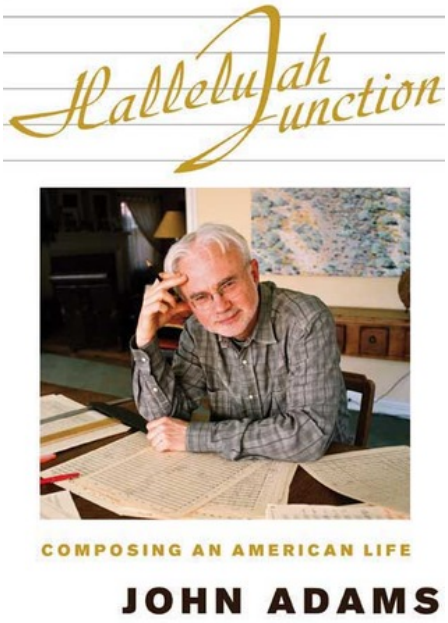

Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life

John Adams

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John Adams is one of the most respected and loved of contemporary composers, and "he has won his eminence fair and square: he has aimed high, he has addressed life as it is lived now, and he has found a language that makes sense to a wide audience" (Alex Ross, *The New Yorker*). Now, in *Hallelujah Junction*, he incisively relates his life story, from his childhood to his early studies in classical composition amid the musical and social ferment of the 1960s, from his landmark minimalist innovations to his controversial "docu-operas." Adams offers a no-holds-barred portrait of the rich musical scene of 1970s California, and of his contemporaries and colleagues, including John Cage, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. He describes the process of writing, rehearsing, and performing his renowned works, as well as both the pleasures and the challenges of writing serious music in a country and a time largely preoccupied with pop culture.

Hallelujah Junction is a thoughtful and original memoir that will appeal to both longtime Adams fans and newcomers to contemporary music. Not since Leonard Bernstein's *Findings* has an eminent composer so candidly and accessibly explored his life and work. This searching self-portrait offers not only a glimpse into the work and world of one of our leading artists, but also an intimate look at one of the most exciting chapters in contemporary culture.

Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life Details

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From Reader Review Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life for online ebook

Ci says

Stephen Jay Gould, the challenging thinker about evolutionary science, reminds us that our culture has two canonical modes for trending. One is "advances to something better as reasons for celebration", the other is "declines to abyss as sources of lamentation (and hankering after a mysthical golden age of 'good old days')." Classic music, defined in my mind as those classic cannons such as Mozart and Beethoven, perhaps Brahms and Siberlius as well, were never to be superceded (so I thought), because their achieved the perfection in forms and feelings.

But such ideas are cowardly retrogressive. In embracing different art forms, we should give all of them their days in court with attentiveness, and the full awareness of our own ignorances and narrow palates. John Adams has written an enthusiastic endorcement for continuing the path for artistic creative and innovations, even through the path of many misfires and embarrassments.

This book is a searingly insightful inspection of one composer's life and work. Less about his own biographic details but his relationships and interactions with influential people in culture and art. Gifted with a broad and deep education and cultivation, John Adams write with gusto and insights both about art and his creative processes. It is worth re-reading as my understanding of contemporary classic music deepens.

Christina Hughes says

Very interesting but also very dense and intellectual. I thought my classical music history and theory knowledge was pretty decent, but I think it needed to be several levels more advanced to fully enjoy this book.

My number one takeaway, though, is that John Adams is both an academic genius and a stoner grandpa

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Bruce says

Hallelujah Junction is John Adams' autobiography, and as autobiographies go, it's a fairly good one. Adams uses a pleasant, bemused tone to describe the signposts that mark his development as an artist and his principle influences as he rejects serialism (no small rejection in the late '60s/early 70's), explores and rejects the John Cage-influenced aleatoric 'music' (e.g., random sounds or sounds randomly generated that are labeled as music when given a definitive start and end point), and ultimately finds his composer's voice in minimalism. Those curious about the origins of his various works (including symphonies, oratorios and choral works, violin and piano concerti, and operas like *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Doctor Atomic*) will find that information here, as well as fascinating forays into Adams' musical philosophy. This is worthwhile given Adams' studied familiarity with the "classical" repertoire as a talented conductor as well as a composer, especially works by moderns and contemporaries (Gavin Bryars, Phillip Glass, Osvaldo Golijov, Lou Harrison, Charles Ives, Steve Reich, etc.), a list so extensive that one wonders at the incidental exclusions (chiefly Carl Orff, given how similar to Orff's percussive works the "Flores" and

other choruses from “A Flowering Tree” sound).

