

Signature characteristics in the piano music of John Adams

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Recognition of music, the ability to hear an excerpt and determine (for example) its composer, is made possible by our unconscious awareness of the music's unique patterns of musical features. One could compare it with the study of fingerprints, though voice recognition is a more suitable analogy. The aim of this chapter is to bring to light the features which enable recognition of John Adams's piano music, and to trace the origins and development of those features. Since Adams composes at the piano, and since a majority of his works have been written for piano or for ensembles including a piano, this will go some way towards making a general study of his compositional style.

Texture and melody

The earliest published piano pieces by John Adams are *China Gates* and *Phrygian Gates*, both dating from 1979.¹ Showing their Minimalist influences, they are written using a very small number of techniques. *China Gates* uses the first of these techniques for the entire piece, and *Phrygian Gates* uses it for its majority.

The technique, as seen in example 1 below, consists of two lines operating at once, each containing only one note at a time, and built either from a fragment of a scale (usually modal), or from an arpeggio, in whole or in part.

Example 1. Adams: *Phrygian Gates*, bars 87–89



¹ John Adams: *China Gates* (New York: G. Schirmer/AMP, 1979). John Adams: *Phrygian Gates* (New York: G. Schirmer/AMP, 1979). Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Phrygian Gates*.

Adams varies the means by which the material is presented: one can have a scale fragment and arpeggio figure played simultaneously between the hands, or simultaneously within each hand, where each line combines stepwise and leaping motion. The lines themselves are always built from a shorter repeating figure, between two and ten notes in length. Also, more often than not, the right hand's repeated figure is of a different length to the left hand's, as the following example where brackets have been added to highlight the six versus seven note pattern.

Example 2. Adams: China Gates, page 7, bars 10–13



It is clearly audible as a result of this that the music is built from repeating material, but the differing lengths of figures add a greater variety of sound to the texture by preventing literal repetition. The harmonic effect of this, since the pairing of notes changes constantly, is that every note of the local scale or mode is treated as equal. There is no melody, only surface texture. The two lines need not be made of the same note values. Such treatment is rare here, but is a principal feature of *Nixon in China*, written six years later.²

This texture is frequently punctuated by single notes, at least an octave higher in register than anything else and almost always doubled in octaves for added emphasis, as shown in example 3, below.

Example 3. Adams: Phrygian Gates, bars 291–94



² John Adams: *Nixon in China* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1987). Act II, Scene 1, Pat Nixon's aria 'This is prophetic', and Act III, Chou En-Lai's soliloquy 'I am old and cannot sleep'. Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Nixon in China*.

They never appear alone, and it is rare for them to appear at regular metric intervals. This, working in conjunction with the repeating figures of different lengths, creates a strong sense of pulsation while undermining any sense of metric regularity, and lends the music an airy, floating quality.

Since the piano functions as a good microcosm of Adams's output in general, we can see these same two techniques being used in the orchestral pieces written at the same time. *Shaker Loops*, written in 1978, differs only in having a denser polyphony and having the gestures translated onto stringed instruments.³

Adams's orchestral works from this period, *Common Tones in Simple Time* (1979–80), *Harmonium* (1980–81) and *Grand Pianola Music* (1981), all make extensive use of these techniques, on a larger scale.⁴ However, one may detect a progression away from their use here: in the latter two works, these techniques become associated with background texture or introductory material rather than the principal substance of the music. By the time of *Harmonielehre* and *The Chairman Dances* (1984–85), these techniques were being superseded by others.⁵

By this time, the character of Adams's music was changing, becoming less ambiguous in its harmony and rhythm. The rhythm became more regular, and more 'rhythmic' in the conventional toe tapping sense. The harmony thinned out, moving from scale clusters to simpler triads. By the time of *Harmonielehre* and particularly *Nixon in China*, most of the music was built from arpeggio figures and repeated block chords.⁶ The arpeggio figures could be thought of as being a

³ John Adams: *Shaker Loops* (New York: G. Schirmer/AMP, 1982, 2005). Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Shaker Loops*.

