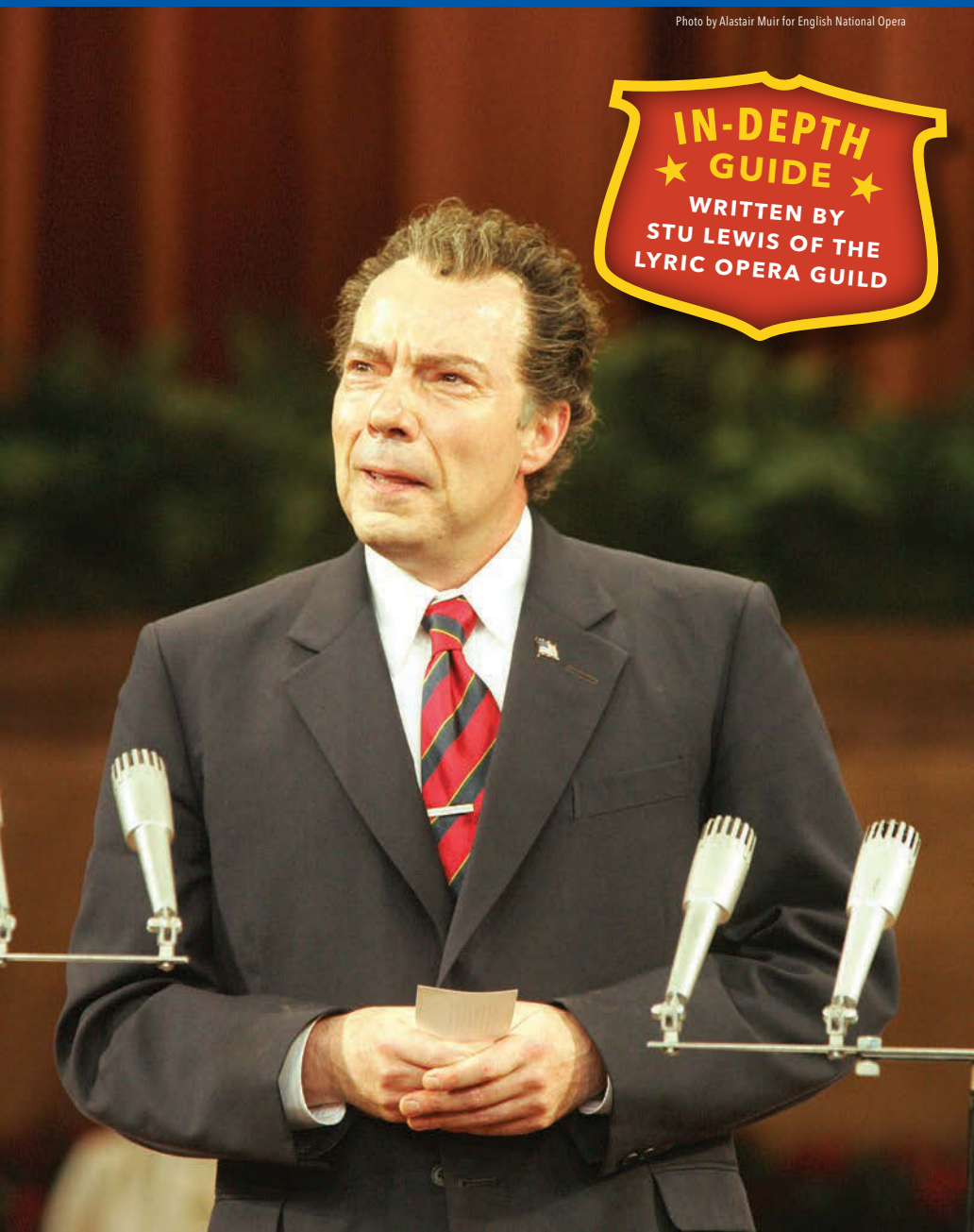
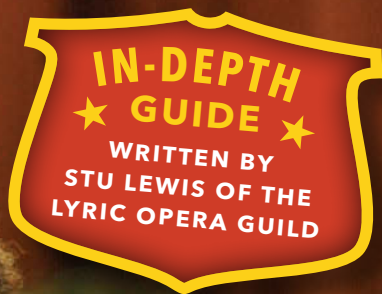


NIXON IN CHINA

By John Adams

Photo by Alastair Muir for English National Opera



INTRODUCTION: THE WEEK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

This past October, readers of the *The Kansas City Star* might have felt a sense of *déjà vu* when they saw the headline, “Nixon to visit China.” This was not some *Twilight Zone* style time-warp, but a rather routine article about a trade mission headed up by Missouri governor Jay Nixon. The fact that this story was on the inner pages of the newspaper is an indication of how commonplace such visits are. Just as today’s college students have no personal recollection of the Soviet Union, many young people might be surprised to learn how isolated from the Western World China was prior to the 1970’s and what a bold diplomatic move it was for a U. S. president to visit that country in 1972.

