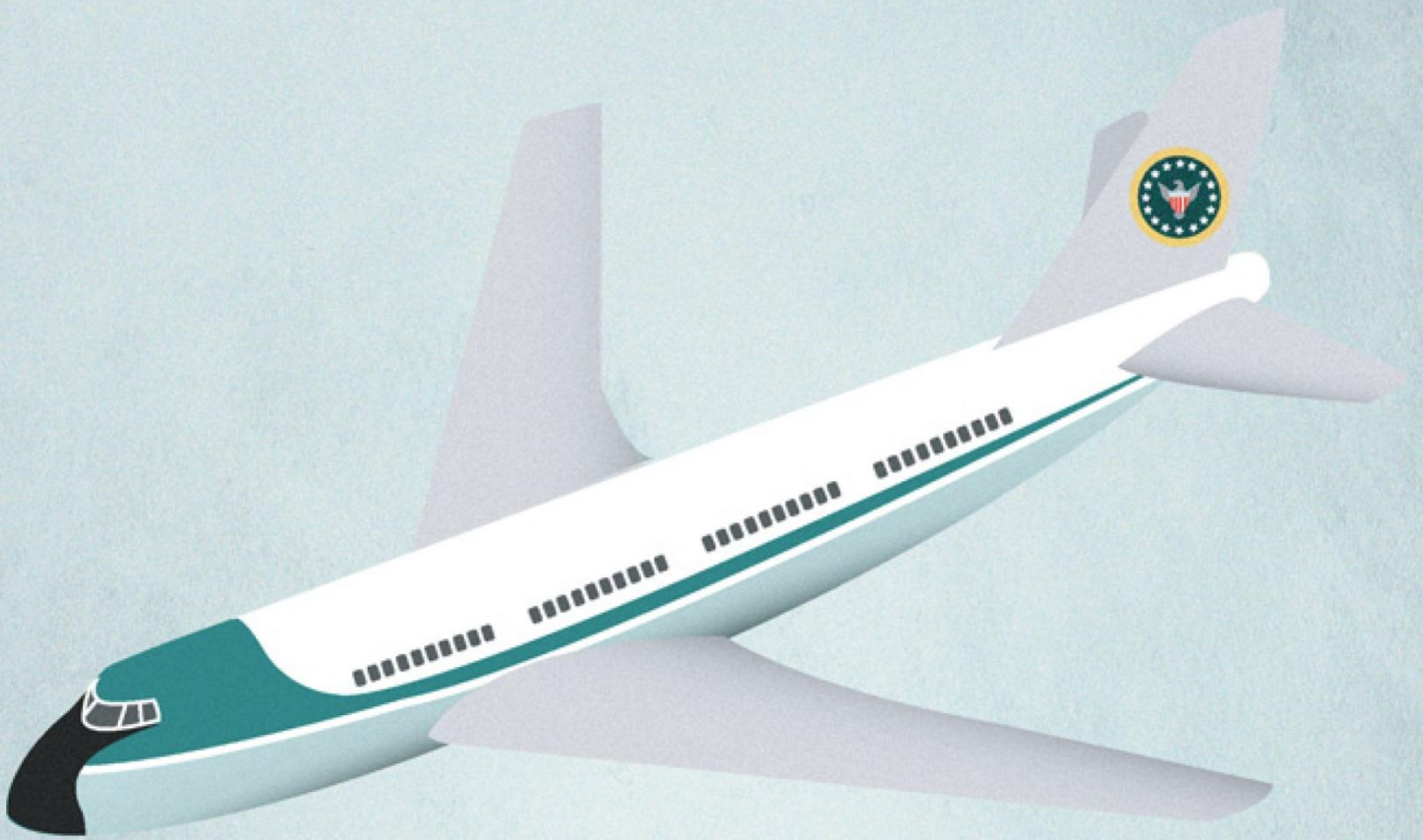




Victorian  
Opera



# NIXON

## IN CHINA

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EDUCATION RESOURCE  
MUSIC

## NIXON IN CHINA

*'A masterpiece'* - Variety Magazine.

In 1971, U.S. President Richard Nixon stunned the world when he revealed he would visit China. It was an historic turning point in American-Chinese relations after twenty five years of no contact, trade or diplomatic recognition. The following year, Richard Nixon and his wife Pat began a week-long visit to China, accompanied by over 100 journalists. And with them, the gaze of the world followed.

