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NIXON IN CHINA
Grand Opera and the "Avant-Garde"

by

Brian Thompson
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We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

[redacted]

Dr. William Kinderman, Supervisor (School of Music)

[redacted]

Mr. Michael Longton, Departmental Member (School of Music)

[redacted]

Dr. Ralph Croizier, Outside Member (Department of History)

[redacted]

Dr. B.N.S. Gooch, External Examiner (Department of English)

Supervisor: Dr. William Kinderman

ABSTRACT

While the opera *Nixon In China* (1987), by John Adams, Alice Goodman, and Peter Sellars, has accumulated a great quantity of public and critical attention, material is currently limited to performance reviews.* Consequently, the aim of this thesis is to assess the dramatic success of the work, and examine its place in twentieth century opera and American culture.

The Introduction includes biographical material on the composer, librettist and director, their collaboration, and a brief summary of the performance history of the work.

The first half of the thesis examines the material of the opera: the text, the staging of the original production, and the musical style. The opening chapter is a description of the libretto and its staging (including a discussion of sets, costumes, stage action and a general description of the music), followed by a brief discussion of the poetic style. Chapter Two explores John Adams' musical language, examining the basic procedures by which the music operates, and includes numerous examples from the score.

Where the first two chapters deal with the materials of the opera in a purely descriptive fashion, the second half of the thesis is an examination of critical and historical issues. In Chapter Three the critical reception of the opera is discussed and then assessed with analysis of specific passages. The use and effectiveness of the orchestra, stage action, and other methods of characterization are discussed, as well as the role of Act III. The fourth and final chapter is an examination of the place of *Nixon in China* in the history of opera and contemporary American culture.

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* There appears to be a growing interest in Adams' work among scholars. Timothy Johnson, a doctoral student at the State University of New York at Buffalo, is currently completing a dissertation in music theory entitled "Harmony in the Music of John Adams: From *Phrygian Gates* to *Nixon in China* ". Mr. Johnson's work focuses on the common-tone relationships between harmonic areas, and prolongation based on common tones.

The use of political and historical subjects is examined as well as the division between tradition and the avant-garde in the twentieth century. The development of American minimalism and its aesthetic is also discussed--focusing on the stage works of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson. In concluding I have attempted to place *Nixon in China* into the larger context of late twentieth-century culture by examining its relationship to popular culture and postmodernism.

The primary source materials used in the preparation of this thesis have been the orchestral score, obtained through the promotion department at Boosey and Hawkes,* a video tape of the Houston production from a P.B.S. broadcast from 1988, and the Electra/Nonesuch sound recording (79177). Reviews of the opera from newspapers, and both general information and literary journals, such as *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Hudson Review*, have been used as a point of departure for Chapter Three.

Examiners:

[redacted]

Dr. William Kinderman, Supervisor (School of Music)

[redacted]

Mr. Michael Longton, Departmental Member (School of Music)

[redacted]

Dr. Ralph Croizier, Outside Member (Department of History)

[redacted]

Dr. B.N.S. Gooch, External Examiner (Department of English)

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INTRODUCTION

In October of 1987 Houston Grand Opera inaugurated its new Wortham Theater Center with a work co-commissioned by the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, Netherlands Opera, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The immediate success of this drama, *Nixon in China*,--by composer John Adams, librettist Alice Goodman, and director Peter Sellars[1]--must certainly have exceeded the expectations of its creators, as it has become one of the most widely heard and discussed operas in many years. As a result of its popularity many questions have been raised not only about how effective *Nixon* is as a drama but also about just what it means. While the style and content contributed to the opera's success, these same features must also lead to a re-examination of the purpose of new operas in the late twentieth century.

In spite of a renewed appetite for opera in recent decades audiences have tended to show little interest in new works.

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[1]Performances of the Peter Sellars production of *Nixon in China* have taken place at Houston Grand Opera (October 22-November 7, 1987), the Brooklyn Academy of Music (December 4-17, 1987), the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (March 26-April 5, 1988), The Netherlands Opera (June 2-18, 1988), and the Edinburgh Festival (September 1-5, 1988). The original cast included soprano Trudy Ellen Craney (Madame Mao), tenor John Duykers (Mao), baritone James Maddalena (Nixon), baritone Sandford Sylvan (Chou En-lai), soprano Carolann Page (Pat Nixon), and baritone Thomas Hammons (Kissinger). The ballet was choreographed by Mark Morris, and John DeMain conducted the Houston Grand Opera Orchestra. The Houston production has been broadcast on P.B.S. in the United States (April 15, 1988), and on Channel Four in Britain, and will soon be released on video cassette. C.B.C. Stereo has played the Nonesuch recording [79177] in its entirety. And, in December, 1990, Bielefeld Opera mounted a new production, in German, with a new cast.

Consequently, with opera companies reluctant to risk their limited resources staging contemporary works, it has been very rare for a new opera to join the repertoire. The present situation is perhaps not unlike earlier times--from Monteverdi to Mozart--when many works were created to mark special occasions, such as coronations or weddings, and were not expected to be restaged. Although *Nixon in China* was created for such an event there are indications that the work may not only break the single production "rule", but it may even have opened up a new avenue for opera.

One of the issues that clearly separates *Nixon in China* from other operas is its exploration of an event from our own time. The subject, conceived by Sellars, has certainly contributed to the work's ability to attract such wide attention. Transporting political figures from the evening news to the opera house stage is as extraordinary as it is relevant to our experience. Although there is no doubt that Nixon's trip was an event of considerable importance in modern political history, never has a large, traditional opera been based explicitly on such a recent event.

Political and historical events have always been a great source of subject matter for opera.[2] Mythology and the classics, as well as the Old Testament, have provided a basis for the works of opera composers from all periods, from the early liturgical dramas and the Florentine Camerata to the stage works of Philip

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[2]In recent years, one of the few large-scale works to be based on political events was Harry Somers' *Louis Riel* (1967), which used a variety of media to depict the Indian and Métis uprisings in Canada, in the late 1800s.

Glass. These stories have often involved politics--either directly, or as a side subject, or an undercurrent. With their ambitious and power-hungry characters, these subjects fulfill a basic need in opera, providing events and conflicts from which the librettist and composer can create a drama.

While mythology was a favorite basis for many of the earliest operas, prior to the French Revolution Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782) standardized serious opera with historical, "heroic" subjects which were ideologically reactionary--or true to the absolutest monarchs for whom they were written. The conventionalizing of the text had a great influence on the music, with a regular number of characters (usually two pairs of lovers and one or two other characters) and careful placement of the arias. Metastasio's librettos were set by virtually all the leading composers of the period, and espoused classical ideals emphasizing the voice rather than spectacle.

Unlike opera seria, grand opera, especially in Paris, excelled in extravagance. In the wake of the Revolution and the rise of the middle class grand opera became, on the one hand, politicized, and on the other, a vulgar spectacle. Although Berlioz's *Les troyens* (1856-58), is considered the apex of the genre, the real "masters" were Scribe and Meyerbeer, whose works were usually based on sensational events (such as that of *Les Huguenots*, 1836), and though well-crafted, the music and meaning were overshadowed by the sensationalism.

Although also written in the grand opera style, Giuseppe Verdi's works often reflected a greater awareness of social and political issues than did those of Meyerbeer. In many of Verdi's operas politics played a large role, especially in those works composed before Italy achieved independence in 1860. In an opera such as *Nabucco* (1842), the oppressed Milanese could easily empathize with the Jews of Babylon, and readily adopted the anthem "Va, pensiero." For the authorities of the independent kingdom of Naples *Un Ballo in maschera* (1859) proved even too controversial a subject when it was reviewed. With a recent attempt on the life of Napoleon III and rising nationalism in Italy, the plot of *Un Ballo*, involving the assassination of the Swedish monarch, was considered too provocative. For this reason, the location of the première was eventually shifted to Rome, and that of the plot to the unlikely setting of Boston.

Both *Don Carlos* and *Aida* are archetypical grand operas. While *Don Carlos* (1866-67, rev. 1883) was composed after Italy had gained independence, historical accuracy in opera was still a low priority--though not because of censure by fearful monarchs. However, as Verdi was creating the work for the Paris Opera, the subject provided many potentially dramatic and spectacular situations, with its conflicts between public and private life, church and state. These were essentially the same features Verdi found in *Aida* (1871), where the subject is again of conflicting

desires and ideals--though with even more opportunity for spectacle. The principal characters were again the political and military leaders, whose actions control the lives of the chorus of slaves, soldiers and citizens.

With growing popularity of works such as *Don Carlos* and *Aida*, the influence of grand opera soon spread to reform-minded Russia. In the cultural centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg the dual tendencies in Russian arts of social relevance and spectacle are reflected in works such as *Boris Godunov* (1874). Adapted very freely from Pushkin, Mussorgsky's opera examines the themes of greed and personal ambition but also the suffering of the masses, paternal love, and the burden of guilt (in the Russian court).

It is in just this sort of setting which Peter Sellars has created his first opera. The subject of *Nixon in China* has much in common with these classic works: for example, the spectacle and intrigue of international affairs, of the conflict between two peoples (with the Chinese and Americans locked firmly in a cold war at the time), and of the personal stories of each individual. Unlike any of the other works mentioned here, *Nixon* takes place in the very recent past, a difference which the creators believe makes it relevant to its audience.[3]

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[3] *Un Ballo in maschera* is set in an implausible time and place, *Boris Godunov* in the Russia and Poland of 1598-1605, *Don Carlos* in 16th century Spain, and *Aida* in Egyptian antiquity.

While still in his early thirties and considered an *enfant terrible,* Peter Sellars is already a veteran, an accomplished stage director who, until recently, was concerned primarily with re-working the traditional repertoire. Among Sellars' previous positions have been directorships of the Boston Shakespeare Company, the American National Theater, in Washington, D.C., and the 1990 Los Angeles Festival. In recent years Sellars has attracted a great deal of attention in the opera world through his provocative updating of the classics. In spite of his insistence on high performance standards and the use of the original languages, Sellars' alien settings and gimmicks, such as the use of contemporary slang and colour-coding in the surtitles for *Lohengrin,* have at times provoked audiences' ire. The Mozart trilogy, for instance, is set in contemporary America with *Cosi fan tutte* at a seaside diner, *Don Giovanni* in Spanish Harlem, and *Figaro* in a Manhattan penthouse. Other works, such as Handel's *Orlando,* which Sellars set in outer space, have left both critics and audiences speculating as to what could be next.

For the moment it appears that Sellars has turned from revamping the mainstream repertoire to creating new works. Sellars has recently stated that his aim is now to create a "new set of classics" and a theater that "more truly represents the texture of American life."[4] Clearly, with the successes of *Nixon in China* and

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[4]John Calhoun "Peter Sellars: Creating a new set of classics," *Theater Crafts* 41(January 1990): 68.

the following work, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, it appears that Sellars' agenda is on course.[5]

After deciding to create an opera based on Richard Nixon's trip to China Peter Sellars' search for collaborators lead him to approach two fellow Harvard alumni. Sellars first turned to John Adams who, after initial reluctance, agreed to take part, with the conditions that the opera *not* be a satire and that the work be written in rhyming couplets. With these criteria Sellars then contacted the poet Alice Goodman, a native of St. Paul, Minnesota who had been a contemporary of his at Harvard. Goodman, in full agreement with Adams' terms, consented to write the libretto.

Soon after Sellars had secured the financial arrangements for the drama, Adams and Goodman met in Washington D.C., where they read through old issues of news magazines, watched video tapes, and began to work out the opera's structure, based on the events as they occurred between February 21 and 27, 1972. Once back home in Britain Goodman continued to research the subject from the perspective of the period, as she has said, "relentlessly ignoring everything published after 1972 except for the Nixon and Kissinger memoirs. . . . I broke my ban on books published after 1972 when I came across *We Will Always Remember Premier*

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[5]*The Death of Klinghoffer* premièred in Brussels in March, 1991. A co-commission of the Brookyn Academy of Music and the opera companies of Brussels, Lyon, Los Angeles and the Netherlands, the opera recreates the 1985 highjacking of the Greek cruise ship, *Achille Lauro* and the subsequent murder of an invalid American tourist. Through these events the opera attempts to deal with the issues of terrorism and the Palestinian question.

Chou En-lai (1977), the memorial volume with essays by committees, and Roxanne Witke's *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing*."[6] Goodman began writing in February, 1985 and completed the libretto by December of the following year, only ten months before the opera's scheduled première.

At first glance it might appear that Sellars was testing his instincts in choosing John Adams to compose the score, particularly in such a short time. Although Adams had created a substantial body of work and had a growing reputation he had never composed an opera.[7] But, at the age of 39, Adams was then among the second generation of minimalist composers, and even prior to *Nixon* was rapidly approaching the stature of his predecessors.[8]

Throughout his professional career Adams has been associated with the minimalist school of American composers. Even as a student of Leon Kirchner and Roger Sessions at Harvard in the late 1960s, Adams has said that he was never obliged to adopt the

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[6]"Towards Nixon in China," Nonesuch recording booklet, 12.

[7]Among Adams' major works are: *Phrygian Gates*, for piano (1977-78), *Shaker Loops*, for string septet (1978), *Harmonium*, for chorus and orchestra, on texts by Emily Dickinson and John Donne (1981), *Harmonielehre*, for orchestra (1984-85), *The Wound Dresser*, for orchestra and baritone, based on texts by Walt Whitman (1988), and *Fearful Symmetries*, for orchestra (1988). Adams has served as new music adviser and composer-in-residence of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, and been the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship in 1982. In addition to his composing career, Adams is currently the artistic director of contemporary music with the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra, and is active as a conductor.

[8]Minimalism is now somewhat of a misnomer; post-minimalist (or possibly postmodern minimalism) may be more accurate.

serial methods of composition to which he was never sympathetic. In spite of the relative scholastic freedom of the period, upon receiving his M.A., in 1971, Adams fled Cambridge and academicism for the more liberal environment of the West Coast. In San Francisco Adams obtained a teaching position at the Conservatory of Music, and began the process of finding his own musical voice.

In the period immediately following his arrival in California Adams came into contact with the music and ideas of John Cage, and later Steve Reich. While Cage appears to have influenced the young composer's aesthetics it was in Reich that Adams saw a model for his stylistic development.[9] Adams has written that "Certain pieces of Steve's, particularly *Music for 18 Musicians* and *Tehillim*, and *Music for Mallet Instruments* and *Drumming*, were very critical in helping me develop my own style."[10] Adams' 1978 string septet, *Shaker Loops,* is a work which shows his adapting Reich's influence in the creation of his own language. Where Reich can be heard in the piece's highly structured form and use of process, its American folk influence is peculiar to Adams among the minimalists. Similarly, Adams includes jazz and particularly the music of Duke Ellington--whose band he remembers having

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[9]"Cage had a profound philosophical more than aesthetic effect--teaching me to question what we were handed as standards and canons of taste and methods of procedure." Edward Strickland, "From Nixon to Walt Whitman: An interview with John Adams." *Fanfare* 13 (March 1990): 50.

[10] Ibid., p.46.

heard at his grandfather's dance hall in New Hampshire--as a strong influence for its instrumental colour. Adams cites both the modulations in late swing and early bop, and the slow harmonic rhythm of rock music as helping to shape his tonal language.

The minimalist (or post-minimalist) style of Mr. Adams, while certainly as contemporary as the subject of Alice Goodman's libretto, might appear an unlikely musical language for a traditional opera. It would even seem that minimalism and opera would be quite incompatible, since minimalism in music as well as in visual art was intended as a reduction to the unadorned modernist ideal, whereas opera has always involved some degree of spectacle. In *Nixon in China* these two apparently irreconcilable ideals have been persuaded into an unsteady marriage of convenience which, as in all such arrangements, shows both its strengths and shortcomings.

The apparent incompatibility of Adams' music was perhaps overshadowed in Sellars' mind, in part, by its popularity and its ties with popular culture, as well as its "American-ness". Both Adams and Sellars have stated their strong views on cultural nationalism and on the importance of popular culture in art--attitudes which seem to be presently quite "voguish."[11] For Adams these feelings can be traced back as far as the late 1960s, and were reflected in his decision to go west:

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[11] Adams has said that "A very important element in my work is my relationship to popular culture. By and large I think most great art has a very close relationship to popular culture." Ibid., p.58.

> The normal thing at that time was to have your Wandernjahre in Europe, Paris with Boulanger or Italy with Petrassi--but I'd already become profoundly disenchanted with the European hegemony in contemporary music. I detected something very authoritarian and possibly even a little bit phony about the European avant-garde that was in full flower at that time--the Darmstadt school, Berio, Stockhausen. I'd discovered John Cage philosophically if not embraced him musically, and I was interested in an American musical language.[12]

While Sellars has spent a great deal of time in Europe he, like Adams, now plans to remain within the United States as much as possible and develop an art that reflects the culture of that country. It appears that *Nixon in China* represents a significant attempt to achieve their common goal.

Certainly the provocative choice of Nixon as a "hero" created as much interest in the opera as it did confusion. However, whether Richard Nixon or John F. Kennedy, it is the newness of the subject which has raised fundamental questions as to the role of opera. Some of these issues were addressed by John Adams in a 1987 interview in which he discussed his belief in the necessity of using the events of our own time as subject matter: "this is what opera should be doing. The movies do it all the time. Opera is so completely out of touch in this century; it has lost its relevance to our experience. We hardly need another opera on a Shakespeare play or a Greek myth."[13] Though what Adams says about the need for change may be true one might ask "is it not too late?" If, as has

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[12]Ibid., p.48.

[13]K. Robert Schwarz, "John Adams: Music of Contradictions," *New York Times*, 11 Jan. 1987, sect.B: 25.

been suggested by Adorno and others, opera is too closely associated with the values and aesthetics of a by-gone age, in his attempt to revive the form through a contemporary style and subject matter Sellars may merely be "flogging a dead horse."[14]

Unlike many influential stage works of this century, *Nixon in China* is clearly a grand opera. Although the subject is new and, according to John Adams, therefore, relevant to our time, the style is historical. The primary objectives of this thesis are the evaluation of the work as a music drama and as a cultural artifact, in essence, in order to judge in what ways the opera might be representative of its time and to assess what timeless qualities it might have.

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[14]"Neither from the musical nor from the aesthetic point of view can we avoid the impression that the operatic form is obsolete." Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury, 1976): 71.

CHAPTER 1

THE LIBRETTO AND STAGING

The six scenes of *Nixon in China* recount the February, 1972, trip to China by U.S. President, Richard Nixon. The five principal characters are Nixon and his wife Pat, Premier Chou En-lai, and Mao Tse-tung and his wife Chiang Ch'ing. Important secondary roles are played by Henry Kissinger, and Mao's three secretaries, with choruses of soldiers, dignitaries and workers appearing in four of the scenes. The eight-day summit is remembered through its media events and at several points, including all of the final scene, through the imagined thoughts of the characters.

Visually, the opera realistically recreates the era and events through costumes and selected sets. Dunya Ramicova's costumes faithfully recreate those worn at the time, such as the standard green or blue uniforms of the Chinese, and Pat Nixon's red coat. Both the costumes and the staging design were based on photographs from *Life* magazine--the set for scene two was taken from a photograph of Mao's study which appeared on the cover of the March 3, 1972, issue. Designer Adrianne Lobel has said "I started thinking of the opera as part documentary, part fairy tale, part James Bond adventure. . . . I wanted the sets simple, very serious. I wanted no whimsey."[15] Although the sets and other

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[15]Bruce Weber, "Opera on a Grand Scale," *New York Times*. 11 Oct. 1987, sect.VI: 126.

visual aspects of the production are not without elements of caprice the staging is quite spare and relies on a small number of key images.

The opening scene takes place on a barren tarmac outside Beijing. As the curtain rises and the music begins, a chorus of Chinese soldiers and dignitaries is assembling to greet the American President. In the low, red light of dawn the chorus solemnly sings the chant-like "Soldiers of heaven." The song lists the responsibilities of a "People's" soldier ("Divide the landlord's property./Take nothing from the tenantry") as the lights slowly rise and leafless trees appear silhouetted in the background. The soldiers then move closer to the front of the stage and sing a second Red Army song, "The people are heros".[16] This second piece contrasts with the first through its brighter harmonies, but is equally restrained and determined. At the conclusion of "The People" four large, red banners with Chinese characters drop across the back curtain as the orchestra begins a slow crescendo. As Chou En-lai enters and a rolling staircase is pushed out to center stage, the music rises to herald the arrival of "The Spirit of '76"--a full-size cut-out which descends, helicopter fashion. The intensity of the orchestra gradually diminishes and a solo trumpet is heard as the Nixons appear in the doorway. They hesitate for a

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[16]These two numbers are based on actual Chinese army songs,"Three Main Rules of Discipline," and the "Eight Points of Attention," sung by the soldiers while they waited.

moment and wave before descending, Kissinger following awkwardly behind them.

After a brief exchange of greetings with Chou En-lai realism is suspended as Nixon sings his excited ode to the age of mass communications, "News has a kind of mystery." Over pumping ostinatos Nixon sings about making history ("When I shook hands with Chou En-lai on this bare field outside Peking/Just now the whole world was listening.") while being introduced to the assembled officials. Having shaken hands with the various dignitaries Nixon, along with Pat, Chou and two secretaries, walks toward the front of the stage as the airplane ascends and the back curtain conceals the others. The orchestra quiets somewhat as Nixon tells of the purpose of the summit, quoting himself ("'We came in peace for all mankind,' I said"), and comparing himself to the Apollo astronauts. Without a break in the music the optimism of this 'number' shifts as the scene is then transformed (by the lowering of another curtain which conceals Chou and the secretaries) to the Nixon's hotel room as they walk still closer to the front of the stage. Nixon sits on a bed (which has been pushed out onto the otherwise empty stage) but as soon as he lies down he jerks forward and begins to recount his fears while stationed in the South Pacific during World War Two.[17] Just as Nixon has apparently fallen asleep Kissinger enters and summons him

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[17]The meaning of Nixon's words will not become apparent until the final scene of the opera.

through the part in the curtains to the meeting with Mao Tse-tung. A brief musical transition follows before the curtain rises on the second scene.

Scene Two takes place in Chairman Mao's study in the Imperial City. The set is dominated by a wall of bookcases the width of the stage, with long bookmarks hanging from many of the volumes, and by a large, traditional, landscape painting in the upper right corner. With five overstuffed brown armchairs arranged in a semicircle, and four old-fashioned floor lamps behind them, the stage appears very much like the *Life* photograph.

The musical transition from the first scene suddenly shifts, evoking an atmosphere of tribal warfare as the curtains open on Mao being lead in on the left by his three secretaries, and Nixon, Kissinger and Chou entering from the opposite side of the stage. With heavy ostinatos and repeated chords, low pedals in the basses and celli, and a constant bass drum, the orchestra suggests an imminent confrontation. The greeting remarks with Mao differ considerably from the polite exchange Nixon had had with Chou in the previous scene. Mao is clearly not interested in unnecessary formalities and speaks to Nixon directly and jovially as the conversation runs from Chiang Kai-Shek to Mao's influence and books. When Nixon attempts to turn the discussion towards "the issues" of common concern Mao is clearly uninterested ("Save them for the Premier"), preferring to discuss philosophy. With his secretaries repeating his lines Mao turns his attention toward

Henry Kissinger and talk degenerates into shouting and accusations of covert intelligence (and sexual) activities.

In the exchanges which make up the second scene we hear two entirely disparate views of progress, history, and ultimately, what U.S.-Sino relations should be. There is little direction in the topics of their discussion, and the mood rises and falls between great intensity and tranquil, reflective moments. In many instances ideology and ego become inseparable, as when Nixon mentions Confucius and Mao charges back ("we no longer need Confucius, let him rot.") Likewise, to Nixon's concept of history ("history is our mother, we best do her honour") Mao pounces on him again ("History is a dirty sow. If we by chance escape her maw she overlies us") with the trio of secretaries repeating his lines and gesturing violently. While Mao appears maniacal, Nixon seems earnest, though uncomfortable and often overwhelmed.

After forty minutes of ideological duelling the scene concludes with the characters parting company as informally as they met (Mao jokes, "I'm growing old and soft. I won't demand your overthrow," to which Nixon shows he too has a sense of humour: "it's a relief to think I may be spared") and exiting in the directions from which they came. As he hobbles toward the doorway Mao turns and repeats his warning to the secretaries that "Founders come first, then profiteers." They repeat Mao's words, committing them to memory.

The banquet, hosted by the Chinese, forms the setting of the third scene and, like the first, it is of grand proportions and allows for integration of the chorus of officials. The scene opens in the space at the front of the stage, with no set--the hotel room--where the Nixons, accompanied by Chou, are preparing to leave for the dinner. Over music which recalls a slow, and somewhat "schmaltzy" Glen Miller-like arrangement--woodwinds, muted brass, basses, and percussion (high hat, sizzle cymbals, and snare drum with brushes)--the Nixons sing a lyrical duet ("the night is young"). Pat is loving, "Dick", playful and buoyant ("this air agrees with me, wish we could send some to D.C."). After Pat recalls having seen a snow moon, talk turns to the weather and the Nixons forecast a thaw in Chinese-American relations. Over increasingly vibrant orchestration the Nixons begin to sing in unison ("the west wind heralds spring"). Though Chou expresses misgivings ("I doubt that spring has come") as he leads the Nixons through the curtains as they open onto the Great Hall, their enthusiasm cannot be contained ("the spring's as good as here") and as the orchestral music reaches a climax they take their seats to the applause of the other guests.

The principals and chorus sit around the two large, round, cloth-covered tables which dominate the stage. Large American and Chinese flags are pinned to the back curtain above a wood and plant background. To Nixon's optimism and predictions of success only Kissinger is gloomy and distracted. Kissinger's mood is

reflected in the music as the orchestra provides a quiet but agitated background over which Nixon and Chou briefly converse before Chou stands and toasts the guests ('Gam bei!'). He is joined by Nixon and the full chorus who stand and raise their glasses as the music in the orchestra becomes increasingly vigorous.

As the music quiets, a row of microphones is brought out to center stage and Chou steps forward to speak. Over a quiet layer of arpeggios in the keyboards Chou eloquently praises the achievements of the Chinese people and bids his audience "look down from the summit" and see what has been accomplished. As the orchestration becomes more expansive and the volume rises Chou sings of his hopes for the future' then becomes softer as he begins his toast ("All patriots were brothers once, let us drink to the time when they shall be brothers again. Gam bei!"), to which Nixon and the chorus join in.

As the intensity of the orchestra relaxes once more Nixon steps up to the microphones. The music is energetic but stiff as Nixon thanks the Chinese for their hospitality, then more serious as he turns again to the subject of technology ("no one is out of touch"). In his toast Nixon proposes that the summit mark the beginning of a new period of cooperation ("We must seize the hour and seize the day"). And, as the guests stand and raise their glasses, an atmosphere of such optimism and elation develops that even the dour Henry Kissinger is moved.

While the first act focuses on the men and the ceremonial events, Act Two is about the wives: Pat Nixon in the first scene, Chiang Ch'ing in the second. The opening scene depicts Pat Nixon's sight-seeing tour of the environs of Beijing. The focus alternates between the public personality and the personal thoughts, and is paralleled by the music which is either bright and cheerful or quiet and reflective. As the scene opens Pat is asleep (still wearing the red coat and black boots) in her hotel room, where the bed, night table, and glass of water are the only props. While still lying in bed Pat sings about her background and her view of life ("I come from a poor family. I treat each day like Christmas,"). Then, having risen, she makes her bed as the curtains open on the black background and the three secretaries who will be her tour guides.

The media-event nature of "the First Lady's tour" is parodied by the staging in which the set and props of this scene completely avoid realism. Pat is guided back and forth across the stage, first to the glass factory (a table of figurines and a group of workers) where a glass elephant reminds Pat of the Republican party and her mixed feelings about politics ("our sacred cow surrounded by blind Brahmins"). The next stop is a clinic (where a patient and anatomical chart are wheeled on stage surrounded by doctors and nurses). This is followed quickly by a pig farm, where Pat is photographed scratching the ear of a statue of a hog, and recalls, as a girl, having raised a prize winner. Finally the tour of the People's Commune reaches its final destination, the school, where children

are rolled out in their desks, greeted by Pat ("from the children of the United States") then quickly pulled back out of sight. The entire sequence takes only about five minutes and is the most visually active part of the opera to this point.

The entourage arrives next at the Summer Palace where, with a backdrop of traditional buildings in silhouette, Pat sings the aria "This is prophetic," in which she tells of her hopes for a future of cautious progress. Then, as the blue-coated tour guides return, they bring Pat to the ancient Ming Tombs where she is given an informal lesson in communism and Chinese history ('they could work stone in those days. Labor was cheap') before all leave quietly. As they exit the orchestra only briefly recalls the lively music which opened the scene, closing with dark and foreboding harmonies.

The fifth scene is by far the opera's most visually active and features Madame Mao and her ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women*. The curtain opens with the spectators seated on the left; Chou En-lai, the Nixons and Chiang Ch'ing are in front with the three secretaries immediately behind them and officials in the back rows. The ballet takes place on the right side of the stage and recounts the story of a peasant's daughter, Ching-hui, who has been sold to the evil landlord Lao Szu--played by Henry Kissinger!

As the ballet opens the heroine is chained to a post and four female dancers perform while the secretaries sing their thoughts of fear and of the abuse of the peasants at the hands of the

landlords. Lao Szu enters recounting a recent rape ("man upon hen") and fumbles with Ching-hui's chains. As the heroine escapes, and a kitschy backdrop of a lagoon is uncovered, the chorus sings her anxious thoughts as she searches for "the path" while dodging the guards.

When Ching-hui is recaptured and beaten Nixon has to hold Pat back and remind her it is only a play ("Easy there hon, she'll get up afterwards, you'll see"). Even so, when the dancer is left for dead the Nixons rush to help her while a summer storm is depicted by the orchestra. As the storm subsides a young soldier appears and revives Ching-hui--with a glass of orange drink--and they dance together briefly before members of the Red Detachment of Women enter. The women perform a quotation from Chiang Ch'ing's original choreography, with banners waving and rifles twirling, enlist Ching-hui, and exit to the right with the Nixons eagerly following them off.

The ballet's second act takes place in Lao Szu's courtyard. Backdrops of purple buildings descend as Szu and his guards enter from the left followed by Nixon from the right (who greets them with bribes). Four members of the women's brigade then emerge disguised as dancers, but when Ching-hui misses her cue, hesitating when she was expected to enact revenge on the landlord, the furious Chiang stands and halts the ballet. The backdrop quickly rises and Nixon and Kissinger "hot foot it" off to the left. Then as the back curtain opens to reveal a large portrait

of Mao, Chiang stands on a table and, with "the book" raised above her head, delivers her explosive coloratura aria "I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung." By the conclusion of the aria all on stage (except the frightened Pat) have joined the chorus and the cooks (from the banquet in Act I) are brought in and beaten.

The single scene of the third act is composed of a series of overlapping monologues and soliloquies. Five single beds are placed together near the front of the stage; the only other element of the set is the portrait of Mao which remains from the previous scene. The principal characters appear on stage, looking tired and irritable, with Mao first appearing in an opening in his portrait and then joining his wife on stage. The principal dancers, Ching-hui and the young soldier perform, and Kissinger makes a brief appearance, excusing himself to use the toilet and not returning.

In this scene each character reflects on the events of his or her past. There is little dialogue between the Nixons. For Nixon, all that can be recalled are the war memories which were alluded to toward the end of the opening scene. Although it is apparent that he has recounted these stories often, Nixon recalls them as though for the first time, each thought becoming a revelation to him ("that was the time I should have died"). To Nixon's stories Pat is an unwilling listener who has heard them all before ("you told me Dick") and who longs for a closer relationship with her husband. Pat says little during the scene, though she makes a few unsuccessful attempts to share her feelings with Nixon.

Mao, like Nixon, is still preoccupied with his war. Although he too appears lost in his memories, Mao is not quite the sad and lonely character Nixon appears to be. Mao is still vigorous and fierce (as he makes his entrance the orchestra builds to a crescendo which recalls the music which accompanied "The Landing of 'The Spirit of '76'") and relishes his memories of past battles. He also seems to remember fondly the early years with Chiang, though his memories of her are inextricably tied to those of the revolution. But unlike the Nixons, who seem unable to communicate feelings of love, the Maos are still capable of romance. As they reminisce and the dancers perform, it is clear that they are very similar and Chiang, unlike Pat Nixon, shares her husband's ambition and desire for power.

Ultimately it is Chou En-lai who is able to put things into perspective. While the other principal characters see the world only as it affects them Chou appears much less egotistic. In his arioso, the final lines of the opera, Chou questions the value of his achievements as solo strings play chromatic ascending lines recalling the rising scales of the opening of Act I. He is troubled by many of the things that had to be done ("I am old and cannot sleep forever like the young, nor hope that death will be a novelty. . .. How much of what we did was good? Everything seems to move beyond our remedy") and regrets his lack of children.

This final, collage-like scene is a strong contrast to acts I and II, which are presented much like snap shots both in their structure

and staging. The first five scenes appear like the photographs in a glossy magazine, or the electronic images on the evening news: public and spectacular, both simple and complex. In these scenes the story of personal and interpersonal conflicts and trans-Pacific politics, is told as much by the two-dimensional reproductions--the arrival at the airport, the speech, the tour, the meeting, Pat Nixon's red coat--as they are by the words and music. After these two acts, in which real events are depicted, the final scene functions much as a stark epilogue. Other than the few, brief dance sequences there is little movement and there are few visual elements to distract the viewer's attention from the words and music.

THE POETRY

Alice Goodman has written that as a result of her research:

> Certain facts became important: Mao's classical education, the way in which his writing takes the allusions of the Chinese literary pantheon, and its meter, and turns them to its own ends; his admiration of Western philosophy and the heroes of the American Revolution; Nixon's stint in the navy during the war, the fact that he was stationed on various Pacific islands, Mrs Nixon's letters to him, the poverty of her childhood, and the various rented accommodation of the early years of their marriage; the poverty of Chiang Ch'ing's childhood. Chou En-lai's insomnia. ... I pondered Nixon's love of history and his belief in peace and progress, and I pondered the significance of the characters' ages: the Nixons, Kissinger and Chiang Ch'ing in late middle age, Mao and Chou, two old men; all with the ambition of their youth either achieved or abandoned.[18]

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[18]"Towards Nixon in China," Nonesuch recording booklet, 12.

With her knowledge of the characters Goodman felt that they should each have a distinct voice, making it "an opera of character." To this end Goodman has made use of an oddly appropriate mix of the colloquial and the philosophical, ranging from Pat Nixon's recollections of life in suburban America to the songs of China's revolutionary guard.

Stylistically, whether they are the words of the soldiers or of Nixon, the lines are concise and "tightly" written. While the lines are usually presented in couplets Goodman has not strictly followed Adams' guide-lines of rhyming couplets. There is some use of rhyme but most often it is a near-rhyme (such as 'complain-thing', or 'tongue-long') although the phrases regularly end with a common final sound, and there is also some use of alliteration.

