AQA & OCR: John Adams

by David Ashworth

INTRODUCTION

Many music departments include modules on minimalism in their KS3 and KS4 schemes of work. A contemporary musical style that uses simple repetitive diatonic phrases with catchy rhythms and engaging harmonies has considerable appeal for young students, who can themselves use computer sequencers to devise and develop effective-sounding music in this style.

But what next? For many students and indeed older composers, minimalism can become something of a prescriptive musical cul de sac with limited opportunity for further musical development.

The music of John Adams (and indeed the later music of the older minimalist composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass) shows how a post-minimalist style can emerge from these foundations, which gives greater scope for a more diverse musical expression.

John Adams first became attracted to this musical style when, as a young student, he was rejecting the rule-based serialist techniques of his professors in music college, which he described as ‘a mausoleum where we would sit and count tone-rows in Webern’.

The writings of John Cage provided him with a stimulus for alternative lines of musical enquiry, which, in turn, led to an interest in exploring ways of working with minimalist techniques. At the same time, he was making considerable use of pioneering synthesizer technology in his work, which continues through to the present day.

His ‘post-minimalist’ style uses many of the hallmarks of minimalism. A steady pulse coupled with repeated diatonic phrases, combined in intricate interlocking rhythms, underpin much of his work, but this is combined with elements we perhaps associate more with Romanticism. So within the course of a single movement, there is often a great deal of development and variety, light and dark, serenity and turbulence, all of which he achieves with judicious use of instrumental colour – orchestral and electronic – and big contrasts in texture, dynamics and tempos.

Another interesting feature of Adams’s music is the way in which he draws on an eclectic range of non-classical musical styles, which he feeds directly into his work. Charles Ives is a major influence, and Adams uses the same techniques of musical collage and unusual stylistic juxtapositions in many of his works. His parents were both jazz musicians, and as a youngster Adams listened to a lot of 1960s and 1970s pop and rock music, and aspects of all of these styles can be found in several of his compositions. Indeed, it is these elements that serve to broaden the appeal of his music in reaching a wide and diverse audience of enthusiasts.

Finally, the importance of education. Adams has worked with young musicians from institutes such as New York’s Juilliard School and London’s Royal Academy of Music, and he has recently taken a post as visiting professor at the Royal Academy. Coupled with the fact that this year we celebrate John Adams’s 70th birthday, this means that there should be an increased opportunity to hear his music being played live across the UK over the coming months.

A level exam board specifications

Teachers will find much of interest in the music of John Adams that is relevant to teaching an A level music course of study. Specifically, the content and activities included in this resource can be used to support the following areas from the exam board specifications:

- AQA: AoS7 Art music since 1910
- OCR: AoS6 Innovations in music 1900 to the present day
The clarity of parts, clear-cut structures and repeated phrases in Adams’ works make them suitable for use as listening, understanding and appraising exercises across all exam board specifications.

**SHORT RIDE IN A FAST MACHINE**

In his own commentary on the background to writing this piece, Adams describes it as a hair-raising ride in a very fast car driven by a ‘friend’. There is an interview with Adams where he talks about the piece on his website: he explains the fun of having the larger, less flexible instruments of the orchestra being bullied and cajoled by the woodblock into playing much faster than these players would normally expect. For example, the parts for tuba and contrabassoon capture the discomfort that our slow-moving composer felt when hurtling along in his ride a fast machine. You can read more of the interview [here](#).

There is also a link from this page to a simplified version of the piece for school band, for those schools that might want to consider performing the piece.

*Short Ride in a Fast Machine* can be broken down for purposes of listening and analysis into sections defined by the changing woodblocks that provide the steady pulse:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>Woodblock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1-79</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>79-121</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>122-132</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>133-138</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>138-188</td>
<td>No woodblock</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first section demonstrates a typical harmonic process employed by Adams in several of his works. Beginning with some looping figures using just a few notes (in this case D, E and A), he gradually adds notes. It’s in the prominent brass parts where you can hear this most clearly, but these additional notes can also be found added to some of the string, woodwind and synthesizer parts. At bar 52, he uses what he refers to as a ‘gating’ effect. The thick, dense harmony suddenly changes as the E major-based harmony (as shown in red in the music example) changes abruptly to B flat major. The original D, A and E group, however, continues as before:

![Music notation](image-url)
Let’s turn our attention to some of the rhythmic features of this piece:

The driving woodblock pulse (shown on the top line) plays on the beats in a triple metre pattern. The brass parts, and to some extent the additional percussion, try to disrupt this by superimposing rhythmic patterns that are at odds with this.

