

ADAMS GOES *Atomic*

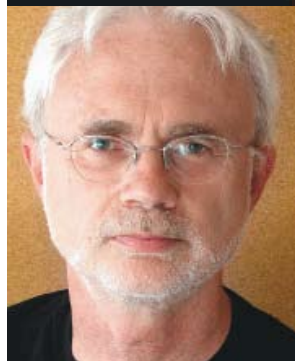
by Thomas May

A new symphony takes its explosive subject—the personalities and moral issues surrounding development of the **atomic bomb**—from opera stage to concert hall.

The concert hall is where John Adams first gained notice, starting in the early 1980s when he was composer-in-residence with the San Francisco Symphony. With his debut opera, 1987's *Nixon in China*, Adams's fame skyrocketed, but symphony audiences had already gotten a sample of where Adams was heading via *The Chairman Dances*, his “foxtrot for orchestra” from 1985—the piece Adams describes as a “warm-up” to the opera.

Now Adams has done an about-face: His latest large-scale project, *Doctor Atomic* Symphony, is moving from opera house to concert hall.

San Francisco Opera staged the world premiere of *Doctor Atomic* in October 2005, during the regime of General Director Pamela Rosenberg. Her impulse to get Adams to write an opera about an “American Faust” triggered his fascination with the mythic potential of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and the first testing of the atomic bomb in the New Mexico desert. The opera has since undergone several iterations and revisions: The Netherlands Opera gave the European premiere last June, while Lyric Opera of Chicago is currently presenting the second American production.