In the decades following World War II, mistrust and hatred of Communism ran deep in this country, and any leader who suggested reconciliation with any Communist nation ran the risk of accusations that he was “soft on Communism.” Perhaps only a man such as Richard Nixon, whose anti-Communist credentials were well established, could dare suggest that rapprochement with China – whose government we had refused to recognize for more than two decades – was in our best interest.

As early as 1967 – before he became president – Nixon had written about America’s need to stop ignoring China. He was not a wide-eyed idealist, however. He and his advisors saw China as an emerging world power, and they feared that an alliance of the two strongest Communist nations – China and the Soviet Union – would endanger the United States’ position as a global power. Friendship with China could drive a wedge between them and the Soviets. China, for its part, was beginning to realize that its historic isolationism was no longer viable in the late Twentieth Century. Thus began a long series of delicate negotiations, culminating with Nixon’s week-long visit in February of 1972.

While the opera *Nixon in China* focuses on the symbolic nature of the visit, substantive negotiations were going on behind the scenes. The status of Taiwan and America’s role in Vietnam were among the key concerns addressed by the diplomats when they were off camera.



Photo by Tim Matheson for Vancouver Opera

While Nixon's approval rating went up after the visit, he was not universally praised, especially by American conservatives. Rosemary Woods considered the visit a sellout, and columnist William F. Buckley – perhaps the most articulate voice for political conservatism – said that it was as if the Nuremberg judges had embraced the Nazi war criminals they were judging. Ronald Reagan took a more practical approach in a letter to a friend: “Personally, I think the Red Chinese are a bunch of murdering bums. I think the President probably believes the same; but in the big chess game going on, where Russia is still head man on the other side, we need a little elbow room.”

Less than four months later, security guard Frank Wills, while patrolling the Watergate building in Washington, DC, found a piece of tape covering the lock on the door of the Democratic Party office, and the discovery of Nixon's misguided attempt to cover up his aides' involvement in the break-in would lead him to become the first American president to resign from office. None of this is foreshadowed in the opera. Rather, the composer and librettist have chosen to celebrate – to borrow a phrase more commonly associated with another president – the “one brief shining moment” when a group of world leaders took a giant step toward world peace.

CHARACTERS

Richard Nixon (Baritone) – President of the United States

Patricia Nixon (Soprano) – his wife

Henry Kissinger (Baritone) – U. S. National Security advisor

Chou En-Lai (Baritone) – Chinese Premier

Mao Tse-Tung (Tenor) – Chairman of Chinese Communist Party

Chiang Ch'ing (Soprano) – Mao's wife

Secretaries to Mao Tse-Tung (Soprano, two Mezzo-Sopranos)

Chorus of Chinese people, and diplomats from both countries

THE STORY

ACT I - Scene I: Morning, February 21, 1972. The Peking (Beijing) airport

There is no overture per se. The curtain opens on a contingent of Chinese people waiting for the president's airplane to arrive. A series of several ascending Aeolian modes (natural minor scales) is repeated over and over, with varying accompaniment. Comparisons with the extended variations on a single chord which open Wagner's *Ring* cycle are inevitable and probably intended by the composer. Quietly, the chorus begins to chant excerpts from Mao Tse-Tung's writings, focusing on one particular phrase – "The people are the heroes now/Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow."

The Spirit of '76 pulls up to the gate. Horn fanfares in the orchestra heighten the sense of anticipation. As if to emphasize the significance of the moment, Adams' music seems to echo Wagner's *Ring*. The airplane's door opens, and President Nixon appears and walks down the steps, followed by his wife, Patricia, and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. (Kissinger had not yet been appointed Secretary of State. At the time of this trip Nixon did not trust the State Department and kept its representatives in the background). He extends his hand to Chou En-Lai, and the two engage in a historic handshake – an important symbolic gesture, in that the latter still recalled a confrontation in 1954 when U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had refused to shake his hand. Chou asks Nixon if he had a good flight, and the president replies in the affirmative, though the wavering music of his response suggests otherwise.

