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John Adams's *Gnarly Buttons*: Issues of History, Performance, and Style

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by

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Abstract

John Adams's clarinet concerto *Gnarly Buttons*, now more than ten years old, fuses post-minimalism, post-Stravinsky techniques, and American vernacular idioms, holding a unique place in the clarinet repertoire and serving as an important marker in Adams's evolution of compositional style that began in the 1990s. The stylistic point of departure is his 1991 opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Gnarly Buttons* is among the pieces that continues to develop the textural and melodic innovations that *Klinghoffer* started. Thus, full comprehension of the style and aesthetic of *Gnarly Buttons* depends on an understanding of the stylistic traits established by Adams's compositions from the 1980s combined with an examination of innovations in the 1990s.

This document offers an account of the history of the work, centered on information of those interviewed for this project, including John Adams, Michael Collins, Paul Meecham and William Helmers. The performance guide that follows also incorporates information from recent performances, especially from the January 2007 performance with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, John Adams conducting, and Derek Bermel as soloist. The last section of the document offers analysis, tracing Adams's style from *Nixon in China*, through *The Death of Klinghoffer,* and finally to *Gnarly Buttons*, showing how the concerto both incorporates and builds on Adams's own compositional past.

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Chapter 1. Introduction: *Gnarly Buttons* in Context

Adams and the First-Generation Minimalists

While John Adams's diatonic, rhythmically energized minimalist techniques seem to have helped with the popularity and accessibility of his music, early minimalist composers generally fell outside of the classical musical establishment. Philip Glass realized early in his career that he would have to perform his own music, because other musicians often became angry about the simple, repetitive structures he asked them to play.[1] When Steve Reich left California and returned to New York in September 1965 he found few in the music establishment who shared much in common with his interests. Instead of finding sympathetic performing musicians, Reich found like-minded experimental composers and visual artists. For early minimalism, the "picture saying a thousand words" is an iconic photograph of him and minimalist visual artists Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman, with composers James Tenney and Michael Snow, performing Reich's *Pendulum Music* in 1969.[2] Concerts of the Philip Glass Ensemble, known for its electrified keyboards and small ensemble played at a loud volume level, attracted some buttoned-down classical music lovers, but perhaps more long-haired rock-and-rollers.

Within academia, minimal music was often viewed as superficial, not worthy of analysis. Not only were the diatonic tendencies of minimalism a rejection of the prevailing trend in composition taught in colleges and universities at the time, but composers, like minimalist visual art-

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[1]Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, *Soundpieces: Interviews With American Composers* (New Jersey and London: Scarecrow Press, 1982): 213.

[2]Steve Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," from *Writings About Music* (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 12–3.

ists, sought a musical style that candidly displayed a piece's structure. Some theorists and composers were dismissive of the music because it provided nothing to analyze, no "inner secret" to discover. While some methodology for the analysis of minimal music has since developed, much musical analysis falls within the category of *formalism*, which seeks a deeper truth or unity in a piece that is likely not clearly visible in the foreground.[3]

Also coming of age in the 1980s was San Francisco-based composer John Adams, who had a similar attitude about the post-Schoenbergian style of composition then encouraged in academia. In 1974, the experience of hearing a performance of Reich's *Drumming* impelled him toward his own use of minimal techniques. However, he began his own foray into minimalism after the experimental period of minimal music had passed. Adams developed his brand of post-minimalism not as a maverick testing uncharted territory, but as a known musician working within the musical establishment, first with musicians willing to experiment while teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory (1972–82), then as resident composer for the San Francisco Symphony (1982–85). Since then he has regularly worked as composer and conductor with many of the world's top chamber music, orchestral, and operatic organizations. In numerous interviews he has openly acknowledged his debts to other composers and has identified Reich, Stravinsky, and Beethoven as among his strongest influences.

[3] Catherine Ann Pellegrino, *Formalist Analysis in the Context of Postmodern Aesthetics: John Adams's Music as a Case Study,* (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999), 1.

Discovery of Adams's Stylistic Evolution through *Gnarly Buttons*

While Adams has spoken repeatedly of his admiration for Stravinsky, the number of direct parallels of compositional technique between the two may come as a surprise. His music of the 1980s seems most closely aligned with minimalism, and his music of the 1990s seem to move away from those influences. The texture of Adams's music of the 1980s, with its emphasis on diatonicism, pulsation, and chords, gives way to a richer, more layered palette of melodic lines and harmonies in the 1990s. This evolution can also be seen as Adams's personal exploration of various compositional techniques of Stravinsky. A gross oversimplification would be to characterize Adams's music of the 1980s as connecting to Stravinsky's pre-*Rite of Spring* ballets, and his music of the 1990s to Stravinsky's neoclassic works.

In 1996, the year that *Gnarly Buttons* was composed, Adams's best-known works were likely *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, *Grand Pianola Music,* and *Nixon in China.* For those familiar with these works, first exposure to *Gnarly Buttons* might be exciting and interesting but also bewildering, because upon first listening the piece seems to share few similarities in style to those earlier works. The first movement, austere in character and processual in construction, is far from the chordal pulsation and diatonicism of his most popular early works. Particularly novel and compelling is the lyrical, song-like style of the third movement, with its gentle, pulsing chords in the middle register and unique harmonic style.

The third movement of *Gnarly Buttons* has been overtly described by Adams as one member of an ongoing compositional experiment. He identifies three pieces as a continuum in his program notes for the large symphonic work *Naive and Sentimental Music,* completed in 1998. The first movement of the symphony, he explains, is the extension of ideas developed first

in the “Chorus of Exiled Palestinians,” the opening chorus of *The Death of Klinghoffer,* from 1991, and continued in the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons,* “Put Your Loving Arms Around Me,” finished in 1996.[4] The score to *Naive and Sentimental Music* was not published until 2006. A detailed examination of the connections between those three movements remains a worthy topic of later research, but is not necessary for the understanding of *Gnarly Buttons*. This research shows how innovations in *The Death of Klinghoffer* expanded on Adams's techniques from works in the 1980s, using *Nixon in China* as one point of comparison, and how *Gnarly Buttons* continues to expand on those innovations.

Analysis of Adams's Stylistic Evolution

In the area of Adams analysis, this document also ventures into new territory, pushing past the scope of currently available published work. Dissertations by Timothy Johnson and Catherine Pellegrino offer some description of his music of the 1980s, and the findings here add more detail to their research and address some of the major works of the 1990s, focusing on *The Death of Klinghoffer* and *Gnarly Buttons* but covering others as well. The goal was to study other works of Adams in order to understand *Gnarly Buttons*, but the journey before reaching *Gnarly Buttons* proved interesting and valuable enough to warrant inclusion of many findings about other works toward the general purpose of fully understanding his style.

The examination of Adams's compositional evolution is likely at cross-purposes with the composer's own interests. Like many active composers, Adams avoids looking back and analyzing his own music. Throughout his career he has successfully found middleground elusive for

[4]John Adams, liner notes to *Naive and Sentimental Music*, Nonesuch Compact Disc 79636-2, 2002.

many classical composers, where audience approval and compositional integrity meet. He seems focused on what has worked for him, to allow his compositional evolution to continue naturally. "I have never been interested in recreating myself," he explained, also admitting that his career as a conductor does keep him in constant interaction with his own past, but on a certain technical and expressive level rather than a "nuts-and-bolts" compositional one. He spoke of the "almost superstitious" avoidance of looking back at his music, explaining that analyzing his previous successes might diminish his ability to keep evolving as a composer.

Nevertheless, his own assessment of the success of his clarinet concerto *Gnarly Buttons* identifies the same elements that stimulated this research. "I [am] very satisfied by *Gnarly Buttons*, because it is not atonal or … messy, that it has a very clear harmonic sense, and I have always felt that you just can't write great music without a unique harmonic language. And I think that so much of the music of the twentieth century that may have had prestige, but never really caught on in the way that the great masters of the past did, was because there wasn't an interesting harmonic picture, and I am very pleased with the harmonic picture of *Gnarly Buttons*."[5]

My opinion is that Adams does subconsciously build on his past successes and his previous harmonic language. At various points in his career as a composer, certain compositional challenges have pushed him toward an expansion of his compositional style. In this regard the existence of all three concertos in the 1990s—the Violin Concerto, *Gnarly Buttons*, and *Century Rolls*—all owe a debt to *The Death of Klinghoffer.* "And then there was a big change with *The Death of Klinghoffer* and some of that had to do with just the nature of the story, you know, it was a very grim and tragic story, and the diatonic mood of minimalism that worked for *Nixon in*

[5] Ibid.

China couldn't have possibly have worked for *Death of Klinghoffer*. And then from there, I went further afield from those kind of initial impulses of pulsation and regular periodicity and tonality, and I think I probably went the furthest out in the first movement of the Chamber Symphony, and also the first movement of the Violin Concerto, and then I retreated from that."[6]

Adams shifted away from "pulsation" and "tonality," and moved, in part, toward melody. This resulted in a greater flexibility of texture, which also seemed to lead him toward the genre of the concerto.

> I was very slow to come to the concerto form. In fact, even after finishing this work, I'm not entirely I'm comfortable with the form itself. There were several issues that tended to make me shy away from the format; one was the problem of handling the dialogue between the instrument and orchestra, something that stood quite apart from—almost alien to—my normal way of experiencing musical discourse. It certainly would have been unthinkable for me to write a concerto ten years ago, for instance, around the time of *Nixon in China*. But in the intervening ten years my language has become less monolithic and ultimately more melodic. In retrospect, *Klinghoffer* seems to have been the dividing line, the watershed.[7]

On many fronts, *Gnarly Buttons* is a rarity in his output. It is his most overtly autobiographical work, incorporating elements of his musical upbringing in New England. It is one of very few that utilize melodic process as a compositional tool, an appropriate feature since it was Adams's first concerto for a truly "single-note-at-a-time" instrument. The first movement of the clarinet concerto and first movement of the violin concerto both develop a melodic fragment, rarities in his output; most often his music, especially works from the 1980s, feature stratified, layered textures that seem rooted in Stravinsky's. However, closer examination reveals that works com-

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Rebecca Jemian and Anne Marie De Zeeuw, "An Interview with John Adams," *Perspectives in New Music* 34/2 (1996): 89.

posed in the 1990s still align with Stravinsky's output and Adams's own past. Using *Gnarly Buttons* to study the evolution of Adams's style is a fruitful exploration, because it does touch on many themes Adams has spoken about during his career—his interest in Stravinsky and minimalism, but also his own desire to be true to himself while continuing to produce music and growing as a composer.

Gnarly Buttons in Context

At the time of this writing, *Gnarly Buttons* is nearly eleven years old, and even though it is a challenging piece to produce, calling for virtuosic skills from every member of the ensemble, two Kurzweil keyboards, a mandolin/banjo/guitar player, and a clarinetist with outstanding technical skills, the piece seems to have already claimed a secure place in the clarinet repertoire. Reviews of the work have been consistently laudatory.

This paper might as well be titled "*Gnarly Buttons* in Context." It is as much an exploration of one strand of post-minimalism as it is a narrative about the work's commission, performance and recording history, and growing foothold in the repertoire. I was able to speak to several clarinetists close to the work, those who premiered the work and some who have performed the work recently, and will also offer a guide to the work's performance. In addition, I hope that my analysis makes some contribution to ongoing scholarship about Adams's music and post-minimal compositional techniques as well.

Chapter 2. Biography and the Birth of *Gnarly Buttons*

A central symbol of Adams's musical upbringing is the Magnavox record player that his father purchased in the Christmas season of 1957 or 1958.[8] It represents the musical eclecticism of the Adams home: his father was an amateur clarinetist and his mother sang, and its arrival marked the beginning of an explosion of new sounds in the household. Adams describes the event:

> Up to that point there had been no recorded music in our house in New Hampshire. All the music I heard was what my parents performed or what I myself played on the clarinet. But on that critical day at Christmastime my dad brought home the Magnavox—still in the days before stereo—along with a couple of LP records. I remember one was the "Brandenburg" Concertos, and another was a Mozart string quintet, and another was the Mozart clarinet concerto. And then there were some jazz albums. I can't remember what it was—probably Benny Goodman, because both my parents loved that band.[9]

The Eclectic Content of *Gnarly Buttons*

In numerous interviews, Adams speaks of the connection between this upbringing and his post-modern style, which consciously incorporates elements of late Romantic composers, Stravinsky, minimalist composers such as Reich and Glass, and American vernacular styles, among others. These formative years are also a primary source for the extramusical content of his only solo work for clarinet, concerto *Gnarly Buttons*, completed in 1996. Many of his works draw from his experiences and other sources, but few are as autobiographical as *Gnarly Buttons*, composed while mourning his father's death.

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[8]Thomas May, ed., *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, (Pompton Plains, NJ), 3.

[9]Ibid.

Like most of Adams's works, his own description of *Gnarly Buttons* is available on his website, http://www.earbox.com, but also appears in the liner notes with the Nonesuch recording. It provides a good starting point for the building of the work's historical context, better quoted than paraphrased.

> The clarinet was my instrument. I learned it from my father, who played it in small swing bands in New England during the Depression era. He was my first and most important teacher, sitting in the front room with me, patiently counting out rhythms and checking my embouchure and fingering. Benny Goodman was a role model, and several of his recordings—in particular the 1938 Carnegie Hall jazz concert and a Mozart album with the Boston Symphony Orchestra—were played so often in the house that they almost became part of the furniture.
>
> Later, as a teenager, I played in a local marching band with my father, and I also began to perform the other clarinet classics by Brahms, von Weber, Bartók, Stravinsky and Copland. During my high school years I played the instrument alongside him in a small community orchestra that gave concerts before an audience of mental patients at the New Hampshire State Hospital.
>
> But strangely enough, I never composed for the instrument until I was almost fifty. By that time my father had died, and the set of instruments I had played as a boy, a Selmer "A" and "Bb" pair, had traveled back and forth across the country from me to my father (who played them until he fell victim to Alzheimer's disease) and ultimately back to me. During the latter stages of my father's illness, the clarinets became an obsession for him, and this gentle, infinitely patient man grew more and more convinced that someone was intent upon breaking into his New Hampshire house and stealing them. Finally, one day, my mother found the disassembled instruments hidden in a hamper of laundry. It was the end of my father's life with the instrument. The horns were sent to me in California where they grew dusty and stiff, sitting in a closet. But I brought them out again when I began to compose *Gnarly Buttons*, and the intimate history they embodied, stretching from Benny Goodman through Mozart, the marching band, the State Hospital to my father's final illness, became deeply embedded in the piece.
>
> "Gnarly" means knotty, twisted or covered with gnarls…your basic village elder's walking stick. In American school kid parlance it takes on additional connotations of something to be admired: "awesome," "neat," "fresh," etc. etc. The "buttons" are probably lingering in my mind from Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons," but my evoking them here also acknowledges our lives at the end of the 20th century

> as being largely given over to pressing buttons of one sort or another. NB; clarinets have rings and keys, not buttons.
>
> The three movements are each based on a "forgery" or imagined musical model. The idea for this goes back to the imagined "foxtrot" of my 1986 piece, *The Chairman Dances*, music to which Madame and Chairman Mao dance and make love, believing my foxtrot to be the genuine article. In this spirit we may believe the genuine articles of *Gnarly Buttons* to be:
>
> I. "The Perilous Shore": a trope on a Protestant shape-note hymn found in a 19th century volume, *The Footsteps of Jesus*, the first lines of which are:
>
> O Lord steer me from that Perilous Shore
> Ease my soul through tempest's roar.
> Satan's leering help me firmly turn away
> Hurl me singing into that tremulous day!
>
> The melodic line is twisted and embellished from the start, appearing first in monody and eventually providing both micro and macro material for the ensuing musical structures.
>
> II. "Hoedown (Mad Cow)": normally associated with horses, this version of the traditional Western hoedown addresses the fault lines of international commerce from a distinctly American perspective.
>
> III. "Put Your Loving Arms Around Me": a simple song, quiet and tender up front, gnarled and crabbed at the end.[10]

The piece as a whole is a view of the word "gnarly," reflecting its different meanings in the American vernacular. It seems that Adams drew some of his inspiration from the word itself, using its multiple meanings and favored position in the vocabularies of young people at that time. "I think it is one of the pieces that I actually had the title in mind before I wrote the piece. Sometimes I don't know what the title is until I get into the piece but I remember taking a hike up in the Sierra mountains, and the title just came to me. I had heard one of my kids use the term

---

[10]John Adams, liner notes to *Gnarly Buttons, John's Book of Alleged Dances*, compact disc recording, Nonesuch 79465–2, 1998.

'gnarly' and I was very amused by it. I was amused by that fact that it had so many different uses, and so that suggested a certain tone, slightly wry…."[11]

Overview of Each Movement of *Gnarly Buttons*

The first movement offers the most literal representation of the word "gnarly." It is the most austere of the three movements. Neo-processual in nature, the movement's short motives suggest the influence of Beethoven and their transformation implies an interest in later Romantic period composers. The lengthy sections that transform the primary thematic material are flanked by contrasting passages that emphasize American vernacular idioms, suggesting the increased eclecticism brought on by the addition of the record player to the Adams household, and also contain additional musical and biographical references.

The opening melody itself connects equally to the inception of the concerto and to Adams's childhood. For the few years leading up to the time the concerto was composed both Michael Collins, principal clarinetist of the London Sinfonietta, and Paul Meecham, executive director of the London Sinfonietta, had been occasionally needling Adams to compose a clarinet concerto. Meecham remembers the day "out of the blue" that Adams called, announcing that he had begun work on the piece, and Adams explained that it was the opening melody that he had just finished.[12] Adams said that he

> started with the beginning, and somehow I got this crazy idea of it being some kind of folk melody.… And when I hear it, I realized that in a certain sense, and I don't want to get too art historical here, because I don't want to make a big deal of it, but in retrospect, I think it might possibly be, it might have been subcon-

[11]Adams, interview with author.

[12]Ibid.

> sciously suggested by the first of the Stravinsky *Three Pieces* which I used to play as a kid. But you know, it begins down low, and it has grace notes, and mine are not grace notes, but they are 32nd notes, and there is a sort of Russian chant-like quality to the Stravinsky. I think it begins (sings the opening motive), like, what is that, the "Song of the Volga Boatman" or something.[13]

In other words, all of the description from the program notes above, from the mention of a nineteenth century volume to the hymn text itself, is a product of Adams's imagination. It seems clear from the notes that some portion of the story was fabricated, but I wondered if some portion might have a basis in reality, so I asked him if *The Footsteps of Jesus* exists, and he had a good laugh. "No, it doesn't (laughs). Nor does my father know Charles Ives."[14]

He originally scored this opening melody with solo clarinet doubled by the keyboard 1 part, set on an accordion sound. He later removed the doubling: "I did that, and I still have sort of mixed feelings about it because I kind of like the sound. When Michael Collins did it by himself, it was just a weird thing. I think he came to rehearsal and the keyboard player hadn't arrived yet, so we just started … when I heard him do it with such freedom, I thought that was really great, so I decided to take the faux accordion out, and I think I do like it better because it gives more freedom to the clarinet."[15]

Collins agreed with Adams's assessment. He described the difficulty of getting the pitch and rhythmic alignment of the two parts just right, especially crucial as the opening phrases of a piece.

> For the beginning of such a big piece, it ended up being unbelievably complicated to try and make it work, to get the keyboard, because there was a time lag as well, to move exactly in time with me, and for the notes to be exactly in tune, although

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

> the issue wasn't for it to be totally in tune, there could be this slightly, how can I say, rough, not rough, but folky, if you like, element, so it wasn't going to be totally perfect. But in the end, we tried it without, so it was just solo clarinet and when we reached the first pause, fermata, and then it became the first forte passage, we thought we would bring the synthesizer in then, and it seemed to make a big impact, it seemed to make the whole thing much stronger. So that's what happened, so we did the first performances with, and then we just decided where it was, in which performance, but we decided to try it without and then it kind of stuck really, we thought, "yes, this works."[16]

Collins explained that the changes weren't implemented in the first performances or recording, but in a later performance conducted by Adams. A few months later, in May 1997, the composer conducted the North American premiere as well, and William Helmers, the clarinet soloist, also recalled that the accordion part was still in place. The André Trouttet recording on the Virgin Classics compact disc "American Clarinet" dates from November 1998, and also uses the original scoring. However, the full score was published for general distribution by Boosey & Hawkes in 2006 without the accordion part.[17] Recent performances by Derek Bermel in Los Angeles, with Adams conducting, and Sean Osborn in Seattle, with Roger Nelson conducting, are of the revised version, with only solo clarinet in the opening.[18] At some point in those intervening years, Adams had made the decision to remove it.

The second movement, "Mad Cow," provides contrast to the more serious outer movements. One might expect a typical common-practice-period concerto to be arranged in a three

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[16]Michael Collins, interview with author, 29 June 2007, see appendix.

[17]While a complete itemization of the changes Adams made between the first version of the concerto and the published version might seem helpful, most of the changes are incidental. A few wrong notes in the orchestral parts were corrected and some dynamics marks adjusted, assumably to improve balance of some passages. The most significant change to the score is the removal of the keyboard 1 part in the beginning of the first movement.

[18]Bermel's performance took place on 23 January 2007 and Osborn's on 20 May 2006.

movement, fast-slow-fast plan, but the three movements of *Gnarly Buttons* are cast instead in a serious-comic-serious or slurred-articulated-slurred format. Overall the movement combines Stravinsky's neoclassic style reminiscent of *L'histoire du soldat* with vernacular American music such as jazz and bluegrass. Adams composed the concerto during the height of the mad cow disease scare in England and made light of the situation not only with the playful, bluegrass style of the movement, but also by his placement of a sampled cow "moo" in the middle of the movement.

The third movement is more explicitly autobiographical, depicting his father's struggle with Alzheimer's Disease. The first published mention of his father's illness came in the late 1980s. In 1988 Adams completed *The Wound-Dresser,* and Sarah Cahill drew a parallel between the subject matter of that piece, a setting of portions of Walt Whitman's poem about visiting sick and wounded soldiers during the American Civil War, to his father's situation. "While he was working on the piece, Adams's own father was dying of Alzheimer's disease and his mother was devoting her life to caring for him."[19]

Gnarly Buttons was composed in 1996, after his father had died, and the emotional territory of the third movement, "Put Your Loving Arms Around Me," from tenderly songful to extremely agitated, suggests that his father's passing occupied his thoughts during that time. The trajectory of this emotional range is as follows: the movement starts gently, then grows more and restless and distraught, increasing in intensity to the point of aggression—at its climax Adams asks for "short, violent strokes" in the string parts, and the clarinet sustains a *fortissimo* note at

[19]Sarah Cahill, "*Fearful Symmetries* and *The Wound-Dresser*," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, Thomas May, ed. (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2006): 125–6.

nearly at the top of its range—followed by a coda that recalls the opening of the movement, but the original melody sounds forgotten, and the link between melody and harmony established in the opening has also been lost. This passage seems to depict the passing of a soul, or more accurately, the period of "twilight" for a person with Alzheimer's Disease, that while the body is still functioning the mind seems to have lost all memories, all self-awareness, all sense of identity. Sean Osborn, former member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, performed the work in 2006, and interprets the last movement in a similar way: "He depicts the anger and confusion of his father, unable to comprehend what is happening to his brain, and in the coda, when the opening material returns, seems to be about some point late in his father's life when his fear and paranoia have passed but has been replaced with a sort of vacancy. I personally feel that it is the greatest depiction of the passing of a human being, even better than Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration.*"[20]

While the coda of the piece seems symbolic of the last days of his father's life, the wistful duet between the clarinet soloist and cellist at the end of the piece, found in mm. 177–93, also has a secondary meaning for Adams, Collins, and the players of the Sinfonietta. Michael Collins joined both the London Sinfonietta and the Nash Ensemble in 1981, at age eighteen, upon the departure of another prominent British clarinetist, Antony Pay. At the time, Collins was still a student at the Royal Academy of Music. Cellist Christopher van Kampen had been a member of both ensembles since the early 1970s, and served as a mentor to the young musician. Collins explained: "He kind of looked after me, because I was doing all the big concerts for the first time

[20]Sean Osborn, interview with author, 19 December 2006, see appendix.

on very little rehearsal, so he took me under his wing, and when he was dying, I kind of helped him through his illness, so it was all quite a charged time."[21]

Collins is referring to van Kampen's pancreatic cancer, and by the time of *Gnarly Buttons*, van Kampen's condition had become serious. The third movement of the concerto offered an emotionally-charged portrait of Adams's father, and van Kampen's presence on stage with the Sinfonietta also added impact to the event. "He was extremely ill but he decided to play, so I think that really affected the whole group, the whole Sinfonietta, they were all affected, by the music, and how brave he was to sit there and play it, and the whole thing ends with a clarinet and cello duet."[22] When Adams was composing the concerto, he knew of van Kampen's illness: "I was aware of that when I wrote the piece, and I didn't want to make a big deal of it but I did this very quiet little duet for them at the end of the piece. When we came back to record it, probably, I am guessing it was almost a year later in London, Chris played the recording but that was one of the last things he ever did, he was very thin and had lost like, 100 pounds or something. It was very sad and very touching, but I always think of that when I get to that spot."[23] Collins recalled that van Kampen died six weeks after that recording session.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the third movement is also the middle installment of three works that explore a textural and harmonic approach Adams describes as a "strum" texture. In the liner notes to his large symphonic work *Naive and Sentimental Music*, he offers the following description of these three works:

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[21]Collins interview.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Adams, interview with author.

> The first movement is an "essay on melody" and is governed by the "naïve/ sentimental" tune, a melody that begins the music and floats throughout the 20-minute structure like an idée fixe, usually accompanied by the strumming of the guitar and harps. The conceit of an extremely simple diatonic tune that leaves the nest and ventures out into the wide world like a Dickens child has its predecessors in several earlier pieces of mine: the "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" from *The Death of Klinghoffer* and, more recently, the final movement of my clarinet concerto, *Gnarly Buttons*, "Put Your Loving Arms Around Me."[24]

Adams's own description is apt: his musical style in these three movements can be summarized as a diatonic melody with increasingly non-diatonic harmony. This style and its evolution are a central topic of the analysis found in Chapter 5.

The Commission of *Gnarly Buttons*

The idea for the commission began in a Paris elevator in December 1991, with a conversation between clarinetist Michael Collins and London Sinfonietta executive director Paul Meecham. The Sinfonietta was in Paris, presenting a full, Peter Sellars production of *Nixon in China* at the MC93 Bobigny theater in a northeastern suburb of the city. John Adams was conducting the performances, and had been impressed with Collins's playing. "Michael Collins blew John away with his playing. He wrote a very high clarinet part in that opera and Michael Collins nailed it every night, and it was just spectacular playing."[25]

In the middle of the run of performances Meecham and Collins asked Adams to compose a clarinet concerto. Around this time, Adams's collaboration with the Sinfonietta was ongoing: his next important collaboration with the Sinfonietta was conducting the premiere recording of

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[24] John Adams, liner notes to *Naive and Sentimental Music*, compact disc recording, Nonesuch 79636-2, 2002.

[25] Paul Meecham, interview with author, 18 January 2007, see appendix.

his Chamber Symphony, in 1994. Meecham approached Adams soon after about the idea of a clarinet concerto, but the composer was ambivalent about the idea. Meecham recalled that Adams brushed the idea off gently for some time: "I must have brought it up once a year over the next few years … he was a clarinetist himself, so he seemed a natural fit, he understood the instrument very well. [He said] 'I haven't got any ideas,' 'Let me think about it,' but he was non-committal, it was just not something that was 'front of mind,' he had other commissions, big projects."[26]

A few years later, probably in 1995, Adams phoned Meecham unexpectedly, announcing that he had an idea for the clarinet concerto. Adams was already scheduled to conduct the Sinfonietta in October 1996, so it seemed a natural choice to premiere the new work on that concert. In addition to the premiere of *Gnarly Buttons,* the concert was to include performances of Adams's piano and violin work *Road Movies,* as well as several numbers from his musical theater work *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, and also Frank Zappa's *The Perfect Stranger* and Morton Feldman's *Rothko Chapel*.

By then there was already another standing request for a new chamber work from Adams, from Kevin Stalheim, the Artistic Director of Present Music, a contemporary ensemble based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who had expressed his interest to Boosey & Hawkes, Adams's publisher. While Present Music does not shy away from full commissions, at the time Stalheim was happy to be involved in a co-commission. Since the original request had come from Collins and the Sinfonietta, the premiere was to be in London, and Stalheim was amenable to that: "At that time that was a big deal for us to just pay that much money, without a grant or anything like that, so it

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[26] Ibid.

was good news to me not having to pay the full amount, and as far as technically who gets the world premiere, I don't get super serious about that, especially if it is premiered in Europe or somewhere else, because to me to have the American premiere of someone of his [Adams's] stature is a big deal. We looked at it as a real opportunity and privilege to premiere a work by him, and even though it wasn't technically the first time it was performed."[27]

John Adams, Michael Collins, London Sinfonietta: World Premiere Performance and Reviews

Adams's annotation in the published full score indicates a completion date of 2 October 1996, but Collins recalled that he didn't have all the music in hand until even later. "It was quite late in the day. He was still faxing it through to me I think just about a week before the performance."[28] By Meecham's account, Collins and the Sinfonietta still made the most of the opportunity.

