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John Donne and John Adams

Paul A. Parrish

Writing about her encounters with and responses to the poetry of John Donne, the artist June Wayne remarks on two very different ways of interacting with the artistic productions of another. Wayne had first created a number of lithographs adopting titles or lines from Donne's poetry as the titles of her works, and the lithographs themselves were appropriate but only vaguely representative of a theme or image found in Donne, most of them representing two lovers in some state of embrace or repose. Wayne came to believe that such a response was inadequate, that it was "cowardly"—to use her word—to snatch lines from his poetry for the titles of her works: "I could have used any title. I could have said 'Love on the Beach in Santa Monica,' and who would know the difference? I felt that I should face Donne squarely. . . . I wanted to prove that, even though there were hundreds of years between us, there was a true collaboration between me and John Donne."[1] The result was her book of poems and images *John Donne Songs & Sonets—Lithographs by June Wayne*, the title itself suggesting the collaboration to which she aspired.[2]

A version of this paper was presented to the 26th annual John Donne Society Conference held in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on 17–19 February 2011. My thanks to colleagues who offered comments and reactions on that occasion.

[1]Quoted in Robert P. Conway, *June Wayne: The Art of Everything. A Catalogue Raissonné 1936–2006* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 119.

[2]Wayne, *John Donne Songs & Sonets—Lithographs by June Wayne. A Livre d'Artiste* (Paris, 1959). For a fuller account of June Wayne's artistic renderings of Donne's poems, see *John Donne Journal* 28 (2009): 173–250. Included are "A Gallery of Words and Images," featuring lithographs by Wayne and poems by

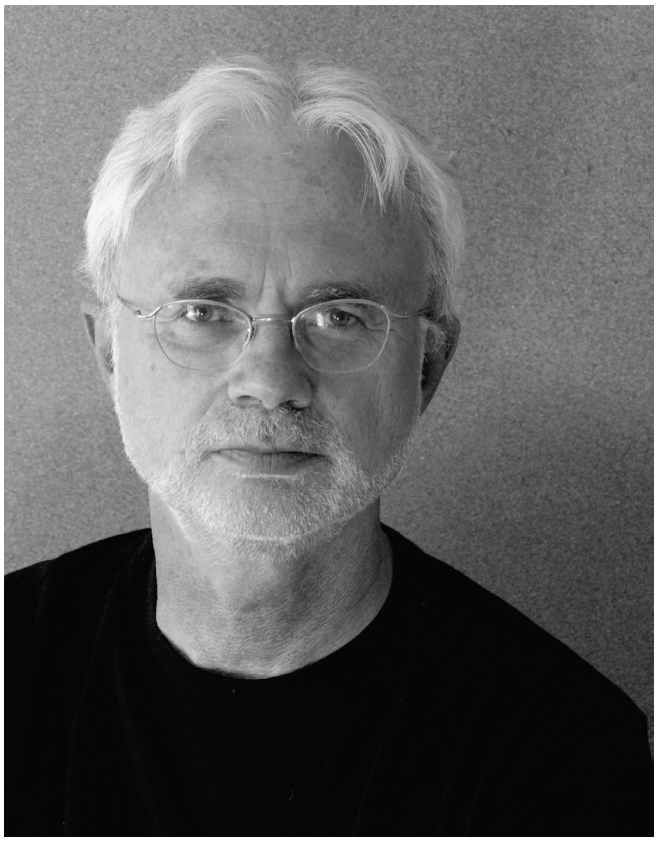

Fig. 1. John Adams. Photograph by Deborah O'Grady © 2008. Used by permission of the photographer.

Wayne's insight is a significant one—pointing to the difference between a casual use of or reference to another artist's work or lines or titles, on the one hand, and a more penetrating integration—a "true collaboration"—between artists and artistic media, on the other. In what follows I want to discuss the contemporary American composer John Adams (fig. 1) and two of his works indebted, in part, to John Donne. In

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Donne, essays by Helen B. Brooks, Jonathan F. S. Post, and Paul A. Parrish (originally presented as a session on Wayne and Donne at the 2009 John Donne Society Conference), and a response to both artists by Ann Hurley and Jebah Baum.

both instances, his choral work *Harmonium* and his opera *Doctor Atomic*, the work, or at least the idea for the work, preceded Adams's use of Donne, but in each case Donne figures significantly in the completed production.

