to destroy a small nation. That’s what’s going on simultaneously [in the opera].”

That this is not made explicit seems to be the point. Sellars noted the opera’s commentary on the Reagan administration, then in its second term. In this sense, the opera peels away the veil of photo opportunities and staged publicity events to reveal actual characters and suggest that there are more important issues at play than are depicted.

The fact that the opera was based on events that had only happened fifteen years prior to its premier, combined with the political implications of those events, earned the opera the reputation as a “CNN Opera,” a term despised by its creators. As Mark Swed noted, “*Nixon in

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China celebrates a moment in history less for its political implications than for its cultural and profoundly human ones.”

1.4 Nixon in China: A Musical Analysis

Arved Ashby has referred to Adams as the “first widely-know composer who felt free to take Reich’s and Glass’s process-music concepts as a fait accompli.” In this sense, Adams takes certain procedures and techniques from minimalist music without using them exclusively to generate his forms. This is the case with Nixon in China where minimalist techniques are blended with late-Romantic tendencies.

In terms of rhythms, Adams draws on the cyclic structure found in Glass’s works, as is exhibited in the opening of Act I of Nixon. (Fig. 1.10) An ascending A natural minor scale, which serves as the basis for the cycle, is played by the violins and violas in constant eighth notes; thus the amount of time it takes to complete one cycle is equivalent to one bar in the 2/2 time signature. Meanwhile, the trumpets play the same ascending scale in groups of dotted quarter notes, a speed three times as slow as the strings. Subsequently, three iterations of the cycle in the strings is equivalent to one iteration of the cycle in the trumpets. Additionally, the same figure is echoed at an even slower speed in the English horn and clarinet, where each note is equal to a dotted half note, half the speed of the trumpet line. The scale in the woodwinds, however, is offset by a dotted quarter note and, as a result, never aligns with the scales in the trumpet and strings, which synchronizes every three measures.

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Figure 1.10. Opening of Nixon in China.

The use of rhythmic displacement is prevalent throughout the opera and is used to generate metrical dissonance. An early example can be found later in Act I just prior to the landing of the Spirit of '76. The orchestral accompaniment creates a dissonance with the duple meter established by the chorus in “The People are the heroes now.” The arpeggiated figures, reminiscent of Glass, appear in groups of three while the meter remains unchanged. (Fig. 1.11) The figure appears in canon with itself in different registers, offset by a dotted eighth note, to generate the accompaniment. Timothy Johnson has noted a similar effect but instead considers the displacement further removed by another eighth note, considering the displacement in the bass to begin on the third beat or fifth eighth note.

Figure 1.11. Metric displacement in Act I of Nixon in China.

Polymeters, long considered a staple in minimalist music, are prevalent in Nixon’s “News” aria, which follows soon afterwards. While Nixon’s singing sounds like it is in a
compound duple meter, the accompaniment plays in a clear simple triple meter, owing to the clear groupings of two in the bass. (Fig. 1.12)

![Figure 1.12. Polymeters in Nixon’s “News” aria.](image)

Indeed the use of polymeters and polyrhythms is a trademark of much of the opera. While the “News” aria displays the prominence of polymeters, Pat’s aria “This is prophetic” shows a reliance on polyrhythms in the accompaniment, with a bass accompaniment providing a compound feeling juxtaposed against a simple accompaniment in the treble. (Fig. 1.13) Adams also makes frequent use of hemiola, as displayed in the opening of Chiang Ch’ing’s aria “I am the wife of Mao Tse-Tung.” (Fig. 1.14) While measures 86-87 are clearly in 6/8, the following two measures suggest 3/4.
The reliance on such means, however, is not necessarily as bound by process as in the early works of Glass and Reich. Instead, these tools, namely the cyclic structure, polymeter, and polyrhythms are used in a more versatile way. They are not bound to be fulfilled but are used to generate textures and background accompaniment figures against which the vocalists can sing. Adams has described the orchestra as functioning like “a giant ukulele underneath the vocal lines, chugging along with the pulses continually tripping up the listener’s expectations.”\textsuperscript{29}

The singing, notably, follows in a more traditional vein. There are clearly recognizable recitatives—the meeting between Nixon and Chou, the conversation between Nixon and Mao in

the study, etc—and arias, which are absent from *Einstein*. In fact, the arias are not uncharacteristic of their genre. The “News” aria is reminiscent of Rossini-era patter style arias while Chiang Ch’ing’s “I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung” displays all the markings of a coloratura soprano aria, replete with exceptionally high notes and demanding virtuosic passages full of leaps. Similarly, the Mao character, singing frequently in a high tessitura, is represented musically by a tenor with all the heroic markings of Wagner’s Siegfried, by Adams’s own account. As he noted, Adams sought to make Mao an “artificially constructed peasant hero,” depicted by an established operatic archetype. The only really innovative aspect concerning the vocals was the need for amplification to compete with the hefty orchestra. Still, the use of microphones, considered unacceptable at the time, was more a matter of practicality rather than a desire for a certain sound.

Harmonically speaking, the piece bears characteristic minimalist traits—for example, it is certainly tonal and is rather consonant throughout. The chords are decidedly triadic, perhaps more so than any other Adams work. Like Glass, Adams’s approach to tonality is not necessarily functional and the harmonic motion is decidedly Reich-influenced. Frequently, dominant seventh chords appear, most often in 4/2 and 6/5 inversion, without proper resolutions; instead, they are used for coloring. The use of seventh chords in a non-functional way is reminiscent of Stravinsky’s neo-classical period, especially the Symphony in Three Movements (1942-45). Adams has noted the parallels between the influence of movie newsreels on Stravinsky’s composition and the media on *Nixon*.³⁰

Much of the harmonic motion in *Nixon* is based on third relationships. With the exception of Figure 1.14, all the above examples show harmonic motion between chords with roots a third apart—the diminished fourth motion between Eb and B in Figure 1.13 can be enharmonically

considered a major third. Timothy A. Johnson notes there are essentially four primary transformations that serve as the basis for the majority of the opera: the inversion around the fifth (Fig. 1.14), the inversion around a major third (Fig. 1.12), the inversion around a minor third (Fig. 1.11), and the inversion around the middle note.\footnote{Timothy A. Johnson, \textit{John Adams’s Nixon in China} (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 10.} (Fig. 1.15) Although they do not exclusively represent all the harmonic motion in \textit{Nixon}, these transformations are responsible for much of the harmony. Other chromatic third relationships, ones that maintain one or no common tones, are possible as well. (Fig. 1.16)

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig15}
\caption{Timothy A. Johnson’s list of primary transformations in \textit{Nixon}.\footnote{Ibid}}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig16}
\caption{Other possible chromatic mediant relations with one common tone.}
\end{figure}

Unlike \textit{Einstein on the Beach}, \textit{Nixon in China} features a standard orchestra that has been modified with the addition of a saxophone quartet and a Yamaha synthesizer. The effect is an especially powerful ensemble, one that necessitated the use of microphones for the singers to compete with it. With the orchestra Adams is able to create a variety of different moods. The
additional saxophones aid in setting the big band-flavored mood that is used to evoke memories for both Pat and Nixon while the low strings at the beginning conjure images of the barren Chinese landscape prior to the Nixons’ arrival. If it is his reliance on processes that resulted in his labeling as a minimalist, it is in his orchestration that Adams firmly establishes a unique voice. Steve Reich has found that Ezra Pound’s distinction that great poets are either “masters” or “inventors” also applies to composers. Although placing himself in the latter category, Reich refers to Adams as a master and credits his adept orchestration skills and romantic flair as the source of his envied ability to connect with audiences.\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Nixon in China} is no exception, and the orchestration lends the work a familiar quality favored by 21\textsuperscript{st} century audiences.