Goodman's characters are delineated in large part by their choice of words: Chou En-lai with eloquence or Pat Nixon with platitudes, for instance. Likewise, the choruses in *Nixon in China* also have a distinct character. Goodman's translations of the Red Army songs which open the opera use simple language and rhyme in listing the rules: "Follow the orders of the poor/Your master is the laborer/ Who rules the world with truth and grace/Deal with him justly, face to face." The chorus's second piece makes use of alliteration in its haunting refrain, "The people are the heros now/ Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow."

In the ballet the thoughts of the heroine, Wu Ching-hui, are sung by three contraltos; their lines are divided into two groups of three

short phrases. Within each tripartite group the final sounds are the same, as in the opening line: "Young as we are/We expect fear/Every year/More of us bow/Beneath the shadow/Of the next blow." Essentially the same style is used as the full women's chorus sings the song of the Red Women's Militia: "Flesh rebels/The body pulls/Those inflamed souls/That mark its trials/Into the war./Arm this soldier!" The phrases in this piece are still concise but the groupings are freer. With the essentially verbatim presentation, the words are a legitimate parody of those of Chiang's ballet, and other Chinese propaganda productions from the time.

Goodman emphasizes the differences between cultures in many ways. Where the interests of the Chinese are largely political and philosophical, Nixon's obsession is with technology and mass communications. These concerns recur several times, as in Nixon's speech in the third scene and in his opening aria, "News," in which he sings "News has a kind of mystery:/When I shook hands with Chou En-lai/On this bare field outside Peking/Just now the whole world was listening." For Goodman's history-conscious Nixon, technology has blurred the divisions between past and present, as he realizes, in his words, "It's prime time in the U.S.A./It's yesterday night!"

In the second scene of the opera the contrast between the lead characters is most evident. While Nixon expects to discuss issues Mao, a volatile polemicist, is no longer interested in the details of

government business and wishes only to discuss philosophy. He calls Nixon's capitalists "fishers of men," and when the President counters "You don't want China to be rich," Mao snaps back "You want to bring your boys back home." Much of this dialogue is in free verse, but Goodman still uses the common-final-sound as a link, as when Mao continues his tirade:

> New missionaries, businesslike,
> Survey the field and then attack,
> Promise to change our rice to bread,
> And wash us in our brothers' blood,
> And crucify
> Us on a cross of usury.
> After them come the Green Berets,
> Insuring their securities.

Mao's lines are as consistently terse as they are pointed and delivered with appropriate ferocity (though perhaps somewhat forcefully for such an elderly man).

In further contrast to Nixon's preoccupations with technology, history and the 'issues,' and Mao's flourishes of philosophical/ political rhetoric, Chou En-lai speaks with poetic eloquence. In the first of his three utterances in Scene Two Chou proposes a riddle to Nixon: "You've said/That there's a certain well-known tree/That grows from nothing in a day,/Lives only as a sapling, dies/Just at its prime, when good men raise/It as their idol." Likewise, in his speech in the following scene Chou's words are picturesque and forthright as he sings of the path followed to their arrival at that point in history. While his words are more elegant and flowing, they recall, in their simple descriptive nature, those of the chorus

of soldiers in the opening scene: "Look down/And think what we have undergone./Future and past lie far below/Half-visible. We marvel now/That we survived those battles, took/Those shifting paths, blasted that rock/To lay those rails."

The contrast in the words Goodman gives to the wives is no less provided for than the men in the opera. Their different characters are emphasized by the disparate languages used in the first ladies' aria in Act Two. In "This is Prophetic" Pat sings lines such as ". . . let the sun set in cloud;/Let lonely drivers on the road/Pull over for a bite to eat" where her words, though metaphorical, are simple and, like those of her husband, often colloquial.

Although Chiang's words in Act Three show a softer side, perhaps one not unlike Pat Nixon's, her aria shows the public character. Chiang sings "I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung/Who raised the weak above the strong/When I appear the people hang/Upon my words, and for his sake/Whose wreaths are heavy round my neck/I speak according to the book." Goodman gives an element of black humour to this public side of Chiang, which is clearly brutal and ruthless, a side which allowed her to ascend to power and which ultimately led to her imprisonment.

While the content of the second scene of Act II reveals the depth of research undertaken by Goodman, the language of the final act confirms and expands the characterization beyond that of the previous scenes. The Chinese and Americans seem most different here with the Mao's reminiscences about the revolution

contrasted with the banal bourgeois concerns of the Nixons--thinness brought on by the drought compared with "squeezing the paycheque." In its realism and its slight shade of parody and kitsch Goodman's poetry remains consistent with the tongue-in-cheek docu-drama staging.

CHAPTER 2

THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE

John Adams has been referred to as a 'romantic minimalist' because, where the original school cultivated a cool and uniform language, Adams' music is more varied and passionate. "What sets me apart from Reich and Glass," Adams has said, "is that I am not a modernist. I embrace the whole musical past, and I don't have the type of refined, systematic language that they have. I rely a lot more on my intuitive sense of balance."[19] In effect, Adams has used minimalism as a point of departure for a style which is considerably more conventional and accessible than the music of Glass or Reich, in spite of their relatively new-found popularity.

In his use of the musical past and present Adams appears in the lineage stemming from another New Englander, Charles Ives. This was perhaps first apparent in Adams' *Grand Pianola Music* of 1981, but was also important to the large orchestral works of the mid-80s, such as *Harmonielehre.* In *Nixon in China* Adams' range includes the use of popular dance music of the 1940s, and even a direct quote from Wagner.

PROCEDURES

Although Adams' music in *Nixon in China* is more varied than that of the minimalists, only a few basic procedures are used.

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[19]K. Robert Schwarz. "Nixon in China." *Musical America* 108 (April 1988): 25.

Much of the score contains a constant pulse, propelled through the use of repetition, ostinatos, and arpeggios. This rhythmic motor underlies the two principal harmonic-thematic devices: the alternating of two chords with common tones, and the alternating of two contrasting materials. Dressed in colourful orchestration, relying heavily on stings, woodwinds, and two electronic keyboards, these procedures form the basis of Adams' language.

Pulse, and Rhythm

The rhythmic values used in the opera are extremely simple, with quarter notes and eighth notes predominating, and no values smaller than a sixteenth note. Within Adams' reduced language pervasive features include the super-imposition and alternating of groups of two and three beat values, often resulting in polymeter. Throughout the opera there is a rhythmic fluidity which is achieved through the use of pulse and shifting meter.

Metric modulation occurs infrequently, usually in transitional passages, such as that in Chiang Ch'ing's aria (Example 1). The tempo accelerates by small increments, with each change of meter and harmony, as the transition becomes a crescendo, climaxing with the return of the opening material.

Harmony

A parallel exists between the rhythmic and harmonic vocabularies where, in both, Adams relies on a continuous re-working of a basic vocabulary. Although the harmonies

occasionally grow complex, simple triads and 7th chords predominate.

As an important structural device, modulation between tonal areas occurs either fluidly or abruptly. Much of the smooth harmonic movement, within and between sections, is in third-related chords, which give a strongly modal quality. In contrast, sudden, remote changes frequently occur at moments of dramatic intensity. These modulation procedures were described by Adams in 1984:

> One way was to bring in a new key area almost on the sly, stretching the ambiguity out over such a length of time that the listener would notice that a change had taken place (you find yourself in a new landscape but you don't know how you got there). Another approach was to introduce a sudden change of key for all the available power of surprise and heightened emotional tension that it might provide.[20]

Adams refers to the latter method as "celestial gear shifting," an effect which is heightened by a simultaneous timbral change.

Alternating Chords

Many of Adams' procedures are found in the 44-measure introduction to Act III [Appendix No. 1]. The passage is based on four pairs of chords (Example 2). Pairs I and II alternate through the first 26 measures, and Pairs III and IV, through measures 27 to 42, with a b diminished chord on the final two bars, 43 and 44.

I	II	III	IV
mm.1-4	mm.5-8	mm.27-28	mm.29-31

[20]John Adams, *Harmonium.* EMC 1277, 1984.

mm.9-12 mm.13-16 mm.32-33 mm.34-37
17-21 22-23 38-40 41-42
24-26

Figure 1. Act III

The relationship of a third exists between both the chords of each pair and between the first and second chords respectively, of adjacent pairs (ie. I and II, III and IV).

The ostinatos in measures 1-44 feature two principles: a continuous figure in the upper line which provides the pulse (Example 3A), and a varying one in the bass (Example 3B-3F). Rhythmic tension is created through the superimposition of two and three beat values, with constant eighth-notes in the upper voice (ostinato 3A), and the conflicting dotted-16ths in the bass, in 6/8 metre.

Frequent changes of meter occur in this excerpt, and as throughout the opera, the shifts are often accompanied by crescendos and changes in the harmony. Although Adams does not always provide metric transitions, an example of such a smooth shift is found at measures 7-9 (Example 4) where he moves from duple to compound duple meter through an intermediary bar of 3/4.

In this brief introductory passage Adams makes full use of his orchestral resources (strings, clarinets, piccolo, flutes, oboes, a saxophone quartet, English horn, trumpets, trombones, percussion, and two synthesizers). Changes of harmony and metre are accompanied by changes of tone colour. After the first nine measures with lower strings (doubled by Keyboard 2), clarinets

and saxophones, Keyboard 1 and violins enter with isolated chords, gradually expanding the texture. With the beginning of the second section (m.27) flutes and oboes are added, and at the repeat of Pair III (m.32), muted trumpets and trombones replace the saxophones and clarinets till the next repeat (m.38), where they re-enter. The use of evolving orchestral colours in this section is typical of Adams' music and plays a large role in his ability to maintain interest.

Contrasting Materials

The instrumental sections of *Nixon in China* are often constructed by the juxtaposition of two brief and highly contrasting figures. The material in these passages usually differs in rhythm, harmony, and orchestration. The procedure forms the basis of "The Landing of the Spirit of '76," in the first scene, in which Adams alternates between the tied-triplet phrase (m.259) and the more relaxed quarter notes (mm.260-261) (Example 5). The contrast is emphasised harmonically by the use of the remote, tritone relationship between the A major chord at measure 259 and the E flat major which leads up to it, and then follows it (mm.260-261). This three measure unit is repeated twice then extended--varied motivically while the harmony is retained. The harmonic and motivic tension is heightened by Adams' use of orchestration, with the tied-triplet motive (m.159), involving all the low register instruments (trombone, lower strings, keyboards,

bass clarinet and baritone saxophone) and the swirling, full orchestra accompaniment.

The dramatic effect of the contrast in "The landing" is representative of that achieved throughout the opera. The device is frequently employed at points where the intensity of the music reinforces the action, such as the ballet and the toasting sequences.

Melody and Text Setting

Although the vocal "melodies" are essentially an extension of the basic texture, the vocal writing in *Nixon in China* is entirely within the operatic tradition. Voice type plays a large role in characterisation: Chiang Ch'ing is a coloratura soprano, Pat Nixon a lyric soprano; while Mao is given a high, piercing tenor, both Nixon and Chou are baritones, and Kissinger is a bass. While no extended vocal techniques are used, within this context the vocal lines (with simple rhythms, repetition, oscillation between two notes, and few unusual leaps), vacillate between genuine lyricism and near-recitative.

Although the vocal lines tend to be declamatory, unique features are found in each character. In the pieces which open the scene, as in much of the choral music, the phrases are concise, and restricted in range and intervalic content, as in the simple homophony and halting style of "Soldiers of heaven" (Example 6).

In contrast to the chant-like style of the chorus is the polite exchange between Chou En-lai and Nixon, and in Nixon's solo which follows. In spite of the triviality of the words exchanged by Nixon

and Chou, the vocal lines are expressive and extend over a considerable range. Where, in these greetings Nixon's enthusiasm is revealed in flowing melismas, in the opening of the aria "News," his zeal is expressed through rapid repetition (Example 7).

Form and Texture

The formal procedures used by John Adams differ substantially from the structures found in "traditional" minimalism. Since the late 1970s there has been a gradual loosening of Adams methods of formal construction--from the strict procedures of *Shaker Loops*, for example, to a freer and more romantic concept, though still clearly based on minimalism.[21] This dichotomous relationship between the highly structured and the capricious is revealed in Adams' comments on his composing methods:

> I don't develop my material, I don't work with identifiable motifs so much as with a forward motion that's colored by its harmonic atmosphere. And I use large, powerful blocks--perhaps I should say 'images,' since I think that my music is more pictorial or cinematographic than it is developmental.[22]

While these "blocks" are often distinct and based primarily on texture and harmony, reinforced by dynamics and orchestration, in Adams' most recent works, such as *Fearful Symmetries* (1990), they are considerably freer.

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[21]In this 1978 string septet a conductor cues the players through a series of modules, in which each instrumentalist plays a different, repeated figure.

[22]Jonathan Cott, "An Interview with John Adams" *Harmonielehre*. Nonesuch 79115, 1985.

Where minimalist works tend to be homogeneous, at least within movements, in *Nixon in China* the texture is never as highly uniform. Adams' concept of form is closer to that of the opera tradition than to minimalism. Throughout *Nixon* a variety of "numbers"--arias, ensembles, choruses, and interludes--are constructed of a gradually freer texture, culminating in the relative formal complexity of Act III.

Adams' aria for Nixon in Act I, "News", is constructed of the type of continuous texture found in many of the set pieces. In the long aria there are a number of internal sections, some connected smoothly while others are juxtaposed. In the opening Nixon sings about the present, and of making history, before his thoughts turn first to home, and then to the war:

Text/Action	Orchestral Texture*	Measures
Nixon's aria ("News"). Nixon sings while shaking hands with the dignitaries.	Pumping ostinatos, common-tone chords in slow harmonic rhythm.	374-475
Nixons, Chou move to center stage, curtain falls behind them ("On our flight over from Shanghai").	Quieter, ostinato in woodwinds and celli, arpeggios alternate with repeated notes.	476-541
'The eastern hemisphere beckoned to us.'	Still quieter, c# pedal.	542-581

*In this and the following diagrams, lower case letters indicate minor chords, while major chords are capitalised. Those in parenthesis appear only once, while all others alternate.

"News, news, news, . . . It's prime time in the U.S.A."	Opening material (A flat-C triads.	582-601
Nixons alone at stage front, Nixon's recollections of the U.S.	Quiet, staccato repeated minor triads.	602-653
Nixon's war memories ("the rats begin to chew the sheets").	Minor triads, then more complex structures.	654-714

Figure 2. Act I, Scene One

The opening is vigorous and expressive with ostinatos and simple, common-tone harmonies. From measure 476 there are changes of mood and texture as the harmony becomes more varied and Nixon expresses his concerns about the present "world order." Rhythmic tension is then reduced (mm.542-581) and Nixon's line becomes more lyrical as he and Pat are left alone at the front of the stage.

After the brief reprise of the opening material the mood changes quickly again and is more subdued (mm.602-736), with a repeated-note pedal in the bass clarinet and celli replacing the ostinato. From measure 690 to 714 Adams uses a series of more complex structures (Example 8), though in the same slow harmonic rhythm: E flat aug over D flat major, E flat aug over F (no 3rd), D(aug) over B flat (no 3rd), F#major over B flat, leading to 19 bars of a minor 7, as Nixon falls asleep and is then woken by Kissinger and ushered off stage.

In contrast to the evolving character of "News" is the da capo construction of Chiang Ch'ing's aria "I am the wife of Mao Tse-

tung". The divisions within the piece are defined primarily by harmony and rhythm:

Harmonies	Orchestral Texture	Measures
B flat, E flat	"Heroic" dotted 8th-note rhythm	781-819
D7, d, G7/B flat E7		820-851
G flat/ G flat, D	Chorus enters, accelerando	852-883
B flat-E flat/B flat, E 7	Opening rhythm, chorus from mm.939	884-983

Figure 3. Act II, Scene Two

With the second verse of the "A" section the simple harmonies modulate up a major 3rd, then return to B flat, and as Chiang sings the climactic phrase, an E 7th chord alternates with the remote B flat triad (mm.832-850) before the orchestra diminishes into the "B" section, and then to the double common-tone chord, G flat, on which "B" is centered (Example 9).

After a return of the "A" section in B flat there are modulations to B and E (mm.903-913), then a return to B flat 7/E flat 7 as Chiang repeats the line "I speak according to the book." Finally the chorus enters, repeating Chiang's lines, and then alternating phrases, as the E flat changes to E natural, as they conclude together in a violent fanfare.

The Six Scenes

The opening scene is constructed of three large "blocks", the first (mm.1-160) is unified in texture while the second (mm.161-373)

and third (mm.374-754) contain internal, contrasting sections that are linked by transitions:

Text/Action	Musical Texture	Measures
Orchestral "Introduction" Chorus of soldiers and officials standing still, silently awaiting Nixon's arrival.	Continuous ascending scale, repeated-note figure and pedals.	1-61
	(transition)	(62-75)
Chorus remains still but begins to sing ("Soldiers of heaven").	Continuation of opening material; vocal line in unison, then in harmony.	76-160
Members of the chorus exit and enter randomly, all slowly move closer to the front of the stage as they sing "The people are heros now".	Change of texture: arpeggios, and harmony.	161-230
	(transition)	(230-258)
Officials and soldiers queue, the airplane approaches, stairs are wheeled out and Chou En-lai enters. The airplane descends, Nixons and Kissinger emerge.	E flat and A chords alternate (contrasting material), decrescendo into the next section.	259-319
Nixon and Chou greet each other.	C and E triads, crescendo to aria.	320-373
Nixon's aria ("News").		(374-754)

Figure 4. Act I, Scene One

The opening section comprises two pieces: the instrumental "Introduction" and the military chorus' song, "Soldiers of heaven" and is constructed from three motivic figures (Examples 10A, 10B and 10C). The ascending scales dominate the texture of the entire 160 measures, appearing in eighth notes throughout, and also in

larger, overlapping rhythmic units. The contrasting repeated-note and pedal are used irregularly, and in various permutations. The repeated-note figure is gradually extended to a sustained cluster in the trumpets and trombones as the intensity diminishes to pianissimo, and the chorus enters quietly with the same motif (see Example 6). The initial, stiff phrases gradually widen from three parts (ATB) to four (SATB), and from unison to full harmony, as the line becomes increasingly expressive.

Although the three parts within the second section do not form a seamless unit, as in the opening 160 measures, the almost continuous variation creates the impression that they comprise a single section. Also, dramatically, these three "blocks" form an arch: the brooding choral piece rising in intensity to "The landing of 'The Spirit of '76'" then diminishing to the greetings between Nixon and Chou En-lai.

The contrasting character of "The people are heros now" (161-223) is produced by the sudden change of accompaniment, harmony and tempo. While the mood of the piece is still serious the text and music are more expressive than the sombre and halting style of "Soldiers". From the opening refrain (Example 11) the static vocal lines gradually become freer, widening in intervalic and dynamic range, before returning, in the end, to the opening refrain.

The piece is constructed of both alternating common-tone chords, and single chords extended with suspensions, and two

basic motivic figures: a descending arpeggio and a repeated-note bass line. Both harmonic procedures are evident in the refrain, where the G#6/4 minor chord is followed by E major, then with the rising f#, on the second beat of the third measure (functioning either as a 9-8 suspension of the E major, or as a major 7th of the G#minor). Harmonically, the piece is in an arch form, alternating between common-tone chords, and the static, suspended chords:

g#6/4 -E (160-171)
f# (sus) (172-184)
b flat 6/4 -G flat (185-194)
a flat (sus)/ b flat (sus) (195-204)
g#6/4 minor-E (205-230)

Figure 5. Act I. Scene One

From the end of the subdued "People are heros now" a gradual transition of increasing intensity leads to "The landing". The harmony first shifts down a half-step to G 6/4 minor-E flat major, then settles on E flat, which the lower strings and woodwinds pound out in quarter notes while a series of other chords (F, G, and A major triads) are presented in arpeggios in the upper woodwinds and sustained chords in the brass. Excitement increases as the arpeggios jump from eighth notes to sixteenths, and the brass repeat the A triad over the E flat pedal in a choppy, 16th-note rhythm, climax-ing with a crescendo on E flat major (mm.251-258).

The intensity of this material is sustained until the aircraft has landed, at which point there is a decrescendo, and finally a low E pedal announces that the plane is firmly on the ground. While the music remains rhythmically agitated the harmony stabilizes through another slow decrescendo, and as the Nixons appear at the top of the stairs a simple texture of arpeggiated C and E minor triads is heard in the keyboards and upper woodwinds. The static texture and harmonies continue through the leaders' greetings but intensify, with accelerating tempos, and the minor triads changing to dominant 7th chords. After a climax of six measures of E dominant 7ths, the harmony shifts abruptly to A flat, accompanied by a jump in the tempo, as Nixon begins his aria "News".

The second scene of Act Two is constructed of shorter sections than the first. The form of these units is created largely by intensity and texture, with several of them culminating in polyphony:[23]

Text/Action	Musical Texture	Measure
Mao, 3 secretaries, Chou, Nixon, Kissinger enter Mao's study, exchange greetings and take their seats.	Ostinatos, 3-part harmonies of the secretaries, contrapuntal ending.	1-185
Mao's tirade against his political opponents ("I like right wingers"), then falls asleep.	Secretaries drop out of texture, more subdued at first.	186-285

[23]With the gradual addition of voices to the texture, the contrapuntal climaxes seem inspired by Mozart's finales, although the lines never achieve true independence.

Chou poses a riddle ("You've said that there's a certain well-known tree").	Quieter, contrapuntal ending.	286-429
Mao's tirade against capitalists ("Founders come first, then profiteers").	More forceful, sudden jump in tempo and intensity, Mao and secretaries in unison.	430-556
Mao and secretaries ("The people are determined").	Quieter at first, simple harmonies, gradually increasing tension, contrapuntal ending.	557-643
Mao and secretaries ("We no longer need Confucious").	Vigorous, Mao and secretaries in rhythmic unison, quick tempo and static harmony, then subdued.	644-702
Mao ("Platonic men").	Brisk tempo, static harmony.	703-814
Nixon's arioso ("Like the Ming Tombs").	Quiet.	815-886
Mao and secretaries ("History is a dirty sow").	Intense again.	887-946
Parting remarks between Mao and Nixon.	More relaxed rhythmically, and harmonically.	947-1019

Figure 6. Act I, Scene Two

In both mood and musical texture the opening section of Scene Two (mm.1-185) is representative of Adams' formal procedure in the scene. With his high tessitura and support of the three-part harmonies of the secretaries, Mao dominates the stage. In the first contrapuntal ending Mao accuses Kissinger of "shady dealings" as Nixon tries vainly to restore order (Example 12). The episode, which takes place over a G7 chord with an F-E flat ostinato, is a brief example of Adams' contrapuntal writing, where there is

always a lead voice, rather than truly independent and equal vocal lines.

The introduction is unified harmonically, with third-related chords (C, E, E flat, and G) in slow harmonic rhythm. Adams uses B and B flat as common-tones around which the harmonies pivot. The heavy orchestral texture is driven by Adams' usual procedures: ostinatos, pedals, and pulsating chords:

Harmonies	Orchestral Texture	Measures
G/g, E flat 7.	Ostinatos (G-B, G-B flat) Pedals (G, E flat, B flat) Alberti bass, repeated-chords.	1-53
E7/e7, C7.	Repeated-chords (irregular rhythms), descending,wide arpeggios.	53-80
C7, E flat7, G7/g7.	Ostinatos, repeated chords.	80-118
E flat7 over A, C#ø7, E flat7, E flat7 over D flat7.	Ostinatos, repeated chords, pedal (E flat sustained chord).	119-149
G7, E flat7 (9).	Ostinatos, arpeggios.	150-179
F#7, E flat7, C7, A7, G7, E7, D flat7, B flat7, C, f, E flat, c.	Descending chord sequence.	180-185

Figure 7. Act I, Scene Two

The remainder of Scene Two is constructed of segments of comparable size to the introduction, and consistent in mood and texture. These "blocks" are defined by intensity, as Mao continues to dominate the scene, and very little happens visually--an issue which has drawn some negative criticism. Adams has refuted this view that the scene is too long and static, asserting that it was dramatically necessary to have this extended philosophical

discussion. His formal solution to the problem is the relatively brief and contrasting sections.

The structure of the third scene is similar to that of the first, with several extended and largely unified parts:

Text/Action	Musical Texture	Measures
Duet: Nixons ("The night is young"), then make their way to the Great Hall.	Jazz band instrumentation, slow crescendo.	1-141
Kissinger, Chou and Nixon converse at the table, Chou toasts the guests ("Gam bei!").	Agitated at first (rhythmically and harmonically), alternating choruses with orchestra.	141-276
Chou's speech ("Ladies and Gentlemen"), concludes with more toasting.	Quiet, gradually expanding from solo keyboards to full orchestra, simple melody and harmony.	277-513
Nixon's speech ("Mr. Premier").	Stiff, martial rhythm gradually more flexible.	514-655
Chorus ("Cheers"), alternates with principals in polyphony.	Alternating between homophony and polyphony.	656-829

Figure 8. Act I, Scene Three

The scene opens with the Nixons' lyrical duet, "The night is young," in which Adams borrows liberally from "swing" to present a sentimental, and dated, "first couple". Developing from jazz band instrumentation, and lilting whole-step motifs and seventh chords, the texture gradually broadens to the full orchestra. With growing optimism the Nixons begin to sing in unison as the tempo increases, and the motif widens to octave leaps. When the curtain

opens on the Great Hall the motif is replaced by E minor 7th arpeggios, and a rising arpeggio/scalar line appears in the strings, leading to the climax on C major, with the entire string section in unison with the final, rising phrase of the vocal line.

The climax marks the beginning of an agitato section, in which the Nixons' confidence is briefly countered by the cynical Henry Kissinger. Arpeggios continue to swirl but now in conflicting groups of six and four (in 3/2 meter), and simultaneous F# and C major chords--gradually resolving to an E major triad, then E minor as toasting begins. Adams uses the same 'contrasting procedure' as was described earlier: chorus over E and G minor triads (two common tones) in slow harmonic rhythm, followed by brief orchestral interludes with a shift up a minor third, to B flat, with alternating triads, B flat major/G flat minor, returning to the chorus in E minor (Example 13). After a repeat of the alternating material there is a return to E minor, without the chorus, as the intensity diminishes, in preparation for Chou En-lai's speech.

The musical texture of Chou's speech is as austere as the Premier himself. The piece takes place over a spartan bed of arpeggios in slow harmonic rhythm, centering on B flat major and E 7th chords. Opening with an accompaniment of keyboards alone, the orchestra gradually enters, gaining in force until an instrumental interlude calms the mood again, before Chou delivers his toast, accompanied by the chorus.

Without a shift in the harmonies (B flat major/B minor) the chorus fades as Nixon begins to address his audience. The structure of Nixon's speech is appropriately stiffer than Chou's, with more breaks in the mood and texture, with the arpeggios replaced by repeated 8th-notes. When Nixon addresses the topic of 'telecommunications' the mood becomes more serious as the strings play C and E minor triads in repeated 8th-notes. As Nixon approaches the "agitato" conclusion of his speech the staccato, repeated minor chords appear in both strings and winds, finally resolving to E major as he toasts the audience--and is joined by the chorus whose episodes alternate with those of the principals, homophony alternating with polyphony.

The four large sections make up the first scene of Act II, but with no sharp contrasts within or between them. The "blocks" correspond to the introductory material and Pat's arioso ("I don't daydream"), the tour of the People's Commune, Pat's aria ("This is prophetic"), and the visit to the Ming Tombs:

Text/Action	Musical Texture	Measures
Pat asleep in bed, wakes, takes a pill, returns to bed, finally rises and sings arioso ("I don't daydream").	Introduction: quick tempo, slow harmonic rhythm, ostinato ("cheerful music"), alternating with 'darker' material.	1-151
The tour of the People's Commune: Curtains open, chorus, Pat, 3 secretaries.	Alternates between the 'cheerful' and darker music.	152-419

Pat's aria ("This is prophetic").	Tempo slows, quiet repeated chords (keyboards, woodwinds, and strings), occasional obliggato instruments and counter-melodies.	420-523
("let the expression of the Statue of Liberty . . .").	Simple repeated chords.	524-567
("The siren's wail").	Simple repeated chords in rhythmic unison.	568-573
	Sustained chords.	574-598
Entourage moves to the Ming Tombs: Pat, 3-part women's chorus ("They could work stone in those days").	Tempo gradually accelerates, then alternates between "cheerful" and dark music.	599-748

Figure 9. Act II, Scene One

In much of the scene, and especially through the first 419 measures, the focus fluctuates between Pat Nixon's personal thoughts and her public personality. The public side of Pat Nixon is reflected in the "cheerful music" with major chords (often in C major), ostinato, and lively tempo, which opens the scene (Example 14). Although the simple, major and minor harmonies continue as Pat begins her arioso, 'I don't daydream,' the reduced orchestra is quieter and rhythmic values slow to a texture of repeated chords. As Pat prepares herself for the tour a quiet ostinato gradually gains momentum and solo woodwinds randomly double her vocal line or provide counter melodies.

The arioso and tour segments are segued through a series of minor triads as the orchestra quiets to pianissimo and the curtains open, revealing the three secretaries. In this sequence of choral,

alto trio, and solo episodes the music from the opening of the scene alternates with darker choral pieces. The tour begins as the secretaries are joined by the chorus (S, A, T), which sings ("look down, look down at the earth") over E and G# minor triads in the same halting and sombre style as "Soldiers of heaven", until the return of the 'cheerful music' as the tour arrives at the glass factory. This sequence continues until the visit to the school, where the opening, 'cheerful music,' returns briefly, followed by a transition which relaxes the mood as Pat reaches the Imperial Palace.

As the tempo slows even more Pat begins her aria ("This is prophetic") over the enharmonic common-tone chords, E flat minor and B7. Pat Nixon's set piece recalls Chou's speech, from the previous scene, in its simplicity and reflective mood. While the accompaniment figures and harmonies gradually evolve, the harmonic rhythm, tempo, and mood are consistent throughout the piece. Interest is maintained by the addition of contrapuntal lines in solo woodwinds (oboe, English horn, soprano saxophone), and the new material which alternates with that from the opening.

The tempo gradually begins to pick up again as the entourage re-enters and moves to the Ming Tombs. The 'cheerful music' returns fleetingly but without its bright orchestration, before the harmony moves from C major back to E flat and B7 chords as the chorus sings briefly about the tombs. And as they conclude and exit there is a brief reprise of the opening material before the orchestra darkens as the scene closes on a quiet, sustained cluster.

As in the 'Tour Scene', the second half of Act II also contains a great deal of choral music, but it is composed of many shorter set pieces, both instrumental and vocal, as well as Chiang's aria. The ballet is constructed entirely of smaller "blocks", in which the focus fluctuates between the orchestra, the chorus, the secretaries, and Kissinger:

Text/Action	Musical Texture	Materials
3 secretaries ("Young as we are"), then Kissinger enters ("Oh what a day").	Repeated chords, ostinatos, alternates between chorus and orchestra.	1-158
Chorus ("How thin you are"), dancers escape, 3 Secretaries ("The land outside"), dancer is recaptured, and whipped.	4-part women's chorus.	159-371
Nixons rush to Ching-hui's side, the "Summer Store".	Arpeggios and ostinatos, long crescendo.	372-473
Soldier enters, revives Ching-hui.	Transition: decrescendo then quotation form "The Ring," transition.	474-528
Red Detachment of Women enter ("Flesh rebels"), all exit.	"Punchy" repeated 8th-notes, static harmony.	529-615
Act II of the ballet, Kissinger enters, then Nixon, dancers, Chorus ("It seems so strange"), Chiang halts the ballet.	Repeated chords, contrasting material in the instrumental sections, diminishes.	616-780
Chiang's aria ("I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung").	"A" (a) slow harmonic rhythm.	781-819
("When did the Chinese people").	(a') Modulation up a maj 3rd.	820-850
("Let me be a grain of sand").	"B" Concludes with chorus "A"	851-883
("I am the wife . . . ").	Chorus alternates with	884-936
("I speak according to the book").	Chiang, orchestra concludes.	937-983

Figure 10. Act II, Scene Two

In the opening sequences of the ballet (mm.1-371) the numerous sections flow freely from one to the next. With fast-paced action on stage, the music is correspondingly dramatic and vigorous. The intensity of this material subsides only momentarily as the heroine is left for dead and the "summer storm" is depicted by the orchestra.

As in many of the instrumental interludes and transitions, the structure of the "summer storm" recalls the 'Landing of The Spirit of '76', from Scene One. Beginning quietly, with A minor and F major arpeggios in the keyboards and upper woodwinds, the tempo gradually accelerates and a crescendo builds to a climax. Here, the tempo quickens suddenly and the arpeggios change to driving ostinatos in the strings and woodwinds. As thunder is represented by the bass drum the harmony shifts to C minor/A flat major, then to A minor/F7, and finally, to C# minor, as a chromatic figure appears in the strings, then the brass, and leads to the climax. As the intensity of the orchestra diminishes and the tempo slows the 'young soldier' enters the tonality moves to E flat major, as Pat explains what has transpired, over quiet arpeggios. While the soldier revives Ching-hui the full orchestra re-emerges and the material evolves into a quotation of Brünnhilda's 'sleep music,' from *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Example 15).

After a brief transition the Red Detachment of Women enter with Adams' only borrowing from Chinese music, appropriately

matching Mark Morris' quotation of Chiang Ching's choreography.[24] The three-part women's chorus sings in block chords over a driving repeated-note bass line, then ostinato, and reaches a climax before beginning the second verse.

In the second act of the ballet the material appears in even more compact "blocks", as the events occur in rapid succession. From the end of "Flesh rebels", the new backdrop has hardly extended when Kissinger enters, followed by Nixon and then the dancers, as a six-part mixed chorus sings ("It seems so strange to take revenge"). After Ching-hui misses her cue the action moves even quicker as Chiang Ch'ing enters with the chorus, stopping the ballet. The intensity of Chiang's commands gradually diminishes, while the repeated chords continue as the trio of secretaries, in low register, question Ching-hui in the same stiff rhythm as the accompaniment, which slowly reduces to a simple repeated f#. The decrescendo and brief pause heighten the contrast as Chiang's aria begins.

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[24]When asked if he had listened to the music of *The Red Detachment of Women* before composing this material Adams was somewhat evasive: "I am a little nervous about too much research when it comes to the creative act. I think it's good to have something suggested but if you get too close to your model I think that your original muse gets offended. I had not seen the Red Detachment of Women but a film of another Chinese ballet which is very similar to it called *The White Haired Girl*. . . . What I recalled from my one and only exposure was that the music was a strange misapprehension, basically of Russsian ballet music. . . . There was a tremendous confusion of styles. It was a case of one culture trying to appropriate another culture without really understanding it. This was just perfect for me . . .". "'Nixon in China': John Adams in Conversation with Andrew Porter." *Tempo* 167(December 1988): 28.

The formal structure of Act III is the most complex in the opera, although it is similar to the continuous texture of Act I, Scene Two. While there are solos, ensembles and interludes, there are no long "numbers," as in previous scenes. The overlapping soliloquies are presented by eliding sections through transitions, overlapping them, and at several points, through distinct breaks between them.