The impetus for *Harmonium* was a request from the then new conductor of the San Francisco Symphony, Edo de Waart, who commissioned Adams in 1980 to write a choral symphony without solo vocalists. Adams acknowledges that, having to that point focused on chamber music or electronic pieces, he found the prospect of such a work intimidating. He first contemplated having the chorus act as "sound generators"—i. e., there would be no text as such, only "meaningless vowel and consonant sounds." Such a possibility, he quickly realized, was limited: "So," he says, "I began a search for a text."[3]

All Adams had, he claims, was an idea, a mental image: "that of a single tone emerging out of a vast, empty space and, by means of a gentle unfolding, evolving into a rich pulsating fabric of sound." He read a lot of poetry, including that of Wallace Stevens, from whom he claimed the title *Harmonium*, but no more. And then, as he puts it, "I stumbled on a poem by John Donne with the intriguing title 'Negative Love.'" For Adams the poem functions as a "trope on negatives, a way of saying something ultimately positive by a curious kind of conceptual inversion."[4] And reading the poem, he asserts, provided him with a sense of "musical form," with the poem moving forward and upward through an assertion of negatives to what Adams sees as its peak of emotion and power with the lines—

> If any who deciphers best,
> What we know not, our selves, can know,
> Let him teach mee that nothing. . . .[5]

Adams later described his use of Donne in this way:

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[3]Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), pp. 110–111.

[4]Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, p. 111.

[5]Donne, "Negative Love," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), lines 14–16.

> "Negative Love" . . . examines the qualities of various forms of love, ascending in the manner of Plato's *Symposium*, from the carnal to the divine. I viewed this "ascent" as a kind of vector, having both velocity and direction. Musically, this meant a formal shape that began with a single, pulsing note (a D above middle C) that, by the process of accretion, becomes a tone cluster, then a chord, and eventually a huge, calmly rippling current of sound that takes on energy and mass until it eventually crests on an immense cataract of sound some ten minutes later.

"To date," he concludes, "I still consider 'Negative Love' one of the most satisfying architectural experiments in all my work."[6]

What is striking about Adams's response is that, apart from his reading of the poem as Donne's effort to describe different forms of love through an ascending arc, Adams says very little about the substance of the poem, focusing instead on what it tells him about form and movement. "Later critics," he acknowledges,

> have complained that much of the poem's philosophical and theological subtlety is railroaded by a too-simplistic musical treatment. That may well be. Nevertheless, the blossoming of consciousness that the Donne text suggests was a launchpad for my imagination, and once I started, the ideas flowed freely.[7]

By "ideas," Adams is surely thinking primarily of musical ideas, not poetic ones, what he calls "musical form" or "architectural experiments," for it is the music more than the words that drives *Harmonium* forward. Or, to say it differently and perhaps more accurately, Donne's words are there but function primarily to provide a verbal text to Adams's musical voice and form, cast as "a musical structure that builds continuously and inexorably to a harmonic culmination point some ten minutes later."[8]

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[6]These remarks appear on Adams's official website; see <http://www.earbox.com/W-harmonium.html>.

[7]Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, p. 111.

[8]These remarks are from Adams's "Programme Note" to *Harmonium* on the G. Schirmer, Inc., website; see <http://www.schirmer.com/default.aspx?TabId=2420&State_2874=2&workId_2874=23705>.

Listening to the piece itself makes clear, perhaps ironically, that in spite of Adams's explicit rejection of meaningless "sound generators," the final product has a lot of "no's," "ne's," and "dat's" that appear to be all but meaningless as words. The score itself consists of 17 pages of the sounds/words "no," "ne," and "never" before we actually get to the opening line of the poem, then some 33 pages of the text through line 13 ("To All, which all love, I say no"), continuing with nearly ten pages of the "sound generator" "dat," and then ending with the final five lines of the poem.[9]

Even for those who appreciate contemporary music, *Harmonium* is, as Adams admits, a "curious piece," and it is made the more so for those who are interested in Donne, since the text *as text* seems almost superfluous. What Adams calls "text intelligibility" is, in a large symphonic hall, "nearly impossible to attain,"[10] so in terms of what Donne *says*, one might well ask, "What's the point?" But if one takes Adams at his word, and I do, the text remains important in understanding the origin and direction of musical form, the words of the poem suggesting to Adams the single chord (and the word "no") that is "brought to life and impelled forward by an inner pulse and by a constantly evolving wave-like manipulation of the surface texture."[11] In short, while Adams's reading of "Negative Love" is not a meditation on or deeper consideration of love, it does in a crucial way inspire the design and architecture of this section of *Harmonium*.

