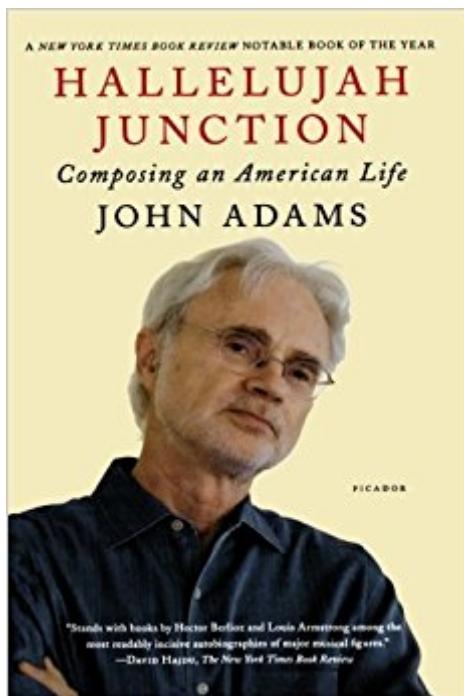


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# Hallelujah Junction: Composing An American Life



## **Synopsis**

A New York Times Notable Book of the Year A San Francisco Chronicle Notable Bay Area Book of the Year A book unlike anything ever written by a composer--part memoir, part description and explication of the creative process--Hallelujah Junction is an absorbing journey across the musical landscape of America and through the life and times of John Adams, one of today's most admired and performed composers.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Starred Review. Best known for his groundbreaking musical works Nixon in China and The Death of Klinghoffer, Adams helped shape the landscape of contemporary classical music. Combining the narrative power of opera, the atonal themes of 20th-century classical music, the spooky modulations of jazz and the complex rhythms of the Beatles and the Band, Adams created a new music that could express the fractiousness of the political scene of the 1960s and 1970s. In this entertaining memoir, Adams deftly chronicles his life and times, providing along the way an incisive exploration of the creative process. A precocious musician, Adams began playing clarinet in the third grade, and, after hearing his teacher read Mozart's biography, tried his hand at composing music. During his undergraduate years at Harvard, he threw himself into performing and conducting when his own inadequacies as a composer began to dawn on him. By his final year at Harvard, however, the chaos of the late 1960s and the creative turbulence of the music scene drove him back to composing. After two years in graduate school, Adams set out for California, where he taught

numerous composition classes and private clarinet lessons while working on his own music and with a who's who of the music world, from Cage and Leonard Bernstein to Philip Glass and Steve Reich. Adams's searingly introspective autobiography reveals the workings of a brilliant musical mind responsible for some of contemporary America's most inventive and original music. (Oct.)

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Celebrated American composer and conductor Adams's memoir chronicles his life from his upbringing as a talented clarinetist in rural New England to his countercultural coming-of-age as a Harvard undergraduate in the 1960s to his embrace of the musical life and vibrant scene of the Bay Area. Adams writes candidly of his compositions and those of his contemporaries in language accessible to the lay reader. Adams—through his engaging orchestral works, such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *On the Transmigration of Souls* and his several landmark "docu-operas" like *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic* (opening at the New York Metropolitan Opera this October)—has emerged as one of the most admired of all living composers. His book proceeds chronologically, but Adams frequently pauses to reflect on the nature of composing and the state of contemporary music. As one of the most inclusive of contemporary composers—his palette covers pop, jazz, and myriad global idioms—he shares his unique perspective on the multiple traditions that inform his musical language. Adams writes articulately about his life and works and the larger social context from which they emerge. Highly recommended for all collections.—Larry Lipkis, Moravian Coll., Bethlehem, PA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

John Adams' background, rise, and development to perhaps the foremost American classical composer alive is well examined in this autobiography. A fan of his compositions from the outset and having seen many of their performances sometimes with Adams conducting, I find additional resonance with his rich and lively descriptions of nearby locales, characters, musics, and events, since I, just two years his senior, had lived under similar and often the same musical and socio-cultural influences in the Bay Area. Adams' takes on John Cage, early electronica, and Minimalism's Steve Reich and Philip Glass are keen, full of peer insights. Adams acknowledges that he discovered his voice, his own unique compositional style, at age 30 after a long series of avant-garde experimentation. His influences besides classical composers, including Wagner and