Chapter 2

Impact of Nixon in China and Einstein on the Beach: Subsequent Minimalist Opera—Steve Reich’s The Cave and David Lang’s The Difficulty of Crossing a Field

2.1 Steve Reich’s The Cave

By the time The Cave was premiered in 1993, Steve Reich was already considered a well-established composer, having by then headed a number of successful premieres at prestigious venues, a far cry from his modest beginnings in the downtown lofts of New York City in the early 1960s. The 1970s had seen Reich write the influential Drumming (1973) and the seminal Music for 18 Musicians (1976) while the 1980’s witnessed continued productivity in the form of Tehillim (1981), Eight Lines (1983) and Sextet (1985).

Work on The Cave began shortly after the completion of Different Trains (1988) when the composer decided to collaborate with his wife, the video artist Beryl Korot, known for her multiple-channel installations Dachau 1974 (1974) and Text and Commentary (1977). Even before the work’s content was determined, Reich and Korot had decided to create a piece that would constitute a new kind of musical theater that combined music and filmed documentary sources. In this sense, the work is like Einstein on the Beach in its conception as a complete experience; the music and video are not intended as separate items.

Conceptually, the work centers on the Cave of the Patriarchs. In many holy books, the site is of great importance. According to the Book of Genesis and the Quran, while recovering from his circumcision, Abraham was visited by three strangers. Wanting to be hospitable, he followed a cow into the cave to slaughter it to feed his guests. Once inside, he sensed a presence and knew that it was the Garden of Eden and that his descendants would be buried there. Today, many Jews and Muslims believe that the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and
Leah are buried there. The cave is located in Hebron in the West Bank, a much-contested area. Not unlike the rest of the Middle East, the cave has been the site of fighting for thousands of years. A condition of the 1996 Wye River Accords included an agreement that both Jews and Muslims could worship at the sight although the catacombs where Abraham and his descendants are buried are inaccessible to visitors. Currently, the cave is the only major place where both Jews and Muslims worship given the significance of Abraham to both religions.

During the creation of the opera, three different groups were interviewed on camera, each in turn being asked five simple questions: Who for you is Abraham? Who for you is Sarah? Who for you is Hagar? Who for you is Ishmael? Who for you is Isaac? The opera is thus divided into three sections, differentiated by the three groups of people. (Fig. 2.1) In the first section, Israelis are asked to answer the questions, in the second Palestinians are asked, and in the third Americans are asked. The structure of the work results in a piece that essentially tells the same story from three different perspectives. The story offers some reflection on the conflict in the Middle East by displaying a theme of separation and reconciliation given the eventual reunion of Isaac and his half-brother Ishmael at their father’s funeral. As Reich notes, “if they could do it, perhaps it suggests that Arabs and Israelis can too.”

The libretto was not preplanned but instead follows from the interviews, which are shown on five different video screens while the ensemble plays. In this sense, there is no real staging as there is in Nixon in China and Einstein on the Beach. The ensemble remains stationary on the stage while the multiple channel video installation variously displays interviews and footage of landscapes as well as architecture. This combination of video and music seems reflective of the MTV culture that had permeated the decade prior to The Cave’s creation, although Beryl Korot was apt to note that their “independent interests preceded MTV” even if their combined work did

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34 Reich, Writings on Music, 178.


**Figure 2.1. Structure of Reich’s *The Cave*.**

not. Reich further noted, “We’re living in a culture where music videos are a kind of urban folk art.” Reich’s views on the importance of folk art helps to explain the non-traditional staging. Despite the old subject matter, the work is intended to be a commentary on the modern age.

This is further reflected in the orchestration and the music. The ensemble is similar to Glass’s in that it features non-standard instrumentation: two woodwind players (variously playing flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, and bass clarinet), two percussionists (playing vibraphone, claves, kick drum, bass drum, and clapping), three typewriters, two pianos, a sampler, four singers (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass), and a string quartet. The instrumentation, which is amplified during live performance (with the exception of the bass drum and claves), is certainly unconventional, even if Reich himself had used it for years in various guises. The use of samplers reflected current trends in the popular music world the way saxophones and organs in *Einstein* reflected the influence of rock and jazz instrumentations in the 1970s. Describing the shift away from more conventional orchestras, Reich said, “I’m not saying other composers shouldn’t write bel canto operas, but I’ve pursued something that interests me now, here in America in the 1990s, which naturally doesn’t sound like something from eighteenth- or

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36 Ibid.
nineteenth-century Italy or Germany.” This sentiment justifies the use of microphones, as vocalists during previous time periods had to possess loud voices to be heard over the ever-expanding Romantic period orchestra. With the invention of microphones, that type of voice was no longer required. Consequently, Reich, unlike Adams, uses a non-vibrato voice, more typical of contemporary popular music.  

This is all tied into Reich and Korot’s approach to the subject of Abraham. Reich himself described Abraham as “about as radical and visionary a person as we’ve ever had.” To portray such an iconoclast through such outdated means, then, seemed to be inappropriate to the creators. Concerned with not being mired in anachronisms, Reich and Korot opted for a more abstract, Glass/Wilson-style portrayal of Abraham. Given the lack of detailed history on Abraham and his descendants, the creators decided to portray the figures as current people view them:  

I don’t really feel comfortable with the idea of singers acting biblical roles—that tenor is Abraham…hmm. We really have no idea how these 4,000-year-old characters looked, and it’s always awkward when someone portrays them. The reality is that Abraham and the others only live in the words and thoughts of the living. In our piece, The Cave, they live in the words of the people we interviewed.  

Musically, the opera is nothing radically new for Reich. The harmonic language is tonal and most of the harmonies are diatonic. Similar to the harmonic progressions in Music for 18 Musicians, the chords seem to melt into each other at times. When modulations do occur, they are usually abrupt, shifting suddenly to the new key.  

Rhythmically, the piece deals with some processes Reich had been using for years. While there is certainly a pulse in much of the work, it is more rhythmically involved than Music for 18 Musicians. At times, the meter changes every bar, and mixed meters are prevalent. The text

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37 Reich, *Writings on Music*, 173.
38 Reich, *Writings on Music*, 173.
40 Reich, *Writings on Music*, 175.
setting of some of the words of the Koran and Bible recalls his earlier composition *Tehillim* (1981). In addition to by-then standard processes like block additive process, Reich also incorporates newer methods, notably speech melodies. Prior to this, Reich had experimented with speech in his early phasing pieces *It’s Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966). However, his work in the late 1980s saw Reich experimenting with speech in a different way. *Different Trains* (1988) incorporated recorded speech as the source of a number of melodies. The idea—which was influenced by Leoš Janáček’s speech melodies and first featured prominently in his opera *Jenůfa*—was later expounded upon in *The Cave*. Here, the instrumentalists play along with the videotaped interviews and mimic the speech patterns. A clear example of this is found in Act I: Scene 7: Who is Sarah? (Fig. 2.2) As in *Different Trains*, the string quartet (here, the first violin and cello) is asked to imitate the recorded speech. This is why the recorded text is found beneath the first violin and cello part.

![Figure 2.2. Speech melodies in Act I: Scene 7: Who is Sarah?](image)

*Although not generally considered as significant as other Reich pieces, *The Cave* provided an important bridge between *Einstein on the Beach* and current opera. The influence of Reich’s and Korot’s combination of video with opera can still be seen today, from more*
independent chamber operas like Missy Mazzoli’s *Song from the Uproar: The Lives and Deaths of Isabelle Eberhardt* to major productions mounted by established opera companies. Similarly, the influence of speech melodies can be found in the works of classical composers alongside more popular music, especially remixes done by DJs. Indeed, the unique concept and structure continued to suggest that opera was redefining itself all the time.

