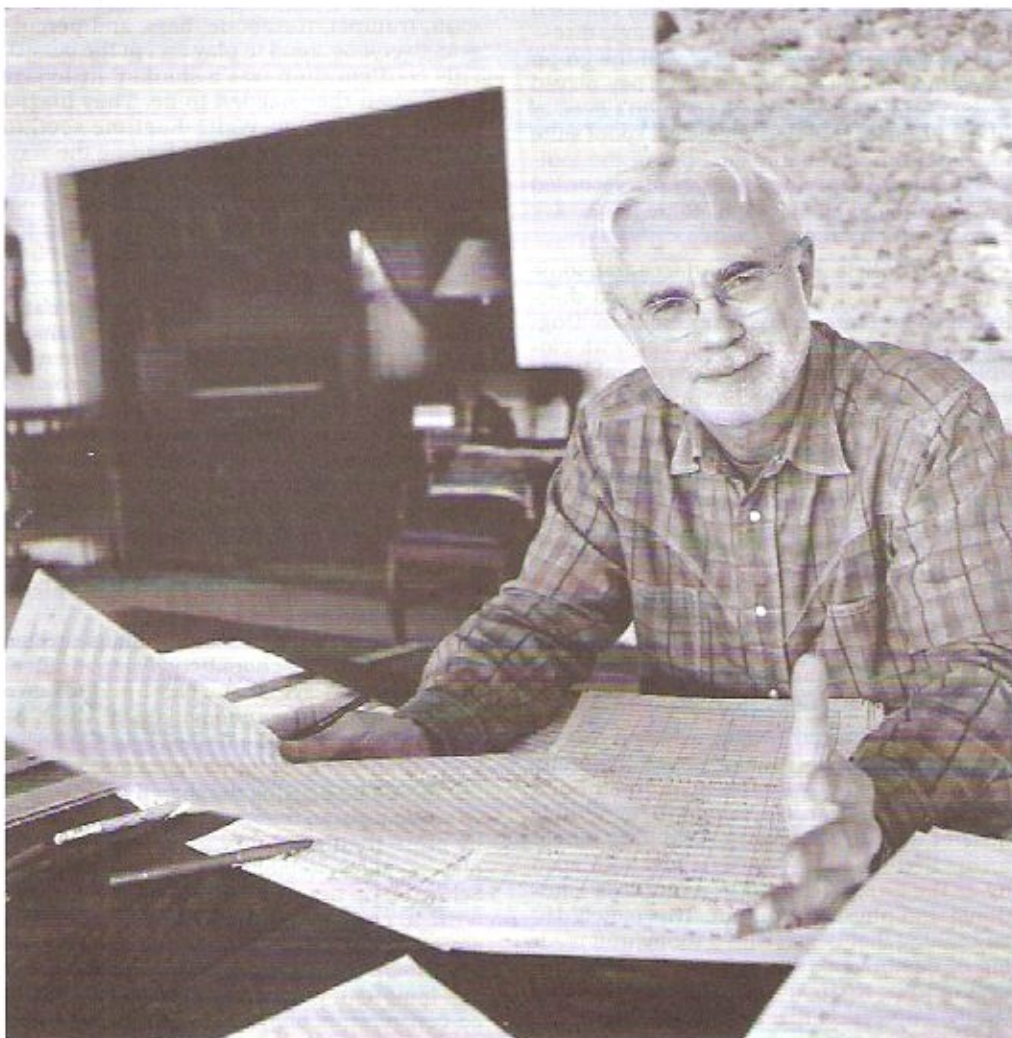


John Adams Blast in DC

Attacca, ICE at Coolidge Auditorium

Charles McCardell



John Adams is a familiar name in Washington DC. The composer solidified his capital connection in 1988 with *Nixon in China* at the Kennedy Center, which co-commissioned the work with the Houston Grand Opera and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In 2010, the Kennedy Center hosted "John Adams: Perspectives", a two-week festival of his music, where he also conducted the National Symphony. He returned to the NSO podium to conduct his urban California-themed *City Noir* as a coda to his 2013 DC residency.

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In May the Library of Congress and the Atlas Performing Arts Center joined forces in a four-concert Adams mini-festival. The LOC's Coolidge Auditorium, which remains one of the finest halls in the US for chamber music, has a long history of presenting contemporary composers. By comparison, the Atlas, a converted 1938 movie theater that reopened in 2005 after considerable renovation and expansion to offer many genres of music, is the "new kid on the block" (the hip H Street NE corridor). The contrasting venues suited Adams,

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whose sense of tradition and observations of current culture, musical and beyond, inform his methods of composing.

