

# John Luther Adams – An Avant-garde Composer in Alaska

Sabine Feisst

Arizona State University, U. S. A.

Sabine.Feisst@asu.edu - <http://music.asu.edu/directory/selectOne.php?ID=104&>

Proceedings of the International Conference *Beyond the Centres: Musical Avant-Gardes Since 1950*  
Thessaloniki, Greece, 1-3 July 2010, <http://btc.web.auth.gr/>

**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.

John Luther Adams has written most of his works thousands of miles away from musical centers and the hotbeds of musical avant-gardes. Fascinated by the Arctic North, its indigenous cultures and wintry landscapes with their special light, colors and sounds, Adams has established himself as the composer most strongly associated with Alaska. Born in Meridian, Mississippi and drawn to environmentalism during his music studies in overdeveloped southern California, Adams traveled for the first time to Alaska in 1975 to work as a wilderness guide and for the Alaska Coalition, which at that time fought for the passage of the "Alaska Lands Act," eventually enacted to preserve large areas of Alaska, including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. He fell in love with Alaska, settling there in 1978 and living and composing there ever since. In Alaska Adams found his unique creative voice and conceived music aiming at what he has called "sonic geography." In the following I will investigate how Alaska shaped three of Adams's compositions – *Earth and the Great Weather*, a music theater work, *In the White Silence*, a lengthy orchestral piece, and *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, a sound installation at the Museum of the North – and explain why Adams can be classified as an avant-garde composer.

Adams's move from Los Angeles to Alaska (with intermediate stops in rural Georgia and Idaho) was clearly a bold step, considering that he was a 26 year-old young artist at the beginning of his career. Although Alaska is the largest state of the United States by area, it has only a population of circa 686,293 (2008), comparable to that of a smaller and very spread out city, and a limited and young classical music infrastructure. Alaska has been the home of several composers including Palmer-based composer-environmentalist Philip Munger (born 1946) and Anchorage-based Craig Coray (born 1948) who studies and incorporates Alaska Native music in his works.<sup>1</sup> Among the main orchestras in Alaska, the Anchorage Symphony (founded in 1946), the Fairbanks Symphony (founded in 1958) the Juneau Symphony (founded in 1962) and the Arctic Chamber Orchestra (founded in 1970), the semi-professional Anchorage Symphony is the most prominent group. The Anchorage Opera (founded in 1962) is the only professional opera company in Alaska, besides such volunteer

companies as the Juneau Lyric Opera (founded in 1974) and the Opera Fairbanks (founded in 2005). Classical music has also been featured at various festivals: the Sitka Summer Music Festival (since 1972), the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival (since 1980) and the Juneau Jazz and Classics Festival (since 1986).

Some of these institutions have occasionally presented Adams's and other composers' new and experimental works. Adams collaborated with his friend Gordon Wright, the musical director of the Fairbanks Symphony (1969–89) and founder and director of the Arctic Chamber Orchestra.<sup>2</sup> A timpanist and principal percussionist in Wright's orchestras, Adams initiated with Wright an annual series of new music concerts. Further, Adams was a composer in residence with the Anchorage Symphony and Opera and the Alaska Public Radio Network (1994–97) for which he produced a weekly program featuring new music. Yet most classical music venues have mainly catered to and depended on conservative audiences in a Republican-leaning environment that offers little support for the arts. Adams, who composes in the woods in a cabin with no plumbing, however, does not feel hampered by such limitations. On the contrary, very much drawn to the traditional and contemporary music made by Native people and the natural sounds of his environment, he has sought to transcend the boundaries of classical music making and venues in manifold ways.

Adams's experimental compositional techniques and tools which include clusters, modal harmonies, static textures, just intonation, complex rhythms, elements of Non-Western music, recorded natural and electronic sounds, and extended length and were pioneered by Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, Lou Harrison, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and La Monte Young among others are, however, not avant-garde per se. Yet considering how he uses, adapts and develops these devices in new contexts "forging a path previously unknown" is innovative and can be viewed as avant-gardist.<sup>3</sup> Undeterred by his politically and culturally conservative environment where corporations dominate electoral politics and public policies, Adams, a passionate environmentalist, has with his unconventional works consistently drawn attention to the fragility of Alaska's land- and soundscapes threatened by pollution, global warming and industrial development. Fighting for the preservation of musical diversity in Alaska, Adams has sided with the Alaska Native people whose cultural traditions are threatened by extinction as they have been increasingly losing their lands and livelihoods. He has collaborated with indigenous Inuit and Indian people and also embedded elements of their music, language and poetry in his works. Furthermore, as Adams's music has received performances all over America and abroad, he has emerged as a musical and environmentalist ambassador for Alaska and was recently rightly dubbed as the "John Muir of music."<sup>4</sup>

