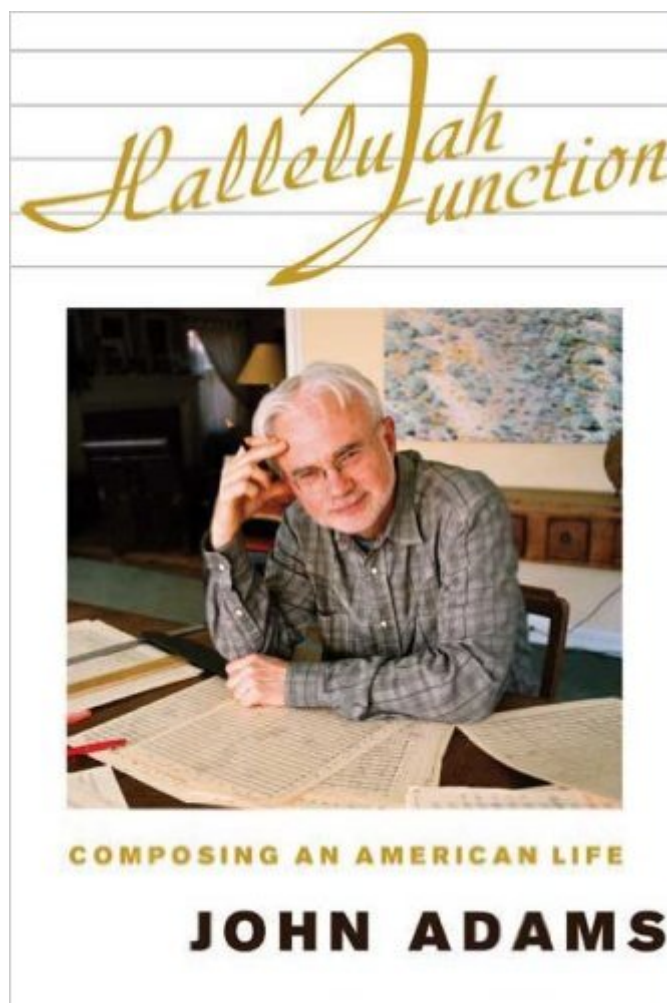


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# Hallelujah Junction: Composing An American Life



## Synopsis

John Adams is one of the most respected and loved of contemporary composers, and "he has won his eminence fair and square: he has aimed high, he has addressed life as it is lived now, and he has found a language that makes sense to a wide audience" (Alex Ross, *The New Yorker*). Now, in *Hallelujah Junction*, he incisively relates his life story, from his childhood to his early studies in classical composition amid the musical and social ferment of the 1960s, from his landmark minimalist innovations to his controversial "docu-operas." Adams offers a no-holds-barred portrait of the rich musical scene of 1970s California, and of his contemporaries and colleagues, including John Cage, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. He describes the process of writing, rehearsing, and performing his renowned works, as well as both the pleasures and the challenges of writing serious music in a country and a time largely preoccupied with pop culture. *Hallelujah Junction* is a thoughtful and original memoir that will appeal to both longtime Adams fans and newcomers to contemporary music. Not since Leonard Bernstein's *Findings* has an eminent composer so candidly and accessibly explored his life and work. This searching self-portrait offers not only a glimpse into the work and world of one of our leading artists, but also an intimate look at one of the most exciting chapters in contemporary culture.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 352 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; First Edition edition (September 30, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374281157

ISBN-13: 978-0374281151

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (10 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #198,092 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #36 in Â Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Classical #621 in Â Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Classical #3681 in Â Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature

## Customer Reviews

John Adams' background, rise, and development to perhaps the foremost American classical composer alive is well examined in this autobiography. A fan of his compositions from the outset and having seen many of their performances sometimes with Adams conducting, I find additional

resonance with his rich and lively descriptions of nearby locales, characters, musics, and events, since I, just two years his senior, had lived under similar and often the same musical and socio-cultural influences in the Bay Area. Adams' takes on John Cage, early electronica, and Minimalism's Steve Reich and Philip Glass are keen, full of peer insights. Adams acknowledges that he discovered his voice, his own unique compositional style, at age 30 after a long series of avant-garde experimentation. His influences besides classical composers, including Wagner and Ives, were psychedelic rock (e.g., Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and the Grateful Dead) as well as jazz greats (e.g., Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Eric Dolphy, and John Coltrane). Adams is a Boomer composer who lived the alternative and experimental musical life. In 1981, his choral symphony "Harmonium" premiered at the inaugural of Davies Symphony Hall of the San Francisco Symphony. It launched him, providing an international reputation and a major record label, Nonesuch. (Later, his "Dharma at Big Sur" celebrated the opening of Disney Hall, home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.) His second punch was "Grand Pianola Music", whose conceptual source was an LSD memory of his attending a Rudolf Serkin concert of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto; the keyboard of Serkin's Steinway seemed to be continually expanding.

John Adams, America's best known living composer, is far from universally loved. His work is variedly labeled as dreary Minimalism, facile postmodernism, reactionary neoromanticism, politically correct eclecticism, and more. Personally I have been listening to his work for many years, with deepening admiration. For whatever it is worth I believe that compositions such as *Harmonielehre*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *El Niño* and *The Dharma at Big Sur* will eventually be accepted as a solid part of the canon of serious Western music. In his autobiography *Hallelujah Junction* the composer cogently and vivaciously retraces the path from his early musical experiences to creative maturity. The early chapters recount his New England youth and composition studies at Harvard University. In 1971 Adams moved to the West Coast and settled down in the Bay Area where he still lives. As a composer Adams started to find his own voice in the late 1970s. He considers his piano piece *Phrygian Gates* (1977) to be his first mature piece. *Harmonium* (1980), his first large scale work for large orchestra and chorus, was another important milestone. I found the transitional part of his autobiography, roughly covering the two decades from 1965 to 1985, the most insightful. Here is an aspiring composer who has absorbed and tries to forge his own voice from a fantastically wide range of influences - the canon of 18th and 19th century European art music, the vernacular of jazz and American popular song, post-war serialism and Cagean aleatorics, minimalism, counterculture pop music, the emergence of electronically generated sounds. His early infatuation with the musical

avant-garde, however, proves to be stillborn.

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