

EL NIÑO

JOHN COOLIDGE ADAMS was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on February 15, 1947 and now lives in Berkeley. *El Niño* is a setting of texts taken or adapted from poems by Rosario Castellanos, Gabriela Mistral, Hildegard of Bingen, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Rubén Darío, and Vicente Huidobro, as well as some anonymous versions and passages from the Bible, the New Testament Apocrypha, and the Wakefield Mystery Plays. Peter Sellars was instrumental in assisting the composer with assembling the libretto, and the score is dedicated to him. *El Niño* was commissioned by Le Châtelet (Paris), the San Francisco Symphony, the Barbican Centre (London), the Rotterdam Philharmonic, the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (Rome), and the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (New York). Adams completed the score on November 8, 2000, and the first performance was given at the Châtelet, Paris, on December 15. Kent Nagano conducted forces including soprano Dawn Upshaw, mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, bass-baritone Willard White, three countertenors from Paul Hillier's Theater of Voices, London Voices, and the Deutsche Sinfonie-Orchester (Berlin). The production, by Peter Sellars, included dancers Daniela Graça, Nora Kimball, and Michael Schumacher, as well as sets, designs, costumes, and a film by Yreina Cervantes, Martin Pakledinaz, James F. Ingalls, and Mark Grey. These are the first performances in the United States. The score calls for soprano, mezzo-soprano, and baritone soloists, a male ensemble consisting of three countertenors, a mixed chorus, a children's chorus (optional), and an orchestra of flute (doubling piccolo), piccolo (doubling flute), oboe (doubling English horn), English horn (doubling oboe), clarinet, bass clarinet (doubling clarinet), bassoon, contrabassoon (doubling bassoon), three horns, three trombones, glockenspiel, triangles of three sizes, gong, Alpine herd bells, guiro, maracas, high cowbell, temple block, tam-tam, chimes, claves, temple bowls, piano, celesta, electronic sampler, two steel-string guitars, harp, and strings.

“Scenes from my childhood”: Those are the opening words of *Tom Sails Away*, a poignantly beautiful song by Charles Ives, a composer—and fellow New Englander—who has meant a lot to John Adams. *El Niño* might not immediately evoke Woodstock,

Vermont, in the 1950s, but that too is part of its background or, as Adams himself would probably put it, the DNA of this captivatingly multi-faceted work. The musical part of John Adams's childhood included clarinet lessons with his father and playing in marching bands with him, and an integral part of it was the celebration of Christmas through music, the whole range, from *Jingle Bells* through *Good King Wenceslas* to *Messiah*. Describing all that at a talk about *El Niño* at the San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum in November, Adams had to stop and laugh: "It's all too picturesque, isn't it? Like something dreamed up by a casting director."

However that may be, it is true. "I love *Messiah*," Adams goes on to say, and it follows quite naturally—and with not the slightest touch of arrogance or suggestion of equivalence—when, with another laugh, he comes out with it: "I wanted to write a *Messiah*." He never thought that with his "checkered religious background" he would find himself writing a religious work. "I envy people with strong religious belief. Mine is shaky and unformed. I don't know what I'm saying and one reason for writing *El Niño* was to find out." Digging deep into your own psyche, you learn.

But Adams had also always wanted to write a work about birth, and while *El Niño* is about a specific birth, its subject is more generally the miracle of birth itself. The birth of his daughter Emily in 1984 was an event that changed his life, and the recollection of it still amazes him: "There were four people in the room, and then there were five." For the Western World, the Nativity is, after the myth of the creation of Adam, the most famous of all births, and that, Adams thought, would make it a good pretext or matrix for a contemplation and celebration of Birth. (He was startled to discover that his own teenage offspring were less familiar with the details of the Nativity story than he expected.)