This book was also a nice way of revisiting my music school nostalgia, but back to the big ideas. What is the place of “classical music” as a genre or an art form within music generally nowadays? Junction hints at this question in many ways, among them inviting comparison of Adams’ ouerve to Zappa’s and how each are considered by the concert-going public, and separately by consideration of the serialism and aleatoric movements. As someone who doesn’t believe in making “high” versus “low” artistic distinctions, I found much that kept me gnashing my teeth (on food for thought?).

Adams has with contemporary ensembles conducted pieces by Frank Zappa (“Bogus Pomp” and other “Yellow Shark” works… wonder if he’s ever done “G-Spot Tornado”?) and ponders why Zappa’s works haven’t secured a greater foothold within classical programming. As Adams observes, Zappa's works are often difficult, challenging, and provocative to perform and listen to, but so are those of Ades, Berg, Ives, Schoenberg, Boulez, Varese (whose inspiration can be traced within Zappa), and many others in the contemporary idiom whom Adams admires and whose works he feels are programmed as or more frequently. Zappa’s name is better-known than some of these other composers and therefore a better concert draw, Zappa was extremely prolific (leaving plenty to choose from), and because he introduced a significant new compositional concept in “xenochrony” (the postmodern act of collaging together once disparate musical events to create one work with new meaning), Zappa's work is arguably both important and influential. In the larger scheme of things, Adams doesn’t believe Adams’ own work to be more popular than Zappa’s or Adams’ Nonesuch recordings to be better selling than Zappa’s Barking Pumpkin. Adams isn’t even as effective a self-promoter. Why, then, should Adams be programmed more frequently?

Adams argues that as a satirist, Zappa suffers from having thumbed his nose at the longhaired set. I buy that. What I don’t accept is the unstated premise that classical music (and by extension, classical concerts or theater pieces like ballet and opera) are in some way distinct as sophisticated musical experiences from those considered “popular,” that (as Zappa suspects in his own autobiography) Zappa should be tainted by popular brand as a lightweight instead of recognized (where recognition is merited) as an iconoclast. I feel strongly that all art falls somewhere into a range from good to bad, from playable to listenable, as personal taste defines. Fortunately, I still have the touring concert "Zappa Plays Zappa" to fall back on (along with occasional performances by fellow odd-meter specialists Bela Fleck and Sufjan Stevens).

Speaking of Zappa, Adams’ autobiography includes diatribes one might expect to find in The Real Frank Zappa Book. “[Seiji] Ozawa’s performances [with the San Francisco Symphony in the late 1970s]… amplified all the faults I attributed to the classical music industry. The concertgoing experience was largely about him, his podium exertions, and his impressive ability to conduct anything and everything from memory.” (p. 108)

Founder of the Scratch Orchestra, Cornelius “Cardew[,] had followed all of Cage’s directions to a tee and had done so for years, believing that this discipline would help to remove the ego and let the sounds just be sounds. But now Cardew was very publicly renouncing the error of his ways, violently condemning the aesthetics of chance and indeterminacy, proclaiming that the musical, emotional, and social results of all this avant-garde activity was, in a word, a ‘desert.’ This was a brutal admission, not only because so many of us had come to revere Cage as our guru but also because Cardew’s apostasy threatened to confirm what most conservative music critics had been saying all along: that the musical experiments of Cage and his school were little more than Dadaist doodling.” (p. 77)