⁴ John Adams: *Common Tones in Simple Time* (London: Chester Novello, 1980, rev. 1986). John Adams: *Harmonium*, 2nd edn (New York: G. Schirmer/AMP, 2006). Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Harmonium*. John Adams: *Grand Pianola Music* (New York: G. Schirmer/AMP, 1994).

⁵ John Adams: *Harmonielehre*, 2nd edn (New York: G. Schirmer/AMP, 2004). Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Harmonielehre*. John Adams: *The Chairman Dances: Foxtrot for Orchestra* (New York: G. Schirmer/AMP, 1989). Hereafter referred to as Adams: *The Chairman Dances*.

⁶ Adams: *Harmonielehre*, bar 1. Adams: *Nixon in China*, Act 1, Scene 1, bar 374.

development of the *Gates* lines, evolving in tandem with the harmony. In the context of Adams's compositions, a loop can be thought of as a repeating figure of pitches drawn from any of the notes of the local mode or scale. Furthermore, a loop which has been drawn from the more limited palette of a triadic chord constitutes an arpeggio. Block chords had been present since *Phrygian Gates*, but only in small quantities as clusters.⁷ As their use became more common in Adams's works from the mid 1980s, use of the scale figures dwindled as arpeggios proved less malleable than scale fragments. Block chords are, however, more adaptable than scales to such harmonic change; remove the non-triadic pitches from a cluster chord and what remains is still a chord that can be treated in much the same manner.

Another change occurring at this time is the increasing use of melody in Adams's compositions. At this time, melody for Adams was treated as another aspect of texture, rather than as an aspect of form as it would be in most other Classical music. The following motif, by far the most enduring one in all of Adams's music, is a melodic and textural feature which literally saturates almost every work he wrote for the next twenty five years. It is Adams's solution to the problem which faces all composers who write in a Minimalist style: the music must incorporate enough surface activity to counterbalance the static, or very slowly changing, harmony, but by what means should such activity be introduced? For the sake of comparison with Adams's peers, Philip Glass tends to favour the use of arpeggiation, often in combination with conflicting speeds; e.g. triplet quavers against straight quavers. Steve Reich tends to favour canons and pulsation of block chords. Adams favours oscillation: he takes one or more members of the local harmony, and alternates it with an adjacent tone.

Adams's method has strong precedents within American musical traditions. In folk music, particularly the *blues*, and in popular music based on it, harmony moves at a relatively much slower pace than it does in Western Art Music. Musicians naturally tend toward oscillation of chords as a way to justify the prolongation. It is from this tradition that we get the use of the fourth introduced as an oscillation within a chord rather than as a suspension from the previous one, hence

⁷ Adams: *Phrygian Gates*, bar 334.

the ubiquitous mannerism found in popular styles of guitar playing: D–Dsus4–D.

When applied to more than one note of the chord simultaneously, the effect is similar to a rapid alternation between two chords. A downward oscillation produces the effect of I–bVII–I, while an upward oscillation produces the effect of I–IV–I. Both are common effects in *blues* and the various genres influenced by it. Adams's use of this technique is, I believe, one of the principle causes of the apparently 'American' sound of his music.

An excellent illustration of oscillation in action is the song, 'Play that Funky Music' by Wild Cherry.⁸ The verses of that song are rooted in E Dorian harmony, which remains static for a full minute, an eternity for a popular song. The riff is centred around the root, in octaves, and the fifth. The upper two notes oscillate with their lower neighbouring note.

Example 4. Parissi: Play that Funky Music, bass riff



Reductive analysis suggests that leaps between registers create inner melodic lines. Based on this principle, we can see three lines at work in this riff, the lowest of them being static E, and the other two being simple oscillations between the chordal note and its lower neighbour.

