

**JOHN LUTHER ADAMS**  
**Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing**

**New World Records 80500**

Picasso is supposed to have said, regarding his creative process, that it was remarkable when the finished painting resembled as much as it did the original sketches on which it was based. Just witness the numerous colorful small oil sketches Picasso made for the billboard-size *Guernica*, each a microstudy in brilliant hues: a square-toothed horse screams, blood and tears on agonized faces. But in the final painting--no color, only monochrome greys, whites, and blacks like a blown-up news photo!

There is a persistent, albeit wrongheaded, notion that the creative act is one of foreknowledge. But in art as well as science this is the exception--the forgotten petrie dish discovered much later on its shelf or windowsill, the culture now covered with an unfamiliar bluish mold, penicillin's Victory Garden. Playwright Sam Shepard, asked where he got his ideas for writing plays, answered, "from writing plays." The blank page, that icy void glaring back at the writer, starts thawing at the first word written thereon.

John Luther Adams, whose music fills this disc, like many of us has a kind of plan for his work, a plan for his life. And the remarkable thing is probably how much his work and life actually conform to that plan. In the case of *Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing*, there was much conceptual armature on which to mold the plasticene of his musical ideas. But art has a way of taking over the artist's mind and will, changing things during the process, for better or worse.

Anyone living in an extreme climate must have trunks full of plausible rationales for doing so--hardy woollens shaken out and displayed to those asking, *Why?* (Including oneself, perhaps.) Adams, 44, who has lived in Fairbanks, Alaska, now these 20-odd years, is like the average Lower-Forty-Eight heliocentric, and he admittedly suffers from those winter frustrations brought on by the interminable dark of the northern city's winters. He has sometimes resorted to artificial-sunlight lights, a therapy favored by those with Seasonal Affective Depression, when the sun goes on its months-long dip South. But his fascination, or rather obsession, with Alaska's geography of ice and sea, of light and dark, of myriad hues amid black and white, the roaring silences of this Northern Lights terrain, keeps him bound to its tundra, happily frozen in a vast white grip. He struggles against it but loves it, needs it, and he refers to "the Big Lonely," as the Canadians call the North, constantly in his writings and his music. Alaska is perhaps his Lutheran hair shirt, worn not for warmth but for righteousness' sake.

Although his previous New World CD, *Earth and the Great Weather: A Sonic Geography of the Arctic* (NW 80459-2), can shed some light on the present work, it is another matter altogether: It is a theater piece, a hybrid opera. It is, like *Clouds*, another landscape of the North, a paean to its fearsome beauties.

The spiritual tone of Adams's music and writings can be said to be central to why he lives where he lives and writes what he writes. The chief difference between *Clouds* and his other works is not in the external references to nature or spiritual matters, but to the lack of a programmatic impulse in the creation of *Clouds*.

The textual basis of *Earth*, its uses of English, Latin, and Alaska Native languages and their litanies of names of places, birds, and plants, provides a quasi-narrative framework that gives a structure for the piece, its large and smaller sections. Adams's minimalist esthetic, however, has remained "pure." That is, it admits no Post-Modern pastiche such as has crept into the work of some other minimalists. The absence of textual guides in *Clouds* thrusts the composer away from telling stories about his chosen frozen environment through narrative forms. Instead, Adams fixed upon a purely musical idea, the Bachian rationale for the *Well Tempered Clavier*, namely, a justification through usage, of the tempered musical scale. He decided to move methodically up the chromatic scale as Bach did.

Having made this fundamental decision, Adams, the denizen of frigid landscapes where complexity is hidden within expanses of ice, set out to write his own *Well Tempered Clavier* for chamber orchestra. One can demonstrate this easily: Simply start with the tone C and, moving upward, fill in the chromatics of the tempered scale until you reach the C an octave higher. It can be done in a few seconds by pressing down all the black and white keys of a piano between middle C and the octave above.

Adams found himself on uncertain ground as he worked on the piece over a five-and-a-half year period. He writes of the creative process in ways Picasso would have clearly understood:

"I began working on *Clouds* immediately following the death of my father, in early 1991. By March that year, I had completed a forty-minute fragment for large orchestra. The press of other commitments forced me to set this aside. But over the next five and a half years, I returned to *Clouds* as time allowed, following as it evolved through various incarnations and instrumentations. I worked on it throughout 1994, during a fellowship from the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, finally completing the score in late 1995."

Looking at that just-completed score for the first time, on the occasion of a visit to New World Records by Adams, I remember being struck with the simplicity of his conception, and, turning the pages of the now chamber-ensemble orchestration, was impressed by the richness of detail emerging with each exploration of the intervals. The logical conclusion, the Unum into which all the E Pluribuses would resolve themselves, was foreordained on the first page: We would end at the octave, the expanded unison, the tensionless interval of no stress--peace. And so it was.