Reading Adams leads me to the conclusion that the term “classical” no longer has meaning. Is it “through composed” music? No, because the genre admits of the performance events of John Cage, Luciano Berio,

Meredith Monk, and others. (Is Laurie Anderson classical? Or Stomp? Or Bang on a Can? Or Savion Glover? And so what if they're not?) Does "classical" mean "fully-transcribed" or even "acoustic"? Clearly not when the works of Adams, Edgard Varese, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and heck, all of ICAM are considered. (And what of Radiohead, Brian Eno, and William Orbit – whom I happen to prefer to Aphex Twin?) Thanks to music-processing software that allows composers to multitrack, edit, and finish pieces using everything from found sound samples, to acoustically-performed snippets, to handdrawn waves one no longer need be traditionally musically literate (e.g., able intelligently to read and write staff lines, notes, and attendant punctuation) to create and share with listeners works of any degree of sophistication.

At any rate, why is Adams, a man who grew up every bit as immersed in Rodgers and Hammerstein as Sibelius and who admits to being in the thrall of the respective talents of Leonard Bernstein and Jimi Hendrix choosing to pigeonhole himself as a classical composer? Adams comes of age as a composer-in-training at the same time that the psychedelic, electronic, and other "progressive" rock movements are exploding, yet never once steps foot into the pop world. Consider this seriously for a moment. Between 1967 and 1971 the Beatles have revolutionized the concept of studio production with *Sergeant Pepper* (featuring the epic "A Day in the Life") and *The White Album* (especially the track of musique concrete, "Revolution 9"), Zappa and his band the Mothers of Invention have released "Freak Out!" "Lumpy Gravy," and "We're Only in it for the Money," (each heavy with musique concrete, electronic experimentation, and symphonic layers of guitars equivalent to the "sheets of sound" being produced by jazz greats like John Coltrane), Miles Davis is leaving behind acoustic performance for extended, amplified "fusion" jams, and bands like Pink Floyd (who will produce the critically acclaimed LP symphony, *Meddle* and have introduced the critically-disdained LP symphony I prefer to it *Atom Heart Mother*); Emerson, Lake, and Palmer (who are recording and performing in concert lesser-known works by Ginastera and Prokofiev); and the Moody Blues, Led Zeppelin (and soon Rush), and other imitators are all in the process of carving out commercial niches for larger-scale works that combine acoustic and electronic instrumentation, and producing music of rhythmic, tonal, timbral, and in some cases greater melodic and harmonic sophistication to anything then going on in the classical concert hall. Music theater, driven by innovators like Stephen Sondheim and emerging "rock operas,"are exploring subject matter, themes, and compositional styles equivalent (if not superior) to the existing repertory. This is all happening at the same time Adams has physically removed himself from Harvard's 12-tone proponents **to live in San Francisco**!

"So how did I make Cageian thought cohabit in my head with be-bop, Beethoven, John Lennon, and Stravinsky?" Adams asks. "The answer is: I didn't. I remarked very soon after discovering him that Cage was apparently deaf or at least monumentally indifferent to all kinds of music, including most classical and virtually all jazz and popular music." (p. 58) But why differentiate at all?

As Adams notes, "By the year 2000, the pressing issue for music consumers [is] no longer one of accessibility or availability, but rather one of discrimination. How [does] one find something new and of true value amid the blizzard of recordings currently available? Even more serious [is] the question 'How can one make the public aware of your own creations amidst the din and chaos of what is already out there?'" (p. 196) Hopefully, Adams will answer this for us someday. I'm kinda hoping the answer will prove to be some sort of combination of Smithsonian Global Sound and Facebook. In the meantime, I'll happily settle for the kind of performance heterogeneity offered by alternate trips to the Kennedy Center and the Birchmere. Please give me a shout when you're in the neighborhood and have scored good tickets.

