



John
ADAMS

**Complete
Piano Music**

Phrygian Gates

American Berserk

China Gates

Hallelujah Junction

Ralph van Raat, Piano



John Adams (b. 1947)

Phrygian Gates • American Berserk • China Gates • Hallelujah Junction

“A minimalist bored with minimalism”, remarked a writer describing the work of John Adams. This outlines the composer’s compositional output very well, although one can hardly describe his vast and very differentiated works in one sentence. In Adams’ musical world, the pure and repetitive minimalistic language of the early works by composers such as Terry Riley or Steve Reich rubs shoulders with the sounds of jazz, the long passionate lines of nineteenth-century Romantic music and the direct emotional appeal of pop styles. This has made John Adams one of the most versatile composers of today’s music, embracing a wide type of audience which has hardly been achieved before in the history of contemporary classical music.

Learning about Adams’s musical environment as a youngster, his open-minded use of diverse stylistic resources nowadays does not come as a surprise. Father Adams being a jazz sax player, mother a jazz singer, he grew up in a family “where Benny Goodman and Mozart were not separated”. Playing clarinet in his father’s marching band as a teenager, and playing in, composing for and conducting a local community orchestra not much later, he learnt hands-on about the emotional power of music, as some of the people in local audiences burst into tears at even the most banal sounds. At the time John Adams decided to study composition at the prestigious Harvard University, he listened to rock music and free jazz, as opposed to the “serious” music by serialists such as Schoenberg and Webern, which the institution expected him to study. After obtaining his master’s degree in 1971, Adams left for San Francisco to explore alternatives to modernism, which he thought of as uncommunicative. From 1972 to 1983 he became head of the new music programme at the San Francisco Conservatory, hearing and seeing a myriad of compositions.

At first experimenting with different unconventional sound resources and electronics, it was not until 1974, at a Steve Reich concert, that he found the solution to

realising an individual compositional language incorporating traditional harmony and making the return of direct emotional appeal possible: through minimal music. Inspired mainly by non-Western music, this meditative style was characterized by a strongly pulsating and tonal-based texture of repeating patterns which gradually changed over relatively long stretches of time. This would offer Adams the possibilities to realise his musical goals, but he knew he had to expand the language in his own way to make it speak as he wished.

China Gates (1977) and *Phrygian Gates* (1977-78) could be regarded as his first works in this language. In both pieces, minimalistic (apparent) repetition plays an important and striking rôle. In both pieces it is also the exclusive return to tonal (modal) writing that makes these works stand apart from modernistic works by other composers of that time. In general, one could compare listening to this music as viewing the earth from a spaceship. Although the earth seems hardly to move, the closer one gets to it, the busier the place gets: first clouds that slowly move, then contours of cities that bustle with energy and eventually the fast vibrations of molecules.

Thus, an undulating piece such as *China Gates* can be listened to at various levels of awareness. Harmonic progressions are relatively slow, but the inner pulse is fast, and seemingly repeating patterns actually turn out to be often slightly and slowly changed at a closer listen. There are three layers or strata of musical activity: the slow bass notes, which are the root of the modes, and two simultaneously sounding patterns in the treble register, of which one is varied, the other is literally repeated. The structure of the piece is built up of different sections each strictly adhering to one scale, and each marked by a new bass note and pedal change. All together, a highly colourful and atmospheric music is the result, comparable to a diamond which radiates different colours and moods at different angles of light,

though it remains the same object. It is the sudden change of colour, or tonal mode, which is referred to by “gate”, which is a term borrowed from electronics where a switch changes polarity.

In *Phrygian Gates*, Adams’s individual new and more expressive approach to minimalism can more readily be heard. An epic piece, its intense musical tension is achieved by abrupt changes in energy, mood, speed, rhythm and colour. Dark and light are sharply juxtaposed, owing to the alternation between the sweet and light lydian mode and the more fiery and dissonant phrygian mode. Through tonal modulations, in this case by the cycle of fifths, the music seems to intensify and relax alternately as was usual in Romantic music. As the time spent in the lydian mode diminishes over time and the more aggressive character of the phrygian mode gradually determines the work’s character, the composition conveys expressive drama previously unknown to minimalism. The slow chordal middle section (“a system of weights and measures”) serves as a great musical relief, contemplating the different refractions of light on one single basic harmony, before the fast ripples of the final section bring the composition to a breathtaking close.

During the years after these piano works, Adams’s musical style crystallized even more clearly. Through highly successful orchestral and ensemble works such as *Shaker Loops* (1978), *Grand Pianola Music* (1982), *Harmonium* (1980-81) and *Harmonielehre* (1984-85), one can hear how the composer incorporated more and

more elements of his youth – classical, jazz and pop – in his music, thereby achieving a unique and expressive style, of which the traditional minimalist heritage is only one way of recognising the composer.