> So, here is a brand new concerto that the London Sinfonietta players hadn't had much of a chance to see, but not even the soloist, so it was pulled together in a pretty short time. Now, generally, premiering a new piece, we don't look at it until … don't have the first rehearsals until several days beforehand, but generally we try to, obviously, in most of the cases, you try to get the parts to the musicians way in advance. The London Sinfonietta are incredible sight-readers, and for them it wasn't a real problem, but Michael Collins, it was unbelievable, he really didn't have that much time. I remember the premiere. It was like they'd played it several times; it was really an extraordinary performance.[29]

For Collins, it was also a memorable event.

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[27]Kevin Stalheim, interview by the author, 31 January 2007, see appendix.

[28]Collins interview.

[29]Meecham interview.

> Well, all that I can remember, it was a huge success, and to play it, was a really magnificent experience, because it is such a well-crafted piece for the instrument, which is not surprising, as he played the clarinet, so he knew what he was doing. I just remember the amazing atmosphere it seemed to create in the hall with the audience. They were really almost hanging on every note, and with the players too. I don't know why, it seemed to be, I just remember it being all around, a quite an emotional experience.[30]

The date of the premiere was Saturday 19 October 1996, and Adams described the event as "a long marathon concert that Paul had organized at Queen Elizabeth Hall."[31] Collins remembers little about the overall concert, because he had to learn the concerto so quickly. "I was just locked away really learning it, because it was a live broadcast on the radio as well."[32] These concerts were the second part of a festival called "American Independents," starting with a "foyer programme" by the South Bank Gamelan Players followed by three back-to-back concerts featuring players of the London Sinfonietta.

Neither newspaper reviewers of the long event were thrilled about the programming overall, but both felt positively about *Gnarly Buttons.* Keith Potter, music reviewer for the *Independent*, described it this way: "Among expected delights is a brilliant use of an ensemble consisting of cor anglais and bassoon, a banjo/mandolin/guitar player, trombone, two keyboard players and strings. But *Gnarly Buttons* is much more than a clever 'wheeze': the way the first movement unfolds its expanding single line, for instance, demonstrates a control of timing as

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[30]Collins interview.

[31]Adams interview with author.

[32]Collins interview.

well as texture, of chromatic inflection as well as the drama of more familiar solutions. Masterly."[33]

Philip Hensher, reviewer for *The Daily Telegraph*, also offered a few fitting comments. After a few words of criticism of the style of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and then I Saw the Sky*, he offered praise for the new work: "Adams's new clarinet concerto, however, *Gnarly Buttons*, being premiered here by Michael Collins and conducted by the composer, is a superb piece. It treads a fine line between exploring a small range of material and exasperating the listener; each movement has a terrific cumulative force, and displays an ear for orchestral color which few of his contemporaries can match."[34]

John Adams, William Helmers, Present Music: North American Premiere and Reviews

The first performance of *Gnarly Buttons* in North America was on the campus of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, on Friday 23 May 1997, with the composer conducting and William Helmers as soloist. At that time, Present Music put on about four concerts per year in the college town of Madison, eighty miles west of Milwaukee. This concert took place on the night before the advertised Milwaukee performance in an auditorium in the music building on campus. While the Madison concerts often had much lower attendance than their Milwaukee counterparts, William Helmers, clarinet soloist for these performances, recalled that the Madison pre-

[33]Keith Potter, review of *Gnarly Buttons* in "American Independents," *The Independent* (London), 24 October 1996, 27.

[34]Philip Hensher, review of *Gnarly Buttons* in "Some Most Peculiar Americana," *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 October 1996, 20.

miere attracted a larger audience than usual, including several University of Wisconsin faculty members.[35]

The second performance in the United States, the next night in Milwaukee, felt like the genuine premiere to Helmers and Stalheim. Helmers described the energy at the second concert: “Our Milwaukee concerts are always better attended than in Madison, and we enjoy a large and enthusiastic following. There was an incredible atmosphere at this concert, a sense of electricity. Musicians and audience alike had a feeling of this being special, of history in the making. I had many family members and orchestral colleagues present; this was an unforgettable event for me, and I think for most people in attendance. I would think that John Adams has fond memories of this concert also.… We got such a nice ovation at the end of the performance, we came back and played the second movement as an encore.”[36]

Attendance at the Milwaukee concert was about six hundred. Present Music regularly enjoys healthy attendance, and Stalheim was quick to point out some subtleties of this success. He explained that while composers and world premieres can be a selling point for their concerts, their greatest successes have been popular themes and collaborations. As one example, he explained that instead of just “doing ‘serious music,’ we will have Irish dancers and fiddlers and we will get the audience dancing, or we’ll have a Thanksgiving concert where we will have a bunch of choirs and their parents will come.”[37] Even though Adams was the most high profile composer Present Music had had as a guest, the attendance was fairly close to normal size.

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[35]William Helmers, interview by the author, 31 July 2006, see appendix.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Stalheim interview.

The description of Present Music's audience base and marketing successes explain their willingness to split the commission without seeking the world premiere or any recording rights. It was good enough to get Adams to work with their organization. "It was a real high point artistically for us, up to that point in our history."[38]

Tom Strini reviewed the concert for the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, and his comments suggest that the piece and performance were extremely well received.

> Throughout "Buttons," Adams spices a fairly placid spine of harmony with occasional fierce intrusions of dissonance or even noise, such as the unpitched violin scrapings near the end of the second [sic, first] movement. Those intrusions make for gnarly sound, but the real knots and twists lie in the exceedingly tricky layered, interlocking rhythms. Helmers and the Present Music band were in command, fearless and free amid the gnarls. They didn't play as if they were counting; they played as telling jokes or crying from the heart. It was a great night for Adams, Helmers and Present Music and an audience of 600 loved everything, "Buttons" most of all.[39]

<u>Recordings of *Gnarly Buttons*</u>

To date, three recordings of *Gnarly Buttons* have been produced on major labels, two on compact disc and one on DVD. The London Sinfonietta, Michael Collins and John Adams recorded the piece for Nonesuch in 1997. Paul Griffiths, in his review of the recording that appeared in the New York Times, provides another positive review and some ideas worth further exploration.

> *Gnarly Buttons* is thoroughly enjoyable and at the same time shows its composer continuing to grow. Much of the first movement is a wandering unison line, with the solo clarinet present most of the way, joined in patches by members of the accompanying ensemble on a deliberately disjointed, often countryish array of in-

[38] Ibid.

[39] Tom Strini, "Present Music Artfully Weaves Evening of *Loops* and *Buttons*, " *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel,* 24 May 1997, 12.

> struments: two reeds, trombone, string quartet, banjo (doubling on mandolin and guitar) and two samplers (alternating on pianos).… This recording is by the same musicians [as the 1996 premiere], with Mr. Collins a splendid soloist, engaging and athletic. Finally comes an adieu something like Chou's concluding song in Mr. Adams's opera, *Nixon in China*, but with the tune going up into the air near the end and waving its legs furiously.[40]

Clarinetist André Trouttet, at one time a member of the Ensemble Intercontemporain, recorded *Gnarly Buttons* twice, on a 1998 compact disc and in a live performance in 2000 on DVD. The disc, titled "American Clarinet," features the Ensemble Intercontemporain and another recent clarinet concerto, by Elliott Carter, with David Robertson conducting and Alain Damiens as clarinet soloist. The DVD contains an hour-long documentary about Adams, with a lengthy interview with the composer filmed at his home in California, and a concert featuring *Gnarly Buttons* and a work by Steve Reich, with the Ensemble Intercontemporain and Jonathan Nutt conducting.

[40] Paul Griffiths, "Critics Choice/Classical CDs: Divided By Centuries, United By Fun," *The New York Times,* 11 August 1998, E5.

Chapter 3. Performance Guide to *Gnarly Buttons*

Introduction

In an afternoon rehearsal with the Los Angeles Philharmonic on 22 January 2007, John Adams stood on the conductor's podium during the opening measures of *Gnarly Buttons*, fingering an imaginary clarinet in the air as soloist Derek Bermel played the first unaccompanied, unconducted measures of the work. He was preparing a concert marking his upcoming sixtieth birthday, displaying the boundless energy and enthusiasm of someone who really loves his work. William Helmers had glowing praise for Adams as a conductor.

> I should comment on performing and rehearsing with John Adams the conductor. Not knowing too much about John Adams aside from his compositions, I was very pleasantly surprised to find that he was an accomplished conductor, both technically, and in rehearsal methods. (Some of my experiences with composer-conductors have been, well, 'interesting.') Adams had a clear, economical, and commanding stick technique, and he knew how to get things done in rehearsals. He was quite demanding, and he really made the ensemble sparkle. I found him to be a down-to-earth 'musician's musician.'[41]

Adams is clearly fond of his clarinet concerto and the clarinet itself, perhaps as much for its connections to his youth than the instrument's capabilities as an expressive and agile instrument. Through college Adams had been a skilled clarinetist himself, good enough to work as a substitute player in the Boston Symphony during his undergraduate years at Harvard.

I was thankful to be able to attend these rehearsals, not only to learn about the piece but also to spend some time in the Los Angeles Philharmonic's fabulous facility, Walt Disney Concert Hall. While Adams and the members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic became performance-ready quickly, on one rehearsal and a run-through dress rehearsal, I was able to learn many de-

[41]Helmers interview.

tails about the performance challenges of the work. In addition, this performance guide also focuses on interviews of clarinetists Michael Collins, William Helmers, Derek Bermel, and Sean Osborn, who have all performed the work. In addition, it also incorporates observations from my own study of the work; I learned the concerto in the summer of 2006, while studying with Ron Aufmann at the College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati.

Technical Challenges—General Comments

Gnarly Buttons is technically challenging for both soloist and ensemble. Since Adams intended to exploit the full and varied meaning of the word "gnarly," one would expect the work to be difficult to play. William Helmers characterized the difficult passagework of the Adams concerto as on par with the "thornier areas" of Nielsen's Clarinet Concerto.[42] Osborn commented that Adams seems proud that he has composed a clarinet concerto that is challenging for the soloist, "but I guess I would characterize it as 'awkward' rather than 'difficult.' It is the kind of piece that you have practice really consistently, really staying on it, or it just leaves the fingers."[43] Michael Collins also used the word "awkward," and seems to be referring to all the quick register changes when he describes it: "a lot of the writing is awkward in that first movement for the clarinet. He knew what he was doing, and in a way, he wanted to make it difficult, that I'm sure. But its all, a lot of it is around the part of the instrument that doesn't lend itself for easy easy playing, if you know what I mean. It's quite tricky."[44]

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[42]Ibid.

[43]Osborn interview.

[44]Collins interview.

Aesthetic Challenges—General Comments

Most clarinetists who tackle *Gnarly Buttons* will find aesthetic as well as technical challenges. As Derek Bermel was preparing for his first performance of the work, he commented that he was "still trying to find how I fit into this piece.…The tempos are so fast, and your brain is occupied with those technical things, the challenge is to find space to make the music beyond just getting the notes."[45] Even in passages without formidable technical challenges, clarinetists accustomed to the standard repertoire can be disoriented by *Gnarly Buttons*. Just as critic Philip Hensher described the work as treading "a fine line between exploring a small range of material and exasperating the listener,"[46] some performers identify Adams's aesthetic approach as one of the performance challenges. Adams was conducting in Seattle, in January and February 2004, at the time Sean Osborn had just begun work on the concerto. Osborn played for Adams, and recalled his experience: "He wanted it played as it is on the page, without adding things to it, making it very dry. But the piece is clearly dear to his heart."[47]

Although Adams's music has been described as post-modern, post-minimalistic, and neo-romantic, careful investigation often reveals close connections to the style and techniques of Stravinsky.

> The most striking Stravinskian feature of much of Adams's music is its 'objectivity.' Adams acknowledges this in some of his pieces (what he calls 'the Trickster—the garish, ironic wild card') but more generally his works seem to be self-consciously 'music about music,' even, as is certainly the case with *Grand Pianola Music*, 'music about other music.' As Adorno accused Stravinsky's music of depersonalisation, so we find in many of Adams's works not only a sense of deper-

[45]Derek Bermel, interview with author, 23 January 2007, see appendix.

[46]Hensher review, 20.

[47]Sean Osborn, interview.

> sonalisation, the rejection of expression, but also a playfulness, a sense of irony, an eclecticism.[48]

Thus, how does a performer sort out all these possibilities when learning *Gnarly Buttons*? As Bermel's comments suggest, the concerto is difficult enough so as to induce myopia, with all attention focused on note accuracy with no attention available for aesthetic considerations. The most important general aesthetic consideration is to allow the piece to be, as Cross suggests, "music about other music," creating a balance between expressive and detached delivery. Perhaps the strongest example of this fine balance is found in the first movement.

First Movement—"The Perilous Shore"

As described in Chapter 2, the first movement provides Adams's most literal musical representation of the word "gnarly." It is the most difficult of the movements to learn, requiring concentration and endurance, and solid technique. Michael Collins characterized the concerto this way: "Well, it is interesting, because with a lot of clarinet concertos you get a chance to warm up, maybe, before you do some of the really pyrotechnic things that you have to do in a concerto, they tend to happen later on. Now, with the Adams, it in almost in reverse, the most difficult things to start with, after the introduction and then when you are in full swing in the first movement, that is the most difficult part of the whole piece, so you've got to really have full concentration…"[49] The technical demands increase as the movement continues, and several long passages of continuous playing allow little time to reclaim poise or breath. It is also the most

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[48]Jonathan Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 177.

[49]Collins interview.

characteristically post-minimalist and post-Stravinskian of the movements, incorporating techniques of minimalist process to a melody composed in a Russian primitivist style.

This melody, presented by the clarinet soloist in the opening measures of the work, is loosely based on the opening of Stravinsky's *Three Pieces*, a piece that Adams learned as a young clarinetist. Its mood emulates the detached, Russian chant-like quality, though the grace notes found in the *Three Pieces* are replaced by dotted rhythms in the Adams's work. This thematic material, which Adams describes as an "imagined musical model," a faux folksong, should be played freely. Adams was likely aiming for a melancholy, nostalgic mood when he first scored this passage, originally doubling the solo clarinet with one keyboard part, playing a synthesizer set on an "accordion" sound. As described in the previous chapter, he later removed the keyboard part, allowing greater freedom for the soloist.

However, the nature of the melody is highly restrictive at its outset, employing only a few pitch classes and a relatively steady rhythm of delivery. Adams paces the gradual buildup of energy carefully, in part by maintaining an understated quality in the solo opening. The "objective" delivery does not progress toward a more overt form of expression; rather, the objectivity remains, but overall sense is that the tempo, density, complexity, and intensity all increase gradually throughout the movement. The movement ends with an orchestrationally-devised fade-out, with the violins and viola playing repeated eighth notes of indiscriminately high pitch behind the bridge, beginning at a sustained *fortissimo* eventually fading to *pianissimo.*[50]

Sean Osborn shared one of his strategies for learning new pieces when interviewed about *Gnarly Buttons*. He suggests beginning work on the most difficult passages first, proposing the

[50]See first movement, mm. 275–83.

passage in mm. 246–51 as a starting point.[51] In this passage Adams drew from another standard clarinet work that he had learned in his youth, Nielsen's clarinet concerto. Osborn's choice is appropriate: this phrase is among the most difficult in the concerto because of the dotted rhythms and awkward passagework. Measures 248–50 are particularly unwieldy.[52] The F-sharp in the middle of m. 248 must be played with the middle finger, otherwise the fingers must shift quickly from forked F-sharp to the succeeding note, D-sharp. The overall difficulty is due to the mixture of repeated and non-repeated notes, between each sixteenth note and the thirty-second note that

Figure 3.1 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, solo clarinet part, mm. 248–50

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follows it. The second and third measures in Figure 3.1 are the trickiest in this regard. The prevalence of repeated notes B, A, and B in the first half of the measure make the second half of the measure feel unexpected, especially the D-sharp marked with an asterisk. The other asterisk

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[51]Osborn interview.

[52]The following passage identifies awkward elements in the passage, based on my own practice of the piece.

marks another awkward fingering: for some reason, it is difficult to place the left-hand middle finger on the A key soon enough. For this note, using clear articulation to clip the end of the B-natural, and early placement of the left middle finger—in other words, using “prepared fingers” for that one note—is the best solution. In fact, preparing the D-sharp in the previous measure is also a good choice. However, this approach does complicate the concept of the rhythm of the passage for the performer, and takes much slow practice before it becomes automatic.

Working from the beginning of the movement, the first passage worthy of discussion begins in m. 36. The strings and keyboard 2, set on an “Arco strings” sound, set the tone of the trajectory of the movement. The opening solo part, discussed previously, should be played freely and expressively, but perhaps in a slightly understated fashion, to imply the movement’s long, gradual trajectory. The strings’ entry, at the bottom of the violin’s range, is to be played with a slightly aggressive, full-throated sound, characterizing the extremeness of expression implied by the word “gnarly.” With the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Adams rehearsed this passage with strings alone, asking them to seek timbre consistent with the title: “You know the term ‘gnarly’,” describing the desired articulation to be “not exactly ugly, but just rough.”[53]

In the interview later that day, Adams pointed out what he emphatically described as “a GRIEVOUS error” in the recently published full score. Boosey & Hawkes describe the proper string instrumentation as “minimum number of stands: 1.1.1.1.1, maximum 6.6.4.4.2.”[54] Adams explained that it should have read “minimum number of players: 1.1.1.1.1, maximum number of stands, 6.6.4.4.2.” Although he has conducted the piece with chamber orchestra and with full or-

[53]Transcript of comments by John Adams during rehearsal with Derek Bermel and members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic on 22, 23 January 2007.

[54]John Adams, interview by author.

chestra, he prefers the sound of single strings. “I did it a few times with a larger ensemble, like 666442 with the Cleveland Orchestra and with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and I didn’t like it in that format, the piece lost its ‘gnarly’ quality.”[55] The Los Angeles Philharmonic management had assigned players to the piece exactly as the score indicated: one stand, thus two players per part, which had prompted Adams to investigate the cause of the error. Some passages were enhanced by the larger instrumentation: single notes in the string parts serving as accented punctuation at the end of phrases were more ardent with double strings. However, to achieve the “rough” sound Adams asks for, the ten players can easily overbalance the solo clarinet’s intricate passagework, especially when the clarinet plays in the throat or chalumeau register. In the January 23 performance, given in the acoustically superlative Walt Disney Concert Hall, Derek Bermel and the orchestra handled this challenge masterfully. In a few passages, balance would likely have been an issue in most concert halls.

In terms of coordination between the soloist and the ensemble, the trickiest passage in the first movement is the entrance in m. 106. To the players of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Adams described this passage as “the worst part of the piece.”[56] William Helmers also commented on this entrance and the passage following that calls for a gradual accelerando: “pacing this with good ensemble was the biggest technical challenge we faced.”[57] In this passage Adams conducts each eighth-note subdivision. The clarinetist’s cadenza ends after the first eighth note of the

[55]Ibid.

[56]Transcript of comments by John Adams during rehearsal with Derek Bermel and members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic on 22, 23 January 2007.

[57]Helmers interview.

measure, and, after a fermata, soloist and orchestra followed Adams as he cued the second half of the measure.

This passage also marks the beginning of a long, gradual accelerando, and the soloist and chamber orchestra must be technically prepared to handle the fast tempos. Adams marked specific tempos: eighth note=132 to start the passage in m. 106, 138 in m. 112, 138–44 in m. 125, 152 in m. 129, and finally 168 in m. 133.[58] Derek Bermel also commented on the fast tempos marked in this section. However, in the rehearsal with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Adams's treatment of this passage was one of give-and-take, where he pushed for a steady accelerando but only within reason. For instance, the English horn part in mm. 125–8 is a challenge even for professional players, and Adams offered to "go easy" during this phrase, asking the ensemble to "shift into high gear" when the full ensemble entered in the next phrase, beginning in m. 129. In other words, though Adams's notation is very specific, his own attitude about performing his music is oriented toward the overall gesture. He takes a practical and collaborative approach rather than an autocratic one.

Many passages, like the one that follows the aforementioned passage of gradual acceleration, utilize Adams's "earbox" technique, fairly new at the time *Gnarly Buttons* was composed. Adams often determines the harmonic underpinnings of a passage first, and then devises melodies that also express the chord movement.[59] In a passage such as mm. 134–65, the harmonic rhythm is fairly rapid, often with a chordal change every measure or even every few beats. In

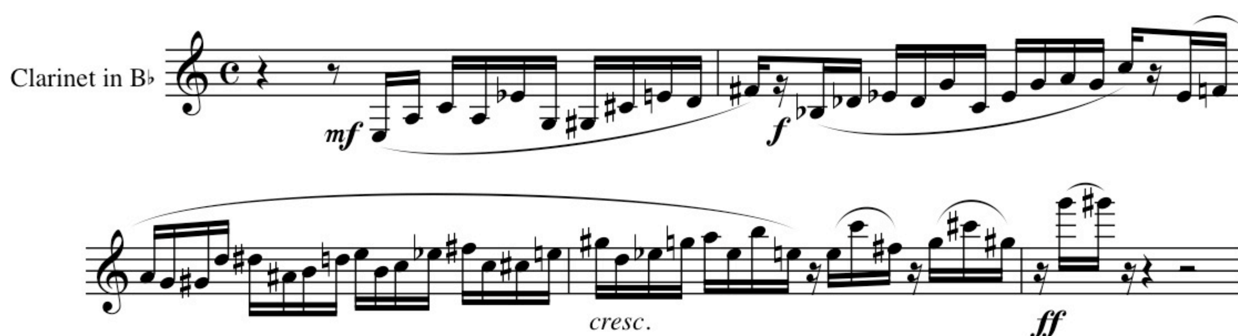
[58]An interesting metric modulation also occurs in the following measure, marked mm=126 for the quarter note. The composite rhythm of m. 133 is sextuplet sixteenths, and the regular sixteenths that follow in the solo clarinet part in the subsequent passage continue at the same rate as the sextuple sixteenths of the previous passage.

[59]John Adams, interview by author.

some instances the harmonic rhythm is in steady eighth notes with root motion in seconds. In such passages, the solo clarinet part implies many chords in a short period of time, using sixteenth notes, and the resulting lines are angular, chromatic, and far removed from the patterns that clarinetists learn in a Baermann book, making them challenging to learn. In other words, for passages like this, a clarinetist cannot rely on muscle memory of familiar scales and patterns, but must become so familiar with the passage itself that it is virtually memorized. More than one clarinetist I spoke with mentioned the need to memorize passages such as this, and I had the same experience learning the work. These passages need to become automatic, completely committed to muscle memory.

For some performers, analysis of such passages may also be helpful. Figure 3.2 shows one such example. In m. 161 Adams fully outlined A and C-sharp minor triads. The

Figure 3.2 *Gnarly Buttons,* first movement, solo clarinet part, mm. 161–5, illustrating Adams's "earbox" technique



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second through sixth notes of the next measure imply an E-flat dominant chord, and the following ten notes seem to outline C dorian minor, emphasizing the triad and the major sixth. In m.

163–5, a rising line—D, D-sharp, E, F-sharp, G-sharp, A, B, C, C-sharp—can be found in the peaks of the contour of the line. Identification of these short segments that outline common chords and scales might be helpful for the soloist to follow mentally when executing such passages. Perhaps the lower ascending line is more essential to the gesture—from m. 163, the line including G, G-sharp, A-sharp, B, C, C-sharp, D, E-flat, E-natural, F-sharp, G, G-sharp—since the passage begins and ends with G, G-sharp, and emphasizes the two pcs by repeating them an octave higher at the end of the phrase. For some performers this kind of analytical reduction will not be a helpful tool toward learning the difficult passages, but for others it may allow the performer to mentally group the notes into segments, preventing the eye from having to read every pitch. In either case, as with all technically challenging music, methodical and repetitive practice will be necessary.

Some passages in the first movement of *Gnarly Buttons* are easy to read but are still difficult to play. For many clarinetists the most challenging in this category is found in mm. 184–96, shown in Figure 3.3. The tempo is fast, marked 126 for the quarter note, making the dotted rhythms difficult to execute quickly enough, and repeated, rapid changes of register add to the challenge. For this passage note analysis is not helpful: maintaining awareness of the subtleties of hand position and movement while gradually increasing the practice tempo seems the only path to success.

This movement also includes a rhythmically dissonant passage typical of Adams's output of the 1990s. Often found around the midpoint of a movement, such passages seem to turn the traditional notion of a sonata movement's development section on its head, if one thinks of High

Figure 3.3 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, mm. 184–96, solo clarinet part

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Classic development sections loosely as passages of rhythmic constancy but harmonic fluctuation. In its place Adams often prefers a passage of harmonic stability but rhythmic instability. In the first movement one such passage is found in mm. 218–34. Here the texture has many rhythmic layers, each varied so that repeated motives are heard, but those motives, when repeated, seldom fall in the same location within the 4/4 meter. The core of the composite rhythm of the passage is a mixture of eighth notes against triplet eighth notes. The solo clarinet part adds the additional layer of complexity with its emphasis on 5:4 eighth notes; five notes to be played evenly over two beats. The passage would be fairly easy for the soloist to execute if the groups of five notes started on a strong beat. However, to add to the rhythmic dissonance, the soloist never

begins a 5:4 grouping on a strong beat. One entrance can be found on a strong beat in mm. 226–7, marked 19:14, nineteen notes played over seven beats, a rate slightly faster than 5:4 eighth notes.

Of course, exacting, diligent practice of such passages is essential, but Adams's attitude about these passages, when preparing the work for performance, is fairly relaxed. Los Angeles studio guitarist Paul Viapiano, who played the prominent guitar/mandolin/banjo part in the January performance, asked Adams about a difficult passage at the end of the third movement, the last phrases of the guitar part. The guitarist must begin 5:4 quarter notes on beat three of a 4/4 measure, and Adams's response was to not worry about it, that the point was to be off tempo from everyone else, not to be concerned with an exact 5:4 ratio. For the clarinetist, the end of the first movement works this way: in mm. 252 and 254, the notation 13:8 can be thought of as "slightly rushed triplets" rather than a thirteen-tuplet. In other words, when Adams writes such passages, he is after *rhythmic dissonance*, and whether or not the ratios are perfect is not as important as achieving the overall rhythmically dissonant effect.

Second Movement—"Hoedown (Mad Cow)"

The second movement, composed during the height of the Mad Cow Disease scare in England in 1996, typifies Adams's "trickster" style as it makes light of the seriousness of the news item of the day. In rehearsal with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Adams offered the following description of the character of this movement: "I think of this as an old guy who tipples a little too much, and *thinks* he is good at concealing it. Always just a little off, but try to keep that

elegance."[60] Another way to characterize this movement is as a "country bluegrass" version of "The Soldier's Violin" movement of Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat*: its resemblance to that movement is particularly clear if the main motive found in the violin part from *L'histoire* is compared to the main motive in the clarinet part of Adams's work.

Throughout the movement, the score is specific about articulation in the solo clarinet part. The two prevalent articulation markings for the clarinetist are *light staccato, not too short* or *legato tongue.* Adams's intention seems to be imitation of the note-by-note articulation of plucked banjo or guitar. As Derek Bermel was preparing the clarinet part, he experimented with jazz inflection which might evoke the spirit of Americana, but of an urban and sophisticated variety. Bermel found that Adams preferred inflection that evokes a rustic simplicity consistent with the rural "tippler" character Adams described.

As in the first movement, the second movement has one difficult passage that should be given special practice attention: the sextuplet passage shown in Figure 3.4. Special attention must be paid to avoid rushing, especially in mm. 156–8. The "open Gs" found on the second eighth of m. 156 and m. 157 are easy to rush, and m. 157 is also difficult because the left hand must be carefully regulated as it opens and closes to execute the notes in the middle of the measure.

A second passage in this movement, shown in Figure 3.5, also challenges the skill and finesse of the clarinetist's left hand. The three high Ds found in mm. 167–9 tend to have unintentional accents unless the index finger moves gently away from the ring. Open D fingerings might be useful here, if used sparingly. The passage in mm. 171–7 is virtually identical to an earlier

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[60]Transcript of comments by John Adams during rehearsal with Derek Bermel and members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic on 22, 23 January 2007.

Figure 3.4 *Gnarly Buttons*, second movement, solo clarinet part, mm. 155–60

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passage, mm. 80–6. In these instances most of the notes are played by the left hand alone and require the fingers to stay curved and the wrist to move freely. Slow, careful practice will likely be necessary to overcome the awkwardness of the alternations between the lower notes of the B-flat seventh arpeggio, the D and the F, and the upper pitches, the A-flat and B-flat.