A similar analysis of Adams's piano writing produces the same results: multiple individual oscillations occurring within the material. See example 2 above, where the highest note (alternately B and C) creates one oscillation, while another takes place between F–G in the right hand. The left contains two further oscillations: E–F (upper) and B–C (lower). I describe this as the Oscillating Note Motif, abbreviated to ONM. It can be defined as any instance, harmonic or melodic, of a note alternating regularly with either of its diatonic adjacent notes. For music written by Adams since 1985, the definition can be refined further as being between any note which is a member of the local triad, and either of its diatonic adjacent notes. Its use throughout Adams's works is extensive: in *Tromba Lontana* the trumpet solo which forms

⁸ Robert Parissi: *Play that Funky Music* (Sony Music Entertainment, 1976).

the majority of the piece's melodic content begins with a simple C–D oscillation, and returns to this material frequently.⁹ The accompaniment in the orchestra in the flutes and piccolos, doubled by piano and harp, meanwhile oscillates between G–A for the duration. The second movement of *El Dorado* uses a flugelhorn solo on the same notes, while a keyboard sampler accompanies with material including ONMs between A–B, and D–E.¹⁰

The foxtrot melody of *The Chairman Dances*, shown in example 5, which also appears as a recurring theme in act III of *Nixon in China*, is a combination of two ONMs: B–A (upper) and C#–D (lower).¹¹

Example 5. Adams: The Chairman Dances, bars 305–10



The second movement of *Harmonium*, ‘Because I could not stop for Death’, generates most of its melodic content from an ONM, as does *Hallelujah Junction* (for two pianos), which begins with a motif featuring the ONM between Ab–G, and derives most of what follows from the opening material.¹²

Century Rolls opens with a collection of repeating accompanying patterns, each incorporating an ONM.¹³ Whereas earlier works had incorporated several oscillations within a single line, the excerpt below gives a single, individual oscillation to each instrument, creating the effect of multiple cogs in a machine. Each loop is also of a different length, creating an effect similar to that of the *Gates* pieces.

⁹ John Adams: *Short Ride in a Fast Machine and Tromba Lontana*, published as *Two Fanfares* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1986), bar 5.

¹⁰ John Adams: *El Dorado* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1991), bar 39.

¹¹ Adams: *The Chairman Dances*. Adams: *Nixon in China*.

¹² Adams: *Harmonium*. John Adams: *Hallelujah Junction* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1996). Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Hallelujah Junction*.

¹³ John Adams: *Century Rolls* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1997). Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Century Rolls*.

Example 6. Century Rolls, I, bars 1-5

$\text{♩} = 120$
all notes equally short

Picc.
Flute 1
Bsn.
Horn 2 in F
Harp

$\text{♩} = 120$
first stand division

1st stand Vln. I
altri
solo Vln. II
altri
Viola

all notes equally short

Vln. I
Vln. I *altri part*
Vln. II
Vln. II *altri part*
Viola *part*

Of particular interest here is the pattern played by the flute and harp, in which the ONM is implied between C#–D, rather than being played explicitly as a direct oscillation. This method hides oscillations at a background level, as in the second movement of *The Dharma at Big Sur*, here between B and C#.¹⁴

Example 7. The Dharma at Big Sur, II, bars 1–3



Other analysts of Adams's music, Mark Simmons and Daniel Colvard, have previously discerned the significance of the ONM in *Harmonium* and *The Dharma at Big Sur* respectively, describing it as a significant element which Adams uses to unify his melodic, harmonic and textural writing.¹⁵ This is, of course, true. However, Simmons and Colvard saw it as locally significant within the works they studied, rather than as a unifying motif through all of Adams's music.