Adams has had a tight association with the San Francisco Symphony ever since he became Edo de Waart's new-music adviser in the 1978-79 season. He went on to serve as the Symphony's first composer-in-residence and founded the New and Unusual Music concert series. The works he has written for the San Francisco Symphony are *Harmonium*, *Grand Pianola Music*, *Harmonielehre*, *El Dorado*, and now *El Niño*. The

Symphony had asked him for a work for chorus and orchestra, and at about the same time the Châtelet Theater in Paris proposed that he write an opera for performance there. Adams saw how he could combine these projects by writing an oratorio that could be staged, and so the practicalities came together. (The other commissioning groups in London, New York, Rome, and Rotterdam came on board later.)

The first compositional question to be dealt with was the choice or the assembling of a text. Adams never intended to offer a straight Biblical narrative; rather, he imagined from the beginning that he would follow the plan that appears in various forms in, for example, the Bach Passions and *Christmas Oratorio*, in *Messiah* itself, and such twentieth-century works as Britten's *War Requiem* and Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Requiem for a Young Poet*—a plan that interlards a basic narration with commentary from other sources. The music, too, draws from many springs, but it always sounds unmistakably like John Adams. We hear his distinctive voice, nourished by other idioms.

Something else Adams knew early on was that he wanted women's voices clearly heard in a work whose subject was birth: "How can you tell this story in the year 2001 and not have a woman's voice? Seldom in the officially sanctioned stories is there any more than a passing awareness of the misery and pain of labor, of the uncertainty and doubt of pregnancy, or of that mixture of supreme happiness and inexplicable emptiness that follows the moment of birth." All of that can, however, be found in the piercingly eloquent poems by Hispanic women to which Peter Sellars drew Adams's attention when asked to help with the libretto. (Sellars is not just a director of genius and Adams's collaborator in several previous projects, including the operas *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, but one of those miraculous non-musicians who understand music more deeply than most professionals. Sellars, to whom Adams dedicated *El Niño*, planned the stage presentation for the first performances of *El Niño* in Paris.)

The last verbal component to come into focus for Adams was the title. He originally called the work *How Could This Happen?* He had found the phrase in German in a motet by the sixteenth-century Franco-Flemish master Orlando di Lasso, and it comes from an

antiphon for Advent. But Adams noticed that people kept “mangling” the title in conversation, and so he came to the conclusion that there was something not right about it. Hence the change last summer to *El Niño*. It is a signal, too, of the importance of the Hispanic element in the work, an important point for Adams, who delights in living in a polyglot culture and who has said that “the intensity and genuineness of Latin American art and culture is one of the great gifts one receives by living in California.” About one-third of *El Niño* is in Spanish. Adams has anticipated the comment that his new title will bring the Weather Channel to mind: “The association [with storms and violent weather] is right. As Sor Juana...says, a miracle is not without its alarming force. Christ was referred to as the ‘Wind,’ a kind of tempest that blows away all that comes in its path and transforms it. Herod knows this. We all know it when a child comes into the world.”

Some of the text of *El Niño* will be familiar to you, for example the words from Saint Luke known as the *Magnificat*, Mary’s response to the Annunciation: “My soul doth magnify the Lord.” (The most famous musical setting, in Latin, is Bach’s.) Another is a passage from Haggai, a sixth-century prophet whose book appears near the end of the Old Testament: “For thus saith the Lord: Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land....” Handel sets it (in slightly different verbal form) in *Messiah*. This is the only instance where Adams goes directly head to head with his great precursor, though *El Niño* is on two senses very Handelian: in the simplicity and directness with which the words convey their message of belief, and in the glory with which English words are set to music. In *El Niño* Adams has written that rare work, a vocal composition in which you actually hear all the words.

An important part of what gives *El Niño* its distinctive expressive and literary flavor is the presence of many passages from the New Testament Apocrypha. (The Greek word “apocrypha” means “things that are hidden.”) This is a collection of some thirty books—by its very nature, the text has never been fixed—that resemble the gospels, acts, and epistles in the New Testament, many of them written at about the same time as the New Testament gospels, but which for reasons that range from doubts about their authenticity to accusations of heresy, have never been accepted as part of the canon. You

have to acquire the New Testament Apocrypha as a separate book, and you will not usually find it in religious bookstores. Rejected though it may be by the Church, the New Testament Apocrypha makes for lively and varied reading. Some of it seems as though written for children or at least for quite a naïve audience; other parts are as deeply serious as anything you will find in the canon. The Nativity narratives are often humanly more penetrating than the official ones, and you also find a vein of humor of which there is not a trace in the writings attributed to the four New Testament evangelists. *El Niño*, then, draws on various elements, weaving all together in a dense counterpoint of music, poetry, film, and dance. A lot goes on here. The effect, as Sellars has said, is similar to a many-paneled masterpiece, in which the eye is not sure of exactly where to look.

