

The Chairman Dances

John Adams (1947–)

Written: 1985

Movements: One

Style: American Minimalist

Duration: Twelve minutes

John Adams is part of the second generation of minimalist composers who strip their compositions down to the barest essentials, often focusing on a single rhythm, melody, or harmony that only gradually changes throughout the duration of a piece. They often use elements of jazz, pop, rock or world music as the basis for their compositions.

He went to Harvard, taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and served as new music adviser and composer-in-residence for the San Francisco Symphony. His creative output spans a wide range: works for orchestra, opera, video, film, and dance, as well as electronic and instrumental music. In his works, Adams takes minimalism into new and fresh terrain characterized by “luminous sonorities and a powerful and dramatic approach to form.” He was the 2019 recipient of the Erasmus Prize “for notable contributions to European culture, society and social science.” He is the only American to receive that prize in its 61-year history.

Adams wrote *The Chairman Dances* (a commission from the Milwaukee Symphony) as a sort of “warm-up” to a much larger work, the opera *Nixon in China*. Originally it was supposed to appear in the final act, when

Madame Mao, firebrand, revolutionary executioner, architect of China’s calamitous Cultural Revolution, and (a fact not universally realized) a former Shanghai movie actress . . . interrupts the tired formalities of a state banquet, disrupts the slow moving protocol, and invites the Chairman, who is present only as a gigantic 40-foot portrait on the wall, to ‘come down, old man, and dance.’

The actual scenario by Peter Sellars and Alice Goodman gives a fuller picture of the scene:

Chiang Ch’ing, a.k.a. Madame Mao, has gatecrashed the Presidential Banquet. She is first seen standing where she is most in the way of the waiters. After a few minutes, she

brings out a box of paper lanterns and hangs them around the hall, then strips down to a cheongsam, skin-tight from neck to ankle and slit up the hip. She signals the orchestra to play and begins dancing by herself. Mao is becoming excited. He steps down from his portrait on the wall, and they begin to foxtrot together. They are back in Yenan, dancing to the gramophone....”

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Concerto for Clarinet in A Major, K. 622
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Written: 1791

Movements: Three

Style: Classical

Duration: 30 minutes

Anton Stadler was one of the most renowned clarinet players in Vienna in the latter part of the eighteenth century. In a review of one of his performances, Gabriel Wilhelm wrote:

I have never heard the like of what you contrived with your instrument. Never should I have thought that a clarinet could be capable of imitating a human voice so deceptively as it was imitated by you.

Otto Jahn, one of Mozart’s first biographers wrote that “[Anton Stadler] was an excellent clarinet-player and a Free-Mason; he was full of jokes and nonsense and [so] contrived to ingratiate himself with Mozart that the latter invited him to his house and composed many things for him.” Mozart’s sister-in-law didn’t have such a favorable impression. She claimed that he was one of those “secret bloodsuckers and worthless people who served only to amuse Wolfgang at the table and relationship with whom damaged his reputation.”

Nevertheless, Mozart and Stadler were friends. They were fellow Masons. In the summer before he died, Mozart brought Stadler with him to Prague for the premiere of his opera *The Clemency of Titus* that includes two soprano arias featuring virtuoso clarinet obbligatos. At Mozart's death, Stadler owed him 500 florins—possibly \$12,000 in today's money. About two months after Mozart wrote his *Titus*, Mozart completed the concerto he was writing for Stadler. It was the last instrumental work that Mozart completed before his death. He wrote it for an instrument that Stadler invented, the basset clarinet—a clarinet with an extended lower range. (Stadler also played the basset *horn*, but that is a different beast: a type of alto clarinet with an extended lower range.)

The first movement is joyful, but there is also a serene and intimate character to it. Throughout, Mozart exploits the clarinet's warm low register (called the *chalumeau*) and its ability to handle large leaps and sparkling arpeggios. The second movement is a model of simplicity. There are two tender themes that, after a short solo cadenza, get restated at a softer dynamic. Things get even softer at the magical ending. The third movement features a skipping theme that alternates with more serious material. Here, the clarinet displays even more of its range and agility.

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Symphony No. 7 in E Major
Anton Bruckner (1824–1896)

Written: 1881–83

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 65 minutes

“Bruckner! He is my man!” That was Richard Wagner’s assessment. The conductor Hans von Bülow had a different idea of Bruckner’s symphonies. He called them “the anti-musical ravings of a half-wit.”

Anton Bruckner was a deeply religious Roman Catholic from the peasant class in upper Austria. His composition studies relied heavily on the old masters. Beethoven was as "modern" as Bruckner knew, until his encounter with the music of Wagner. Thereafter, Bruckner set out on a course of composition that was so individual in character that it was not until this century that his genius achieved worldwide acclaim. His symphonies are often compared to the great Gothic Cathedrals of Europe. They are massive, blocky, and sturdy. Yet they also contain a stillness of the sort that reflects the spiritual contemplation of this intensely devout man.

Listening to a Bruckner symphony requires a different approach than for other symphonists. Bruckner based each movement of his symphonies on a standard form; but instead of developing to a distinct point of arrival as in other symphonies of the day, it is more static. We are presented with huge blocks of sound, surprising pauses, and long, long ascending sections that abruptly end, followed by long periods of utter quietude.

Bruckner's *Symphony No. 7* was the first of his symphonies to receive unqualified public acclaim. Bruckner's idol Wagner died while he was working on the second movement. “One day I came home and felt very sad,” he wrote. “It is impossible, I thought, that the Master should live much longer. And then the C-sharp minor Adagio came to me.” Many commentators regard

this symphony as Bruckner's encomium to his idol. (The coda of this movement contains an excerpt from Bruckner's own *Te Deum*: "Let me never be confounded.")

The first movement, based on three contrasting themes, begins peacefully and contains some of Bruckner's longest and most beautiful melodies. The second movement is similar to the slow movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in that it is a series of variations on two alternating themes. The third movement is in the style of a delightful Austrian folk dance, the *ländler*, with a slower, gentler trio section. The final movement is a rondo. It gives us great tidal waves of sound ending in grand jubilation.

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