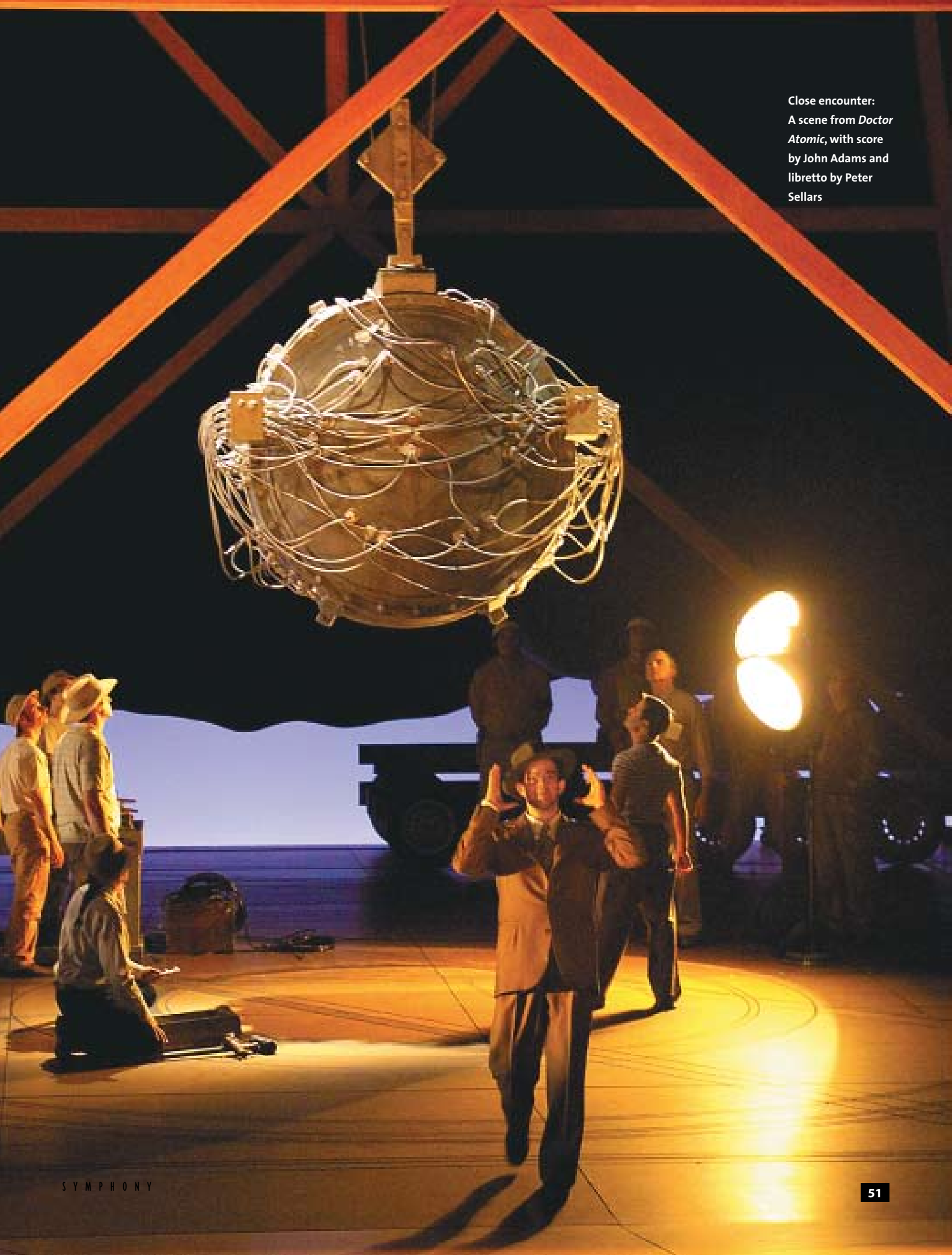


Composer John Adams

Deborah O'Grady

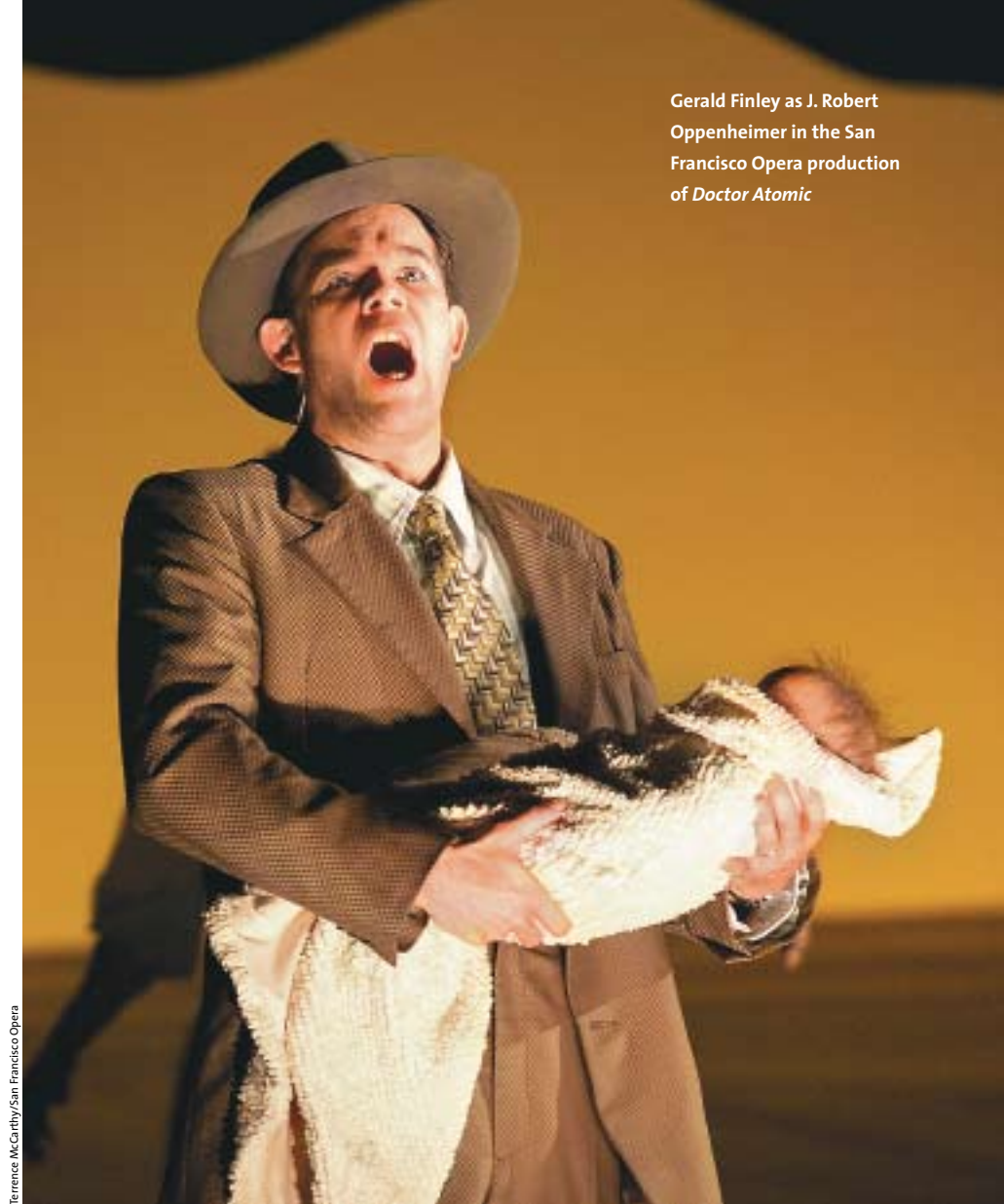
Terrence McCarthy/San Francisco Opera

Close encounter:
A scene from *Doctor
Atomic*, with score
by John Adams and
libretto by Peter
Sellars



Both Adams and librettist and director Peter Sellars recognized some weaknesses in the original production, which they set about improving not just structurally and dramatically, but even down to the science. In reference to the opening chorus, which had contained an egregious error about the transformation of matter and energy, the composer jokingly explains, “We’ve finally got the physics right!” The Metropolitan Opera brings *Doctor Atomic* to its stage next October in what will presumably be the opera’s definitive form. Much of the discussion prompted by *Doctor Atomic* has, not surprisingly, revolved around the provocative dramaturgical and ethical issues broached by the opera’s subject matter, beginning with Sellars’s bold assertion that with *Doctor Atomic*, Adams has written “the *Götterdämmerung* for our time.”

With the *Doctor Atomic* Symphony, the concert public now has the option of approaching on purely musical terms what some critics consider a significant leap forward for Adams as a composer. The Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, which commissioned the *Doctor Atomic* Symphony together with Carnegie Hall and BBC Radio 3, gives the U.S. premiere of the work at Powell Hall in St. Louis on February 7 and 8, with performances at the University of Missouri on February



Gerald Finley as J. Robert Oppenheimer in the San Francisco Opera production of *Doctor Atomic*

Terence McCarthy/San Francisco Opera

Music Director David Robertson will lead the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra in the North American premiere of John Adams’s *Doctor Atomic* Symphony.



Tim Parker