For the whole of *Harmonium*, the setting of "Negative Love" is followed by Adam's compositions that interact with and respond to two poems of Emily Dickinson, "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and "Wild Nights." In some respects, Adams's setting of "Wild Nights" is more closely aligned with his setting of "Negative Love" than with the setting of "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." The last, which appears second in the sequence of poems, is treated as a "pastoral elegy," an example of what Adams refers to as the "intimate, hushed Dickinson," and the words of the poem are treated in a relatively more straightforward fashion and are more accessible to a listening audience.

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[9]For images of the relevant pages from the published score of *Harmonium*, see the Appendix (pp. 190–193, below).

[10]Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, p. 114.

[11]Adams, "Programme Note."

Following "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and ten pages of instrumentation (a section Adams calls "a kind of bardo stage between the end of one life and the beginning of a new one"), *Harmonium* turns its attention to "Wild Nights" and with it, a return to the more urgent music that marks much of "Negative Love." Adams acknowledges the similarity, noting that, as in "Negative Love," the music "gradually assumes weight, force and speed until it is hurled headlong into the bright, vibrant clangor of "Wild Nights."[12]

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"Negative Love" is thus a substantial element of *Harmonium*, albeit only one of three poems that provide the texts for Adams's musical voice. Donne's appearance in *Doctor Atomic* occupies an even smaller portion of that much longer work, about 7–8 minutes of the more than 2½-hour opera, but it is a crucial, climactic, and, for many viewers, an unforgettable occasion.

As with *Harmonium*, the idea for *Doctor Atomic* was not Adams's. Indeed, he writes that, after the significant success of *Nixon in China* and the more mixed reception to *The Death of Klinghoffer*, he wasn't at all sure that he would write another grand opera on that scale.[13] But again came a call from San Francisco, this time in 1999 and in the person of Pamela Rosenberg, who had just become general director of the San Francisco Opera. Rosenberg wanted Adams to compose an "American Faust" opera and proposed that its subject be J. Robert Oppenheimer, the leading scientist for the Manhattan Project whose reputation was later tarnished when he was stripped of his security clearance after a 1954 hearing of the Atomic Energy Commission—an action taken because of his apparently leftist and pacifist views. Adams was attracted to this idea for an opera and soon began to work on the project, first with two collaborators, the director Peter Sellars (fig. 2) and the librettist Alice Goodman, with whom he had produced *Nixon in China*. Goodman soon

[12]These remarks appear on Adams's official website; see <http://www.earbox.com/W-harmonium.html>.

[13]For this summary account of *Doctor Atomic*, I have relied on "A Swirl of Atoms," ch. 13 of Adams's *Hallelujah Junction*.

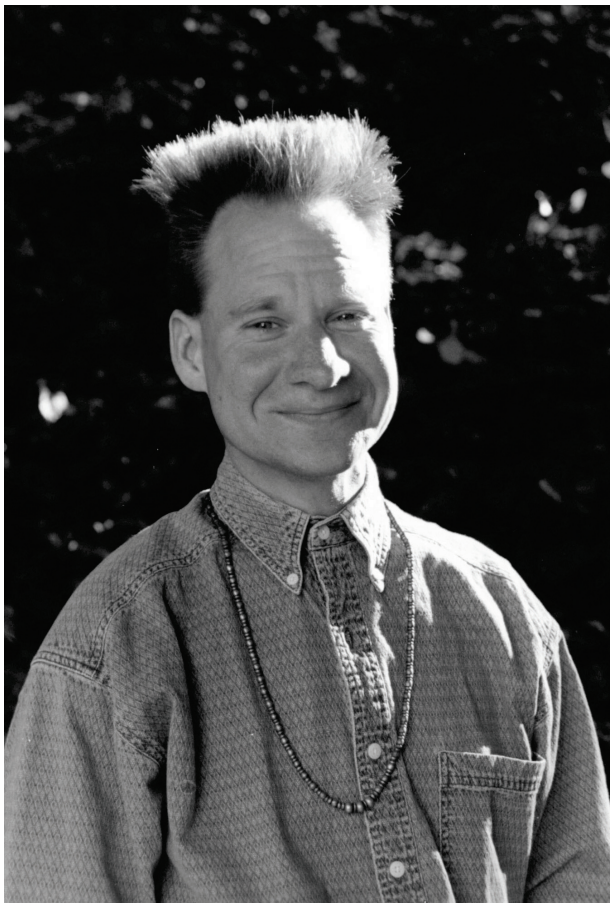


Fig. 2. Peter Sellars. Photograph by Kevin Higa. Used by permission of the photographer.