Following a few pleasantries, Nixon launches into his aria "News has a kind of mystery," in which he envisions the people back home watching him on television in prime time. Throughout the aria, he is introduced to a number of Chinese officials, but as indicated in his words, his thoughts are elsewhere. Opera scholar David Schwartz has noted that here, as well as in several other places in the opera, the characters tend to talk past one another: "This is language failing at the most elementary level and it pervades the libretto of the opera." He compares this technique to that used for comic effect by writers such as Chekhov and Beckett.

As Nixon continues the aria, the scene dissolves into his arrival at his hotel. Suddenly, the mood of the aria changes, and he begins to sing of rats devouring the sheets, apparently a poetic representation of the paranoid feelings of betrayal which we now know were part of his personality. He is interrupted by Kissinger, who tells him it is time to meet with Chairman Mao.

ACT I - Scene II: Shortly afterwards. Chairman Mao's study

Chairman Mao, seated in a large cushioned chair, greets Chou, Nixon, and Kissinger. The Chairman is accompanied by three young female secretaries. In fact, during his public appearances he was generally surrounded by an entourage of pretty young women. The choice of three seems to be an analogy to the Queen of the Night's three ladies in waiting in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (as well as the three attendants in Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*). They add a comic touch to the scene, echoing several of Mao's statements in unison while performing ritualistic gestures, also in unison. The composer has compared them to a back-up group such as one would find in American pop music.

Much of the dialogue in this scene is a poetic depiction of the conversations that actually took place among the three. (Throughout the opera, all of the principals sing in English, without the aid of interpreters). The Americans' praise of Mao's writings, Mao's reciprocal praise of Nixon's *Six Crises*, and Mao's statement that he prefers dealing with candidates "on the right" were all part of the historical record.

Following some pleasantries, Nixon attempts to turn the conversation to substantive issues, but Mao tells him to leave those for later – his concern is philosophy. In fact, this meeting was largely a symbolic photo-op. Moreover, Chairman Mao was seriously ill at the time, and may have been losing some of his mental faculties. As the conversation becomes more theoretical and allegorical, audience members may find it hard to follow. Even Kissinger admits at one point, "I am lost." Nevertheless, as the summit meeting nears its conclusion, Nixon makes an eloquent plea that the parties take advantage of the opportunity to advance world peace.

ACT I - Scene III: That evening. The Great Hall of the People

Following some small talk between the Nixons, we see a large banquet given by the Chinese in honor of their American guests. This is the first time we become aware of the large contingent of diplomats and journalists who accompanied the Nixons and Kissinger on the trip. Chou and Nixon give prolonged toasts (Nixon is acutely aware of how his words are being heard back home), and Mrs. Nixon reminds them to toast George Washington, whose birthday will be celebrated the next day. The chorus joins enthusiastically in the toast with music that many spectators will find to be the musical highlight of the entire opera.

ACT II - Scene I: The next day. Various locations in and around Peking

While the world leaders worked behind the scenes, Mrs. Nixon was taken on a public-relations tour of the area. The following scene changes occur onstage without interruption, with the rapid pace providing comic effect.

The curtain opens on Mrs. Nixon enjoying a private reverie about her simple sense of optimism: “I treat each day like Christmas.” She is soon greeted by her Chinese escorts, who first take her to a factory, where she is given a replica of an elephant, which, she notes, is the symbol of the Republican Party. She asks if it is one of a kind and is told they can make hundreds every day – a line which seems more ironic in our own time, when such elephants crowd the shelves at Wal-Mart, than it did at the opera’s 1987 premiere. She is subsequently whisked away to a clinic, a pig farm (where she scratches the pig’s ear for the sake of the photographers), and a school, where she tells the students that she was a teacher once herself. The affection of the children clearly has an impact on her, and she pauses to reflect on her own apolitical, “every man under his vine and fig tree” vision of world peace, which she expresses in her aria “This is prophetic.” Though much of the librettist’s imagery is difficult to follow, the overall impression is one of people living simply, in tranquility.

The final stop on the tour is the Ming Dynasty tombs, where she is thrilled to see another sculpture of an elephant, but her escorts remind her of the harsh labor conditions suffered by those who crafted it. She is escorted off stage as the curtain falls.