### ***Earth and the Great Weather. A Sonic Geography of the Arctic (1993)***

Commissioned by the Alaska Festival of Native Arts and inspired by the Arctic Refuge, *Earth and the Great Weather*, a 75-minute music theater work for four narrators, four singers, string and percussion quartets and recorded natural sounds from the Arctic (wind, thunder, melting ice, booming glaciers, birdcalls) constitutes a mature realization of Adams's idea of "sonic geography" and a provocative eco-critical statement.<sup>5</sup> *Earth* evokes the Arctic Refuge and Alaska with experimental musical means in multiple ways. The work's title and non-narrative "libretto" draws on an Inuit poem, which reflects an individual's intense identification with nature and is recited at the opening and end of *Earth*.

The great sea has set me adrift  
It moves me like a weed  
in a great river  
Earth and the great weather move me,  
Have carried me away and move my inward parts with joy<sup>6</sup>

The libretto, consisting of seven "Arctic Litanies," features, in addition to the poem, incantations of indigenous names for Arctic places, animals, plants, seasons and weather in English, Latin, Iñupiaq and Gwich'in, respectively spoken by the Iñupiat and northern Athabascan Indian people living in the Arctic Refuge area. While the Native languages suggest an "authentic poetry of place," the juxtaposition of the four different languages (due to their incommensurateness rarely presented in straightforward translations) points to the coexistence and interpenetration of Western and non-Western cultures.<sup>7</sup>

The seven litanies are accompanied by atmospheric string and vocal textures derived from the sounds of Aeolian wind harps in the Brooks Range of northernmost Alaska and thus called "Aeolian Dreams." Adams employs just intonation.<sup>8</sup> Based on the first eight uneven-numbered harmonics of a low D (d, a, f#, c, e, etc.) on a double bass (IV string), the pitch material is produced from retuned open strings and natural overtones up to the 105<sup>th</sup> harmonic (the seventh of the fifteenth harmonic). Each of the "Aeolian Dreams" is accompanied by a vocal quartet using the same pitches and lending with its repetitive, sustained open sounds depth to the ethereal strings. The indigenous texts are set syllabically. In the second "Dream" ("Pointed Mountains Scattered All Around"), the pitch material is worked into contrapuntally layered unbroken rising and falling glissandos on natural harmonics, with the highest note as the sounding harmonic closest to the bridge and the lowest note as the harmonic closest to the nut. The score reveals both tone painting and *Augenmusik*. Further the string quartet is expanded to a virtual 16-part orchestra through three tiers of digital delay, producing dense and complex canonic structures and a surround sound effect (See Figure 1 and listen to Audio clip 1).

**Figure 1.** John Luther Adams, "Pointed Mountains Scattered All Around," from *Earth and the Great Weather*, strings and voices (mm. 9–16); Copyright © 2000. Taiga Press. Audio clip: Opening of "Pointed Mountains," performed by the Synergy Vocals, Robin Lorentz, violin, Ron Lawrence, viola, Michael Finckel, cello, Robert Black, double bass, narrators Lincoln Tritt and Adeline Peter Raboff (Gwich'in Athabascans) under Tim Weiss. Used by permission.

The "Litanies" are linked by recorded natural sound and interspersed with three vigorous percussion pieces: "Drums of Winter," "Deep and Distant Thunder," and "Drums of Fire, Drums of Stone." Emerging from recorded sounds of wind and thunder, each of these pieces embraces rhythmic elements derived from traditional Iñupiat and Gwich'in dance music. "Drums of Winter" and "Drums of Fire, Drums of Stone" make use of asymmetrical cells from Iñupiat music. In "Drums of Winter" the asymmetries are created through additive and divided rhythms (ever-changing rhythmic combinations of two and three in groups of three, five, seven and nine) and through constant tempo modulation. Throughout the piece, common pulse sections alternate with segments featuring divided pulse, and both textures gradually gain in complexity. The common pulse sections reveal more and more frequent change of meter and dense textures due to the increasing division of longer rhythmic values and the superimposition of rhythmic layers (See Figure 2 and listen to audio clip 2).<sup>9</sup> At the same time the common pulse textures get faster from section to section. Gradual acceleration is another typical feature of Iñupiat drumming. In contrast, the segments with divided pulse retain the same tempo and never deviate from their 4/4 meter. In comparison "Deep and Distant Thunder" uses relentless steady drumbeats typically found in Gwich'in and other Athabascan music.