Jae Choi says

This book is what got me into contemporary music and helped me come to a greater understanding of the struggles of being a composer. This book has certainly influenced me in my own composition and how I view the process. John Adams' writing is clear and easy to follow. Though I don't agree with all that he has to say about new contemporary compositional trends (and attendant musical implications), he has interesting ideas and I enjoyed learning about his life.

George says

This is as good an autobiography as you'll get from a composer. It would be a great read even for someone uninterested in his music -- except of course for some chapters which are music specific.

Adams's writing is evocative, funny, self-deprecating, and illuminating. I felt like I was living his life -- or as if he were writing the story of MY life. To use Bob Dylan's words, "like it was written in my soul."

The great thing about Hallelujah Junction is that Adams is open and honest in his assessments of composers and their music -- his own included. He has a healthy sense of self-esteem & high regard for most of his music -- but not all of it, and his openness in discussing what he sees as the failures makes this a really great book.

Last but not least, this book is WELL WRITTEN. Often we forgive sloppy or just plain untalented prose style when we read books by "non-writers." Not only is that not the case here, but Adams's prose is wonderful. He clearly didn't see the writing of this book as a chore -- and, having spent a lifetime in publishing, I can guarantee you he didn't do it "for the money" (yeah, money . . . right) -- but clearly he enjoyed writing this.

And treats his readers with the same respect he treats the audience for his music. (And I'm definitely in that group. My favorite Adams works being THE DHARMA AT BIG SUR, MY FATHER KNEW CHARLES IVES, and the piano concerto, CENTURY ROLLS (particularly the 3rd movement, "Hail, Bop!")

Brett says

It is common practice to compare a composer's prose with his music. Milton Babbitt essays are just as thorny as his music. Subordinate clauses intermingle together until the true meaning of his sentences are lost. Morton Feldman composed music of amazing quiet and solitude, yet he was notoriously loud and extroverted in person. And somehow his writings allows these two personalities to coexist, so that his absurd and clever humor somehow touches you deeply. John Cage's writings are almost more important than his music. Elliott Carter speaks and writes with immense practicality, even though he writes some of the most impractically difficult music around. In short, a composer's own words can tell you a lot or nothing at all. I was anxious to read John Adams' memoir for these reasons.

I am a devout follower of John Adams career ever since I picked up Harmonium in the late 90's. Here was music that appealed to both sides of my brain, and it contained something that was distinctly American. It was new music, but yet it seemed so obviously derivative. Part of me suspected that Adams is a genius, but

another part thought the music was inevitable. Someone was bound to meld the modern and minimalist. But Adams did it in a way only an American could, and for that he deserves his place as composer laureate.

Adams starts with the usual stories of childhood. They are typically American. He has the immigrant grandfather, the mother from the broken home, the parents who met at a dance, and the bohemian search for the American dream. These stories are told with color and insight. Who would have thought that Adams plopped down next to Duke Ellington in the middle of a dance set? He tells us that he learned orchestral warhorses by air conducting and he is unashamed of being a clarinet prodigy.

His time at Harvard is equally interesting. He expresses the often heard struggle of being trapped in a modernist world, yet yearning to compose accessible music. He even tells us of his adventures in taking acid (he seems to remember the details of his trips almost too well). But these stories seem typical of any composer of the time. He led certain student ensembles and conducted certain operas. Sometimes a particular piece of music would teach him something. Even a mediocre composer can tell you stories like these. Between the lines, however, there is a sense that he was up to something. He seemed to be leading the best student orchestras and conducting the hardest music. Adams was determined to become great. When he explains his experiments with tape and early synthesizers, he lets us know that he was a singular figure.

The most famous moment of Adams career is his trek across the continent. Even the shortest biography of Adams must include that he was trained on the east and, unsatisfied, made the journey in his beat up VW to the west in search of artistic freedom. For a composer who has weaved the coastal artistic dogmas so well, how could anything seem more appropriate? But it was Alex Ross in The Rest Is Noise who first let us on to the reality of this journey. Adams, unemployed and having read Cage's Silence, decided to go to California not to change the world, but to leave his own. Ironically this great American sojourn westward was made via Canada. Adams seemed as likely to become a washup as the next great composer.

