

## John ADAMS (born 1947)

The Chairman Dances: Foxtrot for Orchestra [1985]

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Composers love commissions, but the sign of a successful composer is having more commissions than one can cope with. American John Adams found himself in this awkward position in 1984, wanting to launch into the composition of his landmark opera *Nixon in China*, but needing first to complete an overdue concert work for the Milwaukee Symphony. He decided to treat the commission as a kind of 'warm up' to his work on the opera, composing an eccentric foxtrot whose roots are found in the libretto from Act III of the opera. This piece was omitted from the final opera, but has since become one of Adams' best-known orchestral works.

The setting (as described by the opera's original director, Peter Sellars, and librettist Alice Goodman) is the last night of the exhausted Nixons' official visit to China in 1972. Although called *The Chairman Dances*, it is actually *Madame Mao - Chiang Ch'ing* - who initiates the dancing, not Chairman Mao. In the scene depicted by Adams, Madame Mao, responsible for China's notorious Cultural Revolution, turns up uninvited to the presidential banquet where Richard Nixon and his wife are reminiscing about their lives prior to political scrutiny. Madame Mao interrupts this moment by stripping down to the seductive clothes of her former profession: a Chinese movie star. She begins a sexy foxtrot, captivating not just the Nixons but also the giant portrait of Mao on the back wall, causing the excited Chairman to step out in person from inside the picture and join in the dancing.

John Adams admits that he really had no idea what a foxtrot should sound like when he began the work&hellip; 'But then,' he realised, 'neither did the Maos.' Instead, he created a kind of 'skewed impression of Hollywood,' featuring urbane rhythms and slinky, sentimental strings, but laden with all manner of unpredictable gestures and effects, giving the music a wistful but ironic flavour. Halfway through, the pulse slows reluctantly as the music languishes nostalgically - both the Maos and Nixons are lost in their own dreams and memories - before the insistent rhythms return, and the music's Hollywood touch grows yet more extravagant. But there is no whiz-bang finale; instead, the music trails off into the night, leaving us behind&hellip;and is it perhaps President Nixon dreamily tinkling out those last few piano chords?

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