

Bridging the Gap Between Literature and Music: How John Adams Succeeded in Sonically Interpreting and Realizing a Poem of Profound Nature

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ABSTRACT

Pulitzer Prize and 3-time Grammy Award recipient, composer and conductor, John Adams, is known to be one of the pioneers and innovators of American minimalist music. This paper explores a composition from his 1981 work, *Harmonium*, and how it reflects a poem by 17th century poet, John Donne. Both works are titled “Negative Love,” and with the support of scholarly research and analysis of both works, new understandings of how music can interpret literature are forged.

INTRODUCTION

Love is perhaps the one thing that all humans are searching for and are attempting to understand during their lifetimes. While this elusive phenomenon has been subject to artistic expression for millennia, seldom do two works from two different platforms, separated by nearly three centuries, have the opportunity to co-mingle within a single medium. In 1980, the text and message of “Negative Love”, a work by the 16th/17th century English poet and cleric John Donne, was musically interpreted by the 20th century minimalist American composer, John Adams. It was at the debut performance of this piece, (the piece which Adams appropriately titled “Negative Love)” that he exposed the world to a way of writing minimalist music that pushed the boundaries and norms of the medium; one that showcased both “a fascinating mix of daring newness and easily recognizable beauty.”¹ This essay serves as proof that John Adams succeeded in accurately portraying John Donne’s poem, sonically. This claim will be supported by comparing scholarly research written about different aspects of the content of each work.

BACKGROUND

In 1977, John Adams, was introduced to world renowned Dutch conductor, Edo de Waart, who had recently moved to the San Francisco Symphony. At the recommendation of the SF Symphony's president Milton Salkind, de Waart began educating himself on the current affairs of American classical music through Adams, and after a fruitful few years, John acquired the position of composer-in-residence for the Symphony, (which he held from 1979 to 1985).² Adams was commissioned by the San Francisco Conservatory to write music which would be conducted by none other than de Waart, which premiered at the new home of the orchestra, Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall. Although Adams had been a professional composer for many years, and had been honing his original compositional voice, he found himself contemplating ideas in writing for this project that he hadn't imagined. *Harmonium*, a work unlike the majority of minimalist compositions, would be "no longer dealing with a systematic harmonic process but with a personal, intuitive stylistic signature."³

Adams is known to have "created his own style out of a system known as minimalism, a music based on hypnotic repetition and pulsation," but *Harmonium* would remove this particular musical ascetic from its comfort zone.⁴ Given that minimalist music is often quite simple and cyclic; and contains very little harmonic movement, one might speculate that minimalist music is not designed to elicit a necessarily high emotional response in the listener.⁵ Even John Adams himself was "searching for ways to convolute and enrich the inherent simplicities of the style,"⁶ and already had declared that his "music had a kind of emotional drama that was not at all part of the traditional cool minimalist aesthetic."⁷

Harmonium would be an undertaking for Adams himself, and an opportunity for the minimalist and Western musical conglomerate to expand and change. The project not only served as the inauguration of John Adams' career, and launched his reputation as one of America's most-honored composers," but it also presented a challenge for him as an artist, in that he already "had written ensemble pieces and a lot of electronic music, but [had] never tackled anything even remotely close to [this] scale – over a half-hour long, for 200 singers and orchestra."⁹ Upon reflecting on his initial creative spark in writing for this commission, Adams recalled having first heard the Ludwig van Beethoven cantata, *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, around the same time. This piece incorporates full choir, and although Adams admired Beethoven, scoring for full choir was not something he had explored much at all until this point. However, the idea of a sea of voices intrigued him, because of how it could be used to create a certain type of sonic texture, one which he described as a "single tone coming out of a vast empty space, and by means of a gentle unfolding, evolving into a rich, pulsating fabric of sound."¹⁰

As Adams contemplated the use of the human voice as a main focal point within the music at hand, he came upon writings by Emily Dickinson, and John Donne; two poets separated by 300 year's time. Adams found the title of Donne's poem, "Negative Love," "irresistible," and would go on to score the entire first of three movements of the commissioned work around its content, but what was it about Donne's writing specifically that compelled Adams to include it in such a major way?¹¹

With an unrelenting penchant for the erotic and paradoxical, John Donne, spent much of his life studying the psychology of love and human motives. He wrote poems which carry a strong, sensual style, inventiveness of metaphor, various paradoxes, abrupt openings, dislocations and ironies. Could poetry as dense and abstract as Donne's be put to music, and if

so, could it be realized in a way that would be accessible to the average American concertgoer?