The figure displays three systems of musical notation for the piece "Drums of Winter". Each system consists of four staves, labeled I, II, III, and IV from top to bottom. The notation is highly rhythmic, with many beamed notes and rests, suggesting a fast and complex tempo. The first system begins at measure 130, the second at measure 134, and the third at measure 138. A fortissimo (ff) dynamic marking is visible in the first system. The notation is dense and intricate, reflecting the complex rhythmic elements described in the text.

**Figure 2.** John Luther Adams, "Drums of Winter," from *Earth and the Great Weather* (mm. 130–37); Copyright © 1993. Taiga Press. Quoted by permission. Sound Excerpt: Opening of "Drums of Winter," performed by Amy Knoles, Scott Deal, Stuart Gerber and John Kennedy, percussion under the direction of Tim Weiss. Used by permission.

With *Earth* Adams sought to “create a musical landscape with an essential coherence equivalent to the wholeness of a natural landscape,”<sup>10</sup> allowing listeners to immerse themselves like “in a place of suspended time and endless space,” as if being in the midst of a wilderness and “getting hopelessly lost in it.”<sup>11</sup> Such devices as static textures, non-narrative structures, non-developmental harmony, reiterative techniques, extended length and spatialized sound can indeed suggest to the listener space and a standstill of time. With *Earth* Adams not only makes listeners rethink their relationship to musical time and the sound and spirit of places, but he also makes them question their often superficial relationship to the environment. A work stimulated by the Arctic Refuge and dedicated to Adams’s wife Cynthia Adams, who worked with the composer at the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, *Earth* undoubtedly reflects Adams’s commitment to environmentalism, Deep Ecology and Bioregionalism.<sup>12</sup> Although not intended as an overtly political work, *Earth* draws attention to the preciousness and equality of human and non-human life and the pricelessness of the Arctic Refuge’s eco-regions, threatened by oil exploitation and global warming.<sup>13</sup> *Earth* showcases the Alaska Native people’s deep knowledge of and connection with the Arctic nature, incompatible with the goals of Alaska’s rightwing and corporate-driven politics and its fast-paced and technologically oriented Western lifestyles. Adams involved two Gwich’in Athabascans (Adeline Peter Raboff and Lincoln Tritt) and two Iñupiat (James Nageak and Doreen Simmonds) as collaborators and vocal performers in *Earth*. The work was commissioned to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Festival of Alaska Native Arts (1993). Alaska Natives were also present at performances of the work at Anchorage Opera (1995). One Iñupiaq who attended one of these performances remarked that he “kept going back and forth into the spirit world.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore *Earth* provides a glimpse into the rich yet fragile acoustic ecology of the North by bringing into prominence actual sounds of non-human species and natural phenomena of the Arctic, which Adams captured on tape in the context of his “Alaska Soundscape Project.”<sup>15</sup>

### ***In the White Silence* (1998)**

Composed in 1998, *In the White Silence* is one of several meditative orchestral works in one movement that Adams conceived as sonic equivalents to the treeless and windswept expanses of the North.<sup>16</sup> This piece reveals Adams’s fascination with the color of white, a dominant, but now endangered feature of Arctic landscapes. Adams explains: “White is not the absence of color. It is the fullness of light. As the Inuit have known for centuries, and as painters from Malevich to Ryman have shown us more recently, whiteness embraces many hues, textures, and nuances.”<sup>17</sup> Whiteness is evoked in *Silence* in several ways. The instrumentation (celesta, harp, orchestra bells, two vibraphones, and strings) produces luminous and iridescent sonorities. Further, the work often features durations consisting of whole and half notes, the non-chromatic “white” tones (the “white” keys of the piano) as well as perfect intervals, harmonics, and unstopped string tones, all connoting the color white.

