

“I want my music to resonate with the fullness of empty space, charged
with a pristine atmosphere of stillness and expectancy.”

—*John Luther Adams*

John Luther Adams is an American composer whose music and career both are uncompromising, unique, and fascinating. Born in 1953 in Meridian, Mississippi, and growing up in the South and on the Northeastern seaboard, Adams took piano lessons as a child and played the trumpet in school bands and orchestras. In his teens Adams began writing songs and playing the drums in a number of garage bands, which drew him toward serious music making. His interest in progressive rock and Frank Zappa led him to discover the music of Edgard Varèse, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Harry Partch, and other experimental composers. As a consequence, he studied music and composition at Mercer University and Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia, and at the California Institute of the Arts, where his principal teachers were James Tenney and Leonard Stein.

His experiences in overdeveloped Southern California turned Adams toward environmentalism, and after two years at Cal Arts he became active with environmental groups in the South and in the Rocky Mountain West. In 1975 he began to travel to Alaska and to work for the Alaska Coalition, which at that time was struggling for the passage of the Alaska Lands Act to preserve large wilderness areas in Alaska. Since 1978 Alaska has been Adams’s home and a major inspirational source for most of his compositions. He once stated:

My work has long been grounded in the physical, cultural, and spiritual landscapes of Alaska, and an ideal of ‘sonic geography,’ a music of place.... Living in Alaska for most of my creative life, I’ve come to measure everything I do—in fact, all human invention and activity – against the overwhelming presence of this place. This has profoundly influenced the atmosphere and the scale of my work.¹

As indicated by such titles as *songbirdsongs*, *A Northern Suite*, *The Far Country of Sleep*, and *Earth and the Great Weather*, almost all of his compositions reveal his strong commitment to nature. They evoke natural phenomena, in particular the wintry Northern landscapes, light, and colors as well as elements of indigenous Alaskan cultures. Adams’s music thus shares aesthetic features with nature-inspired works of such composers as Debussy, Ives, Sibelius, Hovhaness, and R. Murray Schafer. Due to the use of certain “minimalist” strategies Adams’s music is often classified as “minimalist” or “postminimalist,” referring to a certain kinship with the works of La Monte Young and Steve Reich. He avoids expressive musical rhetoric, prefers reduced and elementally simple musical material, and frequently uses sustained tones and static textures. Adams’s compositions embrace just intonation, consonance, and modal harmony, and they often feature a meditative quality and extended length reminiscent of Feldmanesque dimensions. On the other hand a number of Adams’s works such as his “Three Percussion Quartets” from *Earth and the Great Weather* include iterative and percussive patterns, cyclic rhythms, systematic processes, and elements of non-Western music. The extensive use of percussion in *Earth and the Great Weather* and also in *Strange and Sacred Noise* reveals not only his background as a percussionist but also his close connection with the great American percussion tradition of Varèse, Cowell, Cage, and Harrison. However Adams’s overriding concern is the realization of his idea of “sonic geography” to which he subjects “minimalist” and other experimental techniques, combining and transforming them always with concern for stylistic coherence and integrity. Even though “sonic geography” is a metaphor and not synonymous with specific compositional procedures, it seems to characterize Adams’s works appropriately. It points toward the

¹ Gale Young, “Sonic Geography of the Arctic: An Interview with John Luther Adams,” *Musicworks*, No. 70, 1998, 39–40.

pictorial aspects, the spaciousness and the expanded sense of time in his music and to Adams's close relationship to nature and involvement in environmentalism (Deep Ecology, Bioregionalism, and Acoustic Ecology). Early examples of "sonic geography" include *songbirdsongs* (1974–80) for piccolos, percussion, and ocarinas, a collection of indeterminate miniature pieces featuring free translations of birdsongs, and *Night Peace* (1976), a quiet piece in one movement for solo soprano, two choirs, harp, and percussion. *Earth and the Great Weather* (1989–93), an extended music theater work involving Inuit and Athabascan languages and recorded sound from the Arctic, *Dream in White on White* (1992) for strings and harp, and the featured piece on this recording, *In the White Silence* (1998), represent mature realizations of "sonic geography." Other works such as *Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing* (1991–95) for chamber orchestra, and *Strange and Sacred Noise* (1991–97) for percussion quartet reveal a convergence of "sonic geography" with "sonic geometry." As Adams proceeds in his explorations of "sonic geography," he is guided by a vivid musical imagination and moral strength nourished by the extraordinary landscapes of Alaska where he has lived and worked for almost twenty-five years.