12 and at Carnegie Hall on February 16. The New World Symphony will also play the work, under Adams’s baton, as part of a program called “John Adams, Plugged and Unplugged” on March 22 in Miami Beach.

The Saint Louis Symphony (SLSO) had been scheduled to give the symphony’s world premiere under Music Director David Robertson last March. But it was forced to postpone its performances owing to an uncharacteristic delay in the completion of the score. Adams isn’t the kind of composer who drives his colleagues to nail-biting exhaustion with last-minute delivery of a score, but as work progressed he realized that the symphony prompted him to a powerfully creative re-engagement with the music that proved to be more time-consuming than he had initially allowed for—expanding from one month to seven. The opera itself works up

to a terrifyingly intense finale around the countdown to the atomic explosion at the Trinity test site, but the clock prosaically ticked away past the composer's deadline before he could finish his score in its symphonic guise.

"I was extremely embarrassed that I missed the original premiere date," Adams sheepishly confesses. The BBC Symphony instead gave the world premiere at the Proms last August, with Adams himself conducting. Reviews were nearly as mixed as they were for the opera's orig-

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inal reception—a reminder that this is challenging music for performers and audiences alike.

While this is the SLSO's first Adams commission, the ensemble has been playing lots of his music under Robertson's

J. Robert Oppenheimer, scientific head of the Manhattan Project (below, left), and General Leslie Groves, military head of the project, inspect the remains of the Trinity test tower, from which the first atomic bomb was deployed. The bomb vaporized the tower and turned the surrounding asphalt into sand.