These transformative years of Adams' life are what really interested me. We get to understand why he gave up modernism, why he took up minimalism, and then why he ultimately become unsatisfied. He gives us most of the details. He describes writing his early experimental music and his first mature pieces Phrygian Gates, Wavemaker and Shaker Loops. But by this time he already sounds like Adams. I am left disappointed. Where did this voice come from?

The rest of the chapters are typical composer fair, sort of extended liner notes. Some of the them are more interesting than others, particularly his chapter of The Death of Klinghoffer. This opera eluded me prior to reading his comments; I had been unaware of the great poetry present in the work. No doubt different chapters may speak to others in this way. He goes into specific detail about Harmonielehre, Nixon, the Violin Concerto, the Chamber Symphony, El Nino, Doctor Atomic and his latest opera, A Flowering Tree. Some of these pieces get full chapters. Other pieces, most curiously Hallelujah Junction, are left out completely. Adams mentions Slonimsky and his earbox concept in passing, but we will never know about Slonimsky's Earbox.

Reading, it is obvious that Adams, the jetset composer/conductor, wrote these chapters in short bursts. Chapters are self-contained and seldom refer to each other. Often Adams repeats himself, telling us the same story twice. This usually works against the book, except in the case of one of the later chapters. Adams writes a full chapter on his use of electronics, and he speaks will real authority, as a composer who has taken advantage of the medium. I never quite understood why he was so obsessed with synthesizers until now.

So Adams, as one of the most loved living composers, has done us a real service with a memior. Before this there wasn't a real biography of his life (so far), except for the patchwork of Thomas May's book. I am glad

to have read it, and I will admit that my appreciation for him has only grown.

Nick says

When I read someone's memoir, what I am most interested in learning is what kind of person the writer might be. A select few describe their failures along with their achievements, and John Adams is one of that small group. (Pitcher David Wells, of all people, is another!) If I had never listened to any of his compositions (only what I can find recorded, unfortunately), I might miss some of his work after reading his comments on his work. Adams also illuminates the work of composition, at least as it is for him, and the difficulties of writing operas. What struck me most was what a fine person he is, speaking ill of no one but himself.

Jules says

John Adams is a rock star. The first time I heard his music was the last day of an opera class at UW-Mad. taught by an uninspired professor--the prof "generously" tossed in some modern and contemporary composers as an afterthought. When I heard a snippet of Nixon in China I was completely blown away. It was a seriously a religious experience. I had never heard anything like it and never knew opera could sounds this way--so moving, so fresh, so Different. I never forgot John Adams and soon checked out what I could find in libraries of his music--not much. But one year Dave gave me Nixon in China for christmas and I have played it over and over these years. Now in a few weeks I will actually get to see this amazing opera performed at the Met conducted by Adams himself! It is a dream come true for me. I cannot wait. A few years ago we were fortunate to see at the BSO El Nino which was extremely moving and beautiful.
So, started Adams autobio when it came out and put it down. Found it annoying and badly written--many factual mistakes and he's just not the great writer like he is composer, but would like to read it to understand his life and how he came to be the interesting artist that he is.

Philippe says

John Adams, America’s best known living composer, is far from universally loved. His work is variedly labeled as dreary Minimalism, facile postmodernism, reactionary neoromanticism, politically correct eclecticism, and more. Personally I have been listening to his work for many years, with deepening admiration. For whatever it is worth I believe that compositions such as *Harmonielehre*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *El Nino* and *The Dharma at Big Sur* will eventually be accepted as a solid part of the canon of serious Western music.

In his autobiography *Halleluja Junction* the composer cogently and vivaciously retraces the path from his early musical experiences to creative maturity. The early chapters recount his New England youth and composition studies at Harvard University. In 1971 Adams moved to the West Coast and settled down in the Bay Area where he still lives. As a composer Adams started to find his own voice in the late 1970s. He considers his piano piece *Phrygian Gates* (1977) to be his first mature piece. *Harmonium* (1980), his first large scale work for large orchestra and chorus, was another important milestone.