### 2.2 David Lang’s *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*

If John Adams could be considered a half-generation behind Glass and Reich, David Lang (b. 1957) is a full generation removed from the first school of minimalists. Being born twenty-years after the original school of minimalists, Lang was exposed to rock and roll at an early age, and along with Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon, he later founded Bang on a Can, a classical group with a newfound pop/rock sensibility. The group, renowned for its marathon concerts, is known for its more casual approach to classical music, often insisting upon jeans and t-shirts as the appropriate attire for their events. The marathon concerts, started in 1987, often showcase a wide variety of styles ranging from the post-minimalist driven scores of Lang, Wolfe, and Gordon to Glenn Branca’s pieces for electric guitar orchestras to Meredith Monk’s vocal ensemble pieces and beyond.

Lang, perhaps the most well known of the trio, has enjoyed wide success throughout his career, has been commissioned frequently, and has won a number of prestigious awards including the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for *The Little Match Girl Passion*, a work Lang once described as “quasi-medieval and pseudoreligious, vaguely pleasant to listen to, and a cappella.”41 Prior to this, Lang had been responsible for a number of notable pieces, namely his 1980 piece *Cheating*.

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Lying, Stealing. The piece, described by the composer as an “ominous funk” in the score, is one of the more important early post-minimalist works.42

Other pieces show the composer’s quirkier side. One prominent example is Are You Experienced? (1987), a piece—featuring a narrator, amplified tuba, and large ensemble—that could be considered a reaction to Jimi Hendrix’s 1967 song of the same name. The score indicates somewhat amusingly that the narrator should always introduce him- or herself as David Lang in any performance of the work. More recently, 2013 saw Lang win Musical America’s Composer of the Year, as well as the premiere of The Whisper Opera, an hour-long work that is supposed to be played to no more than 10 people at a time. The score indicates that the opera should not be recorded or broadcast live.

Lang’s Difficulty of Crossing a Field (2002), one of his earliest theater works, is based on a one-page story by Ambrose Bierce, a nineteenth century journalist, editor, and short story writer. Work on the opera began during Lang’s tenure as the composer-in-residence for the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. Mac Wellman, the librettist for the opera, was concurrently the playwright-in-residence. Thinking the two might be a complementary pair, Carey Perloff, the artistic director for the program, commissioned the two to create a work that would bridge the gap between opera and musical theater.

The plot of the work concerns the disappearance of Mr. Williamson, a slave owner in the pre-Civil War south.43 In the story, a boy asks his father what has happened to Mr. Williamson, but, as Ambrose Bierce is quick to point out, “It is not the purpose of this narrative to answer that

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43 Coincidentally, Ambrose Bierce later disappeared unexpectedly himself. Additionally, the story later reappeared in urban legend form; in these versions, the disappearing man is known as David Lang.
Rather than centering on a narrative, the opera focuses on the reactions of those who witnessed the event, with each person coming to their own conclusions. Lang has noted:

> Everyone around him has his or her own sharp view of what that disappearance means, of why it had to happen, and of what will happen now that there is a ‘hole’ where a man used to be. No one knows the truth. Perhaps there is no truth. But there are infinite possible consequences, and only by continuous examination of what few details are known can any sense of order be restored.  

The more abstract nature of the work appropriately places the opera within the more abstract trajectory established by *Einstein on the Beach*.

The instrumentation is nothing new, especially given Lang’s generally idiosyncratic scoring. In *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, Lang relies on fairly limited means: a string quartet, four principal voices—featuring a soprano, mezzo soprano, tenor, and bass—and a small chorus of slaves. It should be noted that although there are four principal voices there are five principal characters—the role of Mr. Williamson is spoken. Similar to *Einstein* and *The Cave*, the string quartet appears on the stage alongside the performers rather than in a pit underneath the stage.

Although the instrumentation seems fairly traditional, Lang manages to use the voices in interesting ways. Most notable perhaps is the integration of different styles of voices, a reflection of Carey Perloff’s desire for the work to bridge the gap between opera and musical theater. For example, Mrs. Williamson, the slave owner’s wife, is intended to be a reflection of the traditional operatic world. Conversely, Virginia Creeper, the leader of the slave chorus, possesses a voice that is intended to be more evocative of musical theater. The limited instrumentation and variety

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of vocal styles has been an asset to the piece with many university theater programs staging the work due to the limited means a performance requires.

Musically, the work displays all the marks of post-minimalism. Like Adams, Lang uses processes but they are not the sole determinant in the music; often, repetitive figures are used without the restrictions found in Glass and Reich’s early music. However, gone are Adams’s clear neo-Romantic tendencies. There is no trace of the soaring melismatic vocal lines that pervade Nixon in China; instead, vocal lines are fractured and often syllabic, much as they are in Einstein on the Beach but with more substantial text than numbers and solfege. Unlike Nixon, the text is sometimes subjected to loose processes.

Similar to much minimalist music, Lang’s music employs frequent simple polymeters. An example of this can be found in the opening of the work where a clear 3/4 time signature is established by the outline of harmonies in the second violin while the viola plays a pizzicato figure that could be considered in 6/8. (Fig. 2.3) Another example of this can be found towards the end of the opera. (Fig. 2.4) While the violins and viola suggest the actual time signature of 3/4, the voices and cello suggest a 6/8 feel simultaneously. Furthermore, polyrhythms can be found throughout the opera, especially in sections that feature the slave chorus. These are sometimes found within the chorus itself but, more often than not, are found in the accompaniment. The resulting effect is similar to the chaotic atmosphere found in sections of Einstein on the Beach where the chorus is rapidly singing numbers and solfege.

The harmonic language of the piece is kept simple, more so than the previously discussed operas. Most of the harmonies are indeed triadic but odd modulations, related by thirds or otherwise, are not as common as in previous operas, nor are they as frequent. Most of the opera instead seems to dwell in Aeolian or Dorian modes with modulations at a less rapid pace. Certain
Figure 2.3. Opening of Lang’s *Difficulty of Crossing a Field*.

With grace and mystery

\[ \frac{3}{8} \quad \frac{3}{4} \]

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\begin{music}
\text{violin 1} \\
\text{violin 2} \\
\text{viola} \\
\text{cello}
\end{music}
```

Figure 2.4. Polymeters in Scene 7 of *Difficulty of Crossing a Field*.

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\begin{music}
\text{Mrs. Williamson} \\
\text{Virginia Creeper} \\
\text{Boy Sam} \\
\text{violin 1} \\
\text{violin 2} \\
\text{viola} \\
\text{cello}
\end{music}
```
progressions appear a number of times in different guises. One of the more frequent progressions is found in the opening, which is essentially a \( i-v-VI^7-i'' \) progression. (Fig. 2.3) Another progression found throughout the opera is the one outlined in the second violin in Scene 7. (Fig. 2.4) This progression—\( i-VI-iv-vi^7 \)—is first found in Scene 1, and appears throughout the opera. Oftentimes, melodic fragments are built off the outline of the progression.

Like *The Cave*, Lang’s *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* suggested that opera did not need to be confined to traditional preconceptions. While the use of operatic voices alongside musical theater voices made the work a suitable candidate for university music programs, the smaller instrumentation continued to indicate that opera could be performed with even more limited forces, a trend that has carried further into the 21st century.
Chapter 3

Minimalist Opera in the 21st Century-Nico Muhly’s Two Boys and Dark Sisters

Born in 1981, Nico Muhly earned a B.A. from Columbia University while simultaneously earning a Master’s degree in Music from Juilliard University studying under Christopher Rouse and John Corigliano. While still a student, he was championed by Alex Ross of the New Yorker as the youngest composer “best poised for a major career.” It was also during his time in college that Muhly began working for Philip Glass, doing MIDI inputting and editing, notably on Glass’s score to the 2002 Stephen Daldry film The Hours.

Despite his classical training, Muhly has developed significant connections within popular and independent music scenes. His contributions have included performing, arranging, and conducting on albums for artists as diverse as off-kilter singer-songwriter Bonnie Prince Billy, Antony and the Johnsons, indie-rock darling Sufjan Stevens, Jónsi of the Icelandic band Sigur Rós, the National, and R&B icon Usher, in addition to a significant number of collaborations with folk singer Sam Amidon. His credibility with pop musicians has led William Robins to note that he is “certainly the only classical composer who has been covered by both BuzzFeed and The New Yorker.”