Courtesy of the Department of Energy

tenure. In fact, Adams singles out the enterprising conductor as one of his most astute interpreters. As part of Robertson's commitment to making new music an integral part of the repertory, he has been an especially fervent champion of Adams, scheduling his music whenever possible. Later this season the SLSO will also assay his concerto for electric violin and orchestra, *Dharma at Big Sur*.

Robertson remained unfazed by the delay. "For me it was actually a sign that things were moving in the right direction,"

says the conductor, "that John wasn't just grabbing bleeding chunks and trying to suture them together. By waiting, we've allowed for precisely what I hoped the piece would be." Robertson had broached the idea of a new symphonic commission when he and SLSO Artistic Administrator Jeremy Geffen were bowled over at the San Francisco Opera premiere of *Doctor Atomic*. "What I hear in *Doctor Atomic* are certain things that are innovations for John in his own language," Robertson observes. "The story brought out an extra layer from him. At first there was talk of



Courtesy of the Department of Energy

J. Robert Oppenheimer, the focal point of *Doctor Atomic*

a vocal symphony based on the opera, but then I thought an instrumental piece would be more interesting."

Into the Dark

Doctor Atomic focuses on humanity's capacity to harness its creative genius for purposes of destruction, as encapsulated in the Trinity test of the atomic bomb in the summer of 1945 under Oppenheimer's supervision. Though relatively obscure before the bomb tests, the scientist is now a profoundly resonant figure in American history whom one biographer has labeled an "American Prometheus."

Adams recalls becoming sick during the time-consuming period of the opera's premiere—perhaps the first stage in an effort to purge himself of the demons he had confronted while grappling with its subject matter. The work into which he threw himself following *Doctor Atomic* was a Mozart-inspired opera based on *A Flowering Tree*, an ancient Tamil folk tale of injury and redemption, beguiling in its simplicity. Originally commissioned for Peter Sellars's New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna—which presented a slew of new works across various media in response to the Mozart anniversary year in 2006—*A Flowering Tree* was created with flexibility in mind, suitable for both opera house and concert hall. In fact, its North American premiere was a concert staging at Davies Hall by the San Francisco Symphony, which had co-commissioned the piece. Composing *A Flowering Tree* delivered just the antidote to *Doctor Atomic* that Adams needed. "After three years of 'handling plutonium' and feeling that the end of the world was not just a figure of speech," as Adams puts it, "I was ready to come back into the light."

The *Doctor Atomic* Symphony commission required Adams to return to the opera's sonic world of nervously crackling polyrhythms and ominous harmonies. Even so, he found the challenge exciting—much as he had when writing the opera's score in the first place. "I somewhat naively thought I could compile this symphony—and I use the word 'compile' advisedly—because I thought I could cut and paste," Adams says. "But as soon

as I sat down to work on it I realized symphonic logic and operatic logic are two completely different species.”

As Adams reconsidered the opera and experienced it in performance, he noticed that certain musical ideas felt cut short as a result of stage priorities. His process with the symphony became one of elaborating on some of those ideas by extending and transforming them, following a trajectory dictated not by dramatic concerns but by the score’s self-contained musical language as it unfolded. “While there were some sections where all I had to do was take the vocal parts and assign them to different instruments—for example, the bedroom scene was taken entirely whole cloth—most other scenes needed to be transformed symphonically,” Adams explains.

Adams was surprised by the symphony’s dimensions. He had originally envisioned a piece along the lines of Hindemith’s modestly scaled three-movement symphony drawing on themes from his opera *Mathis der Maler*. Instead, what resulted is Adams’s second-longest symphonic work to date, after *Naive and Sentimental Music* from a decade ago. The symphony, lasting around 45 minutes, spans four movements whose titles (“The Laboratory,” “The Bedroom,” “Panic,” and “Trinity”) reference moments in the opera. Some of the critics reacting to the London premiere last August insisted on viewing the symphony unfavorably as a sort of “paraphrase” of the opera, but this misses the whole point. *Doctor Atomic* Symphony is hardly some sort of contemporary *Carmen*-Fantasie recycling the big moments. Adams’s attention to symphonic versus operatic logic applies both to the large-scale structure and its local details.