On *In the White Silence*

Adams composed *In the White Silence* in 1998 as a memorial to his mother, who died in the fall of 1996, as he had composed *Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing* five years earlier following the death of his father. While these two pieces share the same number of instruments and a similar form, they are very different from one another as far as sound and orchestration are concerned. In fact, *In the White Silence* seems to have grown out of *Dream in White on White* (1992), a fifteen-minute piece in one movement. *In the White Silence* was premiered in the year of its completion by the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble, conducted by Tim Weiss in the Finney Chapel in Oberlin, Ohio.

Like many of Adams's previous works, *In the White Silence* is an example of his concept of "sonic geography," through which he attempts to realize the notion of music as place and place as music and reveals his obsession with the "treeless, windswept expanses of the Arctic." The title of the work thus points to Alaskan landscapes in a general sense. And like *Dream in White on White*, it specifically refers to Adams's fascination with the color of white, a dominant feature of Arctic landscapes. As Adams explains in his preface to the score: "White is not the absence of color. It is the fullness of light. As the Inuit have known for centuries, and as painters from Malevich to Ryman have shown us more recently, whiteness embraces many hues, textures, and nuances." Whiteness is evoked in *In the White Silence* in various ways. First of all, the instrumentation comprising celesta, harp, orchestra bells, two vibraphones, and strings produces luminous and iridescent sonorities. Further, the work often features durations consisting of whole and half notes ("white notes") and is based—like *Dream in White on White*—exclusively on the non-chromatic "white" tones (the "white" keys of the piano).² These aspects, including the frequent use of perfect intervals, harmonics, and unstopped string tones, all connote the color white.

The title *In the White Silence* reveals another important aspect of the piece and Adams's music in general: silence. He explains: "As John Cage reminded us, silence does not literally exist. Still, in a world going deaf with human noise, silence endures as a deep and resonant metaphor." For Adams "Silence is not the absence of sound. It is the presence of stillness." Although silence and stillness are two phenomena contradicting the basic premises of music (musically it is easier to depict sonic aspects of nature such as bird calls, or characteristics of motion-oriented landscape such as murmuring brooks), they are evoked in this piece through various compositional means. The dynamic range of *In the White Silence* is subtle and unobtrusive and the dynamic levels of piano and pianissimo predominate. *In the White Silence* dispenses

² It is interesting to note that in *Dream in White on White* Adams availed himself of the non-tempered intervals of the Pythagorean diatonic tuning, thanks to the flexible tuning of the instruments. Because of the choice of vibraphones, celesta, and orchestra bells, *In the White Silence* uses equal temperament. However, Adams would "love to hear it played with non-tempered metallophones." Interview with John Luther Adams, December 20, 2002.