Text/Action	Musical Texture	Measures
Characters gradually enter.	Introduction: ostinatos, alternating chords.	1-107
Dancers perform.	Quiet alternating chords (b/ D/f#).	108-154
Mao descends from his portrait.	Agitato, then a variation of material from the "landing".	155-227
Chou ("And to what end?"), then Pat ("I squeezed your paycheck till it screamed").	Variation of material from 108,transition: crescendo.	228-307
Dancers perform, Maos' duet,then joined by Nixons', finally interrupted by Chou.	"Fast shuffle" repeated 7th chords, tempo slows as Chou enters.	308-384
Nixon ("sitting around the radio")	Elided to previous material.	385-432
Maos and Chou.	Quiet, repeated chords, tempo slows.	433-470
Mao's duet ("Your few subjectivist mistakes").	Chromatic harmony, Chiang's vocalese.	471-495
Nixon's duet ("When I woke up").	Faster tempo, repeated chords.	495-516
Dancers perform.	Interlude: "Gam bei!" music, decrescendo.	517-550
Duet: Chou and Mao, trio with Chiang (from mm.585).	Tempo slows, counterpoint.	551-600
Chiang's arioso ("I can keep still").	Quiet arpeggios, minor triads,gradual crescendo, then decrescendo.	601-658
Trio: Chiang, with Nixons, then with Mao and Chou.	In counterpoint, strings double Chiang's line.	659-703

Duet: Maos ("Peking watches the stars").	Quiet, major triads; transition.	704-756
Duet: Nixons ("You won at poker"), then quartet with the Maos and finally Nixon alone.	Still quiet, orchestra closes withmaterial from Act I duet.	757-846
Chou's arioso ("I am old and cannot sleep forever").	Quiet ostinatos and sustained chords, ascending chromatic lines (from mm.899).	847-938

Figure 11. Act III

The continuous change within Act III is illustrated in an excerpt from the middle of the scene, where the material evolves from a trio through two duets, and finally an interlude (mm.433-550).

Harmonies	Texture	Measures
E ø7.	(Transition) Pedal (E), repeated chords.	431-432
E flat 4/2-C#ø7.	Pedal (D flat), repeated chords, slower tempo.	433-444
g7-e7.	Ostinato, repeated chords, slower tempo.	445-459
b-D-f#.	Pedal (F#, F), alternating chords (from 228) repeated chords.	460-470
E# ø7, F, B7, a, clusters.	Pedals (E#, C, F, B flat, E, D flat), repeated chords, obbligato cello, contrapuntal solo violin.	471-490
E flat 4/2.	(Transition) Pedal (D flat), sustained chords.	491-494
C#ø7.	Repeated chords, pedal (C#), faster tempo.	495-550

Figure 12. Act III

From Nixon's solo the harmony moves from alternating chords to a two-measure transition where it drops from an E half-diminished

chord to a repeated E flat dominant 7th chord in 3rd inversion, as Mao begins to sing quietly. The tempo slows further as Mao is joined by Chiang and Chou and the pedal and chord sequence from m.228 returns. As the trio evolves into the Maos' duet (m.471), the harmonies become more varied and Mao's line is doubled by a solo cello and a solo violin plays a counter-melody. Intensity rises as the orchestration thickens, until another change of texture, as the E flat 4/2 chord returns, followed by a sudden jump in tempo and shift to a repeated C# half-diminished 7th chord as Nixon resumes his story.

Conclusion

Although *Nixon in China* was John Adams' first opera, and the organisation within the scenes is influenced by the structure of the libretto, the formal structures are consistent with his stylistic development. From the large "blocks" of the opening scene to the collage-like Act III, the gradual loosening of the formal procedures results from dramatic considerations--the great expanse of the Chinese experience, the country, the population, and history, depicted by the continuous, rising scales of Act I, and the interior space of the principals in the final scene with its more complex music.

Adams has created a musical style from the skeleton of minimalism, principally using pulse and tonality. Even with this foundation Adams has departed from the central spirit or aesthetic of minimalism: its audible form, or use of process, has not been

employed, and Adams' materials are considerably more irregular and unpredictable. The form is created through the use of all parameters but does not make use of memory or anticipation in the way teleological music does. More is going on in Adams' music: fluctuating dynamics and expressive orchestration, textures shifting from pulse-oriented, ostinato driven homophony to free polyphony. This use of diverse materials, and historical references--such as his use of popular music, and ironic quotation--clearly separates Adams from the first generation of minimalists, and links him to the postmodern trend in the arts.

CHAPTER 3

CRITICAL RECEPTION OF 'NIXON IN CHINA'

From a "bizarre but potentially beguiling concoction" in its concert preview to "a phenomenal success" in its latest production, *Nixon in China* has drawn criticism of impressive range and quantity.[25] Unlike most operas of the latter part of the twentieth century, this one has had no difficulty attracting the attention of the media. In each city in which *Nixon* has been produced journalists from major newspapers, and both news and literary journals joined the music in comment ranging from praise to condemnation.

With opinions as to the success of the work widely divided, the actual performance of the original cast was perhaps the only area of general consensus--most critics found the performances generally quite good.[26] A diverse range of views, however, was found in all of he other issues frequently addressed. Politics,

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[25]Among the first to review *Nixon* was the critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and *Opera* magazine, Martin Bernheimer, who attended a preview -- a concert run-through, with pianos and synthesizer in place of an orchestra--in San Francisco. "Nixon in Progress," *Opera* 38 (Sept, 1987): 1022. Bernheimer's comments provoked an angry response from the Artistic Administrator of Houston Grand Opera, Scott Heumann, who admonished him for judging the material solely on the basis of the concert reading of the vocal score, "just to scoop his collegues,"[*Opera* 38 (11): 1252-53] and, in turn, a sarcastic counter-response from Bernheimer [Opera 38 (12): 1366]. James Suttliffe, "Bielefeld," *Opera News* 54 (March 31, 1990): 39.

[26]One of the few complaints was that John Dykers' Mao, with his high tessitura, was somewhat shrill.

musical style, staging, the libretto and drama were often discussed by the critics, though with a diversity of views.

Although much of the text is not easily understood on first hearing, Alice Goodman's poetry has been a major factor in the opera's positive reception, and has been almost as widely praised as the performances.[27] To Joan Acocella Goodman's lines were "just about perfect," and "pierced to the very heart of Nixon's linguistic habits: the combination of crude colloquialism . . . and windy grandiloquence".[28] Similar comments came from Andrew Porter and John Rockwell, respectively:

> Her lines are good to sing. And without simplism or glibness she has written philosophical and political speeches for Mao, Chou En-lai, and Nixon in poetry that bears pondering.[29]

> Ms. Goodman's libretto strikes a lovely balance between caricature, ironic sentimentality and more deeply felt truths, and reaches a real transcendence in the last two scenes.[30]

While it is usually the composer of the opera who receives the attention, in this case there has been sufficient for considerable

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[27]Paul Giffiths has referred to the poetry as "cool, elegant, elusive and sometimes slyly witty". "Houston," *Musical Times* 129 (January 1988): 42.

[28]"A Hero for Our Time?" *Art in America* 76 (April 1988): 53.

[29]Andrew Porter, "Nixon in Houston", *New Yorker* (November 30, 1987): 124.

[30]John Rockwell, "Why Nixon Shouldn't Pass Up 'Nixon in China.'" *New York Times* 10 Dec. 1987 sect. C: 30.

spill-over to Goodman, most of it as positive as that of the comments of Porter and Rockwell.

Unlike the poetry, the subject on which the opera is written has been hotly debated. While *Nixon* "beguiled" Bernheimer and others, opinions have been diverse and strongly worded. Calling the work a "successful and stirring drama," in his review of the Houston première, Andrew Porter felt the subject was entirely appropriate: "a meeting--like those of Wotan and Erda in the *Ring* or that of Attila and Leo I, pictured in Verdi's *Attila*--that changed the history of the world".[31] This inevitable debate was certainly, in part, responsible for Sellars choice of the subject and title, and has played a large role in generating interest.

While Andrew Porter and others have found the subject well suited to the opera stage, a number of critics have felt that there was a basic lack of drama, especially as a result of the opera's structure.[32] Clearly, there is no plot as it is generally found in opera or conventional theater. Through the depiction of actual events we see portraits of characters: political leaders, wives, men and women, Americans and Chinese. Oddly, perhaps, critics have been least comfortable with the final scene. For a number of reasons Act III, the only scene which does not recreate a real event from the summit, elicited some of the strongest responses.

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[31]"Nixon in Houston", *New Yorker* (November 30, 1987): 124.

[32]"They create a series of static tableaux that contrast cultures rather than portray the clash of action or character". Robert Clark "'I Don't Like Modern Music,'" *Hudson Review* 41(January, 1988): 174.

Critical appraisal of Act III has ranged from such complaints as that it is "visually dull," and simply "too long," to others who have suggested that it is "anti-climactic" and an unsuitable ending. Noel Goodwin called it "a scene of stupefying tedium," with music "devoid of any compensatory interest".[33]

Positive criticism of Act III has ranged from merely lukewarm to highly enthusiastic. While Andrew Porter was not entirely convinced by the final scene other critics found the ending perfectly appropriate.[34] Gary Seibert, in *America,* went as far as to call it a "triumphant ending".[35] Acceptance of the act was both cautious and whole-hearted. To Gerald Weales the final scene, with the characters expressing their private thoughts, was a pragmatic and honest conclusion to the opera and a needed break from the docu-drama style of Acts I and II:

> To some members of the audience this scene is a letdown from the fierce cheerfulness of much of the music and action, but it seems a necessary finish to the piece. It may not make *Nixon in China* a heroic opera, but it gives a dramatic substance to the characters that rescues them from any lingering claims of caricature.[36]

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[33]"Houston's operatic space centre," *Opera* 39 (January, 1988): 24.

[34]Porter felt that the final scene needed "rethinking", as "it grew visually dull while high events were being sung of." "Nixon in Houston," *New Yorker* (November 30, 1987): 124.

[35]"Nixon in China" *America.* 158(January 23, 1988): 67.

[36]"Tales & Dragons, Into the Woods and Nixon in China," *Commonweal* 115 (January 15, 1988): 20.

Both Patrick Smith and John Rockwell, on the other hand, found that the final scene involved no compromise:

> After numerous rehearings on record plus viewings of the production, I am convinced the team made the right decision. It was necessary to get away from the external world . . . and to explore what Michael Steinberg has called 'the inner landscapes of their minds'. . . . This is a beautiful scene, with an understanding that recalls the work of Hugo von Hofmannsthal.[37]

> The sixth scene, much criticized at the premiere, finds the five principals--Dick, Pat, Chou En-lai, Mao and his wife, Jiang Qing--dreaming their self-images in bed arrayed along in front of the stage. Everyone is affecting, the staging is beautiful and Mr. Adams surpasses himself at the close.[38]

Any apparent apprehension on the part of the critics may have been shared by the creators who revised the final scene, from another banquet to the final bedroom setting.

While Goodman's poetry in the final scene received kudos, in the minds of some critics Mr. Adams did not fare so well. Michael Davidson found the music especially ineffective in the final scene: "The most regrettable blemish is that Adams's melodic invention, influenced by both Bayreuth and Broadway, is not up to the subtlety of the libretto in the last act, though there is no doubting the overall achievement and potential".[39] This

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[37]Patrick Smith, "Inner Landscapes," *Opera News* 54 (January, 1989): 22.

[38]John Rockwell, "Why Nixon Shouldn't Pass Up 'Nixon in China'" *New York Times* 10 Dec. 1987 sect C: 30.

[39]Davidson, "Amsterdam: Light years apart (Holland Festival)," *Opera* 39 (November 1988): 1342.

view was shared by some critics who thought the music was of value but unable to attain the level of richness found in the libretto.

The harshest criticism of John Adams' music has not been restricted to the final act. Perhaps it is not surprising that the more severe of the reactions tended to come from opera specialists rather than the music critics, some of whom rejected the music in its entirety, finding little of interest:

> . . . predicated on lush, push-button sonorities, pretty. second hand effects, repetitive twaddle, rhythmic hyper-monotony and primitive piffle.[40]

> Once each musical module is set in motion it simply trundles forward robotically until a change of pulse or harmony or both, with the occasional big crescendo to point a moment of climax.[41]

While Bernheimer and Goodwin 'wasted' little time explaining their unease with the music other opera critics offered a greater discussion of its effect within the dramatic context. These ranged from enthusiastic acceptance,[42] to more qualified assessments:

> The alternation of dominant-seventh chords and exotic resolutions is perhaps overworked. The alternation of triads with two notes

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[40]Martin Bernheimer, "Nixon in Progress" Opera 38, (9)(September 1987): 1022.

[41]Noel Goodwin, "Nixon in China" *Opera* 39 (March 18, 1989): 1143.

[42]"It seems to me that Adams . . . has made a major contribution to opera in the late 20th century: it successfully confronts the real issues of drama and characterization via repetitive music of a quite individual kind". Keith Potter. "Edinburgh" *Musical Times* 129(December, 1988): 680.

in common . . . is protracted for bars on end. . . . As the opera proceeds, the writing grows richer, rhythmically freer, more lyrical. . . . [the orchestration, more] colorful and precisely expressive. . . . But Adams' command of mounting tension and slow or sudden release, of clouding and brightening, is so sure that during the performance no tedium set in.[43]

John Adams applies the full arsenal of minimalist effects but the score seldom tires the listener or falls into mere note-spinning. . . . Nixon's halting manner of speech is characterized, but not satirized by use of words. The instrumental writing is effective, relying principally on strings and brass, and at many points creates a genuine tension and penetration. Only the vocal writing grows somewhat monotonous: many of the lines repeat declamatory patterns that at last become predictable. Occasionally, however, as in the final scene, the vocal passages obtain their own kind of poignancy against the cunningly managed orchestral fabric.[44]

Whether finding the work a success or a dismal failure, few critics were without strongly-worded opinions. Clearly, many journalists were drawn to the opera sensing that it posed a new aesthetic challenge: a new creation of the controversial Peter Sellars with highly unusual subject matter. In the end, the publicity generated by the critics--whether favorable or not--stimulated the public's attention, thus arousing the interest of opera administrators, and ultimately resulting in the creation of *The Death of Klinghoffer*--now accumulating its own body of critical writing. With few operas benefitting from the level of

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[43]Andrew Porter, "Nixon in Houston," *New Yorker* (November 30, 1987): 125.

[44]Robert Clark, "'I Don't Like Modern Music'" *Hudson Review* 41 (January 1988): 175.

coverage received by *Nixon in China,* and challenging the role of this traditional art form, a re-examination of the issues raised by critics is due.

Certainly among the most contentious issues are dramatic style--the subject and structure--and musical language. While neither the quality of the poetry nor the effectiveness of the staging were not often disputed, the dramatic content and Adams ability to develop the drama were the subjects of much of the discussion.

Although characterization is developed in the extended set pieces, often the music does not further this character development to a great degree because of its inherent simplicity. Nixons' music, in both "News" and "Mr. Premier", is more effective, with the textures shifting more frequently. In pieces such as Chou's speech, however, the uniformity of the music has a numbing effect on the ear not unlike that of Saskatchewan on the eyes of hapless motorists.

An extreme instance of the overly-simplistic texture is experienced in Pat Nixon's aria "This is prophetic". Pat's text is like a shopping list of her vision of the future: "This is prophetic! I foresee/A time will come when luxury/Dissolves into the atmosphere/Like a perfume, and everywhere/The simple virtues root and branch/And leaf and flower. And . . . ." The words offer ample opportunity for an aurally rich setting but Adams places the text within a virtually static orchestral texture.

Although secondary figures appear and evolve into new ones, the accompaniment is based primarily on harmony and pulse. The simple, predominantly triadic harmonies form sections, with two third-related chords in slow harmonic rhythm, interspersed with the recurring, distantly related pair of E flat minor-B major (Figure 13). The orchestra strums the chords in constant quarter-notes and dotted quarter notes--an effect which softens the pulse. Change occurs only once, where the dotted quarter-notes change to eighth-notes, from measure 532 to 561 (while the quarter-notes continue).

Harmonies	Measures	Textural Changes
e flat-B	420-439	
(E-e-C)	440-452	obliggato oboe (mm.440-446)
g-E flat (B)	453-467	imitative contrapuntal lines in woodwinds (mm.455-466)
c	468-482	sustained chords (mm.468-483)
(e) e flat-B7	483-502	obliggato oboe (mm.485-491)
C7-c-eø7-E flat7	503-523	chords in alternating (high-low) register (mm.507-523)
e flat-B7	524-531	
a-F7	532-565	repeated chords in eighth notes (mm.532-561), counter-melody in tpt (mm.547-569), obliggato English horn (mm.559-566)
(D7) e flat-B7	566-575	chords also in half-notes, and sustained in brass (mm.573-583), and strings (mm.572-590)
(Fmaj7) d-B flat	576-615	obliggato oboe (mm.590-591), dotted quarter notes become 8th-note arpeggios (mm.593-598), return of "cheerful music", tempo accelerates (from m.599)
e-g (E7)	616-627	
C7	628-	

Figure 13. Act II, Scene Two

The increased vigor occurs as Pat sings of "the unknown soldier"; the rhythm depicting his "march across the plain," accompanied by a slow melody in a solo trumpet. This type of musical counterpoint to the text is rarely exploited by Adams. Neither is there a sense of melodic development--phrases regularly begin with an upward leap of a third, followed by a return to the opening note, outlining the common-tones of the harmonies (Example 16).

Although the consistency of the music reflects the solid and humble character with which Pat is portrayed, never obtrusive, and never obscuring the words, neither does it further develop the character or words. Equally important, with no significant visual element, the effect on the listener is tedium--which severly restricts one's ability to feel empathy.

In the public scenes, such as the arrival at the airport, and the banquet, Pat performs her role as Mrs. Richard Nixon with quiet grace. In the opening of Act II the dual nature of Pat's character is depicted in the orchestra through music representing both the superficial public role and the more serious thoughts of both Pat and the chorus. Immediately following the lively introduction intensity diminishes and the mood darkens as Pat reflects on her outlook on life. Her words and philosophy are simple and practical, those of a strong woman raised in relative poverty: "I don't daydream and I don't look back./In this world you can't count on luck". As she sings the animated material continues, but

subdued, a perpetual undercurrent, occasionally rising to the surface.

While the texture of the tour scene continuously alternates between Pat's public and private moods, the music lacks subtlety. An exception, and one of the opera's most effective passages, occurs as the tour reaches the glass factory, where an elephant figurine reminds Pat of the Republican Party. The mood darkens as her thoughts lead from the elephant to the party hierarchy (Example 17). The bustling, arpeggiated A flat major and A minor chords shift suddenly, at measure 212, to an E augmented triad over a sustained C# minor, with a chromatic counter-melody in the English horn. This melody continues at measure 220, where the arpeggios return in C major, finally resolving back to the "cheerful music", at measure 224, in E major, and the *public* Pat returns as the tour continues. Although this is a highly effective moment, the music and text in this scene rarely achieve this level of dramatic unity. The simplistic concept of the music, representing Pat's dual character, covers the scene like a reversible overcoat, reducing complex emotions to black and white.

With his quiet humility Adams' Chou En-lai is not unlike Pat Nixon. Although the music seldom rises to the level of Chou's language, Adams does give his line a lyricism which often matches his eloquence. One such occasion occurs in Scene Two, where, after the intensity of a Mao tirade, the tension dissipates as Chou

poses a riddle (Example 18). Unlike much of the vocal writing Chou's line is graceful, and lacks the insistent repetition of the other characters. The harmonies are minor, but consonant and stable. Regrettably, Adams does not maintain this richness in extended passages, such as Chou's speech, in the third scene, where the sameness of the accompaniment adds little to the words.

Although Act III contains problems of dramatic conception it is the most dramatically integrated of the opera's six scenes. While the scene is visually drab it most effectively allows for comparisons of the characters and cultures. Adams meets Goodman's text with the most intricate music in the opera, often achieving a true unity of words and music. Perhaps the most effective feature of Act III is the use of juxtaposition to compare and contrast both the characters and cultures. Although in earlier scenes the char-acters do some philosophizing, in the final act Goodman and Adams present, exclusively, the personal side of the characters, through their private thoughts, as recounted in memoirs and interviews.[45]

The juxtaposition of characters produces some unusual similarities. Outside of their public roles the characters' thoughts tend to return to the past and for both Nixon and Mao, their

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[45]As Adams has said, the text of Act III is based on research: "Virtually everything--even in the third act, which most people assume is poetic licence--is based on things Nixon said in his memoirs or that Pat said in interviews". "'Nixon in China': John Adams in conversation with Andrew Porter". *Tempo* 167(December 1988): 26.

obsessions with their respective wars. In contrast to both Chiang and Chou, the Nixons appear vacuous and certainly *trivial*. This comparison is made several times but best accomplished in Act III, by simply having their lines either elided or overlapped. Where a parallel seemed to exist between Chou and Pat in the earlier scene, created in part by the unobtrusive characters and simpler, more consonant and melodic music, in Act III the connection is intensified. Just as solo keyboard accompaniment began both their arias, Adams uses the approach again in the final scene, first at measure 108 (Pat: "Oh California hold me close"), then at measure 228, slightly varied (Chou: "And to what end? Tell me?"). After a brief interruption by Kissinger Chou continues, followed by Pat, his grieving for the suffering and mistakes of the past elided to Pat's lament about the household expenses (Example 19). The juxtaposition of the Nixons' middle-class American lifestyle and the experiences of the Chinese is highly effective and recurs throughout the final scene.

Where Chiang initially appears a one-dimensional tyrant, in the final scene Goodman and Adams create a much more complex and vulnerable character. In the arioso, "I can keep still", Chiang reveals her own fears and past suffering: "Nothing I fear has ever harmed me, why should you? Marshall your forces, I'll lie low; the draught has made me thin and strong". Adams' setting begins quietly and rises in intensity as Chiang remembers how she "shook with pure excitement". After an orchestral transition

lowers the intensity, Chiang repeats her text while Nixon drones on about the war and Pat, in distraction, even begins her own reminiscing. Unlike the contrapuntal passages from previous scenes, in this section Adams creates a truly effective union of music and text (Example 20). The characters begin on an equal footing, with an accompaniment of arpeggios, but at measure 665 a solo violin and cello begin to double Chiang's line. As Chiang again repeats the line "I shook with pure excitement", the Nixons are gradually drowned out and finally replaced by Chou and Mao.

While Adams has avoided the use of leitmotives in *Nixon in China*, there are several instances of recapitulation. Although the "cheerful music" of the tour scene is constantly recapitulated, its meaning is consistent, and the "California music" which links Pat and Chou appears only in Act III; only in the third act does Adams recapitulate material from previous scenes, thereby giving it new, or greater meaning. In all four instances of recapitulation the material is derived from Act One. The toasting music recurs between two duets: the Nixons' (mm.495-516), and that of Maos' (beginning at measure 551). The intensity of the material provides a contrast to the vocal material which precedes and follows it, and reminds us of the feelings of goodwill that were outwardly expressed earlier. The recurrence of the music from "The Landing of 'The Spirit of '76'", when Mao descends from his portrait, on the other hand, tends to confirm our first impressions of the fierce revolutionary. Likewise, when the ascending scales

from the opening of Act I return during Chou's final soliloquy the chromaticism is as poignant as his words.

Equally subtle is the use of the accompaniment from the Nixons' duet, in the opening of the banquet scene. This material, with lilting saxophones and clarinets, illustrates the sentimental side of the Nixons, and returns with Dick's final lines (Example 21). As Nixon continues ("The customer is king./Sorry we're low on relish. Drinks?/ This was my way of saying thanks"), the orchestra picks up the melancholy motive and half-diminished seventh chords, painting a poignant image of the American leader.

Against the text and images which tell the story of the summit and its characters, Adams has created a varied and colorful layer of sound through his simple musical language, but one that often lacks the complexity needed to give the words greater depth. Without a level of subtlety comparable to that of the poetry, the music tends to act as a surface soundtrack through much of the opera. There are moments of humor, pathos, and true beauty, but the superficial nature of the music does not allow it to reach the dramatic potential of the libretto. Though characterization is achieved through the vocal writing, often with humor and feeling, only in Act III is there finally a true unity of music and drama.

Perhaps it is ironic, but the final scene, in which the central themes of contrasting characters and cultures are best explored, is the least minimalistic. While the scene may be tiring visually, Adams' use of recapitulation and the American musical

vernacular corresponds well to Goodman's colloquial language. This ultimate synthesis was lost on critics such as Rodney Milnes, who seems to have gotten things backwards:

> Adams's 'enhanced minimalism' is certainly capable of characterisation: Nixon, Mao and Chou are precisely fixed by the very singable music they are given. . . . What the music doesn't do is develop these characterizations. [In the final scene] . . . Miss Goodman's words provide countless opportunities to which the limited musical language is simply incapable of rising and even Mr. Sellars at his most frenetic can't disguise the fact that the piece has completely fallen apart.[46]

Mr. Milnes remarks are unusual as he faults Adams where he is most successful. There is no doubt that Goodman's text for Act III requires a skilled compositional hand, but it is in this final scene that Adams proves his dramatic capabilities. One might wonder if, perhaps, Milnes was simply tired on the night he saw the opera, and the staging of Act III was only a cruel reminder of where he would rather be.

While Milnes was not alone in his views of Act III--one may recall the those of Michael Davidson, discussed earlier--the scene *does* stand up to repeated listenings. For Andrew Porter familiarity with the opera has re-confirmed his assessment of the scene. While Porter did find the final scene "visually dull" the music and drama where well received. After the 1988 concert performance of Act III, Porter wrote "Act III, an almost actionless span of lapped solos and duets--reflective, reminiscent,

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[46] "Houston Grand Opera at the Playhouse Theatre, September 1," *Opera* (Spring 1988): 35-6.

narrative, visionary--works as well in the concert hall as in the theatre".[47] Of course, the "actionlessness" plays a large role in making the scene's transition to the concert stage an effortless one--little can be lost. This is not to say that I would rush it into the concert repertory. The relative richness of the scene can only be fully appreciated with a good knowledge of the entire opera.

The structure of *Nixon in China* will continue to be a problem for opera audiences used to standard dramatic structure: conflict, character development, climactic resolution, dénouement. The subject is certainly appropriate for the opera stage, but there is little doubt that the docu-drama style will be a little too close to reality for those accustomed to mythical figures from previous centuries, told in a familiar format.

Adams' *Nixon in China* stands at an odd point, between the 19th century high art form and information age kitsch, and its ability to inspire further similar works remains to be seen. The opera's mix of idiosyncrasies limits its dramatic success as its elements pull it both toward and away from unity. *Nixon* may indeed be best viewed as an experiment which justifies further development. In this respect, Will Crutchfield has offered one of the most compelling assessments of the opera:

Mr. Adams has proved that the vocabulary of Minimalism can be used to satisfy traditional requirements of characterization,

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[47]"Inventions," *New Yorker* 64(November 14, 1988): 130. Review of an Orchestra of St. Luke's all-Adams concert at Avery Fiser Hall, conducted by Adams.

pacing, variety. A well-crafted opera is possible in the idiom. Whether in this instance a work of durable worth has been created is a separate question but the demonstration itself is valuable.[48]

While Adams has shown the potential of his extended-minimalist style in a dramatic work, in the end the subject will likely be the true generator of change within opera, if in fact, it occurs. While John Rockwell has predicted a long future for the work only time will indeed tell whether this was the 'spark that started the prairie fire'.[49]

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[48]"'Nixon opens a new chapter for opera" *New York Times* 3 April 1988, Sect. II: 31.

[49] "Unlike so many new operas, grimly earnest or shinely trendy, this one's likely to last". "Why Nixon Shouldn't Pass Up 'Nixon in China'" *New York Times* 10 Dec. 1987 Sect.C: C30.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RETURN TO GRAND OPERA

Walter Cronkite, one of the American correspondents travelling with the President on that trip in 1972, and commentator on the P.B.S. broadcast of the opera, has remarked, "In our wildest imagination, not one of us who witnessed these events would have thought that one day, in the not so distant future, Richard Nixon's historic journey to China would be the subject of a grand opera".[50] As *Nixon in China* made its way through various cities, and reviews appeared in journals and newspapers around the world, Cronkite's reaction of surprise was shared by many members of the opera-going public. More important than its unusual title, however, was that *Nixon in China* appeared to represent a bold, new stage in the development of opera.

Nixon has emerged near the end of a century which has seen an unprecedented profusion of musical styles. With the new century and breaks with both romanticism and tonality there also came divisions within opera. While the traditional stream of opera continued, as it did in concert music, there was also the development of more experimental branches and a new diversity of dramatic works appeared, as varied in their styles as their subjects. It may be useful, and even essential, to review here

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[50]From the P.B.S. broadcast of the opera, October 1988.

some of the main historical trends in opera of the last century, as a background for a critical assessment of *Nixon in China.*

The majority of American composers appeared quite cautious in the first half of this century. While this generation attempted to create a native musical language through the use of jazz and folk music, the works of Gershwin, Thomson, Barber and others--all European-educated--made no real attempt to supplant opera with an indigenous form of musical drama.[51] It was only in the years following WWII that composers began to feel confident enough to cut their ties with the prevailing European aesthetics and extend the boundaries of music theater.

With its audacious title and subject *Nixon in China* first appears to be a continuation of the maverick, American "avant-garde". It is only after one goes beneath the surface and considers the history of opera in the 20th century, particularly in the United States, that the conservatism of Adams' opera begins to become apparent. Although opera's traditional wing has always been strong in North America, *Nixon* is unusual because its roots lie in the experimental tradition, led by John Cage and stemming directly from the minimalist movement of the 1960s and '70s. John Adams and his collaborators have taken these experimental

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[51]Perhaps one could cite Scott Joplin's *Tremonisha* (1911), Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), and Thomson's *The Mother of Us All* (1947) as important attempts to create a truly American opera. However, despite the use of largely indigenous musical styles and subjects, the forms are essentially those of traditional opera. Similar works, such as Leonard Bernstein's *A Quiet Place*, were also valuable attempts to create a native musical theater, midway between Broadway and the "Met".

influences to create a work that returns to the age of grand opera in many aspects of its style and subject.

In spite of the continuance of the mainstream Strauss and Puccini are perhaps the only opera composers in the twentieth century have approached the stature of Wagner and Verdi.[52] In the works of these composers, however, there is little true innovation and they represent the continuation of 19th century aesthetics: lush, romantic music and, often, historical subjects. In spite of his melodic and structural skills Puccini's melodramas show a consistent preference for sensation over substance, often relying on exotic settings, as in the ancient China of *Turandot* (1924), or the 19th century, feudal Japan of *Madama Butterfly* (1904). Although Richard Strauss kept up with current interest in psychology all but one of his fifteen operas--the autobiographical *Intermezzo* (1924)--takes place in the past, from the ancient Egypt of *Die aegyptische Helena* (1928), to 19th century Europe of *Arabella* (1933).

Even with historical settings and characters many of Strauss' works reflect an interest in deeper exploration of the human psyche which was growing throughout the arts. Although Strauss' *Salome* (1905) and Bela Bartok's one-act opera, *Bluebeard's Castle* (1909) are effective examples of

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[52]While Alban Berg's name could be included for his influence on opera, his two dramas have not yet begun to approach the works of Strauss and Puccini in their frequency of performance--due, in large part, to the greater demands made on the listener by the musical style.

expressionism, it was the works of the Second Viennese School which we most closely associate with such operas. The nightmarish thoughts of a half-mad woman searching for her lover in a moonlit forest proved to be the archetypical expressionist subject in Schoenberg's single-act monodrama *Erwartung* (1908).

The extension of expressionism to full-length opera was realized in the two dramas of Alban Berg: *Wozzeck* (1921), and *Lulu* (incomplete on his death in 1935).[53] Although Berg did not specify the time and place in which *Wozzeck* takes place the unfinished play by Georg Buchner, from which it is derived, is set in 1821 Leipzig and many stage designers have followed this lead--perhaps without good reason as the work reflects highly contemporary trends in the arts. The story, about the abuse and subsequent mental breakdown and suicide of the soldier, *Wozzeck,* is the definitive expressionist work, and like *Erwartung,* is told in a free atonal style.

In contrast to the composers of Schoenberg's circle were the neo-classicists who, at the same time, were producing stage works which relied on traditional forms and historical subjects. Opera-oratorios and number operas were paralleled with anachronistic music in the works of many of the periods most

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[53] *Lulu* and Schoenberg's biblical tale, *Moses und Aron* (1930-32), are two rare uses of the 12-tone method in full-length opera. The procedure may have caused some difficulties as both were left unfinished even though the composers appear to have had sufficient time to complete them.

gifted composers, such as Hindemith, Honegger, Milhaud, and Poulenc. Stravinsky wrote paradigms of each genre in his *Oedipus rex* (1927) and *The Rake's Progress* (1951), respectively--the latter is not strictly historical but based on a series of 18th century paintings.

While the production of large-scale works continued in the opening decades of the twentieth century, for a number of reasons chamber operas became increasingly common. With the more intimate nature of expressionist subjects and with economic hardship in the aftermath of the First World War, a trend towards smaller works was inevitable. Though pre-dated by *Erwartung* and *Bluebeard's Castle,* Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) and Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* (1918), required even fewer resources to stage.[54] These pieces are not operas and do not use elaborate sets or many performers, but the strong subject matter and compatible musical styles made them highly relevant to the times and widely influential as an alternative for experimentation.

Both of these trends towards smaller scale and introspective subject matter are seen in two of most important opera composers of the mid-century period, Benjamin Britten and Hans Werner Henze. Though both men composed in evolving styles, their works are more conservative than experimental. Many of

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[54]*L'Histoire* was intended for a small travelling troop while Schoenberg wrote *Pierrot* for a Berlin cabaret.

Britten's operas are based on literary texts and historical subjects. His operas often contain acts of violence, and many, such as *Peter Grimes* (1945) and *Death in Venice* (1973),[55] an element of implicit homosexuality. *Grimes* has often been compared with other anti-heros such as Petruchka and Pierrot, and like Wozzeck he is forced--in this instance literally--to commit suicide. Although many of Henze's works reflect strong socialist beliefs, like Britten he has maintained a preference for traditional opera and for historical subjects through much of his career. Although many of Henze's stage works are for the opera house, his story of the run-away slave turned revolutionary, *El Cimarron* (1969-70), is in the *Pierrot*-style and referred to as a "recital for four musicians". The work reflected Henze's new belief that opera was too imbued with capitalism to be meaningful to the utopian society envisioned by the New Left.[56]

In the years immediately following the Second World War many of the more experimental composers avoided opera. This was partly the result of a nihilistic trend in music, but also

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[55]Based on the Thomas Mann novella *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912).