Silence, as the title suggests, is another important, yet fragile phenomenon of Northern landscapes and explored in this piece. Adams explains: “As Cage reminded us, silence does not literally exist. Still, in a world going deaf with human noise, silence endures as a deep and resonant metaphor ... Silence is not the absence of sound. It is the presence of stillness.”<sup>18</sup> Although silence and stillness contradict music’s basic premises, they are evoked through various means. The dynamic range is subtle with piano and pianissimo predominating. Stillness is suggested through static textures, sustained tones, short repetitive patterns, and long slowly rising and falling modal lines. It is also conveyed through the piece’s symmetrical and arch-like rondo form featuring three basic rotating textures. An opening texture (A), consisting of dispersed clusters (or in Adams’s words: “clouds” due to the “air” between the tones) recurs between two contrasting textures and concludes the piece. Of the two contrasting textures, one reveals a chorale-like texture (B) and the other, long contrapuntally

interwoven lines (C). The subtly and kaleidoscopically occurring cyclical changes in the piece are non-developmental and comparable to the gradual changes of a vista.

*Silence* opens with sustained spacious pianissimo clusters or “clouds” in the string orchestra which recede to the background when the string quartet adds a slightly more intense layer of mezzo piano “clouds” and the harp injects bright ascending eighth-note motifs. Then two additional colorful strata emerge: the celesta intersperses ascending scale-like motifs and the vibraphones add a soft, dense and continuous tremolo cluster sound. Later in the piece, the texture displays more intricate polymetric and polyrhythmic relationships between various strata culminating in what Adams calls “allover counterpoint” (See Figure 3 and listen to Audio Clip 3). This technique not only points to Cowell’s innovative rhythmic ideas, but it also refers to the idea of an “allover” structure in Jackson Pollock’s poured paintings which often show dense tangles of lines without a center or hierarchy.

The image displays a complex musical score for an orchestral ensemble. It features multiple staves for various instruments, including Vibraphone (Vib. 1), Celesta (Cel.), Harp (Hr.), and a String Quartet (Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello). The score is written in a modern, minimalist style with many sustained notes and clusters. A small circular icon is visible on the left side of the page, near the middle of the score.

**Figure 3.** John Luther Adams, *In the White Silence*, excerpt from the second before last C episode (N1); Copyright © 1998. Taiga Press. Sound Excerpt (N1) performed by the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble under Tim Weiss. New World Records 80600-2. Used by permission.

As in *Earth* Adams evokes space and spaciousness through spatially deployed sounds to enhance the perception of background and foreground strata. The strings are divided into an orchestra seated in a wide arc upstage providing a gleaming background layer with soft, sustained non-vibrato sonorities, and a quartet seated in a small arc downstage playing always with more volume and vibrato. The vibraphones, bells, celesta, and harp are placed

mid-stage between the orchestra and quartet and their timbrally and texturally contrasting sonic layers increases the spatial feel as well. Space or spaciousness is further suggested by the work's extended dimension of time. Devoid of a sense of pulse and goal-directedness, *Silence* uninterruptedly unfolds over the course of 75 minutes and reflects Adams's desire to "leave the composition ... for the wholeness of music" and his hope that the audience may inhabit this work's time and sound like a place without beginning and end – as the title *In the White Silence* suggests.<sup>19</sup>

The Arctic's whiteness celebrated in this piece has, however, become an endangered phenomenon. With temperatures on the rise, glaciers melt, and permafrost, sea ice and snow disappear. In his essay "Global Warming and Art" of 2003, Adams noted:

Some say the world will end by fire. Others say by ice. Here in Alaska, the land of snow and ice, we're beginning to feel the fire. In the summer of 2000 the Iñupiaq community of Barrow – the farthest-north settlement on the mainland of North America – had its first thunderstorm in history. Tuna were sighted in the Arctic Ocean. No one had ever seen them this far north before. The following winter Lake Illiamna on the Alaska Peninsula didn't freeze over. No one, not even the oldest Native elders, could remember this happening.<sup>20</sup>

The pristine silence and stillness have been under attack as well, through noisy snowmobiles, more and bigger vehicles on the roads, increased air traffic, industrial clamor and bustle from oil and gas exploitation and with proposals for new highways into the wilderness, a new gas pipeline, more oil drilling and major new mines on the horizon. Thus Adams hopes that this piece with its "deep attention to the natural world" may "contribute to the awakening of our ecological understanding."<sup>21</sup> It already stands as an artist's document of an invaluable experience no longer within reach to present and future Alaskans and visitors of this country. Like *Earth*, *Silence* challenges listeners to leave their hectic lifestyles and appetites for short, melody-driven and easily digestible music behind and to consider this work's ever more urgent eco-critical implications.