I found the transitional part of his autobiography, roughly covering the two decades from 1965 to 1985, the

most insightful. Here is an aspiring composer who has absorbed and tries to forge his own voice from a fantastically wide range of influences - the canon of 18th and 19th century European art music, the vernacular of jazz and American popular song, post-war serialism and Cagean aleatorics, minimalism, counterculture pop music, the emergence of electronically generated sounds. His early infatuation with the musical avant-garde, however, proves to be stillborn. In 1976 Adams had a revelation whilst driving his old Karmann Ghia convertible along a ridge in the Sierra foothills. His tape recorder was playing music from Act I of *Götterdämmerung*. Wagner's chromatic but still tonal harmonies produced „an expressive world of constantly changing, forever ambiguous, disturbingly human yearning". Adams realizes that he could not relinquish the power of tonal harmony if he wanted to build expressive, large scale musical structures. There and then he understood that a personal harmonic language would have to be the core of his compositional genome. All this went against the grain of the atonal avant-garde the budding composer initially felt attracted to.

Adams felt, however, he was entitled to embrace this legacy: „The harmonic language developed by Schumann and Wagner did not die out with the advent of Modernism. It simply moved across the Atlantic, where it was appropriated by composers, many of them African Americans and émigré Jews" who created the tradition that he grew up with. The harmonic essence of composers like Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Ellington was not all that different from the chromaticism of the late Romantic composers. But in that process of migration the morbid self-awareness of turn-of-the-century European composers was transformed into a characteristically New World, jubilant lyricism. This „fresh optimism, busy and brash and thoroughly at ease with itself" is in my opinion still the *tinta*, the color or atmosphere that pervades John Adams' mature oeuvre.

From 1985 onwards the flow of commissions provided Adams with a constant supply of artistic challenges. The storyline of *Halleluja Junction* then turns into a blow by blow account of how he tackled his major compositions. Here it is interesting to see how his fundamental optimism intersects with the grave conflicts and dilemmas of our time. Particularly in his stage works - *Nixon in China, The Death of Klinghoffer, Doctor Atomic* - Adams confronts the ambiguities surrounding his American identity. These are counterbalanced by a series of works - *El Nino, A Flowering Tree, The Gospel According to the Other Mary* - that confirm his belief in the generative and healing potential of particularly the female element in our society.

Adams is an exceptionally reflective and articulate artist. There is much more in this book to nurture the reader's understanding of his artistic position and a richly layered compositional process matured over decades.

I found this book rewarding in many respects. It offers a compelling autobiographical narrative, a variegated and often jocular panorama on the development of 20th century ‚classical' music, and a fascinating insight into the workings of a creative mind. However, a solid grasp of 19th and 20th classical music and at least some exposure to Adams' own work is necessary to fully enjoy this book.

Jeff says

John Adams really became a composer after moving to San Francisco in the mid-70s, the same time I was living there. I've been following his work every since, and it's been gratifying to see him gain the success and visibility his work deserves. This autobiography provides a lot of fresh insight into Adams' compositional process and into the kind of human being he is. It's fun to realize that the inspiration for one of his works, which programs notes originally claimed came from a "dream," in fact came from an acid trip he was on.

He's very straight forward about the fact that yes, he inhaled, regularly. There are still some gaps here, works of his that simply don't get much discussion, but that's made up for by the extensive notes on his major projects. It's nice to know that not all his collaborations have been easy or felicitous - makes him seem human. I highly recommend this book to people interested in contemporary classical music.

Mimi says

I completely enjoyed this autobiography describing the process of composing music by one of my favorite contemporary composers. Sometimes it is very dense writing and I found myself reading some sections over and over. He goes into detail about his own compositions as well as most other contemporary composers and their predecessors.