A weightless energy sustains interest and tension throughout the course of the almost sixty-two minutes of this chromatic exploration. There are some claps of thunder, to be sure--Adams's percussionist background seems to guarantee virtuoso writing for the battery--but in the main it is quiet, reflective, contemplative music. I think that Morton Feldman, one of Adams's influences, would have liked *Clouds*, and am reminded of that composer's *Piano and String Quartet* (1985) whenever Adams's piano part traces wisps of arpeggios against a quiet background of strings.

This is not to say that Adams was comfortable writing it. Quite the reverse. He has said that once he moved into the work, *Clouds* began dictating to him what would or would not happen. He retained, as it were, only a kind of editorial control. And at the time of the premiere and subsequent recording, second thoughts continued. An interviewer from the Norfolk, Virginia *Daily Press* wrote, "For now, Adams isn't sure if *Clouds* is 'a new direction or an anomaly' for him. The work was 'created out of a compulsion not to compromise and not to make concessions,' he says. 'There were major self-doubts, and I'm still having them.'"

So it was with the creative process of John Luther Adams and *Clouds*. So it has been for other artists and so it should always be, lest formulas replace the hard work of imagination and the hand-to-hand combat of art.

—Howard Klein

Howard Klein *is a musician living in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.*

*"Love is most nearly itself*

*When here and now cease to matter."*

- T. S. Eliot

Quantum physics has recently confirmed what shamans and mystics, poets and musicians have long known: The universe is more like music than like matter. It may well be that our most fundamental relationship to the great mysteries is one of listening. Through sustained, concentrated attention to the fullness of the present moment, we listen for the breath of being, the voice of God.

*Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing* is a work of musical contemplation, an attempt to consecrate a small time and space for extraordinary listening. The work is titled after *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a fourteenth-century mystical Christian text which has much in common with the teachings of contemplative traditions throughout the world, be they Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Sufi, Native American, or other. The essence of the contemplative experience is voluntary surrender, purposeful immersion in the fullness of a presence far larger than ourselves.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* teaches that we can achieve communion with God only through the Grace of divine Love. To prepare ourselves to receive this gift, we must enter a state of quiet stillness, suspended between Heaven and Earth. Above--between us and God--lies a mysterious "cloud of unknowing," which our understanding can never penetrate. Between us and the world, we must create a "cloud of forgetting," leaving conscious thought and desire below. In this timeless place of forgetting and unknowing, we may begin to hear that for which we are listening.

Eliot said it this way:

*We must be still and still moving*

*Into another intensity*

*for a further union, a deeper communion*

*Through the dark cold and the empty desolation. . . .*

To find communion, we must lose perspective. What, after all, is perspective but a way of removing ourselves from experience?

In Western music, melody and harmony are equivalents of figure and ground. Together, they constitute a kind of musical perspective, which evolved parallel to that of Renaissance painting. In the musical textures of *Clouds*, I hoped to lose perspective. Surrendering the idea of self-expression, I placed my faith in the instruments themselves, and in a few elementally simple sonorities and gestures. My aspiration here was not so much to compose a *piece* of music, as it was to evoke a *wholeness* of music, a sounding presence somehow equivalent to that of a vast landscape. Still,

perhaps unavoidably for me, this music has a certain starkness, reminiscent of the light, atmosphere, and landforms of the Arctic.

In painting, chromaticism means color. In music, all too often, it means charcoal grey. After years of composing in predominantly consonant harmonies, exploring the harmonic series and non-tempered tunings, I chose in *Clouds* to return to the rich complexities and ambiguities of equal temperament and chromaticism, to discover, if I could, new colors within them.

Despite its unrelenting chromaticism, this music is modal. Over the course of an hour, it moves slowly but inexorably through a spectrum of chromatic modes, each with its own distinctive harmonic hue. From unisons and minor seconds, it rises and expands through the succession of equal-tempered intervals, to major sevenths and, finally, to the perfect clarity of octaves.

*Clouds* was composed specifically for JoAnn Falletta and the Apollo Chamber Orchestra. I'm deeply grateful to these musicians for their extraordinary sensitivity and grace.

*Clouds* is dedicated, with love, to the memory of my father, Thomas Luther Adams, and, with gratitude and respect, to Jasper Johns.

**JOHN LUTHER ADAMS** has lived for more than twenty years in the boreal forest near Fairbanks, Alaska. He has served as composer in residence with the Anchorage Symphony, the Fairbanks Symphony, the Arctic Chamber Orchestra, the Anchorage Opera, and the Alaska Public Radio Network. He has taught at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and at Bennington College.

Adams's music embraces a wide range of media, including works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, radio, film, television, opera, and music theater. He has worked with many prominent ensembles and presenters, including the California E.A.R. Unit, Bang on a Can, the Paul Dresher Ensemble, The Percussion Group-Cincinnati, New Music America, the Sundance Institute, Perseverance Theater, The Children's Theater Company, and Just Strings.

