

# John Luther Adams – An avant-garde composer in Alaska

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## Abstract

John Luther Adams has conceived most of his music far away from musical centers. Captivated by the Arctic North, its indigenous cultures and wintry landscapes with their special light, colors and sounds, he moved to Alaska in the 1970s to fight for the preservation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and other wild places, and to explore what he would soon term "sonic geography." In a politically and culturally conservative environment, Adams, a passionate environmentalist, has drawn with his unconventional works attention to the fragility of land- and soundscapes threatened by industrial development, noise, pollution and global warming. Building on the American experimental tradition established by Ives, Cowell, Partch, Cage and La Monte Young among others, his compositions almost exclusively pay tribute to his chosen environment. They feature Northern birdsong and recorded sounds of the Arctic; they draw on the music, language and poetry of indigenous cultures and sometimes involve the participation of Inuit and Indian people. Furthermore these compositions evoke the color white and the spaciousness of Arctic landscapes through the use of just intonation, modal harmonies, static textures, delicate instrumentation and extended length.

In this paper I will examine three works to show how Adams developed his creative voice in Alaska and demonstrate different compositional techniques and eco-critical implications: *Earth and the Great Weather* (1993), an experimental music theater work inspired by the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, *In the White Silence* (1998), a lengthy piece for percussion, harp and strings celebrating the region's predominant color white, and *The Place Where You Go to Listen* (2005), a sound installation which makes Interior Alaska's geophysical forces audible. Thanks to his oeuvre's strikingly diverse and original compositional approaches and implicit political message, Adams has, in spite or because of his status as an outsider, emerged as one of America's foremost eco-critical composers.

## CV

Sabine Feisst, received her Ph.D. in musicology at the Freie Universität of Berlin (1995) and is an Associate Professor of Music History and Literature at Arizona State University. Her publications include two books *Der Begriff "Improvisation" in der neuen Musik* (Sinzig 1997) and *Arnold Schoenberg in America* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming) as well as numerous essays on such figures as John Luther Adams, John Cage, Annie Gosfield, Ingram Marshall, Arnold Schoenberg, and Edgar Varèse in various anthologies and such journals as the *Musical Quarterly*, *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, *MusikTexte*, *Chamber Music America*, and *Twenty-First-Century Music*.