



Performance Studies

A LEVEL

Performance Studies: John Adams

Topic Exploration Pack

September 2015

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CB1 2EU

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This activity offers an opportunity for English skills development.

John Adams Teacher Resource Pack

What the specification says...

For each practitioner, candidates must study a minimum of one work. The choice of work is left to the centre's discretion but it must demonstrate broad trends in the output of that practitioner.

Candidates need to be able to comment generally on the relationship between the work studied and the practitioners output as a whole. The length of each work is not prescribed; candidates are expected to deal with each work in a similar manner regardless of length.

The examination questions will test knowledge and understanding of one or more of the following interrelated analytical aspects for each work studied. Each question will address one or more of the following:

- **Structure and form** – the manner in which the practitioner organises materials within this work and the various effects this organisation produces
- **Elements of the performing arts** – the way the practitioner exploits these elements, as identified in Unit G401 (see below), in order to produce his or her distinctive style and any naturally occurring links between the art forms
- **Performance techniques** – approaches that might be taken by performers undertaking a performance of the work, specific skills required to perform in works of this style or interpretative perspectives possible in the realisation of the work
- **Stylistic influences** – the extent to which the material itself or the creative approach to its organisation are developed from the style of other practitioners, genres or cultures
- **Cultural, historical and social context** – the extent to which the practitioner's place in history, culture and society has influenced his or her approach to the creation, selection and organisation of material.

The elements of music which should be covered are:

- Rhythm
- Melody
- Harmony
- Timbre
- Texture

Background

Adams studied at Harvard University and he then moved to San Francisco where he continued to create music.

Adams is well known for his works in collaboration with artists who were going to perform them and he has been described as a “post-minimalist” composer due to the eclectic style and emotional aspects of his works. Adams was initially associated with Minimalism after hearing a live performance of Steve Reich’s *Drumming*, however, he spent much time trying to explore different musical styles. When talking about his time at University, Adams explains that:

“I was interested in jazz and rock, and then I would go in to the music department, which was like a mausoleum where we would sit and count tone rows in Webern”.¹

Adams’ Works

1970	Heavy Metal	Tape and electronic compositions
1970	Piano Quintet	Chamber Music
1973	American Standard	Other ensemble works
1973	Christian Zeal and Activity	Other ensemble works
1973	Ktaadn	Choral works
1975	Grounding	Other ensemble works
1976	Studebaker Love Music	Tape and electronic compositions
1976	Onyx	Tape and electronic compositions
1977	Phrygian Gates	Piano
1977	China Gates	Piano
1978	Shaker Loops	Chamber Music
1979	Common Tones in Simple Time	Orchestral
1980	Harmonium	Choral works
1982	Grand Pianola Music	Other ensemble works
1982	Matter of Heart	Film score
1983	Shaker Loops (version for string orchestra)	Orchestral
1983	Light Over Water	Tape and electronic compositions
1985	Harmonielehre	Orchestral

¹ Schwarz, K.R., 1996. *Minimalists*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, p. 175

1985	The Chairman Dances	Orchestral
1986	Tromba Lontana	Orchestral
1986	Short Ride in a Fast Machine	Orchestral
1987	Nixon in China	Opera
1987	The Nixon Tapes	Voice and Orchestra
1988	Fearful Symmetries	Orchestral
1989	Eros Piano	Orchestral
1989	The Wound-Dresser	Voice and Orchestra
1991	The Death of Klinghoffer	Opera
1991	El Dorado	Orchestral
1991	Choruses from the Death of Klinghoffer	Choral works
1992	Chamber Symphony	Chamber Music
1993	Violin Concerto	Orchestral
1993	Hoodoo Zephyr	Tape and electronic compositions
1994	John's Book of Alleged Dances	Chamber Music
1995	I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky	Opera
1995	Lollapalooza	Orchestral
1995	Road Movies	Chamber Music
1996	Slonimsky's Earbox	Orchestral
1996	Gnarly Buttons	Chamber Music
1996	Scratchband	Other ensemble works
1996	Hallelujah Junction	Piano
1997	Century Rolls	Orchestral
1998	Naïve and Sentimental Music	Orchestral
1999	An American Tapestry	Film score
2000	El Nino	Opera – Oratorio
2001	Guide to Strange Places	Orchestral
2001	Nancy's Fancy	Other ensemble works
2001	American Berserk	Piano
2002	On the Transmigration of Souls	Choral works
2003	My Father Knew Charles Ives	Orchestral
2003	The Dharma at Big Sur	Orchestral
2005	Doctor Atomic	Opera
2006	A Flowering Tree	Opera
2007	Doctor Atomic Symphony	Orchestral