El Niño is in two parts, the first of which ends with the miraculous birth and the appearance of the Christmas star. It begins with a medieval English poem, *I Sing of a Maiden*, sung by the chorus and two countertenors. The music begins with what has become an Adams signature, the steady chugging of a single chord—here D minor—but with the texture quickly becoming more complex as cross-rhythms and dissonant notes are added to the mix. I don't know whether the opening of Beethoven's Ninth, where a D on the bassoon enters to blur the harmony, was a consciously chosen model for Adams, but the effect is similar. And as at the beginning of *Harmonium*, the chorus, first just reiterating the syllable "may," then adding repetitions of "King, King, King," gradually finds its way into the poem:

I sing of a maiden,
A matchless maiden,
King of all Kings...

A huge crescendo for the orchestra alone propels us into *Hail, Mary, Gracious!*, a text taken from one of the mystery plays that made the little Yorkshire town of Wakefield famous in the Middle Ages. Its subject is the Annunciation. The male ensemble of three countertenors takes the part of Gabriel, while the soprano assumes the role of Mary. Taking a cue from Handel, Adams does not lock his three soloists into specific roles:

later, in fact in the very next movement, we will find the mezzo-soprano singing the part of the Virgin. Here Mary's music is in that vein of rapt lyricism that makes Pat Nixon's aria in *Nixon in China* such a lovely moment.

Now we come to the first of *El Niño*'s Spanish texts. In my long listening life, I have often been grateful to composers for showing me wonderful poets whose work I had not known: Schubert and Mahler with Friedrich Rückert, for example, or Schumann with Justinus Kerner, and Britten with Thomas Hardy. I am sure I will not be the only listener for whom *El Niño* will, among other things, mean the first amazed encounter with the writing of Rosario Castellanos, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Rubén Darío, and Vicente Huidobro. Even in translation, it is clear that Castellanos and Sor Juana must be among the greatest poets in any language.

Castellanos was born in Mexico City in 1925 and died in 1974 in Tel Aviv, where she was serving as Mexican ambassador to Israel. She was a writer of enormous range, deeply interested in Mexico's pre-Columbian heritage, but at the same time a thoroughly committed citizen of the mid-twentieth century. Here she is represented by a long poem, impassioned and inward, titled *La anunciación*, something to set beside the great Annunciation paintings and, in poetry, Rilke's *Mariä Verkündigung* (*The Annunciation to Mary*), so powerfully set to music by Paul Hindemith. Adams gives Castellanos's words to the mezzo-soprano, who makes her way through the feast of imagery in strong and varied musical declamation. The orchestra begins delicately and ends in a blaze of string sound.

This expansive song is followed by a chorus on words from Saint Luke, brief, punchy, tight. This is in fact the shortest section of *El Niño*.

The next movement, *The Babe Leaped in Her Womb*, also draws on the third Gospel, but with a very different sort of text. This sets before us the touching scene of the Visitation, Mary's visit to her cousin Elisabeth. At Mary's greeting, the child in Elisabeth's womb, the child who will grow up to be John the Baptist, leaped in her womb for joy. The three

countertenors, with brief help from the chorus, tell the story and sing Elisabeth's jubilant words.

Then, still drawing on Saint Luke, comes the *Magnificat*, sung by the soprano with support from two of the countertenors and the women of the chorus.