The Coolidge Auditorium concerts put Adams in the best possible light by pairing him with young musicians who have recordings as evidence to prove how well they grasp his intentions. The Attacca Quartet has released his complete string quartets on a single disc—a good thing, considering how well the group performed his pieces on May 22. They played seven of the ten segments from *John's Book of Alleged Dances* (1994), a whimsical spoof suite judging from the snarky qualities of the individual titles. Adams incorporates pre-recorded prepared piano audio to add some percussive edge in certain dances.

True to their name, the Attacca foursome jumped into action, unfazed by the wild shifts in tempo and mood. The crazy scales of 'Dog-jam' had a bluesy, psychedelic feel, with violinist Amy Schroeder sometimes resembling a cross between Stephane Grappelli and Papa John Creach—great fun while it lasted. But it was the taut ensemble playing in the 'Pavane: She's So Fine' centerpiece that was really impressive. The quartet's relentless drive and precision seemed to dissolve the bar lines in this minimalist-designed movement. A beautiful singing cello melody came courtesy of Andrew Yee, who elsewhere in the suite initiated the prepared piano sounds from a laptop. This nod to Cage is not that effective or cool, and the work probably would be better off without these electronic "rhythm loops".

Adams's Quartet (2008) needs no further explanation, and the Attacca's rendition pretty much answered any doubts about their bond with the composer. He helped them add his quartet to their repertoire. Two long movements that lasted just under a half hour sped by as the group engaged in an intense emotional and physical workout. This concluded an evening that began with a thoughtful reading of Beethoven's Quartet No. 2. The evenness of tone, sharp attacks, and agile phrasing left the impression that these musicians didn't need a warm-up period.

Later, the Attacca treated the audience to a world premiere commissioned by the LOC for this residency. Composer Timothy Andres, claiming that he drew inspiration from Schumann's chamber music, described his *Early to Rise* as a "full quartet compressed into ten minutes". It contains some of the most thoughtful ten minutes of quartet writing you could ask for in one tidy package. The music has purpose and direction and moves with assured efficiency. The Attacca made a strong case for *Early to Rise*. Adams recommended

Andres for this assignment, and both composers should be proud of the results.

Two nights later on May 24, Adams took to the Coolidge Auditorium stage more in the role of conductor than as honored guest. He and the International Contemporary Ensemble opened with Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale* arranged for a septet of violin, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, bass, and percussion. Everyone stood to play except the bassist. This configuration was a smokin' little jazz band when they needed to be. They blazed through the Tango-Waltz-Ragtime section with violinist Jennifer Curtis leading the way. Rich brass and wind sonorities graced the 'Triumphal March of the Devil' finale. If evil defeats good in the world, does that mean the drum solo is Satan's handiwork? This may be a drummer's joke that writes itself.

Adams also presented *La Forma della Spazio* (The Form of Space—2010) by Canadian composer Zosha Di Castri. This quintet for piano, violin, cello, clarinet, and flute explored the free-moving spatial relation of the instruments by placing the flute and clarinet in the back of the hall. Having sounds that ricochet around the listener was not impressive. Canadian-born composer Henry Brant pioneered the spatial concept back in the 50s. He made it work. Despite the room's excellent acoustics, this work's enhanced sonic effect was as convincing as re-channeled stereo.

With an expanded roster, Adams tackled the main events, Schoenberg's single-movement Chamber Symphony No. 1 and his own *Son of Chamber Symphony* (2007), which he recorded with ICE several years ago. A Schoenberg-Adams connection might sound weird, but there's no denying the shared urgency and virtuosic turns in these symphonies, separated by more than a century. Adams and 15 ICE players quickly established their stance in the Schoenberg, drawing out the score's passion with a cool head and hands. If Adams appeared more demonstrative conducting *Son of Chamber Symphony*, it's understandable. He had important points to get across, and his 16 co-conspirators obliged. A celeste and a percussionist doubling on keyboard sampler were subtle additions that brought extra texture.

There's even a quote from *Nixon in China* in the last movement.

Musical and personal connections are important to Adams. He has two incredible allies in ICE and the Attacca Quartet, who became a double layer of protection to ensure a goof-proof residency. As Attacca violist Luke Fleming summed it up, "It's a blast to play here." It's also a blast to hear them play here. ✪