

October 8, 2008

Dear ASOC,

It's no secret: I am a big fan of John Adams.

When one of you wrote me this week, after having struggled through a bit of the new *Doctor Atomic* DVD, it inspired me to respond accordingly (see below). Maybe simply rehearsing our part each Monday may have caused some similar frustration? I hope this helps:

The opera is tough – given its unusual subject matter and length – but the rewards of study, repeated listening and most of all live performance are great.

Aside from his total mastery of the orchestral palette, one of John Adams' greatest talents is his lyric gift – his ability to set text effectively and write beautifully for the human voice, either when composing the natural rhythms of speech (especially colloquial "American" English) or interjecting an ecstatic melodic outburst (where like Monteverdi, the Godfather of opera, he delivers melismatic treatment for heightened emotional effect).

One of the more odd and confusing (but wonderful) aspects of *Doctor Atomic* is its libretto, culled from so many sources:

1. General Groves and the scientists all "speak" in a conversational, almost Hemingway-like "tone" – dialogue drawn from actual accounts of the minute-by-minute events.
2. Oppenheimer joins in the dialogue too, but often he breaks into poetic utterances of heart-breaking beauty (John Donne and Charles Baudelaire).
3. Pasqualita the housekeeper sings of Native American myths that comment on the action.

-But perhaps the most confusing is:

4. Kitty Oppenheimer, whose scenes with her husband are almost entirely the musings of poet Muriel Rukeyser (a creative-vs.-destructive tone? -an Eastern-style masculine/feminine pair of opposites?). In the Act II opening Mr. and Mrs. Oppenheimer are singing "at" and "with" each other; not "to" each other – unusual, but not unprecedented, as Mozart did the same thing with the duet "about" love in *The Magic Flute*, "Bei Männern."

5. Less confusing is the role of the chorus – obviously a chorus as one would find in classic Greek drama (or even the Bach Passions) – a "family of man" that both participates in and comments on the action, but with texts as varied as scientific descriptions of nuclear physics, Government directives, the *Bhagavad Gita* and even textless utterances that go beyond words and their dictionary equivalents.

-And like the two greatest operatic masterpieces of the 20th century, Berg's *Wozzeck* and Britten's *Peter Grimes*, orchestral interludes complete the emotional portraits at key dramatic moments where language leaves off.

The result in *Atomic* is a fascinating piece that is sometimes more lyric (cantata-like) than dramatic (traditionally "operatic").

-And then there's the ending, or lack thereof.... something John Adams loves to do in many of his works, from *Nixon in China* to *The Death of Klinghoffer* to *El Niño* to the *Transmigration of Souls* ... He leaves us hanging. I recently read one writer who explained it best by imagining that John Adams in works like *Atomic* is posing the question: "This is what I imagined. What do YOU think?"

-More than you wanted to know? -More to come, later.

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