Matt says

The release of this memoir was well timed with my discovery of Adams' music - though I'd been aware of a few of his pieces previously, it was when a friend introduced me to "Grand Pianola Music" last spring that I totally fell in love with his work. Adams' work contains many of the formal innovations of the minimalists, electronic music pioneers, and other experimental composers - yet, unlike of his contemporaries, he doesn't shy away from direct emotional appeal within his music.

So, given my new-found enthusiasm for his music, I was quite excited to read Adams' memoir. The book lived up to my expectations, although not for the reasons I expected. The first half of his book, in which he recounts his familiar history, his early life, schooling, and eventual move out West, provides only anecdotal information for helping understanding his music and composing process. While the second half delves more deeply into the creation of his work, that still failed to be the most compelling aspect of the book.

Rather, what was so wonderful about the book is how warm, kind, and generous Adams consistently appears. It's certainly true in his reflections on his own work. Take, for example, his closing thoughts on his Violin Concerto:

"Leila especially took the concert to heart, playing it from memory in cities all over the United States and Europe, finding rhythmic shadings and expressive possibilities that even its composer had never realized were implicit in the music. The concerto is Leila's signature piece, and her mesmerizing performances became a model for how a serious new instrumental work could indeed achieve repertoire status through the determined advocacy of an exceptionally talented artist."

His humility comes through in his recounting on his own work, as well. I was struck, for example, of his description of his first marriage. It was clear that he was an oddity in his in-laws family, a wealthy, bourgeois Boston family - yet he finds it in himself to write:

"Hawley's parents could well have desired a more conservative, economically upscale mate for their daughter, but if they did, they never revealed any chagrin about her choice of a husband."

Perhaps that's merely a reflection of New England WASP reticence, but still, there's no reason one must speak of ex-in-laws in such understanding terms. But these are just two of many, many examples of Adams'

compassion presented throughout the book. Overall, Hallelujah Junction is an impressive antidote to the myth that successful artists must be megalomaniacs.

Rob Hermanowski says

John Adams is a leading (in my opinion the best) American composer of modern classical music. I have had the pleasure of meeting him and hearing him speak on the curent state of modern music. This is his autobiography, which I found very well-written and fascinating.

Sarah says

One of the most thoughtful and erudite composer biographies I've read. Besides his personal memoir, Adams includes commentary on American social and political issues in the last half of the twentieth century and early twenty first century, musings on the activity of composing and lovely personal anecdotes of other well known musicians and artists. Adams' style is engaging and makes me want to listen to more of his oevre.

Marsha Hunter says

Anticipating going to see Doctor Atomic at the Curtis Institute this week, I pulled this compelling memoir off my reading shelf. I loved reading about Adams' composing process, the artists he has worked with, and how he coped with the prevailing modernist musical styles over the decades of his career. He spends very little time writing about his life as a classical music celebrity, as I was worried he might. He is, after all, a famous guy and could have indulged in more name-dropping and vain ruminations. Instead he gives the reader important ideas, about his reasons for composing, and his collaborators, and his larger artistic vision. Why did he spend a lifetime struggling to find meaning and render it artfully? He tells us what he has wanted to accomplish and why, and how he did it. I found it extremely interesting and satisfying. He's a good writer, sinking just deeply enough into his stories to give us a sense of what was most important about each piece. I've been listening to Shaker Loops, The Wound-Dresser, and Short Ride in a Fast Machine. I've been asking my friends who played in orchestras what it was like to rehearse and perform his pieces, using his memoir as a jumping-off point for the music itself. I've always loved Nixon in China, and now I'm looking forward to listening to a list of other pieces I'm unfamiliar with.

I was also charmed that he dedicates this book to the late great Michael Steinberg, whose own writing about the great classic works of orchestral repertoire are among the most beloved volumes on my shelves. Michael and his wife Jorja Fleezanis (I have a CD of her playing Beethoven violin sonatas in my car now) lit up the Twin Cities with wit and beautiful playing while we lived there, and I will always remember them warmly. How could I not buy this book, which I found in a book store on Fillmore Street last June, with such a dedication? Always shop in indie book stores.
