

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Dark Waves

John Luther Adams

John Luther Adams is given to wide-open spaces. Since 2014 he has divided his time between New York City and a comparatively empty expanse in the Sonoran Desert of northwestern Mexico, but for more than three decades he was the composer of the American Far-North. He settled in the interior of Alaska in 1978 and began producing an oeuvre very much rooted in that region, imbued with a sense of unhurried pace and vast horizons. In 2009 he wrote, in connection with his environmental sound installation *The Place You Go to Listen*,

Over the years as my work has matured, its northern qualities have become less obvious and, I hope, more deeply assimilated into the music. I like to say that the music is no longer *about* place, that it has in a sense *become* place. Like a healthy ecosystem, a vibrant work of art must be able to sustain itself. Art may derive energies and substance from the world in which it exists. Yet ultimately a successful work of art must be itself.

Alaska was far from where he spent his childhood, in the Deep South and in the suburbs of New York City. He studied composition with James Tenney and Leonard Stein at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, just north of Los Angeles, from which he graduated in 1973. Drawn to ecological issues, Adams became active campaigning for the Alaska National Interests Conservation Act. By the time that initiative became federal law in 1980, providing for more than 43 million acres of new national parklands in Alaska, he had become a resident of the state, serving as

executive director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center.

The seductive qualities of Adams's music invited listeners to engage with his favored landscape. Over the years he served as composer-in-residence for the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra, Anchorage Opera, Fairbanks Symphony Orchestra, Arctic Chamber Orchestra, and Alaska Public Radio, but he also remained plugged in to the musical community outside his state, even serving as president of the American Music Center (now New Music USA), which is based in New York City. He has served on the faculties of the University of Alaska, Bennington College, Harvard University, and Oberlin College Conservatory of Music.

In 2006 he was named one of the first United States Artists Fellows, and in 2010 he was awarded Northwestern University's

IN SHORT

Born: January 23, 1953, in Meridian, Mississippi

Resides: in New York City and in the Sonoran Desert of Mexico

Work composed: 2006, on commission from Musica Nova [the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra's Commissioning Club] for the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra

World premiere: February 17, 2007, in Anchorage, Alaska, by the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra, Randall Craig Fleischer, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which mark the work's New York Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 12 minutes

Nemmers Prize in Music Composition. He was honored with the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his *Become Ocean*, which the Pulitzer committee described as “a haunting orchestral work that suggests a relentless tidal surge, evoking thoughts of melting polar ice and rising sea levels.” In 2015 *Musical America* named him its Composer of the Year, and he also received Columbia University’s William Schuman Award that year.

Dark Waves shares some of the spirit of *Become Ocean*. “This music,” wrote Adams,

should evoke a vast, rolling sea of sound. All entrances, exits and changes in individual parts occur “beneath the surface of the waves,” with every sound emerging from and receding back into the overall texture.

Underpinning the composition is what Adams describes as an “aura” of recorded electronic sounds. The orchestra plays over

this unvarying foundation, with the recorded track and the live orchestra coalescing “into a single complex sonority.” The impression is somehow minimalist, although it does not employ such classic minimalist techniques as perpetual rhythmic repetition or phase realignments. It is, however, nourished by minute incremental changes of chord composition, texture, and (most engagingly) instrumental sound. One imagines the composer using the orchestra as if it were a huge organ, selectively altering its registration bit by bit, unhurriedly adding and subtracting individual stops from the sound palette across a broad range of dynamics.

Instrumentation: two piccolos, two oboes, two clarinets and contrabass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, bass drum, suspended cymbal, orchestra bells, two vibraphones, recorded electronic sounds, celeste, piano, and strings.

In the Composer’s Words

In recent years I’ve composed in mixed media, combining electronic sounds with acoustic instruments, both solos and small ensembles. But *Dark Waves* is the first time I’ve mixed electronics with the complex sonorities of the symphony orchestra.

I began with an impossible orchestra — large choirs of virtual instruments, with no musicians, no articulation and no breathing — sculpting layer upon layer into expansive waves of sound. Then I added the human element. The musicians of the real orchestra impart depth and texture, shimmer and substance to the electronic sounds. They give the music life. Their instruments speak in different ways. They change bow directions. They breathe. They play at different speeds. They ride the waves.

Together, the orchestra and the electronics evoke a vast rolling sea. Waves of Perfect Fifths rise and fall, in tempo relationships of 3, 5, and 7. At the central moment, these waves crest together in a tsunami of sound encompassing all 12 chromatic tones and the full range of the orchestra.

As I composed *Dark Waves* I pondered the ominous events of our times: terrorism and war, intensifying storms and wildfires, the melting of the polar ice and the rising of the seas. Yet even in the presence of our deepening fears, we find ourselves immersed in the mysterious beauty of this world. Amid the turbulent waves we may still find the light, the wisdom and the courage we need to pass through this darkness of our own making.

— John Luther Adams

