

**October 17, 2008**

**ASOC Atomic Question of the Day - read at your own risk!**

Dear ASO Chorus,

A three-part riddle for you:

I have been intrigued of late by a question posed in a recent article about *Doctor Atomic* (one of many articles surrounding the opera's recent rebirth at the Metropolitan Opera):

In the years to come (perhaps centuries) will what humanity knows of Robert Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project result from knowledge of the John Adams opera?

-Which, to me, begs two further questions:

1. Does art really have that kind of sustainability or durability?  
and
2. If so, why?

Regarding the original query about Dr. A. one has to first wonder, why all the fuss over an opera? -Why all the writing and blogging, both at the 2005 premiere and now, three years later? Adams himself even marvels at it in his recent memoir, commenting on how much less attention is paid to the premiere of one of his new instrumental works (chamber or orchestral) as compared to the eruption of press, dialogue and even casual comments from passers-by when he premieres a new stage work such as *Atomic*. (Adams' anecdote about casual comments to him by strangers about the premiere of *Atomic* reminds one of the old Monty Python sketch about the Cockney couple as literary critics and their comments on Shakespeare: "I like 'is comedies; me wife likes th' histories.")

Adams' situation is not unique.

Think of Mozart and his *Nozze di Figaro*, that masterful operatic transformation of Beaumarchais' satirical play that caused such a stir in Vienna (the original play was hardly unknown at the time). -Or Shostakovich and his grand catalogue of "public" (symphonic) and "private" (chamber) creations - small vs. large masterpieces that were of such a distinctly different character, due to the attention swirling around him (and the pressure put upon him by both the musical establishment and the Soviet authority) at the premiere of each of his symphonies, from No. 5 onwards to the 15<sup>th</sup> and final one. -Or even (and maybe especially) the many examples of a film adaptation of a preexisting work like Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*: the controversy over the original novel was more than eclipsed by the future furor over the film. It seems when stories are brought to life on the big stage (and in film) we notice and remember.

But will that knowledge or memory as preserved in an artistic retelling of a historical event or character eventually replace the well known and well documented facts? -Especially with a figure like Robert Oppenheimer, in our Information-Age of radio, TV, film, Getty Images, the Internet and its Google-bility? Perhaps it is precisely because of all of this that Oppenheimer has already entered into the status of myth, well before Adams breathed life into him on the operatic stage (The commission to compose the work came from San Francisco Opera's Pamela Rosenberg who requested a contemporary work as part of a "Faustian" festival of operas).

Is it then really so hard to imagine that half a millennium from now what is known about the pre-Hiroshima prelude might be gleaned from a work of art? I think it possible. To wit, William Shakespeare.

Google the name "Hamlet" and you'll find that of the 23,100,100 entries (which, by the way, are ordered by Google according to "most hits received"), the overwhelming majority of them reference Shakespeare, not the historical Prince of Denmark. Try the same with Macbeth, King Lear and even the infamous leader of the ancient world, Julius Caesar. It seems we have chosen to remember "To be or not to be," "Out, out brief candle," and the scene on the "blasted heath" over the nitty-gritty details of who actually said or did what.

-And while "the Bard" may loom largest in our collective consciousness, there are certainly others: We have chosen to remember Ozymandias from Shelley, not the historical record. It is Picasso's *Guernica* that resonates so deeply with us and will endure longer than any photo of the town's ruins. We even choose to remember our non-historic figures better than our real history, with monuments by Sophocles like *Oedipus* and *Antigone* and the oft-told tale of Don Juan and the Stone Guest (the most imaginative version being Mozart's *Don Giovanni*).

So, to the original question, we will never know if *Doctor Atomic* will achieve this enduring status – we are too close to its creation. We may imagine that future generations will be moved, as we are, by the character Oppenheimer's powerful evocation (at the end of Act I) of the Donne sonnet, "Batter my Heart," or by Kitty Oppenheimer's cries (via the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser) right before the bomb's detonation, "We are hopes, you should have hoped us. We are dreams; you should have dreamed us. -Calling our name, calling our name."

What is known, however, is that we remember and cherish (and "naturally select") not what art tells us about any particular person or event, but what it tell us about ourselves. The great works of art will remain as long as we keep asking the same "great" questions.

-And to the follow-up questions, #1, yes, it would seem art has that kind of longevity and universality, more so than history itself. To quote Robert Shaw, the arts will always "provide for the exchange of ideas and values otherwise uncommunicable by alphabets, numbers, equations or grunts. The reason that our reaction to a Beethoven quartet or El Greco's *Toledo* cannot be described is that the Arts are not superfluous. They exist to convey that which cannot otherwise be conveyed."

-And to #2, Why? It is because art struggles (and often succeeds) at grappling with the universal issues of the human condition. –And great art that survives the centuries has done so by its creators' mythic process of transcending a world of opposites in the fusion of technique and spirit, form and feeling, head and heart. Someone who understood this well was Albert Schweitzer who, I believe, commenting on Bach's St. Matthew Passion said: "While Bach was not a witness to the Crucifixion, he was a witness to the meaning of the Crucifixion." Perhaps the same may be said of John Adams and Los Alamos – only time will tell, and none of us will live long enough to know.

–But ain't it great to be so close to the creative spark that started it all, and in our case from time to time to routinely rub elbows with the likes of a John Adams and an Osvaldo Golijov, just two of many great living artists who regularly collaborate with us?

See you Monday,

**Jeffrey Baxter**  
*Choral Administrator*  
*Atlanta Symphony Orchestra*