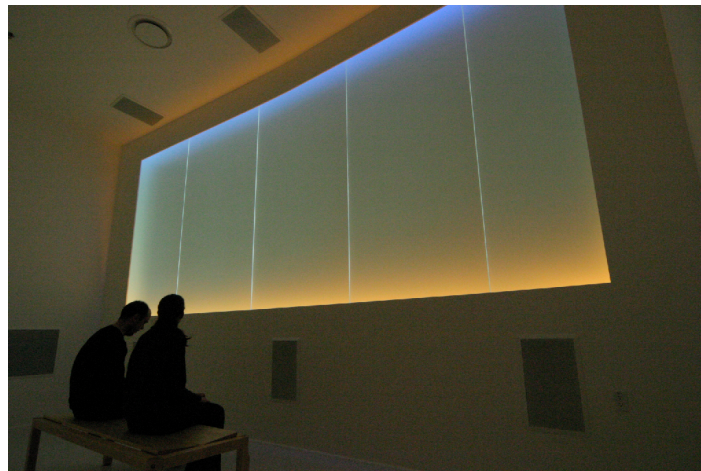
### ***The Place Where You Go to Listen (2005)***

With his continuous sound-light installation, *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, commissioned by the Museum of the North, funded by the Paul Allen and Rasmuson foundations and titled after the Iñupiaq name *Naalagiagvik* for a place on the Arctic coast, Adams offered his most intriguing and innovative realization to date of "sonic geography." This audio-visual environment, permanently installed at the Museum of the North in Fairbanks since spring equinox in 2006, reflects the geography of Interior Alaska (from the Alaska Range's to the Brooks Range's crest including most of the Yukon River basin). It makes audible in real-time this region's cycles of daylight and nighttime, phases of the moon, meteorological, seismic and geomagnetic activities and the aurora borealis. It even tunes the listeners' ears to the slow changes of the global climate.

Adams's *Place* draws on real-time digital data streams (numerical maps) of this region's geophysical forces, which are continuously fed into a computer and "orchestrated" with electronic sounds.<sup>22</sup> As in his six-hour sound installation *Veils* of 2005, Adams uses pink noise (a variation of white noise) as his point of departure from which he obtains through filtering and tuning processes (subtractive sound synthesis) the desired tones and timbres. A "Day" and a "Night Choir" of virtual voices feature sustained chords based on a respective overtone and undertone series on G which change according to the phases of the sun and darkness. The

"Voice of the Moon" traces the positions and phases of the moon through a month-long glissando of a narrow band of pink noise. The so-called "Earth Drums" with their low-frequency roars sonify Interior Alaska's many small earthquakes while the "Aurora Bells," shimmering high-pitched sonorities in just intonation prompted by geomagnetic fluctuations, are a sonic translation of the aurora borealis, the Northern polar lights in the sky.

During a sunny day a listener is typically confronted with an ongoing sensuous drone, with bright and clearly defined voices embracing a range of up to four octaves, that may be temporarily muted by passing clouds or dramatically punctuated by rattling drums triggered by strong seismic activity and/or shimmering bell tones set off by geomagnetic disturbances. Yet such changes are controlled by nature and are unpredictable (Listen to Audio Clip 4). 🎧



**Figure 4.** Picture from John Luther Adams's audio-visual installation *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, at the Museum of the North in Fairbanks, Alaska. Audio clip: Moment from Winter Solstice with Aurora. Used by permission.

With this sound installation, Adams undoubtedly comes closest to his vision of creating music with a place-like enveloping presence. Unlike most of his other works, *The Place* is devoid of a beginning, middle and end, as it resonates the ever-changing natural events 24/7 all year long, year after year, transcending in expansive length La Monte Young's "Dream House" and "eternal music" projects. The fact that this music is not "portable," emanates from 14 surround sound speakers and features specially designed visual components, including five glass panels with constantly changing colors in response to the cycles of the sun, further enhances this work's sense of place (See Figure 4).

