

# How Nixon's Trip to China Inspired a Great American Opera

by Seth Colter Walls



*Image credit: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera*

Just 13 years after President Richard Nixon's resignation, a heroic opera about him seemed like a sure flop. Today, it's part of the global repertoire.

Opera houses don't usually have to protect themselves against libel suits. But before curtains rose at the Houston Grand Opera on October 22, 1987, the venue's management took out a massive insurance policy. The team knew the upcoming show would be a lightning rod. And now, as the world premiere approached, they were getting nervous.

They weren't the only ones. As the audience anxiously filed in, the minimalist orchestral prelude built simple patterns that crested and morphed. The set, on the other hand, was anything but austere. As the music crescendoed, a life-size airliner landed on stage: Richard Nixon's *Spirit of '76*. The sight of the massive prop sent the audience into uncertain applause. Things were only about to get stranger.

When the door of the plane swung open, Nixon emerged from the stairs, belting out an aria. In rhyming couplets, he sang of the "murmuring down below" and rats—his political enemies—that "begin to chew the sheets" back home, lying in wait for his failures.

From its opening scene, *Nixon in China*, this brainchild of a precocious 30-year-old director, promised to be a complete departure from tradition. By diving into fresh history and painting a heroic picture of a man whose legacy was far more dubious, *Nixon in China* was no doubt a gutsy work of art. But was it any good? That's been a subject of debate for critics ever since. Could *Nixon in China* be the great savior of opera, helping it navigate the modern terrain of MTV and the 24-hour news cycle? Or was it simply an audacious act of bravado poised to fizzle out?

## NIXON'S BIG ADVENTURE



On July 15, 1971, President Richard Nixon made a shocking announcement. In a televised address to the American people, he stated, “There can be no stable and enduring peace without the participation of the People’s Republic of China.” The implications were staggering. Since the end of World War II, the United States and Communist PRC had at best ignored each other and at worst fought a proxy war on the Korean Peninsula. But as the 1960s drew to a close, both Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong were beginning to see the advantage of improved relations.

Setting the stage for the two longtime enemies to make up was no small task. At the time, the United States didn’t recognize the Communist government in mainland China—all official relations were still conducted with the Republic of China in Taiwan. And China wasn’t exactly the modern nation it claimed to be—there were only a few airports with runways considered safe enough for the president to land. But Nixon was in a unique position. Thanks to his reputation as a “Red hunter,” a badge he’d earned prosecuting accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss, Nixon had the freedom to take gambles that a president with fewer conservative credentials could not. As the adage goes: Only Nixon could go to China.



Today, Nixon is remembered as part crook, part cartoon. But in February 1972, his eight-day trip to the People’s Republic became a global media extravaganza. New technology allowed for evening banquets to be broadcast live on American morning television. One New York chef had official dinner menus sent to him via Telex so he could re-create the president’s meals for patrons that very same day.

The public was captivated and enamored, and Nixon’s effort was universally praised. It didn’t matter that virtually nothing of direct diplomatic importance was achieved during the trip—the images were enough.



Thirteen years later, the world was a different place. Relations with China had improved, but the trip had largely faded from the national memory. And Nixon himself, tarnished by Watergate, was no longer a romantic figure. Even in conservative circles, this wasn't the time for a sympathetic opera about Nixon—at least that's how it seemed.

## THE WUNDERKIND

On every playbill and poster, *Nixon in China* is billed as minimalist composer John Adams's work. And it is. The score is pure Adams, awash in his signature swelling and folding themes. But the opera is that rare masterpiece that owes its existence to its director, not its composer. If only Nixon could go to China, then only Peter Sellars could make an opera about it.



As an undergrad at Harvard, Sellars emerged as a new force in American theater. He'd made waves with his interpretations, setting *Antony and Cleopatra* in a university swimming pool and performing Wagner's *Ring Cycle* with marionettes. Since graduating, his goal was to shake up Broadway. "Coming out of school, I thought I would transform the American musical," said Sellars. But in 1983, two weeks before his Broadway debut, he was handed a pink slip. His confidence shattered.