Rhythm

While much can be said about Adams's use of rhythm, the present discussion will focus on one characteristic, an almost universal aspect of the piano writing of Adams. The method by which most of the rhythms are played is a percussive alternating hands pattern. Like the use of block chords, it had been present in his earliest pieces but its potential was never fully explored. In the following example, from *Hallelujah Junction*, Adams is drawing on the 'oom-pah' tradition of piano writing established in music based on folk styles and ragtime, in which the left hand leaps constantly between registers to play both a bassline and accompanying chord.¹⁶ In the present case, Adams modifies the style slightly, so that the lower notes outline a third rather than the usual

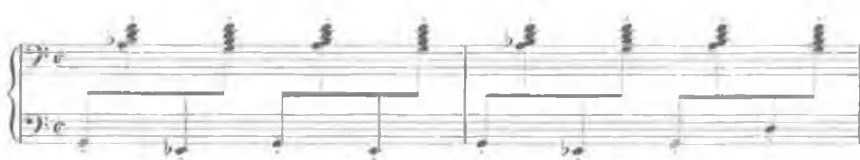
¹⁴ John Adams: *The Dharma at Big Sur* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2003).

¹⁵ Mark Simmons, 'An analysis of the melodic content of John Adams's *Harmonium*' (unpublished MA dissertation, Arizona State University, 2002). Daniel Colvard, 'Three Works by John Adams's' (unpublished MA dissertation, Dartmouth College, 2004).

¹⁶ Adams: *Hallelujah Junction*.

fourth or fifth. Outlining thirds in the bass is an accompaniment style also used throughout *Nixon in China*.¹⁷

Example 8. Hallelujah Junction, bars 512–13



At other times, the division between the hands occurs to emphasize shifting accents and create apparent changes of metre, as in example 11. This style also echoes a twentieth century style of piano playing in popular music in which syncopated right hand chords are played against the unsyncopated left hand, in imitation of a larger ensemble, and resulting in an alternating hands pattern. It is a highly percussive style of playing, in which the movement of the hands alone suggests drumming on a solid surface.

Example 9. Hallelujah Junction, bars 622–24



The third strain of alternating hand patterns allows Adams to use the *Gates* motif in a new, rhythmically charged way. The following example is from *Road Movies*, with brackets added to highlight the patterns.¹⁸ The switches in pattern occur in quicker succession, and the hands no longer sound note against note, but the ancestry is clear.

¹⁷ Adams: *Nixon in China*. Act 1, Scene 1, bar 374.

¹⁸ John Adams: *Road Movies* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1995). Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Road Movies*.

Example 10. Road Movies, III, bars 76–78

Adams's most obvious predecessor in this style of piano writing is Steve Reich. Reich's *Piano Phase* uses a twelve-note ostinato played in the same manner as the above excerpt.¹⁹ Indeed, Adams explicitly draws the connection himself in bars 132–33 of the third movement, which quotes *Piano Phase* almost verbatim (the only difference being that Adams raises one note by a semitone). The alternating hands use of block chords as a pounding, percussive effect is also a recurring feature in Reich, notably in the opening bars of works such as *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, *You Are (Variations)*, *The Desert Music* and *Sextet*.²⁰

Harmony

Having evolved from being modal to being triadic in the early 1980s, Adams's harmonic language began to broaden once more after *Nixon in China*.²¹ *Eros Piano* (1989), one of Adams's lesser-known works, introduced the use of stacked and interlocking fifths to create chords.²² Such use of fifths is an easy way to achieve a kind of consonant atonality, as the resulting music cannot be described tonally, but the most common intervals at any given moment are thirds and fifths. The most likely reason for his use of fifths is because *Eros Piano* is written

¹⁹ Steve Reich: *Piano Phase* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1967).

²⁰ Steve Reich: *Music for 18 Musicians* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2000). Steve Reich: *You Are (Variations)* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2004). Steve Reich: *Sextet* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1985). Steve Reich: *The Desert Music* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1984).

²¹ Adams: *Nixon in China*.