Now the story is continued by the Gospel of James in the New Testament Apocrypha. James, known as the Just, was one of the first leaders of the Christian church in Jerusalem and died a martyr's death there in about the year 65. Some theologians believe him to have been a cousin of Jesus. A marvelously lively and humanly perceptive writer, he tells the story of Joseph, after a long absence, coming home to find his sixteen-year-old bride six months pregnant, and reacting in anger and suspicion, disbelieving her protestations, at this point thinking only like a *macho* male of how bad this makes him look. The scene is set by the ensemble of countertenors, the baritone takes the part of Joseph, with the countertenors and the soprano sharing the words of the teenage mother-to-be.

James goes on to tell how an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, persuading him that "that which is conceived in [Mary's] womb is of the Holy Ghost," and foretelling the circumstances of Jesus' birth "among the animals and beasts of burden, on a cold night, in a strange land, and in a poor resting place." To James's text Adams adds words from Matthew, Isaiah, and one of Martin Luther's Christmas sermons. The baritone changes roles from Joseph to storyteller, and this movement, titled *Joseph's Dream*, culminates in a great orchestral crescendo that spills directly into the next section.

This is called *Shake the Heavens*. It begins with the passage from Haggai I mentioned earlier—"I will shake the heavens, and the earth..."—but moves into another passage from the Gospel of James, describing Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem, Mary both weeping and laughing "because I see two people with my eyes, the one weeping and mourning, the other rejoicing and glad." Inevitably, the "shaking" passage alludes to Handel, though without the eighteenth-century virtuoso coloraturas. The continuation

from James enlists the countertenor trio both to tell the story and to pose Joseph's questions, with soprano and mezzo-soprano joining together to give us Mary's reply.

Se habla de Gabriel (Speaking of Gabriel) brings us another poem by Rosario Castellanos, one that wryly and powerfully evokes what Adams referred to as "the misery and pain of labor...the uncertainty and doubt of pregnancy or...that mixture of supreme happiness and inexplicable emptiness that follows the moment of birth." Soprano and mezzo-soprano brings us Castellanos's words over a slow-moving accompaniment.

Without break, the music moves into more words from the New Testament Apocrypha, partly James, partly the so-called Latin Infancy Gospel. This is a wondrously moving passage in which Joseph, in the moments before the Birth, suddenly realizes that all the world, the heavens, the birds of the air, the workers on earth, the sheep and their shepherd, the rivers, the ocean, and the winds have become totally still, and "the maiden stood looking intently into heaven." It is the moment when Joseph understands. Quietly, the baritone evokes this miraculous scene.

The first part of *El Niño* concludes with a fiery poem by Gabriela Mistral (1899-1957), the great Chilean poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1945, the first Latin American writer to be so honored. In swift-moving verse she evokes the mixed ecstasy and pain of religious revelation, the chorus, later joined by the countertenor trio and the three soloists giving voice to her words. It is heard in a translation by Maria Jacketti. Adams conflates Mistral's lines with the enraptured utterance *O quam preciosa* (*Oh, how precious*), by the twelfth-century mystic and writer Hildegard of Bingen. The music descends from the great crest it has reached, and the last word we hear is "paradisum": "The tender shoot which is the Virgin's son has opened Paradise."

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1658-1695), whose poem *Pues mi Dios ha nacido a penar* (*Because My Lord was Born to Suffer*) opens Part Two of *El Niño*, has been called Mexico's Tenth Muse and the Mexican Phoenix. She was a brilliant writer and intellectual who was a nun from her twenty-first year until her death. She learned to read

at three, taught herself Latin before she was in double digits, tried in vain to have her mother send her to the university in Mexico City disguised as a boy, and devoted much of her life campaigning against the notion that women should not be educated. Her poems are recognized as the first truly Mexican ones as distinct from traditional Spanish verse written on New World soil. *Pues mi Dios* is a remarkable short example of what her mind and ear could produce, its text, which speeds up so powerfully toward its close, being an artful play of opposites and paradox. It reads like something designed for musical settings, and Adams, using the mezzo-soprano and the chorus (all of it at first, then the men only), projects the dialogue vividly and creates a most evocative atmosphere for this extraordinary poem.

Now *El Niño* reverts to the Bible, this time to Matthew's account of Herod's plot to seek out the Child in order, supposedly, to worship him. The setting, over a restless accompaniment, is for baritone and the trio of countertenors.