[56]Henze had acknowleged only reluctantly what Kurt Weill had understood as a young man. With the severe economic conditions in Germany in the late 1920s Weill and Bertold Brecht turned away from opera to cabaret-like works with tuneful, jazz-inspired music, such as *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1930). The medium allowed for musical experimentation as well as serving as a outlet for political protest--until both works were promptly banned by the Nazis when they came to power in 1933. A rare voice of political protest in American music came from a disciple of Weill and Brecht, Marc Blitzstein (1905-64), whose works are in a similar style, with dialogue, recitatives, and songs in a jazz-like idiom.

because of the incompatibility of many of the new styles. The complexity of much post-war music kept many composers from both sides of the Atlantic--such as Carter, Babbit, Boulez, Penderecki or Ligeti--from achieving much success in opera, or even from composing for the theater at all. For Stockhausen and many of the composers associated with Darmstadt the concern with absolute music was non-exclusive at first, and only cautiously did they incorporate non-musical elements into their work. Generally, European composers have tended to place stronger emphasis on music while their American counterparts pay greater attention to the visual aspects of their stage works.[57]

Like other European composers of his generation, Luciano Berio (b.1925) has tended to combine existentialist themes with highly structured music. Theatricality is inherent to Berio's works, both in the concert music as well as the theater pieces. Berio often explores the dramatic subject through the use of extended vocal and instrumental techniques and new notation, as in chamber works such as *Sequenza III* (1965), and *Circles* (1960), in which the singer circles the musicians who imitate the vocal sounds with their instruments. Larger-scale pieces with more staging,

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[57]As Argentinian-born Mauricio Kagel (b.1931) has spent most of his career in Europe he is somewhat of a musical anomaly, often leaning closer towards theater than pure music. In many of his works Kagel uses quotation and humour to question of the value of accumulating historical masterpieces--as in *Ludwig van* (1970), or *Match* (1965). In England, Peter Maxwell Davies (b.1934) has created numerous stage works, many of them are "music theater" pieces in the *Pierrot* mould, such as *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) which employs a single singing actor and chamber ensemble, with each musician playing inside a cage.

like *Passaggio* (1963) and *Laborintus II* (1965), have allowed Berio to express the themes of isolation and decay more explicitly. In *Opera* (1970), he created a highly structured collage depicting the decline of civilization through the images of the sinking of the Titanic, the legend of Orpheus, and a hospital terminal ward. Similar themes were explored by Berio in more recent large and original operatic works such as *La vera storia* (1982) and *Un re in as colto* (1985).

Perhaps the most politically outspoken European of his generation has been Berio's compatriot Luigi Nono (b.1924). Nono's first opera, *Intollerenza* ("a scenic action,"1960), which uses film and slides and an almost constant chorus (the exploited and oppressed masses), tells of the plight of an immigrant. Although Nono did not write another opera until *Al gram sole carico d'amore* (1975), about the Paris Commune of 1871, his instrumental and tape pieces still tend to outwardly reflect his politics.

As a member of the Darmstadt school Nono was a staunch opponent of John Cage and indeterminacy, though Nono and Cage may in fact represent different sides of the same coin. Where Nono's politics are contained in the subject matter, in Cage's music politics--anarchy--are the means by which the it operates. The division between Nono and Cage, however, is representative of the growing independence of American composers.

It was only at the age of seventy-five that John Cage "composed" his first opera, *Europeras I and II* (1988). Using chance procedures Cage created a collage consisting entirely of extracts from operas within the public domain. Nineteen singers are used, each representing one of the voice types of traditional opera. Each singer performs the aria of his or her choice a cappella. Likewise, each of the two dozen instrumentalists has a different and unrelated fragment of a score. Other aspects of the opera also operate by chance procedures: exits and entrances; the sets--from photos in Frankfurt libraries, and lights, controlled by computers operating by chance procedures. Props, chosen randomly from *Webster's Dictionary*, include a giant bubble machine, a coffin that cranks up and down, a garbage can, an igloo that zips and unzips, a jeep, a giant mynah bird, and a radio-controled Zeppelin.

While the *New York Times'* critic John Rockwell has simply called the resulting confusion "gently charming," the philosophy expressed in *Europeras 1 and 2* was not so frivolous.[58] Frankfurt Opera's artistic directors Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn saw the work as the historic conclusion of opera.[59] The ultimate

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[58]"John Cage's Quasi Opera has American Premiere". 16 July, 1988, sect. A:11.

[59]"Colleagues of Theodor Adorno, they saw this as exactly the project Adorno would have undertaken to complete his discussion of the operatic tradition. Metzger believes that after *Europeras 1 & 2* no more operas can be written." Leah Durner "John Cage, Past and Future in *Europeras 1 and 2*," *Ear* 13 (April 1988): 10.

value of the work, Metzger believes, will only be understood in the future. "What is important," he says, "is that property relations and the principle of exchange be abolished--these can for the time being only be violated in the shape of gifts or robbery."[60]

Long before Cage envisioned his first opera he and other composers, such as Christian Wolff, teamed up with artists in other media to create a theater of spontaneity. These "happenings" reflected Cage's own nihilistic approach to the arts and have generated similar multi-media genres. Since the 1960s and the works of early exponents such as Nam June Paik, performance art has developed an increasingly diverse following. The use of electronic technology and music have allowed the unique story-telling abilities of Laurie Anderson (b.1947) to reach a wide audience. With the financial support of a large record company Anderson's reputation has gone from "Downtown" artist to international recording "star," with such albums as *Big Science* (1982)--derived from her large touring work, *United States, Parts I-IV.*

Also developing in part from Cage's inspiration was the minimalist movement in the 1960s and early 70s. Originating in the visual arts, minimalism was quickly adopted to describe a contemporary style of music. Both artists and musicians found their home and early recognition in the lofts and galleries of the

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[60]Ibid., p.13.

Soho district of downtown Manhattan, a community that Philip Glass has described as "a little like what people said Paris was like in the 1920s." The minimalists were unified in several aspects of their approach: a political awareness and concern for social issues, a rejection of tradition, and a reduction to the most basic elements of their respective arts. Underlying all minimalist works was a desire for absolute objectivity, based on the belief that meaning should be dependent on the viewer's experience and interpretation.

The elimination of personal expression was often achieved in the visual arts through a heightened emphasis on the materials, with a preference for industrial qualities, and in some cases, procedures. With no hierarchy of parts, i.e., no sense of front, back or sides, the box-like sculptures of Donald Judd (b.1928), and Robert Morris (b.1931) are some of the most characteristic of minimalism. Many of Judd's pieces show the influence of buildings in their form, the industrial quality of their design and the materials, such as galvanized iron, aluminium, and coloured plexiglass. John Coplans has written that Judd's objective art is created by his rejection of illusion or "any device that represents, symbolizes, or acts to deter or prevent the direct ordering of the viewer's perceptions other than the sculpture itself and its ambient situation."[61] Moreover, Marcia Tucker writes:

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[61] John Coplans, Catalogue from the *Art Museum of Pasadena*, 17.

[The minimalist sculpture] arouses in us a desire to confirm our expectations, so that we walk around it to see what we already know, and are literally disillusioned. . . . The object acquires meaning or completes itself in relation to a human activity, to the behaviour of the spectator as he physically participates in the work by walking around it.[62]

The interaction of the viewer represents a fundamental change in aesthetics: moving the emphases from the object to the spectator, who must now take part.

The four principal composers associated with minimalism share a number of influences and stylistic traits but each followed a different path, and focused on one or two elements, refining them to the virtual exclusion of the other parameters of music. For La Monte Young (b.1935) an interest in serialism and the music of Anton Webern led to extending the duration of notes. This procedure resulted in compositions such as the serial *Octet for Brass* (1957), in which notes are held for up to three and four minutes. Where the emphasis is clearly on harmony in Young's music, pulse and repetition are central to that of Terry Riley (b.1935), as in his highly influential *In C* (1964).

Equally radical in its reduction was the music of both Steve Reich (b.1937) and Philip Glass (b.1936). From the mid-sixties to 1973 Reich focused on two primary concerns: the use of phase, and process.[63] In the pieces from this period the role of timbre

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[62]Marcia Tucker, *Robert Morris* (New York: Praeger), 33, 25.

[63]Phasing is essentially the creation of a canon by having two or more instruments play identical material with a delay between entries. In what Reich refers to as "the gradual process," the primary formal procedure in his work, whatever the procedure in the work it should be audible and

contributes greatly to the success of making the process audible, as ensembles of identical instruments are often used--as in *Four Organs* (1970), *Piano Phase* (1967), and other works. The lack of timbral variety, in addition to making the process more evident, also serves to focus the listener's attention on rhythm, the primary element in Reich's music. In contrast, through the same period Glass composed almost exclusively for his own ensemble--usually consisting of electric organs, woodwinds and soprano (all heavily amplified). In all of the music from the late 1960s through the early '70s Glass focused on rhythm and repetition, using a technique influenced by Indian music which he called "additive repetition."[64] All other parameters were virtually excluded, with constant dynamic levels, no traditional melody, and harmonies reduced to a single key for each piece or long section.

In the early 1970s both Reich and Glass started to explore wider musical styles. With *Drumming* (1973) Reich began to extend his musical language, moving away from the use of phase, and towards increasingly large ensembles. The opportunity to use larger groups of instruments came partly as a result of the growing audience for minimalist music. By the early 1970s both

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evolve slowly enough so that the sound and structure of the music become one and the same.

[64]Glass describes the technique of "additive process" as "a musical grouping or measure of, say, five notes is repeated several times, then is followed by a measure of six notes (also repeated), then seven, then eight, and so on." *Music By Philip Glass* (New York: Harper & Row), 67.

composers were beginning to find audiences outside their community, and stylistic changes were partly the result of the music's acceptance. Within the span of only a few years Reich began to receive performances and commissions by major orchestras and Glass became involved in theatre projects which would lead to commissions by major opera companies.

Although Glass had worked as a theater musician for many years, in 1975 he teamed up with theater director Robert Wilson, to create his first "opera", *Einstein on the Beach.* This work formed a natural union of similar movements happening simultaneously in music and theater. While Glass was composing increasingly longer pieces in a simplified language, Wilson had been reducing the elements of the theater, and extending the durations of his productions. In 1973 Wilson's work culminated in the monumental *Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, a 12-hour compendium of earlier character studies, *The King of Spain* (1969), and *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* (1971).

The musical style of *Einstein* developed directly from the two large works which preceded it. Where, in *Music in Twelve Parts* (1971-74), Glass explored both additive processes and cyclic structure, in *Another Look at Harmony* (1975) he focused on harmony as a method of structure. Glass has written that in *Einstein* he attempted

> to link harmonic structure directly to a base rhythmic structure, reversing the traditional priorities of Western music. . . . What I was trying to discover was a function between rhythm and

harmony. We have what's called functional harmony but I wanted to find a rhythmic structure that was functional in terms of harmony. Everything in *Einstein* is about that, there's practically no note in the piece that doesn't conform to that idea. The opera is rather obsessive in that way.[65]

The instrumentation was left with that of the Ensemble to which Glass added a 16-voice chamber choir, a second soprano soloist, 1 tenor soloist, and a violinist (played by a character dressed as Einstein, who sits midway between the stage and the orchestra).

A non-narrative opera, *Einstein* uses only a small amount of text and no dialogue. The spoken texts where written by the performers--such as the judge's speech, "Paris: City of Light." The material performed by the chorus consists entirely of the solfege syllables and numbers which relate to the music itself (the numbers describe the rhythmic structure). As an opera of images, three visual "themes" are used throughout *Einstein*: a Train, a Trial and Prison, and a Field-with-Spaceship, which are presented during four acts. This non-narrative series of events occurs between five "Knee Plays," which act much like intermezzos, making the performance continuous (Figure 14).

Knee Play 1 (Chorus and electric organ)

Act I	Scene 1	Train (ensemble with solo voice and chorus joining in at the end)
	Scene 2	Trial (chorus, violin, electric organ and flutes)

Knee Play 2 (Violin solo)

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[65]Lawrence Shyer. *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989), 221.

Act II	Scene 1	Dance 1--Field with Spaceship (ensemble with solo voice/dancers)
	Scene 2	Night Train (2 voices, chorus and small ensemble)
Knee Play 3	(Chorus a capella)	
Act III	Scene 1	Trial/Prison (chorus and electric organ, ensemble at the end)
	Scene 2	Dance 2--Field with Spaceship (6 voices, violin, electric organ)
Knee Play 4	(Chorus and violin)	
Act IV	Scene 1	Building/Train (chorus and ensemble)
	Scene 2	Bed (solo electric organ and voice)
	Scene 3	Spaceship (chorus and ensemble)

Figure 14. Einstein on the Beach

Glass has written that "the portrait of Einstein that we would be constructing replaced the idea of plot, narrative, development, all the paraphernalia of conventional theatre." This "vision" would take the form of a meditation on the common ideas held on Einstein and what he represents. "Facts and chronology could be included (and indeed were)," wrote Glass; "conveying that kind of information, though, was certainly not the point of the work."[66]

Not surprisingly, *Einstein* received mixed reviews. The lack of narrative, or the "conveying of information," was certainly a problem for many opera-goers and opera critics. "Stage activity and sound are linked only in that they occur at the same time," wrote Paul Griffiths, concluding, "only the most innocent observer

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[66]Philip Glass. *Music By Philip Glass*, 32.

would expect to learn much about Einstein from the opera."[67] For New York-based critics, with more exposure to minimalism, the opera perhaps came as less of a challenge. John Rockwell saw the work of Robert Wilson as the continuation of the "visionary-mystical movement" descending from Wagner and the surrealists,[68] and Andrew Porter referred to *Einstein* as "precisely organized, tautly patterned, economical in its focus, and austere in its decor."[69]

Whether good press or bad, with the interest created by *Einstein* Glass' popularity grew immensely. The publicity *Einstein* aroused attracted an increasingly large and youthful audience to Glass' reduced musical language and amplified ensemble As a result of Glass' popular success opera companies have been eager to commission new works from him. After two sold-out performances at the Metropolitan Opera *Einstein* quickly went from an experimental music theater to "opera trilogy" as

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[67]Paul Griffiths. "Opera Glass," *Musical Times*. 126 (June 1985): 338.

[68]"Robert Wilson's Stage Works: Originality and Influence," *Robert Wilson, The Theater of Images* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984). "To me and others who admire minimalism at its best (we aren't talking here of childish, new-age reductions or of the mediocrity that comprises the bulk of any widely disseminated style), the repetition can attain a compelling, meditative, hypnotic intensity. Especially in his music-theatre works, when glass has a subject suitable to mystical, rhapsodic expansion or gently purling lyricism, as in much of *Satyagraha* and (to a lesser but still telling extent) *Akhnaten*, Glass has attained musical heights that justify both his current success and his claim to posterity's attention." John Rockwell, "Glass at the Crossroads," *Opera* 39(11): 1276.

[69]Andrew Porter. "Many-Colored Glass," *Music of Three Seasons (1974-77)* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), 461.

two further works were commissioned--*Satygraha* (1980), a study of politics, based on Mahatma Gandhi, and *Akhnaten* (1983), on the 15th century B.C. Egyptian pharaoh who was the first monotheist ruler. These works were, however, a departure from Glass' experimental background. Both operas use largely conventional libretti, and music. Where Glass had not used opera singers or an orchestra for *Einstein*, in *Satyagraha* and *Akhnaten* he was obliged to use both.[70]

In recent years Glass has taken on several more theater projects, and with each new work he appears to have edged closer to a style of conventional theatre to which his music is not suited. The recent theater works tend to fall into one of two categories: full-fledged operas, or smaller-scale works, intended for touring. Among Glass' theater works have been the chamber operas *The Juniper Tree* (from 1984, composed with Robert Moran) and *The Fall of the House of Usher,* the full-length operas *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (adapted by Doris Lessing from her novel of the same name), and the 1984 collaboration with Robert Wilson on his *Civil warS* series. In the 1987 touring piece, *1000 Airplanes on the Roof,* a monologue for

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[70]"[In *Satyagraha*] what we ended up with was something resembling an opera libretto--a staged telling of Gandhi's story divided into acts and scenes, complete with settings, action and vocal text." Philip Glass. *Music By Philip Glass*. p.95. For Satyagraha Glass based the orchestra on his own ensemble: triple winds (flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons (2), and one bass clarinet), and a standard compliment of strings--no brass or percussion. To these instruments was added one electric organ filling a continuo-like role. The orchestra for *Akhnaten* is more standard.

actor with text by David Henry Hwang and spectacular holographic scenery, Glass provided little more than high volume background music that was only remotely related to the stage action. With more events in the works, including a $325,000 commission from the Metropolitan, the once innovative Glass may emerge as the late twentieth century's answer to Meyerbeer.

Nixon in China is a result of the same trend toward excess which led to the creation of Glass' post-*Einstein* operatic works. In an effort to attract as large an audience as possible Adams and Sellars have created more of a "pop culture" opera than a historical or political one. Paradoxically, they have used developments of the "avant-garde"--minimalist music, and Robert Wilson's character studies of twentieth century figures--as a ticket to the past, and to large scale form and popular success. Moreover, in spite of the use of an objective, docu-drama format, they have chosen to mythologize the events and characters, and thus return to subjectivity and romanticism.

The trappings, or "paraphernalia," of grand opera can be found in most aspects of *Nixon*. The Asian setting remains as mysterious and exotic to us as it was in *Turandot*. Likewise, the opulence of the big scenes--the arrival at the airport, the banquet, the tour--with their choruses of soldiers, dignitaries and citizens, provide traditional spectacle, culminating in the ballet. The characters and subject, too, are really no different than those

of Don Carlos, only more recent. Just like the great libretti of Lorenzo da Ponte, Goodman's *Nixon* presents the standard late-18th century configuration of characters--two pairs of lovers, the solitary and noble Chou, the buffo Kissinger (why, one might ask, is Kissinger a buffo bass and not Nixon or Mao?)--while the events allow for the spectacle of grand opera.

While the opera is based on an event of great importance--we are still in the post-summit era, as Nixon's reopening of relations with the People's Republic of China was an event which todays leaders did not wish to jeopardise, in spite of the crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in 1989--the summit itself tends to serve only as an interesting backdrop. In spite of this, the importance of the negotiations is still apparent, and the issues discussed at the summit, Taiwan in particular, are mentioned in the opera, but not dwelled on.[71]

Although we must be thankful for the exclusion of a great amount of sung negotiations, the lack of any real opinion as to the characters' places in history is disconcerting. Where one might expect an opera in which Richard Nixon and Mao Tse-tung are the principal characters to be political, *Nixon in China* expresses few ideas. Though an objective basis has been used, the characters

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[71]For both sides the main reason for renewing relations was their mutual fear and mistrust of the Soviet Union. The United States saw the opportunity to gain the upper hand on the U.S.S.R. in the wake of its split with China. While China also feared a Soviet invasion, they also needed U.S. aid in modernising--so much so that they ignored the Watergate scandal, stating that it was an internal matter.

and events of *Nixon in China* have been mythologized and become only quasi-historical, and ultimately, safe. In the end, *Nixon in China* is not really about politics at all, but politicians as human beings.

And, as interesting as these characters are, the creators' avoidance of a stand as to their place in history reduces the coherence of the opera, and can only be explained as a result of their unwillingness to offend elements of the audience, and thus risk loosing a portion of their broad appeal. While presenting the opera as an objective docu-drama, the creators have disregarded the entire Richard Nixon, and as Will Crutchfield has perhaps best pointed out, the avoidance of the complete Nixon is to overlook too much.[72]

Likewise, Adams' music has taken minimalism as a starting point, and adapted it to the demands of traditional opera. This is achieved partly through Adams' integration of both classical and popular music. In this style anything is fair game: counterpoint,

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[72]"Problematic," he writes, "is the creators' dogged avoidance of comment on the whole Nixon." ["Nixon Opens a New Chapter on Opera," *New York Times*, 3 April, 1988, Sect. II: 31.] More disconcerting have been comments from Adams which tend to discredit any claims of objectivity. While recently released White House transcripts reveal Nixon suggested using members of the Teamsters union to 'bash in the heads' of anti-war protestors, Adams has said:

> Alice and I created our own Nixon, and we fell in love with him. Seeing the real Nixon again on television lately was annoying. We've focused on his more heroic aspects. He's such an interesting character because he's so vulnerable. . . . We didn't try to make saints of these people or to rehabilitate them. We tried to make each character speak as eloquently as he or she could.

Von Buchau. "Not Just an Entertainment," *Opera News* 52(4): 26.

inspired by Mozart's finales, programme music (such as "the summer storm") recalling Beethoven, Wagner and even Glenn Miller. The result is a language without the "difficulty" of much twentieth-century music, and one which does reflect some current cultural movements.

Adams' comments have indicated that he clearly sees himself as a part of the period and aesthetic known as Postmodernism:

> My attitude towards creation is one of incorporating in my compositions everything I've learned and experienced of the past. . . . I like to think of the example of the architect Philip Johnson, especially in his most recent work . . . the A.T.&T. building in New York City is an example of the sensuousness, reminiscence, and sentiment; but it also feels like a part of our contemporary experience. Now, I'm not saying that my music has split pedestals and curlicues, but there is a sense of the past in it.[73]

The 'sense of the past,' found in Adams' music is the glue which binds this opera together, for it is contained in virtually all elements of the work. A description of Postmodern art, given by Fredric Jamison could, thus, apply equally well to *Nixon*:

> characterized by a play of surfaces and a loss of interpretive depth; an obsession with simulation and mass-produced images; . . . a predilection for pastiche over parody; a treatment of difference as a mode of relation; a 'derealized' sense of history; and a schizophrenic splintering of subjectivity. Materials they no longer simply 'quote', as a Joyce or Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance.[74]

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[73]"An interview With John Adams, by Jonathan Cott," *Harmonielehre*. Nonesuch 79115.

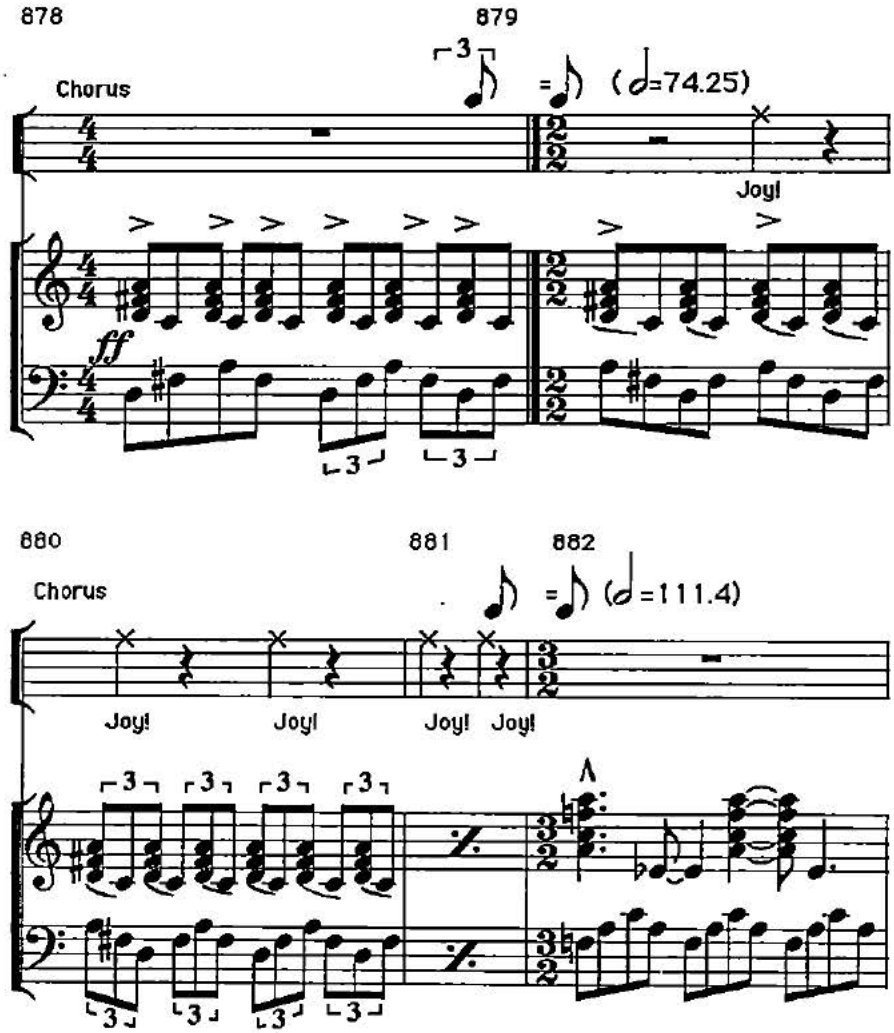
[74]Fredric Jamison. "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review 146 (July/August 1984): 64.

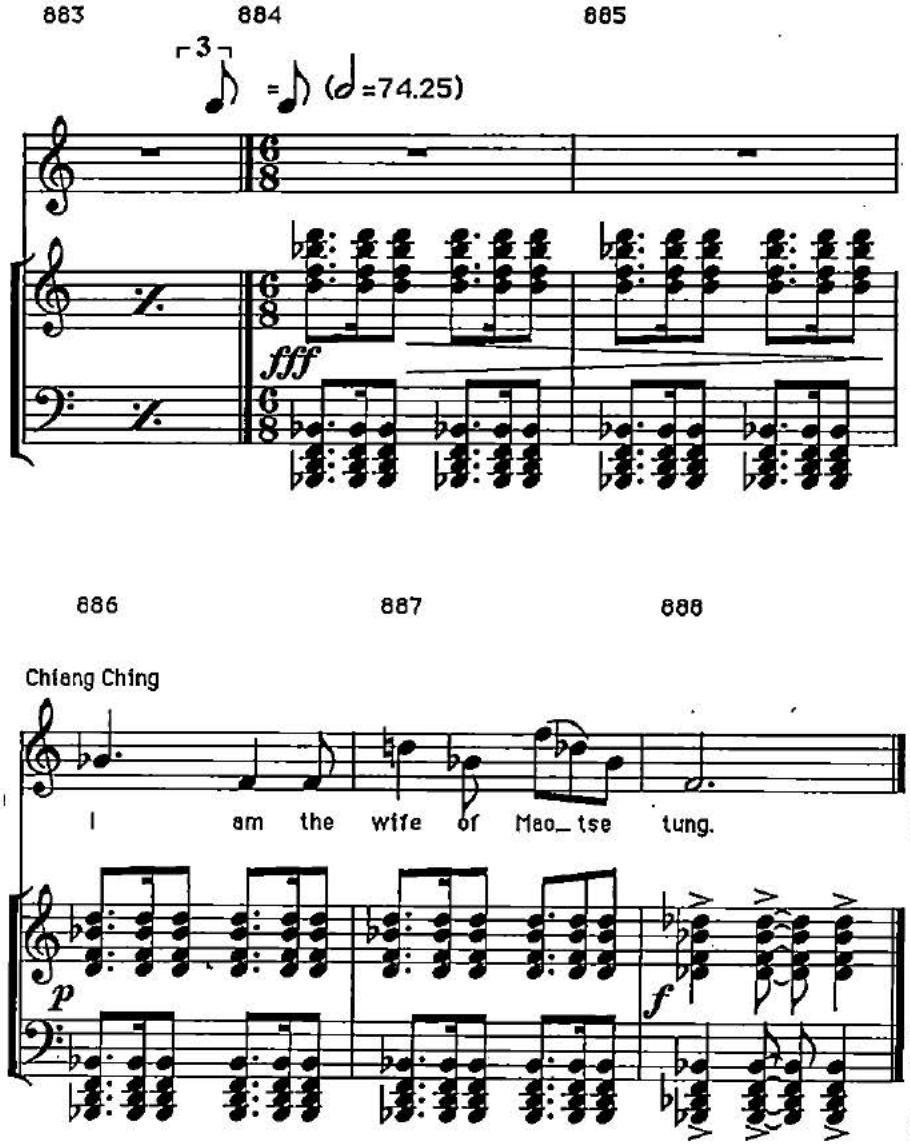
It is, perhaps, their absorption of the characteristics of Postmodernism that Adams and Sellars were referring to when they spoke of their intention to create works which reflect contemporary American life. Moreover, by so closely associating themselves and the opera with the latest cultural trends *Nixon's* creators have taken an extra step towards making it the season's "hot ticket".

In *Nixon in China* the denial of the experimental tradition has been interpreted by many as reflective of the "avant-garde" itself. In spite of the novelty of the subject matter and the authors' claims to be reflecting contemporary American life, in many ways they have returned to grand opera, and thus to Europe of the 19th century. Certainly, in its subject and its use of the vernacular and kitsch in its music, language, and staging, *Nixon* is very much an American artefact. In the end, perhaps *Nixon in China* is best viewed as another opportunity, given to us by Peter Sellars, to re-examine our culture and times. While the opera has a number of fine dramatic moments and the music can often stand on its own, it resembles more a return to safe court entertainment than "revolutionary" art. Ironically, what may in fact make *Nixon in China* truly contemporary is simply that it *is* an opera: archaic, thus modern.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example 1. (Act II, scene two, mm.878-888)

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I am the wife of Mao_ tse tung.
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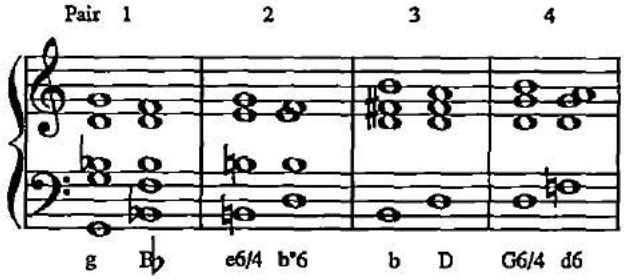
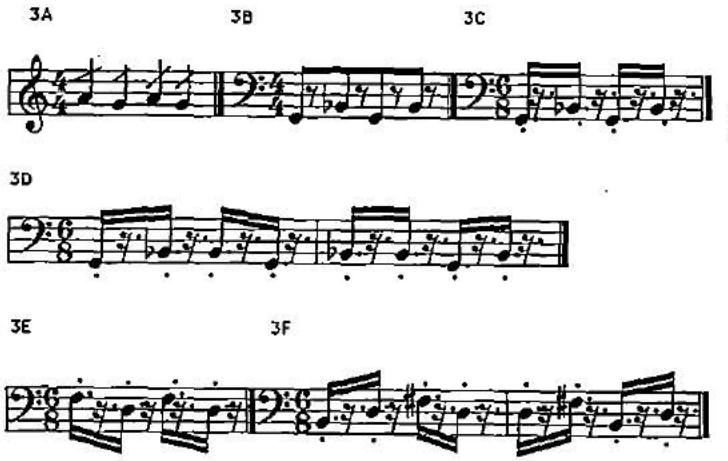
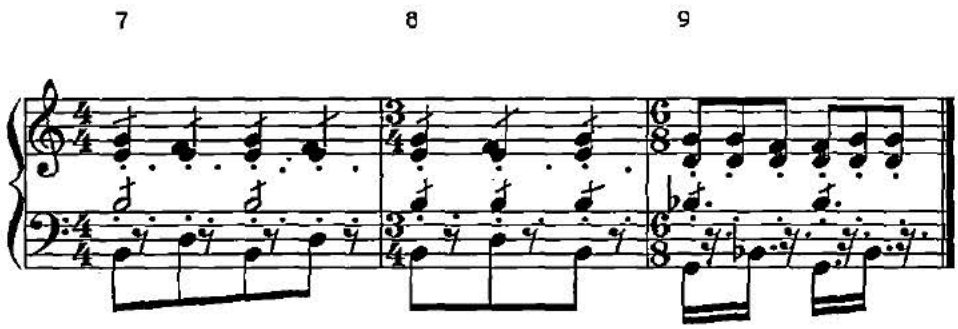
Example2 (Act III, mm.1-42)



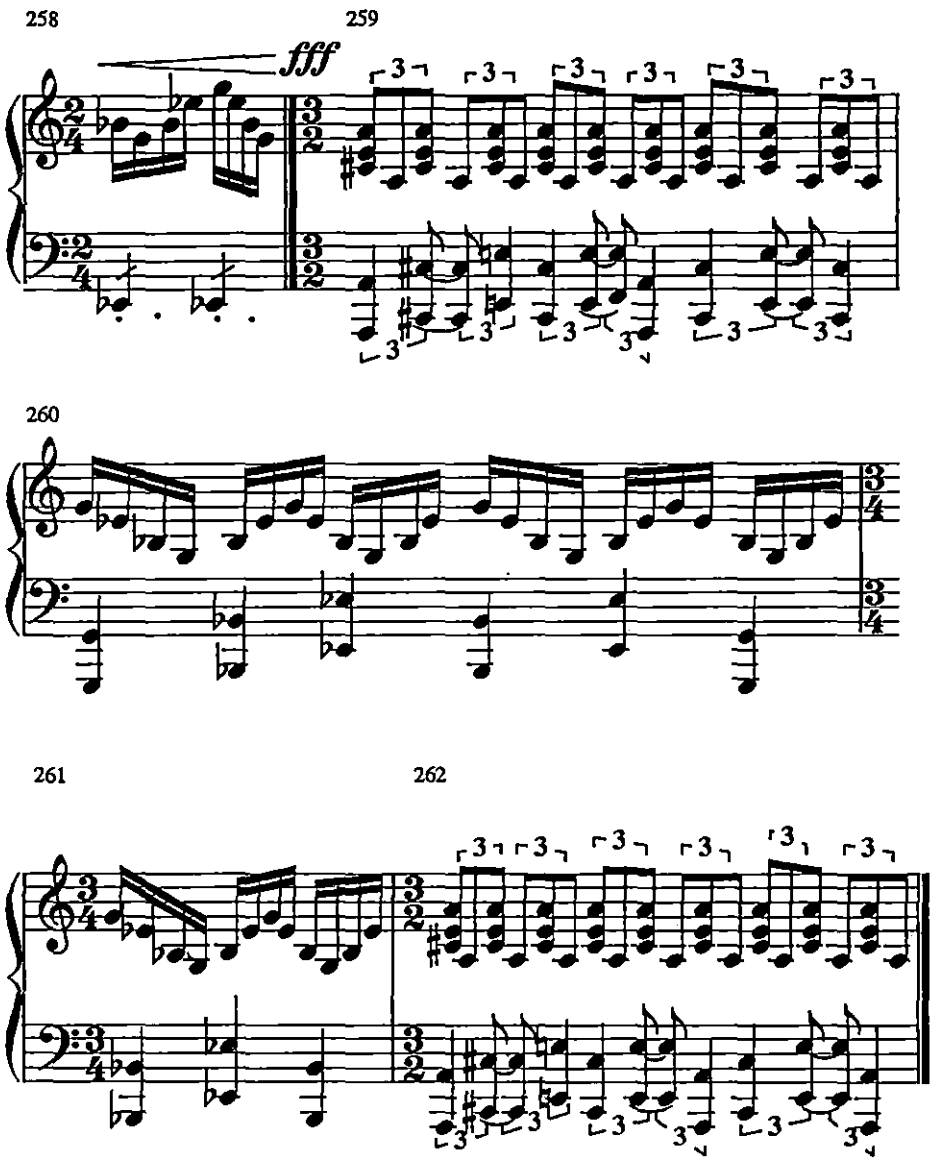
Example 3 (Act III, mm.1-42)



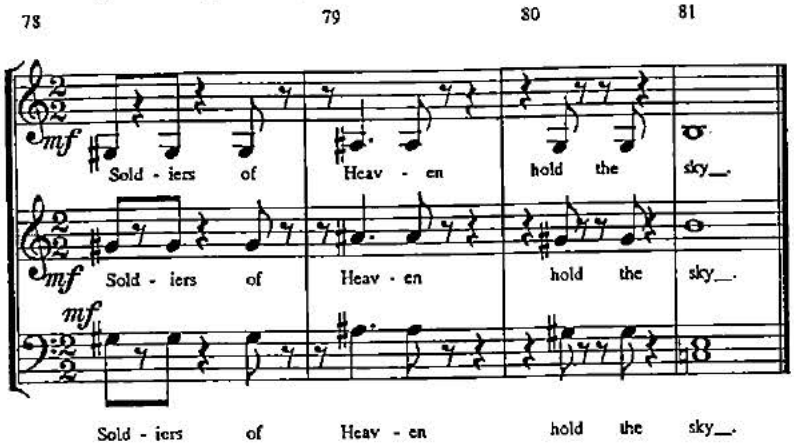
Example 4 (Act III, mm.7-9)