with traditional melodic and developmental syntax. Instead the piece is marked by static textures of densely layered sound, sustained tones, short repetitive patterns, and long rising and falling lines. The harmony based on the limited diatonic scale is for the most part modal and non-developmental, since leading tones conveying a sense of goal-directed tonal motion are avoided. Yet Adams goes further in realizing his idea of music as a place by spatializing the sound in specific ways. For instance, the strings are divided into a string orchestra and a string quartet. The string orchestra is seated in a wide arc upstage, the string quartet is seated in a small arc downstage, and the vibraphones, bells, celesta, and harp are placed mid-stage between the orchestra and the string quartet. The spatial distribution of the sound sources is further emphasized by five often texturally different, superimposed layers of sound presented by five different instrumental groups. These sonic layers simulate space in that some function as background and others as foreground strata. The string orchestra with its spacious and sustained sonorities, for instance, plays pianissimo or piano and without vibrato throughout. Compared to the string quartet, which always plays louder than the orchestra and uses normal vibrato, the string orchestra drone sounds like a kind of sonic priming or gleaming background layer. The mostly inert, widely-spaced tone clusters of the orchestra and quartet, often embracing all seven pitches of the diatonic scale in extended position, are frequently topped by a layer of shimmering harmonics. Interestingly, Adams conceives of these spaciouly voiced tone clusters as “clouds” —“There’s so much ‘air’ between the tones.”³ He used “clouds” in *Dream in White on White* for the first time. In *In the White Silence*, however, they become more expansive and more densely layered.

With regard to form, *In the White Silence* can be viewed as an “expanded concerto grosso” due to the alternation of tutti and soli patterns. Cast in one movement, the piece can also be analyzed in terms of a rondo featuring three basic rotating sections. The opening texture (A), which consists of spacious tone clusters or “clouds,” consistently recurs between two different subsidiary sections and concludes the piece. Of the two subsidiary textures, one reveals a chorale-like texture (B) and the other, long contrapuntally interwoven lines (C). These sections are organized in a symmetrical and arch-like form whereby a sequence of ABA sections (recurring five times) alternates with the C-episode. From the listener’s perspective the cyclical changes of the piece’s texture often seem to occur subtly and kaleidoscopically due to the delicate juxtaposition and superimposition of different patterns. *In the White Silence*, for instance, opens with sustained spacious pianissimo tone clusters (“clouds”) in the string orchestra. These sonorities recede to the background when after some time the string quartet adds a slightly more intense layer of mezzo-piano “clouds” and the harp sprinkles in bright ascending eighth-note motifs each separated by three measures of rests. In the following passage two additional colorful strata are added: the celesta intersperses ascending scale-like motifs and the vibraphones add a soft, dense, and continuous tremolo cluster sound. As the work proceeds, certain textural changes occur which are comparable to changes of a vista. The B-episode includes hymn-like, heterophonic, contrapuntal, and polymetric passages in the string quartet, harp, and celesta. In the C-couplet various solo lines, undulating ostinato figurations in the celesta and vibraphones and soaring string solos, are gradually superimposed. The B- and C-sections in particular show intricate polymetric and polyrhythmic relationships between various strata culminating in what Adams calls “allover counterpoint.” This technique reminds one of Henry Cowell’s innovative rhythmic ideas in his *New Musical Resources* (1930), whereby whole notes are often continuously divided into different numbers of equal durations. The idea of an “allover” structure—another visual and spatial metaphor—hints at paintings of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, which often reveal dense tangles of lines without a center or hierarchy.

³ The visual metaphor and landscape component “cloud” is used in the titles of the two outer sections of *Dream in White on White*. La Monte Young too uses the word “cloud” for relatively dense harmonies or harmonies embracing a wide range of pitches.

Space or spaciousness is further suggested by the implication of an extended dimension of time. *In the White Silence* slowly unfolds over the course of about seventy-five minutes. The work's extended length and non-dramatic structure suggest the idea of music as an "immeasurable space" and reflect the desire to transcend the conventional boundaries of musical composition. Adams wants "to leave the composition, the 'piece' of music, for the *wholeness* of music." The opening indication of *In the White Silence* reads "Timeless..." Hence this piece should not be perceived as a sound object apart or a narrative structure proceeding from A to B. Rather, time and sound should be inhabited like a place devoid of beginning and end—thus the title *In the White Silence* rather than "The White Silence." Due to the piece's meditative quality, the act of listening should ideally become a "form of contemplation: the sensual reaching for the spiritual." *In the White Silence*, a large-scale work of structural refinement, balance and arresting beauty gently envelops the listener and thus becomes a "musical presence equivalent to that of a vast tundra landscape."
—Sabine Feisst

Sabine Feisst is Assistant Professor of Music History and Literature at Arizona State University. She has numerous publications to her credit, including a book on improvisation in new music as well as articles in *The Musical Quarterly*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians II*, the *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Center* and *MusikTexte*.