At 33 years of age, even Adams found himself wondering “how to follow a labyrinthine, philosophically allusive text like Donne's without veering toward the precious.”¹²

INTERPRETATION

In this section, the meaning behind the poem itself will be explored, and how it relates to Adam's approach to interpreting it.

Upon analyzing “Negative Love”, we can tell that Donne “compares - to reject - physical and intellectual love with the love of God.”¹³ Concurrently, in regards to Adams' approach to *Harmonium* he “rejects the rigidity of musical process and turns to increasingly grand Romantic rhetoric.”¹⁴ Can we make an association between the rejection of the rigidity of musical process and the rejection of a more material, physical form of love for one more spiritual? With a similarity, too uncanny to dismiss, it's no surprise that Donne's unconventional approach to conveying his poetic motives was in fact one of the qualities that drew Adams to “Negative Love?”¹⁵

Adams interpreted Donne's “Negative Love” to express “a way of saying something ultimately positive by means of a curious kind of conceptual inversion.”¹⁶ Interestingly, it appears that Adams himself is doing his own bit of conceptual inversion as well. Instead of taking the standard route towards minimalist composition, Adams is poetically expressing the birth and growth of the emotion of love itself. A single tone coming out of a vast empty space can be compared to a single feeling emerging from the space of the heart, or of the depths of the soul, seemingly from nothing; and the gentle unfolding of this feeling, as it takes its natural course in its own evolution, propels itself toward a rich, pulsating veil or fabric of emotion.¹⁷ It has even been said that “contrary to most minimal music, [“Negative Love”] is a highly

emotional composition with a clearly expressed text that exhibits the Romantic practice of enlisting musical contrasts to emphasize or reinforce text meaning.”¹⁸

At this point we can tell that John Adams is pushing the envelope within the realm of minimalist music as we know it, through his composition *Negative Love*, with its unorthodox instrumentation, and “its subjective emotional stance”¹⁹ The three-piece *Harmonium* suite (which “Negative Love” is a part), may have made quite an impact on Adam's success as a composer and in the mainstream Western musical world. However, even according to a most dedicated and thorough John Adams scholar, Rebecca Burkhardt, who analyzed the music of Adams over the course of an 11-year period, “the first movement, ‘Negative Love’ (Donne), stands alone, while the second and third [...] are linked.”²⁰

While *Negative Love* does exist a part of a trilogy, it appears that it functions within its own sphere of importance, and not only because it is the only one of the three movements of *Harmonium* to employ a piece of Donne literature, while the other two rely on Emily Dickinson's. Adams seems to have truly crept inside this poem, and while “riding on the waves of John Donne's poetic imagery, surrounding his thoughts on the humility of love,”²¹ music that *negated* what minimalist music listeners were accustomed to, emerged. Instead of what was common to the minimalist genre, “the music builds continuously and inexorably toward a climax, accumulating speed and power until a listener could pardonably forget to breathe.”²²

The following examination of the words, lyricism, harmony, orchestration, structure, and scientific components that are working together to create *Negative Love*, will help “to extract every minim of the emotion suspended in it.”²³

THE MUSIC

The remaining portion of the paper is devoted to the cross-examination of the score, recording, and poem, to provide a theoretical understanding of how the poem was musically realized. The graph below (found on page 133 of Rebecca Burkhardt's PhD. dissertation, "The Development of Style in the Music of John Adams from 1978 to 1989," will be of use in this analysis. Note that all timings listed refer to the following source:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4pPohlQ1Ao>

mm	1-152	152-238	239-310	311-345	346-427	428-441	442-488	(climax) 489-506	506-568
Section	Intro	A	B	Transition	C	→	Transition/ D	D	CODA (Intro mat.)
Verse/ line	"no" "no"	1/1-6	1/7-9	no text	11/1-3	11/4 "no"	"no" "dal"	11/5-7	11/8-9
Key/ Mode	E phr. G dor (incomplete)	A aeo A phr A mix	E ^b maj/ E aeophr	C aeo D dor	E dor F [#] phr	E dor	G mel min C phr D ^b lyd	D ^b lyd. F [#] phr	F [#] phr
Pedal	G(m. 24)	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G(partial)
Tempo	H-126 accel	H-132 accel	H-144	H-152	H-152 accel	H-168 accel	H-176 accel	H-184 DH-126	H-126