2007	Son of Chamber Symphony	Chamber Music
2007	Fellow Traveler	Chamber Music
2008	String Quartet	Chamber Music
2009	City Noir	Orchestral
2010	Absolute Jest	Orchestral
2013	The Gospel According to the Other Mary	Opera – Oratorio
2013	Saxophone Concerto	Orchestral
2015	Scheherazade.2	Orchestral

*information taken from Wikipedia.org²

Fingerprints of Adams' Style

- Takes an eclectic approach to using different styles of music. He uses aspects of the music of the past but in a new way and so can be seen as post-modern in his approach (e.g. his orchestration is often reminiscent of the nineteenth century).
- Aspects of Minimalism are evident in many of his earlier works. This is less severe than the rigid systems used by Steve Reich and Philip Glass.
- Well-crafted orchestration is a key feature that links Adams to the mainstream of orchestral composers.
- Engages with the culture of contemporary America, particularly America's place in the world, and its political role.
- The importance of popular music styles as well as classical ones (e.g. the use of Gospel music in *I was looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*)
- His collaborations with particular performers in writing pieces for them e.g. *Century Rolls* (1996) was written for Emanuel Ax. His collaboration with Peter Sellers underpins several stage works.

² Wikipedia, 2015. *John Adams (composer)*. [online] Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_\(composer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_(composer))> [Accessed 13th July 2015]

Influences

- Father – jazz saxophone and clarinet player
 - *Gnarly Buttons* is dedicated to Adams' father
- Mother – singer
- John Cage
- Steve Reich
 - Phasing technique in *Phrygian Gates*
- Philip Glass
- Rock music
- Skempton
 - *Phrygian Gates*
- Hobbes
 - *Phrygian Gates*
- White
 - *Phrygian Gates*
- Electronics
 - The structure of *Phrygian Gates* is based upon a square wave therefore influenced by electronics. Not only this, “gates” is linked to electronics and in the music of the piece, refers to the moments when the modes abruptly change / shift
- Early music
 - Within *Phrygian Gates*, the piece is tonally based upon the Ancient Greek modes **Phrygian** and **Lydian**
- Jazz
- Minimalism
 - *Fearful Symmetries* returns to minimalism
- Romantic choral works
 - *Harmonium* uses the lush sounds of these choral works but also has the broad architectural sweep of Sibelius
- Schoenberg
 - *Harmonielehre* is a letter to Schoenberg castigating him for restricting classical music and stripping it of power, beauty and emotion
- Politics
 - *Nixon*
 - *The Death of Klinghoffer* is an example of an opera using a contemporary event with a political dimension

- Gospel Music
 - *I Was looking at the Ceiling and then I Saw the Sky.*

Phrygian Gates

Style:

- First performed on 17th March 1977 by Mack McCray
- ‘Gates’ is a term borrowed from electronics and refers to the moments when the modes abruptly change / shift
- Represents the rippling of waveforms that are sometimes smooth and tranquil, sometimes surging and stabbing.

“*[this is]* ‘opus one’ by virtue of the fact that *[it]* appeared in 1977-78 as the first coherent statements in a new language”.³

Structure:

- Two arguments of overall structure

	Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	Section 4
4 sections	9 mins	3.2 mins	2.8 mins	9 mins

	Section 1	Section 2	Section 3
3 sections	12.2 mins	2.8 mins	9 mins

- Both models share two ‘meeting points’; b640 (12.2 mins) and b809 (15 mins)
- b809 is argued to be the Coda
- Repetitive cell structure
- Structure is in the form of a modulating square wave with one state in the Lydian mode and the other in the Phrygian
- Amount of time spent in the Lydian mode shortens while more time is given to the Phrygian mode
- “Pings” of sound signpost the smaller internal units of 3-3-2-4.

³ Earbox, 2015. *Phrygian Gates and China Gates*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.earbox.com/phrygian-gates-china-gates/>> [Accessed 17th June 2015]



Harmony:

- Amount of time spent in the Lydian mode shortens while more time is given to the Phrygian mode
- In the coda the modes are rapidly mixed
- Pitch centres of:
 - A
 - E
 - B
 - Gb
 - Db
 - Ab
 - Eb
- This utilizes the circle of fifths.