In line A, extracted from bars 6-9 of the score, the trumpets have a two-against-three pattern of rest, crotchet, crotchet. Later on, as shown in line B, the trumpets are joined by the trombones to develop this disruption with the addition of a quaver figure to the existing pattern.

The rhythmic dissonance becomes more extreme when the horns join in at bar 20. Line C shows how the previous pattern has been developed and extended by adding a highly syncopated pattern to the original figure.

In fact, it is a hallmark of some of the most successful minimalist composers that they will use rhythmic ambiguity and cross-rhythms to generate and maintain interest in music that contains highly repetitive elements.

**ACTIVITY: BUILDING HARMONIC LAYERS**

This activity involves gradually building up complex harmonic layers that eventually change abruptly at a determined point – as illustrated in the discussion above:

- Begin by devising parts for one or more instruments that use just three or four notes from any given key.
- Very gradually add more notes, and possibly more instruments as the music develops over time. This should result in a rich harmonic support for the original parts, which are still working with the initial selection of notes.
- At a given point, suddenly change the supporting harmonies to move to a highly contrasting chord.

**ACTIVITY: DEVELOPING RHYTHMIC PROCEDURES**

Devise another composition exercise based on the rhythmic procedures Adams uses in this piece:

- Have a percussion instrument play a steady driving pulse or a simple rhythmic pattern.
- Add a second percussion or melody instrument that plays a simple pattern in a different metre.
- Develop this rhythmic pattern so that it becomes more complex and possibly syncopated.
- Gradually add more instruments, playing in rhythmic unison but with different melodic material.
PHRYGIAN GATES AND CHINA GATES

Like many composers of his generation, Adams was caught up in an ideological struggle between the wave of serialist composers, who followed the principles originally laid down by Schoenberg, and the musical philosophies epitomised in the thinking of John Cage. Adams became attracted to the newly emerging minimalist style and saw it as an effective path to take as a means of sidestepping these confrontations. However, from the outset, he considered the basic minimalist procedures to be too simplistic and restrictive for his needs. He has said:

‘from the start I was already searching for ways to convolute and enrich the inherent simplicities of the style. The phrase, often attributed to me, that I was “a minimalist bored with minimalism”, was the remark of another writer, yet it was not far from the mark.’

In two of his earliest pieces, the solo piano Phrygian Gates and China Gates (1977-8), he is already pushing the envelope. These pieces have many of the hallmarks of minimalism – pulsing sounds and repeated patterns – but it is the structural procedures that set them apart.

Phrygian Gates is built on a sequence of sections that alternate between Phrygian and Lydian modes following a cycle of 5ths pattern. The first section in A Lydian is the longest in the piece, and is followed by a very short section in A Phrygian. This is followed by sections in E Lydian and E Phrygian respectively. During the course of the piece, the Lydian sections become gradually shorter and the Phrygian sections increase in length. This schematic illustrates the start of this process:

Gates, a procedure we’ve already seen in connection with Short Ride in a Fast Machine, is a term borrowed from electronics – which was an area of considerable interest for Adams, who was heavily involved in building and modifying synthesizers and other electronic gadgets whose potential he would explore in many of his early works. ‘Gates’ are moments when the modes change abruptly and without warning. There is ‘mode’ in this music, but there is no ‘modulation’. China Gates was written for young pianists and utilizes the same principles without resorting to virtuoso technical effects. It also oscillates between two modal worlds.

There are parallels between these two piano pieces and his 1978 work for string ensemble Shaker Loops (see below). In a set of programme notes Adams has written for these pieces, he says:

‘What makes Phrygian Gates still interesting for me is the topography of its form and the variety of keyboard ideas, many of which suggest the rippling of wave forms. Sometimes these waves are smooth and tranquil; sometimes their surging and stabbing figurations can be as violent as a white-water expedition. In most cases I treat each hand as if it were operating in a wave-like manner, generating patterns and figurations that operate in continuous harmony with the other hand. These waves are always articulated by short “pings” of sound, little signposts which mark off the smaller internal units in a ratio of roughly 3-3-2-4.’
SHAKER LOOPS

Shaker Loops is a fine example of Adams’s post-minimalist style. He draws on many of the features and conventions of minimalism, but by using dramatic, dynamic gestures and harmonies more associated with music from the Romantic period, he finds ways of moving into new musical territory.

Comparing Shaker Loops to minimalist composer Terry Riley’s groundbreaking piece In C, Adams says:

‘rather than set up small engines of motivic materials and let them run free in a kind of random play of counterpoint, I used the fabric of continually repeating cells to forge large architectonic shapes, creating a web of activity that, even within the course of a single movement, was more detailed, more varied, and knew both light and dark, serenity and turbulence.’