ACT II - Scene II: *That evening. A performance venue*

On their second evening in China, the Americans were “treated” to a performance of Madame Mao’s ballet “The Detachment of Red Women,” a propaganda piece which was a product of the Cultural Revolution, a radical campaign to rid Chinese culture of all Western influence with a stifling effect on the development of the arts and creative thought throughout China. This ballet was actually one of only eight which the government approved for performance. Such are the facts, but whereas much of the action of the opera to this point was based on photographic realism, this scene becomes increasingly surreal as the action progresses.

The plot of the ballet depicts a young woman who is sexually exploited and tortured by her landlord, only to be rescued by a brigade of female Red Army soldiers, whereupon she joins the revolution. The first surreal touch is that the landlord’s factotum, who exploits and tortures the heroine, bears a strong resemblance to Henry Kissinger. In fact, he is played by the same person, and in case we miss the connection, Mrs. Nixon makes note of the resemblance. He is the only character in the ballet whose voice is heard. The rest of the narrative is provided by the chorus.

The ballet itself contains some of Adams’ most beautiful music. Some passages, in fact, may remind the listener of the great ballet scores of Tchaikovsky or Prokofiev, a romanticism which represents a departure from the composer’s usual, minimalist style.

The scene grows progressively more bizarre. Pat Nixon becomes so caught up in the action that she tries to intervene on behalf of the young woman, and her husband has to remind her that it is only a play. Eventually, however, he also gets involved in the action and rushes to the aid of the young woman after she has been beaten senseless. Though the theater appears to be indoors, the Nixons get soaked in an on-stage rainstorm. There is some confusion about cues, leading Chiang Ch’ing to run onto the stage shouting hysterically “I am the wife of Chairman Mao.” Holding up a little red book (Mao’s sayings), she declares that she does everything according to the book. General chaos ensues as the act ends.

ACT III - *Five days later. The bedrooms of the principal characters*

By the end of the week, reporters noted that a feeling of fatigue had set in among the participants, and this is reflected in the final scene. A row of beds is seen on stage, representing the bedrooms of the various characters. In real life, Mao and his wife were no longer living together, but apparently the writers wished to provide a sense of symmetry between them and the Nixons. The composer has said, “I think of the opera over the course of three acts...as a movement from extreme outer-directed, extroverted, public persona activity toward a more inward, reflective state.” He added, “In the final act, the focus of both text and music is their vulnerability, their desperate desire to roll back time to when life was simpler and feelings less compromised.” Critic Matthew Davies has commented that, “The final act focuses on what the characters have in common – their shared humanity....The characters’ conflicts are not resolved in any way, but are merely brought out into the open.”

Six beds are seen on stage, indicating that most of the action will take place in the privacy of the characters’ bedrooms, though there is also some interaction among the characters. For portions of the scene, the ballet dancers from the second act also make their appearance, giving a dream-like feel to the entire act. The dialogues of the various characters often overlap, creating an ensemble from the various separate dialogues and monologues.

The act opens with Nixon and Kissinger discussing some unfavorable press notices the trip has received. Kissinger, who through much of the opera has been treated as a comic character, asks for directions to the bathroom and is not heard from again.

The remainder of the dialogue consists primarily of the reminiscences of the various characters. The two married couples speak nostalgically of their early struggles. Mao and Chiang Ch’ing remember their early days and the Great March which led to Communist control of China. The Nixons speak about the early days of their marriage and of the pain of separation during World War II, though Nixon is also nostalgic about his poker playing and his entrepreneurship in running a hamburger stand for the soldiers. There is a tenderness to the dialogue, showing us a side of the president that the public rarely saw in real life.



In contrast to the others, Chou En-Lai is philosophical and melancholy. His solo aria concludes the opera. He asks “How much of what we did was good? Everything seems to move beyond our remedy.” He utters the concluding lines: “To work! Outside this room the chill of grace lies heavy on the morning grass.” The orchestra grows increasingly quiet, and the opera concludes with an ascending phrase from a solo violin.

THE CREATIVE TEAM

Composer John C. Adams was born in Worcester, MA February 14, 1957. Like most successful composers, he took up composition at a young age (age 10). He continued his musical education at Harvard University, where he studied with such notable composers as David del Tredici and Roger Sessions, among others. Finding the Northeast composition scene too rigid, he moved to San Francisco in the early 1970's, where he taught at the San Francisco Conservatory and served as composer in residence for the San Francisco Symphony. It was there that he composed *Harmonium*, a work for voice and orchestra, his first vocal composition.