Then, a phone call changed everything. That same week, the 24-year-old learned that he'd won a \$144,000 MacArthur grant. "Without the money, I might have given up directing and taken up something else," he said. Bolstered by the news, he wanted to tackle something ambitious. When he approached John Adams, a fellow Harvard grad known for his minimalist compositions, Sellars used three words to sell his vision: "Nixon in China."

Adams, who had never written music for a solo voice, dismissed Sellars's proposal outright. But the director persisted. In 1985, Adams finally agreed, with one condition: A poet had to write the libretto. Sellars already had one in mind—Alice Goodman, another Harvard classmate. Together the three set out to construct a modern opera: a heroic tale of Nixon's forgotten triumph, free of any satire.



What emerged was a work thick with questions about the government's role in manufacturing history and myth. The first act plays like postcards from a look book, with scenes ripped from TV screens and magazine spreads; the second peers behind the gloss to explore tense behind-the-scenes chaos; and the third finds the principals lonely in bed, reflecting on what just happened, wondering whether any of it mattered. Working from Washington, D.C., had its own effect. As Sellars told Tempo, "[W]e were writing this opera in the second term of the Reagan era ... that whole notion of government by press release, where there is no substance, just a photo opportunity became the issue."

Adding to the complexity, Sellars and his team merged but never unified their competing visions for the production. According to Goodman, "There are places where the music goes against the grain of the libretto and places where the staging goes against the grain of both." Differing stances on the Cultural Revolution, Nixon, and Mao, brought further tension to the group. And while the team tried to turn disagreements into musical counterpoints, some decisions were railroaded through. Sellars, for instance, changed the third act at the last minute from a noisy party scene to one where the actors sing from beds "that look like coffins." As he tells it: "John was shocked. Alice was shocked. John was resistant for years, really—though he was nice about it." The result was a beautifully layered and fractured product. But would the critics see it that way?

## THE CURTAIN RISES

"That was it?" ran the headline of The New York Times story about the Houston premiere. In his dismissive review, the critic Donal Henahan likened the simplistic, repetitive riffs to McDonald's cuisine. The PBS live broadcast that accompanied the debut, narrated by Walter Cronkite, was dismissive in its own way: Cronkite talked more about his own experience on the trip than the opera being aired.

Like the meeting between Nixon and Mao itself, *Nixon in China* saw no immediate world-changing payoff. And yet, the opera was undoubtedly a phenomenon—an avant-garde performance that became big business. Despite middling reviews, the show toured to sold-out theaters night after night. When it arrived at D.C.'s Kennedy Center six months into its run, 12 congressmen, three senators and a Supreme Court justice were in attendance. Audiences filed out of theaters with cloudy impressions: unsure about the production but certain that they'd witnessed something important.



To Peter Sellars's credit, *Nixon in China* did what the director had set out to do: It changed opera. For the first time in recent memory, an opera mattered—and not just to people who already cared about opera. Sellars's brash spinning of headlines into a classical format spurred a new genre. Today, "CNN operas" are hardly a novelty, with modern variants such as the tabloid-inspired *Anna Nicole* finding success on world stages.

Image credit: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

And just as *Nixon in China* helped push the opera world to reconsider the definition of epic, critics have begun to reconsider their stance. In 2011, *Nixon in China* debuted at New York's Metropolitan Opera. This time, *The New York Times* called it "audacious and moving." But perhaps *Nixon in China*'s greatest legacy won't be how it's thought of today. Sellars believes his work could function as an oral history, not unlike Verdi's *Don Carlo*, which few people try to reconcile with the history books. "Opera is about this long-term perspective, and this piece will be performed 200 years from now ... when so many of the journalistic details will have faded," said Sellars, in a 2011 interview with *The Times*. "The music and the poetry will be carrying something that will always be true."