Since 2006, he has been a member of the artist-run Bedroom Community, an Icelandic record label he co-founded with Valgeir Sigurroson and Ben Frost. His first album, Speaks Volumes, was released in the same year, becoming the first release on the newfound label. Since then, he has released four other albums under the label: Mothertongue, I Drink the Air Before Me, Drones, and Cycles, a CD of organ works performed by James McVinnie. Additionally, his

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works have been performed on albums released by Nadia Sirota, The Los Angeles Master Chorale, and the Aurora Orchestra. He has also contributed film scores to *Joshua* (2007), *The Reader* (2008), *Margaret* (2011), and *Kill Your Darlings* (2013).

Despite his popularity among younger audiences, Muhly takes his work model from much older sources. He has frequently cited Bach and Vivaldi as composers after whom he models his work habits. The similarity is evident in his output. In the six years following the commissioning of *Two Boys*, Muhly completed seventy pieces, an astonishingly high number for a composer simultaneously working on a large-scale opera.\(^{48}\) Notably, many of the completed works were commissions. It was while working on *Two Boys* that Muhly was also commissioned to write *Dark Sisters*, a chamber opera.

*Two Boys*, premiered at the English National Opera in 2011 with a subsequent American premiere in 2013, was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in conjunction with the Lincoln Center Theater in 2006, as part of a commissioning project where playwrights were paired with composers to create new operas. (The project has been infamously unfruitful; as of 2014, *Two Boys* is the only one of the original commissions to see the light of day.) Muhly was paired with Craig Lucas, a writer most known for his plays *Reckless* (1983) and *Prelude to a Kiss* (1988), which were both later adapted into major motion pictures during the 1990s. *Dark Sisters* was written in collaboration with Stephen Karam, the young playwright responsible for *Speech & Debate* as well as *Sons of the Prophet*, a 2012 Pulitzer Prize finalist.

The plot of *Two Boys* is a dramatization of a 2003 crime in Manchester, England in which a younger boy is stabbed by an older one. The incident is caught on closed circuit TV and appears to be a simple case, but as Detective Anne Strawson investigates further, she realizes that the older boy was essentially tricked into murdering the younger boy through a series of

\(^{48}\) Robin, “Nico Muhly’s Team Spirit.”
wildly fantastic internet chatrooms, in which the younger boy had constructed a complicated web of fictional people. The story is presented in a manner reminiscent of crime show procedurals like *Law and Order*, an important feature given Muhly’s views that opera should be entertaining.

Thematically the opera centers on themes of internet identity and homosexuality. In regards to the internet, the time period of the work is important to note. Although taking place only a few years ago, the incident occurred during what could be considered the early days of the internet. Even over the course of ten years, things have changed dramatically. As Muhly has noted in interviews:

> What was so exciting for me about this story—and what was so sort of poignant about it—is that we don’t live in a place where there’s masked balls really anymore. So I thought of the internet—and especially the early days of the internet, the sort of chatrooms before video chat, before any of that—when you really could pretend to be another person. It’s actually quite a traditional subject for an opera, I thought.49

*Dark Sisters*, Muhly’s chamber opera written in collaboration with playwright Stephen Karam, similarly takes its subject from relatively recent news stories. However, instead of focusing on the wild world of the early internet, *Dark Sisters* takes the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as it’s jumping off point. The plot of the opera is loosely based on the government raids that occurred outside of Eldorado, Texas in 2008 at the Yearning for Zion Ranch. During the raids, 462 children were removed from their homes under suspicions of abuse. It is interesting to note that the opera does not take place in Eldorado but rather Colorado City, the sight of an earlier government raid on the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints in 1953. In addition to the raids, Karam’s libretto draws on various accounts of women attempting to leave the church and their subsequent lives outside the church.

While *Two Boys* concerns themes of internet identity and homosexuality, *Dark Sisters* centers on issues of polygamy and the morality of taking children away from their homes, while

49 Nico Muhly, Interview with Adam Gopnik, Metropolitan Opera Season Book. September 2013.
still retaining ideas about identity that are also present in *Two Boys*. Muhly himself has said, “at one time, it’s a story of one woman who is attempting to leave, and on a larger scale, it’s about how one person, one family in a large polygamist household reacts to having their children taken away.”50 Despite Muhly’s beliefs that opera should be entertainment, it does not mean that it need be devoid of thought, with the composer saying, “…also it makes you think about your life and makes you think about the country and maybe teases a sort of moral nerve.”51

Both operas tend to ask more questions than they answer, a sentiment that is certainly echoed in *Nixon in China*. While *Nixon in China* could be considered as side commentary on the Reagan administration, *Dark Sisters* could be considered to offer peripheral commentary on gay marriage in the United States, although it is not explicitly mentioned in the opera. Muhly himself identified the subject of the “government staying out of the bedroom,” a relevant topic given the composer’s homosexuality.

The orchestration, like the plot and themes of both operas, is rooted in the influence of John Adams. While *Einstein on the Beach* was a less traditional, do-it-yourself type of production, *Nixon in China* was funded by an established opera company with a certain set of expectations. This is similarly true of both Muhly operas. Given Muhly’s less-than-conventional career trajectory, the fruition of both *Two Boys* and *Dark Sisters* was fairly conventional. The resulting works are not as abstract as either *Einstein on the Beach* or *The Cave*, and feature typical operatic orchestras—*Two Boys* features a large cast and conventional orchestra, while *Dark Sisters* requires only a chamber orchestra and a small cast of seven singers, six of whom are women.

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51 Ibid.
The style of singing is similarly more traditional than the type of singing featured in *The Cave* and *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*. Although both operas tell modern stories, they feature vocalists that fall into types of singing associated with older forms of opera, as is the case with *Nixon in China*. It is in this type of medium that Muhly’s exceptional choir writing is able to shine through.

Although well grounded in minimalism (the influence of John Adams, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass can be heard frequently), Muhly is no stranger to older forms of music. Although often reluctant to characterize his style, he is always open about which composers he loves, especially those of the English Renaissance. Indeed, the influence of Orlando Gibbons and Thomas Tallis can be heard in Muhly’s music—most obviously in his choir works—alongside more modern influences, particularly Benjamin Britten. Muhly himself noted the influence of the exotic gamelan scale featured at the end of Britten’s last opera, *Death in Venice*, in *Two Boys*, considering the reference to Britten and English Renaissance composers as a sort of “coded high-five, as it were, into the past.”

While the influence may be present, the choral writing is distinctly Muhly’s own. At times, it features a wild chattering of voices that the composer says should be reminiscent of the first Pentecost, when people were wildly speaking in different tongues. Although achieved with voices, the resulting sound is almost electronic, and despite the biblical association, the technique is used to represent the frenzied nature of the internet. The resulting blitz of voices is not unlike the rapid-fire delivery of numbers and solfege in *Einstein on the Beach*, although the sound is certainly less orderly. The effect is notated in the score as a sustained note with a tremolo and the text notated beneath the note; at times, the text is specific (i.e., “how are you?”) while at other times the text only gives an indication that the singer should sing phone numbers, names, etc.

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52 Nico Muhly, Interview with Adam Gopnik, Metropolitan Opera Season Book. September 2013.
(Fig. 3.1 and Fig. 3.2) The text is to be repeated for the duration of the note. Additionally, singers should avoid coordinating with one another at all times.

Figure 3.1. Notation of unsynchronized voices in Two Boys.

Figure 3.2. Notation of unsynchronized voices in Two Boys.