Fifteen years later, composer John Adams wrote *Nixon in China* inspired by 'the week that changed the world'. His heroic opera, with its powerful music and text, centres as much on the personal journeys of individual characters as on the grand historical narrative. Recently Variety Magazine called *Nixon in China*, 'a masterpiece'. In 2013, Victorian Opera re-imagines this compelling work bringing an all-Australian perspective to this grand American opera.

Nixon in China | John Adams  
16 – 23 May 2013 Her Majesty's Theatre

These performances of *Nixon in China* by John Adams with libretto by Alice Goodman are given by permission of Hal Leonard Australia Pty Ltd, exclusive agents for Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd of London.

## WHAT TO EXPECT BEFORE, DURING & AFTER YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE!

To gain the most of your opera experience it is highly recommended to study the work, discover its inspiration, learn about the composers and explore the main themes. The following educational resources will provide you with information about the work, what to expect during your opera experience and post opera reflection. Most of the information is included here in the pre-visit exploration section which of course can be re-visited during and after the opera experience. Visit our [interactive Wall online](#) for historical facts, behind-the-scenes and archival photographs, trailer and more!

The Wall


**NIXON IN CHINA COUNTDOWN**  
35 DAYS TO GO... [BOOK NOW >](#)

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**A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY FROM EAST TO WEST**


The first act reveals a world of men and politics as the key players: the nervous **Nixon**, the confident **Chinese Premier Chou En-lai**, the gnomish **Chairman Mao** and the stoic National Security Advisor **Henry Kissinger** go about their business. Then in the second, the focus shifts to the women in this story, the president's sympathetic wife **Pat Nixon** and the defiant **Madame Mao** caught up in an inevitable wave of change, before culminating in a moving final act in which they all reflect on their lives and their contribution to history.

**U.S. PRESIDENT IN CHINA FIRST TIME IN 25 YEARS**



'By American standards, the capital airport is almost deserted only half an hour before the President touches down. Where are Chou En-lai and the palace guards? Around, spy the Chinese officials, but not in sight. Finally, from behind some buildings come the sound of troops. Rhythmic marching, hard boots, the shout of a command.'

Source: Excerpted from the notebooks of Washington Bureau Chief Hugh Sidey and White House Correspondent Jerrold Schecter. Herewith, Time Magazine, The Nation: The President's Odyssey Day by Day, Monday, Mar. 06, 1972. Image: Arrival of Air Force One in Peking, 02/21/1972 © White House Photo Office [Public domain]



**THE PRESIDENT'S ITINERARY**

**First Day**  
Arrival in Peking. Trip from airport to city. Meeting with Mao. First banquet in the Great Hall of the People.

**Second Day**  
People's Daily frontpages a picture of Mao and Nixon. Nixon and Chou En-lai confer privately for four hours. Evening at the ballet.

**Third Day**  
More talks with Chou. Evening sports spectacle of gymnastics, badminton, table tennis.

**Fourth Day**  
Again, talks with Chou. The visit to the Great Wall.

**Fifth Day**  
Visit to the Forbidden City in Peking. Last banquet in the Great Hall of the People.


**Sixth Day**  
Joint communiqué concluded. Flight to Hangchow. Boat ride in park with Chou.

[RESERVE YOUR SEATS >](#)


Source: Excerpted from the notebooks of Washington Bureau Chief Hugh Sidey and White House Correspondent Jerrold Schecter. Time Magazine, The Nation: The President's Odyssey Day by Day, Monday, Mar. 06, 1972.

**f**

A sneak preview of our photo shoot in Chinatown, in the style of 1970's propaganda posters. [Click away](#) to relive the week that changed the world!