In 1983 he was approached by director Peter Sellars, who asked him to compose the music for an opera he had envisioned, *Nixon in China*. Though Adams had never written an opera before, Sellars was sufficiently impressed with *Harmonium* to believe that Adams would be up to the task. At first, Adams was skeptical about the project: "I thought it would be ridiculous for Nixon to sing." However, after further discussion with Sellars, he became convinced that the concept could work. After securing the services of poet Alice Goodman, a classmate of Sellars, they began working on the opera, which had its premiere at the Houston Grand Opera in 1987. Since then, it has become one of the most popular operas of the past twenty-five years, finally reaching the New York Metropolitan last year, and it was featured in one of the Met's live HD theater transmissions.

The three then collaborated on a second opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), based on a terrorist incident on a cruise ship during which a paraplegic passenger was thrown overboard to his death. This opera has been less successful than Adams' other works, perhaps because many people found the subject matter too sensitive.

During the next decade Adams devoted himself to a great variety of conducting assignments and the composition of non-operatic works. In 2005 he again collaborated with Sellars, who wrote the libretto, on another opera, *Dr. Atomic*, which depicts the detonation of the first atomic bomb. The following year he composed *The Flowering Tree*, departing from his usual practice of basing operas on recent history, choosing instead an ancient Indian folk tale for his subject.

Adams has won numerous awards for his compositions, most notably a Pulitzer Prize for *On the Transmigration of Souls*, a work commemorating the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He currently lives with his wife in Berkeley, CA.

Music critic Anne Midgette has written, “One reason John Adams has been so successful as an opera composer...is that he works in close collaboration with an experienced man of the theater: Peter Sellars.” Sellars was born in Pittsburgh, PA September 27, 1957. Like his collaborators, he attended Harvard. He became famous (or notorious) for his unusual settings of classical works, such as a production of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle using puppets and *Anthony and Cleopatra* in a swimming pool. Subsequently, he staged Handel’s *Orlando* (at the American Repertory Theater) in outer space.

He has served as artistic director of the American National Theater and various theater festivals. Among his best-known projects were his versions of the three Mozart-DaPonte operas, set in contemporary America. The three controversial productions were subsequently telecast on PBS. He currently teaches at UCLA.

Alice Goodman was born in St. Paul, MN in 1958. While at Harvard, she won a number of prizes for her poetry, subsequently earning a scholarship to study at Cambridge University in England. While she was there, she was approached by Peter Sellars to write the libretto for *Nixon in China*, a task which she accepted initially because she needed the money. She subsequently wrote the libretto for *The Death of Klinghoffer*. This appears to be the extent of her involvement in the music world. Raised Jewish, she subsequently converted to Christianity and is currently an Anglican priest serving in England.

THE STYLE

Nixon in China is a challenging work in both its libretto and its music. Both Goodman and Adams write in a style that may be unfamiliar to most opera audiences.

Whereas most opera librettists have come from a theater background, and many have specialized in opera, Alice Goodman initially made her reputation as a poet, and *Nixon in China* was her first work for the stage. Like much modern poetry, her writing is often non-literal and hard to understand on first hearing. Much of her imagery appears to be private, defying explication.

Virtually the entire opera is written in rhymed couplets, but rather than using “perfect rhyme” she prefers instead to use “imperfect” rhyme, sometimes called “consonant rhyme.” The term “imperfect” may have the wrong connotations, since such rhyme is in some ways more subtle than exact rhyme. In perfect rhyme, *June* rhymes with *moon*. In imperfect rhyme, *June* can rhyme with *mane* or *mean*. Most operas, as well as Broadway and popular music, are written in exact rhyme, so many listeners will not really notice Ms. Goodman’s rhymes without reading them on the page (or on the screen during a performance). The following excerpt from Pat Nixon’s second-act aria illustrate this subtle rhyme scheme, where *dream* rhymes with *resume* and *fruit* rhymes with *regret*:

On that bench
There we’ll relax and taste the fruit
Of all our actions. Why regret
Life which is so much like a dream?
Let the eternal plan resume:
In the bedroom communities
Let us be taken by surprise.