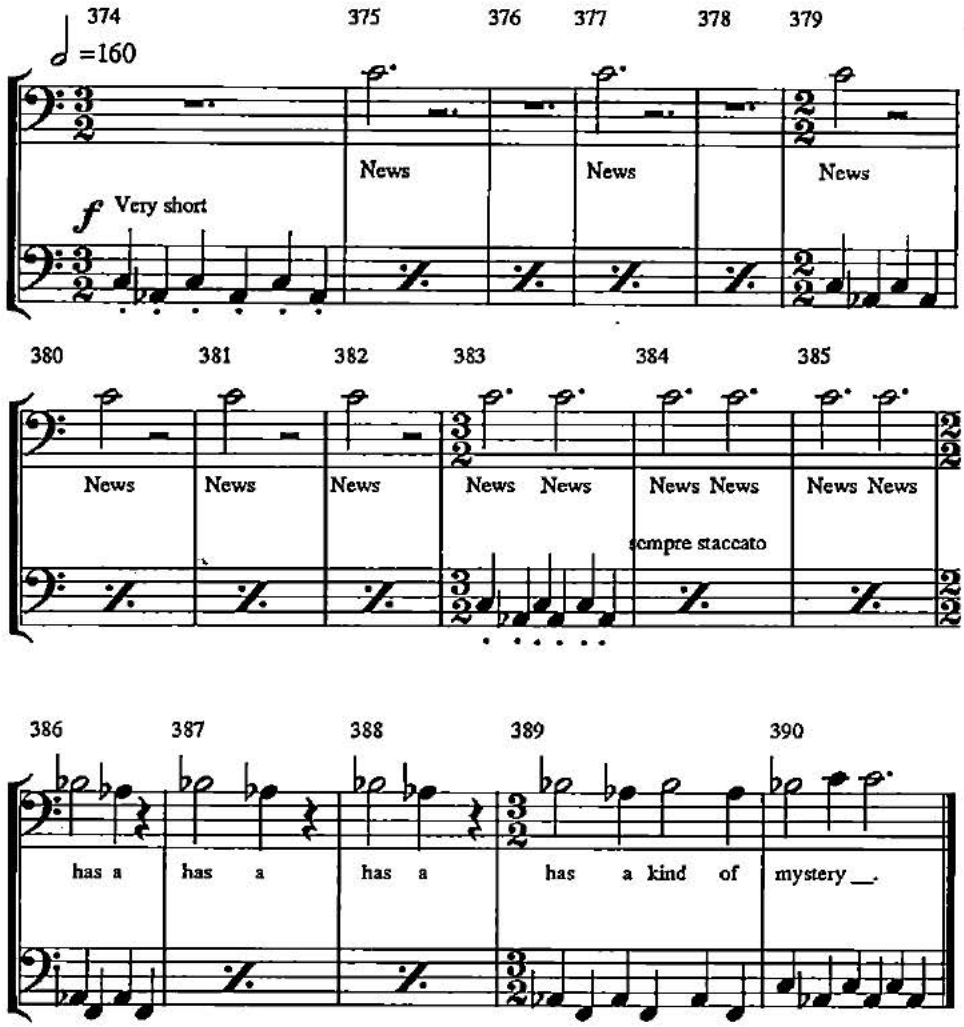
Example 5 (Act I, scene one, mm.258-262)



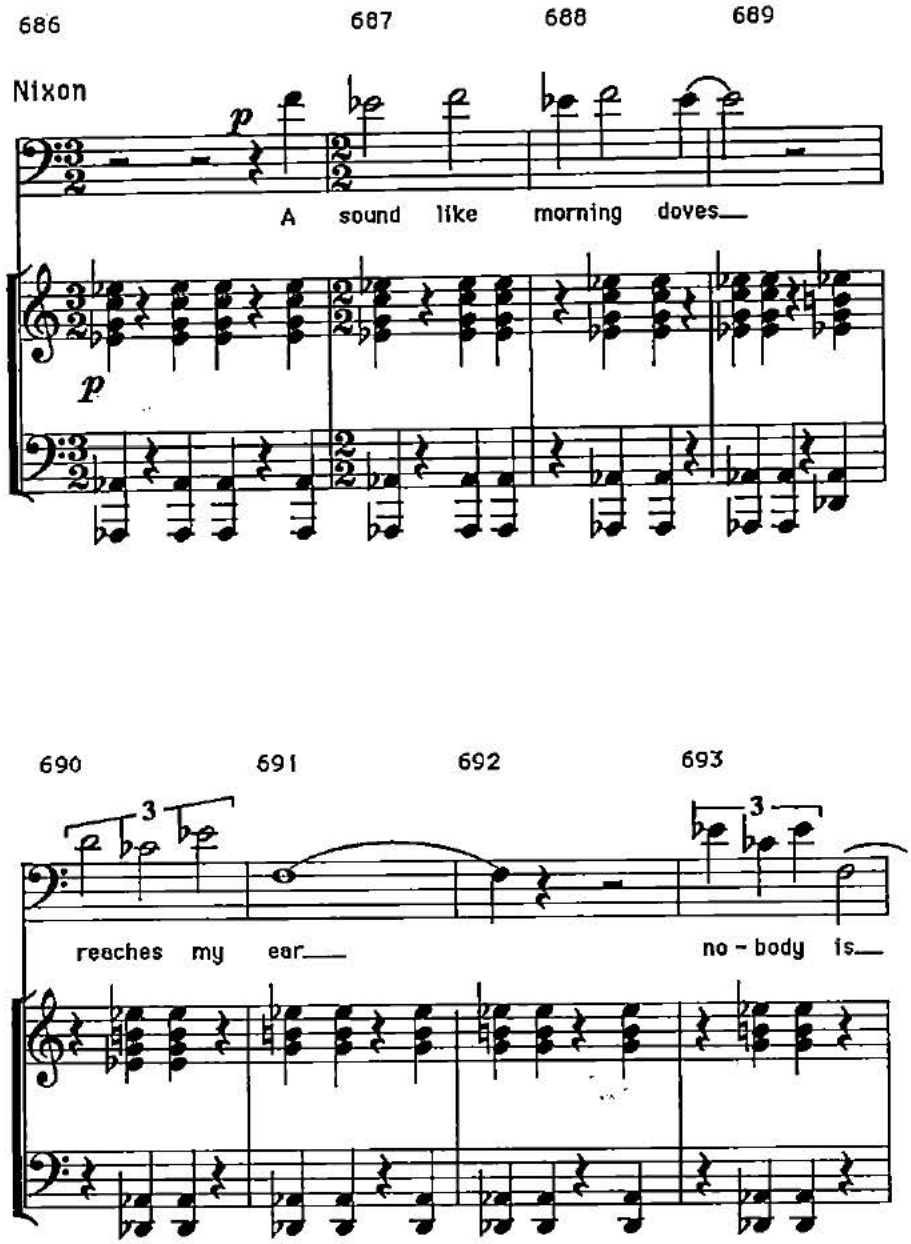
Example 6 (Act I, scene one, mm.78-81)

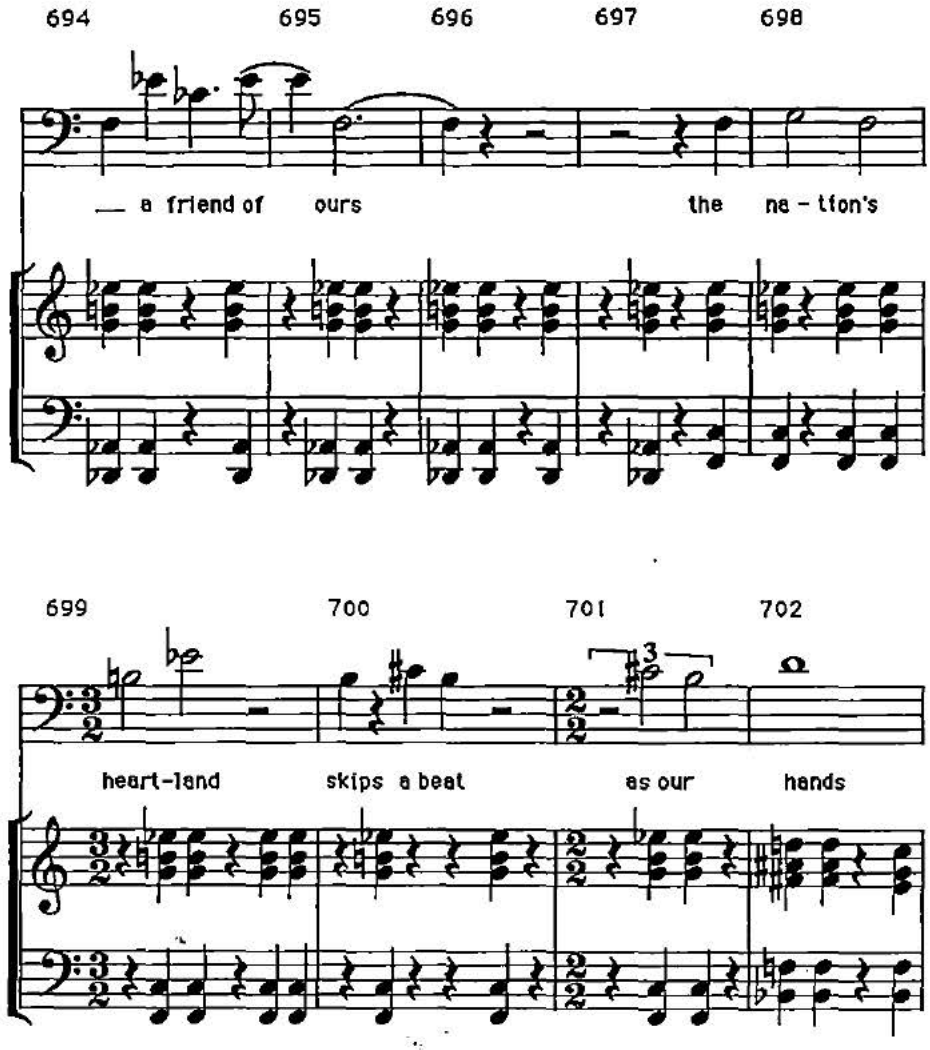


Example 7 (Act I, scene one, mm.374-390)



Example 8 (Act I, scene one, mm.686-717)

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— a friend of ours
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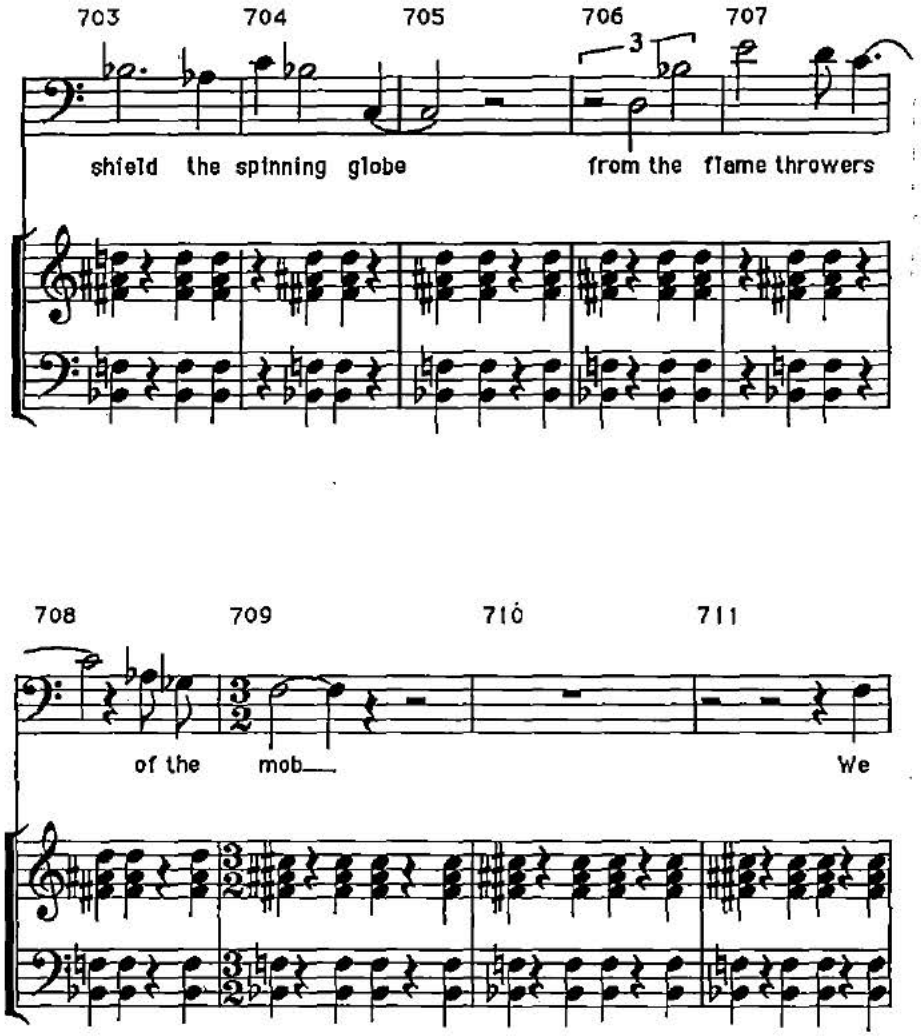
702
3
heart-land
skips a beat
as our
hands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3
shield the spinning globe
from the flame throwers
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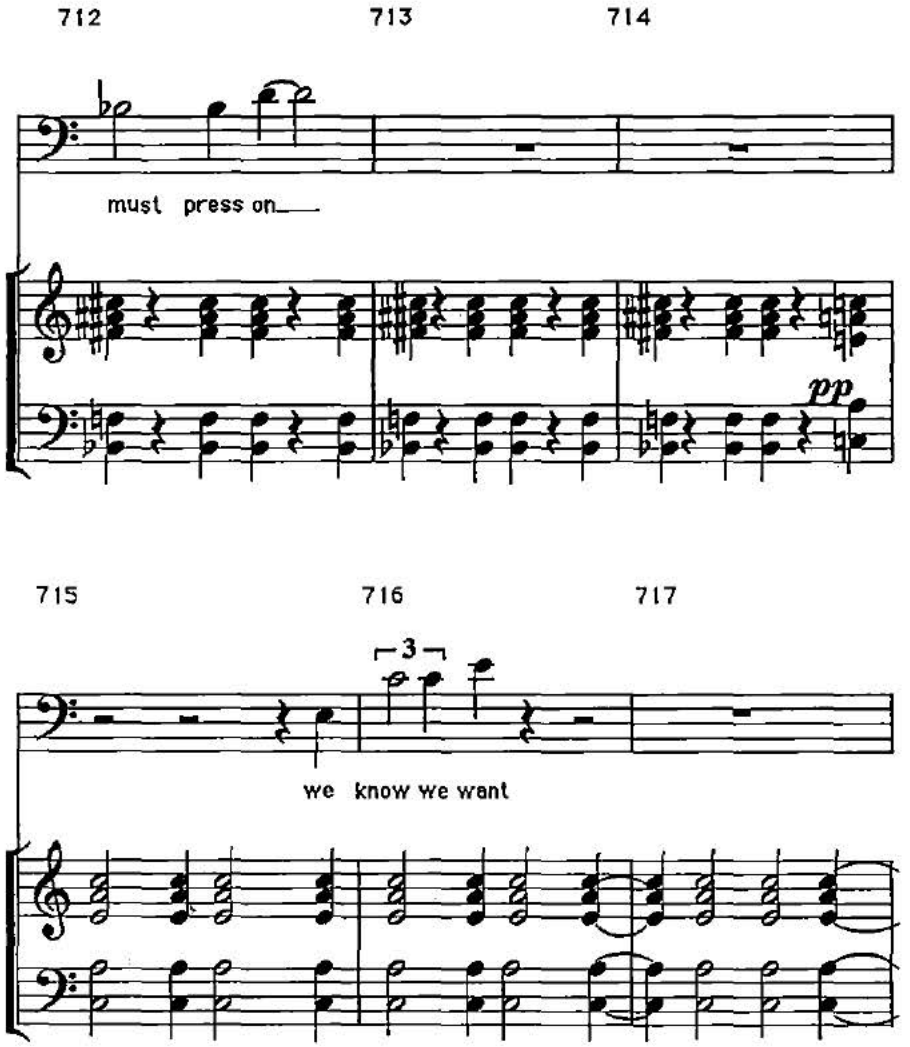
of the mob—
We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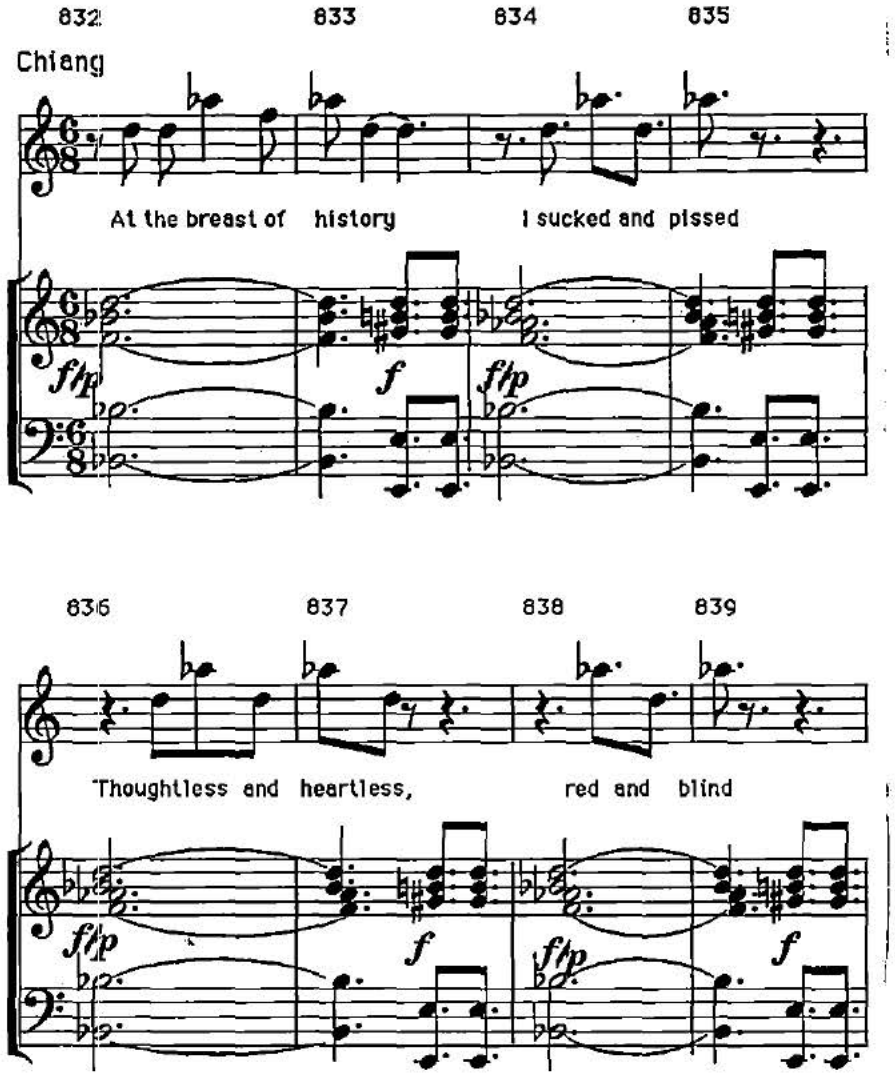
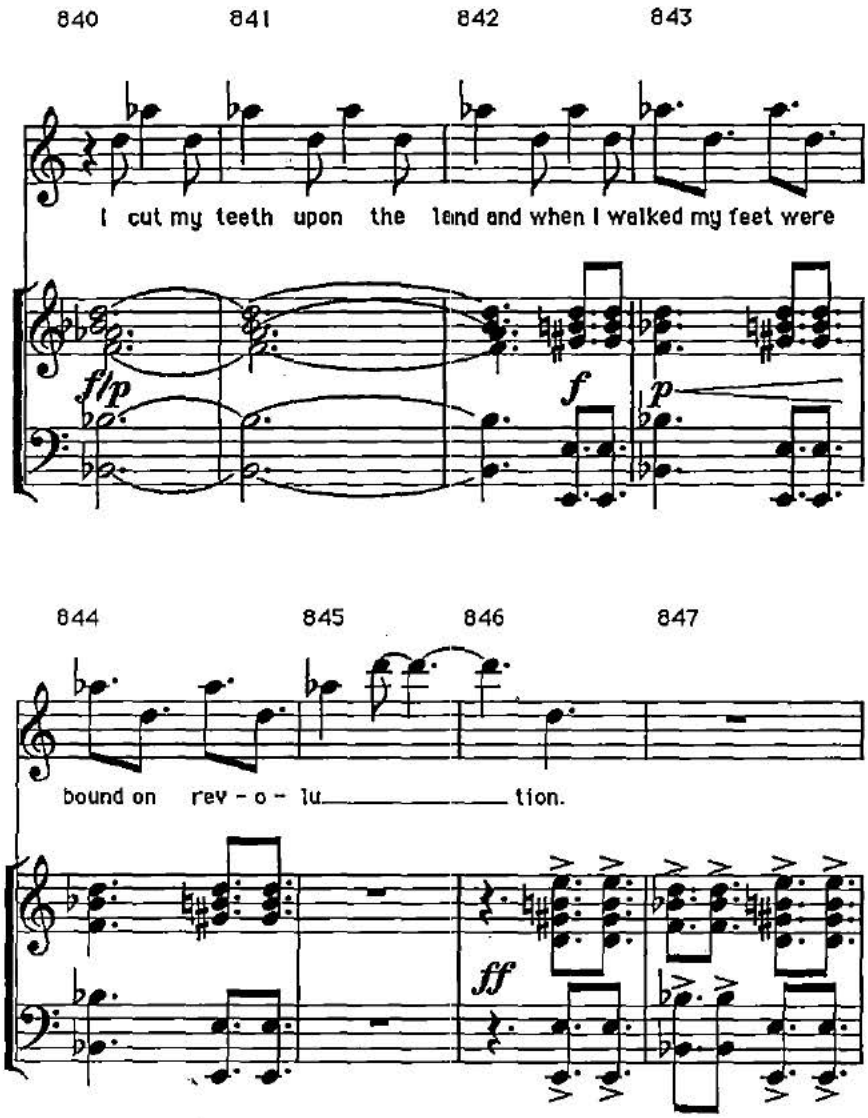
we know we want

Example 9 (Act II, scene two, mm.832-853)

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I cut my teeth upon the land and when I walked my feet were
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bound on rev - o - lu tion.
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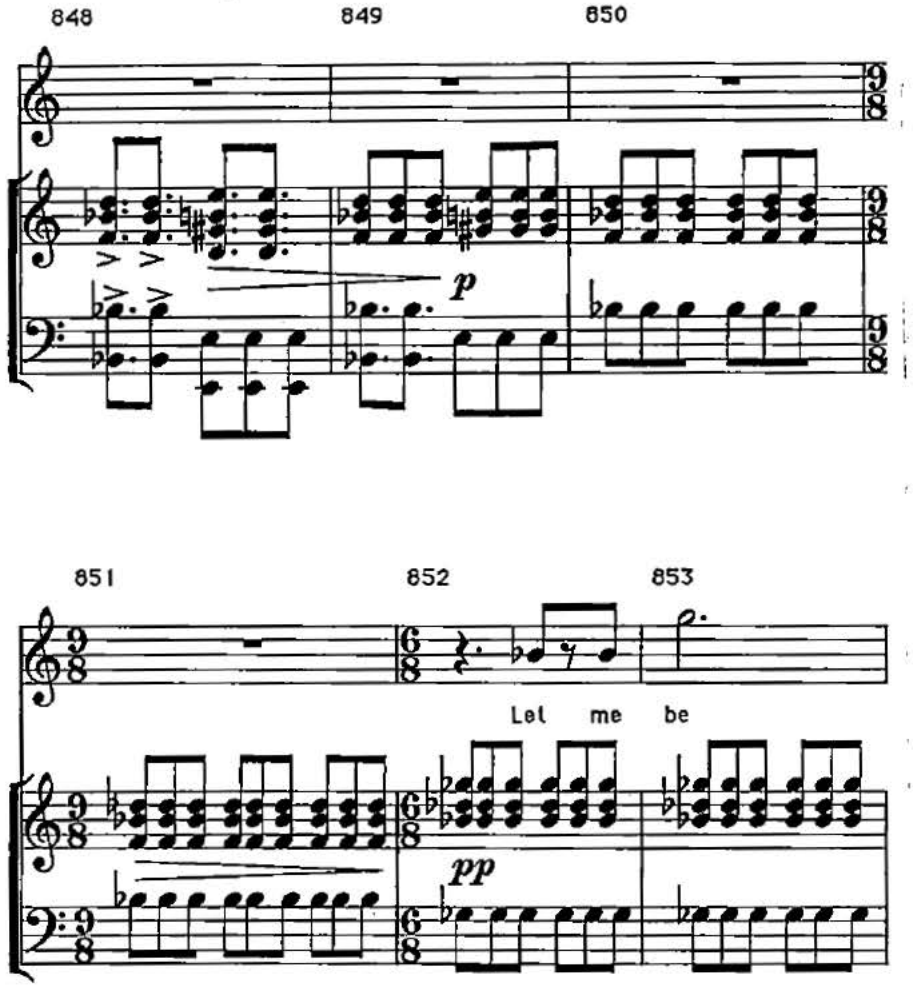
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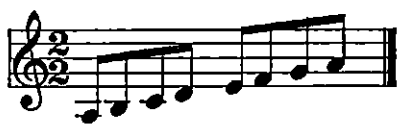
Example 10 (Act I, scene one, mm.1, 10, 15-24)

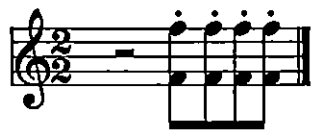
Ex. 10A.

m.1



Ex. 10B.

m.10



Ex. 10C.

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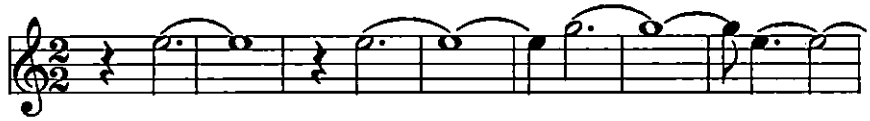

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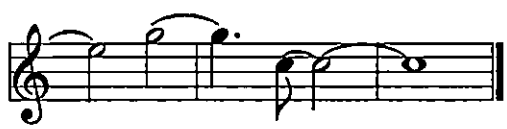
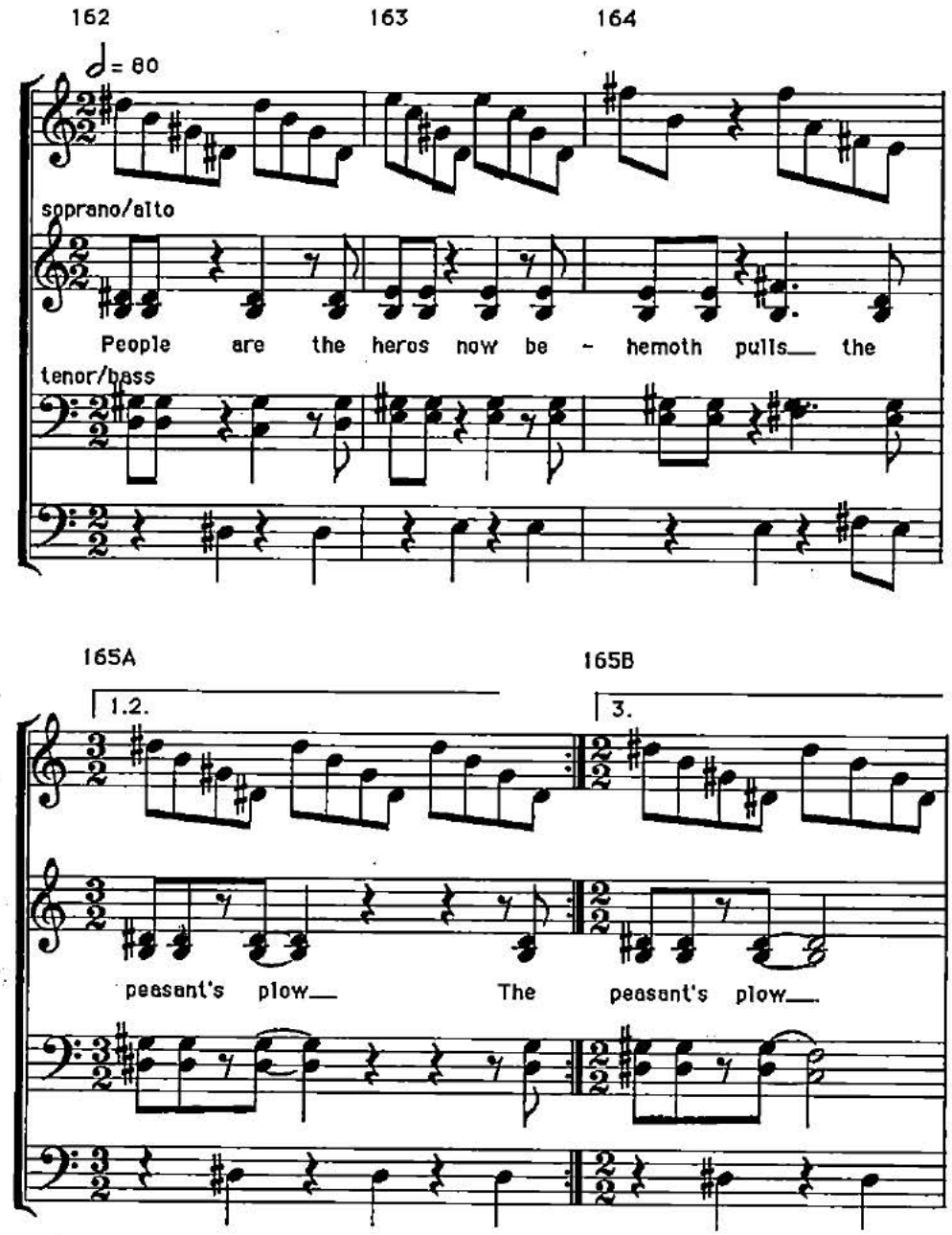
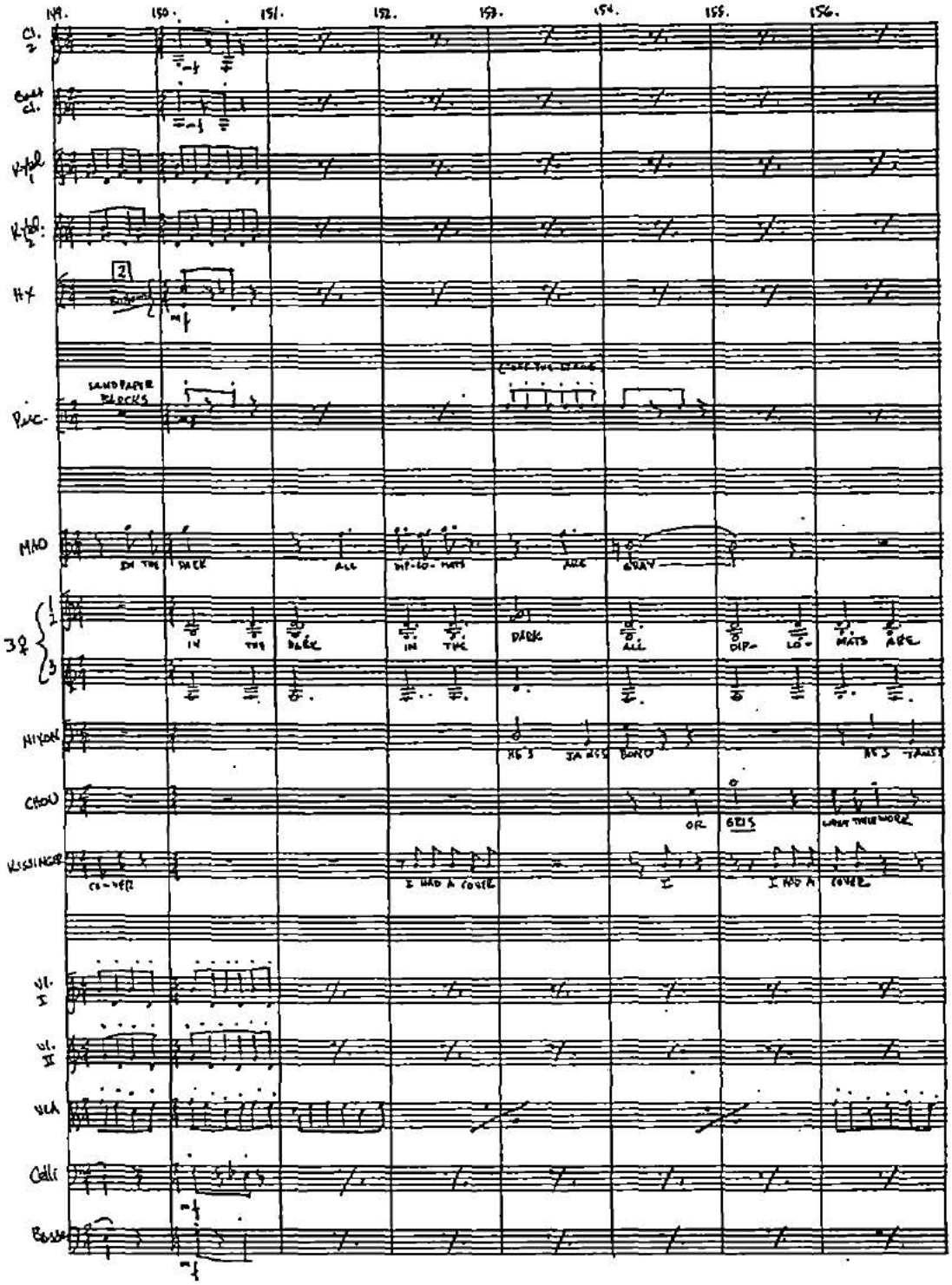
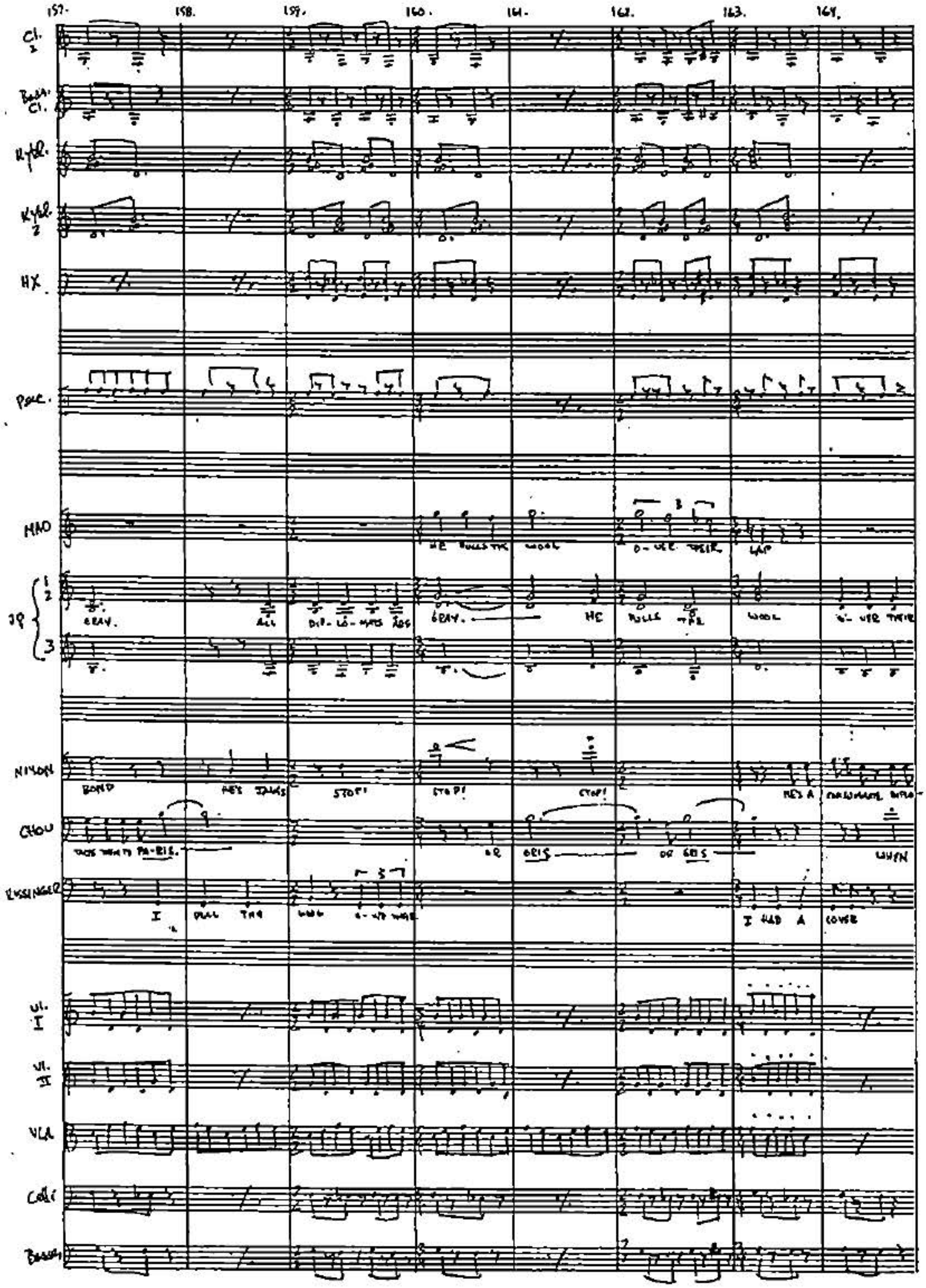