In his orchestration of some of the vocal lines, for example, Adams notes that he did “rather perverse things that I’m extremely pleased with. I gave one large section for Pasqualita [the Tewa Indian maid in the Oppenheimer household] to the tuba, and it totally transforms that section. It’s an example of how the use of a different instrument playing in a different mode changes the entire affect of the music.” The domineering, overweight



Terence McCarthy/San Francisco Opera

James Maddalena (left) as Manhattan Project meteorologist Jack Hubbard and Eric Owens as General Leslie Groves in *Doctor Atomic*

General Groves, who orders the test to proceed despite a threatening electrical storm, becomes personified by the “spouting and blustering” of a trombone player. In fact, some of Adams’s original scoring for the brass in the symphony led to what he calls “serious miscalculations,” where he wrote “things that were literally impossible to play. That’s why the tempo was so distressingly slow at the Proms concert. I had to rewrite those passages. As a composer, you try some things that just don’t work because they’re too difficult, and then you go back and fix them.”

Adams considered the work’s impact on those who don’t know the opera, but hopes that listeners will come to know both works as complementary and mutually reinforcing aspects of one of the periods of his career of which he is proudest—and which has pushed his creative faculties to extremes. “Going into this world was a very disturbing place to be,” Adams observes, “but it was an exhilarating period for me as a composer. *Doctor Atomic* is one of my favorite works.”

For his part, Robertson says, “if a piece is good, then it posits certain ideas, puts forward certain propositions. And within the context of that piece it deals with those propositions successfully or not. The thing I admire about John’s music is that he’s aware of just what those ideas are when he’s putting forward a piece. He’s aware of them on the small scale—the individual theme scale—and on the larger scale of form. How to make those connections apparent is what the interpreter does.”

The Human Scale

Adams created a terrifying electronic collage in both the introduction to the opera

and its final scenes of alien, non-human, metallic shards of noise inspired by the music of Edgard Varèse—suggesting, as the composer puts it, “a post-nuclear holocaust landscape.” This was, in fact, his first musical impulse for the opera, together with science-fiction movie music of the 1950s. Those who are familiar with the opera score will find the absence of its electronic soundscape particularly noticeable. When asked why he chose to score the symphony for purely acoustic instruments, Adams says he wanted a piece that would not present “logistical problems” with a complex sound design that could hinder performances.

Yet might the symphony’s internal logic—with its rejection of these alien sounds—also suggest a perspective geared toward a more human dimension? “That wasn’t a conscious decision on my part,” Adams says, but he acknowledges this may be an important aspect setting the two *Doctor Atomic* compositions apart. On one level, the symphony offers greater clarity as a more focused portrait of the multi-dimensional Oppenheimer himself, who often recedes into the larger canvas of the opera. Indeed, instead of the atomic countdown, Oppenheimer’s final Act I aria is what Adams chooses for his finale in the symphony. In one of the opera’s most emotionally compelling moments, the poetry-loving physicist expresses his agony of doubt by singing the “Holy Sonnet” of John Donne after which he had named the Trinity test site (“Batter my heart, three-personed God”). “At first I was wary of using that in the symphony,” Adams says. “I didn’t think it would be possible to equal the incredible emotional intensity that Gerald Finley [who created

the role of Oppenheimer] gave. But I had an inspiration at the last minute to take the melody up an octave and give it to the trumpet. It's a different emotion—you don't have that extreme tormented intensity you get with the baritone voice—but you get something that's very poignant and unsettling and melancholy.”

On the other hand, Kitty, Oppenheimer's wife, is relatively absent from the symphony (except in “The Bedroom” section)—as is much of the feminine sphere Adams and Sellars devised for the opera as a counterweight to the male-only Trinity test site. Curiously, Kitty is the subject of the most extensive revisions in the opera. Not only did Adams move the vocal role up to soprano from mezzo—he had originally composed Kitty with the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson in mind—but he added a whole new passage for her in the countdown scene.