Ives, were psychedelic rock (e.g., Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrex, Janis Joplin, and the Grateful Dead) as well as jazz greats (e.g., Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Eric Dolphy, and John Coltrane). Adams is a Boomer composer who lived the alternative and experimental musical life. In 1981, his choral symphony "Harmonium" premiered at the inaugural of Davis Symphony Hall of the San Francisco Symphony. It launched him, providing an international reputation and a major record label, Nonesuch. (Later, his "Dharma at Big Sur" celebrated the opening of Disney Hall, home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.) His second punch was "Grand Pianola Music", whose conceptual source was an LSD memory of his attending a Rudolf Serkin concert of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto; the keyboard of Serkin's Steinway seemed to be continually expanding. The early years of Adams' upbringing, training, surviving with odd jobs, and becoming established were the most interesting for me, as it illustrates the social forces and dispositions that make the person. The later and current years are the increasing successes of an international musical leader, and the parade of orchestras, conducting, travels, and assorted musical stars are as we expect, although much of the details of creating a composition and performance are particularly worthy. I found his perspectives on music, musicians, and the actual work and struggle of composing always edifying. Reading the autobiographies and biographies of composers have a historical and analytical purpose, but this nontechnical book is contemporary in every way, making it attractive to the general reader, not just the musicologist or classical music fan. Adams is only in his early 60s and far from retirement. There will probably be a future updated account of life long after we revel in his forthcoming compositions.

I never before read a book written by a composer. Very interesting and exiting experience to study from the author how he created his works. Also it is important to feel the time and people that surrounded him during different events in his life. I reccomend the book to people who love contemporary music.

So as not to diminish my thoughts on this book, I should first mention that I am a great lover of Adams' music, and as a composer always interested in what other composers have to write about themselves. That being said, this is a wonderful book in every way. Adams is a graceful and charming writer, and the book runs on several parallel and intertwined courses that are mutually supportive, like elegant counterpoint. He recounts his personal and professional life, and along the way examines himself, his art and the music of other colleagues. His critical evaluation of his own work and that of others is exceptionally clear, well-considered and wise, and his thoughts on what it

takes to be a composer, what he feels is the right path, and his own experiences of the difficulties of living as a serious, creative artist in America are sober and courageous. I find myself constantly re-reading passages simply for the pleasure of the insight of his thoughts and his ability to express them. This is a book for all readers, not just specialists or fans. It's an exceptional autobiography of any kind, of any figure in contemporary American life, and for anyone interested in classical music in general, and the current iterations, this book demands to be read. This will be as essential a part of the literature of music as Adams' own work is an essential part of the history of music itself.

This is a wonderful book by one of our most renowned modern composers. It is beautifully written and very thoughtful and insightful with regard to music in general and the art of composing "relevant" music in this day and age. There are also many interesting recounts of the conception, evolution and production of many of Adams' operatic and orchestral works. Finally Adams provides us with wry insights into his own character and progress. Five stars!

I really enjoyed this book. There is history, biography, discussion of musical history and style- all written in an engaging style. Since I performed a few of this composer's works I was especially interested in knowing how those pieces came to exist. In addition, the author is relaxed and open about his human imperfections, so the reader can laugh, groan, whatever is appropriate, right along with John Adams. The book is a keeper.

This is a wonderful book, highly recommended to anyone interested in life in the United States in the 1960s and 70s. John Adams is an excellent writer, his autobiography reads like a novel.

My spouse loved this book, and I got points for getting it for her for Christmas. She is not a musician but loves classical music. Well written, entertaining, informative were her comments. Adams' philosophy of music and views on modern classical music.

John Adam's memoir is like his music - it's spirited and immediately engaging but wears thin after prolonged exposure. I obsessively dipped into *Hallelujah Junction* and enjoyed Adam's early history as well as his struggle to find a unique musical voice. He's truly articulate explaining his inspirations, sources and challenges. But as the book progressed my attention flagged, particularly after his description of *Nixon In China*. His critique of Philip Glass was insightful but I think he might take a cue from Stephen Sondheim who refuses to criticize the work of his living contemporaries. It comes

off as mean spirited. Still, I enjoyed this book but I have to say I don't think I'll finish it.

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