The wild chattering effect can be traced, like much of the opera, to certain phases of Muhly’s career. Given the seven years between the opera’s commission and the Metropolitan premiere, it is not unlikely that his style has evolved. The composer himself noted that the opera was the last composition in which he used certain techniques and the first in which he used others.\textsuperscript{53} Certainly, the different techniques are apparent in different sections. The aforementioned “wild chattering” found in the choir sections in Two Boys can be traced to Mothertongue (2008) as well as his choir piece Senex Puerum Portabat.

Throughout the opera, Muhly also relies on a number of drones. The obsession with drones is evident in three EPs released through Bedroom Community in 2012 and 2013: Drones and Piano, Drones and Viola, and Drones and Violin. (The three pieces were later released together on the album Drones that included another track entitled Drones in Large Cycles.) According to Muhly, this fascination stems from his childhood when he loved to sing alongside the hum of vacuum cleaners.

\textsuperscript{53} Robin, “Nico Muhly’s Team Spirit.”
Polyrhythms, found in much minimalist music, are found in both of these operas as well. Muhly has used them in a number of pieces; his solo piano piece *A Hudson Cycle* is reminiscent of the opening movement of Glass’s *Glassworks* due to it’s almost constant two against three rhythm with occasional interruptions. (Fig. 3.3) As in his earlier music, he uses polyrhythms in both *Two Boys* and *Dark Sisters*. In the opening measures of *Two Boys*, a five-against-four polyrhythm is set up in the bass. (Fig. 3.4)

![Figure 3.3. 3:2 Polyrhythms in A Hudson Cycle.](image1)

![Figure 3.4. 5:4 Polyrhythms in the Opening of Two Boys.](image2)

Certainly, other older techniques derived from Baroque masters are present alongside the more modern minimalist innovations. Structurally, Muhly based much of the opera on repetitive bass ostinatos, a nod to Henry Purcell. Although not repeated exactly each time they appear, these bass ostinatos are used as accompaniment to a significant portion of the opera. This is evident early in Act I. (Fig. 3.5) Here, the upward outline of triads in the bass—variously A minor or first inversion F major 7th chords in this example—repeats a number of times while the
harmonies float above it. The use of passacaglias, frequently seen in Baroque music, is also evident, especially in Act II. *Two Boys* is not the first time Muhly has used this technique, however. A passacaglia provides the accompaniment throughout much of *Keep in Touch (Three Missed Calls for Holy Week)*, a viola solo with electronic accompaniment (including vocals from Antony Hegarty) written for Nadia Sirota.

![Figure 3.5. Repetitive bass figures in Act I of *Two Boys*.](image)

If the textures and shimmery orchestration could be considered a manifestation of Glass’s influence, the harmonic language is certainly more akin to Adams. Although still tonal, the harmonic language is certainly more advanced than those used in Reich’s and Glass’s operas. There are still plenty of triadic harmonies but there are also instances of polytonality and greater amounts of dissonance than in the aforementioned works. (A dissonant moment can be seen in Figure 3.5 above where an Eb minor chord clashes against the A minor chord outlined in the bass.) Muhly also makes frequent use of triads that have both major and minor thirds, a common harmony in his works, notably in the final movement of his choir work *Expecting the Main Things from You*. An example of this harmony appears over the bass ostinato in Act I. While the bass outlines a third inversion A minor triad, a chord with both C# and C♯ is sustained in the
treble. (Fig. 3.6) If the mark of John Adams is apparent in the harmonic language, it is significant to acknowledge that Two Boys and Dark Sisters owe more to later Adams operas like Death of Klinghoffer and Doctor Atomic than to Nixon in China.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3_6.png}
\caption{Mixed third chords in Act I of Two Boys.}
\end{figure}

Despite his work with Glass, Muhly seems to channel John Adams in both of his operas, in terms of sources for stories and traditional orchestration, although the influence of Glass and Reich is still present. However, Muhly, like Adams, draws on a wider variety of influences ranging from sources as varied as English Renaissance music, Baroque music, Benjamin Britten and even popular music. If the pop music influence is a bit subtle, the influence of pop culture certainly is not. Despite the eclecticism, Muhly’s works are still grounded within the more traditional operatic vein perpetuated by John Adams. The topical, rather than abstract, nature of the work places both operas squarely within this trajectory.
Chapter Four

Analysis of *Violetting through August’s End (or the sunset in water, the carillon-chime in square)*

The compositional portion of this thesis document is fulfilled by an original chamber opera, *Violetting through August’s End (or the sunset in water, the carillon-chime in square)*. The story was conceived during an evening conversation between the composer and Kurt Zacharias centering around proposed short stories that could have been written by Don DeLillo or David Foster Wallace; other suggestions concerned a man who cannot focus on an interview with a top-notch brokerage firm because his socks, unseen by the interviewer, do not match the rest of his outfit and the mid-life crisis of a woman who won everything she owns through repeated appearances under different names on *Wheel of Fortune*. Joseph Verica, then studying for his master’s degree in creative writing under Richard Kenney at the University of Iowa, was enlisted to write the text.

The plot, initially centered around two teenagers who engage in a suicide pact without telling their other friend, took a darker turn as a murderous rampage was added to the initial storyline, as was a fourth character. The opera centers around the aftermath of the murder-suicide pact, the massacre having already occurred before the start of the opera. The story concerns the reactions of the various people affected by the suicide, namely the single father of one of the boys and a close friend who was not included in their suicide pact. While the single father’s reaction is clearly one of grief and mourning, the friend’s reaction is more concerned with why he was not aware of their pact or even included. He muses on whether or not to kill himself. Subsequently, he is struck by a car and goes into a coma, whereupon his mother has to decide whether or not to keep him alive.
The majority of the opera focuses on the reactions of those not involved directly in the events, as opposed to the events themselves, casting the opera in a vein more similar to David Lang’s *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, although the musical aesthetic is not necessarily similar. The more abstract nature of the piece places the work closer to Glass’s work, although the musical nature of the opera is certainly more in line with post-minimalist attitudes, using processes as a jumping off point rather than a determinant.

Regardless of the differences, minimalist processes are used throughout the piece. A clear use of the linear additive process is used at the end of “July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview.” (Fig. 4.1) Amidst prerecorded children’s voices whispering numbers and a synthesizer bass line, the violin and cello repeat a four-chord progression. The chord voicing remains the same each time, but an eighth note is subtracted from the end of each half-note, resulting in a sort of hiccup effect. The effect is felt more obviously due to the synthesizer line in the prerecorded electronics, which drops an octave at each reiteration, eventually sinking so low as to no longer be audible.

*Figure 4.1. Linear additive process in “July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview.”*
Block additive process, more commonly associated with Reich, is used in “July 27th, Obadiah Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods).” (Fig. 4.2) Its usage appears in the vibraphone part, beginning at measure 86. Here, the meter remains unchanged while eighth notes are subtracted from the end of the pattern, one at a time, beginning in measure 87. The process continues through measure 97, eventually cycling back to its beginning at measure 93. The use of the block additive process is again not a critical part of the music; instead, it is used to generate accompanimental background textures.

Figure 4.2. Block additive process in “July 27th, Obadiah Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods).”