In the White Silence

White is not the absence of color. It is the fullness of light.

Silence is not the absence of sound. It is the presence of stillness.

As the Inuit have known for centuries and as painters from Malevich to Ryman have shown us more recently, whiteness embraces many hues, textures and nuances.

As John Cage reminded us, silence does not literally exist. Still, in a world going deaf with human noise, silence endures as a deep and resonant metaphor.

In his *Poetics of Music* Stravinsky speaks of music as a form of philosophical speculation. But music can also be a form of contemplation: the sensual reaching for the spiritual.

I aspire to music that is both rigorous in thought and sensuous in sound.

I've long been obsessed with the notion of music as place and place as music. The treeless, windswept expanses of the Arctic are enduring creative touchstones for my work and *In the White Silence* is an attempt to evoke an enveloping musical presence equivalent to that of a vast tundra landscape.

But I want to go beyond landscape painting with tones, beyond language, metaphor and the extra-musical image. I want to leave the composition, the "piece" of music, for the *wholeness* of music.

I no longer want to be outside the music, listening to it as an object apart. I want to inhabit the music, to be fully present and listening in that immeasurable space that Malevich called "a desert of pure feeling." — *John Luther Adams*

For the past twenty-five years composer **John Luther Adams** has made his home in the boreal forest

near Fairbanks, Alaska. From there he has created a unique musical world grounded in the elemental landscapes and indigenous cultures of the North. His music includes works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, percussion, and electronic media, and is recorded on New World, Cold Blue, New Albion, and other labels.

Adams has worked with many prominent performers and venues, including Bang On A Can, Almeida Opera, FLUX Quartet, the California E.A.R. Unit, the Paul Dresher Ensemble, the Sundance Institute, and Arena Stage. He has received commissions and fellowships from Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, Lila Wallace Arts Partners, the Rockefeller Foundation, Opera America, and the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts.

Adams has served as composer in residence with the Anchorage Symphony, Fairbanks Symphony, Arctic Chamber Orchestra, Anchorage Opera, and the Alaska Public Radio Network. He has taught at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Bennington College, and the University of Alaska, and is past-president of the American Music Center.

Articles about John Luther Adams and his music appear in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary*, *American Music in the 20th Century* (G. Schirmer), and *Music in the United States* (Prentice Hall). His own writings have appeared in *The Utne Reader*, *The North American Review*, *The Book of Music and Nature* (Wesleyan), *The Best Spiritual Writing* (Harper Collins), and other publications.

Tim Weiss is Associate Professor of Conducting at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music at Oberlin College. His performances often showcase the works of living composers and involve ongoing collaborations and commissions. As an active guest conductor, Mr. Weiss has conducted and recorded numerous premieres with composers, soloists, and choreographers. He conducted the European premiere of John Luther Adams's *Earth and the Great Weather* to critical acclaim at the Almeida Opera Festival in London. Recent appearances have included concerts with the Toledo Symphony, Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings, and the Symphony Orchestra of the Asociación Nacional de Conciertos of Panama City, Panama. During his tenure at Oberlin, Weiss has mentored the award-winning new-music ensemble *eighth blackbird*, among many others. He has served as the Music Director of the Northern Ohio Youth Orchestra and was a member of the American Soviet Youth Orchestra and the Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival. He received a First Prize Diploma with Distinction from the Royal Music Conservatory in Brussels, Belgium, earned a B.M. from Northwestern University, and holds an M.M. in Conducting from the University of Michigan, where he was the recipient of the annual Earl V. Moore award given to the outstanding graduate.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Clouds of Forgetting, *Clouds of Unknowing* Apollo Chamber Orchestra, JoAnn Falletta, conductor. New World Records 80500-2.