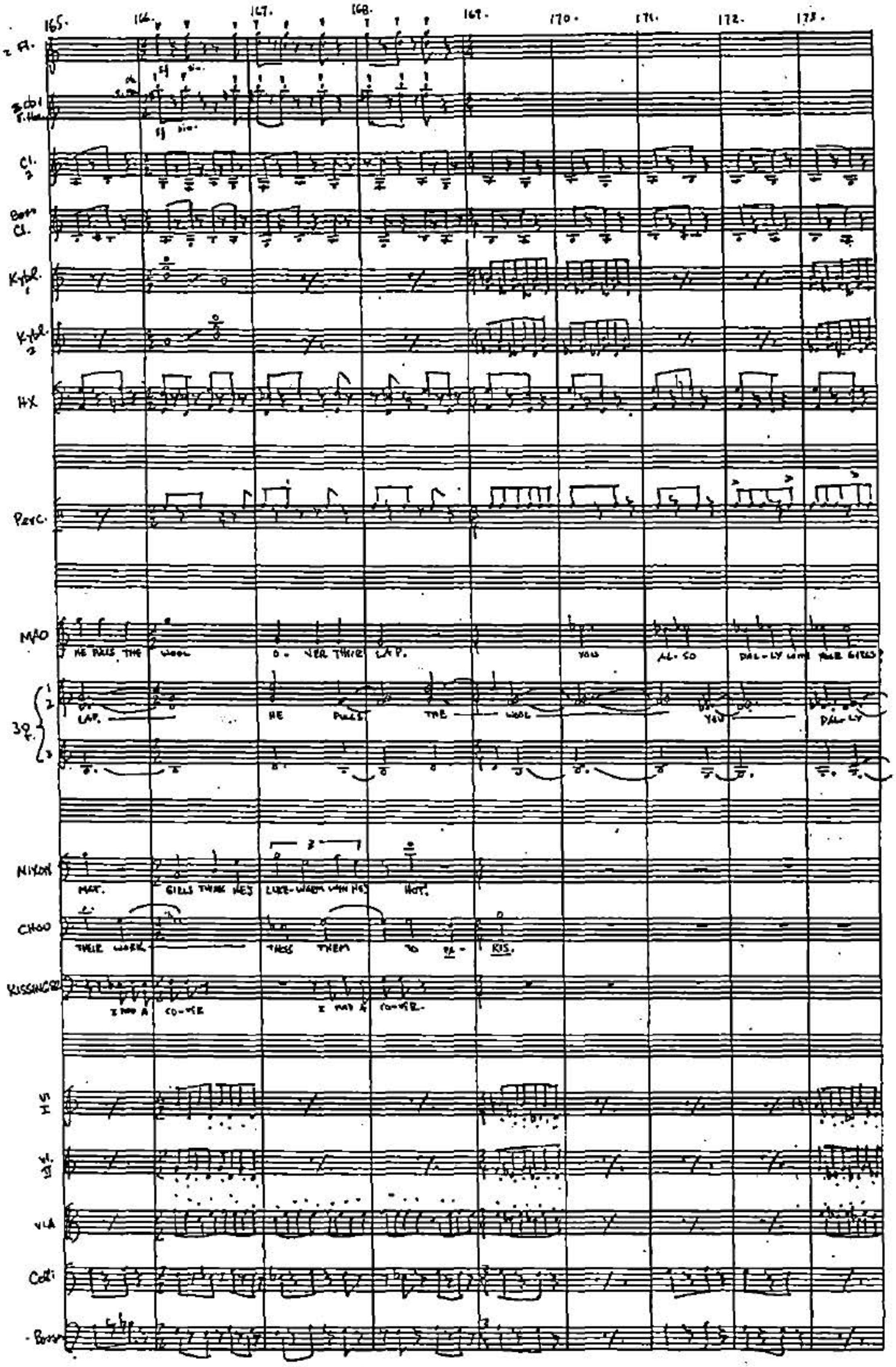
Example 11 (Act I, scene one, mm.162-165b)



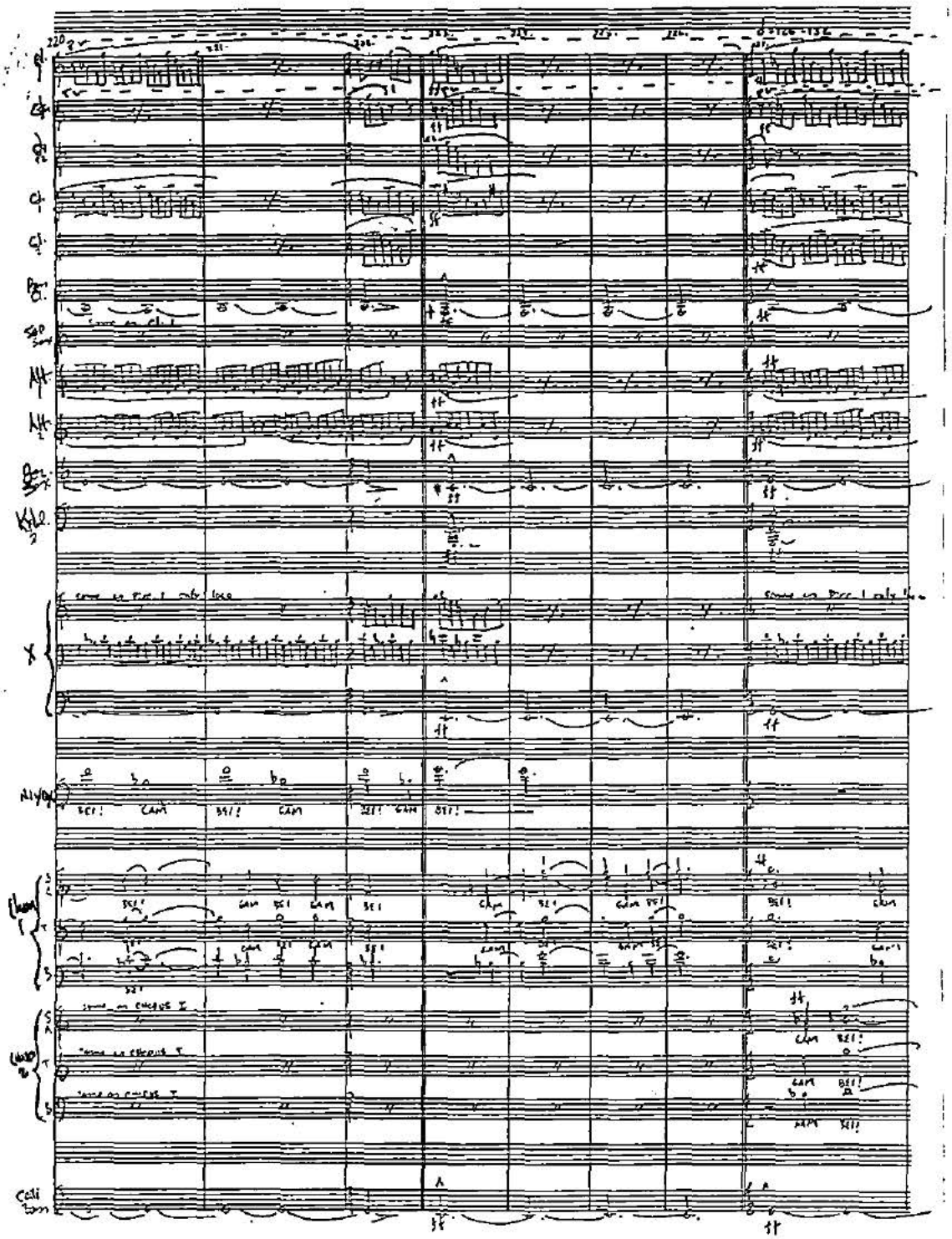
Example 12 (Act I, scene two, mm.149-169)

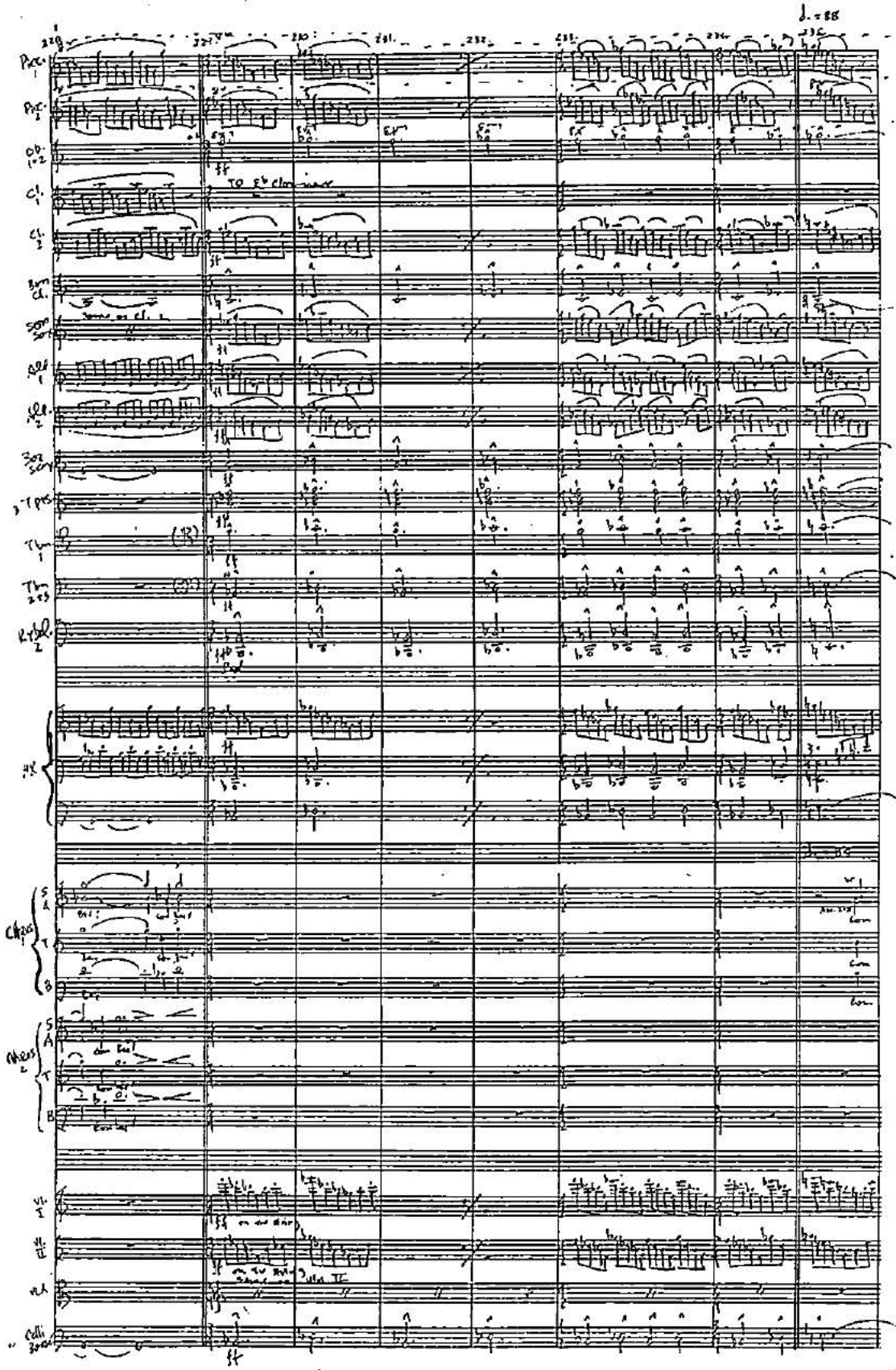



Cl.
HX
Perc.
MAO
HE PULLS THE WOOL
O-VER THEIR
LAP
JP
GRAY.
ALL
DIP-LO-MATS ARE
GRAY.
HE
PULLS THE
WOOL
NIXON
BOND
HE'S JAMES
STOP!
STOP!
STOP!
HE'S A
CHOU
PA-RIS.
OR
GRIS
OR GRIS
WHEN
KISSINGER
I
PULL THE
WOOL
I HAD A
COVER
Vl. I
Vl. II
VLA
Celli

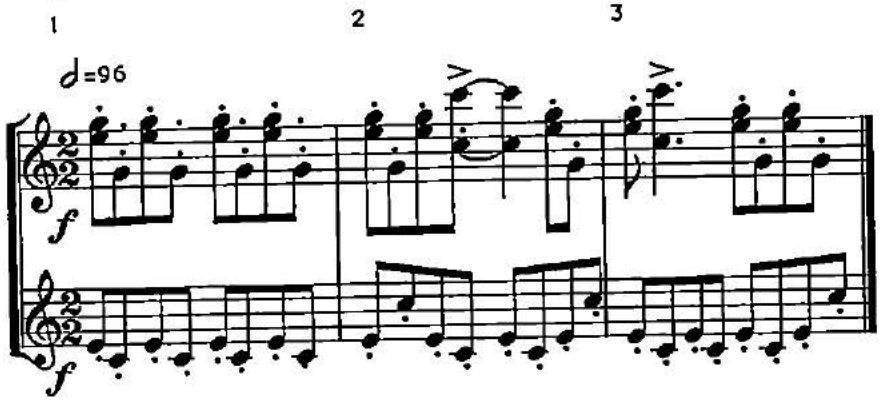

Perc.
MAO
NIXON
CHOO
KISSINGER
Cell.
VLA

Example 13 (Act I, scene three, mm.223-234)

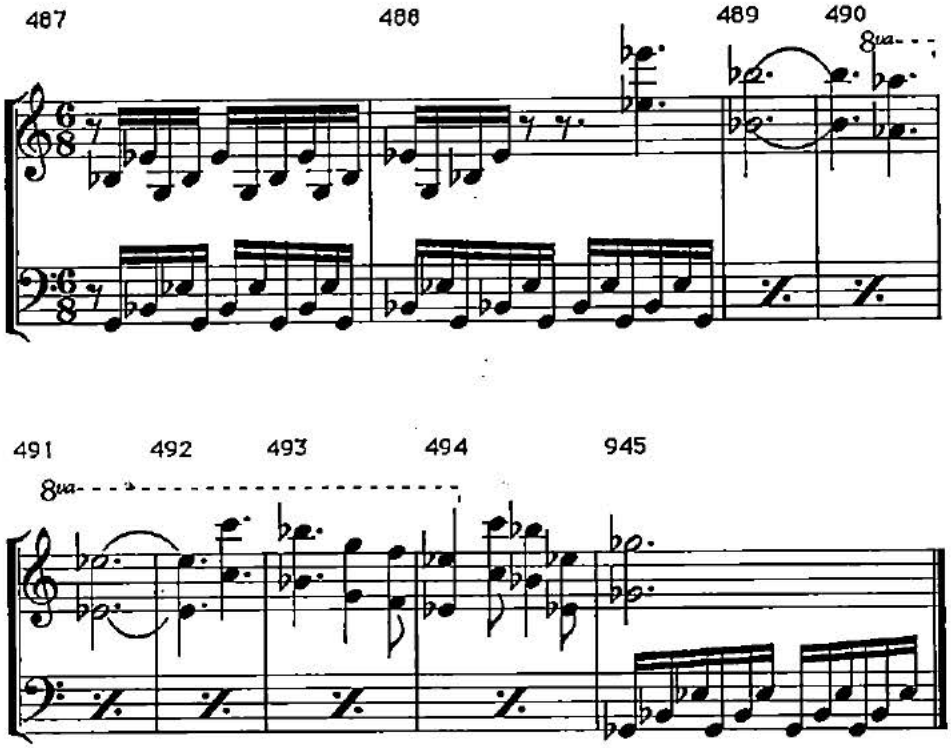



♩. = 88
Perc. 1
Perc. 2
Ob. 1+2
Cl. 1
Cl. 2
Bass Cl.
Sop. Sax.
Alto Sax. 1
Alto Sax. 2
Ten. Sax.
Trpts.
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2+3
Ref. 2
Hrn.
Choir
S
A
T
B
Others 2
S
A
T
B
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Cello
Bass

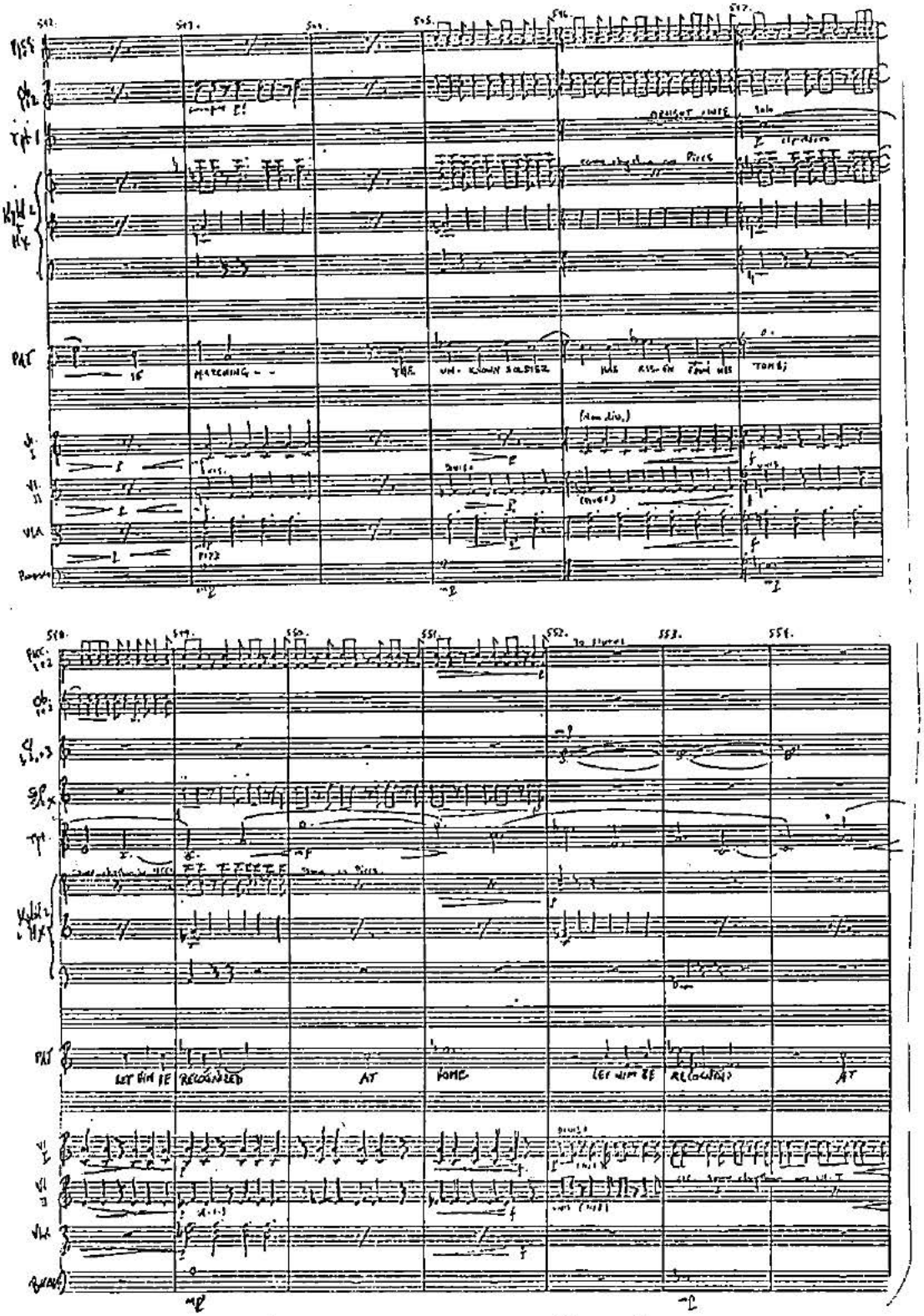
Example 14 (Act II, scene one, mm.1-3)

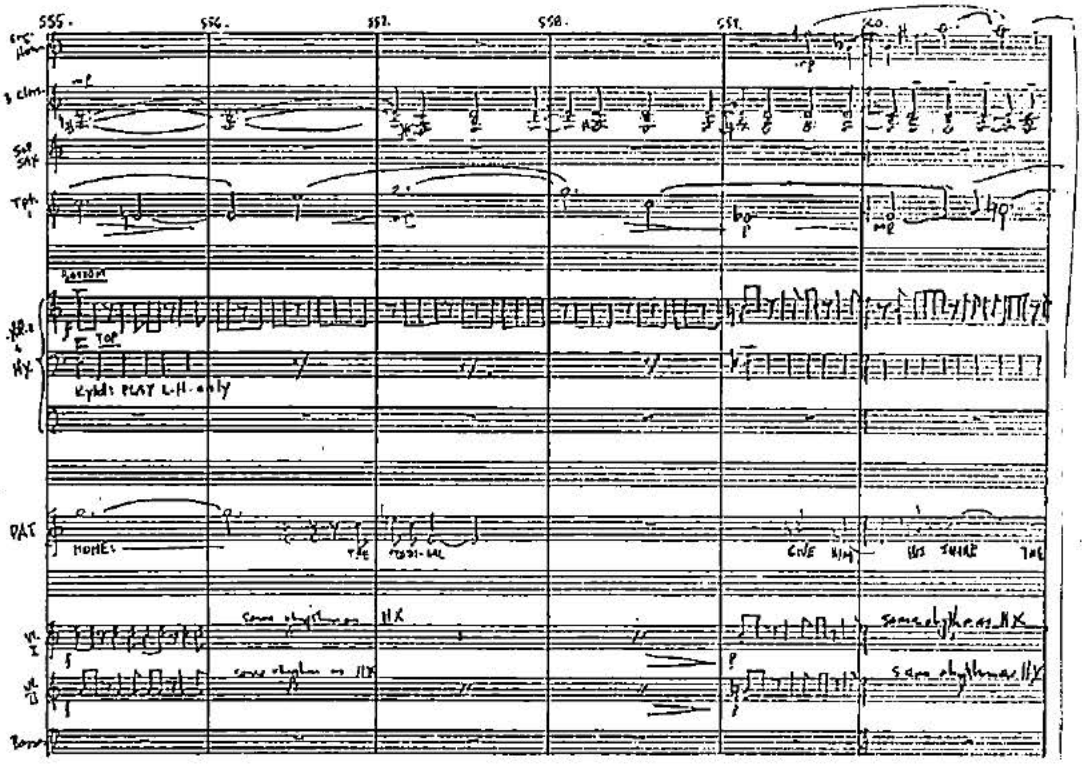


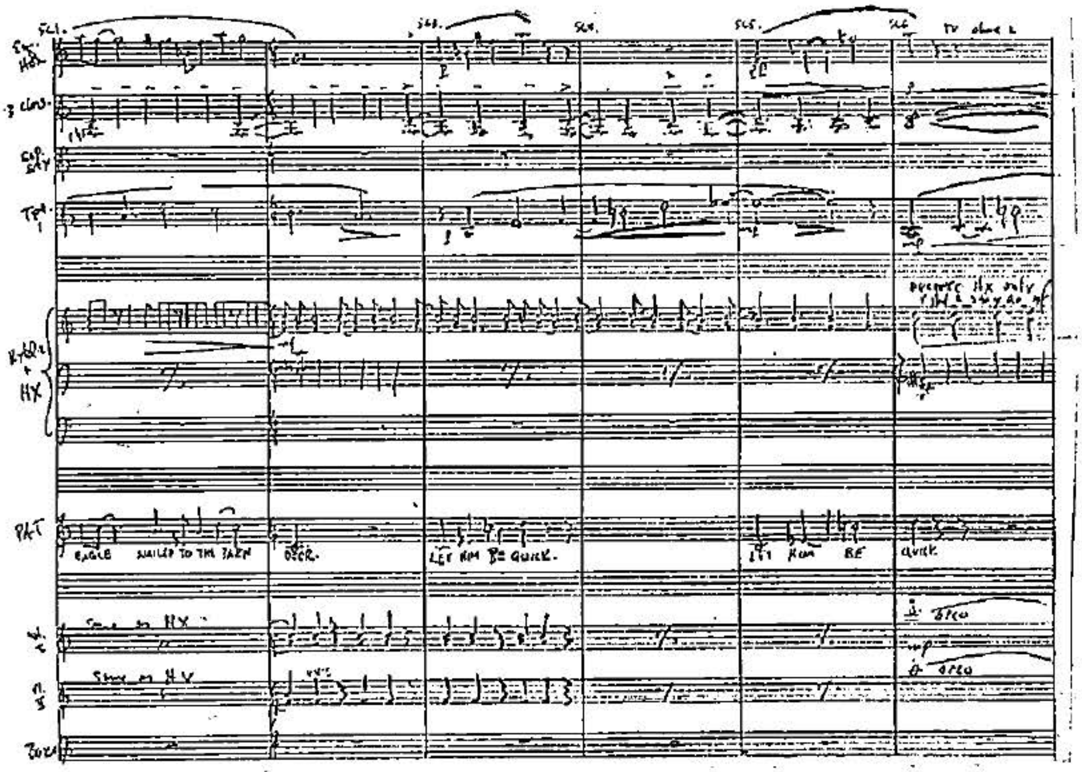
Example 15 (Act II, scene two, mm.487-495)



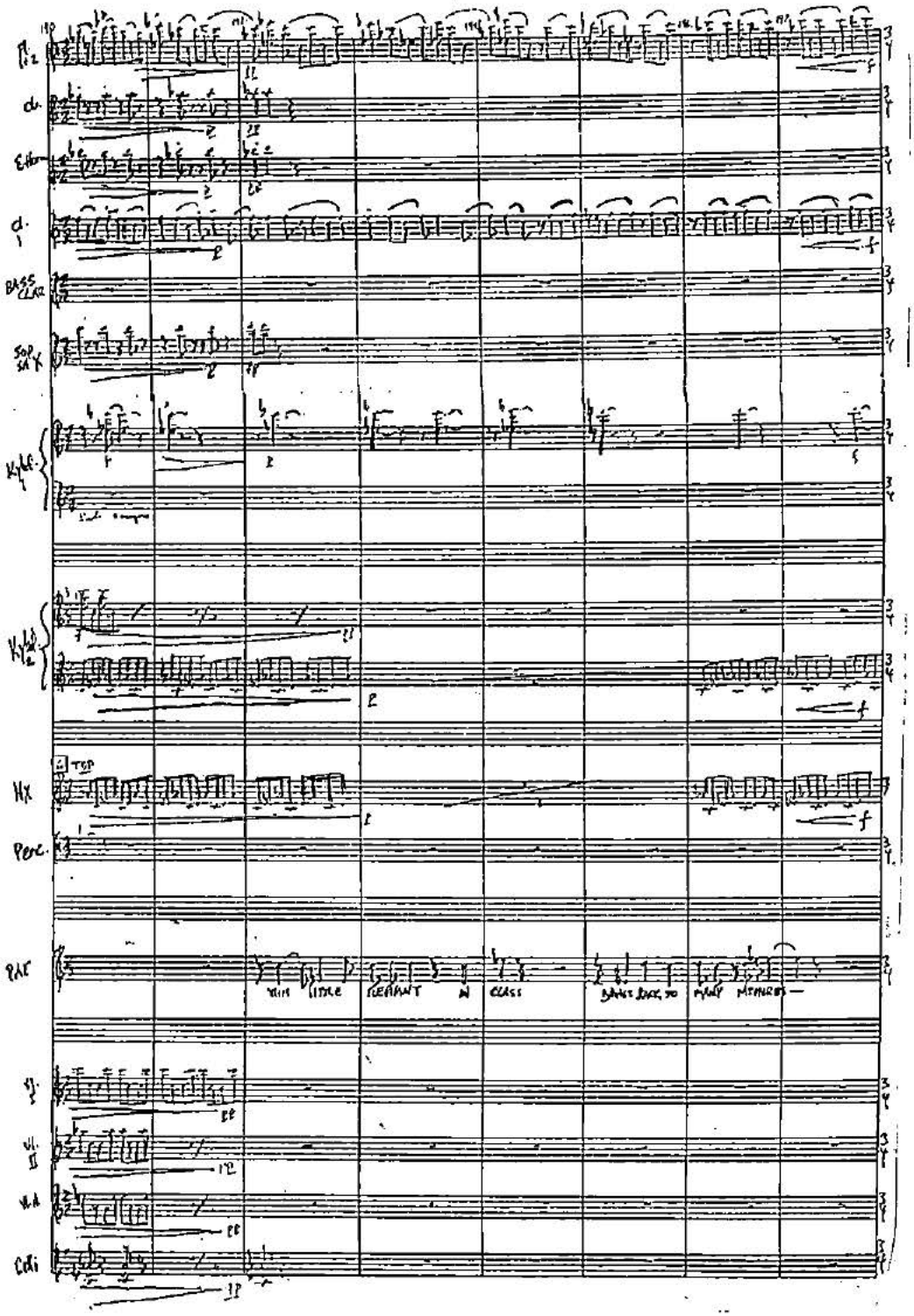
Example 16 (Act II, scene one, mm.544-558)

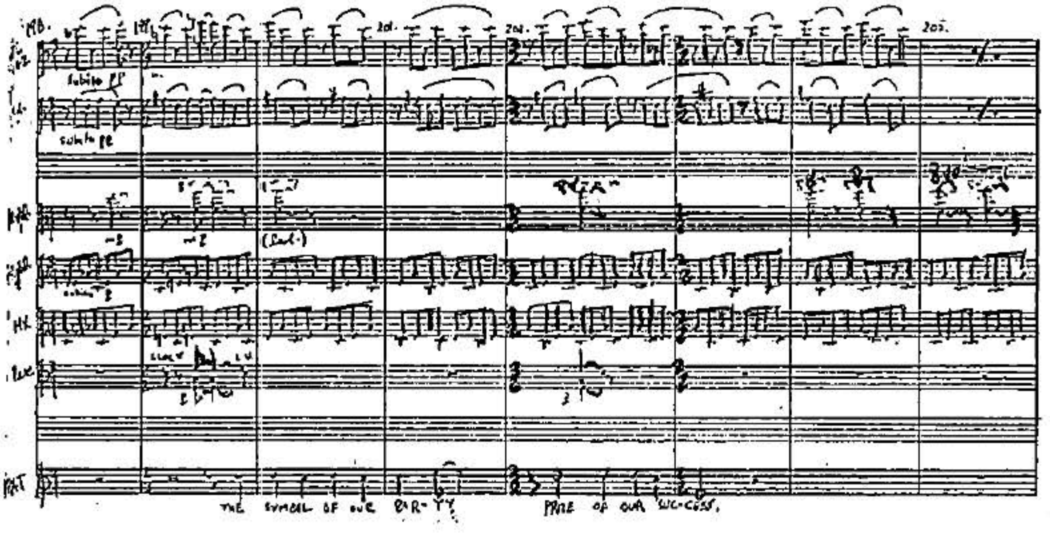


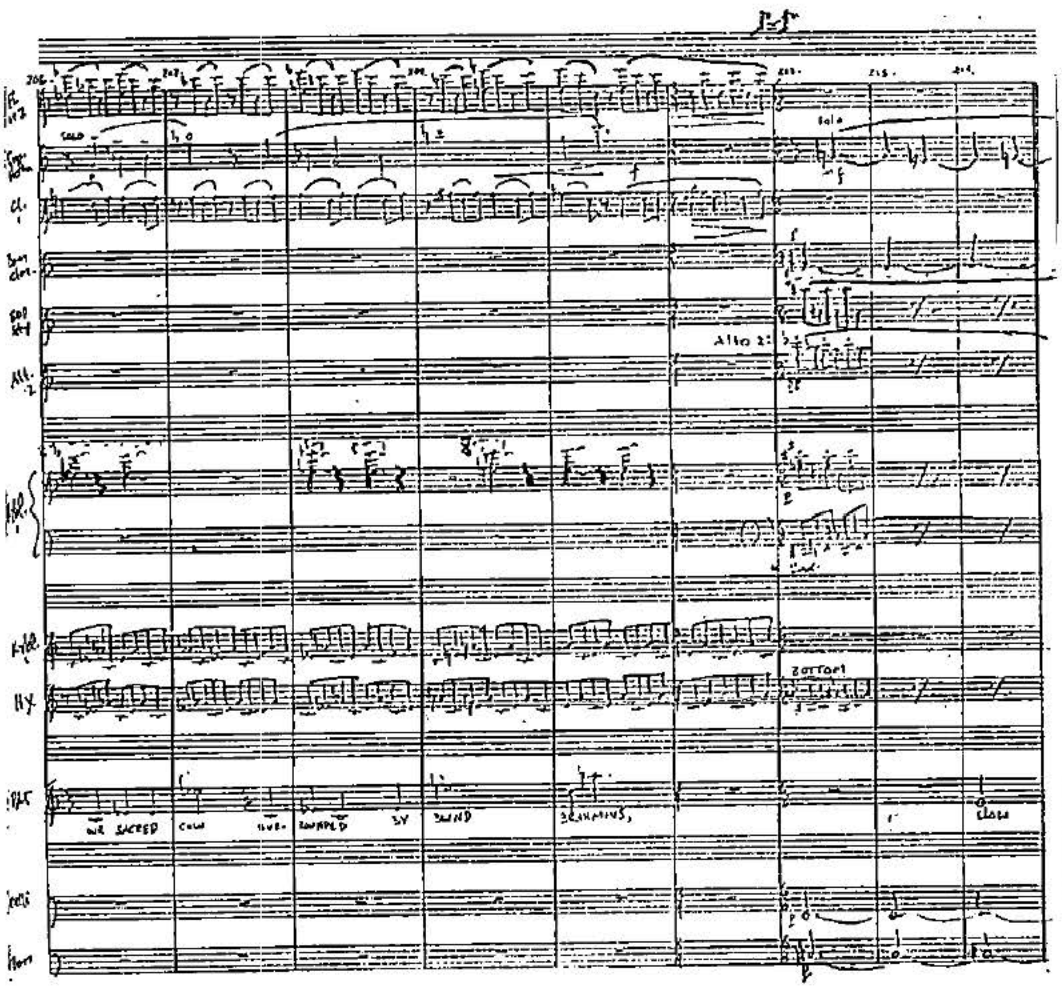

Eng. Horn
3 Clns.
Sop. Sax
Tpt. 1
Kybd. + HX
PAT
Vl. I
Vl. II
Bass
BOTTOM
TOP
Kybd: PLAY L.H. only
HOME!
THE
Same rhythm as HX
GIVE HIM
Same rhythm as HX