Adams studied composition with James Tenney and Leonard Stein at the California Institute of the Arts, where his other teachers included Harold Budd, Mel Powell, and Morton Subotnik. He has received awards and fellowships from Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Lila Wallace Arts Partners Program, the Rockefeller Foundation, Opera America, the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, the American Music Center, the Alaska Humanities Forum, and the Alaska State Council on the Arts.

**JOANN FALLETTA** is music director of the Virginia and Long Beach Symphony Orchestras, and past music director of the Women's Philharmonic (San Francisco) and the Denver Chamber Orchestra. Winner of the prestigious Stokowski, Toscanini, and Bruno Walter Awards, she is one of the most sought-after guest conductors of her generation, and has appeared with many leading orchestras in the U.S. and abroad.

A strong advocate of the music of living composers, Ms. Falletta has conducted more than sixty world premieres, and recorded works by John Luther Adams, Shulamit Ran, Chen Yi, Elinor Armer and others, for Koch, Newport Classics, and New Albion Records. Her creative programming has

won eight consecutive ASCAP awards, and the American Symphony Orchestra League's John Edwards Award.

**APOLLO** was founded in 1992 by a group of musicians from the Virginia Symphony in Norwalk, Virginia. Exploring many different kinds of chamber music literature, they have performed to critical acclaim such composers as Bach, Mozart, Villa-Lobos, Stravinsky, Persichetti, Takemitsu, and Liebermann. On the Diehn Concert Series at Old Dominion University they have been featured with guest artists André Michel Schub, JoAnn Falletta, the National Symphony Brass, Richard Stoltzman, Paul Neubauer, and Jorge Mester. This recording marks the second collaboration between Apollo and John Luther Adams.

### **The Apollo Chamber Orchestra**

Debra Wendells Cross, flute/piccolo  
Laurie Baefsky, flute/piccolo  
Patti Carlson, clarinet  
Norm Schononbrick, clarinet/bass clarinet

David Wick, horn  
Allen Patterson, horn  
Stephen Carlson, trumpet  
Rodney Martell, bass trombone

Robert W. Cross, percussion  
Thomas Bishop, percussion  
Barbara Chapman, celesta  
Stephen Kolb, piano

Vahn Armstrong, violin  
Debra H. Fong, violin  
Beverly Kane Baker, viola  
Michael Daniels, cello  
Scott Harris, doublebass

### **Selected Discography**

*Dream in White On White*. New Albion NA 061.  
*Earth and the Great Weather*. New World Records 80459-2.  
*The Far Country of Sleep*. New Albion NA 061.  
*Forest Without Leaves*. Owl Recording 032.  
*Night Peace*. New Albion NA 061/Opus One #88.  
*songbirdsongs*. Centaur CRC 2273/Opus One #66.

### **Selected Bibliography**

Essay: "Resonance of Place" in *The North American Review* - January-February 1994.  
Short Story: "The Place Where You Go To Listen" in *Terra Nova* (MIT Press) - Summer 1997.

These and other works by John Luther Adams are available from:  
Taiga Press (BMI)/414 Reinerman/Houston, TX/77007.

<http://www.alaska.net/~jla>

Executive producer: John Luther Adams

Produced and engineered by Paul Zinman for SoundByte Productions, Inc., NYC.

Assistant engineers: Hsi-Ling Chang and Matthias Schwab

Recorded in Chandler Hall, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, February 27 and 29, 1996.

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***Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing***

**The Apollo Chamber Orchestra**

**JoAnn Falletta, conductor**

*We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity*

*for a further union, a deeper communion  
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation. . .  
- T. S. Eliot*

In form, *Clouds* is a single, continuous movement. Index marks are provided for convenience in locating specific sections within the music.

1	<i>minor seconds, rising</i>		4:41
2	<i>Clouds of mixed Seconds</i>	2:18	
3	<i>Major Seconds, rising</i>		1:51
4	<i>Clouds of Seconds and thirds</i>		3:46
5	<i>diminished bells</i>	2:49	
6	<i>Clouds of mixed Thirds</i>	3:02	
7	<i>Forgotten Triads</i>	2:20	
8	<i>Lost Chorales</i>		1:25
9	<i>Clouds of Perfect Fourths</i>	3:37	
10	<i>Turbulent Changes</i>		5:09
11	<i>Clouds of Perfect Fifths</i>	3:31	
12	<i>Chorales return</i>	2:07	
13	<i>Triads, remembered</i>		1:51
14	<i>Clouds of mixed Sixths</i>		4:18
15	<i>. . . and bells, again . . .</i>	2:53	
16	<i>Clouds of Sixths and sevenths</i>		4:15
17	<i>minor sevenths, rising</i>		1:48
18	<i>clouds of mixed Sevenths</i>	3:59	
19	<i>Major Sevenths, rising</i>		5:44

Total Time: 61:24

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TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685  
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