Forces:

- Waves are always articulated by “pings” of sound
- Written for piano
- Use of sustain pedal (full ped, $\frac{1}{2}$ ped, $\frac{1}{4}$ ped)
- Arpeggiando (b340).

Rhythm & Metre

- Tempo change at b402
- Syncopation (b185)
- Quintuplets (b210), Sextuplets (b230)
- Use of quavers (opening)
- Use of semiquavers (introduced b194, increase in use until R.H. completely semiquavers b198 and both hands b201).

Melody

- Rising scale (b260)
- Use of limited pitches due to minimalist influence (b275 only 3 pitches)
- Arch shaped melodies (b280)
- Tonal centres of melody relate to tonal structure of work
- Use of short motifs in repetitive succession.

Texture

- Monophonic opening
- Homorhythm (b8)
- 4-part (b159)
- Pedal note (b161 – 171 – low E in L.H.)
- Chordal R.H. (b248)
- Chordal (b334)
- Use of phasing technique – influenced by Steve Reich (b351-361).

Lesson 1 – Introduction to John Adams

Starter

- Students to enter whilst *Phrygian Gates* is playing in the classroom.
- Piece of paper to be on desk as students arrive and instructions on the board to ask students to answer:
 - What genre is this piece of music?
 - What connotations does the piece give?
 - What can you tell about the forces⁴ of the piece?
 - How would you describe the melody of the piece?

Main – John Adams Background

- Teacher led discussion on background information of John Adams
- Talk about:
 - Works
 - What Prolific output of Adams
 - Vast array of different genres
 - Family background
 - Students to do a research task on John Adams
 - Guide students to
 - www.earbox.com
 - Johnadamscomposer.com
- Ask students to focus on the influences of Adams works.

⁴ Forces = instrumental devices

Plenary

- Students to present findings to the entire group
- All students to make notes on what is discussed.

Lesson 2 – Phrygian Gates

Starter

- Students to make a mind-map answering: What can you remember from last session?
- Students to create a list answering: What do you want to gain from this session?

Main – Phrygian Gates Analysis

- Students to be given a copy of the score for Phrygian Gates (teacher discretion whether this is the entire score or partial score)
- Students to actively listen to the work following the score
- Students to make notes on a sheet of paper about the following elements:
 - Melody
 - Structure
 - Rhythm & Tempo
 - Harmony
 - Forces (Timbre)
 - Texture

Plenary

- Teacher led analysis of the work (this could be done using the information above as a handout / worksheet)
- You may want students to highlight points on the score using coloured pens.

Lesson 3 – Further Analysis of Adams

Starter – Influences on Phrygian Gates

- Using information gleaned from lessons 1 and 2, students are to analyse how Adams' early life influenced his music
- Try looking at other influences on Phrygian Gates.

Main

- Other works and fingerprints of Adams' work
- Ask students to look at fingerprints of Adams' work and link these to Phrygian Gates. [see Fingerprints of Adams' Work worksheet]

Plenary

- Feedback answers to fingerprints to class and get create an answer sheet.

Lesson 4 – Structure & Form

Starter

- Students to draw a table of the structure of Phrygian Gates and to include all information they have gleaned from previous sessions in the diagram.

Main

- Students to create a 'model answer' for a question on John Adams about structure and form
 - Direct students to think about not only the structure of his works but:
 - the structure of his career
 - the structure of performances
 - the structure of influences
 - the developments of his musical output.

Plenary

- Share some model answers on the board and ask students to mark them / give their thoughts i.e. has the student included a point, an example, a link to the question etc.

Lesson 5 – Cultural, Historical and Social Context

Starter

- Students to list any historical knowledge they have of the time period 1970 - 2015

Main

- Students to create a timeline from 1970 -2015
- Students to research American historical events from this time
- Links to be drawn with Adams' works (e.g. *Nixon in China*).

Plenary

- Create a class timeline of historical events and link these to all Adams works giving examples from musical output.

Fingerprints of Adams' Work

Fingerprint of Adams' Style	Link to Phrygian Gates	Link to other works
Eclectic approach using different styles of music		
Aspects of minimalism		
Well-crafter orchestration		
Engages with the culture of America		
Importance of popular music styles as well as classical ones		
Collaborations with particular performers		





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