Sean Osborn made special mention of mm. 177–243 as one of the most treacherous ensemble passages in the concerto. The meter in most of the movement is 2/4, and at the printed tempo of quarter=108, the conductor, by showing each quarter note beat, provides enough information to keep the ensemble together. When the meter changes to 3/8 in m. 178, the eighth note stays constant, and the conductor has little choice but to conduct in "one." With only a single gesture each measure at the slower tempo of 72 bpm, it is easy for ensemble problems to develop. Adams's printed tempo is 104–8 for the quarter note; thus, if the performance tempo is

Figure 3.5 *Gnarly Buttons,* second movement, solo clarinet part, mm. 162–73

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much slower, the tempo for the 3/8 sections will likely be in the 66–72 range, slow enough that the conductor provides relatively little visual information. In other words, the burden of tempo steadiness shifts away from the conductor and toward the ensemble in these passages. In addition, Adams employed a mixture of triple and duple division of the 3/8 measures, notating the duple division with dotted eighth notes; thus, even if the tempo is slow enough to conduct each beat of the measure, the sense of subdivision changes constantly, providing an additional deterrent to conducting one particular subdivision.

In the rehearsals with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Adams did spend a little extra rehearsal time on one challenging rhythm found in the beginning of the 3/8 sections. The lengthy section discussed in the previous paragraph, mm. 177–243, is foreshadowed in mm. 86–91. Figure 3.5 illustrates either section, since the two are virtually identical. The first violin part is doubled by the viola part, at the unison, and by the violoncello part an octave lower. The rhythm found in m. 177 is a difficult way to begin the passage; many players will accidentally execute this rhythm as found in m. 181. The speed of the sixteenth notes C and D-flat is crucial, and the players may need to be cautioned against rushing. The placement of the E-flat squarely on the last eighth-note beat of each measure becomes more difficult if the rhythm of the C and D-flat is compressed, and m. 181 provides a further complication, a slightly altered rhythm that likely comes just after the previous rhythm has stabilized. In each rehearsal with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Adams repeatedly had violin 1, violas, and cellos play this passage alone.

Figure 3.6 *Gnarly Buttons,* second movement, violin I part, mm. 177–82 (or mm. 86–91)

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Another rhythmically challenging passage is the duet between bassoon and trombone found near the end of the movement, mm. 269–89. Figure 3.7 offers a representative sample, mm. 277–84. The bassoon consistently plays at canon to the trombone part, three-quarters of a

beat later. The two parts combined add a dotted-eighth cross-rhythm to the 2/4 texture, a rhythmic device also found prominently in the third movement.[61] Figure 3.7 also illustrates the difficulty of the passage. The first phrase begins with the trombone entrance on a strong beat,

Figure 3.7 *Gnarly Buttons*, second movement, bassoon and trombone parts, mm. 277–84, a portion of the bassoon/trombone duet

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which is easy for the bassoonist to coordinate with. However, of the five phrases of the passage three begin like m. 282, starting on the half-beat. In addition, the two players should match dynamic level and articulation style.

Third Movement

The third movement, "Put Your Loving Arms Around Me," is essentially lyrical, an interesting choice for the final movement of a concerto. Clearly autobiographical, the movement seems to blend Adams's affection for his father with a musical depiction of the agitation and delusion associated with Alzheimer's Disease, which his father suffered from between the late 1980s and his death in the early 1990s. This movement is the least virtuosic of the three but has

[61] See third movement; string parts, mm. 82–105; tutti orchestra, mm. 123–30; strings, mm. 145–56.

interesting conceptual and rhetorical features, and has significant connections of style and technique to other works in Adams's output. While the discussion here will include coverage of the technical challenges of the movement, it will focus on the interaction between harmonic and melodic forces.

The analysis portion of this document will offer details of the unique harmonic language of this movement, but the general description of harmony to follow is directly relevant for performers. While Adams mentions the naïveté of the melody—in other words, the inability for the melody to negotiate the complicated chord progression—the opposite is also true: in some passages the melody implies changing harmonies while the chord or pitches in the middle register remain static.

Most relevant to phrasing for the clarinetist is the implied grammar of the melody and the relationship between the melody and chords, asserted through repetition. Sean Osborn pointed out that the primary motive seems to be a musical setting of the words, "Put Your Loving Arms Around Me,"[62] and Adams confirmed that assessment, adding that "the melody is so intimately wedded to the chord change."[63] From the outset, the most common place for a chord change is on the syllable "round" of "around," and as the movement progresses, the chordal part, "strummed" in the middle register by the guitar and keyboard 1 part, moves to more distant chords each time the melody repeats that motive. Often, at the moment of this chordal change, the degree of dissonance between melody and chord increases, giving the impression of increasing paranoia or delusion. Throughout the movement, the soloist should be sensitive to this rela-

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[62]See Figure 4.7.

[63]Osborne and Adams interviews.

tionship between melody and chord, and direct phrases toward the point of chordal change to reinforce this interaction.

The dotted-eighth polyrhythm found in the second movement is also found in the third, used as an additional layer further blurring harmonies and rhythms another way to depict his father's delusions. In m. 82 and m. 87, the viola and cello parts enter, playing the dotted-eighth polyrhythm, also adding an additional harmonic layer and implying another chord than the one in the strummed middle-register parts. In rehearsals with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the string players had to concentrate to perform this rhythm accurately. It was easy for them to imply a new tempo when the cross-rhythm begins, but not as easy to establish the new implied tempo exactly enough to gracefully make the transition back into quarter-note time, in m. 85, 98, and 101.

As the music becomes more agitated, more technique is demanded from the players, especially the soloist. Like the first movement, the sixteenth-note runs seldom imply one diatonic collection for more than a few successive notes. However, the tempo of this movement is more manageable, making reading the runs much easier than the equivalent passages in the first movement.

In his interview Sean Osborn did make a helpful fingering suggestion. "For the high B-flat to B-natural in mm. 104–5, I used a fingering for B-flat that is voiced really closely to the B-natural: like a C in the middle of the staff, with the C-sharp/G-sharp key added and half-holing the left index finger. Then you just have to basically move two fingers to get to the [standard fingering for] B-natural."[64] The two later high A-sharp/B-flats found in m. 159 and mm. 169–71

[64]Osborn interview.

speak well using the “high F without thumb ring” fingering, where the standard high-F fingering is used but the thumb is removed from the ring while still depressing the register key.

In another important and difficult passage, the bassoon and English horn play together in unison for its entire duration, shown in Figure 3.8. The passage approaches the top of the bassoon’s range and the bottom of the English horn’s range, and the various subdivisions played across many ties make it a challenge to play in tune and with rhythmic accuracy. Nevertheless,

Figure 3.8 *Gnarly Buttons,* third movement, unison passage for bassoon and English horn, mm. 46–60

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the resultant color is unique and wonderful: instrumentation, tessitura, and harmony make this passage perhaps the most memorable few phrases in the whole work.

The last strand of melody in the concerto, a wistful duet between the solo clarinet and cello, holds special symbolic significance, as discussed in the previous chapter. Found in mm. 177–93 and shown in Figure 3.9, the cello and clarinet ascend in octaves and fade away, overall

Figure 3.9 *Gnarly Buttons*, third movement, solo clarinet part (also doubled by cello an octave lower), mm. 177–93

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as a symbol of the end of Adams's father's life. This duet also marked the twilight of the friendship between the Michael Collins and cellist Christopher van Kampen, since Kampen was seriously ill with cancer at the time of the premiere and passed away soon after the recording session. Sean Osborn also explained that the passage may demand a little rehearsal time. "The ending is also actually pretty tricky to put together with the cellist, getting the pitch and rhythm just right, and the cellist's bowing. For instance, it is really easy to play the G natural in m. 177 too

long; it isn't really a very long note. That passage took some careful work, and took more time than expected."[65] Just like the previous example, the ties over strong beats and changing subdivision make stronger demands on the players when doubled, because it forces a higher degree of rhythmic accuracy if the two parts are to sound well coordinated.

Practical Performance Considerations

It takes much more than amassing a group of skilled musicians to achieve a successful performance of *Gnarly Buttons.* Paying the Boosey & Hawkes rental cost is one obvious hurdle, but additional considerations include determining a workable stage setup, covering some issues with the banjo/mandolin/guitar part, and negotiating the technical intricacies of the Kurzweil keyboards.

The chamber ensemble will likely be arranged in three rows: strings, winds, and keyboards.[66] The four players of the string quartet can be placed in the center of the stage, and the double bassist can play slightly stage left of the quartet. The three wind players should be directly behind the quartet, in a second row. It is best if the bassoonist is placed between the English horn player and the trombonist, since the bassoonist has key passages with both the trombonist and English horn player, such as those previously discussed, Figure 3.7 and Figure 3.8, respectively.

The banjo/mandolin/guitar player can be placed in either row, and perhaps the most important consideration for this part is amplification, not location. Adams suggests subtle amplifi-

[65]Ibid.

[66]Adams preferred scoring, 1.1.1.1.1, is discussed here.

cation for this part, explaining that the banjo projects well but that guitar and especially mandolin could use a little sound reinforcement.[67]

Since the Keyboard 1 part has equal amounts of music for piano and Kurzweil keyboard, the stage arrangement of these two keyboard instruments should allow the player to see the conductor from either instrument. In addition, the Keyboard 2 player needs to be able to move efficiently from the second Kurzweil to the lower tessitura of the grand piano. Only one passage of the piece specifies piano in the Keyboard 2 part—the third movement, in mm. 144–69—and in this case, the two keyboardists can play their parts in a "piano four hands" configuration on the one grand piano on stage. With those considerations in mind, the grand piano could be placed at a 45º angle such that the player faces upstage left, and the Kurzweil keyboard at a 45º angle such that the player faces upstage right. This configuration may not be practical on every stage, of course, but hopefully at least an effort can be made that the Keyboard 1 player is consistently able to see the conductor.

For *Gnarly Buttons* and most other acoustic works by Adams that utilize a few electronic instruments, the composer firmly asserts that the electronic instruments should function like acoustic instruments within the ensemble. In the full score of *Gnarly Buttons,* Adams is unequivocally clear: "Keyboard samplers should be amplified using two stereo keyboard combination amplifiers (speaker and amplifier together as one unit)—one per keyboard player and separated from each other. The samplers are not to be amplified through a house sound reinforcement system and should be seen as 'acoustic' within the context of the orchestra."[68]

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[67]Adams interview by author.

[68]John Adams, *Gnarly Buttons,* full score (New York: Hendon Music/Boosey & Hawkes, 2006), instrumentation instructions.

The keyboard that Adams likely had in his home composing studio when *Gnarly Buttons* was composed was a Kurzweil K2000 v3. It was released in a few different versions, starting in 1990. In 1996, an updated version went on the market, the K2500. These are the two Kurzweil models mentioned on Adams's "Technical Specifications" pages within his website.[69] These pages provide a list of all the equipment needed. The keyboards that work for *Gnarly Buttons,* according to the site, are the Kurzweil K2000 v3, the Kurzweil K2500, or the AKAI S1000.

Sean Osborn candidly described the technical challenges faced in his May 2006 performance in Seattle. His comments are especially relevant when programming *Gnarly Buttons*: the fact that the keyboards need to be powered up before the concert and remain plugged in through the performance of the concerto will likely affect its position in the concert program.

> In terms of technical aspects, dealing with the onerous software is really difficult. We used equipment from [the] Cornish [College of the Arts]. What we had to do was to reload the software every time we turn it on. The concert we played the piece on had several pieces before us and we had to get the keyboards ready, have them plugged in offstage, since it took 45 minutes to load the software. The software had not only the cow sound, but all the other sounds for the piece, but the cow was much softer than the other sounds. In that passage, the keyboardist has to crank the volume up all the way just for the cow sound, and in the mp3 of our performance, the keyboardist doesn't manage to turn the volume up, and so instead of "MOO!" you only barely hear "moo."

In the recent Los Angeles performance, two Kurzweil 2600 keyboards were used, and there was no apparent problem with the volume of the cow sound. However, Adams spent the entirety of the break of the rehearsal trying to remove some excess reverb that was blurring the preprogrammed sounds on one of the Kurzweil K2600s. While working on the problem, he said that "the problem with these Kurzweil keyboards is every time you power them down, you have

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[69]The general technology specification page is <http://www.earbox.com/tech-guide/t-specs.htm>. The *Gnarly Buttons* page is <http://www.earbox.com/tech-guide/eq/ja-gb-eq.htm>.

to reprogram them."[70] He spent the fifteen-minute break fixing the problem, also mentioning that the 2600 was slightly different than the keyboard he had in his home studio.

Clearly, renting the sound patches will not be the only technical consideration to be covered. Compatible keyboards and amplifiers will need to be acquired for the performance, and their configuration and sound production will need to be checked and rechecked. The most important issue to consider is a practical plan that allows the keyboards to be powered up and tested before the concert.

[70]Transcript of comments by John Adams during rehearsal with Derek Bermel and members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic on 22, 23 January 2007.

Chapter 4. Context: Adams, the First-Generation Minimalists and Stravinsky

Two Primary Influences

The diatonicism and pulsation of Adams's music in the 1980s linked the composer immediately with first-generation minimalist composers. Careful study also reveals many connections to Stravinsky's oeuvre. In 1991, when Adams ventured out in a new and more individualistic compositional direction with *The Death of Klinghoffer*, those influences became less visible. Parallels can be drawn not only from Adams's work in the 1980s to Stravinsky's ballets and large neoclassic works like *Symphony in C,* but also between Adams's works in the 1990s to neoclassic works by Stravinsky with chamber music proportions. This chapter explores the connections between Adams's music and these two sources to understand the style of *Gnarly Buttons* and other works composed during the 1990s.

First-Generation Minimalism, Rooted in Visual Art

Adams's style did not grow singularly from first-generation minimalism, but an exploration of that maverick musical and artistic movement does help to explain critical response to his early works and places the composer's work most clearly in context. Adams and first-generation minimalists seem to have shared an open disdain for the brand of serialism prevalent in American music schools and Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, but this may be where the aesthetic overlap ends.

> Adams, like his younger American successors, writes for established symphony houses and ensembles, not, as did first-generation minimalists, for home-grown experimental ensembles associated exclusively with 'their' composer's music (Steve Reich and Musicians, the Philip Glass Ensemble, etc.) Given, then, that he

> is working from within rather than outside established musical institutions, it is perhaps inevitable that Adams's focus should be on the 'mainstream' of Western art and popular musics: more than Reich and Glass. Adams engages directly (and perhaps anxiously) with his precursors.[71]

While Reich and Glass developed techniques that, whether conscious or not, expressed disillusionment with the state of contemporary classical music at the time, Adams used those techniques as available tools rather than aesthetic statement.

To a certain degree, musical minimalism grew out of developments in visual art. "The reigning style of the fifties, abstract expressionism, was characterized—especially in painting—by a high degree of gestural spontaneity which vividly conveyed the presence of the artist *in* the work."[72] Artists such as Frank Stella sought techniques that eliminated the ego of the artist from the work, as if to avoid a display of narcissism. "I had been badly affected by what could be called the romance of Abstract Expressionism … the idea of the artist as a terrifically sensitive, ever-changing, ever-ambitious person.… I began to feel very strongly about finding a way that wasn't so wrapped up in the hullabaloo, or a way of working that you couldn't write about … something that was stable in a sense, something that wasn't constantly a record of your sensitivity.…"[73]

In visual art, what started out as an attempt to remove the ego from the artifact sometimes had the opposite end result as artists seem to have competed to create art with the most complete removal of ego or content altogether. Gerhard Richter's large glass panes reflect only other objects in the room, and Fred Sandback's yarn sculpture, single strands of yarn pulled taut, forming

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[71]Cross, 174.

[72]Jonathan W. Bernard, "The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music," *Perspectives in New Music* 31/1 (1993): 87.

[73]Ibid., 93–5.

simple geometric shapes, rectangles suggesting the frame of a painting or photograph, represent an extreme reduction in content. The size and weight of Richard Serra's "Torqued Ellipses" remove the concept of a single temperamental artist as a physical possibility. Made of bent and curved pieces of shipyard steel, the works are large enough that a museum-goer trying to get a complete sense of the object is forced to confront it, walking around it and often between its spiraling layers, through narrow passages that seem, because of their angles, ready to collapse. Paradoxically, a survey of minimal art, a male-dominated period in visual art, reveals a displacement of the ego, rather than its removal. The desire to remove the artist turned into an egocentric competition of one-upmanship.

The Influence of Reich and Glass

Serra's work focuses the observer on the *surface* of the object, a common approach. Minimalist painters could place "an emphasis upon the *surface* of the work, by means of the absolutely uniform application of color—as if the ideal were an industrial paint job—or by other techniques that produced an exceptionally smooth, 'machined' finish,"[74] techniques that could easily be converted into the musical arts. In their early works both Reich and Glass focused on the musical surface; Glass used the technique in the most obvious way with music of a monophonic texture. Reich used gradually unfolding processes clearly audible to the listener. "What I'm interested in is a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing."[75] Like minimalist artists created works that avoid display of the artist's ego, Reich's early process pieces used processes, not human expression, as the point of interest.

[74]Ibid., 95.

[75]Steve Reich, *Writings About Music*, 10.

However, while minimalist artists were acting in response to the display of artistic intuition, Reich was acting in response to the notion that good music had structure that was actively hidden from the listener by the composer. Reich explains:

> James Tenney said in conversation, "then the composer isn't privy to anything." I don't know any secrets of structure that you can't hear. We all listen to the process together since it's quite audible, and one of the reasons it's quite audible is, because it's happening extremely gradually. The use of hidden structural devices in music never appealed to me. Even when all the cards are on the table and everyone hears what is gradually happening in a musical process, there are still enough mysteries to satisfy all.… Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outwards towards *it.*[76]

While Steve Reich consciously pursued the removal of the composer's ego, Philip Glass, whether consciously or subconsciously, removed composer and performer ego, angering musicians who felt they were left with nothing interesting to do.

> I was writing in repetitive structures with very reduced pitch relationships, a steady eighth-note beat, and a static dynamic level. Those were things that appeared in the music in '65, with a whole new body of work.… But at the point where I was really working with repetitive structures and simple pitch relationships and approached other musicians with it, they actually became quite angry and wouldn't play it.… I remember in Paris in '65, a young conductor asked me to write a piece, and I wrote him one of these repetitive pieces, and he actually became quite nasty about it. That was when I first realized what kind of reaction I was going to get with this music. And it's been true as recently as last year, when we did *Dance* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. People threw eggs at us. Funny things still happen; even though you think, well, that can't happen anymore, very funny things can still happen.
>
> But originally I was unprepared for that. It seemed to me that the music was so simple, so transparent, what was there to be angry about? Of course, that was precisely what there was to be angry about. I had, perhaps without intending it—although that's really hard to know—challenged so many precepts of the modernist tradition at the point. In fact, you could have almost defined my music in terms of polarities: If Stockhausen jumped all over the place, my music stayed in a very limited range; if his music changed pitches with every note, my music stayed the same; if he never repeated anything, I repeated all the time. I didn't go

[76]Reich, *Writings*, 10, 11.

> about inventing a language in those terms, but looking back on it, it looked as if I was dealing with polarities. In fact, I wasn't thinking about that at all. I was just trying to write some music, and it came out that way—for a variety of reasons, partially having to do with my discontent with contemporary music at that time.[77]

Reich's claim that an unfolding musical process ought to have "enough to satisfy all," or Glass's opera *Satyagraha*, which subjects its audience to 2 1/2 hours of repetitive tonal patterns, most in G minor, can be viewed as exerting the same high demands on its audience as serial music does. Kyle Gann, in 1987, claimed that minimalism and serialism "merely represent two sides of the same 'objectivist mindset' coin." He writes: "Consider the seminal works of each movement: Boulez's *Structures* and Reich's early tape loop and process pieces. Both had as their raison d'être the desire to remove human personality from the creation of music, to allow mathematics in one case and nature in the other (as though there were any difference) to speak for themselves without the ego's intervention."[78] Elaine Broad Ginsberg also sums it up: "Serialism and minimalism can be considered the two schools of objective composition—one which hides the compositional structure and one that wants to expose it."[79]

Minimalist composers developed process techniques to achieve their aesthetic goals, but those techniques eventually took on a life of their own. For example, Reich noticed that the ear is drawn to the intersection of two parts in a phase process, and in larger pieces began writing a third part that accentuated notes in that intersection. In the opening of *Music for Eighteen Musicians* Reich used a changing accent pattern in the marimba parts that imitates the sound of phas-

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[77]Gagne and Caras, 213–4.

[78]Kyle Gann, "Minimalism vs. Serialism: Let X = X." *The Village Voice* (24 February 1987), 76.

[79]Elaine Broad, "A New X? An Examination of the Aesthetic Foundations of Early Minimalism," *Music Research Forum* 5 (1990): 51.

ing, even though there is no phase process in motion. At this point, minimal techniques were explored on their own merits, not as anti-serialist modernist experimentation.

Adams's Extension of Reich: Process vs. Intuition

Reich's extension of his own phase techniques is the critical entry point for John Adams. He did not adopt a minimalist aesthetic because he interacted with minimalist artists, he instead was drawn to minimalist techniques as devices available for his use. He is interested in music that reaches a general audience as well as trained musicians, not in rigorous application of minimal techniques that lends itself to elegant analysis by music theorists. In interviews Adams seems to use the word "intuitive" to ward off attempts to analyze his music or to make subconscious elements in his compositional process more conscious. In this way, he is aligned with the first-generation minimalists, who rejected the idea that the essence of a good piece of music can be discovered through deconstructive analysis. As discussed in Chapter 1, Adams used the word "intuitive" in his interview on 22 January 2007 when asked questions of an analytical nature.

> You know, [pause] I am not interested in going back and looking to see what I did. It's a very funny thing, it is almost a superstition that I trust my intuitive sense so strongly. I look at other artists, not necessarily composers, but painters and sculptors, and I see people repeating themselves. After they have done something successful, and so they go back and analyze what they did and they become very conscious of it and I never want to do that, so I have never systematically gone back to see if something was successful, why it is. I mean, sometimes I obviously can tell, because it is so clear, but I have never had any impetus to do a really thorough survey and see what I have done.[80]

Adams had used the word "intuitive" before to describe his compositional process when interviewed by K. Robert Schwarz more than twenty years before. "What sets me apart from Reich

[80]Adams, interview by the author.

and Glass is that I am not a modernist. I embrace the whole musical past, and I don't have the kind of refined, systematic language that they have. I rely a lot more on my intuitive sense of balance. I've stopped worrying about whether intuiting a structure is right or not; as far as I can tell, most nineteenth-century composers wrote on intuitive levels."[81]

Schwarz did not take kindly to this attitude, and repeatedly used the word "intuitive" in the pejorative in a subsequent article and book. Clearly, he favored the systematic purity of early Reich works as the models of minimalism. Schwarz wrote: "Less involved with non-Western music, Adams immediately turned minimalist techniques to the service of much more emotional, climactic, and directionalized musical language.… The result is an unpredictable music filled with emotive outbursts and stylistic disparities. And to those who uphold the ascetic, self-abnegating purity of minimalism, Adams seems no better than a traitor to the cause."[82]

> Although John Adams's music is often linked with Reich's, only Adams's early piano works, *China Gates* (1977) and *Phrygian Gates* (1978) meet Reich's definition of process music. The legacy of minimalism continues to permeate the surface of Adams's works written since 1978, but the underlying structures are far freer, and no attempt is made to achieve systematic purity.
>
> What Adams's career displays is a shift from process to intuition, from an aesthetic that demands rigorous systemization of structure to one that picks and chooses from an eclectic range of historical and vernacular styles, minimalism being only one."[83]

In some ways Schwarz's assessment is accurate. However, he fails to acknowledge fully that in the years that he offered such criticism none of the first-generation minimalist composers were still producing works that stayed true to early minimalistic principles. Jonathan Bernard com-

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[81]K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 179.

[82]Ibid.

[83]K. Robert Schwarz, "Process vs. Intuition in the Recent Works of Steve Reich and John Adams," *American Music* 8/3 (1990): 246–7.

mented that "Those familiar with John Adams's personal history, for example, will realize that he lacks the intimate contact with artists and their works in the visual realm that the older minimalists have experienced."[84] Instead of holding his personal history against him, Schwarz could have accepted the fact that Adams's style is an honest outgrowth of his own experience. Adams has always readily acknowledged his influences and has never pretended to be a purist.

Schwarz shows agreement with Gann and Broad Ginsberg when he wrote: "When you start a revolution, you are inclined to argue the most extreme position first, and only later move toward compromise … the minimalists, for their part, proposed a music that was every bit as radical as what they were rejecting."[85] But this statement also liberates Adams from his own allegations, since Adams was not a part of the radical beginnings of the movement.

Adams's Harmonic Extension of the Music of Reich

Adams particularly took notice of Reich's approach to harmony. In an interview with William Duckworth about his seminal large work *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, Reich spoke about the difference between functional and coloristic harmony. "I have now begun to use the idea of harmonic ambiguity in the middle register as a linchpin, allowing you to move from key to key without giving away your hand. I can work in functional harmony, but the functional part of the harmony is the key signature; the bass is coloristic." Reich also spoke of his conscious avoidance of drones: "How do you use the bass in this kind of a music without using a drone? I don't want

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[84]Jonathan W. Bernard, "Theory, Analysis, and the 'Problem' of Minimal Music," in *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz Since 1945: Essays and Analytical Studies*, edited by Elizabeth West Marvin and Richard Hermann (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 1995), 283.

[85]Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 11.

to use a drone. I mean, that part of Terry Riley I just completely rejected. That's foolishness to me."[86]

Reich is describing the technique of presenting some chord voices in the middle register implying one tonality, then subjecting that chord to one or more reinterpretations by proposing one or more lower pitches as a bass voice, pitches still diatonic to the middle register pitches but implying new tonal centers. For example, introducing a D-major triad in the middle register and then adding a B in the bass a few measures later followed by an even lower E after that creates a sense of shifting modality for the listener from D major to B minor seventh to E minor extended with a ninth and eleventh.

These techniques, developed by Reich, can be found in many of Adams's works. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate a straightforward example from *The Chairman Dances* (1986). Figure 4.2 reduces the opening to pitch events. The first two measures use a diatonic but ambiguous sonority, an [027], to imply D as a weak tonic. Measure 3, with the introduction of a perfect fifth F-sharp and C-sharp, likely causes the first reinterpretation of the harmony as an F-sharp rooted harmony, an F-sharp minor seventh chord, with an added pitch, D natural. Then, in m. 9, not shown in Figure 4.1, the basses and cellos add a B below the existing sonority, causing a second reinterpretation of the chord as a B minor chord with an added seventh, ninth, and eleventh. Certainly, every listener does not hear these reinterpretations consciously. However, by using this technique, which clearly owes a debt to Reich, Adams was able to maximize the interest of a diatonic collection.

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[86]William Duckworth, *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers*, New York: Schirmer, 1995: 311.

Figure 4.1 *The Chairman Dances*, orchestral reduction, mm. 1–6

bassoons and violas

clarinets and horns

piccolo 1

Figure 4.2 *The Chairman Dances*, mm. 1–9, reduction of opening to pitch events

m. 1 m. 3 m. 9

These techniques are not limited to Adams's output from the mid-1980s. *Lollapalooza* (1995) also draws heavily from first-generation minimalist techniques. Adams describes the piece as "a short orchestral work, very minimalist in the way the material is presented. The events make their appearance in a very formal, sequential manner. Then the little engines go through their repetition and evolve into different patterns."[87] In the opening it takes twenty-four

[87]Jemian and De Zeeuw, 94–6.

measures to reach the primary motive, “a kind of ideé fixe” in which trombone and tuba emphatically “spell out” the title in instrumental terms, illustrated in Figure 4.6.[88]

Unlike the previous examples, in *Lollapalooza* Adams did not arrange the entry of notes within a diatonic collection to maximize irony, but predictability. The emphasized pitches descend gradually in thirds from B-flat, to G, to E-flat, and the arrival on C marks the simultaneous arrival of the true tonal center and the central motive. Figure 4.4 includes only the primary motivic elements, which also demonstrate the progress of the harmony. The first two elements in the first “measure” of the example imply G minor, the next three imply E-flat major, and the last

Figure 4.4 *Lollapalooza,* reduction of opening showing motivic and pitch events

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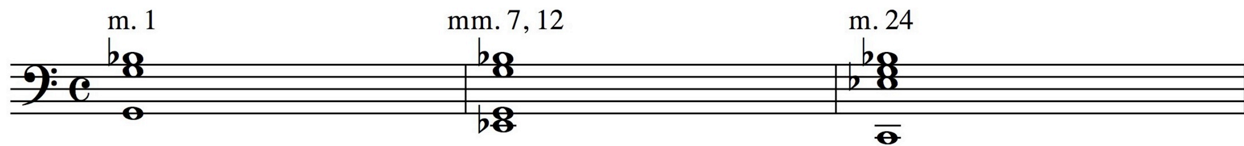
[88]John Adams, liner notes to *Lollapalooza*, compact disc recording, Nonesuch 79607-2, 2000.