dropped out, and it then fell to Sellars to create the libretto, which he did largely by piecing together a significant amount of already existing material—from documents associated with the Manhattan project, from books and memoirs, from letters, and, importantly, from poems and translations. The most important texts of this sort are the poems of Charles Baudelaire, who was a particular favorite of Oppenheimer; the Bhagavad Gita, which Oppenheimer was known to have admired and from which he quoted on several occasions; the poetry of Muriel

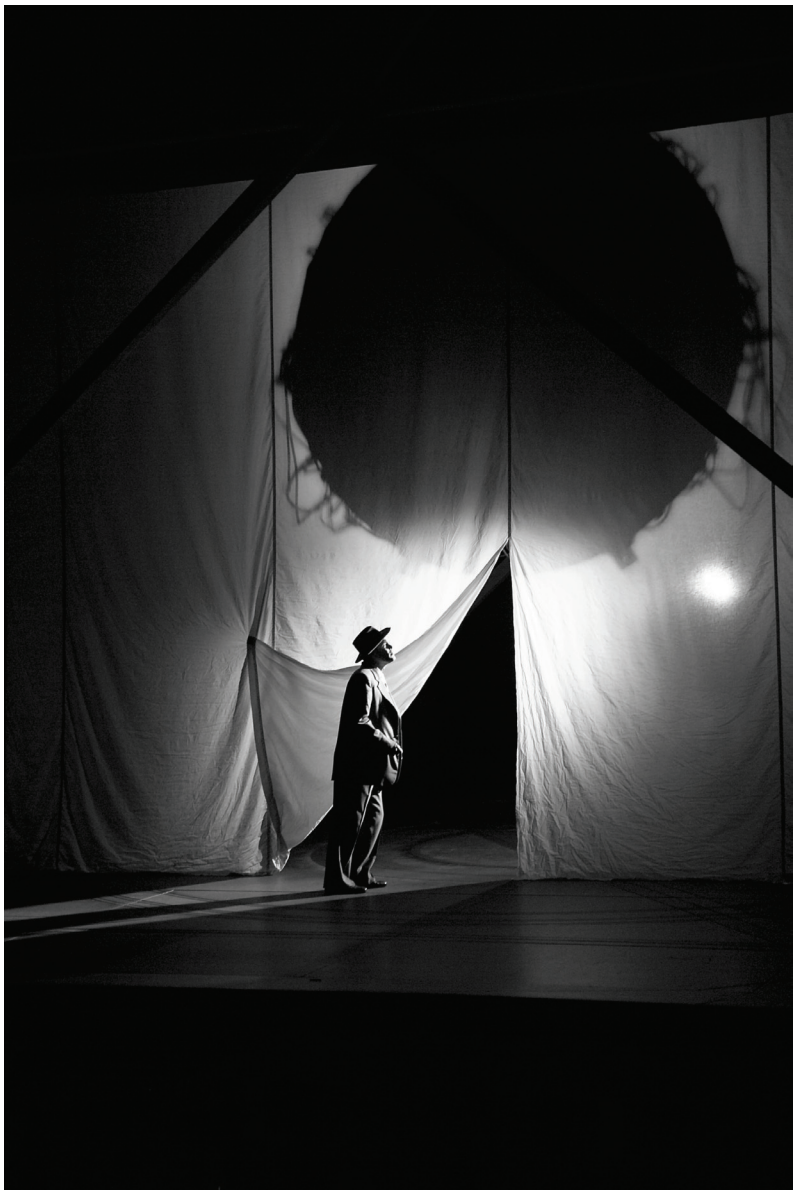


Fig. 3. Gerald Finley as J. Robert Oppenheimer singing the "Batter my heart" aria at the end of Act 1 of *Doctor Atomic*. San Francisco Opera premiere of the work, 1 October 2005. Photograph by Terrence McCarthy/San Francisco Opera. Used by permission of San Francisco Opera.

Rukeyser, whose life and writing career overlapped with the life and achievement of Oppenheimer; and the poetry of John Donne—specifically his Holy Sonnet "Batter my heart, three-person'd God."[14]

Although originally planned to encompass the more than eight-year period from the test at Los Alamos in 1945 to the hearing of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1954, the opera was reduced to only three days in June and July 1945, culminating with the actual detonation of the first atomic bomb.