John Adams has generally been associated with the minimalist style of composition, though he is not a doctrinaire follower of that “school”. He has described himself as a “minimalist bored with minimalism.” According to *Grove Music Online*, Minimalism is “characterized by an intentionally simplified rhythmic, melodic and harmonic vocabulary;” and is



distinguished from Modernism – “It is tonal or modal where Modernism is atonal, rhythmically regular and continuous where Modernism is aperiodic and fragmented structurally and texturally simple where Modernism is complex.”

While Adams was to some extent influenced by the leading proponent of minimalism, Phillip Glass, he has stated, “My basic problem with Phillip’s music is that there is never more than one thing going on at a time.” In fact, he has stated that his music is greatly influenced by jazz, especially Duke Ellington. Both of his parents were amateur jazz musicians. He also credits rock music with inspiring his use of pulsating rhythms – “I was interested in an *American* musical language” – and he has been praised for the way in which his music “is so attuned to the cadences of American speech.”

Unlike Puccini, who sought out Chinese music to lend an air of authenticity to *Turandot*, Adams has said, “At no point in this opera did I want to write fake Chinese music; the music is inexorably American, no matter who is singing.”

One way in which this opera differs from many modern operas is in the use of set pieces. There are several solo arias, an extended ballet sequence, and recognizable ensembles. On the other hand, like most modern opera composers, Adams does not write melodies that people will want to whistle as they leave the theater. Rather, the goal is to present an overall dramatic effect that will leave the audience with more lasting memories.

MAN VS MYTH

Historical characters have often been depicted in opera, but *Nixon in China* is unusual, though not unique, in that most of the principal characters were alive when the opera first appeared, and moreover a number of the events had literally been witnessed by members of its audience via satellite television. Few opera-goers are bothered by the idealized portrayal of Julius Caesar in Handel's opera or by the way in which history is distorted in Donizetti's explorations of British history in the "three queen" operas. In *The Ballad of Baby Doe* William Jennings Bryan makes a campaign stop in Leadville and gives a dramatic speech. It never happened, but who would wish to be without his powerful aria for the sake of historical correctness? However, when we are dealing with people so fresh in the memory of the audience (even more so 24 years ago), controversy is almost inevitable.

In the words of opera writer Ray Sawhill, "What was most startling for the culture-class was the rounded, even sympathetic portrayal of Richard Nixon... Here was something unfamiliar – a Richard Nixon capable of tenderness and dreams." Even today, the legacy of president Nixon continues to be a source of controversy. During Nixon's presidency, his enemies literally demonized him. Novelist Philip Roth even wrote a satire in which a president named "Trick E. Dixon" dies, goes to Hell, and challenges Satan for the leadership of the Underworld. Perhaps forty years after the events of this opera we can achieve a more balanced view of the man who may have been one of the most psychologically complex men ever to have occupied the White House. Besides this opera, one might also cite the recent Broadway play (and film adaptation) *Frost/Nixon*, which presented Nixon as vulnerable and gracious in defeat.

Strangely enough, less attention was paid to the portrayal of the Chinese leaders. However, at the time of the Metropolitan Opera premiere last year, Max Frankel, a reporter who covered the actual trip, wrote, "I... insist that to a billion contemporary Chinese, Mao Tse-tung has a lot more to answer for than the merry chaos and inscrutable epigrams this opera uses to recall his reckless ardors." After all, both Mao and Chou were ruthless leaders, responsible for the death of millions. Frankel is also offended by the caricature of the "fascinating and complicated" Henry

Kissinger whom he knew personally. Only the shrill Chiang Ch'ing seems true to character: “her artful shrieks clear up to high D actually do some justice to her vicious real-life domination of the Cultural Revolution.”

Adams would be the first to admit that the purpose of the opera was not to present historical characters as they really were: “My Nixon is not the historical Richard Nixon, he is every President...It’s a particularly American figure we’ve developed. If you take that as a given and try to forget the Nixon of [the] Checkers [speech] and Watergate, I think it immediately becomes a more interesting opera. My Nixon has as much relationship to the real Nixon as Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar does to the Roman Emperor.” Opera, he states, “has to function on a mythic level... For me as an American today the myths aren’t King Lear or Odysseus but historical figures and events, cultural focal points often blown up by the media into a mythological dimension, in the way that Andromache meant something very specific to the Greeks.” Librettist Alice Goodman when she agreed to join the creative team insisted, “It had to be a heroic opera. I would not write a satire.” Adams adds, “We tried to make each character speak as eloquently as he or she could.” “What attracted me to this story,” he explained, “was its rich overtones of the American experience, especially in our confused way of relating to the outside world.” He referred to Nixon as “the presidential Everyman.” Mao, on the other hand, had made a myth out of himself.

