

# The wound dresser – john adams

People



The second piece I reviewed was entitled The Wound Dresser. This is a composition for chamber orchestra and baritone singer. John Adams based this piece off of The Wound Dresser, a poem by Walt Whitman. The poem was written in in 1865 and was based on Whitman's experiences working as a nurse in the American Civil War. John Adam's is most often recognized as a minimalist, and well known for his pieces Doctor Atomic, and Short Ride in a Fast Car. You can hear examples of minimalism all throughout the piece.

What I found interesting was that when Adams was working on this piece, his father was dying of Alzheimer's disease. This gave Adams the ability to connect with Whitman's poem on a much deeper level. Not just by having an awareness of dying, but by caring for people who are dying. Lyrically, this piece start out with a man reminiscing of caring for wounded soldiers in the hospital. It was his job do change the dressings on the wounded soldiers. What I noticed most was how Adams reflected the mood and tone of the lyrics by using odd combinations of instruments, and unusual harmonic combinations.

The bugle style trumpet, with a synthesizer, and some extreme ranges on the first violin produce a sense of misery or weakness that couples with the baritone's lyrics perfectly. The first violin's solo was beautiful but yet projected a somehow painful, sorrowful feel. When the strings all began to play, it was slow The piece starts out with just violins, and the first violin playing a solo in an usually high register. The double basses begin playing legato and slowly fading in and out. If pain and sorrow could be written through music, then John Adams did it in this piece.

I heard them eventually playing pizzicato, with strings still sweeping in and out. That moment was beautiful. There was a trumpet solo, which somehow sounded distant. Upon reflection I realized that it had the same effect that Adams used in his piece Distant Trumpet written in 1986. The lyrics were shockingly disturbing. Not something that I was expecting to hear. They were many points in the baritone's melody that it sounded atonal. It was dark, and miserable from every end. Lyrics like " come, sweet death" implying that death would be complete joy for him.

I couldn't quite pick a structure out of the piece, but at the end, I heard a returning theme in the first violin. All in all, this piece was beautifully miserable. Like always, I thoroughly enjoyed my time at the CPO. I heard the Chorus for the first time, I also heard a synthesizer be used for the first time. I hope to hear different versions of Ave Maria and Ode Joy as well. This experience was impacting and inspiring. It made me desire to strive to a new level in my musicianship that I have never been to before.