Harmonium, Mvt. I, "Negative Love"

Example 2.15

“‘Negative Love’ begins with an incomplete E Phrygian mode and ends in an F# Phrygian mode. Throughout the many harmonic phrases, the note G is common to all modes used and is sounding in all but a few measures.”²⁴ This is important, considering the entire piece is enclosed between two Phrygian modes (see graph). In her 1954 publication, “Introduction to the Psychology of Music,” Géza Révész discusses the phenomenology of the Greek modes, which we know have been used since the 6th century BCE. Since all Western music is built from the

use, expansion, and manipulation of these modes, when a musician employs them, he or she has the potential to wield two and half millennia worth of information and intention. Intention refers to the fact that “it was because of the structural and phenomenological differences of the Greek modes that the Greeks used the modes for very definitive occurrences, convinced that the public would understand.”²⁵

Not only was the Phrygian [tonality] employed to inspire soldiers,²⁵ and inspire enthusiasm,²⁶ it also is known to promote boldness, passion, exuberance, courage, [and] in excess pride, and rashness.”²⁷ In addition, Mars, which governs masculine energy, is known to be attributed to the Phrygian mode.²⁸ The poem “Negative Love” happens to be written by a man, who is attempting to understand and embrace the complexities of his masculinity. Per Burkhardt's analysis, Adams employs the Phrygian mode not only in the beginning and end, but also amongst the featured tonalities in an overwhelming 7 of the 8 other sections of the piece.

Aside from the abundant use of Phrygian mode throughout the piece, there are also four stretches where Dorian, Aeolian, and/or melodic minor was used, leaving only 4 small instances where either Lydian, Mixolydian or major was employed. For the purposes of this analysis melodic minor, Aeolian, and Dorian are all considered as part of the minor tonality. As stated earlier, Donne's poem portrays the striving to treat those he loves with an ideal form of love; one that is too “difficult to describe let alone understand: in fact, this way of loving he describes could only be depicted by saying what it is not 'perfect' or 'ideal.’”²⁸ Musically, this idea is well supported, given that “a minor chord can be compared to the message conveyed when someone says, 'No more.’”²⁹ No more, in this case, is an expression of the rejection and willing away of an undesirable way of loving. Adams even employs the syllable “no” for the first two minutes and

forty seconds of the piece, and returns to it once again later, as the climax approaches. The *negative* in “Negative Love” is being thoroughly and thoughtfully utilized.

Lastly, it is important to explore the effect of the co-existence of the Phrygian and dorian modes within the piece as it reflects the poem's theme. Though Phrygian is the main tonality expressed throughout the piece, Dorian is employed frequently throughout as well, especially in the 4th and 6th sections, where it serves as the main tonality. In the poem, Donne is attempting to describe a way of loving that is more spiritual than material, and he often compares loving the spiritual/religious ideal to the loving of a woman. This polarity is representative of man's one foot in the door of falling victim to jealousy and possessiveness over their female lovers, and man's desire to unite with God, serving all of humanity. Notice how this is directly correlated to Aristotle's analysis of the two modes of our query:

For Aristotle, there are two main types of polarity: democracy and oligarchy, from which all the others derive and are simple variations. The harshness of the oligarchic regime is compared in Aristotle's view with the Dorian mode, which is sober, masculine and suits harsh, difficult to play chordophones: that is, non-pleasurable ones, in particular the zither; the tenderness of the democratic regime, on the other hand, is identified with the Phrygian mode, a style which is persuasive rather than warlike.³⁰

Throughout the poem, Donne is attempting to explain his negation of various forms of love. He clearly expresses his favor towards the more spiritual form of love, or the love of God. This directly relates to the relationship between the two-polar opposite political regimes depicted earlier, and their tonal counterparts: a democratic type of relationship between people - one that exists to serve the whole; one that is liberating, vs. an oligarchic system – one that gives power over a whole to a select few. In the case of a loving relationship, between a man and woman, as Donne is referencing, the latter describes the man having a manipulative and demeaning type of

control over the woman and over the relationship itself. In the case of the prior, the man and woman exist as equals, and as part of a whole.