**THE FAST LANE OF 1970'S AMERICA**



## PRE-VISIT EXPLORATION

### *Adams' Compositional Style*

Adams' compositional style has been described as 'minimalist' which is characterized by repetitive rhythmic patterns. Other famous minimalist composers include Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Tony Riley. Adams was attracted to minimalism due to its scope and possibilities. As he stated:

*What I found liberating about minimalist techniques was that through them I found I could build large musical structures: Brucknerian structures even. The control of tonal harmony and the construction by means of repeated motivic cells allowed me to create architectural "events" like the first movements of Harmonium and Harmonielehre of those big opera scenes in Nixon. You just couldn't build big structures like that in atonal music.*<sup>1</sup>

*Nixon in China* has been described as beyond minimalism. Rhythmic dissonance is achieved through displaced pulses and syncopated cross-rhythms are used as a compositional device. Adams was also inspired by the late nineteenth century Romanticism namely Richard Wagner, Johann Strauss and Igor Stravinsky. Adams employed a full orchestra for the opera and augmented it with a saxophone section, an electronic synthesizer and percussion instruments including [wood block](#), sandpaper blocks, [slapsticks](#) and [sleigh bells](#).

Adams created tension in his work through his treatment of rhythm. There is metrical consonance when the pulse is aligned and dissonance through displacing the pulse, layering textures of sound in which the pulse is displaced.

Harmonically, Adams does employ the traditional tonic to dominant and sub-dominant chord changes, but largely employs slow moving transformations from neo-Riemannian theory. Here chords are changed where either one of more notes of the triads move a shift, or when the entire chord is transposed up or down a semitone from one chord to another. For example a C major chord can transform to C minor by the E natural changing to an E flat.

## THE FAST LANE OF 1970'S AMERICA



*Nixon in China* is an artistic realisation of a significant political event. The score is complex, it's over a 1000 pages long, but the sound is bright, powerful and energetic. It's the sound of living in the fast lane of 1970's America. And then there's the added layer of sound design, as Composer John Adams wanted singers and orchestra in stereo, evoking a kind of 'televised effect.'

**Fabian Russell, Conductor *Nixon in China***

Image: Line Up of Fair Seeking Taxis NARA -554331 © Dan McCoy [Public Domain]

## QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

- Why was Richard Nixon's visit to China such a big event? Was it easy for Westerners to visit China in 1972?
- Watch the YouTube documentary [Assignment China: The week that changed the world](#). How important was the media in Nixon's visit to China?
- What are some of the characteristics of Communism which are different to Capitalist society?

<sup>1</sup> May (2006) Adams 2006a, pp.21-2.

## *Scenes for Discussion*

The Opera displays the contrast in the perceptions of China from an Eastern and Western perspective. The scenes selected are: the arrival of Nixon, his wife and Kissinger in China; Pat Nixon's Grand Tour of China followed by a performance by the ballet

### Act One – Scene One – The Red Dawn

The opera begins with an orchestral prelude of overlapping ascending Aeolian scales to depict dawn in China. It is played slowly creating a warm relaxed feel, but with alternating A and F pedal notes on the bass. The use of rhythm creates an unsettled atmosphere. Adams uses layers of disjunct overlapping scales punctured by dissonant chords most notably four note staccato outbursts on the trombone. The brass play dotted notes against symmetrical strings. The winds never fall into alignment. In the opening scene the common note is an E. Harmonically, Adams uses semitone shifts.

### **QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES**

- Listen to the opening scene.
- What function do the strings, wind and brass have in the opening scene? Which instrumental group plays the scale, chords?
- Play an Aeolian mode on a musical instrument (A to A on white keys). If you are in group, play the scale simultaneously at different tempi to create overlapping scales in the style of Adams. What impact does this have on the musical atmosphere?

### The White Fields (Bars 78-220)

A Chinese military song "The White Fields" is then introduced where the Chinese citizens celebrate the common labourer. Here, the contrast of perspectives of the landscape from the East and West are displayed through the music and the libretto.

*Whereas its inhabitants saw fruitful soil, vivid colors, and serene openness, its Western visitors saw barren fields, a gray canvas, and emptiness. With the simultaneous presentation of metrical and harmonic consonance and dissonance, Adams musically depicts this divergence in point of view between the American visitors and the Chinese citizens.<sup>2</sup>*

The contrast between East and West is apparent from the first scene. Nixon exploits through a variety of compositional techniques. The Chinese chorus sing harmoniously about the fruits of the harvest.

### **QUESTIONS**

- Listen to the text. What is the song about?
- What words and phrases indicate that they are in China?
- Adams changes the meter often. 2/2, 3/4, 3/2. What impact does this have on the melody? What instruments accompany the singers?

