

# The Chairman Dances

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## JOHN ADAMS

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**BORN** 1947, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA  
**FIRST PERFORMED** 31 January 1986, by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra conducted by Lukas Foss  
**DURATION** 12 minutes

‘A minimalist who’s bored with minimalism.’ That’s how John Adams memorably described himself as far back as 1981, four years before he wrote this buoyant, bouncy ‘foxtrot for orchestra’. In his earliest pieces, it was just about reasonable to lump him in with fellow US composers Philip Glass and Steve Reich as a trio of radical minimalists, creating music full of repetition, slowly changing textures, and usually consonant, pleasant-sounding harmonies. But very quickly, Adams started to strain against the boundaries, introducing all kinds of new, swiftly developing material into his pieces, so that his more recent works have even been described as ‘maximally minimalist’.

*The Chairman Dances* neatly encapsulates both sides of Adams’ musical personality. He describes the piece as an ‘out-take’ from *Nixon in China*, his first opera, which relates US President Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China and the easing of US-Chinese relations as a result. *Nixon in China* was enormously successful – as well as groundbreaking in its focus on very recent, real-world events – and has been staged across the world since its 1987 premiere at Houston Grand Opera.

### Communist dance fantasy

In the piece’s title, ‘Dances’ is a verb, not a noun. The Chairman in question is Mao Zedong, and the piece describes a specific fantasy scenario, which Adams later reworked in the opera’s third act. Jiang Qing – whom

Adams describes as ‘the fabled “Madame Mao”, firebrand, revolutionary executioner, architect of China’s calamitous Cultural Revolution, and (a fact not universally realised) a former Shanghai movie actress’ – gatecrashes a Presidential banquet, inviting her husband – present only in a gigantic, 40-foot portrait – to dance with her. He dutifully steps down from his picture, and they begin to dance a foxtrot together, remembering their youthful days on the Long March, dancing to music from a wind-up gramophone.

### The music

*The Chairman Dances* begins with a typically Adams minimalist texture, all chugging rhythms on strings and woodwind, a propulsive bassline and increasingly insistent ‘pings’ from woodwind, piano and percussion. After a couple of gradual build-ups (one of which features an almost exact quotation from Stravinsky’s *Symphony in Three Movements* in the violins), the texture suddenly clears and the tempo slows for the piece’s sensuous, sultry middle section, complete with soaring, Hollywood-style string melody, mirrored in a ghostly, stratospheric theme on violin harmonics later on.

When the opening music returns, it’s almost like a train slowly picking up speed, but the sensuousness of the middle section soon returns in a joyful rerun of the Hollywood-style melody, now combined with the chugging minimalist textures in a kind of ecstatic union. Suddenly a solo piano takes over, and as the Maos’ gramophone runs down, all that’s left is the crackle of the needle in the groove.

Adams himself playfully suggests that we might associate the piece’s minimalist opening with Mao, and the more ‘seductive, swaying-hips melody’ of its central section with Jiang Qing, adding: ‘You might imagine the piano part at the end being played by Richard Nixon.’

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