

The musical nature of John Luther Adams

La Jolla Symphony & Chorus performs his "Sila" Sunday in Balboa Park



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John Luther Adams at UC San Diego talking about his upcoming contribution to the campus' Stuart Collection. Photo: Erik Jepsen/UCSD

John Luther Adams had a rough idea about how his proposed new installation for the University of California San Diego might sound. But a recent visit to the site near La Jolla Playhouse, where “The Wind Garden” is expected to become the next addition to the Stuart Collection, proved to be a revelation.

“I have the basics of the piece together, but of course I didn’t really know what to expect until we got into the site,” said Adams in an interview at the Ojai Festival. “And I am just thrilled at the way the sounds behave in the air under the canopy of the grove. It’s just magical.

“I’m finding I’m erasing more and more of my composition to let the trees do their thing, because they are so musical.”

Adams, who won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in music, has always been influenced by the natural world. But that idea of minimizing the composition and allowing the natural world itself to become part of the piece is becoming increasingly evident in his work, which he more typically creates for musicians rather than computers.

Conductor Steven Schick and the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus will perform his most recent outdoor piece, “Sila: The Breath of the World,” next Sunday in the Japanese Friendship Garden at Balboa Park. The hourlong work, in which the musicians and singers will be located throughout the garden, is essentially a succession of sustained tones, or sonic “clouds.” But while clouds have the background of the sky, “Sila” has the background of environmental sounds, which in the memorable performance at Ojai, also conducted by Schick, ranged from wind in the trees to the distant sound of children (there were relatively few sounds from the audience, which seemed spellbound by the work).

At the conclusion of “Sila,” Adams directs the performers to stop playing and just listen — in a sense completely erasing himself from the music.

“Erasing myself? You know I’m such a composer; I’m such a control freak,” Adams said. “Maybe I’ll finally let go the day after I die.

"As an unrepentant control freak, as a composer who loves to have things just so, I'm reveling in this boundary between composition and reality."

Ecotopian dreams

Adams doesn't have the usual bio shared by many full-time composers: piano lessons, music school, graduate school, and ultimately an academic position. He was a skilled rock drummer and knew enough about composition to get into CalArts, where he was deeply influenced by his teachers Lou Harrison and James Tenney. But just as he had never felt at home as a child in a family that was constantly on the move, he never felt at home in Los Angeles.

"I still have this love-hate relationship with Los Angeles particularly, Southern California in general," Adams said. "I owe so much to this place, and yet so much of that is a reaction to it. I think without my fully understanding it, instead of going to graduate school, I went looking for home. I went to the woods to live out my Walden fantasy; and I went north to help save the wilderness."

During his 20s and into his 30s, he lived the life of an environmental activist, working for the Wilderness Society, the Alaska Coalition and the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, where he was executive director.

"To be 21 in Alaska in 1975 was just exhilarating," Adams said. "I'm working on a memoir now trying to come to terms with my life in Alaska, trying to understand why I went there, what happened, why I left (after three decades).

"It was a young person's state. It was a new state. It was a wealthy state. It was an educated state. It had the most elegant and open constitution of any state. And of course it was by far the wildest and the biggest state. There was a sense that not only could we do it right the first time by preserving complete ecosystems intact, we could also create a kind of ecotopian society."

That didn't exactly happen, although Adams counts his involvement in the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980 as one of his greatest achievements.

But at the same time he was saving the wilderness, he was writing music. And with the strong encouragement of Gordon Wright, the conductor of the Fairbanks Symphony Orchestra, he started drumming again.

"It was a devil's bargain with my best friend," Adams said.

The terms were simple: If Adams played timpani in Wright's orchestra, Wright would play Adams' music.

"I was a pretty fair timpanist, too," said Adams. "And I really took to the job. I loved it because you could do a lot back there to drive the orchestra and you had enough time to really listen. Once I learned to count without it taking up all my brain, I was really able to pay attention to orchestration, the dynamics of the orchestra. I just learned an incredible amount.

"Then there's the other part of the bargain: I get to write a bunch of pieces and hear them."

Musical realities

Playing in that orchestra and hearing his work performed was his graduate school, a small cabin in the woods was his studio. When performers like Schick, and ensembles like the Bang on a Can All-Stars, discovered and then championed his music, word started to get around in the Lower 48. With "Become Ocean," commissioned and recorded by the Seattle Symphony — earning the 2014 Pulitzer and a 2015 Grammy for best classical composition — Adams is now considered among the major composers of our time.

That might appear to be a powerful forum for Adams to practice his environmental activism, but he insists his music has no political subtext.

"I was the Alaska composer," said Adams, who now lives in New York and Mexico. "And now I seem to be the eco-composer, or the environmental composer. And I'm fine with all of that. Yet, there's part of me that chafes a little bit, even though I've asked for it. Because I think those kind of labels are a way of minimizing someone. 'Oh yes, he's a Santa Fe painter; it's nice art, but it's regional.'

"So since I'm not running for public office, I figure I can talk out of both sides of my mouth with impunity. I'll tell you, yes, my work, everything that I do, is all about the state of the world, the future of the human species, environmental injustice, climate change — all of these things that are so overwhelming and so deeply concern most thinking people these days.

"Yet, out of the other side of my mouth, I will assert that I believe in art as art. I'm very old-fashioned; I don't make political art. Political art more often than not fails as art and fails as politics."

So "Become Ocean" is not a piece about global warming?

"Well, I was thinking about global warming," he said. "I'm always thinking about global warming. But is it a piece about climate

Is it even a piece about the ocean?

“Yes, but not really.”

Whether with “Become Ocean,” or the pieces like “Sila” that incorporate nature directly, Adams doesn’t try to replicate a place; he aspires for the piece to create its own special place.

“I hope it’s a place unto itself,” he said. “That’s what I try to do: discover new places in music and do the best I can to bring them into the air and invite you, the listener, into them to find your own way and have your own experience.”

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