²² John Adams: *Eros Piano* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1989), bars 1–8. Hereafter referred to as Adams: *Eros Piano*.

as a twin composition to Takemitsu's *Riverrun*.²³ This is made clear from the first bar: *Eros Piano* opens with a slightly altered quotation from *Riverrun*'s ending, implying that *Eros Piano* aims to pick up where *Riverrun* left off, as illustrated in examples 11a and 11b.²⁴

Example 11a. Takemitsu: Riverrun, page 29, bars 3–4



Example 11b. Adams: Eros Piano, bars 1–2



From this point on, in *Eros Piano* and in the works which succeed it, fifths become an integral element of Adams's harmonic style.²⁵ Note the left hand from example 12, and the spacing of notes in example 8.

In *Eros Piano*, one particular chord assumes a structural importance; two fifths separated by a semitone (from the lowest note up, C#–G#–A–E).²⁶ The resulting sonority is to become one of Adams's signature chords: a transposition of it is used as something approaching a 'home' chord in the first movement of *Road Movies* and *Century Rolls*.²⁷ In both cases, the chord becomes expanded through the addition of further fifths at either end.

²³ Toru Takemitsu: *Riverrun for piano and orchestra* (Tokyo: Schott, 1987).

Hereafter referred to as Takemitsu: *Riverrun*.

²⁴ Adams: *Eros Piano*. Takemitsu: *Riverrun*.

²⁵ Adams: *Eros Piano*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, bar 4.

²⁷ Adams: *Road Movies*, bar 1. Adams: *Century Rolls*, bar 67.

Eros Piano also marks the end of Adams's first period of piano writing.²⁸ It was written several years after Adams had ceased writing with the *Gates* techniques and is composed in a style which is partly in imitation of Takemitsu, and partly in imitation of late nineteenth and early twentieth century composers like Ravel and Gershwin. There is little in it which is distinctively 'Adamsian', except when seen with the benefit of hindsight and the harmonic influence it has had on his works since 1990. Prior to it, everything that he had written except *Shaker Loops* had included a piano.²⁹ After its completion, he wrote nothing further for piano for the next five years. In 1995, he wrote *Road Movies* for violin and piano, which was the first of his works to make extensive use of the alternating hands motif in its modern form.³⁰ It was then followed by a string of pieces which prominently feature the piano, all of which were written in this new style, culminating with *Century Rolls* in 1997.³¹

A new addition to Adams's harmonic language, from 1990 onward, is the use of polychords, made from two triads and very often placed apart by a minor or major third. In *Road Movies*, the second movement's main motif is an arpeggiated polychord between F and D major, while much of the harmony in the third movement is in a polychord of F# minor and A minor, occasionally broken up by the F and D polychord played percussively.³²

Adams reserves this effect for turbulent music, and also to denote conflict or aggression, in which case he often heightens it further by moving the harmonies chromatically or placing them apart by sevenths. Its use in *The Death of Klinghoffer* is extensive, but only in particular scenes of anger or malice.³³ It is used when the Captain's rambling monologues turn dark and anxious, for example in act one, scene one, bars 111–18, which begins in D major but turns polychordal

²⁸ Adams: *Eros Piano*.

²⁹ Adams: *Shaker Loops*.

³⁰ Adams: *Road Movies*, bars 1–40.

³¹ Adams: *Century Rolls*.

³² Adams: *Road Movies*, III, bars 89–98, bars 174–78.

³³ John Adams: *The Death of Klinghoffer* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1991).