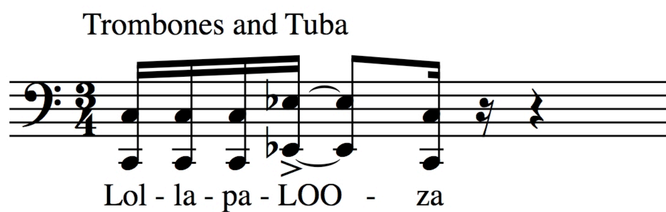
element, delivered emphatically, implies C minor. Figure 4.5 outline this progress downward in thirds.

Figure 4.5 *Lollapalooza,* reduction of opening to show pitch events



Adams's conversion of the word "Lollapalooza" into motive also demonstrates a connection to Reich's technique of "speech melody." Early tape pieces of Reich such as *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966) used taped speech as their sole materials. In *Different Trains* (1988) Reich used field recordings of speech to devise his motivic materials, converting the speech into fragments of pitch and rhythm. In the work, the short clips from the field recordings intermingle with the sound of the strings, as the source and transcribed versions are heard together.[89] Much has been written about Adams's thoughtful setting of text in his operas. He sensitively devises

Figure 4.6 *Lollapalooza* theme, m. 24



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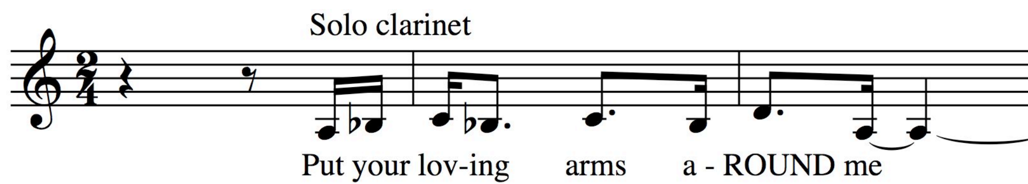
[89]Paul Griffiths, "Steve Reich," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (accessed 20 December 2006), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

melodic and rhythmic materials well-suited to the inflection of the words. The primary theme from *Lollapalooza* in an obvious example, shown in Figure 4.6.

Similarly, the primary motive in the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons* is a setting of the words of its title, "Put Your Loving Arms Around Me," illustrated in Figure 4.7.[90] Like the ex-

Figure 4.7 *Gnarly Buttons*, third movement, primary motive, mm. 5–7



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ample from *Lollapalooza*, Adams used duration and higher pitch to represent the penultimate syllable of the target text.

Adams has spoken about Reich's influence. During the same year that *Gnarly Buttons* was composed, Matthew Daines interviewed him about *Nixon in China*:

> Well, it's difficult to know where to begin…Clearly, all my music, up until very recently, shows the strong influence of the minimalist harmonic movement. Originally I was probably influenced more by Steve Reich than by any of the others. I was very drawn to his way of creating sustained harmonic areas that were manipulated by means of pulsation and counterpoint and by the way he saved modulation for very critical structural emphasis. There are lots of areas in *Nixon in China* where these manifest themselves, for example, "The world to come is here," where we keep shifting very sequentially between major and minor. There is also lots of modulation by thirds—up and down a third—what Schoenberg calls a "weak" modulation (as opposed to a strong modulation).[91]

---

[90]Osborn interview.

[91]Matthew Daines, "An Interview with John Adams," *Opera Quarterly* 13/1 (Autumn 1996): 51.

Chordal shifts by thirds, particularly major thirds, are pervasive in Adams's music through the 1980s and 90s. Also common to the music of late nineteenth-century composers including Wagner and Strauss, Adams used these "weak modulations" to maximal effect, as a means of creating ambiguity, and as a means of creating a unique harmonic palette. Examples of his use of thirds are presented in detail in the next chapter.

Overview of Stravinsky techniques

In numerous interviews, Adams has spoken openly about the influence of Stravinsky on his music. In works of the 1980s much of Adams's orchestral music utilized monolithic, layered textures, and its rhythmic pulsation and diatonicism may have drawn some listeners to hear this music as extensions of minimalism. However, the stratification, dissociative behavior of the thematic materials,[92] and even the choice of sonorities are all indicative of the influence of Stravinsky.

Jonathan Cross, in his book *The Stravinsky Legacy*, eloquently summarizes the connection between the two composers. He explains that Adams is "more open about his use of Stravinsky [than about his use of Reich and Glass], in acknowledging the general and important influence of Stravinsky on his music as well as, on occasions, alluding directly to Stravinsky's works."[93] More specifically, he demonstrates the connections between *Petrushka* and two of Adams's works from the mid-1980s.

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[92]The concept *dissociation*, associated with Lynne Rogers's work on Stravinsky, will be addressed later in this chapter.

[93]Cross, 174.

> Hypostatised Stravinsky is very much in evidence in two short orchestral show pieces (dubbed 'fanfares'): *Tromba lontana* and *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (both 1986). Both are dominated by a *Petrushka*-like oscillating ostinato heard at the outside; both layer ostinatos which move simultaneously at different speeds. Particularly in *Short Ride*, it can be seen how a 'typical' Stravinskian moment is extended into an entire piece. Adams's opening oscillating ostinato uses *at pitch* a subset (D,E,A) of *Petrushka*'s opening four pitch classes (D,E,A,G)(4-23), similarly scored (Stravinsky: clarinets and horns; Adams: clarinets and 'brass' preset on the synthesisers). Adams's articulates this ostinato almost identically to Stravinsky's violins and later harp…. Stravinsky's opening 'fanfare' in the flutes in the flutes uses his ostinato tetrachord horizontally, making a feature of interval class 5. A little later, Adams introduce another layer, a descending, sextuplet flute/piccolo flourish, made up of 4-23 (D,E,G,A) which is a virtual imitation of the triplet figuration that forms the second component of Stravinsky's flute fanfare. Unlike Stravinsky, who very quickly interrupts his 'static' block with others, Adams's material forms just about the entire substance of his work.… It is not meant to be heard ironically—that is, as a Stravinsky moment stretched over four minutes—but the origins of Adams's language lie undoubtedly in *Petrushka.* It is arguable that such 'hypostatisation' of past music could only be possible in a post-modern culture dominated by (and dependent on) commerce. But in another sense this can be seen as just another manifestation of an American love affair with Stravinsky's diatonicism, rhythms and repetitions, one that goes back at least as far as Copland. Adams is nothing if not an *American* composer.[94]

The following analysis chapter will strengthen Cross's conclusions that Adams not only favored the [027] trichord, but often uses the same pitch classes as the *Petrushka* opening. *A Short Ride in a Fast Machine* begins with (D, E, A), and *Tromba lontana* with (G, D, A). Another favorite [027] configuration of Adams is (D-flat, E-flat, A-flat) found in *The Death of Klinghoffer* and throughout *Gnarly Buttons.*

"The most striking Stravinskian feature of much of Adams's music is its 'objectivity.'… generally his works seem to be self-consciously 'music about music', even, as is certainly the case with *Grand Pianola Music*, 'music about other music'."[95] This is certainly the case with

[94]Ibid., 175.

[95]Ibid., 177.

Gnarly Buttons. Rather than being about musical expression in the present moment, the piece is a pastiche of memories, and even the emotional authenticity of the expressive passages in the third movement is blemished by the blurring sense of reality that Adams creates.

Others, such as Pellegrino, have noted the parallels between Adams's music of the 1980s and Stravinsky's pre-neoclassic works. In the 1990s, rather than move away from these influences, it is more likely that Adams began experimenting with other Stravinsky techniques, those associated with his neoclassic music. As explained in Chapter 2, the second movement of *Gnarly Buttons* bears a strong resemblance to a movement of *L'histoire du soldat.* Most important is evidence of Adams's use of a tonal axis, which ties his compositional technique more firmly to Stravinsky and will be demonstrated by example in the next chapter.

One Stravinsky-related concept that will become central to the analysis of Adams's music here, and *Gnarly Buttons* in particular, is the concept of *dissociation*, which Lynne Rogers describes as independent layers forming a unique, non-tonal type of counterpoint.[96] Adams's music is also often dissociative, but that dissociation is often hidden, in the works of the 1980s, by its diatonicism. The third movement of *Gnarly Buttons* proves to be a superlative example of his use and extension of Stravinsky techniques. The excerpts presented in the next chapter will show that the movement begins in a diatonic, dissociative style, using a tonal axis. As the diatonicism dissolves by a systematic expansion of the tonal axis, the dissociation continues, and the apparent "true nature" of the movement is revealed. The irony that is created depends on the techniques pioneered by Stravinsky, but also Adams's innovative extension of them.

[96]Lynne Rogers, "Stravinsky's Break with Contrapuntal Traditions: A Sketch Study," *The Journal of Musicology* 13/4 (1995): 477.

Chapter 5. Compositional and Stylistic Analysis of *Gnarly Buttons*

This lengthy chapter offers analysis of John Adams's compositional style, not only relating to *Gnarly Buttons* but also to works leading up to *Gnarly Buttons*. The techniques of melodic process that occupy the majority of the musical activities in the first movement have few precedents in Adams's own output, making it unproductive to compare the movement to other works. However, Timothy Johnson's dissertation and later article quantified some elements in Adams's harmonic style that provide a basis for analysis of the movement.[97] Harmonic and rhythmic features found in the second and third movements have many precedents in Adams's earlier works, and the latter two-thirds of this chapter trace compositional elements in *Gnarly Buttons* from their origins, works as early as *Nixon in China*.

Section 1: Collection Modulation and Melodic Transformation in the first movement of Adams's *Gnarly Buttons*, "The Perilous Shore"

As described in Chapter 2, the point of inception for *Gnarly Buttons* was a simple, folk-like melody whose mood and "Russian chant-like quality" Adams believes was subconsciously drawn from the first movement of Stravinsky's solo clarinet work, the *Three Pieces*. Adams describes the general nature of the melodic process in the program notes for the work: "The me-

[97]Timothy A. Johnson, *Harmony in the Music of John Adams: From "Phrygian Gates" to "Nixon in China,"* (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1991), and "Harmonic Vocabulary in the Music of John Adams: A Hierarchical Approach," *Journal of Music Theory* 37/1 (1993): 117–56.

lodic line is twisted and embellished from the start, appearing first in monody and eventually providing both micro and macro material for the ensuing musical structures."[98]

To use Reich's term, in this movement there are "audible processes" at work. Because Adams's embellishment occurs at the motivic and the phrase level simultaneously, the audibility of the process is not as clearly on the surface as Reich's original definition mandates. However, the presence of processes at work is audible nevertheless, even if the exact details of those processes are masked by their layering and simultaneity.

From Johnson's Work Toward a Definition of *Collection Modulation*

Timothy Johnson's work offers a useful starting point for harmonic analysis of *Gnarly Buttons*. The methodology found in Johnson's 1993 JMT article is used to analyze early works *Harmonielehre, Harmonium, The Chairman Dances, and Phrygian Gates*, and the theory itself offers Johnson's general assertions about Adams's harmonic thinking. Johnson devised a methodology that closely fit the music he studied. Similarly, *Gnarly Buttons* can be described harmonically through methodology extrapolated from Johnson's, and the necessary modifications to his methodology may suggest some of the evolution of Adams's compositional style since the 1980s. The most important concept proposed here is that of *collection modulation*, Adams's salient introduction of specific pitch-classes to prepare a change of sonority. Both the harmonic and subsequent melodic analysis will focus on the opening passages of the first movement.

Johnson presents a three-tiered complex of harmonic material: chord, sonority, and field. He asserts that Adams conceives chords with roots within a diatonic context, with the possibility to be within a larger chromatic context where some non-diatonic tones are incidental and others

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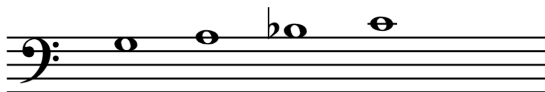
[98]John Adams, liner notes to *Gnarly Buttons,* Nonesuch Compact Disc 79465–2, 1998.

are significant to the harmonic structure, identified as *superdiatonic*. In his analyses a passage of many measures may be summarized, reduced to a single chord and sonority, but he also acknowledges that inclusion of a temporal component is essential to the analysis. In many passages, the complete expression of the sonority is often delayed, unfolding gradually over the span of entire passages. This technique is also present in *Gnarly Buttons*, and Adams's thoughtful control of pitch collections is a primary topic of this analysis.

Adaptation of Johnson's Ideas From Chordal Materials To Melodic Materials

At its essence, the first movement of *Gnarly Buttons* is an expansion and development of a single melodic line, a natural opening of a concerto for a single-line instrument like the clarinet. Adams describes the movement as "a trope on a Protestant shape-note hymn found in a 19th century volume, *The Footsteps of Jesus,*"[99] though as explained in Chapter 2, he composed the theme himself, and its history is imaginary. The first modification of Johnson's methodology is the adoption of a linear, rather than triadic pitch collection as the smallest structural unit of harmony. Figure 5.1 shows the primary pitch collection of the first movement, preserving the range in which it appears. Most phrases in the opening begin on G^3: in the absence of tonal language, these repeated iterations, both in the clarinet and accompanimental parts, imply G as a centric pc.

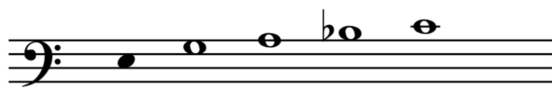
Figure 5.1 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, primary pitch collection



[99]John Adams, liner notes to *Gnarly Buttons, John's Book of Alleged Dances*, Nonesuch Compact Disc 79465–2, 1998.

This pitch collection is expanded in an unexpected way. In m. 12 the additional pitch E-natural makes its first appearance. Eventually, the E appears in other octaves, but its initial emphasis below the tonic G serve as a counterbalance to the G rather than as a potential tonic pitch, dissipating some of the energy-gain of the ascending scale fragments. In addition, the E's (and one F-

Figure 5.2 One additional tone (E) completes the opening sonority



sharp in m. 27) serve a separate melodic/rhythmic function within the opening sequence than the notes in Figure 5.1, to be discussed later as "hesitation" material.

The opening measures put emphasis on steps and minor thirds, which the interval class chart in Figure 5.3 illustrates. The opening phrases, mm. 1–23, sufficiently represent the interval class content of the entire opening of the movement (mm. 1–65). Adams eventually added F-sharp; the resulting scale fragment E-F-sharp-G-A-B-flat-C contains four minor thirds,

Figure 5.3 Interval class content of the melodic line, mm. 1–23

IC	1	2	3	4	5	6
	31	26	28	0	6	2

and the collection implies an ascending melodic-minor scale or octatonic collection. As the movement progresses it becomes evident that Adams uses the symmetrical properties of the scale fragment to its full advantage, first modulating from the melodic minor scale to the whole-tone scale, using pcs B-flat, C, D, E, F-sharp as a means of pivot, and later to an octatonic collection, using pcs E-F-sharp, G, A, B-flat, C in the same way. In the opening passage he reserved F-sharp

and D until m. 71. They are used to complete the fragment, B-flat-C-D-E-F-sharp and serve as preparation for the collection modulation that occurs in m. 75. This fragment is also a subset of the G melodic-minor scale, but is also a nearly complete whole-tone scale.

Figure 5.4 *Gnarly Buttons,* first movement, m. 71, transitional phrase where F-sharp and D first appear

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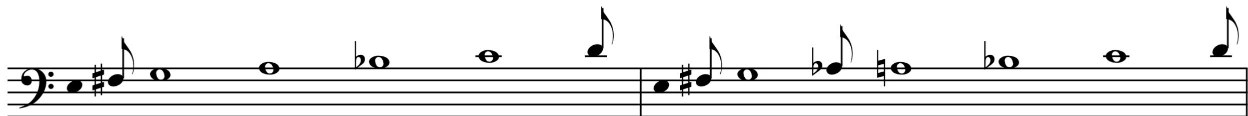
Figure 5.4 contains the measure that can be said to contain the modulatory cue tones, moving from the opening passage that emphasizes steps and minor thirds into a passage that emphasizes steps and major thirds. The first D-natural in the piece is found at the end of this phrase, emphasized by its placement and the rest that follows. The downstems indicate the ambiguous scale fragment emphasizing steps and minor thirds, described as an melodic minor fragment or octatonic scale. With the addition of D, Adams resolves this ambiguity, but also presents the portion of the melodic minor scale with the greatest concentration of major thirds, illustrated by the upstems.

The passage that follows after m. 71 implies the whole-tone properties of the melodic minor scale and the whole-tone scale with nearly equal weight. Figure 5.5a/b illustrate the way that the pc collection changes from the first section to the second. From the opening collection of E-G-A-B-flat-C, F-sharp, D natural is only introduced in a relatively dramatic moment in m. 71. The second section confirms the arrival of the full melodic minor scale in G minor, with occa-

sional touches of the whole-tone scale, where A-flat seems to temporarily replace G and A in the pitch collection. Figure 5b represents the conflation of the two scales used in the passage from mm. 66–82, used the emphasize whole tones and major thirds.

Figure 5.5a The addition of D and F-sharp complete the melodic minor scale

Figure 5.5b Total pitch collection in mm. 66–82



Another example of Adams's use of modulation cue tones can be found in the second transitional phrase starting m. 103, which modulates to the octatonic scale. Similar to the first transition (see Figure 5.4), the cue tone is placed at the end of a phrase and is followed by a short caesura. Like the first transition, the caesura adds emphasis to the newly introduced pitch class. The opening of the phrase implies G minor, which can be reinterpreted as octatonic with the addition of the first cue tone, D-flat. The G minor sonority continues, but halfway through the next measure, B-flat minor is implied and immediately challenged by cue tone E. Similarly, C-sharp minor is followed by cue tone G, and the octatonic passage begins on the next expected tonicized pitch, E. The tonicization of each of these passing pitches is weak, but is consistent with previous use of chromatic cue tones. Other examples of collection modulation using modulation cue tones are found throughout the movement.

While *Tromba lontana* (1985) is a good example of slowly paced, large-scale voice-leading, and *The Chairman Dances* (1987) demonstrates Adams's interest in careful introduction of pcs to delay the full implications of the harmony, there seems to be no precedent before *Gnarly Buttons* for a paced introduction of pcs, slowly building a complete scale. In this movement, Adams chooses adjacent sonorities carefully, and uses the modulation cue tones as a

Figure 5.6 *Gnarly Buttons,* first movement, mm. 103–6, second transition modulating into an octatonic collection, with melodic reduction

103

104

105

106

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means to make the relationship between sonorities audible to the listener. In this way, Adams's harmonic style in *Gnarly Buttons* is aligned with first-generation minimalist values, where audible processes are an aesthetic priority.

Techniques of Melodic Transformation on the Motivic Level

The melodic and rhythmic expansion and variation of the principal material are the main points of interest and the most audible processes in the first movement of *Gnarly Buttons*. The transformation of the faux shape-note hymn begins immediately and on multiple levels. Transformation is achieved through pitch collection expansion, rhythmic processes, octave displacement, and a unique layering process. First, this analysis will describe the transformation of melodic fragments on the micro level and show how Adams established some permutations of the initial material into new, independent themes. Second, the analysis will demonstrate layering, showing how long passages of melodic material, especially early passages that contain the first micro level transformations, are repeated and subjected to additional embellishment.

The primary theme is twenty-three measures long, and is constructed of smaller units that are related to each other. Figure 5.7 includes the whole sequence of principal theme material, with thematic labels. Themes A and B are principal motives, and C is a simple variation of A and B. In fact, B and C can easily be derived from A, as demonstrated by Figure 5.8. H is the label used for a "hesitation" figure throughout the analysis. Theme A appears in varied forms throughout the piece. This paper does not analyze the whole work, but it will consider most versions of theme A. The initial transformation of theme A occurs within the opening sequence. Figure 5.8 illustrates the original theme A and two transformed versions. As shown later, each of these three versions of the theme has an independent identity in the piece, each to be subjected to further

transformation. Some of the later variations of theme A are never reprised, but each permutation in Figure 5.9 returns later in the movement. The version found in mm. 19–20 seems to be the early motivic goal, since he began the sections starting in m. 31 and m. 66 with the permutation found in Figure 5.9. Clearly, the music in Figure 5.10 is derived from theme A, since the dotted sixteenths retain the opening pitches. This pattern has been heard before, in m. 19.[100]

Figure 5.7 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, solo clarinet part, mm. 1–23

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[100]See Figure 5.9.

Figure 5.8 Theme A   Theme B=theme A plus pc C   Theme C=theme B minus pc B-flat

Figure 5.9 Theme A and two melodic permutations, changed rhythm, and added notes

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Figure 5.10 New version of A theme, mm. 31–2

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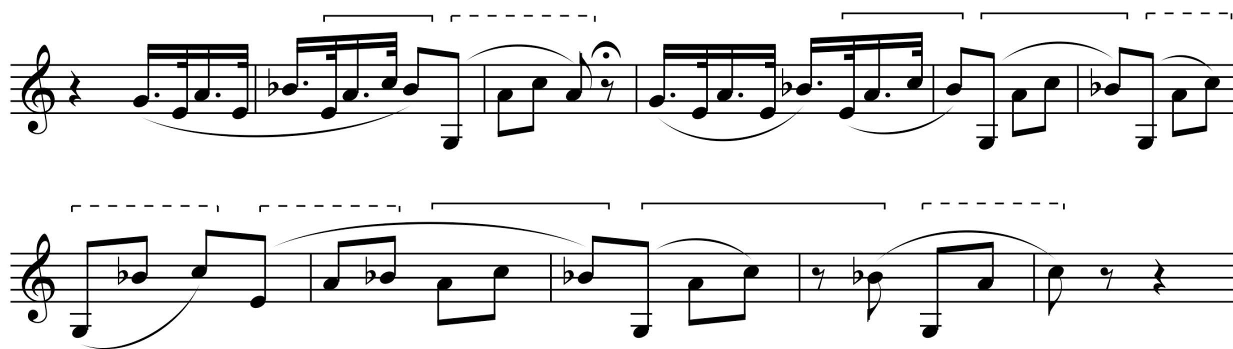
When presented in mm. 31–2 the motive is set apart rhythmically, with rests and a short caesura, introducing the new motive as an independent thematic entity. The eighth notes that follow the theme in Figure 5.10 develop the new idea further. Figure 5.11 illustrates this second layer of melodic permutation. The bracket in m. 32 indicates the new motive, whose contour is

generated from the added thirty-second notes. The destination of the fragment is B-flat, starting with a lower pitch then completing a lower neighbor, upper neighbor, target-note contour.

Figure 5.11 Related motives generated from the new A theme, mm. 31–41



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The solid brackets show where similar contour appears, and the dashed brackets show related fragments, where resolution is avoided.

The version of theme A from Figure 5.10 is also used as a transition in mm. 66–74. Measure 66 and m. 68 can be reduced back to the original note sequence G-A-B-flat-A-B-flat. But m. 71, shown in Figure 5.12, reduces to G-A-B-flat-C-D, a distinct musical development from what has come before. Before m. 71, ascending fragments through the minor third G-A-B-flat have been presented a half-dozen times, twenty-seven ascending fragments through the range covered by G-A-B-flat-C, and no fragments through the range G-A-B-flat-C-D. The addition of the D and F-sharp and their prior exclusion also contribute to the power of the transition. In fact, the dramatic approach to the D strengthens the idea that Adams used the pitch to foreshadow the upcoming change of sonority.

Figure 5.12 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, mm. 66–74, transitional phrase, with melodic reduction

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The melodic content of mm. 75–8 further illustrates the emphasis of major thirds and the whole-tone scale. Melodic reduction further demonstrates this assertion. The reduction shows the prevalence of broken major thirds moving by whole step. There does not seem to be a way to derive this passage from theme A, B, or C. However, the broken thirds, moving primarily in seconds, in the dotted-sixteenth thirty-second-note rhythm are all distinguishing features of the second version of theme A found in Figure 5.10 and create a strong aural connection between them.

Figure 5.13 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, solo clarinet part and melodic reduction, mm. 75–8

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Figure 5.14 Interval class content for mm. 75–8

IC	1	2	3	4	5	6
original	0	10	7	26	7	6
reduction	0	13	0	17	0	3

The fragments labeled as B and C in Figure 5.15 are subjected to similar processes as theme A. It is difficult to discern whether B and C are independent entities or outgrowths of A. Only brief illustration of the thematic transformation of B and C will be shown here. Figure 5.15 identifies a transformation of each fragment that is later used as a new motive.

Figure 5.15 Theme B, original and mm. 17–8 version

Theme C, original and mm. 21–3 version

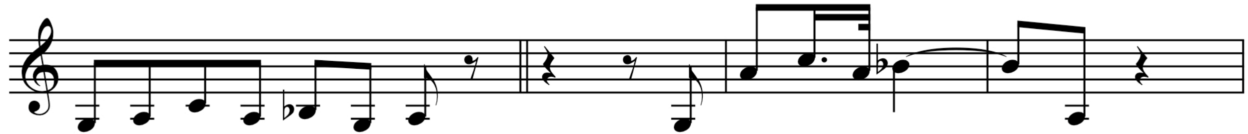

Figure 5.16 presents several versions of H material. Sometimes a three-note unit, the H material, or “hesitation” fragment, serves to break the eighth-note flow and separate the other thematic fragments. It would not be correct to identify H as a “theme.” As is clear from Figure

Figure 5.16 Theme H, “hesitation” themes in various forms

5.16, these fragments serve the same function but are not recognizably derived from one another. Themes A, B, and C start on pitch class G: H fragments provide contrast, usually emphasizing pitch class A or motion from A to B-flat. When found as a four-note unit, one of the pitches is a thirty-second note, often a low E. Adams sometimes used the low E or F-sharp as an extra note that does not function as a member of the thematic sequence. The Es and F-sharps nearly always appear between replications of A, B, or C, and often include a note of longer value. The original hesitation motive is G-A-B-flat, found in m. 2, and as the movement progresses the original is replaced with permutations of the third version listed below, note sequence E-A-B-flat.

Techniques of Melodic Transformation on the Phrase Level

It has been shown how Adams subjected his thematic material to transformation on the micro level. The opening sequence in mm. 1–23, shown in Figure 5.7, contains many examples of the micro type of transformation, but is also subjected to a second level of embellishment. For instance, the passage in mm. 48–64 repeats notes #25–98, subjected only to some octave dis-

Figure 5.17 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, mm. 1–23, opening sequence (solo clarinet part) with notes numbered ordinally

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placement. The passage in mm. 120–4 repeats #6–26, then #1–26, and mm. 129–33 repeats #1–26 then #1–22. In this variation the note sequence is heard as steady sextuplets, with an occasional pitch transposed up an octave. There are other examples throughout the movement, the

most elaborate of which occurs in mm. 94–102, a nearly complete replication of the opening sequence #1–79. Particularly interesting is the rhythmic transformation, where the notes with long values from the original become rests, and the dotted-sixteenth thirty-second pattern becomes a flurry of added thirty-second notes. Figure 5.18 illustrates the embellishment and their correspondence with the original note sequence, with added notes appearing as smaller note heads.

Figure 5.18 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, solo clarinet part, mm. 94–102, passage embellishing the primary thematic material

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One final example combines typical features found in Adams's music and ties together the discussions of harmonic and melodic processes found here. The passage in mm. 163–95 con-

tains changing sonorities with the use of modulation cue tones combined with modified versions of two lengthy versions of the opening material. In mm. 173–81 the sonority is the B-flat melodic minor scale. Melodically, the note sequence through mm. 169–83 is #1–121 in its original form. The narrow range of the opening material allows most of the sequence to remain untransposed and still be consonant within the distant sonority of B-flat melodic minor. The first part of the

Figure 5.19 *Gnarly Buttons*, first movement, mm. 181–3, showing the interjection of F-sharp and E in m. 182

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sequence, mm. 169–73, appears down a minor third. Measure 182 serves as the pivot, containing two tones projecting the upcoming E-minor sonority, F-sharp and E, and corresponds with m. 27. In the first seventy-one measures of the movement, the only F-sharp is found in m. 27. It has been demonstrated that Adams seems to have been carefully controlling the introduction of pcs, making the F-sharp in m. 27 an unexplained event. However, in the passage including m. 182, Adams uses that same F-sharp as a modulatory cue tone, perhaps only then displaying its true function. In mm. 184–7 the solo clarinet part continues with the note sequence from mm. 40–9,

or #167–220. Except for the first three measures of this passage, transposed down a minor third, the material remains at its original pitch level.