As Adams's *Place* is directly tied to the natural world, grafted onto Interior Alaska's ecosystem, it helps listeners to establish a special connection with this place or restore their "lost connection of a place they inhabit." It also allows audiences to enhance their awareness of this place's geophysical activities and unique ecology. Adams's work has drawn countless visitors to the museum including numerous Alaskans and prompted them to spend extended periods of time there to listen to Interior Alaska's natural events.

The question, however, arises why Adams employs machines to pay tribute to the natural world. Adams is undoubtedly aware of the "dangerous illusion that we can manipulate the living world in any way we choose" and of the fact that "increasingly powerful machines have given us the ability to wreak destruction on a planetary scale." Yet he finds that machines can also be used "as creative instruments, to extend the reach of our senses and engage us with



the world in new ways."<sup>23</sup> Yet *The Place's* incessant dependency on electricity also raises questions about its environmental footprint. Wind and solar energies are not available in Fairbanks, as there is very little wind for most of the year and very little sunlight for half the year. Yet Adams, who wishes that his installation could have benefited from renewable energies, assures us that in the course of conceiving this work he "took every step possible to lessen the environmental impact of the project." He also hopes that *The Place* "may stimulate people's ecological awareness enough to offset its carbon footprint."<sup>24</sup>

Adams once stated, "My place is the North. Living here for much of my life, I've come to measure my own work and everything we human animals do against the overwhelming presence of this place."<sup>25</sup> Having spent over 30 years in Alaska, Adams has witnessed how "America's Last Frontier" known for its wilderness, rich wildlife and native cultures, has come under attack. Relentless oil drilling, gas distillation, mining, deforestation, and overfishing have led to pollution of soil, water, air and natural soundscapes. Global warming has made the ice melt and brought flooding, wildfires, armies of spruce bark beetles and violent storms, destroying forests and eroding soil. Many non-human species are threatened with extinction. Yet Native people who are losing their land and livelihoods are endangered as well.<sup>26</sup> It may at first glance seem that Adams has merely been able to preach to a very small choir consisting of musically and environmentally enlightened members. Yet Adams has enriched Alaska's musical life, brought musicians to Alaska and established a fruitful musical dialogue with Alaska Native people. Furthermore he set the stage for such younger Alaskan composers as Matthew Burtner (b. 1970) who experiments with environmental systems (ecoacoustics) and noise-based musical systems.<sup>27</sup> Although dubbed "one of the most self-consciously regional musicians," Adams has also remained connected with the outside world thanks to international performances of his music, a growing catalog of CDs and a strong internet presence.<sup>28</sup> This has allowed him to become an emissary for Alaska's rich indigenous music traditions and to draw attention to the fragility of his precious surroundings in circles that otherwise cannot be reached by other activists. Young musicians, for instance, have increasingly turned to Adams for his advice on "balancing environmental concern with a life in music."<sup>29</sup> Similarly listeners have told Adams "how his music has touched their relationship with the natural world."<sup>30</sup> Finally Adams, who in the 1970s was among few environmentalist pioneers settling in Alaska has helped lay the groundwork for the emergence of many organizations fighting for environmental causes and the preservation of cultural diversity in Alaska.

Like his Eskimo neighbors, Adams believes that space should be defined "more by sound than by sight." As he continues to compose the North, he may indeed lead more and more audiences toward a greater appreciation and conservation of Alaska's bioregions and the ecosystems of their own places, which hopefully will continue to exist and, like Adams's compositions, edify future generations of listeners.

**Acknowledgments.** I wish to thank John Luther Adams for generously answering my many questions about his music, for providing recordings of *Earth and the Great Weather* and *The Place Where You Go to Listen* and for granting me permission to use score and audio excerpts of his music. I would also like to thank Paul Tai from New World Records for his kind permission to use an audio clip from the 2003 New World Records CD of *In the White Silence* and Don Gillespie for invaluable comments on drafts of this essay.