The music still has the driving motor rhythms, but it also has much dynamic shading and contrasts of texture, and it makes considerable use extended techniques on the various string instruments. Adams’s commentary on the development of this piece shows the importance of not rejecting ideas simply because they fail at the first iteration – an important message for composition students. On his website, he says this:

‘Fortunately I had in my students at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music a working laboratory to try out new ideas, and with the original Wavemaker [an earlier string quartet] scrapped I worked over the next four months to pick up the pieces and start over. I held on to the idea of the oscillating patterns and made an overall structure that could embrace much more variety and emotional range. Most importantly the quartet became a septet, thereby adding a sonic mass and the potential for more acoustical power. The “loops” idea was a technique from the era of tape music where small lengths of pre-recorded tape attached end to end could repeat melodic or rhythmic figures ad infinitum.’

The title Shaker Loops is a play on words using the musical term ‘to shake’, meaning either to make a tremolo with the bow across the string or to trill rapidly from one note to another. The ‘waves’ of Adams’s earlier Wavemaker were to be long sequences of oscillating melodic cells that created a rippling, shimmering complex of patterns like the surface of a slightly agitated pond or lake.

The revised version of Shaker Loops can be played either by a septet of soloists (three violins, one viola, two cellos, one double bass) or by a string orchestra of any size. An online score of the work is available here. The four movements, in brief, are as follows:

1. Shaking and Trembling: derived from minimalist procedures, but makes more dramatic use of dynamics, rapid crescendos and diminuendos. Louder, aggressive passages contrast with sections that are more pastoral in nature. Hints of fragments of sustained melodies appear over the top of this shimmering backing
from time to time, but they do not develop significantly. The interest is more in the harmony – sophisticated harmonic changes and rich chordal textures, owing more to the music of Mahler and Wagner than to the relative harmonic simplicity of the music of Adams’s contemporaries Reich and Glass.

2. **Hymning Slews**: this section also makes use of loops, but is much slower with less obvious rhythmic interest. Attention now focuses on longer, more languid, sensuous melodies which make considerable and effective use of glissando technique. We still hear some trills, which provide a connection with and echoes of the first movement. These textures and harmonies have much in common with the ambient music of Brian Eno.

3. **Loops and Verses**: this third section features sustained melodic writing for cellos, drones from the violins, and more subdued and less frequent ‘shaker’ passages. As in the previous movement, effective use is made of string harmonics to extend the pitch range considerably and to give the piece a dreamier, more ethereal quality. An interesting instruction to the players is to aim to achieve a gradual accelerando by moving smoothly to metronome markings that increase in small increments. Key changes and occasional ominous rumblings in the bass add dramatic interest. At approximately three minutes into this movement, the cello begins a melodic passage consisting of a simple climbing passage A B C D (see the score from bar 47 onwards). Although the pitch progression is facile, Adams uses rhythmic procedures to add interest.

4. **A Final Shaking**: revisits the music of the first movement.

**ACTIVITY: CHANGING KEYS**

Minimalist composers often use sudden changes of key as an effective way of making contrasts in a piece of music, and *Shaker Loops* provides fine examples of this:

![Key Signature Chart]

The first movement uses five different key signatures in the order shown above. Note that some are repeated, and that there is no obvious pattern. A good listening test is to ask students to listen to a CD or online recording of the movement, and note down the exact timings (in minutes and seconds) when the key signature changes. You can check with the online score to see exactly where the changes take place.

Next use the key change schema above as a template for students’ own compositions. They can use the timings from the Adams original as a guide for the length of sections, or they may wish to exercise free choice. The relative lengths of sections should vary considerably. There are many precedents for this approach of stripping away the content and using the shell to create a new work. Adams himself does this with his Violin Concerto, for instance. From the jazz world, a well-known instance of borrowing a pre-existing structure as a vehicle for fluid invention is Charlie Parkers ‘Ornithology’, which takes its structure from ‘How High the Moon’.

In sections that have the same key signature, students may wish to repeat some musical ideas. Other sections may contain transpositions of material used in earlier sections. This is not a feature of Adams’s writing in this particular piece, but is a good strategy for generating extended material.
Rhythmic figures

To create the distinctive oscillating effect that is one of the hallmarks of *Shaker Loops*, Adams uses quiet, rapidly alternating rhythmic figures. These figures are played on similar instruments and share notes over a narrow register, which provide a shimmering effect when played together.