Doctor Atomic reveals through the actual words of the participants and documents emanating from the events both the outer clash of perspectives among the participating scientists and governmental officials, and the inner conflict of Oppenheimer himself. Oppenheimer is at once the principal spokesperson for this startling advance of science, a person deeply troubled by the changes about to be wrought on the world, and, ultimately, a person who will become a particularly fierce advocate of controlling, even eliminating, the destructive potential of the weapon he helped create. "Batter my heart" comes as the climactic end of Act 1, as Oppenheimer is alone on stage, agonizingly contemplating what he has done, what he is about to do, and the emotional and psychic pain that brings (fig. 3). The choice of the text of "Batter my heart," it is important to note, was that of Peter Sellars, a choice that, combined with Adams's music, creates a truly powerful effect.

Immediately before the aria, two individuals are left on stage, Oppenheimer and General Leslie Groves, who oversaw the Manhattan Project and who was with Oppenheimer at the Trinity test site. (The source of the name "Trinity" remains somewhat contested, but it is usually thought that Oppenheimer himself named the site, deriving the name from the "three-person'd God" of Donne's poem.) Groves and Oppenheimer are engaged in an apparently lighthearted conversation about Groves's weight, Groves admitting that he has always had problems with his size and producing a diary of various diets and corresponding weights over recent months. Somewhat abruptly, he tells Oppenheimer, "You don't look so good," and excuses himself for the

[14]Citations from Donne's "Batter my heart" are to *The Holy Sonnets. The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne.* Vol. 7, Pt. 1, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). I have quoted from the "Revised Sequence."

night. Oppenheimer is alone on a dark stage with the bomb curtained off in a tent behind. Suddenly, the bomb is illuminated, appearing as an ominous force behind a shrouded but visible enclosure. Oppenheimer approaches the bomb, peers in through the flap of the tent, and then retreats as he begins his aria.

Adams's musical setting is designed to give full attention to Donne's words and Oppenheimer's attendant actions. As Oppenheimer advances toward the bomb—before he begins the aria, again when he pauses in the midst of his singing, and finally after he concludes with the anguished "ravish mee"—the music has a pulsing and staccato rhythm one associates with other of Adams's work. Here the music heightens tension and drama, fitting perfectly the agitated yet uncertain movements of Oppenheimer. When he begins to sing, however, the music is much quieter, more melodic and even simple, never detracting, in other words, from the power of Donne's (and here Oppenheimer's) words. The opening lines are rendered emotionally and energetically and repeated a total of four times, with an obvious emphasis, through tone and gesture, on "batter," "knock," "breathe," "orethrowe," "break," "blowe," and "burne," Oppenheimer alternately pounding his chest, looking upward, and falling to his knees. At the words "to another due," Oppenheimer looks glaringly at the bomb, and, even more tellingly, at "But am betroath'd vnto your enemye," he looks, rises, and walks toward the bomb, only to retreat a final time. After he finishes his anguished plea, Oppenheimer rises again, walks again toward the bomb, hesitates for a moment, and then enters the enclosure. The final image of Act 1 is of Oppenheimer, now silhouetted inside the screen *with* the bomb, gesturing upward toward the bomb, much as he had previously gestured upward toward the "three-person'd God." Adams describes these moments as "one of the eeriest and most disturbing stage images I'd ever witnessed," and he remarks that Oppenheimer's move behind the screen or flap of the tent is "like a man going back into the womb."[15] Perhaps. But it feels to me much more like a man who has made a reluctant, even anguished, allegiance to the enemy—the enemy now embodied as a powerful and destructive bomb.