<sup>2</sup> (Johnson, 2011, p.17)

### Spirit of '76 Plane Arrival

As the plane arrives, the tension is heightened through tempo, register, meter, dynamics and harmony. Nixon uses metric modulation through quavers in 4/4 timing then to 5/4 timing. The brass use metrical displacement. The arrival of the plane Spirit of '76 is signaled by bursts of band sounds and fragmented fanfares, which disrupts the atmosphere. After Nixon disembarks, he exclaims "News" and repeats the word ten times in a row each time closer together. Nixon as a person craved solitude and was uncomfortable at small talk. During greeting, his mind wanders. Adams' has reflected social awkwardness through quick descending, short repetitiveness phrases. Nixon also perceives the landscape as barren after he arrives in China. This is expressed through quick descending chords. When Nixon shakes hands with the Chinese, this is not only a photo opportunity, but observing history.

### QUESTIONS

- What instrumentation does Adams employ when the plane arrives?
- Does the passage use repeated scales or arpeggios? What impact does this have?
- What do the leaders first discuss when they meet? Is this what you would expect?

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### Act Two

In Act Two, there is a focus on Pat Nixon. From Act One, Pat is continuously happy and positive about the entire experience. One of her first lines in the opera is "I treat every day like Christmas" (Bar 89) and "This is Prophetic". Pat Nixon is taken on a Grand Tour of China. The tour took several days but in *Nixon in China*, it is condensed to one scene. The scene highlights the differences in perception of Pat and the Chinese. Her comments reveal her thinking. She is taken around the street of Peking then given a toy glass elephant. The elephant is the symbol of the Republican Party and also of China. Pat asks "Is it one of a kind?" (bars 228-32) which the Chinese respond they make hundreds. Pat sees the elephant as a positive sign of the tour. "I was meant to come here".

She then goes to the Evergreen People's Commune where there are the elephantine hills (bars 273-97) then a school and the Summer Palace. At the Ming Tombs, Pat misses the point. She sees the ancient burial grounds as a lovely park and place for a picnic. Pat stays positive throughout this scene and the visit and believes that the trip was fate.

## QUESTIONS

- Find and watch the scene on YouTube. How does the music change at each of Pat Nixon's destination?
- Listen to the dialogue between Pat Nixon and the people. How well do the responses match the comments and questions?
- Look at some travel guides for Beijing (Peking) on the internet. Are the places Pat Nixon visited on current itineraries? What are the tourist landmarks of Beijing?



Figure 1. Pat Nixon speaks to a child in China © Byron Schumaker

### The Red Detachment of Women

In the second act, the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* is based on a political ballet combining theatre, dance and music from the period of the Cultural Revolution shaped by Madame Mao. The ballet is a juxtaposition of dancers en pointe with army uniforms and rifles. The reaction of the Nixons is negative. They miss the point of the production. This is exemplified by the text and the dissonant harmonies.

## QUESTIONS

- Watch the scene on YouTube and also watch a scene from a Western ballet such as *Swan Lake*. How do they compare?
- Has Adams composed music that is easy to dance to? Why or why not?

### Act Three

The leaders are in their chamber reminiscing about the tour. It was actually Chairman Mao Tse-tung who was most transformed by the tour. At the beginning, he was perceived as an ageing man who was physically deteriorating, but by the end, a vibrant leader.

## QUESTIONS

- What have the leaders learnt from the experience?
- What is the mood in the finale scene?

## **DURING YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE**

Before the performance, make sure you are familiar with the plot. Reacquaint yourself with the characters and the arias. Has this production followed the conventional costumes, lighting and scenery and viewed prior to attending? Listen to the music and how it blends with the singers. Take note of the audiences' reaction around you, what emotion they are sharing with the performers, and how the performers respond to the audience. Most importantly, enjoy the performance and all it has to offer.

## POST- VISIT REFLECTION

After the performance, reflect on what you have experienced. Also discuss this with your peers. What did you like best about the performance? Who was the most memorable performer? What surprised you? If you were a critic for a newspaper, what would you write? Do you think their responses would be different if it was premiered in 2013?

## REFERNCES & FURTHER READING

*With thanks to Dr Sharon Lierse for the research and preparation of this resource pack.*

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