In the first one hundred measures of *Gnarly Buttons*, Adams displayed the two "audible processes" that are the main points of musical interest in the movement. Harmonically, he established a primary sonority, secondary pitches, and a method of collection modulation using preparatory tones. The first complete melodic sequence (mm. 1–22) presents the micro-level melodic and rhythmic embellishment, and the sequences of primary material that immediately follow (mm. 23–65) demonstrate the second layer of embellishment on a more macro level. These compositional choices aid the perceptibility of the processes, and in this way Adams adhered to the core values of early minimalism and expands on them at the same time.

Section 2: Harmonic Style: Basic Compositional Elements in Adams's Music, Leading Toward *Gnarly Buttons*

Harmonically, *Gnarly Buttons* exemplifies both the old and new within Adams's output. Many of his works can be characterized this way, but study of *Gnarly Buttons* provides a key snapshot of the continued development of harmonic advances pioneered in *The Death of Klinghoffer*. It demonstrates Adams's borrowing of elements from Stravinsky's ballets, late-Romantic parsimonious chord progressions, and techniques of ambiguity achieved through use of a double tonic. The narrative presented here is designed to explain some underlying principles of the composer's style, but also to demonstrate that his evolution is a natural outgrowth of his chosen materials and goals. In an effort to place *Gnarly Buttons* in its context within Adams's oeuvre, this section will focus primarily on works that lead up to *Gnarly Buttons*.

Root Movement in Thirds

Adams's predilection for root movement in thirds aligns him with Stravinsky and late-Romantic composers. The following chapter will demonstrate use of a tonal axis, tying his style to Stravinsky's. Those who have labelled Adams as a "neo-Romantic" likely have cast that term in the general direction of "expressive minimalist," but Adams's voice-leading tendencies also connect to late-Romantic harmonic practice, strengthening the label. *Nixon in China*, if held as a model of his early mature style, provides many examples of his progressions by third, using parsimonious voice leading.[101]

The opera's plot begins with a conversation between the Premiere Chou and President Nixon, occurring against the tonal backdrop of alternating C major and E minor chords, achieved through parsimonious shifts between pcs B and C (mm. 297–335). As the scene continues, Adams used parsimonious shifts to traverse two cycles of triads rooted major thirds apart: first the group with C, E, and A-flat as roots, then the group with F, A, and D-flat as roots. Figure 5.20[102] illustrates the harmonic language of a typical passage. The discussion will return to the specifics of this example, after discussion of theoretical methods of describing such chord progressions.

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[101]His use of thirds is already well-documented: Timothy Johnson offers some examples in his dissertation, which draws heavily from *Nixon in China*.

[102]The harmonic reduction in Figure 5.20 is an analysis of the vocal score. In the reduction, the measure lines designate sections prolonging a single chord. In passages including two chords, the chord labeled as a quarter note is an intervening harmony within the passage that is overall a prolongation of the chord labeled as a whole note.

Figure 5.20 *Nixon in China,* from Act I, Scene I, mm. 362–448, harmonic reduction

The Hyper-Hexatonic System[103]

The work of Johnson, Riemann, and Cohn can be combined, as a means to effectively describe such “progressions” of chords in a manner that fits Adams’s tendencies. Since Adams’s chord connections seldom utilize tonal voice-leading practices, Johnson’s term of “chord successions” is appropriate.[104] Since Adams most often employs root shifts of seconds and thirds, where two or three chord voices shift by step, Cohn’s *hyper-hexatonic system* is an effective way to describe Adams’s chord successions.[105] This system, reprinted from an 1996 Cohn article in Figure 5.21, incorporates Riemann’s *Tonnetz*, although the function Riemann describes as R, the

[103]In this paper the term *hexatonic* can refer to a collection of six major and minor triads with roots a major third apart, or the collection of pcs available within that chordal collection. The four arms of the Cohn’s hyper-hexatonic system are illustrated in Figure 6.2. Thus, H_0, often mentioned in this chapter, refers to the collection of triads: C major, C minor, E major, E minor, A-flat major and A-flat minor, or the pcs available within those six triads: C, E-flat, E, G, A-flat, and B.

[104]Timothy A. Johnson, *Harmony in the Music of John Adams: From “Phrygian Gates” to “Nixon in China,”* (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1991), 157.

[105]Richard Cohn, “Maximally Smooth Cycles, Hexatonic System, and the Analysis of Late-Romantic Triadic Progressions,” *Music Analysis* 15/1 (1996): 9–40.

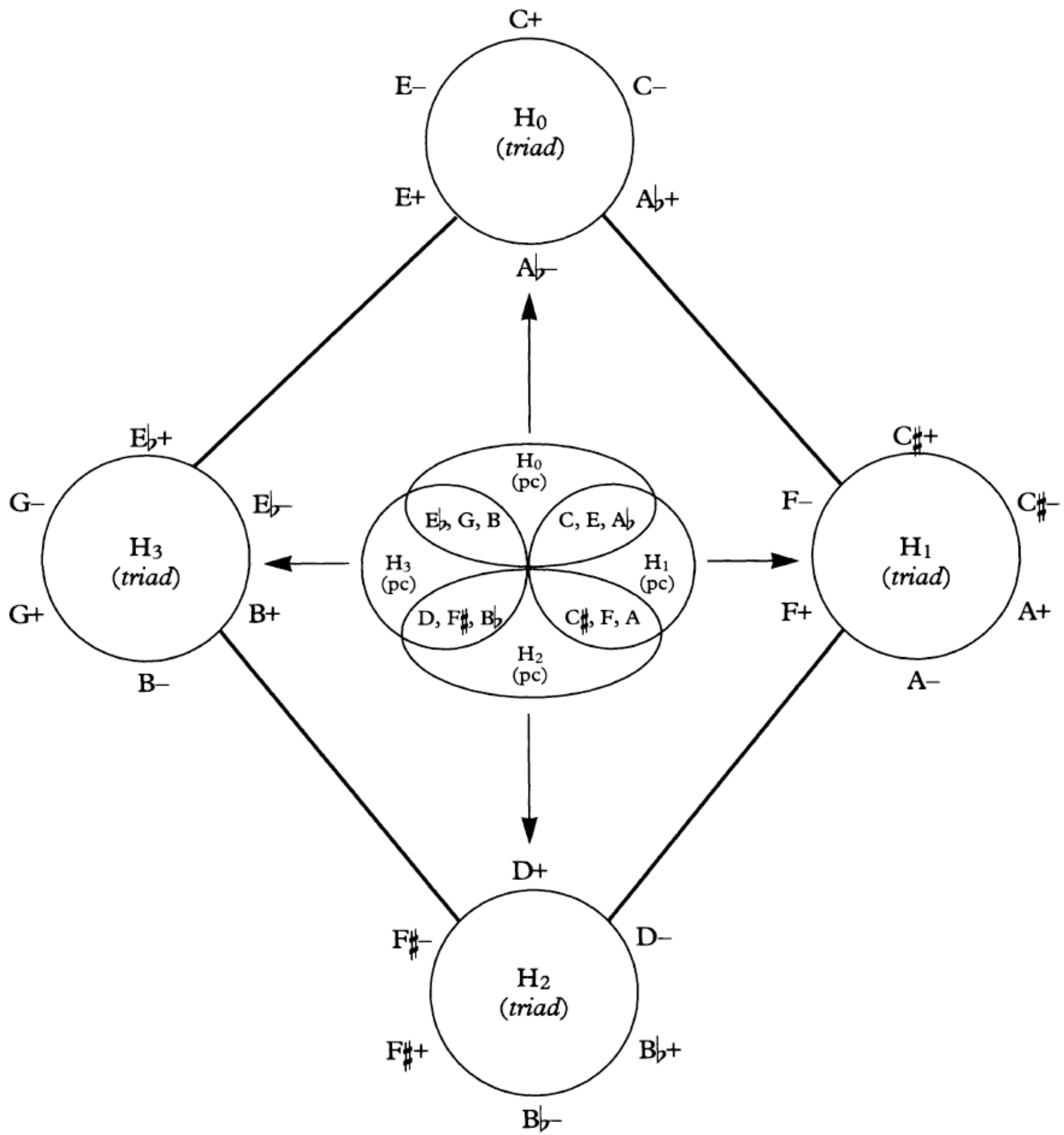
shift between relative keys, is not emphasized.[106] Root shifts of a major third are abundantly common in Adams's music, making the Cohn system appropriate and applicable. An additional advantage to Cohn's system is that it quickly describes chord successions where more than one voice shifts parsimoniously, which is difficult to describe within the *Tonnetz*. For example, the shift from C major in m. 409 to A-flat major in m. 411 could be described as PL, a shift to the parallel key of C minor followed by a leading-tone exchange resulting in an A-flat major chord. Within Cohn's system this shift is described as a transposition within one wheel of the hexatonic system H_0, simply as T_2. This paper will use T_x to describe shifts within a hexatonic group, *x* indicating the number of clockwise rotations within a single wheel on the hyper-hexatonic chart. Similarly, R_x will be used to describe transpositions from one hexatonic system to another, *x* indicating the number of clockwise rotations between wheels on the hyper-hexatonic chart. In other words, T_2(C+) = A-flat+, and R_2(C+) = D+.

In addition, it is helpful in the case of *Gnarly Buttons* to use Cohn's concept of *total voice-leading distance*,[107] especially in the third movement, where the increasing distance between chords in the successions serve a programmatic function: to depict Adams's father's growing paranoia and confusion while suffering from Alzheimer's Disease. In order to emphasize the use of *hexatonic poles*—two chords within one system that share no common tones—positive and negative transpositions will be notated. T_X refers to movement of X positions in the clockwise direction, and T_{-X} to movement of X positions in the counter-clockwise direction. This notation has the added convenience of indicating the number of chord tones that must shift by half-step simply by noting the absolute value of the transposition subscript. For example, a shift from

[106]Ibid., 24.

[107]Ibid., 25.

Figure 5.21 Richard Cohn's *hyper-hexatonic system*



F-sharp major to a B-flat major chord would be labeled as T_{-2}, indicating that two voices shift by half-step, namely F-sharp to F-natural and C-sharp to D-natural. Thus, transposition between hexatonic poles is labeled as T_3. Transpositions T_3 and T_{-3} map identically, making the notation T_{-3} unnecessary, and also indicates that all three triad voices move by half-step.

While Cohn is quick to caution the reader that the hexatonic system fills a gap in analysis and only provides a useful reading when tonal analysis fails, the system has a much higher rate of applicability to the music of Adams than to much common-practice-period music. In Adams's output there are a few exceptions, such as early works *Grand Pianola Music* and *Christian Zeal and Activity*, which display cliché tonal progressions for their sentimental or ironic value, but many passages in Adams's music from the mid-1980s onward can be explained using the hexatonic system.

Nearly all of the chords successions found in Figure 5.20 can be described within the hyper-hexatonic system. The first succession, from an E dominant-seventh chord in third inversion, resolving to an A-flat major triad, is the only one that requires additional explanation, because Cohn's system does not account for seventh chords. However, it is also consistent with late nineteenth-century voice-leading progressions. The D-natural and E-natural converge on E-flat parsimoniously, G-sharp is enharmonically respelled as A-flat, and B-natural moves parsimoniously to C-natural. Charles Smith described similar voice-leading resolutions of dominant-seventh chords in a 1986 *Music Theory Spectrum* article.[108]

[108]Charles J. Smith, "The Functional Extravagance of Chromatic Chords," *Music Theory Spectrum* 8 (Spring 1986): 94–139.

Typical Adams's Chord Successions in Thirds

The majority of the chord successions in Figure 5.20 are transpositions within a single hexatonic system, the Northern system, or H_0. The most common chord in the passage is the A-flat major triad, and through T_{-1}, T_2 , and T_{-2} transpositions, four of the six triads within H_0 are represented in the passage. In fact, E minor, a fifth member of H_0 and the hexatonic pole to A-flat major, appears just beyond the scope of the example, starting in m. 476.

These transpositions completely describe the passage if the forays into H_1 are thought of as upper-neighbor motion, akin to the tonal movement from tonic triad to subdominant. In mm. 386–9 and mm. 392–4, the harmony shifts between H_0 and H_1 using an R shift, a single voice moving a whole step between relative keys, the only *Tonnetz* shift with a single voice moving a whole-step, and the only *Tonnetz* shift that causes a mapping to another wheel of the hexatonic system. In the later passage, starting in m. 415, it is more problematic to characterize this passage as akin to tonic to subdominant since the root and fifth each move up a half-step in m. 417. However, from m. 415 to the chord with the highest tessitura, the D-flat major chord found between m. 419 and m. 430, all the voice-leading movement is upward. From m. 430 back to the return of the governing A-flat major chord in m. 442, all the voice-leading movement, with the exception of one ascending voice shift from A-flat to A-natural between m. 434 and m. 435, is downward. If these motions are thought of as temporary upper-neighbor displacements, the whole passage, from mm. 374–448 and possibly including the previous dominant-seventh chord rooted on E starting in m. 362 can be thought of as prolonging H_0. One could even take a step further and argue that within the context of this passage, H_0 is an expansion of an A-flat major chord.

Conflating harmonic and dramatic considerations further reinforces the previous discussion. Measure 373, containing the dominant-seventh chord rooted on E, marks the end of the

previous section. The logical, parsimonious, but unusual resolution of this chord to A-flat major marks a seam in the drama, preceding the main character Nixon's first sung words of the opera. In this section, each passage begins with several phrases within H_0, eventually moving to H_1. However, H_0 returns at m. 442 and again, more notably, in m. 582, coinciding with the return of Nixon's first line, "News!" While there are are chord successions in this passage that are not as easily explained by the hyper-hexatonic system, the majority of them are. Among the chord successions, by far the most common shift occurs within a hexatonic system, therefore with roots shifting by major third.

Hermeneutically, a chord succession by major third sounds paradoxically between an chordal movement and an act of standing still, the second chord heard equally as a chord change and or as a prolongation, perhaps with chromatic tinges, of the first chord. "Equal divisions [of the octave] are equally paradoxical from a Schenkerian/linear perspective, in part because they erode the fundamental distinction between consonance and dissonance. If we intuit the surface harmonic motions as equivalent, then we intuit them as equivalently consonant."[109] Schachter and Salzer comment on the disorienting effect of progressions of equal division of the octave: "we register the equal intervallic progressions without referring them to a supposed diatonic original. This temporary lack of a diatonic frame of reference creates, as it were, a suspension of tonal gravity."[110] It is difficult to reconcile equal divisions with Schenkerian principles: "Yet the relationship between the constituents of a symmetrical division and the diatonic *Stufen* is fundamentally indeterminate…. David Lewin emphasised the paradoxical and illusory aspects of such

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[109]Cohn, "Maximally Smooth," 11.

[110]Originally in Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 215.

motions, which at once divide their space equally and unequally, inducing a mild type of vertigo. The enharmonic shift can't be located: it occurs everywhere, and it occurs nowhere."[111]

An Example of Hexachordal Bichords from *Nixon in China*

The next example, shown in Figure 5.22, also from *Nixon in China*, reinforces the previous example but also suggests possibilities that Adams explored more fully in later works such as *The Death of Klinghoffer* and *Gnarly Buttons*. This passage provides many keys to Adams's later style, incorporating the hexatonic system but combining it with diatonic elements, the use of a

Figure 5.22 *Nixon in China*, Act 3, harmonic reduction of Chou's final aria*,* measure numbers indicated

[111]Cohn, "Maximally Smooth," 11. Originally appeared in David Lewin, "Amfortas's Prayer to Titurel and the Role of D in *Parsifal*: The Tonal Spaces of the Drama and the Enharmonic Cb/B," *19th-Century Music* 7/3 (1984): 345–9 and passim.

tonal axis, with its origins in the music of Stravinsky, and the use of *overlapping* harmonies.[112]

Like the previous example, the passage in Figure 5.22 centers around H_0, but only utilizes the minor triads within H_0.[113] Bichords are heard or implied in m. 848, m. 862, and m. 874, combining only tones available within H_0. Particularly interesting is mm. 872–4, with a sounding bass line that implies E major, indicated by the first dotted slur, followed by E minor, while C minor and G-sharp minor chords are heard in upper voices. Throughout the passage, Adams presented a C-minor chord with D in the lowest voice, first with the bass voice alternating between D and C, in mm. 857–8, and later without any resolution or melodic movement, such as mm. 868–9. This addition of D-natural, diatonic to C minor, represents a simple combination of hexatonic and diatonic space, and becomes even more interesting when juxtaposed against a G-sharp minor triad in mm. 861–2, creating two harmonic minor ninths.

While the term *bichord* applies well to this passage from *Nixon in China*, it is preferable to think of the passage as a simple form of chord *overlapping*. In later works such as *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *Gnarly Buttons, Naive and Sentimental Music,* and *Doctor Atomic,* bichords are common. However, the later the work, the less likelihood that the entrances and releases of individual chords will coincide, but rather are linked in a overlapping patchwork.

Adams is particularly fond of the chord succession found in mm. 850–5, with a single voice shifting back and forth by half-step. This motion, and its origins in the music of Stravinsky, will be discussed in detail in the next section. It is sufficient to describe it here as the essence of a

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[112]Within this paper, the term *overlapping* has a specific meaning: often achieved through orchestration, *overlapping* occurs when tones from one chord commingle dissociatively with another chord. The tones in question may even be chord members of the second chord, but are *overlapping* if heard dissociatively, and if they blur the boundary between the two chords.

[113]Referring to the hyper-hexatonic chart in Figure 5.21, H_0 is the collection of major and minor triads rooted on C, E, and A-flat.

tonal axis, where the centricity of C major and E minor can be implied with equal weight, as found in Stravinsky works such as *Symphony in C* and *Symphony in Three Movements*. There are many examples of Adams's use of this harmonic technique, and one example will be given here. Figure 5.23 shows the opening of the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons,* establishing a tonal axis between B-flat major and D minor chords. As the passage continues, Adams employed nearly all of the chords available within H_2, of which B-flat major and D minor are members.

Figure 5.23 *Gnarly Buttons*, third movement, mm. 5–17, illustration of chordal movement suggestive of a tonal axis

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Adams has experimented with hexatonic materials in various ways. In *The Wound-Dresser* (1988), the six notes of H_0 are used as a scale as the melodic material in the opening of the work, illustrated in Figure 5.24. This scale can easily be derived in other ways, as a symmetrical "mode of limited transposition" built from alternating minor and augmented seconds. Nevertheless, the chords in this passage can be derived from H_0, and include all pitches available within H_0. Adams does not seem to have favored this scale, because it is seen in few to none

Figure 5.24 Scalar expression of H_0 used in the opening of *The Wound-Dresser* (1988)

of his subsequent works. He has had much more success combining hexachordal chord successions with church mode, melodic minor and octatonic scale material, taking advantage of both the intersection and tension between the intervallic characteristics of each unique pitch collection.

Adams also uses root motion in major seconds or minor thirds, most often as a means of transition or to prepare cadences. Figure 5.25 illustrates a simple but representative example. This passage is an orchestral interlude that occurs after the opening chorus. This chorus, presented in the detached style of a Greek chorus, sets the socialist backdrop of China in the 1970s, with lines such as "The people are the heroes/Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow." This transition

Figure 5.25 *Nixon in China*, Act I, mm. 236–50, harmonic reduction

236–9 240–2 243–4 245–50

connects the chorus to the beginning of the action of the opera, Nixon's entrance discussed in the previous example. While the bass voice serves as a pedal on E-flat, the upper voices move in parallel whole steps, consecutive R_2 transpositions. As it turns out, many passages in *Gnarly Buttons* demonstrate similar tendencies, with emphasis on root motion of major thirds and a single hexatonic system within sections, and the use of whole-step or minor-third motion as transitional material between sections.

Adams's Preference for Sonorities Based on Fifths

Another apparent tie to Stravinsky is Adams's preference for trichords of projected fifths. Figure 5.26 illustrates a famous passage from Stravinsky's output, from the opening of the first act of *The Rake's Progress*, that is saturated in verticalized [027] trichords, using pcs [D, A, E] or [A, E, B].

Figure 5.26 Stravinsky, *The Rake's Progress*, piano reduction of mm. 1–5, Act 1, Scene 1

THE RAKE'S PROGRESS © Copyright 1951 Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reprinted by permission.

Just as a carefully placed major triad may imply centricity, Adams also uses dichords or trichords of perfect fifths to imply weak tonal centers. Study of his works reveals a specific preference for the projected fifths on the pitches [D, A, E], consistent with the example above, but also Cross's discussion of Adams's music in relation to the opening of *Petrushka*, which uses the four pcs [D, E, G, A] in its opening ostinato.[114] In some Adams's works such as *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, this trichord appears in a compact form within the range of one perfect fifth. Figure 5.27 presents an archetypal example.

[114]Cross, 175.

Figure 5.27 *Short Ride in a Fast Machine,* clarinet parts*,* mm. 2–3

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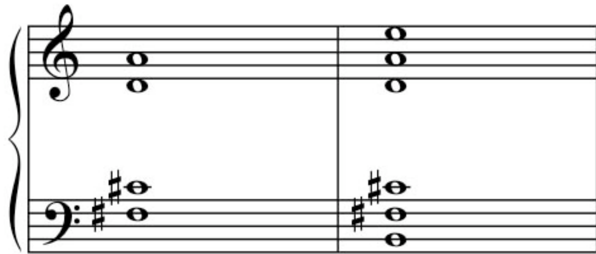
Just as common are perfect fifths projected over the range of a major ninth. In addition, he tends to combine two dichords or trichords built on fifths to express a diatonic collection, in a configuration that accentuates one or both of the half-steps found in the diatonic collection. Adams uses this type of chord spacing flexibly, but the frequency with which he combines [D, A, E] with [B, F-sharp, C-sharp] or [F-sharp, C-sharp] qualifies the sonority in Figure 5.28 for a special name as a *signature sonority* of the composer. This sonority was already seen in *The Chairman Dances,* shown in Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2.

In the next section, it will be suggested that Adams sometimes uses these sonorities toward the creation of a *tonal axis*. Even when not implying a tonal axis, Adams can create ambiguity or at least a changing perception of centricity with chords built on perfect fifths through

Figure 5.28 Adams's signature sonority, two dichords or [027] trichords connected by half-step



registral and temporal elements.

The same sonority, using the same pcs, is also found in the opening measures of *Road Movies,* shown in Figure 5.29. Within the first beat, the pianist outlines the two central fifths linked by half-step. In m. 3 the violin part introduces the first E-natural, adding a fifth pc into the operant collection. In this case the next pitch that emerges, found in m. 10, is a G-sharp. This choice can still be explained in terms of fifths: rather than adding the fifth below F-sharp, he added a perfect fifth above C-sharp. He used projected fifths linked by half-step to define the diatonic collection [A, B, C-sharp, D, E, F-sharp, G-sharp].

A subset of the same pcs in a similar arrangement can be found in several passages in *The Death of Klinghoffer*, prominently in mm. 44–5 of the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons,* and undoubtedly many other passages. Transposed and otherwise modified versions are found throughout Adams's music, and Figure 5.30 offers one example. An F-minor chord is expanded through the addition of D-flat, immediately creating tension between two pcs a major third apart, D-flat and F. The third measure in the figure, which reconfigures the octave placement of the A-

Figure 5.29 *Road Movies*, first movement, mm. 1–5

Violin

mf

always with a slight swing

Piano

mf

Vln.

Pno.

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Figure 5.30 *The Death of Klinghoffer,* "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians," pitch reduction

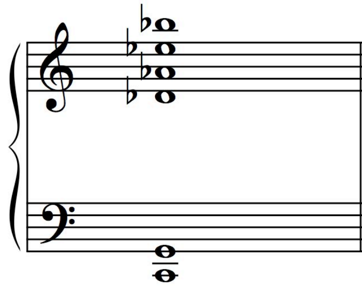
m. 1 m. 7 m.7 respelled

flat and D-flat, illustrates that the second sonority is related to, and as it turns out, is virtually equivalent to Adams's signature sonority in its ambiguous function.

Three Examples From *Gnarly Buttons*

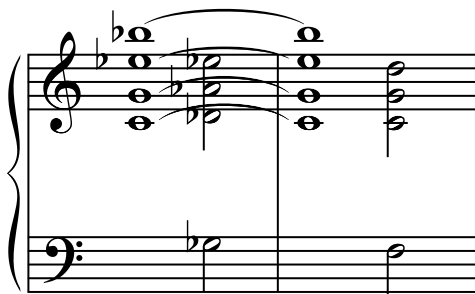
The following three passages from *Gnarly Buttons* emphasize the prevalence of these aforementioned techniques in Adams's music and suggest the way that he uses fifths, preparing the way for topics in the following section, primarily *tonal axes* and *overlapping.* Before their presentation, it is important to include a preliminary example from *The Death of Klinghoffer* that illustrates another common configuration of fifths found in Adams's music, shown in Figure 5.30. In this passage, on the word "teeth" the dissonant sonority found in the choral parts resolves to a simple C-minor triad or C-minor seventh chord: the D-flat and A-flat are resolved downward to C and G. The pcs in the figure are all diatonic within a C minor, Phrygian context. While Johnson, using the system in his dissertation, would label this sonority as "Phrygian" and stop there, it seems likely that Adams is drawn toward minor chords in a Phrygian context for a distinct compositional purpose, because of the ambiguity and flexibility available within that sonority. In addition, it turns out that minor chords, expressed in a Phrygian or Aeolian scalar context, connect directly to Stravinsky's use of a *tonal axis.*

Figure 5.31 *The Death of Klinghoffer,* “Chorus of Exiled Palestinians,” penultimate sonority built on fifths



Many of Adams’s works from the 1980s begin with the presentation of fifths or [027] trichords. In *Gnarly Buttons*, none of the movements begin this way, but the first and second movements each contain a tonally and rhythmically unstable passage which emphasizes fifths and [027] trichords, placed approximately where the listener might expect an unstable developmental section in a sonata movement. Perfect fifths are harmonically stable, but Adams creates instability through voice-leading and complex rhythmic textures. Figure 5.32 illustrates a passage of this type from the second movement of *Gnarly Buttons* that employs Adams’s characteristic voice-leading. The first sonority combines two fifths with another sonority, made up of four

Figure 5.32 *Gnarly Buttons,* third movement, mm. 201–25, reduction of harmonic motion



stacked fifths. With the inclusion of G-flat in the second sonority, the combination is superdiatonic[115] and only becomes diatonic in resolution when the [G-flat, D-flat, A-flat, E-flat] chord resolves to [F, C, G, D]. This alternation occurs nine times in the passage. An additional fifth, on [B, F-sharp], found in the violin and piano parts in m. 220 and m. 224, imply a further, enharmonically respelled extension of the second sonority to [C-flat, G-flat, D-flat, A-flat, E-flat].

Figure 5.33 uses similar voice-leading and also a rhythmically dissonant texture. The orchestral parts, while not included in the example, combine a texture of steady eighth notes with occasional eighth-note triplets. The clarinet part, shown in the example, provides an additional

Figure 5.33 *Gnarly Buttons,* first movement, mm. 218–27, fifths used in unstable passage

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[115]The term *superdiatonic field* is defined by Johnson in his dissertation and subsequent article as a diatonic texture with additional non-diatonic pcs present.

layer of complexity. Like the previous example, in this passage Adams implies an alternation between two fifths, [C, G] and [D-flat, A-flat]. The passage is entirely diatonic to the key signature of A-flat major, with the exception of one D-natural found in m. 223. The bassoon part alternates between emphasis of F and D-flat, consistent with the opening of *The Death of Klinghoffer* and the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons*, proposing dual centricity on those two pitches.

The last example included here is the most harmonically complex and prepares the reader for the discussion in the next section on temporal techniques, those that depend on their placement in time for their dramatic effectiveness. Figure 5.34 is typical of Adams's use of fifths in works from the mid- to late 1990s. Like the previous example, the fifths are used to create instability, but the instability of passage in Figure 5.34 relies more on chromaticism than on rhythm. The two dotted slurs indicate [027] trichords whose third chord member is delayed until a following downbeat. The reduction in the figure converts melodically expressed fifths and [027]s into harmonic events, and the simple analysis reveals tendencies demonstrated in earlier examples. Adams's common technique of shifting fifths by half-step is seen in mm. 236–8. The A-flat and E-flat found in the bass clef momentarily deflect to G and C in m. 237 and then return. His tendency to create sonorities with fifths connected by half-step can be seen at the end of the example in mm. 240–41 as he places trichord [B, F-sharp, C-sharp] above [E-flat, B-flat].

In Figure 5.34, overlapping creates the dissonance. The clarinet part remains on [D-flat, A-flat] while the [G, D] is heard in a lower range, and trails the orchestra in the introduction of [B, F-sharp] in mm. 240–1. Compared to his works from the 1980s, this passage demonstrates a new and innovative use of time for Adams, with a more complex texture developed from previous techniques.