An effect similar to Glass’s use of cyclic structures can be found in “Prologue: July 21st: the sunrise red(fr)acted.” However, instead of two superimposed patterns of different lengths, two patterns of different tempos are layered against one another. In Train from Einstein on the Beach, Glass juxtaposes four iterations of a three-beat pattern against three iterations of a four-beat pattern. In “Prologue: July 21st: the sunrise red(fr)acted,” two measures at a rate of $\mathbf{q}=100$ are juxtaposed against three measures with a tempo of $\mathbf{q}=150$. At measure 34, a shimmering Eb major 7th chord is sounded with different instruments variously outlining the different notes of the chord at a tempo of $\mathbf{q}=100$. (Fig. 4.3) Beginning at measure 37, the tempo shifts to $\mathbf{q}=150$ but only in the vibraphone part. The rest of the ensemble holds steady at $\mathbf{q}=100$. (Fig. 4.4) Following this, the flute and violins switch to the tempo of $\mathbf{q}=150$ in measure 39. It should be noted that although the desired effect is one of two simultaneous tempi, the actual score is notated in tuplets (for ease of the conductor and players) in a manner similar to the scores of John Luther Adams.
Additionally, simple polymeters and polyrhythms can be found in a number of places. One of the more noticeable places is in “July 27th, Obadiah Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods)” during the section which begins at measure 38. While the majority of the musicians are playing in 3/4, the vibraphonist enters at measure 52 with a rhythmic gesture that feels more like it is in 6/8. (Fig. 4.5) Additionally, the motive is a sort of palindrome; measure 54 is measure 52 backwards while measure 55 is the reverse of measure 53.
At other times, polyrhythms are used to generate atmospheric accompaniment. This is evident in “Epilogue: August 2\textsuperscript{nd}: the (viscose) shadows of sunset had graced” beginning at measure 10. Here, the piano holds steady, playing on the beat in 4/4 while the celesta plays fragments of a quintuplet and the vibraphone plays septuplets. (Fig. 4.6) Unlike the texture from the opera prologue, the texture here is not intended to evoke multiple tempos but rather an atmospheric backdrop against which the spoken text of the electronics is set.

Figure 4.5. Polymeters and palindromes in “July 27\textsuperscript{th}, Obadiah Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods).”
Harmonically speaking, *Violetting through August’s End* is tonal and often rather consonant, with heavy usage of minor 7th chords, major 7th chords, and major 9th chords. Similar to *Nixon in China*, the opera employs frequent use of third relationships. One of the more prominent examples of this is the passacaglia-like progression found in “July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview.” The chord progression, found throughout the section is built off roots descending by a major or minor third. (Fig. 4.7.)

*Figure 4.6. Polyrhythms in “Epilogue: August 2nd, the (viscose) shadows of sunset had graced.”*

Each chord, at various times, is either a major 7th or major 9th chord. As a result, the first and second chords share two common tones as do the second and third chords. The progression, which serves as the basis of Jed’s aria, appears in a number of guises. One of the more prominent appearances of the progression begins at measure 56 where the celesta repeats a gesture found earlier in the piece. An electric guitar enters above the celesta, echoing the same chord.
progression a minor third away; if the original progression is centered on F, the guitar suggests a tonal center of A♭. (Fig. 4.8)

Figure 4.8. Appearance of the passacaglia in F and A♭ in “July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview.”

Certainly, there are more dissonant moments in the opera. The freer section beginning at measure 31 in “July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview” features a D triad in the strings containing both a major and minor third set against a major 7th diad of B♭ and A in the electric guitar. Here the dissonance, realized through unsynchronized swelling harmonies, characterize Jed’s state and suggest his underlying instability. This is echoed in the harmonic language of the remainder of the aria as well. The non-functional passacaglia that serves as a basis for Jed’s section is distinct when compared with the rest of the opera, which is generally more diatonic.

The orchestration of the work is more indicative of the relatively new indie-classical scene, and, like the overall length of the work, it reflects an attitude of practicality, one found in the do-it-yourself philosophy of early minimalism. Instruments included are flute, electric guitar, piano (doubling on celesta), two violins, viola, violoncello, percussion (two players, including vibraphone, triangle, crotales, and bass drum), and electronics.

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The electric guitar, specifically, is more indicative of the popular music world. Within the opera, the guitarist is required to use a select number of pedals including distortion, delay, and octave displacement effects, in addition to using an e-bow, a device that produces sound by causing strings to vibrate with an electromagnetic field. The e-bow’s usage is associated with a number of rock guitarists like Robert Fripp, David Gilmour, Peter Buck, and Steve Hackett. (Despite its prominence in rock music, the e-bow is not without precedent in classical music. It is used on harps in John Cage’s *Postcard from Heaven* (1982).)

The singing, likewise, reflects a less traditional sensibility more in line with Glass and Reich; the opera calls for a tenor (for Jed Wallace) and baritone (for Obadiah Lawl), but the desired quality is more akin to a jazz voice tone. As in Reich’s *The Cave*, microphones allow for this more pure-toned voice to blend with the similarly amplified ensemble. Additionally, a substantial amount of the libretto is spoken rather than sung, a clear influence of *Einstein on the Beach*. Spoken sections are reserved for a third person narrator and a female news anchor. Often, these spoken sections occur over ambient music with low drones. More frequently, the spoken text is included in the electronics part, with two exceptions: the last section of “July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview,” beginning at measure 49, requires the tenor to speak the last few lines of libretto over the passacaglia; similarly, in “Epilogue: August 2nd, the (viscose) shadows of sunset had graced,” three instrumentalists—the flautist, percussionist, and pianist—are required to speak beginning at measure 39. The spoken text, consisting solely of numbers, recalls a recurring rhythm first found at the beginning of the opera in the triangle, vibraphone, and celesta. The enigmatic numbers, first heard in conjunction with the recurring rhythm in the closing measures of the work, allude to the news report heard in the background of “July 27th, Obadiah Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods).” As the news anchor indicates, the bodies

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of both shooters were found with “19-digit numbers differing in their last digits only hewed on their left inner-thighs.”

The majority of sung text in the opera is found in Jed Wallace and Obadiah Lawl’s arias with a select number of exceptions in the electronic parts. One of these sung parts in the electronics displays a clear Muhly influence. The section, beginning at measure 50 in “Prologue: July 21st: the sunrise red(fr)acted,” recalls the wild chattering found in *Mohtertongue*, *Senex Puerem Portabat*, and *Two Boys*. As in the score to *Two Boys*, the effect is notated with a tremolo on a whole note. Despite the simple notation, the effect is one of chaotic unsynchronized singing in which select bits of libretto (“it would be a good day,” “as the sun crests,” “toward the solid violet,” etc.) are wildly exclaimed over ominous synth pulses in the bass register. (Fig. 4.9)

![Figure 4.9. Wild chattering effect in Prologue: July 21st: the sunrise red(fr)acted.](image)

The text itself is more abstract than the librettos of *Nixon in China* or either of the Muhly operas. Despite this difference, the inspiration for the story could be seemingly drawn from any number of recent shooting tragedies featured on the news although no specific incident served as the basis for this work. While the opera has a plot, unlike *Einstein on the Beach*, the text is not unlike Christopher Knowles’s contributions to Wilson and Glass’s opera in its focus on imagery. This focus on imagery allows more room for interpretation, although there are certainly clearer
themes than in *Einstein*. The two biggest themes reflect how people react in the aftermath of tragedy and the effect of news media in the wake of these tragedies.

In the opera, for example, the effect of the media is more prominent on Obadiah Lawl, the father of one of the shooters, than it is on Jed Wallace, the duo’s friend. The distinction is made by the amount of news anchor interruptions within the arias. While there are frequent news clips heard in the background during “July 27th, Obadiah Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods),” there are fewer in “July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview.” Here, the clips are shorter and reduced to mere fragments, often no more than a few words, showing that the news media has much less of an impact on Jed, perhaps due to his mental state.

All in all, *Violetting through August’s End (or the sunset in water, the carillon-chime in square)* draws from both the Adams and Glass camps. The CNN-opera-like story is certainly a nod to Adams, but the concept and libretto are perhaps more similar to Glass. Likewise, the smaller, popular-music-influenced instrumentation is more in line with Glass and perhaps more indicative of the future direction of opera in general. The practicality of a smaller ensemble makes mounting new productions more feasible than the large-scale productions presented by the Met. While certain critics bemoan the death of classical music, smaller opera houses have been appearing in great numbers. After the closure of New York City Opera in 2013, the Gotham Chamber Opera became the second-most active company in New York. As of 2014, they do not have their own theater; instead, they mount productions in museums and smaller venues, not unlike those that housed the earliest operas in Florence.