## References

- Adams, John Luther. *Winter Music. Composing the North*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.
- Adams, John Luther. *The Place Where You Go to Listen. In Search of an Ecology of Music*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2009.
- Arquette, Sophie. "Sounds Like City," *Theory Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (Feb. 2004): pp. 159-168.
- Bachelard, Gaston, trans. Maria Jolas. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005.
- Cruikshank, Julie. *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005.
- Feisst, Sabine. "Klanggeographie – Klanggeometrie. Der U.S.-amerikanische Komponist John Luther Adams." *MusikTexte* 91 (Nov. 2001): pp. 4-14.
- Feisst, Sabine. "John Luther Adams: Selected Discography – Selected Bibliography – Catalog of Works," in John Luther Adams, *Winter Music. Composing the North*, 185-198. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.
- Feld, Steven, and Keith H. Basso, eds. *Senses of Place*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research, 1996.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Haines, John. *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire: Twenty-Five Years in the Alaska Wilderness*. Graywolf Press, 2000.
- Herndl, Carl G. and Stuart C. Brown, eds. *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.
- Herzogenrath, Bernd. "The Weather of Music: Sounding Nature in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Deleuze/Guattari & Ecology*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath, 216-232. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Herzogenrath, Bernd, ed. *The Music of John Luther Adams*. Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, forthcoming.
- Johnson, Darryll R. and David L. Peterson. *Human Ecology and Climate Change: People and Resources in the Far North*. Washington D.C.: Taylor and Francis, 1995.
- Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986.
- Morris, Mitchell. "Ecotopian Sound, or the Music of John Luther Adams and Strong Environmentalism," *Crosscurrents and Counterpoints: Offering in Honor of Bengt Hambraeus at 70*, ed. Per F. Broman, Nora A. Engebretsen and Bo Alphonse. 129-141. Göthenburg: University of Sweden Press, 1998.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Nelson, Richard K. *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Ross, Alex. "Song of the Earth. A Composer Takes Inspiration from the Arctic," *New Yorker*, 12 May 2008.
- Rothenberg, David and Martha Ulvaeus, eds. *The Book of Music and Nature*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- Schafer, R. Murray. *The Tuning of the World*. Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1977.

- Schafer, R. Murray and Helmi Järviluoma, eds. *Yearbook of Soundscape Studies I: Northern Soundscapes*. Tampere: University of Tampere Press, 1998.
- Stokes, Martin. "Voices and Places: History, Repetition and the Musical Imagination." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1997): pp. 673-691.
- Taylor, Bron Raymond (ed.). *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.
- Young, Gayle, "Sonic Geography of the Arctic: An Interview with John Luther Adams." *Musicworks* 70 (Spring 1998): pp. 38-43.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Munger moved to Alaska in 1973 and Coray came to Alaska in 1950 when he was four years old and grew up in bush villages near Lake Clark, Lake Iliamna and the lower Kenai Peninsula.
- <sup>2</sup> Born in Brooklyn in 1934, Wright moved to Alaska in 1969 and was like Adams a musician and environmental activist who helped found the Northern Alaska Environmental Center in 1971.
- <sup>3</sup> *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Schirmer, 2000), xix. The term "avant-garde" refers to a small troop of an army advancing into unknown territory or battle ahead of the rest of the army. It was later applied to social reformers, politicians and artists who pushed the boundaries of the social, political and cultural status quo. For a comprehensive discussion of the avant-garde see Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939), 34-49; Renato Poggioli, *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1962); Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974); Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essay on European and American Art from 1955* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000); and Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- <sup>4</sup> See Kyle Gann quoted in: John Luther Adams, *The Place Where You Go to Listen. In Search of an Ecology of Music* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 161. John Muir (1838–1914) was a Scottish-born American naturalist and environmentalist who fought for the preservation of large wilderness areas in America including the Yosemite Valley and Sequoia National Park.
- <sup>5</sup> The 1993 version did not include singers. In 2000 Adams added parts for SSAB quartet to the score of *Earth* and now considers this the ultimate version of the work.
- <sup>6</sup> Conceived by the Inuit shaman Uvavnuq, this poem was translated from Iglulik Inuktitut into Danish by the arctic explorer and ethnologist Knud Rasmussen, then translated into English and from English into Iñupiaq by Jame Mumigaaalik Nageak.
- <sup>7</sup> John Luther Adams, *Winter Music. Composing the North* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 25.
- <sup>8</sup> Adams's use of just intonation points to his chosen musical ancestors Harry Partch, Lou Harrison and La Monte Young, who all employed non-tempered tuning systems with intervals based on such prime numbers as 1, 3 and 5. Adams may have wanted to highlight arctic nature's pristineness with acoustically pure intervals.
- <sup>9</sup> This technique is reminiscent of Henry Cowell's rhythmic theories from his treatise *New Musical Resources* (1930) whereby whole notes are often continuously divided into different numbers of equal durations.
- <sup>10</sup> John Luther Adams, "Resonance of Place. Confessions of an Out-of-Town Composer," *The North American Review* 179, no. 1 (1994), 10.
- <sup>11</sup> Adams, *Winter Music*, 75.
- <sup>12</sup> The term "Deep Ecology" was coined by the Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess in the early 1970s and points to the equality and interdependence of human and non-human life on earth and the need to sustain diversity of life forms through a decrease of the human population and radical changes in the lifestyles of humans. Bioregionalism, which stresses the unique ecosystems of bioregions, local plants, food, materials and culture as well as sustainability, was pioneered by the