Hereafter referred to as Adams: *The Death of Klinghoffer*.

after the words ‘as I believe now, one detail awakened my anxiety’.³⁴ Polychords are also heard when the terrorists take control of the ship³⁵; when Leon Klinghoffer is killed³⁶; during Omar’s aria where he invokes the ‘Holy Death’ he longs for, saying ‘my soul is all violence, my heart will break if I do not walk in paradise within two days’³⁷; after the British Dancing Girl sings ‘I knew I’d be all right’, to add a menacing underscore of doubt to her words³⁸. It is not used, for example, when the terrorists are being non-violent, such as Mamoud’s soliloquy from Act 1, scene 2, where he rhapsodises about listening to his favourite music over local radio stations.³⁹ There are also two confrontational scenes where, significantly, polychords are not used: during Leon Klinghoffer’s measured denunciation of the terrorists, and in the final scene where Marilyn Klinghoffer learns that her husband has been killed and berates the Captain for his cowardice.⁴⁰ In both cases, the omission serves to differentiate the anger of the Klinghoffers from the anger of their attackers, to make the speakers seem like the voices of reason, and to hint at where the composer’s own sympathies lie.

The chaotic final pages of *Hallelujah Junction* feature much use of polychords, but in the theatrical context of the duelling pianos; each attempts to end the piece in a different key and therefore comes across more light hearted than *Klinghoffer*.⁴¹ *American Berserk*, a short and manic piano piece from 2002, is written almost entirely in this manner; using chords separated by thirds, played simultaneously or in rapid succession.⁴² As with the use of interlocking fifths, use of polychords eschews tonality while retaining something of its sound.

The quintessential ‘Adams chord’ in his middle and later works is the minor seventh, which exists where these two techniques of

³⁴ Adams: *The Death of Klinghoffer*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Act 1, Scene 1, bar 311.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Act 2, Scene 2, bar 88.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Act 2, Scene 1, bars 323–33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Act 2, Scene 1, bar 158.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Act 2, Scene 3. *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Adams: *Hallelujah Junction*. Adams: *The Death of Klinghoffer*.

⁴² John Adams: *American Berserk* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2002), bars 45–55.

harmonic generation cross, as it is both a chord comprising two interlocking fifths, and a simple polychord of a minor and major chord placed apart by thirds.

The main theme from the third movement of *Century Rolls*, illustrated in example 12, is one example of Adams's use of the minor seventh, and combines grouped fifths with implied polychords.⁴³

Example 12. Century Rolls, III, bars 58–60



The first two fifths (bracket no. 1) together make an Fm7 chord, those in bracket no. 2 make Gm7, bracket no. 3 makes Bbm7, and the last two chords in bracket no. 4 are a transposition of the same structural chord used in the first movements of *Eros Piano* and *Road Movies*: two open fifths separated by a semitone, but in this instance with the thirds added.⁴⁴

Other examples of the minor seventh chord being prominently featured include the opening motif (perhaps “riff” is a better description) from *Lollapalooza*, which outlines Gm7.⁴⁵ The second movement of *Phrygian Gates*, ‘A System of Weights and Measures’, dwells upon the various permutations of a single chord, C#m7, very slowly oscillating to produce other minor sevenths, such as F#m7.⁴⁶ The second movement of *Harmonium* is built on the same chord, but the larger orchestral and choral forces are used to produce much richer harmonies; ONMs present in some (but not all) parts create passing cluster chords which flux in and out of being.⁴⁷

⁴³ Adams: *Century Rolls*.

⁴⁴ Adams: *Eros Piano*. Adams: *Road Movies*.

⁴⁵ John Adams: *Lollapalooza* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1995), bars 1–4.

⁴⁶ Adams: *Phrygian Gates*, bars 640–808.

⁴⁷ Adams: *Harmonium*, bars 1–28.

In conclusion, one can summarise the development of Adams's compositional style to date as a gradual but continuous move away from the 'purity' of Minimalism towards a music more sharply defined by its influences. The earliest pieces were the most classically Minimalist, until organisation of pitch material became more hierarchical in the mid 1980s. At the same time, the rate of harmonic change and the level of harmonic complexity increased, showing a distinct move away from what we would regard as the tenets of Minimalist music, and beginning a greater engagement with the traditions of the late Romantics and the American vernacular. With each new major work, Adams's musical fingerprints, and the influences which shaped them, become ever more clearly defined.

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