Indeed, similar situations are occurring across the country. Young composers are turning to the genre with greater frequency and premiering their operas with smaller companies or self mounted productions. In 2012, Missy Mazzoli premiered her opera *Song from the Uproar: The
Lives and Deaths of Isabelle Eberhardt at the New York City venue the Kitchen. Subsequently, she was selected as Gotham Chamber Opera’s composer-in-residence from 2012-2014. (She was preceded by Lembit Beecher who served from 2011-2013 and is followed by Andrew Norman, who will follow her during 2013-2015.) Composition students at universities are likewise turning towards opera as the subject of theses in greater numbers. One such composer, University of Pennsylvania PhD student Melissa Dunphy, whose Gonzales Cantata (2009) was featured on The Rachel Maddow Show, is currently working on an opera concerning the sex life of Ayn Rand, as narrated by Alan Greenspan.

Certainly, contemporary figures and history have become common subject matter in opera since the premiere of Nixon in China. While John Adams’s own operas have continued this trend—Death of Klinghoffer (1991) is based off the 1985 murder of Leon Klinghoffer at the hands of terrorists, and Doctor Atomic (2005) is based off the development of the nuclear bomb at Los Alamos in 1945—many others have also opted to draw stories from recent events rather than mythological or literature. Thomas Adès’s chamber opera Powder Her Face (1995) was based on the scandalous life of Margaret Campbell, the “Dirty Duchess of Argyll,” whose divorce was news fodder in Britain during the early 1960’s. Similarly, Mark-Anthony Turnage’s Anna Nicole takes American model and outrageous television personality Anna Nicole Smith as its focus.

Although outwardly, the “CNN opera” appears relatively new, this trend towards topicality in opera could be viewed as a shift back towards older varieties of opera. When discussing Nixon in China John Adams noted:

[T]here always seems to be something that’s tangentially related to this subject going on in the world, which maybe suggests that this is the proper thing for opera to do. It was

---

certainly the case in Verdi and Wagner’s time. Opera addressed hotly debated issues that people thought about all the time.\textsuperscript{55}

Even if the interaction with such issues is more direct now than it has been in previous centuries, the reversion to topical subjects could perhaps herald in a younger generation of listeners.

Similarly, the emergence of smaller companies mounting smaller productions suggests that opera need not remain solely within the opera house. More and more, the do-it-yourself approach of Philip Glass’s and Steve Reich’s early years is becoming commonplace amongst younger composers, especially within the last decade. A big commission is no longer a prerequisite to stage an opera. As many younger composers are showing, all one needs are a few dedicated musician friends and a small venue. This trend, especially popular in places like New York, may well continue to grow as the century progresses.

Additionally, composers are turning more frequently to popular music for inspiration. The use of electric guitars and synthesizers, a somewhat radical notion 30 years ago, is now routine. Like composers of Lang’s generation, the large majority of millennial composers are well versed in the popular music vernacular, having grown up with any type of music easily within their grasp. This pop sensibility manifests itself in both evident and more arcane ways, but the presence is certainly undeniable.

If the majority of innovation is happening with the younger generation, it does not mean that the traditional institutions are dying. In many ways, the now defunct New York City Opera is not indicative of the general state of older companies, which still manage to sell out shows. Although they are producing new works at a slower pace than their smaller competitors, these old institutions are still far from dead, and are likely to turn a profit for years to come. Despite the initial hiccup in the 2006 commissioning project, the Met still has a number of new operas in

the works, including Thomas Adés’s adaptation of the 1962 Luis Buñuel film *The Exterminating Angel* (set to be premiered during the 2017-18 season) and Osvaldo Golijov’s operatic adaptation of Euripides’s *Iphigenia in Aulis* (set to be premiered during the 2018-19 season.)

With such varied plots and aesthetics, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the operatic genre is headed, although a clear dichotomy is emerging between the more traditional forms of opera and the less established do-it-yourself variety that have become prevalent over the course of the last decade. It is the latter that will perhaps give way to the greatest change, enabling the genre to transform and adapt to the needs of the 21st century.
Appendix
Milos Raickovich’s Catalog of Themes in
Philip Glass’s Einstein on the Beach

Theme in C

Theme in Ab
Theme in E♭

Theme in f-E
Theme in a

Theme in f-D
DANCE 1

Theme in d
Bibliography


Gann, Kyle. “Intuition and Algorithm in *Einstein on the Beach*.” Paper presented at the *Einstein on the Beach* Conference, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, January 6, 2013.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dEY_VGf5Lk#t=71.


PART II

VIOLETTING THROUGH AUGUST’S END (OR THE SUNSET IN WATER, THE CARILLON-
CHIME IN SQUARE): AN ORIGINAL CHAMBER OPERA
Violetting through August’s End
(or the sunset in water, the carillon–chime in square)

A CHAMBER OPERA

Music
JAMES DOYLE
&
LIBRETTO
JOSEPH VERICA
Violetting through August’s End
(or the sunset in water, the carillon-chime in square)

Plot:
The opera centers around the aftermath of a teen murder-suicide pact, the suicide having already occurred before the start of the opera. The story concerns the reactions of the various people affected by the suicide, namely the single father of one of the boys and a close friend who was not included in the suicide pact. While the single father’s reaction is clearly one of grief and mourning, the friend’s reaction is more concerned with why he was not aware of their pact or even included. He muses on whether or not to kill himself. Subsequently, he is struck by a car and goes into a coma, whereupon his mother has to decide whether or not to keep him on life support.

Instrumentation:
- Tenor*
- Baritone
- Flute
- Electric Guitar**
- Percussion: Vibraphone, Triangle, Crotales, Glockenspiel, Bass Drum
- Keyboards: Piano, Celesta
- Violin I
- Violin II
- Viola
- Violoncello
- Electronics

Notes:
All performers should be amplified with a small amount of reverb added to all instrumentalists.

* In performance, the tenor may be replaced with a soprano with an octave displacement pedal doubling the voice an octave below. If this is done, the lower harmony should be amplified so as to be louder than the upper one.

** Throughout the piece, the electric guitarist is required to use a select number of effects, namely reverb, delay, and distortion. Additionally, the player should be in possession of an e-bow and octave displacement pedal, used throughout much of “July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview.”
Structure:

Prologue: July 21st, the sunrise redacted
  Flute
  Electric Guitar
  Percussion:
    Crotale, Glockenspiel, Vibraphone, Bass Drum
  Keyboards:
    Piano and Celesta
  String Quartet
  Electronics

Interlude No. 1
  Electronics

July 27th, Obadiab Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods)
  Baritone
  Percussion:
    Vibraphone
  Violin I
  Viola
  Piano
  Electronics

Interlude No. 2
  Electronics

July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview
  Tenor
  Flute
  Electric Guitar
  Violin II
  Violoncello
  Percussion:
    Glockenspiel, Bass Drum
  Celesta
  Electronics

Epilogue: August 2nd, the (viscose)shadows of sunset had graced
  Flute
  Electric Guitar
  Percussion:
    Triangle, Vibraphone, Bass Drum
  Keyboards:
    Piano and Celesta
  String Quartet
  Electronics
Libretto:

Prologue: July 21st, the sunrise redacted

it would be a good day
for some allotted folk’s
daily fluctuation trending down
or wristbackward tropes etc
by nature there’s consideration,
dime-inflation, as the sun crests
yonder range, pumiced plain, subtle
hill, bluff sidle, all in color
chemically reserved for plexiform,
another hundred dolphins
wash on shores squalid wounds
only guess is biotoxins,
only nest in parallaxion
sieved for viscidarity

and toward the solid violet
pylons naphthol-toned
‘million miles away, ‘million souls
and jackals leave their homes to walk
covalently, looking carefully at their feet
making sure to fill the impression
left for them is to feel the radio,
like dark matter, passin’ through;
the news don’t need your fingergaps
to reach the stand

outside the station
a rabbit cirrusly sung

Topping box office sales this week is Ann y Mia,
the feel-good-family-sequel to last year’s hit
following the story of two young E. Coli
its toythigh torn, then there was none, trapped in the bowels of a Latino man; as if it ever were, as if it never was, sure won’t beat again slowly being wretched from its socket

**Interlude No. 1**

(no text)

**July 27th, Obadiab Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods)**

‘million soles mudding my lawn ‘spite the second day of rain; never shoulda stuck that cameraman.