When Robertson introduces American audiences to *Doctor Atomic* Symphony, he'll be adding to an already extensive repertoire of Adams compositions of which he is a leading interpreter. Where does he see the symphony within the ongoing arc of Adams's career? “I liken it to the experience we tend to have when we go to a retrospective of a visual artist and see certain markers that are constant in their output,” Robertson says. “Recently I saw the retrospective of Piet Mondrian in New York, and one of the obvious things is just how important the grid aspect of things was for him from the very start—even in the earliest paintings, before there was any hint of where his style might go. I think that's the type of thing you see in John: this ability to perceive in one three- or four-note phrase a whole potential of things to happen.

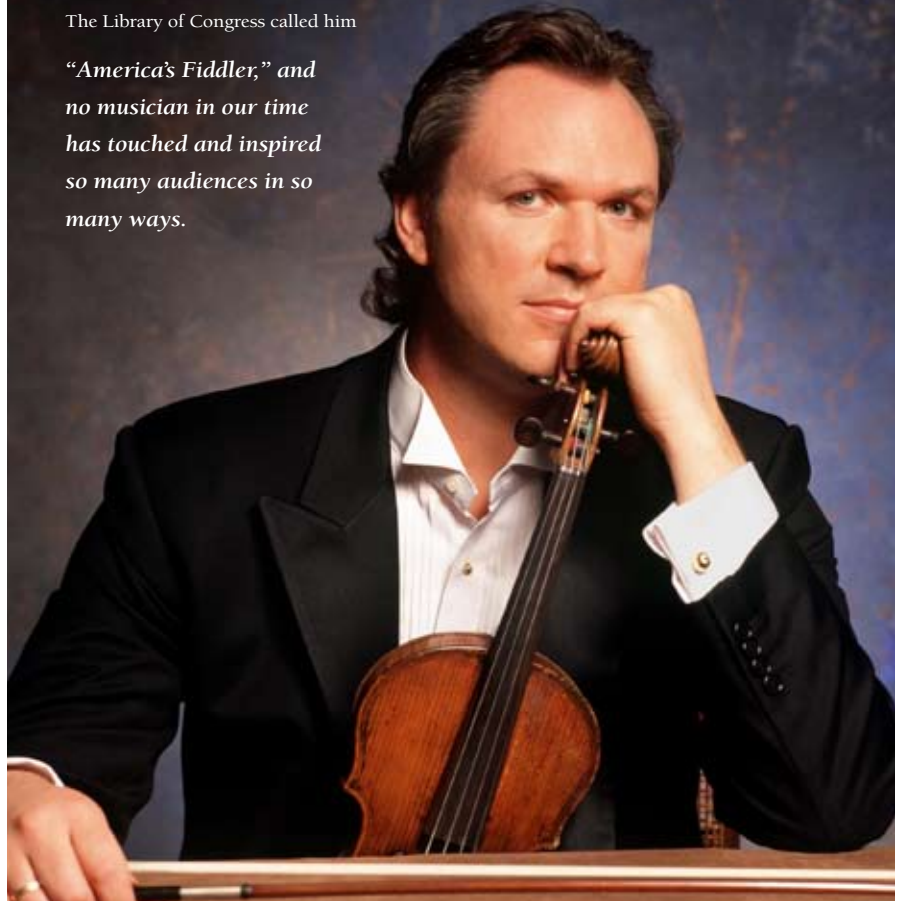
“With a living artist, even though you can say new work will probably have something of the quality you've come to recognize, they'll sometimes take that to a place you were not expecting. That's where creativity resides.” ∞

Thomas May writes and lectures about music and theater. He is the author of *Decoding Wagner* (Amadeus Press, 2007) and *The John Adams Reader* (Amadeus Press, 2006).

Mark O'Connor

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“America's Fiddler,” and no musician in our time has touched and inspired so many audiences in so many ways.



Suggested Programs for “An Evening With Mark O'Connor,” Festival and Outdoor Performances

(Either program would comprise half an orchestral concert.)

PROGRAM #1

The Fiddle Concerto (III) (1992)
Appalachia Waltz (1993)
Fanfare for the Volunteer (1994)

PROGRAM #2

Strings and Threads (1986)
Surrender the Sword (1997) (featured on
“Liberty!” the PBS soundtrack)
Call of the Mockingbird (1994)

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