

## **'Atomic' emperor of opera**

Composer John Adams dominates the genre with his unique body of work

By Pierre Ruhe

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Sunday, November 16, 2008

John Adams, on his way to Atlanta this week, is the first composer since Stravinsky to flood the market in all media.

A new book, a documentary, CDs and DVDs, performances, interviews, Web sites, lectures — this fall the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer with the all-American name looks to be making a bid for both broad popular recognition and artistic dominance.

Adams' just-released memoir, "Hallelujah Junction," recalls his angst and satisfaction at becoming one of the most-admired classical musicians on the planet — a life that, to everyone else, seems charmed beyond belief. A thoughtful writer, Adams has kind words for the Atlanta Symphony Chorus and conductors Robert Spano and Donald Runnicles; the book is a compelling read, too.

There's also a new two-CD retrospective, offering highlights from Adams' most celebrated scores. Punch-packing orchestral masterpieces share space with scenes from in-the-news operas including the brazen work that propelled him to the front ranks, "Nixon in China."

And then there's Adams' latest opera on another new CD, a gorgeous, melodic fairy-tale called "A Flowering Tree."

But it's Adams' acclaimed, controversial opera, "Doctor Atomic," that is getting the most attention just now.

The ASO performs it Friday and next Sunday in Symphony Hall. This semi-staged version follows New York's Metropolitan Opera production — broadcast globally in high-definition movie theaters — and a new DVD filmed at the opera's European premiere.

From the start, ASO musicians were all over "Atomic." ASO principal guest conductor Runnicles led the world premiere at the San Francisco Opera in 2005. Music director Spano conducted a slightly revised version in Chicago and will return to it this week in Atlanta.

"I hear 'Doctor Atomic' as an amazing amalgamation of 20th-century musical styles," says Spano, "which John could do since he wrote it in the 21st century. He speaks in many tongues, and that includes Stravinsky and Mahler and sci-fi movie soundtracks and Bugs Bunny cartoon music and minimalism — it's not overt, it's not obvious, but it's all within his musical language."

Spano adds, "The formal structures are so big that 'Doctor Atomic' is almost Beethovenian in that way. All the small parts refer back to the big, overarching idea. The structure is always right there."

Adams' sound world — at turns brawny and lyrical and always dense with his personality — is well known in these parts.

The ASO has played most of his orchestral and choral scores, going back to the Robert Shaw days. We've grown accustomed to seeing Adams on the calendar every season.

Last year the composer himself conducted in Symphony Hall, including his Pulitzer-winning “On the Transmigration of Souls,” which the New York Philharmonic commissioned as its official memorial for the Sept. 11 attacks.

**Reached at his home in Berkeley, Calif., Adams seems at once flattered by the love he gets from top musicians and eager to fight for the highest standards from everyone else.**

**“I’ve encountered too many clueless performances of my music,” says the composer, “where it’s been programmed without knowing how much rehearsal effort they’ll need. In Atlanta, the chorus is so disciplined and so musically prepared by Norman [Mackenzie, chorus master] that all the difficulties in performance seem to vanish. I think Norman is a genius.**

**“It’s so rare to have both the orchestra and audience on board with my music, as in Atlanta; I feel very lucky.”**

IF YOU GO:

“Doctor Atomic.” Robert Spano conducts the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in the local premiere of John Adams’ opera. With baritone Gerald Finley, soprano Jessica Rivera, baritones James Maddelena and Richard Paul Fink, bass Eric Owens and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus. 8 p.m. Friday and 3 p.m. Sunday. Symphony Hall, 1280 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. \$21-\$78. 404-733-5000, [www.atlantasympphony.org](http://www.atlantasympphony.org).