Dark Wind. M. Walker, bass clarinet; A. Knoles, marimba/vibraphone; B. Pezzone, piano. Cold Blue Music CB 009.

Dream in White on White. Apollo String Quartet and Strings; B. Chapman, harp. New Albion NA 061.

Earth and the Great Weather: A Sonic Geography of the Arctic. New World Records 80459-2.

The Far Country of Sleep. The Cabrillo Festival Orchestra, JoAnn Falletta, conductor. New Albion NA 061.

The Farthest Place. A. Knoles, marimba/vibraphone; B. Pezzone, piano; R. Lorentz, violin; B. Newton, doublebass. Cold Blue Music CB 0010.

Forest Without Leaves. Arctic Chamber Orchestra and Chamber Choir, B. McGilvray, conductor. Owl Recording 32.

The Immeasurable Space of Tones. M. Walker, contrabass clarinet; A. Knoles, marimba/ vibraphone; B. Pezzone, piano; N. Reichman, electronic keyboards, R. Lorentz, violin; B. Newton, double bass. Cold Blue Music CB0010.

The Light That Fills the World. M. Walker, contrabass clarinet; A. Knoles, marimba/vibraphone; N. Reichman, electronic keyboards; R. Lorentz, violin; B. Newton double bass. Cold Blue Music CB0010.

Night Peace. C. B. Lower, soprano; N. Rigell, harp; M. Cebulski, percussion; The Atlanta Singers, Kevin Culver, conductor. New Albion NA 061.
songbirdsongs. Armstrong Flute and Percussion Duo. Centaur Records CRC 2273.

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Soloists

JiSun Yang, Felix Petit, violins
Michael Judge, viola
Arturo Araya, 'cello
Aymeric Dupré-Latour, celesta
Catherine Barrett, harp
David Schotzko, Michael LaMattina, vibraphone and orchestra bells

Violin I

Emily Fowler
Rodica Filipoi
Celeste Cleveland
Dan Stachyra

Violin II

Cyrus Beroukhim
Heather Manalili
Kurt Johnson
Donna Bartlett

Viola

Wendy Richman
Amy Cimini
Michael Fenton

Violoncello

Kivie Cahn-Lipman
Mitchell Wyman

Kristin Cowperthwaite
Sarah Biber
Roberta Reynolds

Bass

Nikki Bartnikki
Toshio Mana
Rachel Sepulveda

Student Assistant

Lisa Jaklitsch

Librarian/Manager

Elizabeth Mast

Producer: John Luther Adams

Associate Producer: Nathaniel Reichman

Production Assistant: Tobias Wagner

Engineer: Michael Schulze, Audio Director, Oberlin Conservatory

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, Inc., NYC

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www.johnlutheradams.com

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JOHN LUTHER ADAMS (b. 1953)
IN THE WHITE SILENCE (1998)
THE OBERLIN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC ENSEMBLE
TIM WEISS, CONDUCTOR
80600-2

- | | |
|---------------------|------|
| 1. <i>Beginning</i> | 4:10 |
| 2. <i>Letter B</i> | 3:43 |
| 3. <i>Letter C</i> | 3:43 |
| 4. <i>Letter D</i> | 4:03 |
| 5. <i>Letter E</i> | 3:59 |
| 6. <i>Letter F</i> | 3:34 |
| 7. <i>Letter G</i> | 2:49 |
| 8. <i>Letter H</i> | 5:05 |
| 9. <i>Letter I</i> | 4:05 |
| 10. <i>Letter J</i> | 4:00 |
| 11. <i>Letter K</i> | 2:57 |
| 12. <i>Letter L</i> | 4:08 |
| 13. <i>Letter M</i> | 4:00 |
| 14. <i>Letter N</i> | 3:40 |
| 15. <i>Letter O</i> | 2:52 |
| 16. <i>Letter P</i> | 4:56 |
| 17. <i>Letter Q</i> | 4:06 |
| 18. <i>Letter R</i> | 5:06 |
| 19. <i>Letter S</i> | 4:10 |

Total Time: 75:15

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