Figure 5.34 *Gnarly Buttons*, second movement, mm. 234–41, harmonic reduction illustrating overlapping fifths and [027]s

Solo clarinet part

Orchestra part - keyboard 1, keyboard 2, violin 1, violin 2, viola, cello

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The concepts in this section extend the work of Johnson and Pellegrino. While the first section of analysis on the first movement demonstrates the applicability of Johnson's ideas about Adams's harmony, it also shows the need to modify them to best describe Adams's more recent music. The following section will address *why* Adams chooses some of the materials he does, not

just provide a method for localized description of harmony as Johnson's *chord, sonority,* and *field* designation does. Catherine Pellegrino discusses Adams's use of fifths and [027] trichords extensively. She wrote that "The [027] trichord pervades Adams's music from the years 1977–1989 to a degree unequalled by any other pitch-class group (except, in some cases, the major and minor triads)."[116] She also noted Adams's tendency to connect fifths by half-step and recognized the ambiguity and dramatic possibilities of Adams's signature sonority, but does not offer thorough discussion on those topics. While much of Adams's music of the 1990s does not yet enjoy the benefits of published analyses, previous work does offer some helpful tools toward that exploration since many elements in Adams's evolution as a composer have developed from his previous ideas.

Section 3: Advanced Techniques in Adams's Music From *Nixon in China* Through *Gnarly Buttons*: Temporal Elements, Overlapping Sonorities, and Harmonic Ambiguity

Observations found in the previous section are essential to the understanding of John Adams's music, but even more essential is knowledge of how those devices are used in time. This section presents compositional techniques that depend on the dimension of time.

Revisiting an passage discussed briefly in Chapter 4—the opening of *The Chairman Dances*—provides a good example. For the sake of convenience, those examples are reprinted here as Figure 5.35 and 5.36. One additional event not shown in Figure 5.35 is the entrance of the cellos and basses in m. 9, on a low B-natural, completing the lower trichord. This example is

[116] Pellegrino, 63.

typical in its temporal treatment of Adams's signature sonority. The upper trichord is heard first, in compact formation, in the bassoon and viola parts. In this configuration, it is difficult for the listener to choose a tonal center from among the three given pitches, though the D seems like the least likely candidate, heard as a lower neighbor to the E on the downbeat. The addition of two pitches in the lower trichord in the clarinets and horns does not clarify matters: at that point the sonority is likely heard as ambiguous. The F-sharp and C-sharp, in lower tessitura, because of the stability of a perfect fifth, imply the root and fifth of a triad. However, the sonority as a whole can be considered as a D-rooted chord in inversion, a major-major seventh, major ninth chord, on D, F-sharp, A, C-sharp and E. The entrance of the piccolo makes a case for D as the key center, and the violoncello/double bass entrance on B causes yet another reinterpretation of the chord, as a B-minor seventh chord, with an added ninth and eleventh.

Figure 5.35 *The Chairman Dances*, mm. 1–6, orchestral reduction

bassoons and violas

clarinets and horns

4

piccolo 1

Figure 5.36 *The Chairman Dances*, mm. 1–9, reduction to pitch events

m. 1 m. 3 m. 9

Through this temporally planned presentation Adams was able to maximize the drama available within this spacing of purely diatonic materials. The use of fifths is important because they imply stability. The delay of the bass pitches, a technique that forces listeners to reinterpret the context of sonorities previously heard, is the most essential feature and likely one derived from music by Steve Reich.

Like the opening of *The Chairman Dances,* in *Tromba lontana* (1985) Adams used the range, order, and timing of pcs to achieve an remarkable effect within the limits of the diatonic pitch collection.[117] After establishing an [027] sonority [G, D, A], a fourth pc is introduced in the bass, an F-sharp on a weak beat. For purposes of the reduction shown in Figure 5.37, the F-sharp and C are labeled as occurring in m. 4 and m. 6, respectively. However, in each case the entrance of the bass note anticipates the downbeat slightly. In this passage, the solo trumpet and cello/bass part outline a dominant seventh chord on D while the other parts continue to reinforce [027] on G, D, and A. By presenting the notes in the middle register first, using constant quarter and

[117]*Tromba lontana* is most accurately described as a diatonic work with a few *superdia-tonic* sonorities. To achieve the maximum effect, Adams sometimes places a nondiatonic pitch in the bass voice.

Figure 5.37 *Tromba lontana*, mm. 1–4, reduction of score to first three pitch events

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eighth notes, Adams implies this sonority as the governing "chord" of the passage. Heard at the outset of the movement, the G enjoys a position of prominence and is also strengthened and stabilized by the presence of the perfect fifth above it. Thus an F-sharp, placed a minor ninth below that G, is a dissonant and ironic choice, and its placement on weak beats further strengthens the implication that it is a non-functional voice.

As discussed in Chapter 4, these techniques draw from the music of Steve Reich. Reich's tendency to establish a chord in the middle register and subject that chord to changing perception by proposing numerous bass notes provides an interesting diatonic texture that does not depend on a drone. Pitches sounding above a drone are heard in relationship to the drone. Most often a drone is heard as consonant, and higher pitches are heard as consonant or dissonant depending on their intervallic relationship to the drone and one another. *Tromba lontana* demonstrates the extension of Reich's technique using pitch choice and temporal factors to prevent the bass voice from being heard as a drone or root. This technique found in *Tromba lontana* is common to many of Adams's works.[118]

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[118]*Tromba lontana* also is an interesting study in large-scale voice-leading, found in dissertations by Johnson, 237–50, and Pellegrino, 91–5.

More Sophisticated Overlapping Starting with *The Death of Klinghoffer*

The first few pcs introduced in the opening of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, in the chorus titled “Chorus of Exiled Palestinians,” were illustrated in the previous section in Figure 5.28. Figure 5.38 offers a more complete look at those opening measures. This passage builds a similar

Figure 5.38 *The Death of Klinghoffer*, “Chorus of Exiled Palestinians,” mm. 5–10, orchestral reduction illustrating the first two challenges to the F minor chord, a D-flat and a D-flat major-minor seventh chord

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sonority to the opening of *The Chairman Dances* but presents the pcs in a different order. The first six measures outline an F-minor chord and the next unique pc that is heard is D-flat. As discussed in the previous section, the sonority found in m. 7 is virtually equivalent to Adams’s signature sonority. As will be shown later in this section, the D-flat provides not only a dissonance against the prolonged C but also could be used as second candidate for centricity to the F.

As described before, followers of Adams's music and the composer himself view *The Death of Klinghoffer* as the watershed for his expansion of style. That expansion manifests itself in the way Adams added pcs to his signature sonority in *Klinghoffer* as well. Most often, when a sonority resembling his signature sonority is used, at least two perfect fifths remain, as in the first sonority in Figure 5.28. Sometimes, Adams expands this sonority into a bichord by adding a pc, dividing each fifth into thirds, which will result in a hexatonic collection, whether diatonic or non-diatonic. Figure 5.39 illustrates the four possible ways that the sonority can be filled in to form hexatonic bichords with D and F-sharp as roots. All pcs shown in Figure 5.39 are available

Figure 5.39 Adams's *signature sonority* and expansions of that sonority, into *diatonic* and *hexatonic* space

within hexatonic wheel H_2.[119] While Adams is more likely to employ non-diatonic pairs of bichords in works from *The Death of Klinghoffer* forward, hexatonic combinations of minor chords have already been presented in Figure 5.22, an example from *Nixon in China*.

In fact, in the 1990s, Adams seems to have favored minor chords related by major thirds, especially those passages utilizing overlapping bichords, such as those shown in Figure 5.22. Figures 5.40 and 5.41 offers a simple example from the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons*, from the middle of a phrase that moves through several chords in H_1, A minor, F major, C-sharp mi-

[119]Referring to Cohn's hyper-hexatonic system, see Figure 5.21.

nor, and F minor.[120] Figure 5.40 offers some harmonic context of the overall passage, and Figure 5.40 illustrates how Adams combined two hexachordally-related minor chords rooted on C-sharp

Figure 5.40 *Gnarly Buttons*, third movement, mm. 71–82, harmonic reduction

mm. 71–3 mm. 74–6 mm. 77–8 mm. 79–82

Figure 5.41 *Gnarly Buttons,* third movement, mm. 77–9, overlapping harmony and rhythmic dissonance

77
solo clarinet
piano and guitar

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and F. In the overall passage, each chord lasts for three measures, except the third chord, in mm. 77–8, lasts only two measures in the orchestra part. The solo clarinet part, however, has three measures of C-sharp minor and thus clashes with the orchestral part in m. 79. Adams set up an expectation of harmonic rhythm and then denied that expectation and added further dissonance in m. 79, albeit rhythmic, placing the subdivision of five in the solo part against the duple subdi-

[120]Again, H_1 refers to Cohn's system, see Figure 5.21.

vision in the orchestra part.[121] E and G-sharp should not be heard as very dissonant to the F-minor chord, but as the E is sustained it is likely heard as a member of a bichord rather than as the major seventh in the F-minor chord. It is heard as a chordal *trace*, a term coined by Steve Larson, and this passage reinforces the validity of Larson's concept.[122] It is also an example of the application of Adams's "earbox" concept for a single-line instrument like the clarinet, where implied harmony is linearized, converted into a melodic fragment.

Figure 5.42 *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Act I, scene 1, mm. 24–32, prominent oboe solo with orchestral reduction

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[121]This is the first of three examples presented in this chapter that include the primary melodic part prolonging a harmony after the accompaniment changes. See also Figure 5.43 and Figure 5.44.

[122]Steve Larson, "The Problem of Prolongation in *Tonal* Music: Terminology, Perception, and Expressive Meaning," *Journal of Music Theory* 41/1 (1997): 104.

As described in Chapter 1, *The Death of Klinghoffer* marked the beginning of a period of stylistic expansion. Figure 5.42 illustrates one such passage demonstrating this evolution, bringing together Adams's preference for minor chords, his signature sonority, and increasingly complex overlapping of sonorities. In Act I, Scene 1, the most common harmonic motion is alternation of F-sharp minor and D minor-major-seventh chords, found in this example. The third and fifth of the F-sharp minor triad are retained as common or overlapping tones with a D minor triad. The first four measures of the oboe solo present Adams's signature sonority once again, even emphasizing the same pitch classes found in earlier examples, [D, A, E] and [F-sharp, C-sharp], and adding G-sharp in m. 28, completing the [027] trichord on [F-sharp, C-sharp, G-sharp]. In m. 30 the lower voices shift to a D-minor chord while A and C-sharp are retained in upper voices, blurring the line between common-tone and dissonant overlapping.

Figure 5.43 features non-hexachordal overlapping of scales and chords. The upper parts, women's voices and strings, prolong F-minor scales, with some modal flexibility between Dorian and melodic minor. The passage in the example does not emphasize F or any other pc as a tonic, and the chords shift primarily in parallel major seconds, offering a sense of drifting movement, musically depicting people displaced from their homeland. In fact, all three parts are elaborations of descending scales: even the lowest voices in the bass clef, from m. 86 to the end of the example, are root-position major triads whose roots come from the F melodic-minor scale. The string part descends two or three times, from B-flat, and the voice part, while more elaborate, descends from E stepwise until reaching a D a ninth below, by m. 87. For a work clearly modelled on

Figure 5.43 *The Death of Klinghoffer*, "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians," mm. 83–90, interaction of scales and chords

83

women's voices

strings

keyboard, with rhythmic reduction

86

89

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Bach's *Passion* settings, it is fitting that Adams used scalar descent—referring to Renaissance and Baroque word-painting techniques—as a detached, objective, but emotionally charged way of depicting the plight of the Palestinian people.[123]

Gnarly Buttons extends overlapping techniques found in *The Death of Klinghoffer*. Figure 5.44 is a reduction of one of the most interesting passages, one that combines many concepts already discussed. Within the first few measures Adams created a disorienting clash between dia-

Figure 5.44 *Gnarly Buttons*, third movement, mm. 36–45, diatonic and hexatonic materials in combination, creating a *dissociative* effect

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[123]Michael Steinberg, *The Adams Reader*, 129.

tonic and hexachordal elements. The excerpt, still in the opening section of the third movement, is the beginning of the transition preparing the first cadence of the movement. While the second section emphasizes F-major and A-minor chords, and the H_1 hexatonic complex, the first is rooted in H_2 and emphasizes B-flat major and D-minor chords, evident at the beginning of the example, in mm. 36–40. The bassoon part sustains B through mm. 38–41, heard as a diatonic tension on the D-minor chord, like the sixth scale degree in D Dorian.

The music seems to split into independent strands in m. 41 as the strings continue to imply D minor, the bassoon sustains B, but the "strumming" part in the keyboard shifts hexatonically to B-flat minor. Most striking about this moment is that the musical elements change logically within the expectations Adams has set up for each element, yet the resulting sound is dissonant and peculiar. As the phrase continues Adams's signature sonority can be found yet again, in the key Adams seems to favor, in m. 44 preceded by a bichord of hexachordally-related minor triads in m. 43. Consistent with the hypothesis that Adams favors superimposed minor chords, m. 43–4 also illustrates the ease of voice-leading between a D minor/F-sharp minor bichord to his signature sonority.

In this movement Adams depicted his father's growing delusion, paranoia, and confusion as the Alzheimer's progressed, using techniques of overlapping and a hexachordal/diatonic mixture. In addition, it is interesting to assess the perception of "dissociation" in relation to his treatment of harmonic and melodic materials. Lynne Rogers's concept of "dissociation," related to the music of Stravinsky, defines the idea as follows:

> The works of Igor Stravinsky have often been noted for the strikingly individual characteristics that so readily identify their composer. One of the most remarkable of these Stravinskian 'calling cards' is *dissociation*, a contrapuntal structure that organizes the texture into highly differentiated and harmonically independent mu-

> sical layers. Dissociation in Stravinsky's music may be seen as a type of counterpoint, but one that differs profoundly from traditional, tonal counterpoint. On the other hand, dissociation, a counterpoint of layers, does not assume such integration. Instead, the audible separation of contrasting, superimposed layers of musical material is primary, prohibiting the formulation of a vertically unifying harmonic progression or pattern of simultaneities.[124]

Figure 5.43 and 5.44 offer evidence that Adams's music, too, has dissociative properties. His music from the 1980s shows a preference for layering and stratification, but he generally used diatonic materials, perhaps with one or two non-diatonic pitches added, partitioning those pitches between layers or orchestrational groupings. In those pieces, works such as *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, *Harmonium*, and *Tromba lontana*, Johnson's characterization of long stretches of music with a single diatonic or superdiatonic label is fitting. However, from *The Death of Klinghoffer* forward, while many of his previous techniques are still in use, there is constant harmonic motion, and often the harmonic progression itself is layered, with each independent strand changing harmony at a different time. Perhaps the most disorienting feature of the two movements represented in Figure 5.43 and Figure 5.44 is that these movements begin in a "non-dissociative" fashion then become dissociative as the movement gains expressive momentum.

In the case of "The Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" from *The Death of Klinghoffer*, the movement starts in a diatonic context, favoring F-minor and D-flat major chords, and presents a prominent B, as will be discussed later in this section. For the most part, however, the outer voices and inner melodic voices are diatonic. The "strumming" part in the middle register provides the majority of the chromaticism, commonly with voice-leading moving by step.

Similarly, in the passage in Figure 5.44, the outer voices remain diatonic to D Dorian, while the "strumming" part in the middle register moves chromatically within a hexatonic sys-

[124]Rogers, 477.

tem. However, an additional rhetorical device is in place. As Adams described it, "the melody is so intimately wedded to the harmonic change,"[125] clearly visible if one inspects Figure 4.7, Figure 5.23, and Figure 5.44 together. The primary motive sets the words "Put Your Loving Arms Around Me" over and again, and Adams aligns the chord changes with the dotted-eighth note on the syllable "round" of "around." The previous section offered brief mention of voice-leading distance, and a quick analysis of the voice-leading may illustrate empirically what is musically clearly evident. At the movement's onset the midpoint of each appearance of the primary motive, shown in Figure 4.7, is marked with a change of chord. In the opening 21 measures, that motive appears six times, and each time has a corresponding chordal change in the same position in the phrase. In Figure 5.23 this relationship can be seen in mm. 7, 10, 13, and 17. In addition, that connection between motive and chord rhetorically creates an inception point of musical danger; each time the motive is presented, the potentiality increases that the chordal change will be to a more foreign or distant chord. As the movement progresses the melodic material sounds increasingly agitated, even disoriented as the harmonic terrain becomes unpredictable. In this way Adams offers another portrayal of "gnarly," likely depicting his father's diminishing ability to stay connected to reality as he suffered from Alzheimer's.

Adams's Use of Harmonic Ambiguity

The rest of this chapter addresses an important sub-category of temporally based techniques, those creating ambiguity. Earlier it was demonstrated that Adams sometimes creates interest in the gradual way that he introduces pcs in a diatonic collection. He can create tension

[125]Adams, interview by the author.

even when using purely diatonic materials in a static, non-tonal way. In some cases Adams uses complex rhythms, independent layers, and multiple themes competing for supremacy. He also incorporates techniques of harmonic ambiguity to create interest and tension. The last section of analysis will explore two techniques of ambiguity Adams used in *Gnarly Buttons* to create interest. It will draw from many of his other works, to demonstrate that ambiguity is a core facet of his style influencing many of his compositional decisions, including harmonic, textural, and thematic choices.

Newcomers to Adams's music are likely struck by his musical borrowing from the minimalists, but he has also been influenced by late-Romantic composers. The previous section illustrated his favoritism for chord movement in thirds and parsimonious voice-leading, techniques pioneered by composers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By restricting root motion to seconds and thirds, Adams is able to use simple triads and other materials common to tonal music while avoiding clichés of common-practice period harmony, with all its built-in expectations for harmonic and melodic movement.[126]

In addition, a related late-Romantic and early twentieth-century technique will be discussed here: the *double tonic* or *tonal axis.* Whichever term best applies to Adams's music, both refer to the situation where two pcs compete for centricity, pitches a third apart. Robert Bailey, in his seminal article about Richard Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*, outlined the concept of

[126]In a few exceptional pieces from his earliest stylistic period, notably *Grand Pianola Music* (1982) and *Christian Zeal and Activity* (1973), Adams uses some tonal progressions.

a *double tonic*.[127] In the discussion to follow about Adams's music, this term is applicable, but Adams does not use tonal harmonic motion to imply multiple tonal centers.

In terms of dual centricity, Adams's compositional technique does seem more closely aligned with the music of Stravinsky. His use of Stravinsky's techniques such as stratification and layering have been well described by Catherine Pellegrino and Jonathan Cross.[128] Adams's use of competing tonal centers is best described using Straus's model of a *tonal axis,* since both Adams and Stravinsky used such techniques without depending on tonal harmonic progressions.[129] More importantly, most examples of Adams's usage of the technique involve a tonal axis that outlines a major triad with a major seventh, correlating with Stravinsky's quintessential example of *Symphony in C*, which implies both C major and E minor.

One passage found early in *Nixon in China* uses the same tonal axis as the *Symphony in C*, using the pitch classes C, E, G, and B. For example, the first sung notes of the opera, musically setting a conversation between the Premiere Chou and President Nixon, occur against the tonal backdrop of alternating C major and E minor chords, achieved through parsimoniously shifting between B and C (mm. 297–335). From mm. 345–59, alternation of E-minor and G-minor triads implies a tonal axis of E, G, B/B-flat, D and bears a strong resemblance to Straus's description of *Oedipus Rex*, with a tonal axis demonstrating a polarity between G-B and B-flat-D.

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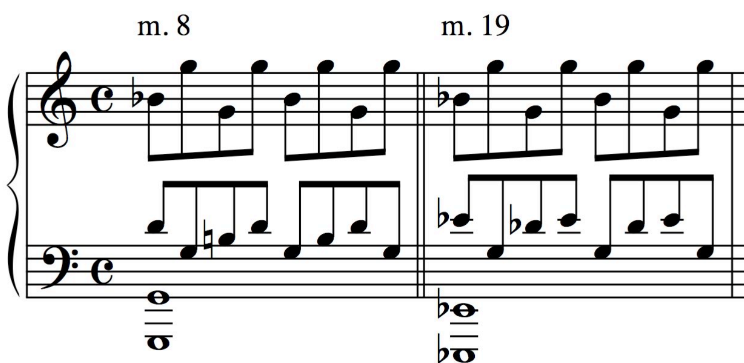
[127]Robert Bailey, "An Analytical Study of the Sketches and Drafts," in *Prelude and Transfiguration from "Tristan and Isolde,"* ed. Robert Bailey, Norton Critical Scores (New York and London: Norton, 1985): 113–46.

[128]See Pellegrino diss. and Cross, 174–8.

[129]Joseph N. Straus, "Stravinsky's *Tonal Axis*," *Journal of Music Theory* 26/2 (1982): 261–90.

The opening measures of Act I, Scene 2 uses a similar pitch collection to the most central pitch collection in Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*.[130] The scene in the Adams opera begins with G, B-flat, B-natural, and D. Unlike the previous examples, Adams did not use this collection to present G and B-flat as polarized, competing tonal centers. After the first dozen measures it becomes apparent that the two competing sonorities are major chords rooted on G and E-flat, with an added D-flat in the E-flat chord. The opening collection of pitches hints at that duality, but its ambiguity maximizes the dramatic effect of the accented introduction of E-flat in the bass register in m. 18. Figure 5.45 illustrates the two poles. The initial meaning of the eighth-note parts in the treble and tenor range becomes clear with the entrance of G in the bass. Despite the unexplained B-flat, the governing sonority is of a G major triad. The B-flat and initial sonority only makes complete sense in m. 18, when the E-flat is heard.

Figure 5.45 *Nixon in China*, Act I, Scene 2, illustration of harmonic ambiguity and duality



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[130]See Straus, "*Tonal Axis*," 271.

This example implies more than a simple third relation, and a more complex form of tonal axis than a C-E-G-B axis expressed through one voice shifting parsimoniously between B and C. The initial sonority of G, B-flat, B-natural, and D does not make much sense by itself, but is successfully explained as a tonal axis when the B-flat is considered a part of the E-flat harmony that weakens the centricity of the G. The repeated alternation of the two chords also seems to connect to Stravinsky's treatment of a tonal axis.

These examples from *Nixon in China* are relevant to Adams's later music, including *Gnarly Buttons.* The third movement of *Gnarly Buttons* is the second in a group of three related pieces: this trio also includes the "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" from *The Death of Klinghoffer* and the first movement of *Naive and Sentimental Music*. All three develop a style that uses a song-like texture that, on the surface, has a texture that could have been derived from rock ballads of the 1980s. Discussed previously in Chapter 1, Adams describes this texture as "strum," with steady, pulsing triads played in eighth notes in the middle register.[131] At least three melodic parts are also found, two above the chordal part and one below. A presentation of key passages from each of these works demonstrates Adams continued use of a tonal axis, but increased overlapping of the polarized sonorities. "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" bears some striking similarities to Act I, Scene 2 from *Nixon in China*. The movement opens on a tonal axis including D-flat, F, A-flat, and C, with two proposed tonal centers on a D-flat major chord and on an F-minor chord. Like the previous example, the D-flat major chord often has an added minor seventh, enharmonically spelled as a B-natural. In the opening, the bass part alternates between D-flat and F, but not exactly in conjunction with the changing pitches in the chordal part.

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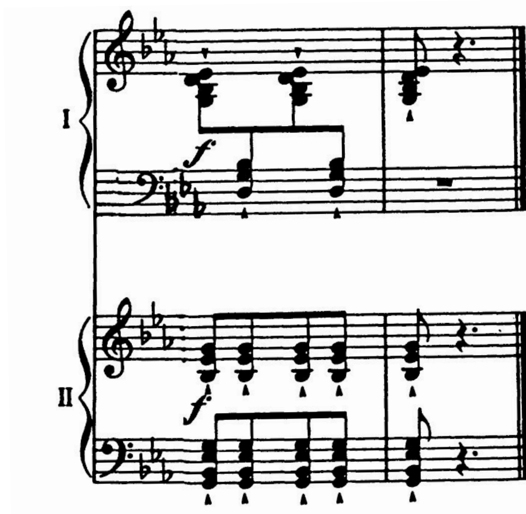
[131]Adams, interview by the author.

In this passage, an F-minor chord is heard without challenge for the first six measures. In m. 7 the melody reaches D-flat, and the pitch is added into the keyboard part, while the bass remains on F. This arrangement, a minor chord with added minor sixth, also received significant discussion in Straus's article, referring to the closing passage of the *Dumbarton Oaks* concerto that includes the pitches G, B-flat, D and E-flat in a similar arrangement. Straus explains this sonority is

> emblematic not of harmonic inversion but rather of tonal polarity. The *G* is placed in the bass of the chord as a final statement of the essential tonal duality of the movement. The movement begins with the tonal axis with an orientation toward *G Bb D*; it end with the same axis, only now with an orientation toward *Eb G Bb*. The tonal axis defines and circumscribes the tonal discourse of the movement. Motion takes place within the axis, but the axis itself remains unaltered as the fixed frame of reference for the entire movement.[132]

Figure 5.46 From Straus, "Stravinsky's *Tonal Axis*," p. 267, example of quintessential spacing of tonal axis between E-flat and G in Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks*



In other words, this spacing, also seen in m. 7 of Figure 5.37, can be taken as a practical expression of a *tonal axis*, even as a symbol of that duality. Arthur Berger, in a much earlier arti-

[132]Straus, 268.

cle, made a related observation about *Dumbarton Oaks*, that "To claim that the finale of *Dumbarton Oaks* is 'Phrygian' discloses nothing of the peculiar symbiotic relationship between scales with common referential collection but different interval orderings."[133] Adams repeatedly uses sonorities equivalent to the one presented by Straus in Figure 5.46, as demonstrated in this document through multiple examples. In addition, Adams also sets up interplay between two competing tonics, through gentle alternation, as in the "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" or the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons*, or in more intense competition as found in *Lollapalooza.* From these examples, identification of Stravinsky techniques as Adams's source is a reasonable conclusion.

More detailed analysis of Figure 5.38 strengthens this assertion. Not only does the spacing of this chord lend the passage some ambiguity, so does Adams's treatment of the dissonant D-flat. D-flat must be heard as the dissonance here, rather than C, since all the measures previous to m. 7 iterate a simple F-minor chord. This example demonstrates the flexibility of Adams's signature sonority or the spacing found in Figure 5.46. In the previous example from *The Chairman Dances*, found in Figure 5.35, the C-sharp is heard as the dissonance to the D, because the D is presented first. In Figure 5.38, the perception is the opposite, the upper pitch is heard as a dissonance to the lower. It is unclear whether a D-flat has been added to a F minor chord, whether a new chord is formed, or whether that sound represents overlapping of two chords.

The view that mm. 7–8 is a chordal overlapping has the strongest precedent in Adams's music. A previous example, Figure 5.45, from *Nixon in China*, also presents the superimposition of two major triads a major third apart. Starting with *The Death of Klinghoffer* these superimpo-

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[133]Arthur Berger, "Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky," *Perspectives in New Music* 2/1 (1963): 17.

sitions become much more common and sophisticated in treatment. In the previous *Nixon in China* example, the dissonant cross-relation created between D from the G-major chord and D-flat and E-flat from the E-flat dominant-seventh chord is audible, but the three pitches never sound simultaneously. In Figure 5.35, however, m. 10 (on the word “street”) contains a transposed version of that same superimposition. Either F-minor and D-flat dominant-seventh chords sound simultaneously, or the F-minor triad is challenged by the pitches D-flat and B. The bass part, alternating between F and D-flat, implies the superimposition.

The discussion about these key passages from *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* prepare the reader for a contextualized analysis of the third movement of *Gnarly Buttons*, “Put Your Loving Arms Around Me,” making it easy to separate the new from the old. While the harmonic language is richer and more adventurous than the previous examples, the movement is still centered around the same type of tonal axis, but on pitches B-flat, D, F, and A. While there are passing chords, such as the C major triad found in mm. 13–4 and the E-flat major chord found intermittently between mm. 24 and 31, overall, the opening passage clearly establishes this tonal axis.

The cadence in m. 60, seen in Figure 5.47, establishes a new tonal axis on F, A, C and E. While the two implied triads found on the downbeat, F major and A minor, are separated by more than three octaves, this configuration still holds the same meaning as the F-minor chord with the added D-flat from *Klinghoffer* and the *Dumbarton Oaks* example in Figure 5.46. The passage that follows, mm. 60–98, is primarily an exploration of a tonal axis on F, A, C, E, which includes major and minor triads rooted on F and A, but also extends into hexatonic space with the inclu-

Figure 5.47 *Gnarly Buttons*, third movement, mm. 54–61, score reduction

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sion of D-flat rooted triads. Another tonal axis is implied in mm. 107–14, albeit weakly, with minor triads rooted on C, E, and G-sharp.