It was not before composing two major operas, *Nixon in China* (1985-87) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1990-91), that Adams returned to the piano. Inspired by a truck stop near his cabin with the same name, *Hallelujah Junction* (1996) for two pianos seems the composer’s personal history translated into music. Starting off with a minimalistic pattern of three syllables (-lle-lu-jah), echoed by the second pianist, the work becomes almost romantic-impressionistic halfway, before the four-syllabled “hallelujah” finally sounds, completely jazzed up and sliced up to atonality towards the end.

Adams’s most recent piano work, *American Berserk* (2001), readily recalls the fractured boogie-woogie style of Conlon Nancarrow. Almost entirely built up out of triadic harmonies, the constant shifting of rhythm and unexpected juxtaposition of harmonies exemplify the composer’s claim that “as an expressive tool... [minimalism] absolutely had to evolve and become more complex”. Its title is owed to novelist Philip Roth, who wrote alarmingly about the disintegrating world of today. The piece could hardly be more expressive in its individual, present-day style. And that is exactly what makes John Adams so unique.

Ralph van Raat

Ralph van Raat



Photograph by
Marco Borggreve

Pianist and musicologist Ralph van Raat studied the piano with Ton Hartsuiker and Willem Brons at the Conservatory of Amsterdam and Musicology at the University of Amsterdam. He concluded both studies with distinction in 2002 and 2003. As a part of the Advanced Programme of the Conservatory of Amsterdam, and with the support of a Prince Bernhard Fellowship, Van Raat also studied with Claude Helffer (Paris), Liisa Pohjola (Helsinki), Ursula Oppens at Chicago's Northwestern University and Pierre-Laurent Aimard at the Musikhochschule in Cologne. Ralph van Raat has won a number of prizes, including the Second Prize and Donemus-Prize (for Contemporary Music) of the Princess Christina Competition (1995), the Stipend-Prize Darmstadt during the Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik (1998), First Prize of the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition (1999), the Philip Morris Arts Award (2003), the Elisabeth Everts Prize (2004), a Borletti-Buitoni Fellowship (2005), the VSCD Classical Music Prize (2005) and the Fortis MeesPierson Award from the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam (2006). He appears as a recitalist and as a soloist with orchestras in Europe, the Middle-East, Asia and in the United States, with many of his concerts broadcast or seen on television. He has made several recordings and regularly collaborates with composers, many of whom have dedicated their piano compositions to him. Ralph van Raat has been a Steinway Artist since 2003.

Maarten van Veen



The pianist Maarten van Veen comes from a musical family and started playing the piano at a young age. He studied at the conservatories of Utrecht and Prague and completed his studies in Amsterdam at the Sweelinck Conservatory, where he specialised in the performance of contemporary music. He studied with Alwin Bär, Kyoko Hashimoto, Ton Hartsuiker and György Sebök, and at the Mozart Academy with Oleg Maisenberg, Ivan Klánsky and David Golub. He was a prize-winner at the Orleans Twentieth Century Piano Music Competition in 1996, he and his brother Jeroen van Veen won First Prize in the Murray Dranoff Two Piano Competition (U.S.A., 1995). In 1998 he worked with Robert Craft on Stravinsky's piano repertoire, recording *Les Noces* with him in London. Van Veen has performed throughout Europe and played with major orchestras and conductors. He founded the International Piano Quartet (four pianos) and has played many concerts in the United States and Canada. In The Netherlands Van Veen is a member of the artistic board of the Doelenensemble (Rotterdam) that offers programmes with a panoramic view of the twentieth century. He also became a member of the Hortus Ensemble (Amsterdam) that concentrates on the performance of repertoire from 1850 to 1910 on historical authentic instruments, mainly on Erard grand pianos. In the United States he is Artistic Advisor to the Murray Dranoff Foundation.

Playing
Time:
52:01

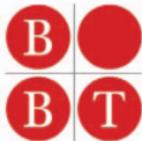
John
ADAMS
(b. 1947)

Complete Piano Music

- 1** Phrygian Gates (1977-78) **24:37**
2 American Berserk (2001) **6:04**
3 China Gates (1977) **5:15**
4 Hallelujah Junction* (1996) **16:05**

Ralph van Raat, Piano

*** with Maarten van Veen, Piano**



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Producer and engineer: Michael Ponder

Booklet notes: Ralph van Raat

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American flag, folk artist, 1880s.



AMERICAN CLASSICS

John Adams' vast and varied output has earned him a wide audience, uncommon among contemporary classical composers. The works on this disc span his entire career to date, and illustrate his many different styles of writing for the piano. *Phrygian Gates* and *China Gates* – “gate” here referring to a type of electronic switch – could be regarded as his first “minimal” works, but are more tonal and expressive than the music of his contemporaries such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass. As a teenager Adams had played clarinet in his father’s marching band, and his *Hallelujah Junction* reflects his love of jazz and popular music. His most recent piano work, *American Berserk*, recalls the fractured boogie-woogie style of Conlon Nancarrow, and has been described by the composer as a “short, manic, bipolar scherzo”.

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