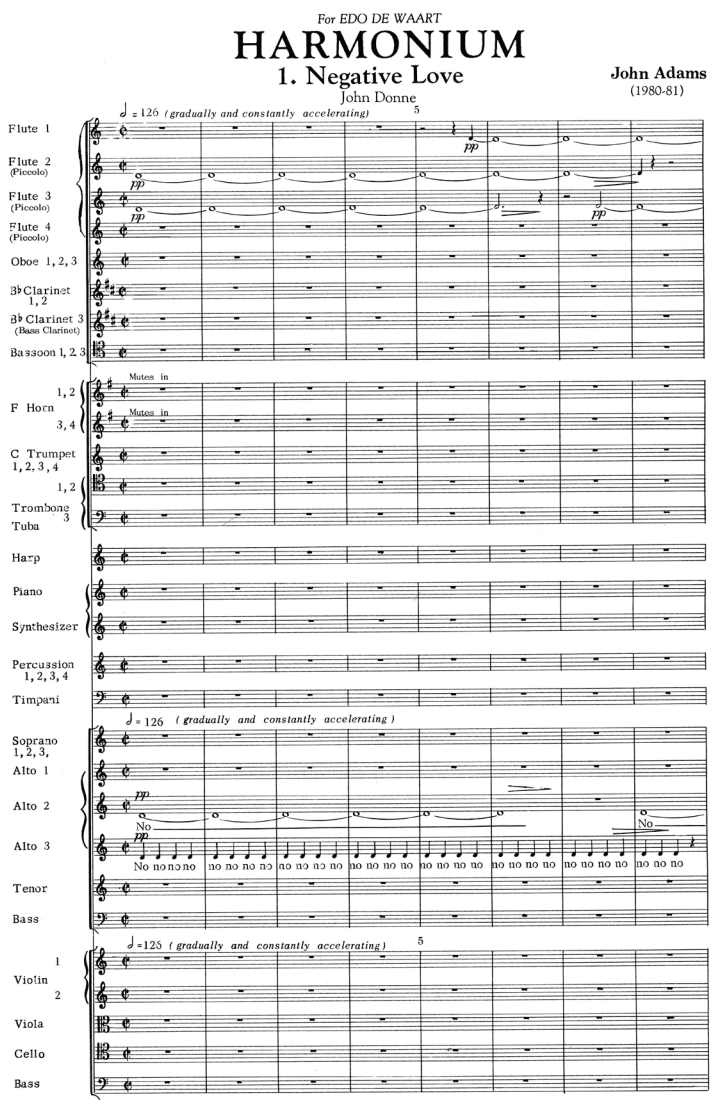
In neither of the instances I have been discussing did Donne's poems prompt the choral or operatic work in which each figures significantly.

[15]Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, pp. 285–286.

But it is equally apparent that each enables the work to become what it is: in *Harmonium*, "Negative Love" provides the impetus for movement and form; in the opera, "Batter my heart" reveals better than any other single moment in the production the depth of Oppenheimer's anguished state. Both result, I think, from what we—and June Wayne—might call a "true collaboration."

Texas A&M University

Appendix



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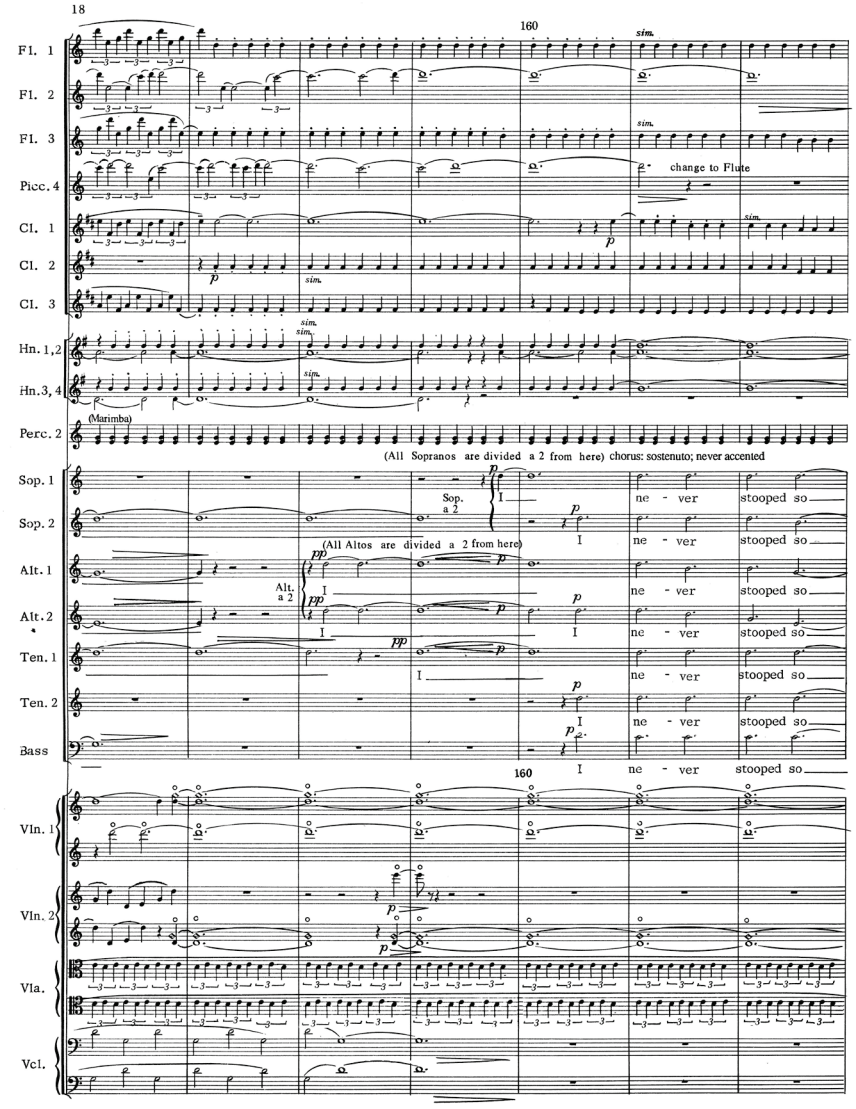