The passage found in Figure 5.47 illustrates more than a cadence on a tonal axis. In fact, this example contains a lexicon of several key elements of Adams's style from the 1990s. Another element here, relevant to ambiguity, is *collectional interaction*. The use of this term appro-

Figure 5.48 *Gnarly Buttons*, third movement, mm. 54–61, reduction of English horn/bassoon part from Figure 5.47

54 E-flat minor dorian scale descending

ascending gesture drawn from octatonic scale connecting back to Eb5, not shown (see Figure 5.47)

58 E-flat minor dorian scale descending

changing to G melodic minor (ascending form) at the point of cadence

priately establishes further ties between Adams and Stravinsky. As shown in the first section of this chapter, Adams employs techniques of *collectional interaction* similar to Stravinsky when he uses common tones between scales to pivot from a collection derived from a melodic-minor scale toward a whole-tone or octatonic collection.

Adams also uses his own style of *collectional interaction* to create ambiguity. One of the most commonly found elements in Adams's music are diatonic scales, often found in slow-paced, stepwise ascending or descending motion. Some of the most gripping and familiar passages of his operas, such as the opening music from *Nixon in China*, and the "Aria of the Falling Body" from *The Death of Klinghoffer*, use scales as word-painting in a way that evokes the spirit of music of the Renaissance and Baroque eras.[134] From the opening of *Nixon in China* to *The Death of Klinghoffer* to *El niño*, scales are central to Adams's restrained brand of expression. Like many other works, the layered passages of *Gnarly Buttons* often include two or more layers of independent scales, most often played at different rates, often avoiding the bar line. Unlike

[134]This rhetorical relationship between motive and chord in the opening of the movement, established through repetition, was discussed in Chapter 3.

earlier works, however, works composed around the time of *Gnarly Buttons* contain passages where two scales sound simultaneously to create tension or ambiguity.

Figure 5.48 illustrates a reduction of the complicated English horn/bassoon part found in Figure 5.47. A comparison of the reduction to the original exposes Adams's technique of building complex melodic structures from simple scales. In this example, the E-flat dorian scale is prominent, and an additional point of interest is the G melodic minor scale that is heard at the point of cadence in m. 60. The target of the cadence, a tonal axis on F-A-C-E, does not exactly align with the pcs in the G melodic minor scale, and has the effect of a montage of slightly disparate overlapping elements, lending ambiguity to the passage.

Another example that is fairly simple to unravel is found near the end of the concerto. The closing section of the third movement is a song-like passage similar to the opening of the movement. However, the connection between harmony and motive found in the opening of the movement is missing, because the motive that cues harmonic changes is not present. Earlier in the movement, this connection between harmony and movement produces passages of escalating ambition and strain. By the end of the movement, when the initial double tonic returns, there is a kind of melodic and harmonic vacancy: the motive cuing further challenge to the double tonic is no longer present, but the guitar part in mm. 173–87, through *collectional interaction*, adds a bittersweet or unsettled element to the movement's closure, likely connected to Adams's depiction of his father's struggle with Alzheimer's.

The note sequence in Figure 5.49, with the exception of the A-flat and G-flat found in the solo parts in mm. 182–4, contain the only pitches in the coda that offer a challenge, albeit weak, to the tonic axis on B-flat-D-F-A. In the example, only the note sequence of the guitar part is re-

tained. The meter and rhythm have been removed, and the dotted barlines propose a new grouping of the note sequence. The guitar part plays in a steady, but rhythmically dissonant, stream of 5:4 quarter notes.

Much of Adams's harmony centers around triads or the [027] trichord, and the previous section demonstrated that Adams often connects these trichords by half-step. Imposing a series of joined perfect fifths and [027] trichords is conjectural but revealing. The second staff illustrates

Figure 5.49 *Gnarly Buttons*, third movement, mm. 173–87, analysis of guitar part

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that proposed series, and ties across the barlines indicate implied common tones between sonorities.

With few exceptions, the pitches in the implied sonorities come from F major and H_2. It is consistent with the claim from the previous section that Adams expanded diatonic space by combining it with hexatonic space. In previous examples Adams might have filled in the fifths with thirds, implying various major or minor triads (see Figure 5.39). With this idea in mind, the note sequence G-flat, A-flat, B-flat, C, A, E-flat, D-flat can be explained as an expression of H_2, including both implications of G-flat major and G-flat minor triads, if the A is considered an enharmonically respelled B-double-flat.

When Adams fills in a perfect fifth, he implies a triad, and even scales or scale fragments that fit the triad. In this way Adams can use pitches foreign to the F-major scale and still convey the prolongation of the F major scale as the governing sonority of the passage. Adams wants this passage performed without "movement, without oozing,"[135] that is to say, in a static manner and with restrained expression. The guitar passage functions, therefore, as a coloration of the overall dual tonic of B-flat major and D minor rather than as movement away from it.

This is similar to the passage illustrated in Figure 5.44, where chords move through a complete hexatonic cycle in the middle register while the other parts remain in scales most sonorous with a D-minor triad. Instead, the guitar part, through ascending and descending scales, implies various superimposed harmonies, including some triads available within H_2. An additional subtle sign of H_2 is found in the last strand of melody, played by the cello and clarinet in octaves and shown in Figure 3.9, which contains only two pitches outside the F major scale, G-flat and

[135]Osborn interview.

A-flat, which can be explained as prominent notes in H_2, as root and upper neighbor from a G-flat major triad, the third triad in H_2 not included in the B-flat, D, F, A tonal axis.

The passages in each of these examples, Figures 3.9, 5.44, and 5.49, all suggest the same basic principles—a diatonic tonal axis expanded and embellished by the hexatonal system. Figure 5.49, even if one finds the proposed analysis too inconclusive, can be summarized as a simple diatonic texture embellished by a single rhythmically and harmonically contrasting layer. However, if the analysis presented above does seem credible, then Figure 5.49 provides a summary of techniques discussed in this chapter. It combines use of chords related by major thirds, with the concept of a tonal axis, additional pitches available in hexatonic space, and melodic expression of harmonic entities.

Conclusions

Adams works such as *Phrygian Gates* have been subjected to thorough analysis; the systematic nature of that piece makes it possible for an analysis to summarize the totality of the work. Many of Adams's works displaying an eclectic compositional palette, such as many from the 1990s, are more difficult to analyze fully, because they require a multitude of analytical approaches corresponding to the diversity within Adams's compositional technique. However, the analysis of *Gnarly Buttons* here, though not broad enough to have addressed all of the compositional techniques found in the work, provides enough substance to encourage others to explore the details of Adams's style further.

In the 1980s some critics, such as K. Robert Schwarz, accused Adams of contributing to the "dumbing down" of minimalism. When looking at works such as *Nixon in China*, *Grand Pianola Music*, or *A Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, one can understand how Schwarz came to his conclusions, but his criticism categorically could not apply to complex works such as *The Death of Klinghoffer*, the Violin Concerto, *Gnarly Buttons, Naive and Sentimental Music*, and *Doctor Atomic.* Schwarz complained about Adams's use of *intuition* instead of *rigor*, taking the word and concept "intuition" from his interview with Adams. It seems clear now that Adams uses words like "intuition" or "intuitive sense" to stave off others' attempts to analyze or pigeonhole his music. And, while Adams claims to rely on intuition for his compositional decisions, clearly he is drawn to certain devices and techniques. Analysis of those patterns of intuition, as seen in the analysis here, proves of equal value to analysis of rigorous compositional structure.

While *Gnarly Buttons* is not as monumental a composition as some of his works from the 1990s—the Violin Concerto and *Naive and Sentimental Music* come to mind—perhaps analysis of *Gnarly Buttons* offers some of the tools that analysis of either of those larger works will require. Analysis of the music of any eclecticist such as Adams requires a veritable "toolbox" whose contents will also offer a means of summary of the composer's techniques. One such technique not covered in this document is his use of materials from Nicolas Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*, notably in the Violin Concerto and orchestral work *Slonimsky's Earbox.* This volume did not play into the discussion of *Gnarly Buttons*, because it was not used, at least not used significantly, in that work.

The findings here do include a few proposed tools for the Adams "toolbox." It is a fair assumption, for instance, that the prevalence of chord relationships in thirds, especially major

thirds, is present in many of his works after 1990. In later works one can expect to find those relationships masked by rich overlapping textures, textures that resemble juxtaposed Stravinskian blocks but with edges blurred. Particularly promising is evidence that suggests that the battery of familiar and established techniques for analysis of Stravinsky's music could be extended to analysis of Adams's later music. In addition, while Adams's style of collectional interaction is discussed here, further study is necessary, perhaps beginning when the score to his oratorio *El niño* is available in print, since that work employs this technique heavily.

Regrettably, the work here does not satisfactorily address Adams's characteristic use of rhythmic texture. In this area there are also clearly parallels to Stravinsky—for instance, the rhythms of repeated chords of *A Short Ride in a Fast Machine* seem related to the repeated chords in *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*—and the exploration of rhythmic dissonance in Adams's music is one of the most worthy topics not yet fully addressed by the scholarly community.

For performers most interested in performing *Gnarly Buttons* and other works by Adams, this analysis is worth reading, since a deeper understanding of the structure and technique of a work is bound to subconsciously influence performance. Most music in a non-tonal language has the ability to confound and exasperate the uninitiated performer or listener, but placing *Gnarly Buttons* in context so that references to American vernacular styles, Stravinsky's music, and first-generation minimalism are identifiable, will continue to bolster the upward trajectory of the work, one that seems bound for the standard repertory.

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Appendix 1. Interviews

William Helmers, Email Interview, 30 June 2006

WH: Performing the US premiere and working with John Adams was a great experience for me, and I would be glad to share my memories with you. After we have gotten the ball rolling by e-mail, then we could follow up with phone conversations.

I have recordings of two performances, one in Madison and one in Milwaukee. Unfortunately, the clarinet was miked too closely so it sounds distorted, and the ensemble sounds distant. I'll check that out, and maybe I can get an engineer to tweak it a little so it sounds better. I was able to find the Milwaukee Journal review and an internet review from a Madison concert-goer.

I'll look forward to further communications. Please say hello to Ron [Aufmann] for me.

Email interview, 31 July 2006

AT: What were the circumstances of the commission? How did it come about? Who was responsible for Present Music's involvement? What performance rights did it come with? Are there additional people within Present Music that I should speak with about this? Kevin Stalheim?

WH: For answers to this, please contact Kevin Stalheim, music director of Present Music. <kstalheim@presentmusic.org> I was not involved in this phase of the project. Kevin contacted me about a year ahead of the premiere to see if I wanted to play it, and of course, I was eager to proceed.

AT: Was John Adams completely open to the idea of writing a clarinet concerto? During the '80s he wrote virtually no music of this type. Of course, the '90s produced the Violin Concerto, Gnarly Buttons, and Century Rolls.

WH: Yes, I believe he was enthusiastic about writing for the clarinet. Partly, this was probably due to the fact that he played clarinet. Also, I believe that Adams was a friend of Michael Collins, who gave the world premiere, prior to writing the concerto.

AT: Did the work feel to you like it was composed by a "clarinetist/composer"? I have been learning it myself, but am interested in your comments about the idiomatic treatment of the instrument.

WH: I feel that the solo part is completely idiomatic, which is not to say "easy." Much of the difficult passagework reminds me of some of the thornier areas in the Nielsen Concerto. For me, the biggest challenge was the first movement beginning around m. 103. In my score, I have eighth note= 120-132 "Freely" penciled in. In measure 106 I have eighth note=132 "gradual accel.

measure 112 eighth note=138

measure 127 eighth=144

measure 133 eighth=168

Pacing this with good ensemble was the biggest technical challenge we faced.

The second movement is fun, and thankfully not as thorny as the first movement. It's a real joy to play. The shorter articulations make a nice contrast with the outer movements, which are mainly legato. The third movement provides an intense emotional buildup and catharsis, as opposed to the somewhat austere first movement and the humorous second. In Milwaukee we got such a nice ovation at the end of the performance, we came back and played the second

movement as an encore.

AT: How familiar were you with the music of John Adams before learning the concerto? How did your sense of the piece change through the course of preparation, rehearsal, and performance?

WH: Prior to preparing *Gnarly Buttons*, I had performed some of Adams's orchestral repertoire with the Milwaukee Symphony, most notably *Harmonium*. Also I had performed *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, *The Chairman Dances* from *Nixon in China*, and I had recently looked at the score to the *Chamber Symphony*. Present Music had previously performed *Shaker Loops*, so I was familiar with that as well.

Prior to preparing and performing *Gnarly Buttons*, I had a conception of Adams's music as being very witty and technically virtuosic, as well as having a process-oriented aesthetic. Working on the concerto brought me into a much more personal contact with the music. I found *Gnarly Buttons* to be very engaging on an emotional level as well as on a technical level. I found the concerto to be a great vehicle for personal communication from the soloist, not dry or mechanical in any way.

AT: So the premiere was in Madison in March 1997, and then the review you sent was from May 1997? Did the Milwaukee concert feel more like the premiere? The reviews were quite positive. Can you offer any other personal recollections about the audience's response to the work?

WH: For several years, Present Music had a series in Madison (since discontinued). The Madison concert usually took place the day before the Milwaukee concert. So, technically, Madison had the actually first American performance. We attracted a larger audience than usual to this concert in Madison, including several University of Wisconsin faculty members. With Adams conducting, this was a much bigger event than usual.

Our Milwaukee concerts are always better attended than in Madison, and we enjoy a large and enthusiastic following. There was an incredible atmosphere at this concert, a sense of electricity. Musicians and audience alike had a feeling of this being special, of history in the making. I had many family members and orchestral colleagues present; this was an unforgettable event for me, and I think for most people in attendance. I would think that John Adams has fond memories of this concert also.

The May internet review was from an avid concert-goer and amateur clarinetist in Madison. I don't recall seeing any review from the Madison newspaper, but you may wish to research this.

AT: Since I hope to write in some depth about performance issues in the work, could you describe some of the performance challenges you faced in this piece? What challenges seem to be connected to Adams's style? In what ways did Mr. Adams attempt to expand the boundaries of what the clarinet can do?

WH: I should comment on performing and rehearsing with John Adams the conductor… Not knowing too much about John Adams aside from his compositions, I was very pleasantly surprised to find that he was an accomplished conductor, both technically and in rehearsal methods. (Some of my experiences with composer-conductors have been, well, "interesting.") Adams had a clear, economical, and commanding stick technique, and he knew how to get things done in rehearsals. He was quite demanding, and he really made the ensemble sparkle. I found him to be a down-to-earth "musician's musician."

Although the concerto is a technical "tour de force," there are no unusual or extended techniques required. It requires a lot of solid technique and endurance from the performer, but

perhaps more importantly, the soloist must relate to the audience in a personal way. I tried to convey such qualities as humor and emotional intensity in my performance as well as technical flair and virtuosity. For me, the requirements are similar to what might be expected for a performance of the Nielsen Concerto.

AT: What challenges does the chamber orchestra face in this work? What issues make the work practical or impractical for repeat performances?

WH: Some unusual instrumentation is required, most notably the two electronic keyboards (with appropriate software) and the banjo. It seems to me that this work could not be easily performed by very many amateur or student ensembles. The level of difficulty would require performers of a professional, or high-level music school capabilities. It also needs a fairly large amount of rehearsal time, a requirement which many orchestras shy away from due to cost.

AT: Have you played the work since 1997? I wish to compile some performance history beyond the premieres.

WH: I have not, but I have been involved in some discussions about programming it again. I certainly hope that an opportunity will arise.

This completes the questions which you sent. I am happy to answer any other things that you might come up with later. If you are able to send me a copy of your finished work, I would be interested in seeing your "complete history." Good luck!

Follow-up question, 7 March 2007

AT: The opening of the concerto was originally doubled with keyboard 1 on an accordion sound. Did you perform it with that doubling, or had Adams removed the keyboard part by then? You

might be able to remember whether you had musical freedom at the beginning or just had to play it strictly.

WH: As I recall, there was some doubling with the keyboard. The volume level was low, and I thought it blended rather nicely with the clarinet. I didn't find it to be musically limiting at all; we did keep the tempo fairly steady, though.

Phone interview with clarinetist Sean Osborn, 19 December 2006:

I spoke to Sean about his performance of *Gnarly Buttons* with performers from Seattle's Cornish College, which took place on 20 May 2006 as a part of the *Made In America* festival.

About his time with John Adams and the 3rd movement:

I did have the good fortune to play it for John Adams, just as I started to learn the piece. He was in Seattle in January and February 2004, conducting his *Naive and Sentimental Music* and the Sibelius violin concerto with Leila Jocefowicz as soloist. [Jocefowicz also recorded Adams's *Road Movies* and has been a champion of his violin concerto.]

He wanted it played as it is on the page, without adding things to it, making it very dry. But the piece is clearly dear to his heart. I'd only been working on it for three weeks. At the end of the last movement he wanted no "oozing," no "movement." Like Steve Reich sets spoken words, the rhythm of the motive of the movement fits the subtitle of the movement, "Put Your Loving Arms Around Me," as if spoken over and over. He seems to be depicting his father's struggle with Alzheimer's Disease. As he was writing the piece, he tested some passages on his father's instruments. It was during this time that his father's set of clarinets were shipped back and forth between father and son, and as his father's disease progressed, Adams opened the case to find the keys bent and distorted, as in "gnarly buttons." He depicts the anger and confusion of his father, unable to comprehend what is happening to his brain, and in the coda, when the opening material returns, seems to be about some point late in his father's life when his fear and paranoia have passed, but has been replaced with a sort of vacancy. I personally feel that it is the

greatest depiction of the passing of a human being, even better than Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration.*

I talked to Mike Norsworthy, who knows the piece really well, about playing the piece in a much more emotional way than you hear on the recording of the London Sinfonietta.

The ending is also actually pretty tricky to put together with the cellist, getting the pitch and rhythm just right, and the cellist's bowing. For instance, it is really easy to play the G natural in m. 177 too long; it isn't really a very long note. That passage took some careful work and took more time than expected.

For the high B-flat to B-natural in mm. 104–5, I used a fingering for B-flat that is voiced really closely to the B-natural: like a C in the middle of the staff, with the C#/G# key added and half-holing the left index finger. Then you just have to basically move two fingers to get to the B-natural.

I also had a very brief conversation with Paul Meecham, who was manager of London Sinfonietta at the time of its commission and premiere. The audience went berserk when this was over.

About the first movement:

This is the most academic movement of the three, and it took me the longest to learn, because of all the metric modulations and the fact that the music just gets faster and faster. When I started to learn the piece I looked for the hardest passage and started to work on it first, in this case the scherzo passage from the first movement, starting m. 246, the one that seems to be making clear reference to the Nielsen concerto. Adams seems proud of the fact that he has composed

a difficult piece, but I guess I would characterize it as “awkward” rather than “difficult.” It is the kind of piece that you have to practice really consistently, really staying on it, or it just leaves the fingers. Passages like mm. 103–12, where I found myself alternating regular and forked E-flats to make the passage manageable. I also found that I really had to memorize some passages, just to be able to see it as my eyes are sliding across the page. I find things like the first page very hard to memorize.

About the second movement:

I do know that he composed this in England during the Mad Cow Disease scare. In terms of technical aspects, dealing with the onerous software is really difficult. We used equipment from Cornish. What we had to do was to reload the software every time we turn it on. The concert we played the piece on had several pieces before us, and we had to get the keyboards ready, have them plugged in off stage, since it took 45 minutes to load the software. The software had not only the cow sound, but all the other sounds for the piece, but the cow was much softer than the other sounds. In that passage, the keyboardist has to crank the volume up all the way just for the cow sound, and in the mp3 of our performance the keyboardist doesn’t manage to turn the volume up, and so instead of “MOO!” you only barely hear “moo.”

It is tricky, because of the two pianos, to get everyone arranged on stage so that everyone can hear well. Also, the 3/8 sections in this movement are difficult to keep together, because the conductor probably conducts in “one” and some of the parts stay in “two.”

About movement 2, from mm.154–65. Some people say these runs are hard, but they weren’t too bad for me.

Phone Interview with Derek Bermel, 5 January 2007

AT: What are some of the challenges of the "Gnarly Buttons" concerto?

DB: Most of the difficulties stem from the fast tempo choices. The tempos are so fast, and your brain is so occupied with those technical things, the challenge is to find space to make the music beyond just getting the notes. I think of myself as an expressive player, and maybe everybody does, and I feel like my skills are about playing expressively. I am not a note machine, but I can go there, but because my time is so split between my musical interests, and maybe even weighted more toward composition, I emphasize expression. If he wants that kind of objective feel to it, I imagine it will be hard to find my way in it. How do find a way to express more than the notes.

I expect to offer my own vision of a piece, my own understanding of its structure, harmony, how it is put together. But with *Gnarly Buttons*, I am still trying to find how I fit into this piece. Trying to find my way into it has been a challenge.

Many of the passages don't fit into the typical Baermann patterns, so many passages I found that I had memorized.

Some choices of accidentals make it hard to read. For me, in the first movement, starting from m. 255, the D, D-sharp, E-sharp, F-sharp, would be better written as D, E-flat, F, G-flat. Also, starting m. 255, the F-sharp, E-sharp, … would be more readable … I think this has to do with transposition from the score in concert pitch. Most of the pitches that are a little counterintuitive to me

are sharps, so that makes sense.

Also, the end of m. 235 outlines a C-sharp major triad, but I find D-flat easier to read, since F natural is easier to think of than E-sharp.

Of course, the third movement has space for expression, and the second movement can be jazzy, but the score is not clear on that. Several places Adams writes legato tongue. Is that a jazz inflection?

Phone Interview with Paul Meecham 18 January 2007

PM: I am fascinated. What exactly is the research you are doing?

AT: I am doing my doctoral paper on the concerto, some analysis.

PM: Just on the one piece?

AT: And a good amount of history.

PM: Fantastic.

AT: and I should say up front that, really for your convenience I have set up a recorder. Is that OK with you?

PM: That is fine. And you are meeting John Adams too?

AT: Yeah, the piece is being played in LA next Tuesday and he's conducting.

PM: Fantastic. So you're going to go. Terrific.

AT: I have had a little trouble reaching and getting any time with him.

PM: That's not surprising, he's a busy busy guy. But you've managed to get some time, or still trying?

AT: Well, I know the soloist pretty well, so I will be in rehearsals and will just try my best.

PM: Who is the soloist?

AT: Derek Bermel.

PM: Oh, I know Derek. Alright. Fire away.

AT: First, when did John Adams begin to collaborate with the London Sinfonietta? Was the Chamber Symphony the first major project?

Good question, and you know, I don't think it was the first major project, but I joined the London Sinfonietta in 1991. I believe they had already done a project with him prior to that. What it was,

I am not certain. What I can tell you is that just as I arrived, I started there in August 1991, and I think it was that summer at the London Proms or it might have been the following summer, 1992. The Chamber Symphony was done in 1992, so the question is was there something, I am pretty certain there was one project, and I don't know what it was, that was before I arrived in the summer of 1991. The whole *Nixon in China* project was in December 1991, where he conducted us, we did it in Paris, a big run, the full production, Peter Sellars, everything, with the Sinfonietta, Bobigny was the theater in a district in Paris.[136] That was crucial to the *Gnarly Buttons* story, which I will come on to, but clearly that was not the first thing that he had conducted the London Sinfonietta, so there must have been something before, but it was before my time, and I don't know what it was.

AT: What I know from basic reading about the concerto is it was a dual commission with London Sinfonietta and Present Music in Milwaukee, but it seems like it might not have been quite a 50/50 split, since the Sinfonietta had the world premiere and the first recording and, in fact, only as I was really digging, discovered Present Music's involvement.

PM: You'd have to ask John Adams a little more about his relationship with Present Music, because I think they had had an involvement with his music before, and I remember the history of the commission, really does date to that *Nixon in China* production in Paris, because the clarinetist in the London Sinfonietta at the time was Michael Collins, and Michael Collins blew John away with his playing. He wrote a very high clarinet part in that opera and Michael Collins nailed it every night, and it was just spectacular playing. And Michael Collins and myself, I remember in Paris, I remember the elevator and we were standing outside and said "Wouldn't it be

[136] Meecham later clarified this as MC93 Bobigny. MC stands for Maison Culture. The theatre is in a suburb of NE Paris called Bobigny.

great if we got John to write a clarinet concerto?" It was during that time that we started … I can't remember whether we actually mentioned the idea then, or in a subsequent phone call or whatever, but the conversation started then, and the idea was born of asking John to write a clarinet concerto. I must have brought it up once a year over the next few years, and John would say, "Well, you know, [scoff]" and he was a clarinetist himself, so he seemed a natural fit, he understood the instrument very well. "I haven't got any ideas. Let me think about it." But he was noncommittal, it was just not something that was "front of mind." He had other commissions, big projects. And then, I am going to say about 1994, when did we premiere it, '96, so maybe it was only in '95, I got a call. He said "I've got an idea for a clarinet concerto." It sort of moved fairly rapidly from that point on, and I think we'd already got a date with him in London, in October 1996 to do something anyway so it seemed a natural for then, and he said "I'll write it in time for it to be premiered there." He must have at some point have also mentioned, when it came to the financing of it, that some of the cost of being able to pay for the commission would be paid for by Present Music, which up to that point was the first time I'd heard about them, and I can't remember the numbers now, but he told me then that they were not so insistent that they got the first performance and everything. Clearly, Present Music based in Milwaukee, London Sinfonietta, based in London, this was done at the Southbank Center, it was a much higher profile way to get the piece [out there], and I guess that Present Music had the US premiere.

AT: The literal premiere was in Madison, Wisconsin, in the music department and then Milwaukee, the next day, so it was a lower profile [event]. I don't know how much of the concert preparations you might have been present for, but I am curious to know your recollections about the preparation and the premiere.

PM: Well, my recollection was it was finished pretty late, and that we did not see, and that Michael Collins did not see the clarinet part too many weeks before the premiere. If you are interested in talking to Michael Collins, I am sure there is a way we could try and hook you up, but he could tell you more about how much time he had, but I believe not a lot of time, maybe just two or three weeks. John Adams could probably tell you if you get to speak to him next week. So, here is a brand new concerto that the London Sinfonietta players hadn't had much of a chance to see, not even the soloist, so it was pulled together in a pretty short time. Now, generally, premiering a new piece, we don't look at it until … don't have the first rehearsals until several days beforehand, but generally we try to, obviously, in most of the cases, you try to get the parts to the musicians way in advance. The London Sinfonietta are incredible sight-readers, and for them it wasn't a real problem, but Michael Collins, it was unbelievable, he really didn't have that much time. I remember the premiere. It was like they'd played it several times; it was really an extraordinary performance. So, preparation-wise, during the rehearsals, I remember John saying to me, modestly, but with some pride, "I think we've got a winner here." You never know until actually hearing it if it's going to work, and it was clear during the rehearsal period that we really did have a very successful piece, a strong piece.

AT: The instrumentation takes some curious players, a couple [of] keyboardists that double on piano and synthesizer and also a jack-of-all-trades on the guitar/mandolin/banjo. I have heard about some performances of this piece where a good amount of rehearsal time has been involved with dealing with the technology.

PM: We had done a lot, both with John, with Steve Reich, we were co-commissioners of *City Life,* the Steve Reich piece that was, from the technology standpoint, a lot more complicated than

Gnarly Buttons, so those kind of things, we had regular keyboard players who were quite used to … and John is pretty on top of this stuff, he knows which type of keyboard gets the sampled sounds or straight synthesizers. I don't recall there being any complications particularly there, but just because the Sinfonietta was extremely experienced at premiering new pieces, often with electronic elements to them.

AT: And as to the person sitting in the guitar chair.

PM: We were fortunate enough to have this guy called Steve Smith who played all three instruments, and we knew way ahead of time that John had scored it for mandolin, guitar, and banjo. We hired somebody who happened to be our regular guitarist, who played all three instruments. I honestly don't know, now, whether John was writing for that player, or whether, I cannot remember now, he might have called the player directly and said, "Do you also play banjo and mandolin?" I just don't know. In fact, if you want to speak to that player, I could put you in touch with him. He lives in Washington, DC now. He's British but he lives in DC. Because it's quite possible that John wrote for those additional instruments, once he knew that the player played them.

AT: I am also interested in more recent performances. I know that Michael Collins played it fairly recently, in London, probably long after your time there. What performances after the premiere do you know of?

PM: Oh, goodness. I couldn't possibly track that one. What I can tell you is that I heard one quite recently in Seattle, where I used to be Executive Director of the Seattle Symphony, which was Sean Osborn. That is the most recent performance, and, to be honest, I don't think I've heard it live since the first performance, although I did attend the recording sessions for Nonesuch the

following summer, because I left the London Sinfonietta in 1997. But I know there have been a lot of performances. Boosey & Hawkes could probably tell you. They would probably give you a full performance history if you called them.

AT: OK. That concludes my written questions. I would to try to speak to Michael Collins but has heard that he is hard to reach. Would you be willing to write him an email?

PM: I don't know that I have his direct contact address. Let me just have a look. I know who his manager is. Just hold on one second, would you?

AT: Sure.