I prayed for all their sunken daughters and sons cooling in the ground, dirtied bones for turning-grey toes now.

He shouldn’t have dredged on her hydrangeas. I worked my wrists straight through to bone, and still my deadheading won’t yield as bright a bloom as curated by her fleece-hands, vi’letting through August’s end.

Oh well Jacob was a kind kinda boy if any man could tell.

the latest salvos depict the father as an apathetic gun owner ignorant of contemporary standards for safe storage, after his firearms were recovered on July 24 th at the scene of the murder-suicide “diatribe” is what his lawyers say, but the Councilmen released a statement today which used words related to terrorism 27 times. When asked his defense, Mr. Lawl says:
I was his only father
and I’d say I fathered well.
If I was told that he’d died first
then I woulda been proud
as he lay adorn in foreign sand,
just like the rest of his kin.

He always was a bit impression’ble,
and one day came home spouting shit
about the Central Bank’s under-skin computer chips.

I read a sign says “what have you done?”
I’ve been judging it at night; the red-like
stain glass over my finger gaps
too wide to sift the drain.

Jesus, on the 24th of all days,
told him home by suppertime,
I bet the little shit didn’t even realize
it was his mother’s goddamn birthday;
come again, we’re usually quiet ‘bout Molly.

**Interlude No. 2**

(no text)
July 30th, Jed Hedgerow Wallace the third, declined an interview:

I wasn’t born
   for such notions
of commoditization;
asshole Ezra knew it, this week’s superfood

manifested dreams
more comforting - Jed the Kid
rides on through terrible rainstorms
with thirst to comeful
creature-tidings
under sun’s canopy:

jackals wander,
dustfell, thingash,
a button that does
feeling coloroils;
don’t know which name

Fuck ‘um though. They’d make the sunset
in water, shitty kin. They made the carillon
chime in square; could’a asked still.
Surely can’t go back to Boothwyn,
with Shari’s sis in lowering-harness, I’d be or could fuckin’ shatter bone
against a time-cracked stucco wall,
watch the slag and fibrils ebb in fall,

might have never lived at all
but iron to the soil
is skin’s intention or
forefathered-grafting
of thinning shin and cure
the grandeur beings seek;

I could do it grander,
we asked the maker
with some six shooters
in hand and a rolled cigarette
cosset in my mouth’s corner;
of the summer’s musthave-
semipermeable-membrane
rare ivoried-game.

Epilogue: August 2nd, the (viscose)shadows of sunset had graced

the hydrangeas were greying in the cold moonlight
reknitting chlorophyll, across the sea a man was found
scapegoat in office, they say it’ll end with his head;
they’re credibility is still under investigation. There was hairmelt
and protein patent in the skid, fatty-white as the strangest blackeye
susans; as neurons are unlike pectin, it seems he is mum for all his years.
Riversearchers have yet to recover the driver’s presumed stiff still
ultraviolet light would guide the honeymaker’s choice, if or not to keep
the kid on lifesupport. The Council Chair flew to aid the parents’ grief;
Mrs. Wallace could only cry, I think she has taken spec – and limp she went,
the pretty lady reading on the screen, quickly replaced and lost she was, in all
the magazines, in unquenched jackals everywhere the distil sun could comfort,
as a handtucked scarlet cigarette was sweptup by the wind,
unlit on the old mill bridge; extricate
in night moisture
Prologue:

*July 21st, the sunrise red(f r)acted*

---

**Text**

Joseph Verica

---

**Music**

J. Doyle

---

Flute

Percussion I

Percussion II

Electric Guitar

Celesta / Piano

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Tape

---

ca. 30" Slow \( \frac{q}{=} \) 66

Triangle

Vibraphone

Crotales

long, quiet delay to achieve sustain effect

fade in with volume pedal

Celesta

piano reverb drone

---

FOR REVIEW ONLY
Slightly Slower $q=60$

Bass Drum

Vibraphone bowed

E. Gtr.

Violin I

Violin II

Violino

Vio.

Slightly Slower $q=60$

Bass Drum

Vibraphone bowed

E. Gtr.

Violin I

Violin II

Violino

Vio.

FOR REVIEW ONLY
Repeat figures as choir builds. Flute and vibraphone should fall out of sync with the piano and bass drum.

Prerecorded choir [chaotic unsynchronized chattering]
Interlude No. 1

(electronics only)

1’05”
July 27th, Obadiah Lawl: the ratchet hands of (gods)

Calmly $\frac{3}{4} = 66$

Baritone

Violin

Viola

Piano

Tape

Sound of rain on rooftop
I prayed for all their sunken daughters and

Bar.

Vib.

Vln.

Vla.

Pno.

Rain (cont'd)
sons cooling in the ground
dirtied bones for turning grey stones now

\[ \text{gently} \]
He shouldn't have dredged on her hydrangeas. I worked my wrists straight through to bone and still my dead-heading won't
yield as bright a bloom as curated by her fleece hands violetting through summer's end
Oh, well Jacob was a kind kind boy if
a ny man could tell I was his on ly fa ther and I'd say I fa thered well If I was told that he'd died first

p − p − p

mp

pizz.

Rain (cont'd)
than I would been proud as he lay adorned in foreign sand like the rest of his kin.
he always was a bit impress'able and one day came home spouting shit 'bout the central bank's under skin computer chips...
I read a sign says
what have you done I've been judging it at night the red-like stain glass over my fingers too wide to sift the
Rain (cont'd)

Bar.

\[ \text{drain} \]

\[ \text{ah, je} \]

\[ \text{sus on the} \]

Vib.

\[ \text{repeat figure sporadically, growing faster} \]

Vln.

\[ \text{sul pont. norm sul pont.} \]

\[ \text{sul pont. norm sul pont.} \]

\[ \text{sul pont. norm sul pont.} \]

Pno.

\[ \text{Rain (cont'd)} \]
of all days I told him home by supper time to the fore
I bet the little shit didn't even realize was his mother's God damn birthday come again we're usually

more freely
Interlude No. 2

(electronics only)

4’45”
I wasn't born for such accommodations.
molto accel. . . . . a tempo

Tuba
plucked e-bow

Viola II
plucked

Violoncello
sul pont.

Glockenspiel

Basso Continuo

Jed the kid rides on with thirstful dreams more comforting
21

Tu.

Fl.

E. Gtr.

Vln. II

Vc.

Glock.

B. D.

Cel.

creature ti - dings un - der sun's canopy
poco
w/ bottle neck slide
sul III, IV

For Review Only

FOR REVIEW ONLY

111
Repeated figures should gradually become out of sync with each other. The singer should pause at every double barline.

**Ta.**

freely

\[ f (\text{forceful}) \]

mf

\[ \text{freely} \]

p (almost whispered)

\[ p \]

\[ mf \]

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suddenly can't go back to Booth with Shari's sister in lowering harness
I'd be or could fuck in' shatter bone against a time cracked window

slightly more manic

(pp in background)

freely, do not synchronize with other instruments or voice
watch the slag and fibrils ebb in fall, might have never lived at all but iron to the...
A tempo

I could do it grander

Fade in from niente to pianissimo
DO NOT synchronize between violin and cello.
with some six shooters and a rolled cigarette cosette in my mouth's corner rare ivoried game.

\[ \text{delay, reverb} \]

\[ pp \text{ (very faintly, as if from offstage)} \]
Epilogue:

August 2nd, the (viscose) shadows of sunset had graced
Fade in underneath guitar
DO NOT synchronize between violin, viola, and cello.