The commentary on Herod's deceitful plan comes from Isaiah: *Woe Unto Them That Call Evil Good*. Again we hear the baritone, this time backed by the full chorus, with the orchestra providing a kind of stride bass.

And the Star Went Before Them is Matthew's account of the voyage of the Three Kings, represented here by the three soloists.

Rubén Darío (1867-1916), a Nicaraguan poet, fleshes out the story of Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar with reverence, charm, and warmth. The kings are neatly characterized by the three countertenors, and the soprano adds the touching close, bidding the three to be still, for "Love has triumphed and bids you to its feast."

A brief link, *And When They Were Departed*, tells how an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, bidding him to flee to Egypt with his family. The words are from Matthew, and they are sung by the chorus.

Dawn Air, for the baritone, is part meditation but even more of a love song. The poem is by the Chilean writer Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948), and Adams has set it in the English translation of David Guss.

The next section, another of great brevity, tells of Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents. The chorus, in an almost percussive declamatory style, sings the text from Matthew, and the orchestra's final punctuation is fierce.

The commentary on the slaughter, an enraged lament, uncompromisingly twentieth-century in language and tone, is by Rosario Castellanos: *Memorial de Tlatelolco* (*Memorandum on Tlatelolco*). On August 13, 1521, Tlatelolco, now part of Mexico City, was the scene of the last great confrontation between the Aztecs and Cortés and his *conquistadors*. Casualties were terrible on both sides, but the defeat of the Aztecs was decisive and the history of modern *mestizo* Mexico begins on that day. On October 2, 1968, Tlatelolco Square was once again the scene of bloodshed. A youth revolt had been brewing that summer as in so many countries in America and Europe. The first killings by police took place on September 21, with more to follow a few days later. On October 2 in the early evening, some 5,000 troops with jeeps, tanks, armored cars, and helicopters attacked the huge crowd of civilians, many of them students, who had filled the square. Mexican police admitted to thirty-two deaths; independent estimates by British journalists set the number at least ten times that amount. The poet's fury is directed not only at the event but also at the subsequent effort to suppress reports of it.

This is the biggest single movement in *El Niño*. The soprano leaves her lyric manner to project the poet's words in wide-ranging lines of enormous expressive power. When the poet bitterly tells the reader not to bother looking in the archives "because nothing has been recorded there," the chorus joins in the painful probing of the terrible scene.

Further comment comes from Isaiah—*In the Day of the Great Slaughter*—set as a percussively declamatory chorus.

Pues está tiritando (*Since Love is Shivering*) again testifies to the extraordinary powers and, no less, the extraordinary originality of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Each stanza brings a new set of contemplations on the power of the four ancient elements, water, earth, air, and fire. The hurling of answers to the repeated question, “Who will come to his aid?”, brings to mind the powerful antiphonal rhetoric in some of the choruses and arias of Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion*.

Now the expressive climate changes as *El Niño* moves into the realm of the quasi-children’s tales that give the New Testament Apocrypha part of its special flavor. The story of the infant Jesus facing down the dragons is told by the writer known (a bit disparagingly) as pseudo-Matthew, most probably Matthias, the apostle chosen to take the place of Judas. The setting is for soprano and the ensemble of countertenors.

Also from pseudo-Matthew comes the tale of the palm tree that, at the bidding of the infant Jesus, bowed down so that Mary might partake of its fruit and then caused a stream of water to appear to quench the thirst of the Holy Family. The passage is another that exhibits delightfully sharp human perception, again, I am afraid, at the expense of the blunt Joseph, who might be any modern American *paterfamilias* on a cross-country car trip. Adams combines it with another Castellanos poem, *Una palmera* (*A Palm Tree*). In this setting, one of touching simplicity, the Spanish poem gradually displaces the pseudo-Biblical tale. It ends beautifully:

From the dark land of men
I’ve come kneeling to admire you.
Tall, naked, alone.
A poem.

The last word we hear, sung softly by high voices—ideally those of children, accompanied by a single guitar, is “*poesía*.”

—*Michael Steinberg*