PM: One number or email I might be able to give you, if I can find it. This is the email for Steve Smith, who was the guitarist at the world premiere and, if you are interested, he might be able to shed some light on whether, in fact, John was writing, but you might want to wait until you speak to John Adams, because he can probably give you all the answers. And Michael Collins, I am just trying to figure out … let me just send an email to somebody and see if I can get an email address. Probably the best way to get some answers out of Michael if you can get to him is just send him an email with a few questions. I think he lives in Holland these days, and he travels around a lot, so he is not easy to track down to have a phone conversation, but you might just send him some email questions.

AT: It wouldn't be very many, I don't think.

PM: I know he uses email a lot, that he would respond. I've got your email, so I will see if I can track him down. Then I can email you with an email address. Alright? Is there anything else I can answer?

AT: Not unless you think I have left stones unturned.

PM: What else can I say? Do you know the reason for the cow sound in the second movement?

AT: Because of the [mad cow disease] "scare" at the time?

PM: Yah, that is John's sense of humor as he was writing, the "scare" was at its height. What else can I tell you? You probably know more research about this than I anyway. I think the circumstances of the commission were the most interesting from my perspective, because, number one, it was Michael Collins' playing that started the idea, and John, I knew, was certainly incredibly impressed by his playing, but then just the process of "when does an idea start to bear fruit" took a few years before.

AT: One thing I am not clear on, not that I have been involved in any commissions, I guess I would expect there would an offer of money at some point.

PM: Sure, we don't say "We got $20,000, so write us an concerto." I knew that, if he said yes to writing a concerto or other piece, that we would raise the money.

AT: So that happened after the fact, because you mostly threw the idea out there.

PM: Threw the idea out there. Once he came back to me, several years later, and said "I think I got an idea for a concerto, and by the way, there is a group in Milwaukee who can probably pay half of the commission," I just needed to go out and raise the other half.

AT: So that is how it worked. OK.

PM: Alright? Good luck. And I hope you manage to get a few words with John Adams next week, and I will try to track down Michael Collins.

AT: Thank you. Thank you for your time.

PM: You are welcome. Take care.

Interview with John Adams, 22 January 2007

AT: The concerto came about because you were impressed with Michael Collins' playing in the 1991 or 1992 Paris run of Nixon in China that you conducted for the Sinfonietta. But it was some years before you actually produced a clarinet concerto. And [Paul] Meecham said that you called him one day and said that "I think I have an idea for a concerto."

JA: Oh, you talked to Paul Meecham.

AT: Yes, a couple of days ago. So, was there a singular idea? I would guess it would be the first movement idea or the last movement.

JA: No. I started with the beginning, and, somehow I got this crazy idea of it being some kind of folk melody.

AT: What did you start with?

JA: Well, I made my own folk melody. And when I hear it, I realized that in a certain sense, and I don't want to get too art historical here, because I don't want to make a big deal of it, but in retrospect, I think it might possibly be, it might have been subconsciously suggested by the first of the Stravinsky *Three Pieces,* which I used to play as a kid. But you know, it begins down low, and it has grace notes, and mine are not grace notes, but they are 32nd notes, and there is a sort of Russian chant-like quality to the Stravinsky. I think it begins (sings the opening motive), like, what is that, the "Song of the Volga Boatman" or something. I think it is one of the pieces that I actually had the title in mind before I wrote the piece. Sometimes I don't know what the title is until I get into the piece, but I remember taking a hike up in the Sierra mountains, and the title just came to me. I had heard one of my kids use the term "gnarly," and I was very amused by it. I

was amused by that fact that it had so many different uses, and so that suggested a certain tone, slightly wry and then, from there, I went into this whole, strange, make-believe scenario that it was a famous folk-song.

AT: So the "Footsteps of Jesus" book doesn't exist.

JA: No, it doesn't (laughs). Nor does my father know Charles Ives.

AT: Right. The last movement too, seems clearly connected to your father's passing, around that time, but the first movement is more like of a literal representation of the word "Gnarly," in a sense, right?

JA: In a sense, yeah, it's got the banjo coming in and, yeah. [pause] You know I played clarinet concertos, and I was disappointed that there wasn't a sort of medium size clarinet concerto that … there were the Mozart and Brahms chamber music, and then there were the larger ones, but there was nothing for kind of medium-sized ensemble.

AT: Maybe you can talk a little bit now about my question about how this piece connects to the style that starts around Klinghoffer. Am I correct in the things I said [earlier]?

JA: Yah, I think you are, I think that the music I wrote in the 70s and most of the 80s was more tonal, and more minimalist in its influence. Certainly pieces like *Shaker Loops* and *Phrygian Gates* and much of *Nixon in China*, parts of *Harmonielehre*, most of *Harmonium*. And then there was a big change with *The Death of Klinghoffer* and some of that had to do with just the nature of the story, you know, it was a very grim and tragic story, and the diatonic mood of minimalism that worked for *Nixon in China* couldn't possibly have worked for *Death of Klinghoffer*. And then from there I went further afield from those kind of initial impulses of pulsation and regular periodicity and tonality, and I think I probably went the furthest out in the first movement of the

Chamber Symphony, and also the first movement of the Violin Concerto, and then I retreated from that. But I [am] very satisfied by *Gnarly Buttons*, because it is not atonal or… messy, that it has a very clear harmonic sense, and I have always felt that you just can't really write great music without a unique harmonic language. And I think that so much of the music of the twentieth century that may have had prestige but never really caught on in the way that the great masters of the past did was because there wasn't an interesting harmonic picture, and I am very pleased with the harmonic picture of *Gnarly Buttons*. I couldn't describe it to you, most of the time when I compose I rely very much on my intuitive sense, but if I go back and I look at things, I see that there is a logic to the harmonic language.

AT: I might describe a few things since I have been looking at it from the other side, that I see a lot of shifts in major thirds, that seem to connect to Nixon in China, and last year I attended Doctor Atomic so I noticed in that piece, just so much overlapping … the interest in the harmonic language depended on how the time element worked, how the overlapping of sonorities worked. And I see the same thing in Gnarly Buttons, and I will pick out a quick example of this, of major thirds, there is a passage in the last movement where the clarinet and the orchestra is playing a C-sharp minor triad, a basic triad, and the clarinet stays on C-sharp minor while the orchestra switches back to F minor, that has been a common chord there, and as I have studied, I have seen a lot of combination of elements in major thirds, if that makes sense. Can you tell me more about your harmonic language?

JA: You know, [pause] I am not interested in going back and looking to see what I did. It's a very funny thing, it is almost a superstition that I trust my intuitive sense so strongly. I look at other artists, not necessarily composers, but painters and sculptors, and I see people repeating them-

selves. After they have done something successful, and so they go back and analyze what they did and they become very conscious of it and I never want to do that, so I have never systematically gone back to see if something was successful, why it is. I mean, sometimes I obviously can tell, because it is so clear, but I have never had any impetus to do a really thorough survey and see what I have done.

AT: I guess my interest has been to notice how your style has evolved and to try to put some… try to be able to describe it.

JA: Well, I think that's fine. And I know a lot of other artists, creative artists who feel the same way that I do, that what they want in life is to keep on producing, and they don't listen to their recordings, or novelists don't read their books. I am very close to my music because I perform it all the time, you know, every single piece of mine I have done a lot, and I bring them back. Next week, I am going to London and I am doing six huge orchestra pieces. I get close to them on a certain expressive and technical level but I never analyze them on a theoretical level.

AT: The point at which that level of detail is important is in the compositional process and then not after.

JA: Yeah, but I am also not interested in repeating myself, and I think people seem to be pleased with that fact, that instead of being the kind of composer who produces a brand. You know that, so and so's music is predictably the same every time you hear it. I am interested in being more like Stravinsky, or for that matter, Beethoven, and moving ahead in my language as I move through life.

AT: You've also commented in liner notes or on earbox.com about the first movement of Kling-hoffer, "The Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" and then the third movement of this piece, and then the first movement of Naive and Sentimental Music has a kind of connected style.

JA: Yah, it has a chord sequence that is strummed.

AT: Can you tell me more about that?

JA: I think, in all of those cases, I started with the chord progression, not with the melody. I am almost certain [that] I did. I know that I did with *Naive and Sentimental Music*. I don't know about this one [pointing to *Gnarly Buttons*]. The melody is so intimately wedded to the harmonic change, but I actually don't remember.

AT: Sean Osborn suggested to me that the last movement melody really came from the rhythm of the title.

JA: Who is that?

AT: Sean Osborn played this piece for you and he was just starting to learn it, about two years ago, in Seattle.

Oh, yeah. I remember. Did he ever play it?

AT: He did. I heard a recording. He thought that the last movement, that the melody came from the rhythm of the title.

JA: Yes, that is absolutely true, obviously.

AT: Can you make any comments about the revision as this has been published?

JA: Well, I don't do my piano reductions and I don't even look at them

AT: Well, at least you removed the accordion part from the beginning.

JA: I did that, and I still have sort of mixed feelings about it because I kind of like the sound. When Michael Collins did it by himself, it was just a weird thing. I think he came to rehearsal and the keyboard player hadn't arrived yet, so we just started, and I thought, when I heard him do it with such freedom, I thought that was really great, so I decided to take the faux accordion out, and I think I do like it better because it gives more freedom to the clarinet. Derek Bermel wrote a piece which he actually dedicated to me called *Thracian Sketches*, and you should hear it. It is a solo clarinet piece.

AT: I have heard one of his solo pieces. There is a short one and a long one.

JA: It is a little tiny bit like the beginning of this, then it goes on and on.

AT: So it is a slow build. Yes, that is the piece I heard. What can you tell me about the premiere? Meecham also mentioned that the piece didn't get finished until … that the group had enough time to learn it but not a lot of time to learn it, and that everything went very well. The piece has gotten great reviews, it has been well-received universally, as far as I understand. What can you tell me about the premiere?

JA: Well, it was with this marvelous group, the London Sinfonietta, and I just remember that it was on a long marathon concert that Paul had organized at Queen Elizabeth Hall. Well, I can tell a small anecdote about it which he may have mentioned to you, that at the very end the clarinet and the cello play the same [melody], and in fact, the clarinetist at the time had been very close to the cellist, whose name was [pause] Christopher van Kampen? It's probably on the CD. And Chris got very ill, he got pancreatic cancer, and I was aware of that when I wrote the piece, and I didn't want to make a big deal of it but I did this very quiet little duet for them at the end of the piece. When we came back to record it, probably, I am guessing it was almost a year later in

London, Chris played the recording but that was one of the last things he ever did, he was very thin and had lost like, 100 pounds or something. It was very sad and very touching, but I always think of that when I get to that spot.

And I also have very mixed feelings about the larger ensemble. By the way, there is a GRIEVOUS error in the score which I never discovered until today. On the instrumentation page, it says "Minimum number of STANDS, 1 1 1 1." That is obviously a mistake because what I meant was … it just doesn't make any sense. I don't think I wrote that. I think someone at the publisher did, because it just makes no sense to have minimum number being "1 1 1 1," because what I mean is that it should be individual players. I came here, and the orchestra manager, the guy who is sort of the contractor, he told me that he had hired, or had gotten from the Philharmonic two people on first violin, two on second, two on third, even two on bass, so it was a really strange string section, because this is an error. I mean, this is just silly. It should say just solo strings or ensemble, up to a maximum of this, but it shouldn't say this, because it would make you think the only way to do *Gnarly Buttons* is with basically 2 2 2 2 and 2, which is not right. But I did it a few times with a larger ensemble, like 666442 with the Cleveland Orchestra and with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and I didn't like it in that format, the piece lost its "gnarly" quality.

AT: And about this banjo/mandolin/guitar part: I understand from talking to Paul Meecham that the original player for the premiere and the recording session was Steve Smith. So did you write that part with him in mind?

JA: No. I just figured that there were people in the world that could do that. I don't think there is anybody anywhere as good as this fellow in the LA Phil, his name is Paul Viapiano, and he also

played my piece *Naive and Sentimental* [*Music*] just UN-believably beautifully. I think that a little amplification is necessary. The banjo is fine, but the mandolin is very hard to hear if it doesn't have some amplification, and the guitar is helpful to have some too, just very subtle.

AT: I think those are my questions.

JA: OK. I am glad I could help. So this a paper you are writing for the Clarinet Society.

AT: Yes, and it is my doctoral project.

JA: So you are a clarinet player.

AT: Yes, and I have learned the piece, but haven't performed it yet.

JA: Oh, great. Wonderful. I have done it with quite a few clarinet players. Richard Stoltzman did it once. I didn't hear him do it.

AT: Is there anyone that you suggest that I should call? I have heard that Larry Combs did it lately.

JA: Larry Combs? You know, actually, I was in Chicago, and Larry or somebody said "we are the only orchestra in the world in which every one of our clarinet players has played *Gnarly Buttons.*" Because John Bruce Yeh has played it, and I have done it with Laurie Bloom, I did it at Northwestern with him, and Larry did it with their Chicago new music group, but I only heard a rehearsal of that. I have done it with Frank Cohen in Cleveland, and Tim Paradise in Minneapolis, and I understand that David Shifrin has done it, and I think I heard a recording of it, but I never heard him do it live.

There is a fantastic Israeli clarinet player who is now living, I think in Paris, named either "zev" or "chev", I think it is like "C H E V" He's amazing. I just heard him do the *Dreams and Visions of Isaac the Blind* with Kronos and he's special.

AT: I talked to Bill Helmers first, last summer.

JA: Right! We did that [in Milwaukee]. Thanks for coming down.

Interview with Kevin Stalheim 31 January 2007

AT: I have been researching details of the commission, premiere, and reception. I have already talked to John Adams and Paul Meecham. My first interview was with Bill Helmers, so he gave me a lot of good information.

KS: That's good. In a sense he was move involved, I wasn't as involved in it as usual. I'm the one who decides all the programming and commissioning, but as far as performance, you know, usually I conduct, but John Adams was the conductor for it. He came out for it and so I was on the sidelines as far as the actual piece goes.

AT: The first thing that comes to mind for me are some of the details of the dual commission and just how it worked. Who approached who?

KS: I have relationships with publishers, so Boosey & Hawkes is his publisher, and this is what I do, I call them and say "hey, is there any way we could get John Adams to write us a piece?" Often, these things go through a long period of waiting, because a composer may be, obviously, busy with something else or whatever. With that one, it was pretty much just a matter of showing Boosey & Hawkes, the publisher, that I was interested, and then they came to me with this idea of the co-commission, which especially at that time, we actually are doing more expensive things these days, but at that time that was a big deal for us to just pay that much money, without a grant or anything like that, so it was good news to me not having to pay the full amount, and as far as technically who gets the world premiere, I don't get super serious about that, especially if it is premiered in Europe or somewhere else, because to me to have the American premiere of someone of his stature is a big deal. We looked at it as a real opportunity and privilege to pre-

miere a work by him, and even though it wasn't technically the first time it was performed. That's really it, and then as far as instrumentation, that was a little bit wild.

AT: Right. I imagine that it is tricky to find the right banjo player.

KS: That was the hard part, because they double on banjo, mandolin, guitar, so it ended up to be my violin player. He is a very talented guy, and he basically sort of learned these instruments. He was a good guitar player when he was in college, but violin is his main instrument. He was one of the keys, as far as I was concerned, besides the clarinet player, as far as trying to get the right group together, so it was a little bit odd, didn't know what I was going to do at first about that one, but we made it.

AT: I am also curious about the North American premiere, and I may have written it up this way and I'd like your confirmation that this is accurate, that the literal premiere was in Madison, but in another way the arrival of the piece was in Milwaukee that was more the official audience.

KS: Yes, technically that is true, it was. We don't have that series in Madison any more, but we used to do about four concerts a year there. We always did it the night before our Milwaukee concert, and it more low key than what we do in the Milwaukee concert, as far as the audience was smaller. We didn't really put a lot into advertising and things like that. It was something that actually sort of fell apart because the audience was so small. We kind of didn't look at that as the "big-audience" publicized premiere, but technically it is true, we went there and did it, but probably only a 100 people or something, I don't know. It is pretty damn interesting actually that someone of his name … it is interesting to me how composers with big names don't necessarily get a big audience, because people still don't know these people's names.

AT: Incidentally, we have John Corigliano visiting our campus next week. I am calling from the campus of Washington State University in Eastern Washington. So we have been staging screenings of The Red Violin, Altered States, and The Ghosts of Versailles and we'll see if we can get the student crowd there.

KS: We get big audiences, but to be really honest about it, and we are known for it all over the country, for getting really big audiences, but the real reason is more that we do these themes and collaborative things, so we will do like a Irish concert and rather than just doing "serious music," we will have Irish dancers and fiddlers and we will get the audience dancing, or we'll have a Thanksgiving concert where we will have a bunch of choirs and their parents will come. That is, in a way, the way that we get a bigger audience, [rather] than names. We have had big names, and if it just the big name … but we had a pretty good audience for John Adams, but we have had way bigger audiences, it's so weird, even though he is the biggest name composer we have had.

AT: I will give you a little background on the Sinfonietta first performances, that he was just finishing the piece, it was performed late October, I haven't really learned the timeline yet, but I suspect that it was two or three weeks they had to learn the parts.

KS: I heard it was a little bit rushed.

AT: So your experience was different than that, you had as long as you wanted, or the amount of time that Boosey & Hawkes usually allowed for the rental. So, what would that be, six weeks, or something like that?

Yes, that's what I generally try to do, is get the musicians the music that far in advance. With Bill, the clarinet, I can't remember really how soon he got it.

AT: Did you have any problem with the synthesizers? It calls for two synthesizers, two Kurzweils.

No, not really. I don't even recall what it was, but the disks came from the publisher, and they required a certain kind of synthesizer so we just got them and we have gone through so many synthesizer "things" that I cannot remember specifically each thing, but sometimes I find a friend that has one, or a friend of a friend, and maybe it was a hassle, because Milwaukee is not a big town. It is often true that things that are more available in Chicago or New York are not here, and I have had synthesizer challenges, but I just can't remember. I know that we didn't have to rent one from Chicago, which has been the case in the past where I freak out because…

AT: I think that these are pretty available but the problem with them, and I even saw this last week in the performance with LA Phil with John Adams spending the break of the rehearsal fooling with one of the keyboards. When you plug them and program them, if you change any of the settings, you kind of can't turn them off. It takes a long time for them to boot up and be ready to go.

KS: I remember something about the long time thing. I think my keyboard player saying he had to boot it up right away or something like that. Yes, I remember something like that.

AT: What else was on the concert, and how was it received?

KS: You know what, I don't know. Well, I do know a little bit. As a matter of fact, I know the guts of the program, because we did *Shaker Loops*. When you put those two pieces together, that is a pretty substantial amount of music, amount of time, and I know that we did something by Ives, I am almost sure that it was the "Concord" sonata but not the whole thing. And after that, I am not sure, and I guess I don't have the access to the program right here.

AT: Did the group enjoy working with Adams?

KS: They LOVED working with him. I am a cynical person in some ways. We have guest artists who come from all over the world, and I don't want to really brag, but they say really great things about us. Things I don't ask them to say. And they are amazed by our audience. I don't think for John Adams, it was that amazing, because he is used to big audiences and things, but for a new music ensemble in Milwaukee, we commonly get five to eight hundred people, and we do a variety of music. That is a huge audience. We had to do the Thanksgiving concert two times [for] eight hundred people. We just did another concert, six hundred people, in the art museum. But for his concert, there were only about 450, or almost 500. But as far as the musicians working with them, and what they all think: he was incredibly complimentary, I think surprised. I think people are really surprised when they come here, which is cool and flattering.

We will have people come from Finland, and they'll say they've been all over Europe and they have never seen audiences for new music like this, and we have had people come from all over the country and they say that. They ask me to be on panels, and it is not because we are the "Yo-Yo Ma" of new music as far as performance, but it's all about the fact that we get this audience for what we do that just mystifies everyone. Typically, composers think that is really something, and I don't think that would have really made a big impression on him because he used to big things. But as far as the actual caliber of the players, he was just super-complimentary, and they just loved working with him, as far as a conductor and a person and being very engaged by the piece. It was a real high point artistically for us, up to that point in our history. It still is, but since then we have had some pretty high points.

Phone Interview with Michael Collins, 29 June 2007

AT: How long were you affiliated with Sinfonietta? Can you tell me about your years with that organization?

MC: Yeah, well, I should start from the beginning, actually, when I first joined. I was still a student, at the Royal College of Music, and in my first years, so I was about eighteen years, and the previous clarinet player, Antony Pay, was leaving the London Sinfonietta and also the Nash Ensemble, he was in both, and I had a phone call to join both, and I didn't know whether I should do this, or just one or the other. Anyway, I decided to do both, and I spent, it was about, just over twenty years with the London Sinfonietta, and of course in that time, got to know lots of [coughs], excuse me, I've got a cold, I got to know a lot of, some of the greatest living composers and that kind of inspired me to approach them after, they say they would like to write major works for the clarinet.

AT: And about John Adams's involvement with the Sinfonietta, how far back ...

MC: It goes back a long way, yeah, it goes back a long way, because he came along quite often to conduct, and we were doing I think about two weeks of performances of *Nixon in China* in Paris, and I approached him. I said, "Hey, John, how about a clarinet concerto?" and he sort of looked and "Oh, yeah, wouldn't that be nice, but you know, I just don't have the time." And whenever I saw him I kept mentioning it, and then one day out of the blue he just suddenly said, "Yeah, I'm going to do one." Originally, it was going to be sort of like a ten minute, one movement piece, with orchestra, and then when it arrived, it turned out to be a fully-blown concerto, three movements, thirty minutes.

AT: Yeah, I did have a chance to talk to Paul Meecham some months ago and he filled me in on some of those details and he mentioned that the timeline for the, that he was scheduled to conduct this concert in October and he didn't exactly done early.

MC: It was quite late in the day. He was still faxing it through to me I think just about a week before the performance.

AT: What he wrote in the score, the published version, says that the 2nd of October that he finished it and the concert was on the 19th. I am just curious if he was sending you clarinet music, I know that he started the first movement, so was he sending you clarinet music in advance. For me the first movement is the hardest, so I am wondering—I can't imagine how you could have learned it in two weeks, I guess, you know, it's hard.

MC: Well, I had to. I think it was even less, because I remember the, I was sent the, I think the score first, and then the actual clarinet part came through my fax machine, only a matter of days before the first rehearsal, so I had to learn it pretty fast.

AT: What can you tell me about the premiere? I know a bit about the details of the event, that it was a long concert, "The Perfect Stranger" was on that concert. There were concerts in that room all day.

MC: You probably know more than I do, because I don't remember. I mean, I was just so involved. I was just locked away really learning it, because it was a live broadcast on the radio as well, so I was really having to…

AT: What do you recollect about the premiere?

MC: Well, all that I can remember, it was a huge success, and to play it, was a really magnificent experience, because it is such a well-crafted piece for the instrument, which is not surprising, as

he played the clarinet, so he knew what he was doing. I just remember the amazing atmosphere it seemed to create in the hall with the audience. They were really almost hanging on every note, and with the players too. I don't know why, it seemed to be, I just remember it being all around, a quite an emotional experience.

AT: It would strike me that people were still worried about "Mad Cow" disease, for instance, at the time of the premiere.

MC: Yeah, that was his kind of joke, to what was going on, the BSE, and the "Mad Cow," hence the second movement, so a kind of gesture to what was going on at the time, but of course. Newspapers make one thing of it, but the general public, you know, we don't really care too much about it, because it is all blown out of proportion, like all these things, you know. Like I am just reading, well on the television this morning, on the news, there was a big bomb scare in London just now, about one hour ago, a car which was absolutely full of nails, and they have closed all London, and they said the car safe. They make all these things so, they overinflate things, to make it sound like one of the biggest tragedies since, mankind, it was like, at the time, with the "mad cow", yes, it was happening, but it was all kind of blown out of proportion. I think it caused quite a stir at the time.

AT: And of course, kind of the emotional center of the piece is the last movement, that it is more or less a recollection of his father's final illness.

MC: That is right, and I think that was the thing that caused the real emotion of that event. Also because a good friend of mine in the orchestra, in the Sinfonietta, a cellist, he was dying of pan-creatic cancer, but he decided to play and he was extremely ill, so I think that really affected the whole group, the whole Sinfonietta, they were all affected, by the music, and how brave he was

to sit there and play it, and the whole thing ends with a clarinet and cello duet. So I think the whole thing had quite an impact in the hall.

AT: Adams talked about that duet, so I am already aware of the secondary meaning of that duet. And your friendship with him, the two of you were in the Sinfonietta for so many years.

MC: Yeah, we were in the Sinfonietta and the Nash and we were colleagues for many years, he kind of, because I joined these two groups when I was very young, he kind of looked after me, because I was doing all the big concerts for the first time on very little rehearsal, so he took me under his wing, and then when he was dying, I kind of helped him through his illness, so it was all quite a highly charged time.

AT: And he did play the subsequent recording session, what was it, like six months later, the recording session the next summer.

MC: That's right, we did the recording session. In fact, he played it, and then he died about six weeks later.

AT: There is a kind of musical issue at the beginning of the piece that I talked to Adams about, and maybe you can help me sort out a little bit of discrepancy. In the original full score, and the way that you played it in those premiere performances, there is a keyboard doubling the clarinet, with an accordion sound, and now that part has been removed.

MC: It's quite simple. We did it with—now, the quality of sound that comes from the synthesizer, this kind of accordion doesn't—he thought it would work, blending with the clarinet but then, of course, the way these things work, because you can't alter the pitch of a synthesizer. For the beginning of such a big piece, it ended up being unbelievably complicated to try and make it work, to get the keyboard, because there was a time lag as well, to move exactly in time with me, and

for the notes to be exactly in tune, although the issue wasn't for it to be totally in tune, there could be this slightly, how can I say, rough, not rough, but folky, if you like, element, so it wasn't going to be totally perfect. But in the end, we tried it without, so it was just solo clarinet and when we reached the first pause, fermata, and then it became the first forte passage, we thought we would bring the synthesizer in then, and it seemed to make a big impact, it seemed to make the whole thing much stronger. So that's what happened, so we did the first performances with, and then we just decided where it was, in which performance, but we decided to try it without and then it kind of stuck really, we thought, "yes, this works."

AT: Yeah, the first performances and the first couple of commercial recordings all have it in there, so maybe you can tell me about … I am jumping ahead here, but it makes sense to ask this question now, for you to give me your performance history on the piece. I think I read about a concert a couple years ago, that you did it again, but how much have you played it since October 1996.

MC: Oh, I do it quite often. Funny enough, I think I am doing again next week in the Cheltenham festival, which is a big international music festival here. So you know, it does crop up. The problem, of course, with such a piece, is the instrumentation and how to program it, because if you do it with a symphony orchestra, it's diff[icult] because it uses a very few players, and it works out incredibly expensive to hire all the electronic stuff on top for such few players. Even though it is a marvelous piece, it has always been a problem, where and how to program it, unless it is with smaller ensembles like the London Sinfonietta or Ensemble Modern, or even chamber orchestras will have a go, which then, we had a conversation, "Well, how about it if we

sometimes use full strings instead of the single strings found in the original," and I have done it a few times using a full string section.

AT: Adams talked about that too. The performances I witnessed in January with the LA Phil, and there were a couple players on each, and for Adams, he felt like that was a little bit too much, because for them to play as heavily, to get heavy sounds like he would want them to be, there would be too much actual sound, if that makes sense.

MC: I mean it depends. If you do it with a symphony orchestra, where a lot of the string players are not used to playing in such a small section, I've found that that is always quite a problem. If you do it with a chamber orchestra, who are used to playing very softly indeed, and very much together, because that's their job, you know, in a small string section, then it can be quite successful.

AT: The last question is really just about the music, your comments on the writing for the clarinet. I don't think we should turn through the score, blow-by-blow, but maybe you can give me some general comments about what you find challenging about the piece, or what it is to perform it.

MC: Well, it is interesting, because with a lot of clarinet concertos you get a chance to warm up, maybe, before you do some of the really pyrotechnic things that you have to do in a concerto, they tend to happen later on. Now, with the Adams, it in almost in reverse, the most difficult things to start with, after the introduction and then when you are in full swing in the first movement, that is the most difficult part of the whole piece, so you've got to really have full concentration to get, and it's awkward, I mean a lot of the writing is awkward in that first movement for the clarinet. He knew what he was doing, and in a way, he wanted to make it difficult, that I'm

sure. But its all, a lot of it is around the part of the instrument that doesn't lend itself for easy easy playing, if you know what I mean. It's quite tricky. And once you get over that, and then you get to the second movement is much easier, and then of course the third movement is just, what a way to finish the piece, with a beautiful melody like that, then technically less challenging, so you've kind of got the most difficult bits over with and you can just simply enjoy yourself for the last movement. Often in conventional concertos, the real virtuosic movements are the last ones, so it is kind of upside-down in a way, which is a lovely way to do it. It means you get all the really tough stuff over with in the beginning and you can relax.

AT: Thanks for the time today. It does really help me.

MC: That's OK. Thanks for calling so late. Go on and get a good sleep. All the best. Bye bye.

AT: Thank you. Bye now.