ACTIVITY: TEXTURES AND RHYTHMIC FIGURES

Here are some ideas for writing accompaniment patterns similar to the ones devised by John Adams:

- Construct a figure that uses an alternating pattern of just two notes. Now replace just a few of those notes by adding a substitute note. For example, if your pattern consists of alternating the notes D and E, you might want to replace a few of the Es with the note F.

- Devise three different rhythmic figures to be played simultaneously on three instruments. Use quavers and semiquavers. The figures should contain some common notes and others just a step apart – so that a cluster emerges when the instruments play simultaneously. Consider using a computer sequencer so that you can trial and error a few ideas.

- Take a look through the online score for further examples from the piece itself.

MY FATHER KNEW CHARLES IVES

In fact, the composer’s father Charles Adams did not know Charles Ives, but they seemed to share much in common. Both were from the same area of Massachusetts and lived there around the same time. They were both businessmen by day, pursuing their artistic interests by night – Ives as a composer and Charles Adams as a jazz musician. Finally, both were drawn to the writings of philosophers such as Henry David Thoreau.

These parallels were enough to prompt John Adams into writing an ‘autobiographical‘ piece, reflecting some of his own childhood impressions of a further ‘three places in New England’, following on from the well-known Ives work. Adams had long been fascinated by the music of Ives, having conducted several of his works. This piece gives him the opportunity to work with some of Ives’s ideas and approaches to composition. You can see the score to the piece here.

Ives's music makes distinctive use of musical quotations from serious and popular music, and it is this approach that Adams uses effectively in the first movement of this work, ‘Concord’.

ACTIVITY: LISTENING EXERCISE

‘Concord’ is an ideal piece to use as a listening exercise. Noteworthy features include:

- The gentle, sustained strings that set up the mood of a ‘hazy stillness of a summer morning’.

- The contemplative ‘free’ melody played on trumpet, which is staunchly independent of any prevailing considerations of key and time signatures.

- A musical quotation of a woodwind exercise by Beethoven, which Adams recalls from his clarinet lessons as a boy.

- The switch to a ‘march style’, evoking memories of Adams’s days as a youth playing in the local marching band. The melodies are original but are pastiche-like in nature. Only towards the end do we hear quotations from ‘Reveille’ and a favourite of Ives’s, ‘Nearer, My God, to Thee’.

The second movement, ‘The Lake’, is summer nocturne. Over the gently lapping sounds of the water, distant lights glimmer and mosquitos hover. This music is reminiscent of some of Bartók’s night music pieces, which would make a useful basis for some comparative listening. Like Bartók, Adams makes effective use of gentle percussive sounds to evoke the sounds of the night. In addition to the usual orchestral instruments, the piece is scored for four percussion, who play a large variety of percussion including crotales, glockenspiel, cowbells,
xylophone, marimba, snare drum, small suspended cymbal, low suspended cymbal, two low toms, vibraphone, triangles, chimes, crash cymbals, bass drum, two bowl gongs, tuned low gongs and tam-tam.

ACTIVITY: ADDING PERCUSSION

A good way for students to add interest and additional layers to a piece is to add some percussion lines to their score. Music departments usually have a good mix of tuned and untuned percussion that are relatively easy to play. These lowly instruments are often associated with semi-improvised junior school music sessions, but careful and judicious scoring can add considerably to the atmosphere being created.

The distant trumpet returns at the start of third movement, ‘The Mountain.’ In the programme notes for this piece, Adams writes:

‘Mountains are mysterious archetypes for me, as they surely were for Ives. In his Second String Quartet, several men have a conversation that turns to a heated argument, and then go out into the night air and walk up a small mountain to view the firmament above. From behind my house in central New Hampshire I could look across the expanse of the Merrimack River valley and see looming in the distance Mount Kearsarge, part of the Appalachian chain. The crooked profile of that mountain commanded not only my view, by also my adolescent mythic imagination.’

The third movement tells a story. Adams recounts climbing a higher peak in California with his son. The movement begins as a distant reverie, growing into a gigantic mass, an implacable wall of granite as the mountain is approached. A pulse emerges, which charges headlong in a series of vigorous upward ascents until suddenly and without warning the summit has been gained. The piece ends in surprise:

‘We came over a rock-strewn knoll to see the mythic, snow-capped peak of Mount Shasta shimmering in the light summer haze, an image of serene majesty and majestic serenity.’

ACTIVITY: USING MEMORIES

The account above provides a solid and inspiring foundation for using memories as basis for a piece – in establishing a structure and as a source of musical ideas. Students could use a similar approach.