CONCLUSION

There is no amount of art or music that can be produced that will satisfy the curiosity of a human in their understanding of love, however, while the quest for this understanding has no single correct route, the sonic aid of music and poetry can bring anyone closer. Not only did Adams push past limitations of composing within a specific musical genre, he also managed to include specific musical vehicles that transported the essence of Donne's poem to the musical tablature. This essay set out to prove that John Adams did in fact succeed in sonically portraying John Donne's poem, and throughout this paper, the reader has been guided through the science and philosophy behind this. Based on the evidence and the explanation of evidence provided, it is clear that John Adams succeeded in not only accurately portraying John Donne's poem, but that he "allow[ed] the images [this poem] suggests, as well as the formal groupings of verse, to appear on the musical surface and influence the structure of the work."³¹

FURTHER THOUGHTS

In addition to acknowledging the undeniable ways in which the two works, both titled "Negative Love," correlate with one another, perhaps additionally the reader has also gathered a greater appreciation of the potential that exists within the process of musically interpreting literature. This paper of course serves as proof that a specific piece of music was successfully created from the interpretation of written word alone, but it also provides one with an opportunity to learn about the science behind love, and music, and its ability to influence the human mind and spirit profoundly.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Alan Rich, "John Adams' Harmonium," *Symphony* 51, no. 3 (June 2000): 28.
- ² Joshua Rosenblum, "Recordings: Choral and Song: Adams: 'Harmonium' 'the Klinghoffer Choruses,'" *Opera News* 65, no. 5 (November 2000): 48-49.
- ³ K. Robert Schwarz, "Process vs. Intuition in the Recent Works of Steve Reich and John Adams," *American Music* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 266.
- ⁴ Jim Berrow et al., *John Adams, Minimalism and Beyond*. DVD. Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1992.
- ⁵ Laura Diane Kuhn, and Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music Since 1900* (New York, Schirmer Reference/Gale Group, 2001), 1077.
- ⁶ John Adams, "Phrygian Gates and China Gates," last updated 2016, <http://www.earbox.com/phrygian-gates-china-gates>.
- ⁷ Susan Elliot, "John Adams' Harmonium," *Symphony* 51 no.3, (June 2000): 29-30.
- ⁸ Rich, "John Adams' Harmonium," 28.
- ⁹ Elliot, "John Adams' Harmonium," 29-30.
- ¹⁰ Thomas May, *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, (Pompton Plains, N.J.: Amadeus, 2006), 84.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² John Adams, "SONIC YOUTH," *The New Yorker* 84 no. 25 (Aug 25, 2008): 32.
- ¹³ May, *The John Adams Reader*, 84.
- ¹⁴ Schwarz, "Process vs. Intuition," 268.
- ¹⁵ May, *The John Adams Reader*, 85.
- ¹⁶ Adams, "SONIC YOUTH," 32.
- ¹⁷ May, *The John Adams Reader*, 84.
- ¹⁸ Brent Heisinger, "American Minimalism in the 1980's," *American Music* 7 no. 4 (1989): 439.
- ¹⁹ Schwarz, "Process vs. Intuition," 266.
- ²⁰ Rebecca Louise Burkhardt, "The Development of Style in the Music of John Adams from 1978 to 1989" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1993), 131.
- ²¹ Rich, "John Adams' Harmonium," 28.
- ²² Rich, "John Adams' Harmonium," 29.
- ²³ Dr. David Naugle, "John Donne's Poetic Philosophy of Love," accessed on November 24th, 2016. https://www3.dbu.edu/naugle/pdf/donne_philosophy_love.pdf.
- ²⁴ Burkhardt, "The Development of Style," 132.
- ²⁵ Géza Révész, *Introduction to the Psychology of Music* (Dover Publications, April 5, 2001), 113.
- ²⁶ Révész, "Introduction to the Psychology of Music," 113.
- ²⁷ Christopher Whitt, "Origins of the the Church Modes," updated on June 5th, 2002, http://www.engr.mun.ca/~whitt/bass/mode_origins.html.
- ²⁸ Stewart Hendrickson, "Musical Traditions of Scales and Modes," accessed on November 22nd, 2016, http://www.stolaf.edu/people/hend/VictoryMusic/Sept-MusicalTrad_OfScalesAndModes.html.
- ²⁹ John Opsopaus, "Using Ancient Greek Music for the Care of the Soul," updated in 2004, <http://wisdomofhyapatia.com/OM/BA/MT.html>.
- ³⁰ Daniela and Bernd Willimek, "Music and Emotions Research on the Theory of Musical Equilibration," accessed on November 23rd, 2016, <http://www.willimekmusic.de/music-and-emotions.pdf>.
- ³¹ Burkhardt, "The Development of Style," 133.

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