---

environmentalist Peter Berg and ecologist Raymond Dasmann in the early 1970s. For more details on Adams, Deep Ecology and Bioregionalism see Mitchell Morris, "Ecotopian Sound or The Music of John Luther Adams and Strong Environmentalism," *Crosscurrents and Counterpoints Offerings in Honor of Bengt Hembraeus at 70*, ed. by Per F. Broman, Nora A. Engebretsen and Bo Alphonse (Göthenborg: University of Sweden Press, 1998), 29-41.

<sup>13</sup> Adams is skeptical of political art. In his view, "all too often it [political art] seems to fall short, both as art and as politics." Adams's most overtly political works were two settings of texts by John Haines: *Forest Without Leaves* for choir and orchestra (1984) and *Requiem for the Arctic Refuge* for spoken voice and cello solo written for the Alaska Wilderness Coalition, but withdrawn. John Luther Adams to author, March 29, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Mike Dunham, "Anchorage," *Opera News* 60, no. 3 (1995), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Here Adams follows in the footsteps of the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, who in 1971 founded the "World Soundscape Project" at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia to regularly record and study environmental sounds and to draw attention to the acoustic elements of the environment.

<sup>16</sup> *In the White Silence* which grew out of a shorter piece titled *Dream in White on White* (1992) is a memorial to Adams's mother who died in the fall of 1996. It was premiered in the year of its completion and recorded for New World Records by the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble, conducted by Tim Weiss in the Finney Chapel in Oberlin, Ohio. John Luther Adams, *In the White Silence* (New York: New World Records 80600-2, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> See Adams's preface of the score for *In the White Silence* (Fairbanks: Taiga Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> John Luther Adams, Preface to *The Light That Fills the World* (Fairbanks: Taiga Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> "Global Warming and Art" was first published as "Alaska Is Melting: Can Art Help?" *Anchorage Daily News*, Dec. 4, 2002 and was later revised and reprinted in Adams, *Winter Music*, 177.

<sup>21</sup> Adams, *The Place*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> This intricate enterprise involved the collaboration of meteorologist James Brader, seismologist, Roger Hansen, scientist Dirk Lummerzheim, physicist John Olson, mathematician Curt Szuberla and the computer programmers Jim Altieri, Josh Stachnik, Roger Topp, and Debi-Lee Wilkinson.

<sup>23</sup> Adams, *The Place*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> John Luther Adams to author, e-mail of March 28, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Adams, *The Place*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> According to the Alaska Village Erosion Technical Assistance program more than 200 other villages, including the Inupiat Eskimo villages Kivalina (between the Chukchi Sea and Kivalina River 600 miles northwest of Anchorage) and Shishmaref (20 miles south of the Arctic Circle between the Chukchi Sea and Serpentine River), are now threatened by flooding and erosion. The relocation and fusion of these communities implies a loss of traditions and cultures. For details on the dramatic increase of coastal erosion see for instance J. C. Mars and D. W. Houseknecht, "Quantitative remote sensing study indicates doubling of coastal erosion rate in past 50 years along a segment of the Arctic coast of Alaska," *Geology* 35 (July 2007), 583-586.

<sup>27</sup> Burtner, however, now lives in Virginia teaching composition at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

<sup>28</sup> Kyle Gann, "Foreword," in Adams, *Winter Music*, xiii.

<sup>29</sup> John Luther Adams to the author, March 29, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.