FEARFUL SYMMETRIES

Written in 1998, Fearful Symmetries is not one of Adams’s best-known pieces, but it bears comparison with what is perhaps the best-known excerpt from Nixon in China, the ‘foxtrot for orchestra’ The Chairman Dances.

Taking its title from words in William Blake’s poem The Tyger, Fearful Symmetries makes an ideal piece for study and analysis because of the clear-cut patterns and symmetry in the phrasing. For much of the piece, the minimalist accompaniment layers are built on regular four- and eight-bar phrases with very obvious chord changes. These backing parts are carried to a large extent by the keyboards and strings.

Within that framework, Adams incorporates many of his typical stylistic elements: a regular and prominent pulse, big band and boogie-woogie riffs, and all sorts of polyrhythmic and polyphonic play. You can refer to the score online here.

A slinky, jazzy saxophone quartet, augmented by cor anglais and bassoon, carries much of the melodic interest and foreground layers, helping to keep the tone light and humorous. Adams successfully draws on his background and interest in jazz and rock styles and successfully integrates these elements within an orchestral framework. Woodwind players can use the online score for valuable sightreading exercises and as a source of inspiration for writing and improvising jazz style melodies and riffs.
Adams’s orchestral pieces demonstrate his control and awareness of the standard traditional elements of the typical orchestra, but this piece provides a good example of his desire to go beyond the conventional palette of available sounds by integrating sounds created using technology. Adams takes considerable care with his use of samplers and synthesizers in his music, and this piece is no exception. The synthesizers are featured prominently, sometimes imitating a cheesy organ, sometimes providing swirling, shimmering, Glass-like arpeggios. There are very detailed instructions in the introduction to the score as to the equipment to be used – and how to amplify these instruments in performance.

The ending is quite distinctive and unusual for a minimalist-style piece. However, one of the features of what has emerged as a post-minimalist style is more freedom and flexibility in how the musical material might develop and change over time. The piece ends on a surprisingly quiet note as the texture gradually lightens and the rhythmic activity spends itself. With many of the instruments playing extremely long-held notes, this is a good section in which to pick out and analyse the sounds of individual parts. The synthesiser part is particularly prominent here and is worth listening out for.

**ACTIVITY: MUSIC FOR DANCE AND FILM**

Although Fearful Symmetries was not written as a dance piece, with all its complex, exciting rhythmic activity, it is no surprise that it has been choreographed many times. Students may wish to write a shorter piece in a similar style that could be used by dance students in the school in devising a new performance piece.

Alternatively, there is an ingenious montage of an orchestral performance overlaid with edited footage from some Buster Keaton silent films [here](#). This might give some students ideas for a music for film project.

**Adams’s use of electronics**

For those interested in exploring the arguments, issues and development of the use of electronics in music making, I can highly recommend reading ‘The Machine in the Garden’, a chapter from Adams’s book *Hallelujah Junction*. Here he provides an overview of the importance of technological innovation over the past 300 years, his experiences with the cumbersome synthesizers of the 1960s, and the importance of tape recorders, mixing boards and digital sequencers in suggesting new musical structures and new approaches to musical form and syntax – for example, the development of minimalism.

Indeed, there are many great examples of the innovative use of electronics in composition and performance throughout Adams’s collection of works from his earliest pieces onwards. The second movement of his Violin Concerto, called ‘Body through which the dream flows’, makes effective use of synthesizer timbres and textures to help evoke a supernatural atmosphere. Of course accomplished composers such as Arvo Pärt can achieve broadly similar effects using conventional acoustic instruments, but for young students without access to a large range of orchestral instruments and players, using synthesizers and samplers allows them to access sounds which they can use to broaden the palette.

In *Fearful Symmetries*, listen out for the use of keyboard samplers at around the 25:00 mark. There is an ancillary website, run by Adams’s technical assistant, which clearly explains the technical requirements for this and other pieces making use of technology.

The hire parts from the publisher come complete with sample libraries and specifications to ensure that the timbres employed are exactly as specified by the composer. Adams also specifically instructs that musicians using technology should have local amplification, rather than having their sounds channelled through a PA.

Adams has probably done more than any other classical composer in seeking to address the challenges and opportunities afforded by contemporary electronic technology. Students interested in using technology in their own work would be well advised to engage in further study of some of his ideas and approaches.
USEFUL LINKS

- [John Adams’s own website](#): an excellent, informative site with background and programme notes for all his compositions.
- [Boosey & Hawkes online scores](#): free access to online scores of most of John Adams’s works, along with those of many other composers.
- Spotify and YouTube have links to many of the Adams pieces mentioned here. There are also some scrolling scores on YouTube, for example [Nixon in China](#).