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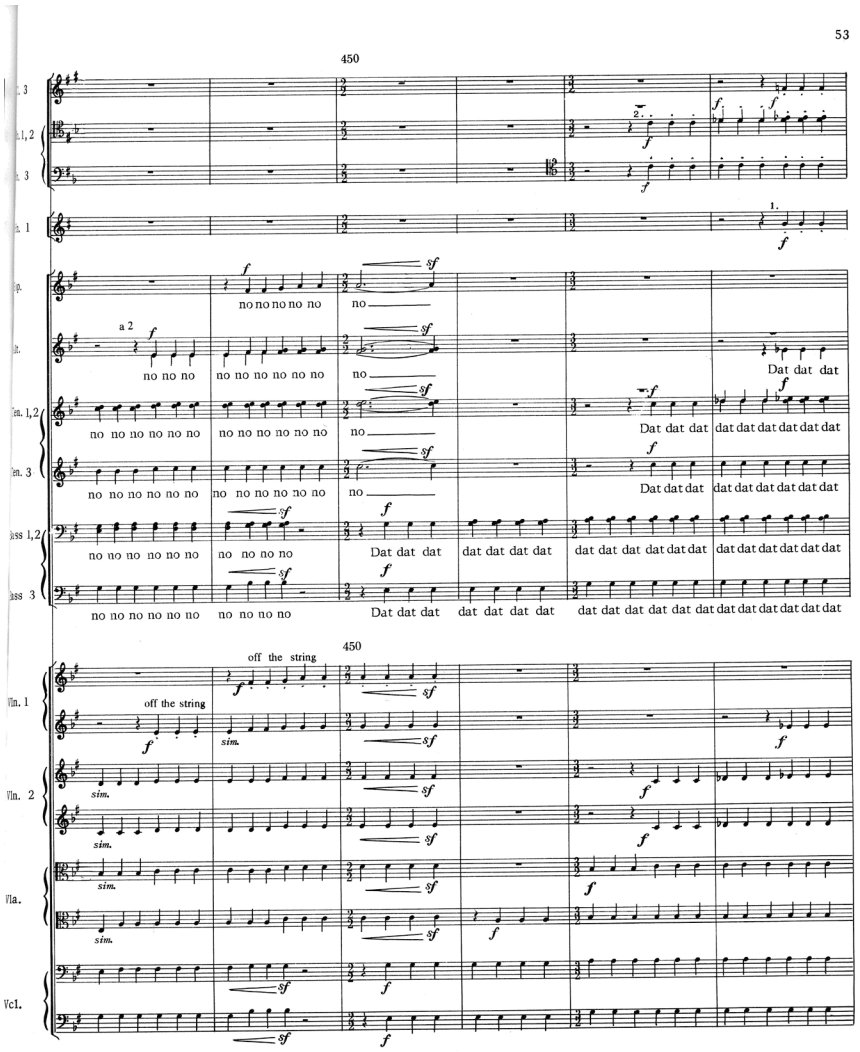

Page 53 of the published score of *Harmonium* by John Adams, the point at which the words change from "no's" to "dat's." Copyright © 1981 by Associated Music Publishers, Inc. (BMI). This arrangement © 2011 by Associated Music Publishers, Inc. (BMI). International Copyright secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.