The very title of the opera, suggested by Sellars, hints at the mythic confrontation between cultures. Some critics have pointed out the parallels to title of mythology-based operas such as *Iphégenie en Tauride* or *Ariadne auf Naxos*, both describing the adventures of people displaced from their homeland, but perhaps two Rossini titles – *Il Turco in Italia* and *L’Italiana in Algeri* (*A Turk in Italy* and *An Italian Girl in Algiers*) – are more to the point, suggesting a major culture clash in which the title characters are completely out of their element.

Perhaps the goal of the entire creative team was best summed up by Sellars: “The odd thing is, it takes poetry, music, and dance to give back to our own history its actual dimensionality. What opera can do to history is deepen it and move into its more subtle, nuanced, and mysterious corners.”

OPERA AND HISTORY

Nixon in China not only attracted interest in its own right; it also became a trend-setter for a genre of opera known as “CNN Operas,” with librettos based on news events still fresh in the minds of the audience. Among the better known were *The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (Anthony and Thulani Davis), *Harvey Milk* (Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie), *Tania* (John LaChiusa, about Patti Hearst), *Anna Nicole* (Mark-Anthony Turnage), and *Dead Man Walking* (Jake Heggie and Terrance McNally). We have previously mentioned two of John Adams’ other operas, *Dr. Atomic* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*. Performances of the latter have been picketed by protesters who objected to Ms. Goodman’s “even-handed” approach to the conflicting parties, feeling that she showed too much sympathy for the terrorists who killed a paraplegic unarmed passenger. While some have complained of “religious zealotry,” it might be fairer to say that many people have been too deeply affected by terrorist attacks. One might compare it to an opera portraying the 9/11 hijackers as martyrs.

While the earliest operas were based on Classical mythology, once it escaped that narrow strait-jacket composers and librettists sought out historical subjects. Among the best known are Donizetti’s Three Queens operas (*Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux*), Mussourgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, and Giordano’s *Andrea Chenier*, about the reign of terror following the French Revolution. Many American operas have explored our own history. Virgil Thompson’s *Mother of us All* (Susan B. Anthony), Douglas Moore’s *Ballad of Baby Doe* (Horace and Baby Doe Tabor) and *Carry Nation*, and Kirke Mechem’s *John Brown*, which had its World Premiere at the Lyric Opera in 2008, are but a few examples.

Where the CNN operas differ from their predecessors, however, is their use of contemporary subjects. Giuseppe Verdi had a great interest in history and politics, but the censors with whom he grappled throughout his career would not have allowed him to approach anything close to recent history. *A Masked Ball* was supposed to be about the assassination of a Swedish king, but he had to move the action to Colonial Boston before it could be performed. *Nabucco*, set in Biblical times, may have been an allegory for Italian independence, but it was indirect enough to get past the censors. (Later, he was to reach back several centuries in Italian history to write *Simon Boccanegra* as a call for Italian unification.)

It seems that the Broadway theater has been more willing to depict living or recent historical figures, though given the nature of the medium, many such plays have been about show-business people. Among the best known are *Gypsy* (burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee), *Minnie's Boys* (the Marx Brothers), *Funny Girl* (Fanny Brice), *Mack and Mabel* (film director Mack Sennett), and *The Sound of Music* (Von Trapp Family singers). However, other historical events and people have inspired major musicals. Among them are *Evita*, *Titanic*, and *Parade* (the Leo Frank trial). Sometimes historical characters interact with fictional ones, such as FDR's cameo appearance in *Annie* or, more seriously, labor activist Emma Goldman's speech in *Ragtime*. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's battles against the corruption of New York's political machine were still fresh in the memory of many audience members when Harnick and Bock's *Fiorello* opened in the 1950's. Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* appeared shortly after the conclusion of the Second World War, bringing home the pain of the war in depicting the death of one of the romantic leads, a rare occurrence in the Broadway musicals of that day. (Years later, *Miss Saigon* brought back memories of the Vietnam War, and included a song protesting the fate of the out-of-wedlock children fathered by American G.I.'s.)

For Sellars, the significance of *Nixon in China* and the progeny it inspired is that "Opera became about something, about figures that our generation could recognize and deal with... That for me revived what Mozart, Verdi and Mussorgsky were working on."

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