

Theses of a Dissertation

Dániel Dobos

The Gospel According to the Other Mary
Compositional and Dramaturgical Solutions in
John Adams' Opera-oratorio

Supervisor: Máté András Bella, DLA

The Liszt Academy of Music 28th Doctoral School of
Arts and Cultural History

Budapest

2025

I. Antecedents of the Research

There is a great body of literature on the compositions, and mainly the stage works, of John Adams, although, they mostly focus on those created before the millennium. The later pieces, such as *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*, do not enjoy the same attention, as only a few if any scholars have attempted to write about them. Thus, for my dissertation, I have searched for source materials that either had remote connection to *The Gospel*, for instance covering only the genre of the piece, or analysed Adams' style and methods as a composer. The foreign language literature focused mainly on his compositional techniques before 2000, his eclectic style, and the psychological background of his stage works. Hungarian literature, however, does not exist on the subject beyond a few articles and reviews published in music periodicals. My research on minimalism is largely based on Timothy A. Johnson's *Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style or Technique?*, Dan Warburton's *A Working Terminology for Minimal Music*, and Keith Potter's publications. The most important sources on Adams were the studies of

Alexander Sanchez-Behar and Thomas May, the text of the concert program for the premiere of *The Gospel* and a 2019 interview with Adams, both by Michael Palmese, and, finally, the 2008 autobiography of the composer himself.

II. Sources

This work is heavily reliant on various internet sources, like the composer's official website or video interviews with both Adams and Peter Sellars. The scores of both stage and concert pieces have also been invaluable, especially their forewords, as they have revealed many musical parallels and tendencies. Besides these, the analysis required the understanding of the context of minimalism, the genre of the opera-oratorio, and Adams' other works, thus sources like *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, or Keith Potter's book: *Four Musical Minimalists* were of key significance. The most important writings that helped to understand the background of Sellars' direction were the publications of

Andrew Maisel, Matthew Isaac Cohen, Laura Battle, Min Tian, and Ágota Révész.

III. Methods

As I did not have enough direct sources regarding *The Gospel*, my first step became gathering material on the context of it, its keywords clustering around minimalism, the opera-oratorio, and the other stage pieces of Adams, these being the defining characteristics of the composition. Halfway between the context and analysis lies the examination of the libretto. At this point in the research gathering of sources on the main text and the analysis of them took place simultaneously. The publications describing Chinese traditions helped to understand the theatrical background of the directorial work, while the fine art essays provided a base to the study of Mary Magdalene. After this, I began the thorough analysis of *The Gospel*, which endeavour was aided by the discovered similarities in previous stage works. Through the analysis, the research of the defining compositional and dramaturgical principles, and the highlighting of the

parallels between parts became paramount. The process was documented in detail, the findings of which were used later, at the writing of the chapter. The inspection of the piece starts at the classic forms and phenomena of music theory, which was then complemented by other methods from English sources. The overlaps between chapters are accompanied by reflections, that are not only showing the composition from a newer perspective but are also drawing the oftentimes thematic connections between parts closer together. As a last step, sheet music excerpts were included and edited, and the text and bibliography were revised.

IV. Results

The dissertation consists of two parts. The first part, *Kontextus*, contains three subsections that provide the necessary base for *The Gospel's* analysis. The one on minimalism progresses from the broader definition of the style towards the musical thinking that first rules, and later layers itself in Adams' works. The next, on the oratorio, touches on the two differently premiered versions

of *The Gospel*, then, based on the operas of the baroque and the first half of the 20th century, it tries to answer the questions regarding the genre of the piece. In the last one we can read a short overview of the composer's stage works, that in one hand works as a reference to the analysis, on the other, highlights general characteristics that can help to better understand Adams' mentality on compositional and dramaturgical matters.

The second part brings the analysis of *The Gospel*. In the first subsection we focus on the theatrical background of the direction, the management of the timelines, and the overview of the libretto. The second subsection contains the actual analysis. This, largest part of the paper, consists of looking at the tendencies regarding form, harmony, and the orchestration, and shedding light on such compositional solutions through the relationship between music and text, that have not or hardly been mentioned in previous Adams studies. Lastly, the most important findings are summarized, and through them I attempt to illustrate why *The Gospel* was first met with mixed reviews. The dissertation is in more ways novel in the field of studying Adams, compared to previous publications.

Not only does it enrich Hungarian literature on the composer, but it also provides a wider scope on his philosophy regarding form and harmony.

V. Documentation of the Activity Relevant to the Topic of the Dissertation

The art of John Adams has greatly impacted my attitude as a composer. When in 2021 I first heard his music, I felt that, after the compositions based purely on pitch or structure, I have found a composer who knows not only the musical styles of the 20th and 21st centuries, but also baroque and romantic traditions. I have found the way he melts different layers together into one unique piece profoundly inspiring, the traces of which method can now be found in a few of my own compositions.

My pieces *Sanctus* (2023) and *Byrd Within* (2024) can be directly linked to my study of Adams. In the former I have dissected the Latin text into smaller units, which are then combined with off-beat rhythm, while the piano uses a lot of repetitive phrases. These techniques were inspired by Adams' use of the choir in his stage works, and his 1996

Hallelujah Junction. The latter composition strives to recreate the American composer's ability to fuse styles. Thus, it contains characteristics of renaissance music, minimalism, and jazz, while, as in Adams' case, reflecting on the times we live in.