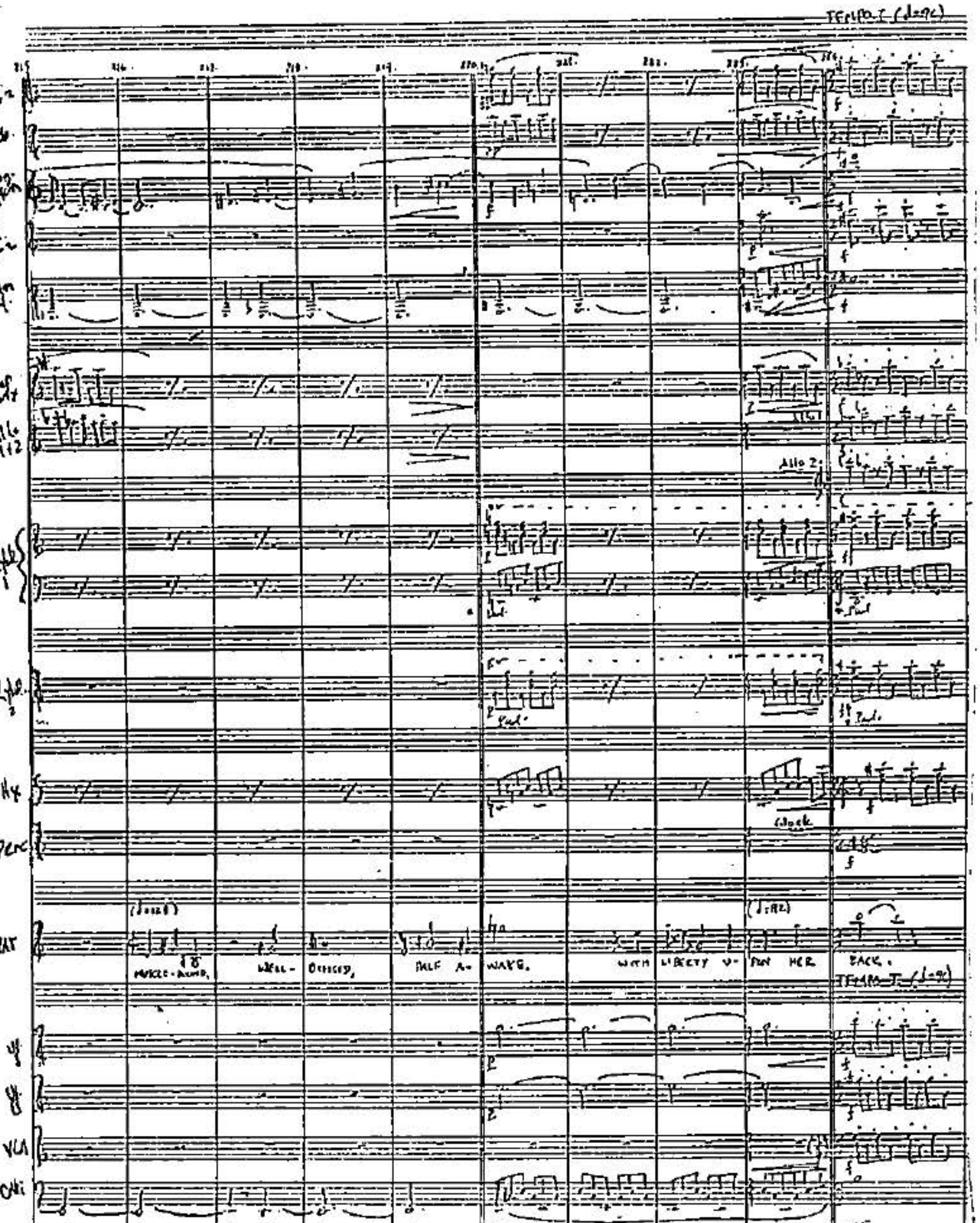

Eng. Hn.
3 Clns.
Sop. Sax
Tpt. 1
Kybd. + HX
PAT
Vl. I
Vl. II
Bass
EAGLE NAILED TO THE BARN
DOOR.
LET HIM BE QUICK.
LET HIM BE
QUICK
Same as HX
Same as HX

Example 17 (Act Two, scene one, mm.190-224)

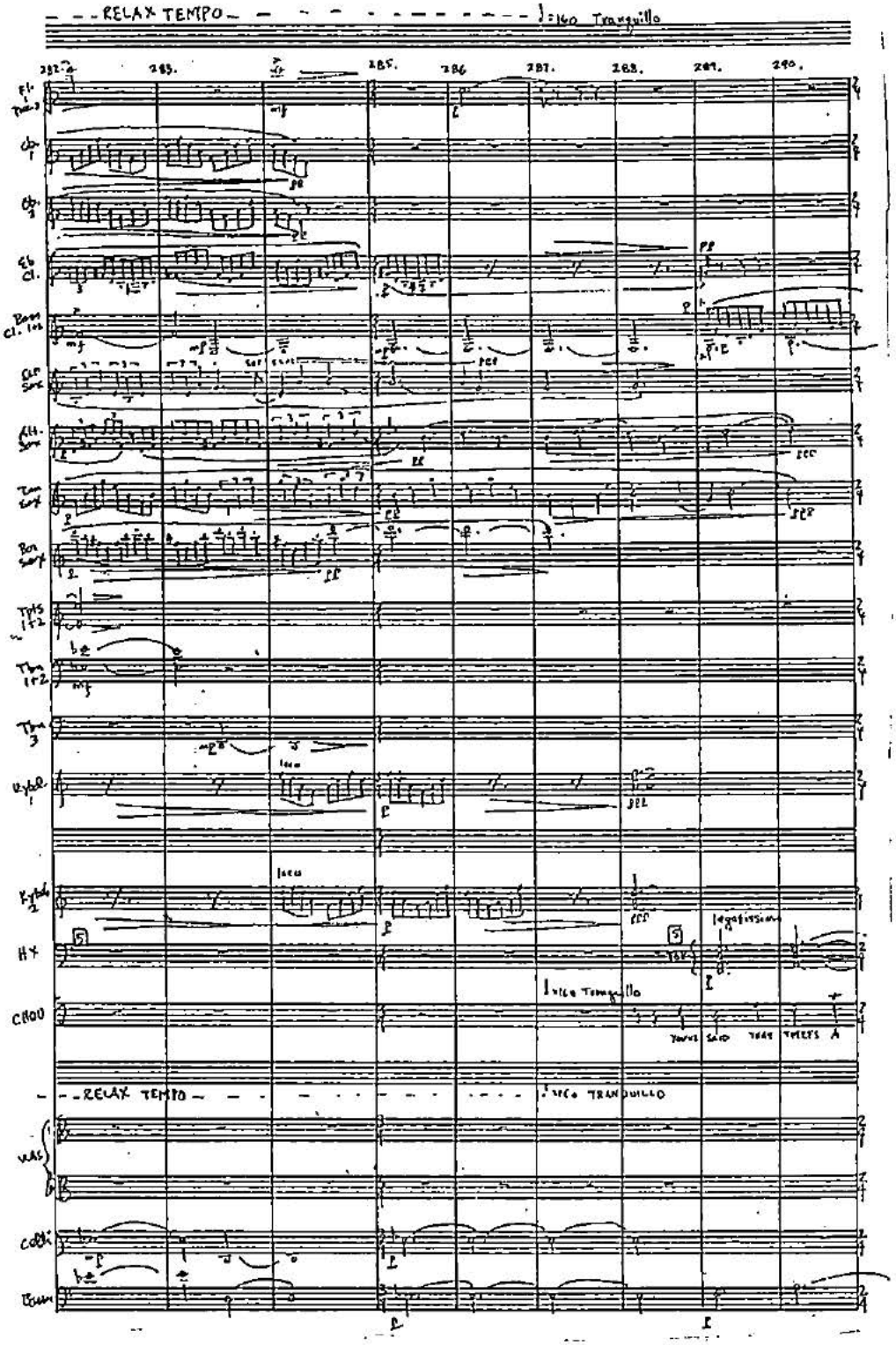


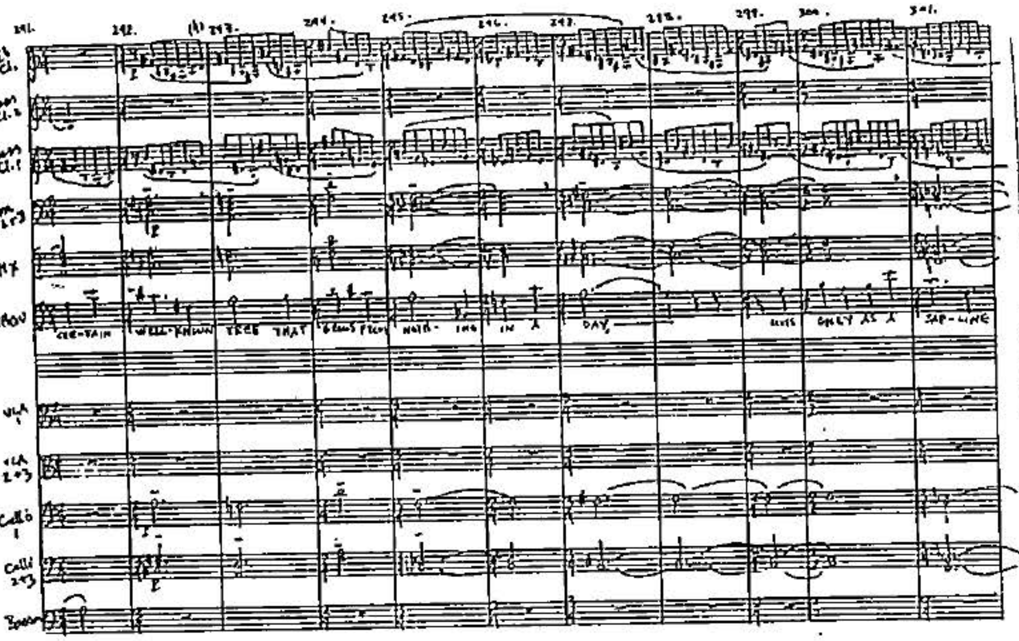

THE SYMBOL OF OUR PUR-ITY,
PRIZE OF OUR SUC-CESS,

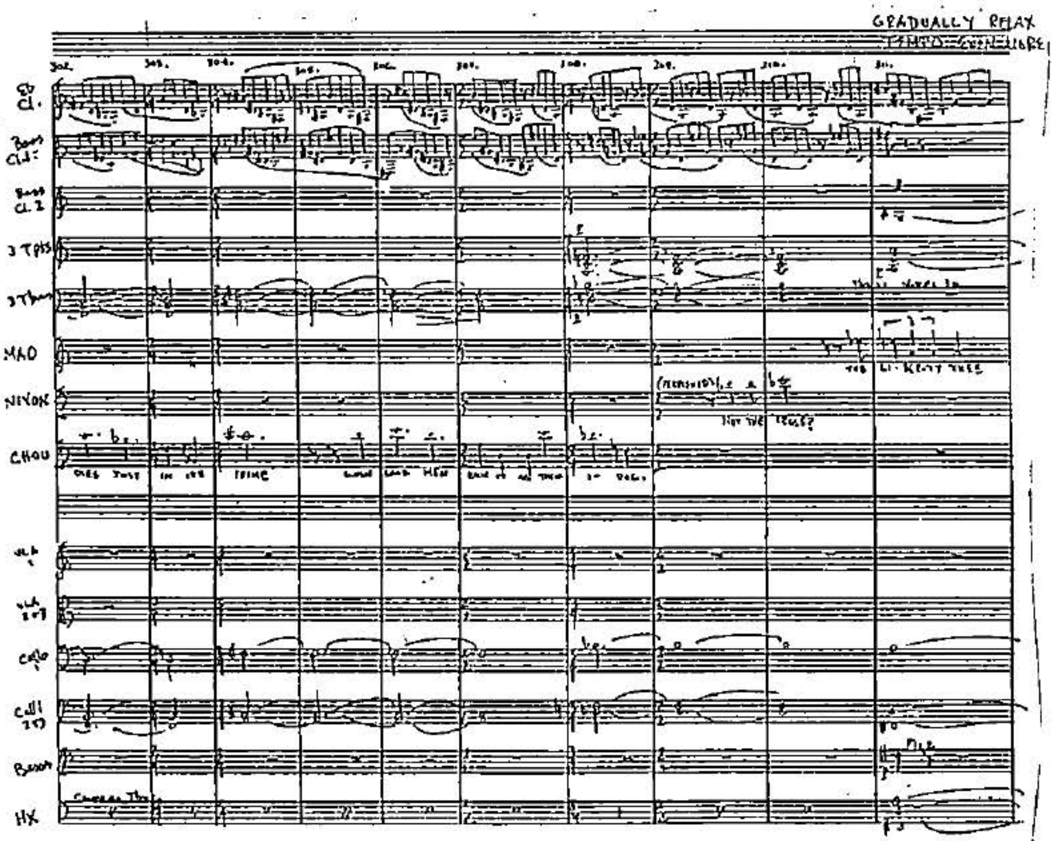

WE SACRED COW
SWAMPED BY SAND
Solo
ZOTTOPI


WAKE.
WITH
U-
PON HER
BACK.

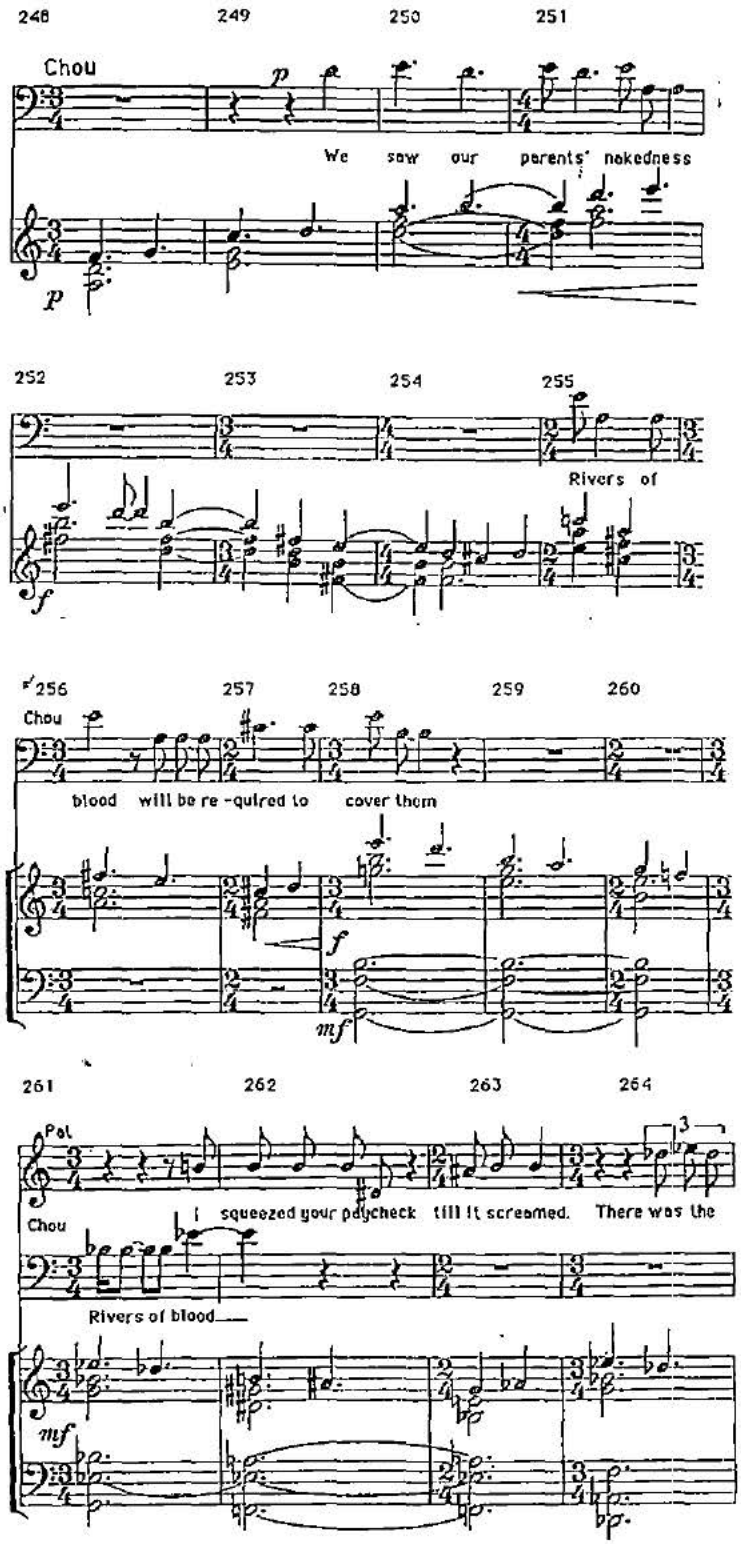
Example 18 (Act I, scene two, mm.285-308)

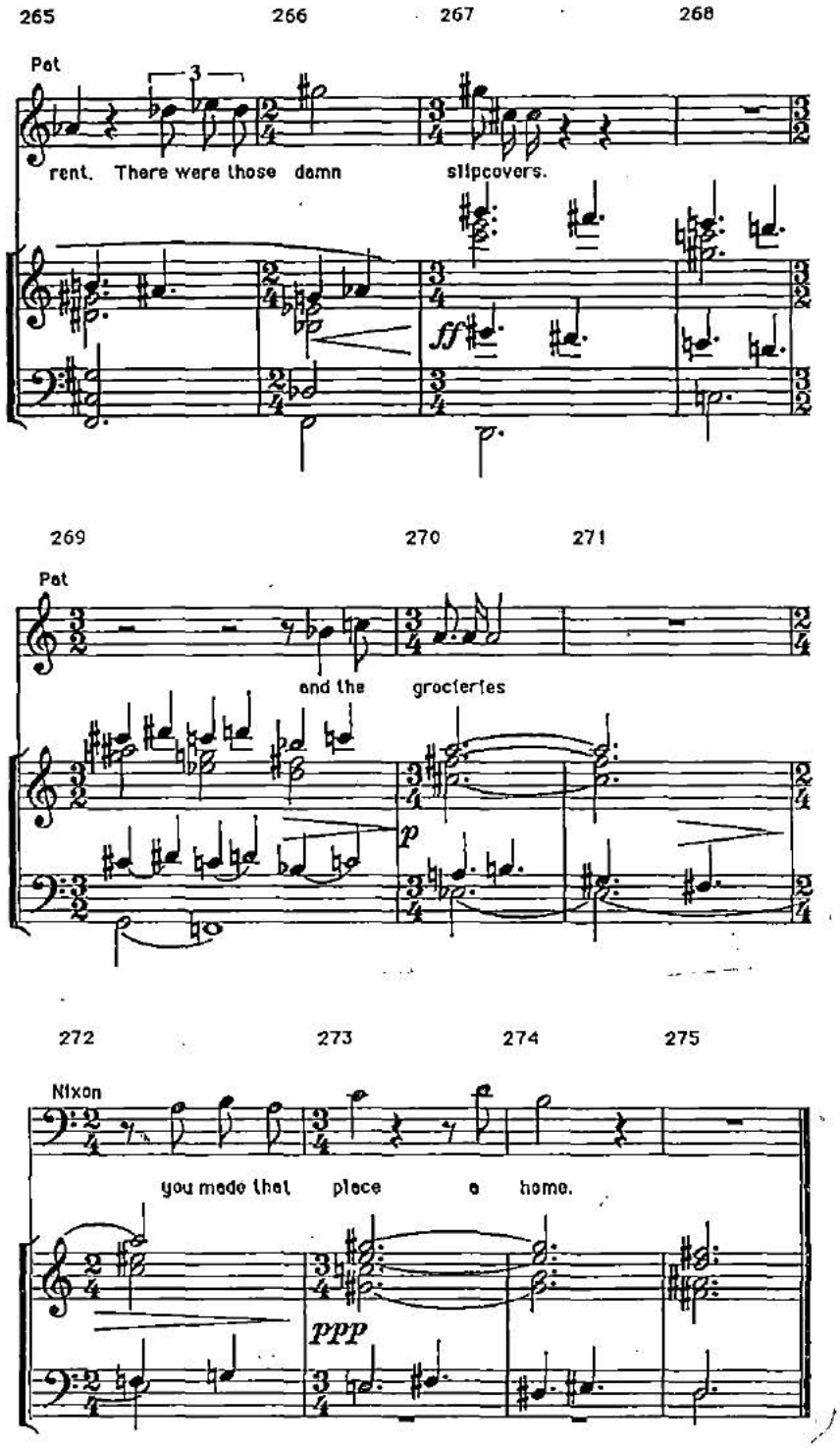



CHOU
CER-TAIN WELL-KNOWN TREE THAT
ONLY AS A SAP-LING

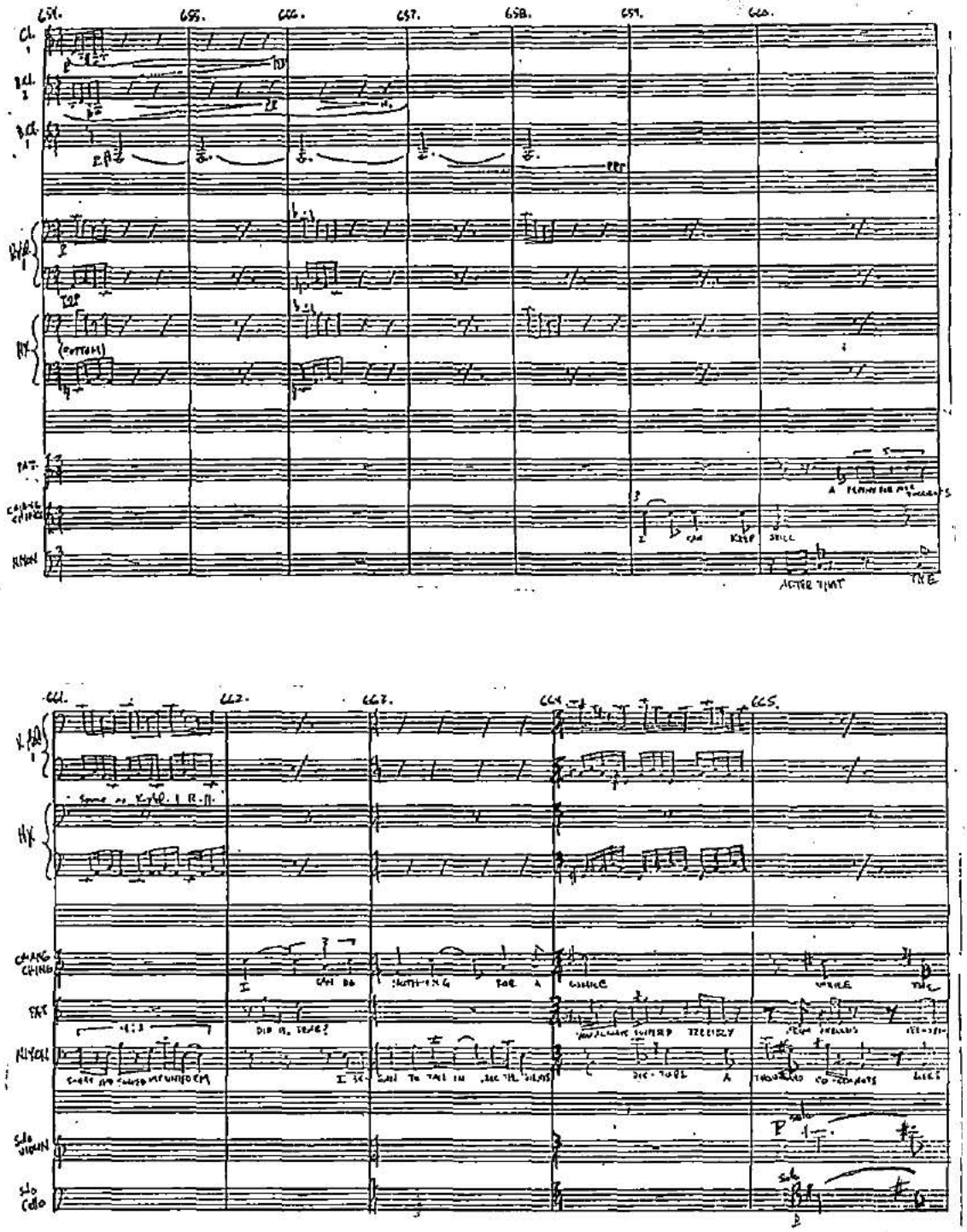

GRADUALLY RELAX
MAO
NIXON
CHOU

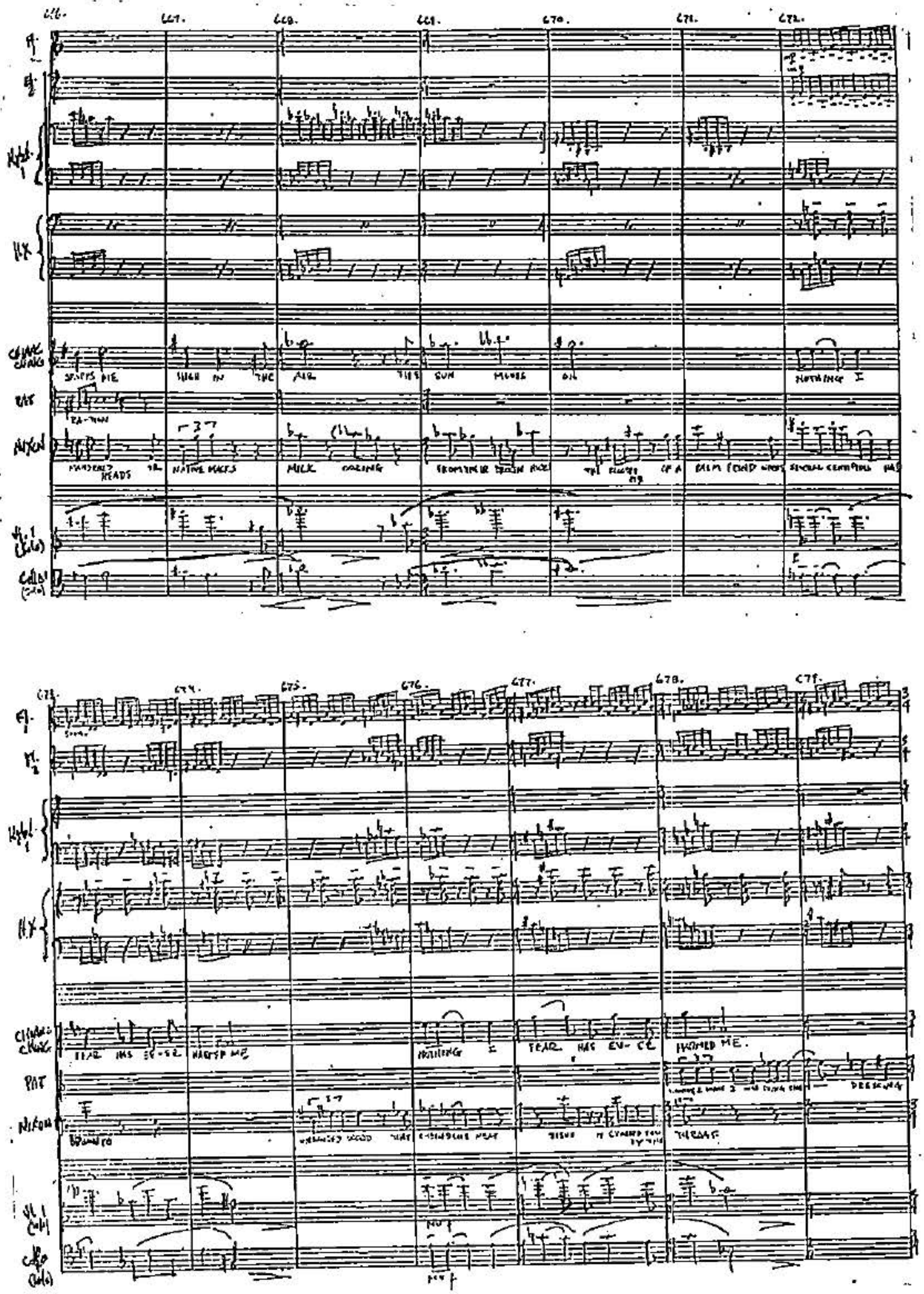
Example 19 (Act III, mm.248-274)

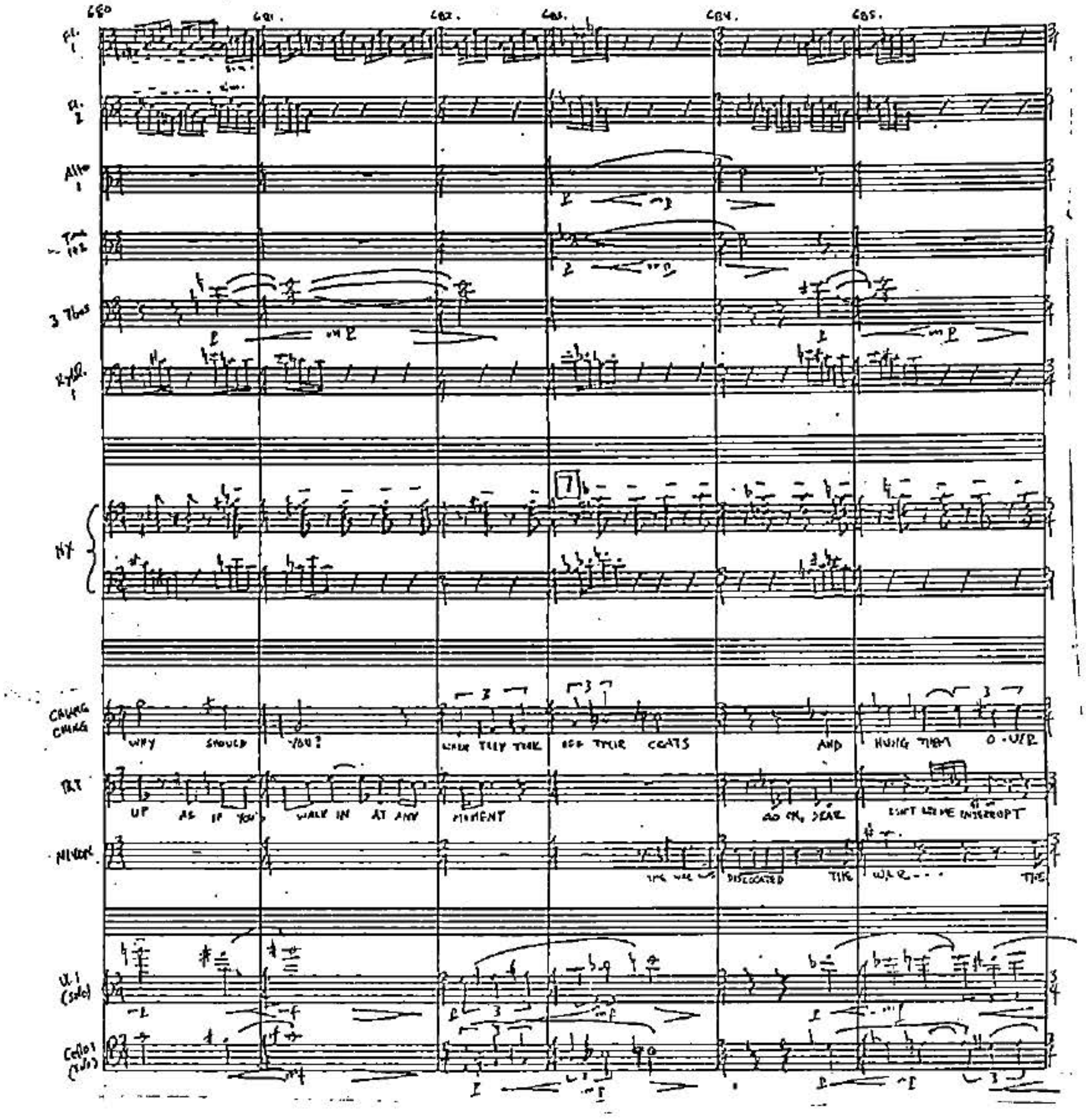


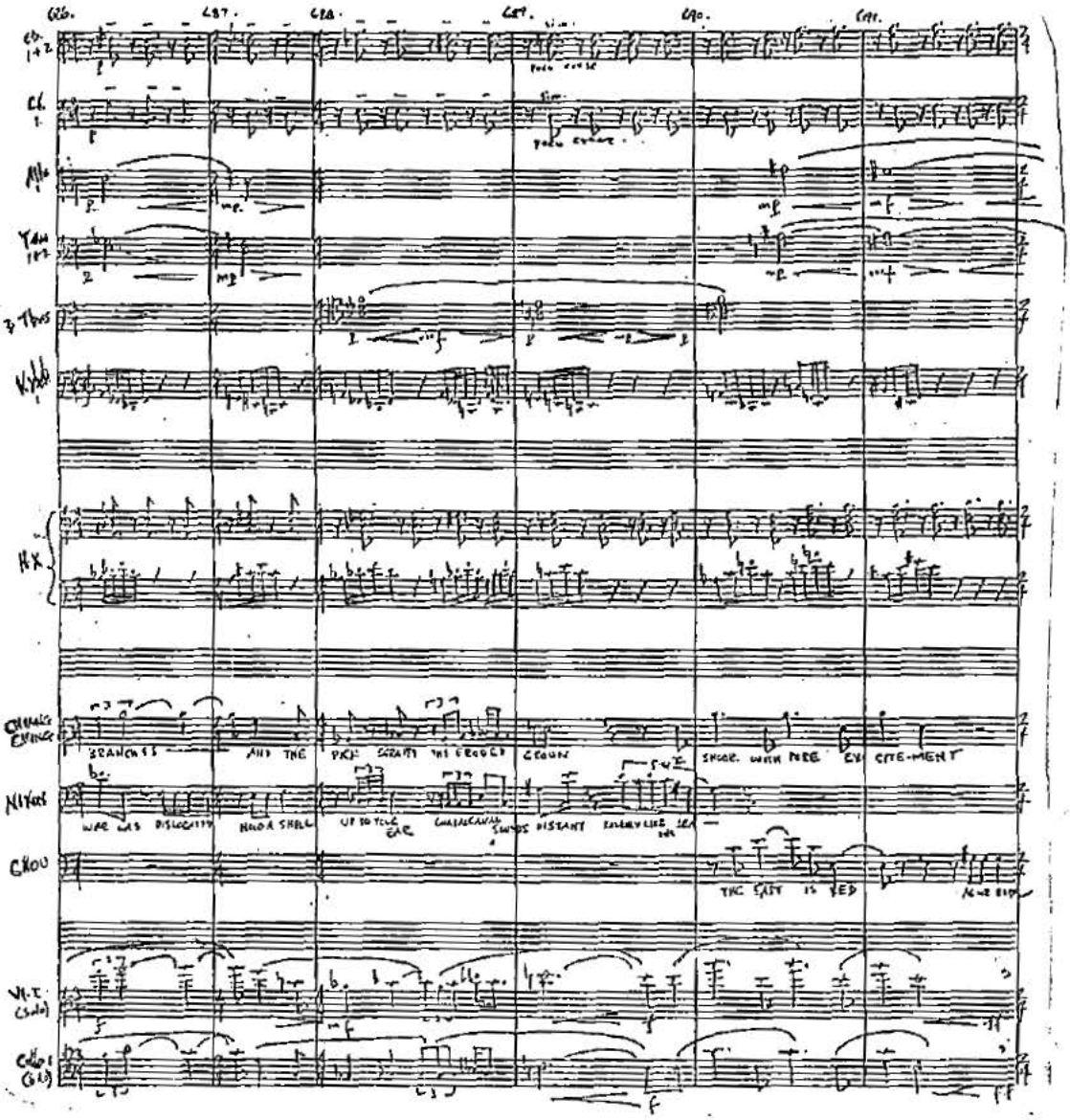

265
266
267
268
Pat
3
rent. There were those damn
slipcovers.
ff
269
270
271
Pat
and the
groceries
p
272
273
274
275
Nixon
you made that
place
a
home.
ppp

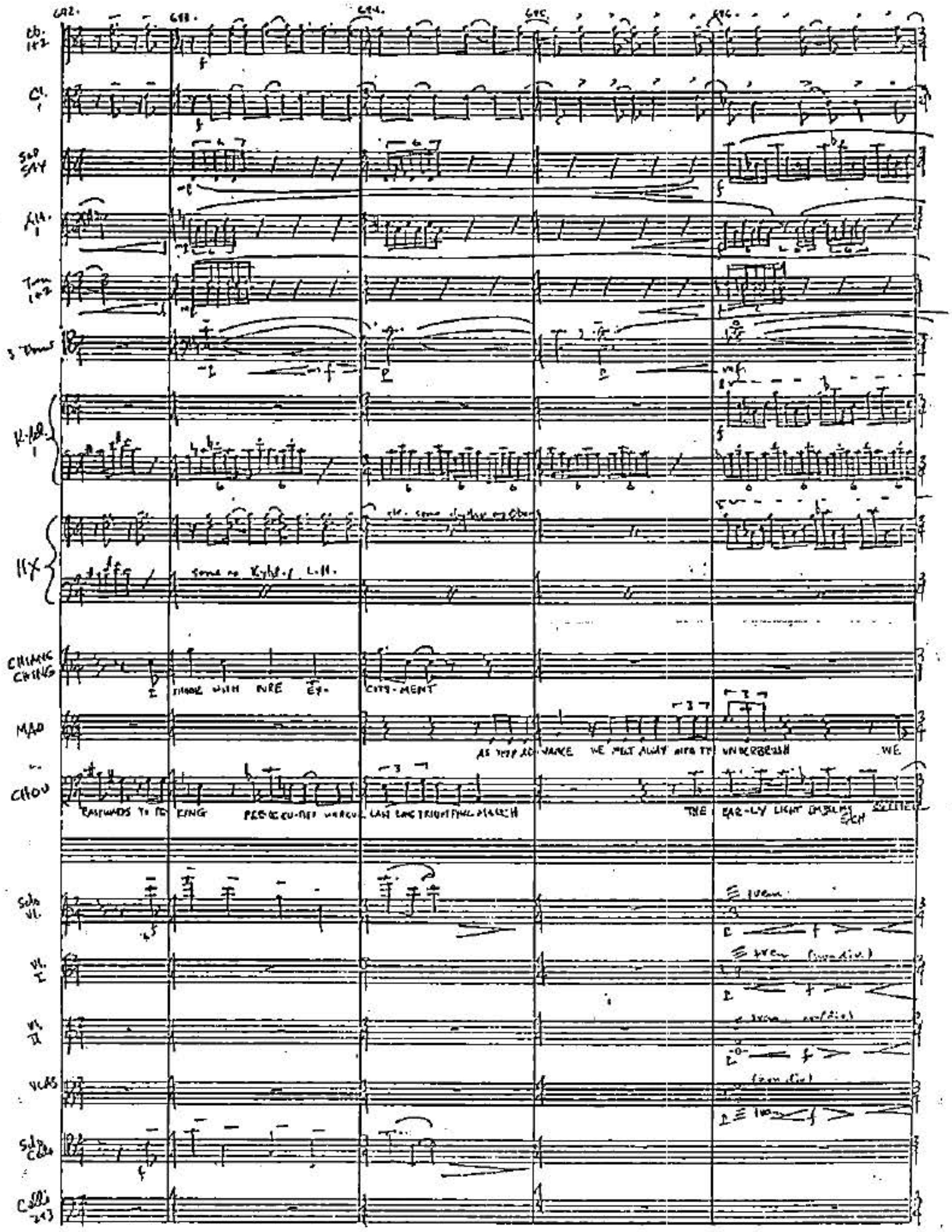
Example 20 (Act III, mm.659-694)




SPITS ME
HIGH IN THE AIR THE SUN MOVES ON
NOTHING I
FEAR HAS EVER HAUNTED ME
NOTHING I
FEAR HAS EV-ER
HAUNTED ME.

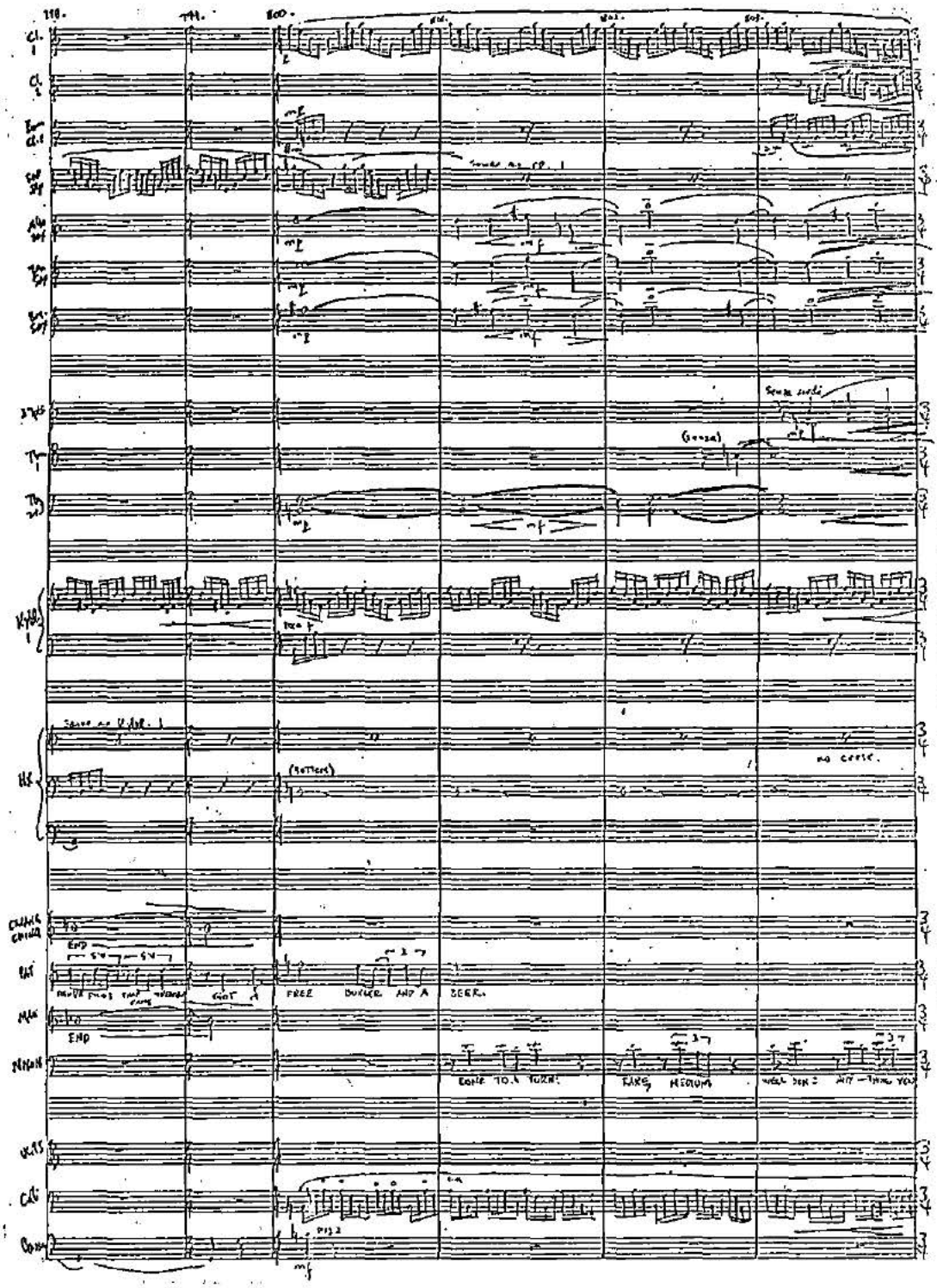

WHY SHOULD YOU?
WHEN THEY TOOK OFF THEIR COATS
AND HUNG THEM O-VER
UP AS IF YOU'D WALK IN AT ANY MOMENT

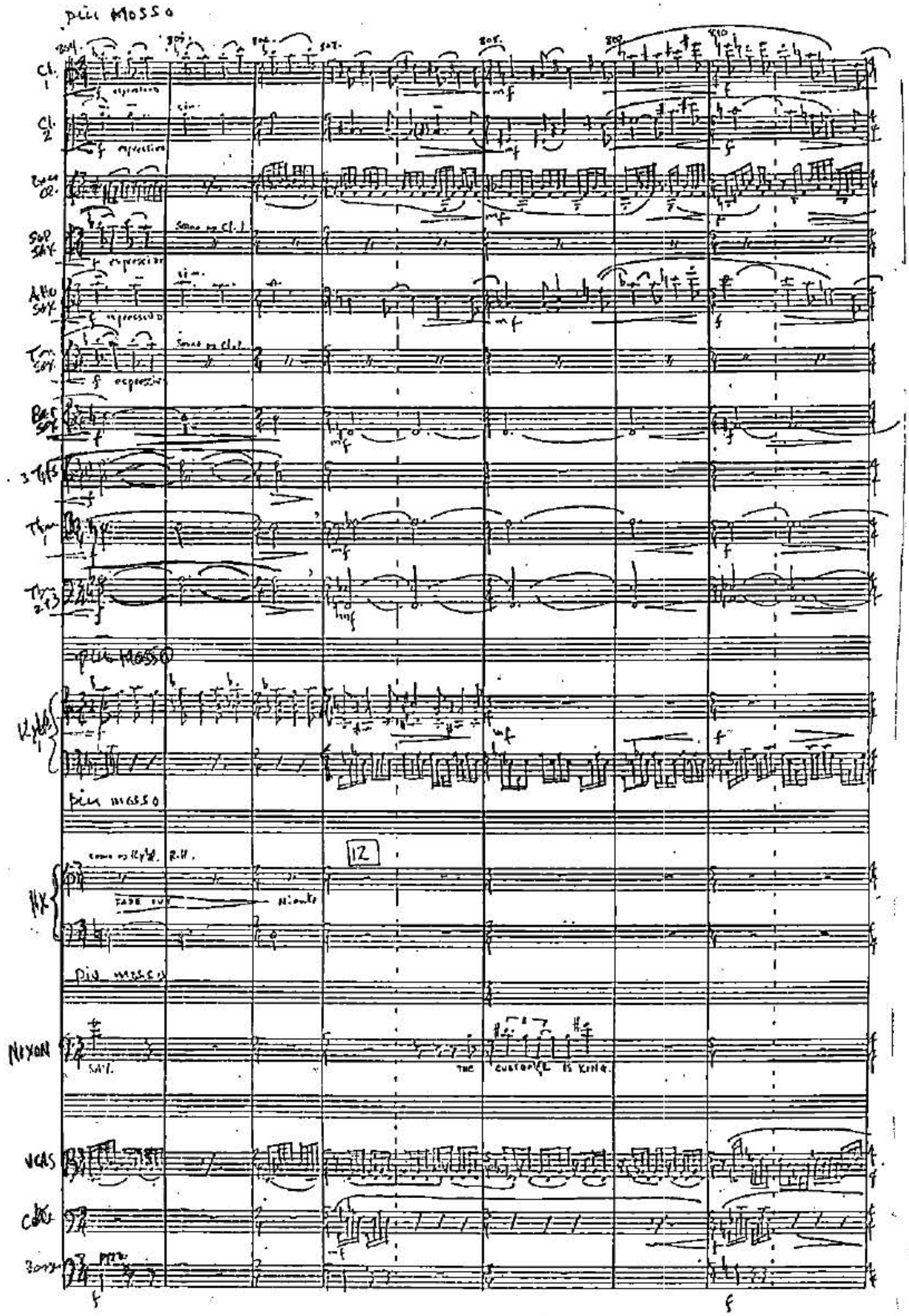

626.
627.
628.
629.
630.
631.
Fl. 1+2
Cl. 1
Alto 1
Tam 1+2
3 Tbns
Vib
H.X
Female Chorus
BRANCHES
AND THE
PICK SCRAPE
THE FROGS
CROAK
SHOE. WITH FREE
EX
CITE-MENT
N.Voices
WAR WAS DISCOVERY
HOLD A SHELL
UP TO THE
EAR
CHATTAHOOCHEE
SWISH
DISTANT
ENERGY LIKE
ICE
CHOU
THE CITY IS FED
Vl. I (solo)
Cellos I (div.)



Ob. 1+2
Cl. 1
Chiang Ching
Mao
Chou
Solo Vl.
Vl. I
Vl. II
Vlas
Solo Cello
Celli 2+3
THOSE WITH NEW EX- CITE-MENT
AS THEY ADVANCE WE MELT AWAY INTO THE UNDERBRUSH WE

Example 21 (Act III, mm.800-810)




più mosso
Cl. 1
Cl. 2
Bass Cl.
Sop Sax.
Alto Sax.
Ten. Sax.
Bar. Sax.
3 Tpts
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2+3
più mosso
Kybd. 1
più mosso
12
Hp.
più mosso
NIXON
THE CUSTOMER IS KING
VCAS
Cbs.

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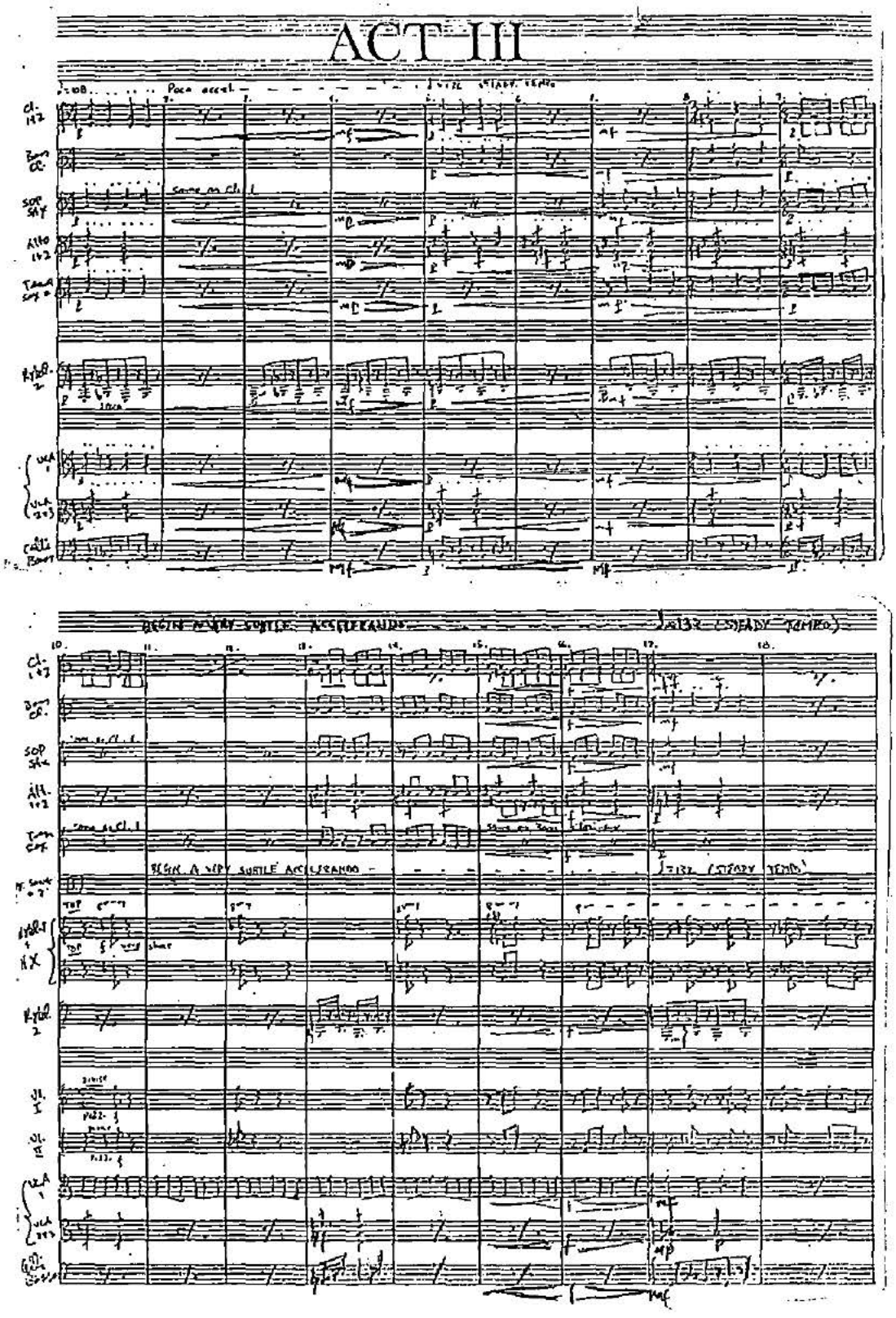
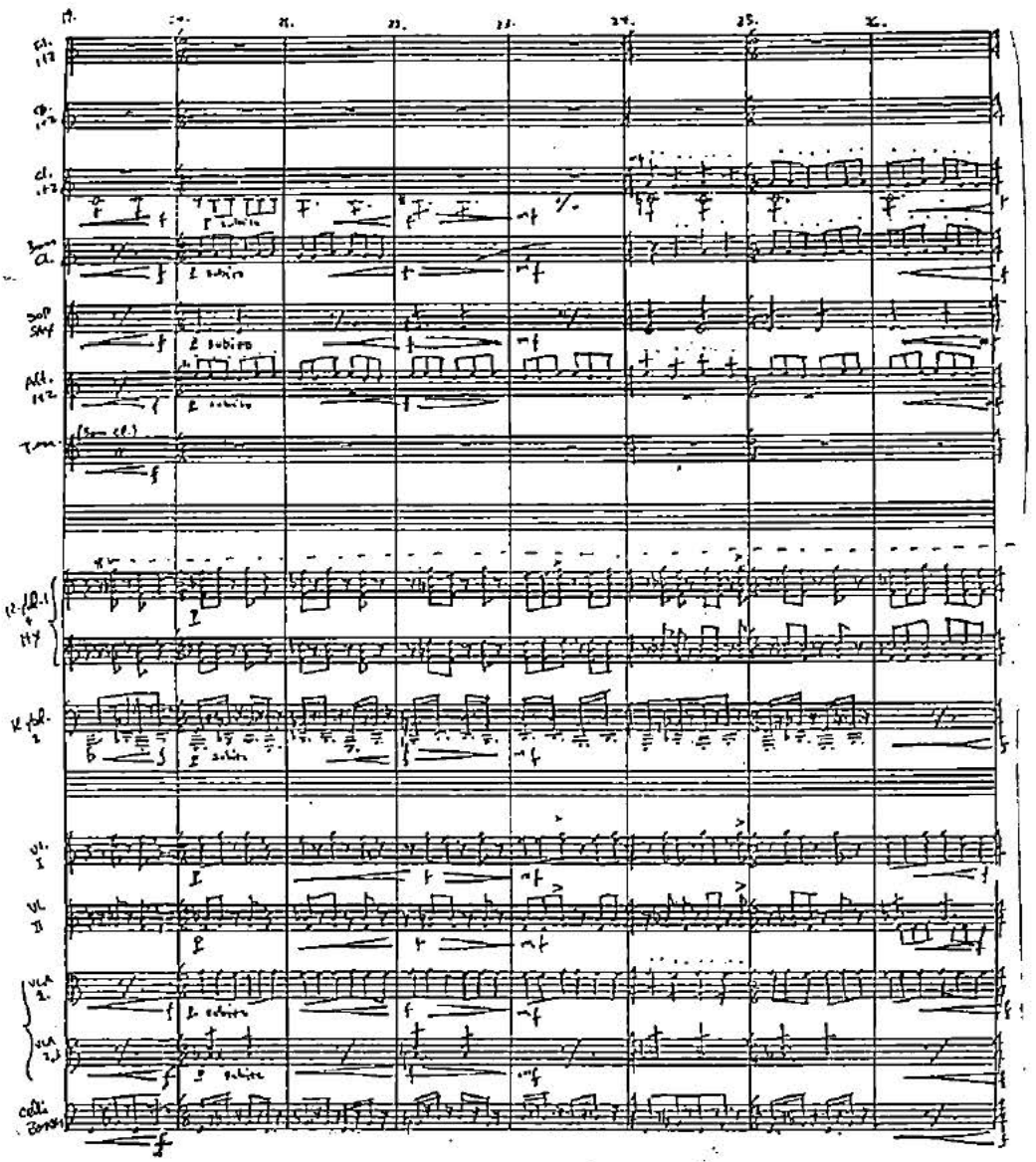
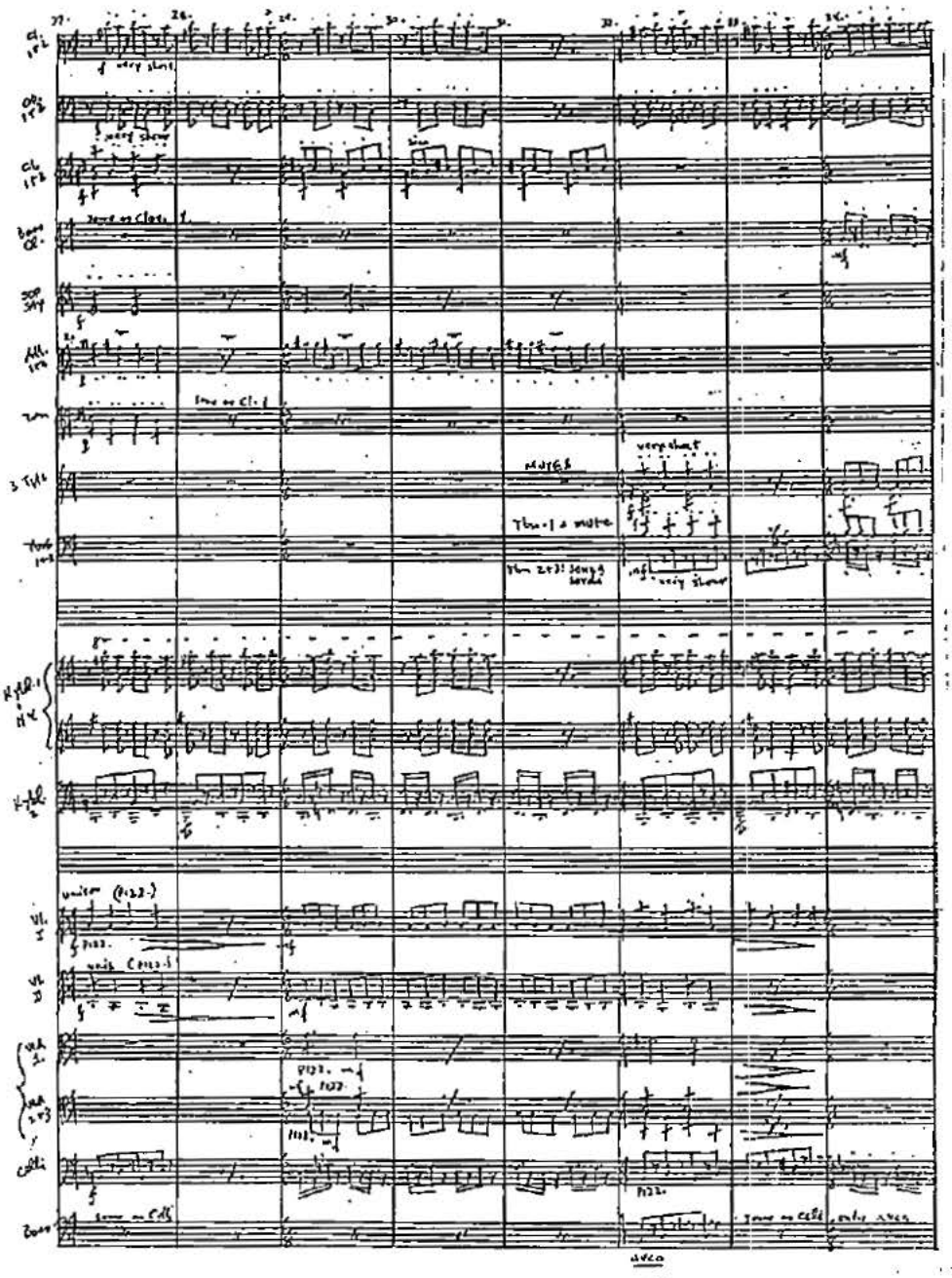
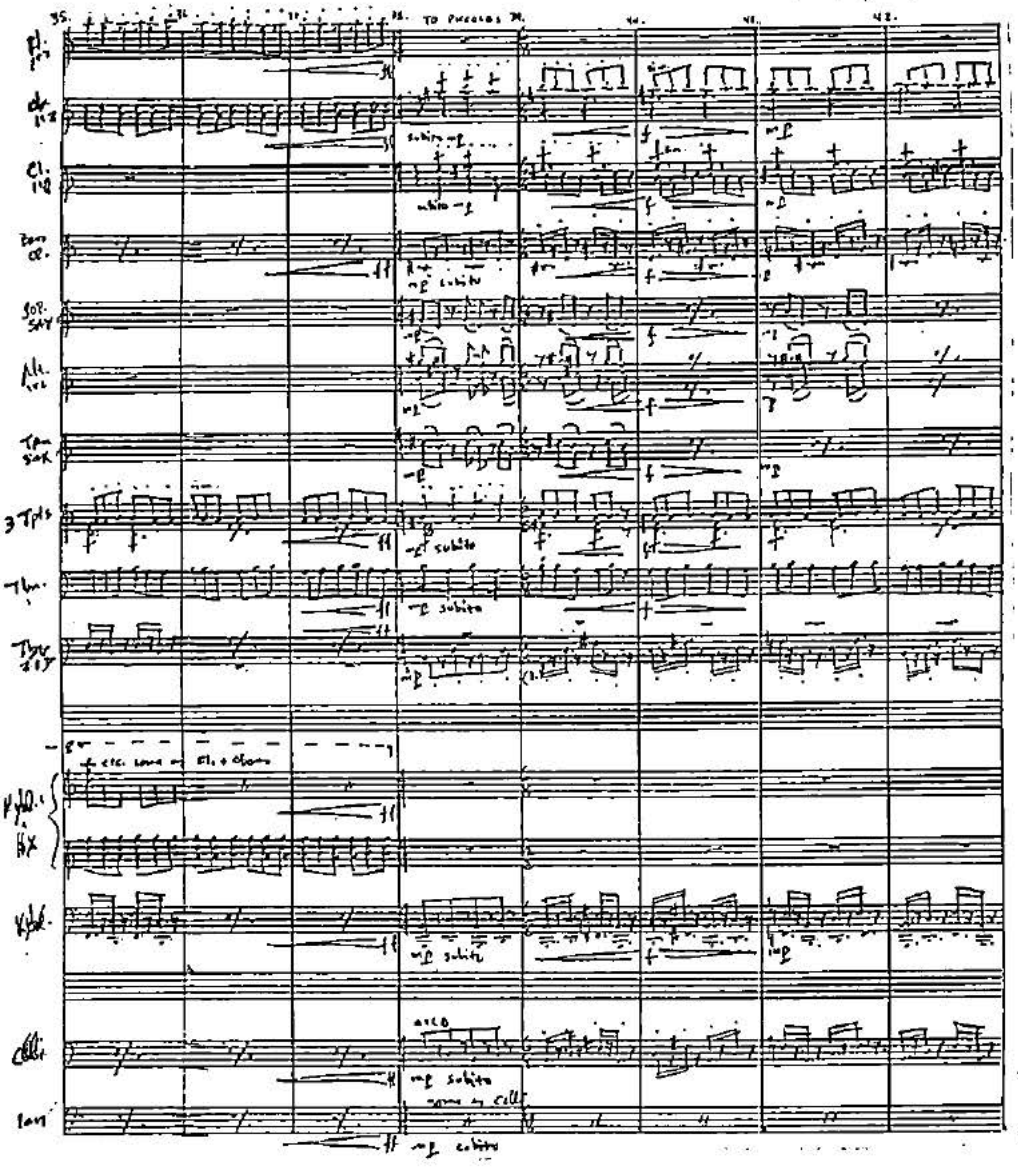
APPENDIX

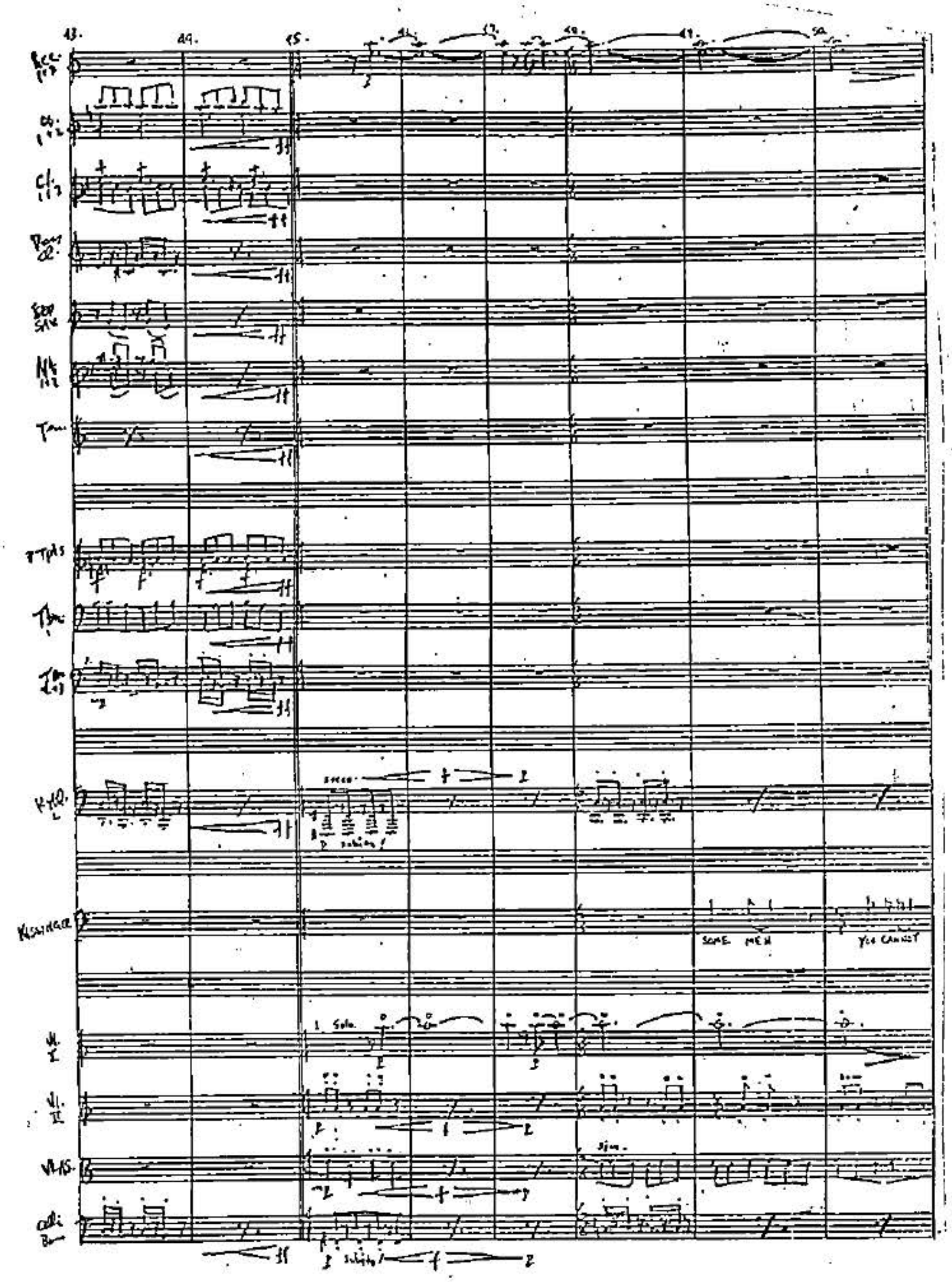
Act III mm.1-42







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VITA

Surname: Thompson Given Names: Brian Christopher

Place of Birth: St. Jerome, Québec Date of Birth: September 4, 1962

Educational Institutions Attended:

York University	1984 to 1985
Concordia University	1985 to 1989

Degrees Awarded:

B.F.A. Concordia University 1989

Honours and Awards:

University of Victoria Fellowship 1989-91

Publications:

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Author [redacted]

Brian Christopher Thompson

September 21, 1991