

In 1953 (the year John Luther Adams was born), Lou Harrison, then a young composer still in his thirties, came home to California after a decade on the East Coast—first in New York City and then at Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina. Back on the West Coast he eventually settled in Aptos, a small coastal community near Santa Cruz. Lou’s “Chinese poet” hermitage was up on the hill, just a short distance from the Pacific Ocean. He and Bill Colvig were still in that tiny house when John and I and others—two generations now after Lou—first met him in the 1970s. By then he was an “elder” (a status we are rapidly approaching!) and an iconic figure in Western American culture. As such, his life and work represented an alternative to the career and reputation machine of New York, and his example was a profound inspiration to several of us younger composers. We were all products of the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s—too young to have been original participants, but old enough to be thoroughly influenced and enthused by the incredible cultural-imaginative expansion which that era represented. By the time we came of age in the early seventies, much of that original energy had become diffused (and already commercialized and exploited), and the dominant ethos of those years was the idea of “going back to the land.” What that represented was a dropping out of the “rat race” of mainstream society and its values and the development of a personal and cultural self-sufficiency. Lou had done precisely that, twenty years before.

By the early seventies, with the Vietnam War soon to be winding down, and the American working class as prosperous (and conservative) as it ever had been, environmentalism came to the fore as the cutting edge of radical politics, replacing old-fashioned Marxist paradigms or the conflicts, so prominent in the sixties, of the so-called generation gap. Twenty years earlier, roughly around that same year 1953, Lou Harrison had written one of his major works, albeit one that is rarely performed and little-known today, the *Four Strict Songs* (1951–55) for male voices with orchestra. In his own words, these were “Making-things-right-&-good-again Songs, after the examples of Hozhonji-Songs from Navaho”—almost twenty years before “ethnopoetics” and Jerome Rothenberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred* anthology that was to have such an influence on our generation. In 1953 Gary Snyder, future spokesperson for the West Coast poetic and environmental counterculture, was a starting-out poet and hermit summer fire lookout in the Cascades of northern Washington. (Fire lookout was a job, in fact, that Lou recommended to us as good for composers; his long-time partner Bill Colvig was a Sierra Club guide and legendary mountaineer.) So Lou’s *Four Strict Songs* are a landmark piece, not just in music, but also in the environmentalist, ethnopoetic, alternative culture vision that emerged on the West Coast of the United States in the 1950s. There were antecedents, of course—Robinson Jeffers and Jaime de Angulo and Henry Cowell—but after World War II it was a brand new ball game, as they say; and Lou, along with Harry Partch and certain poets of the so-called “San Francisco Renaissance,” was one of its early pioneers. Back when it was lonely to be so. So when someone like John Luther Adams arrived on the scene in the mid-1970s, it was not simply a case of a young talented composer—though it was certainly that, too—but more deeply, he was someone that Lou had been waiting for, ever since those difficult years of the 1950s. A cultural (and might I say spiritual—“spiritual’ is a word that has been much abused these days,” Lou once said to me) heir, through whom this legacy and tradition that Lou represented would be passed on and continued. Lou lived to see his vision and life’s work—and his struggles and sacrifices—vindicated, and he died in 2003 a deeply respected and beloved figure. We hear that love and respect in John Luther Adams’s *for Lou Harrison*. In talking about John and his piece, I am going to use as section headings the titles of each of the *Four Strict Songs*: our generation’s environmental, cultural, spiritual manifesto, first elaborated by Lou more than a half century ago.

Here Is Holiness

Lou’s *Four Strict Songs* make reference to a Native American spirituality and reverence for all forms of life and manifestations of living energy, and it is clear that such an attitude has influenced John deeply too. Titles of his works alone illustrate that: *songbirdsongs*, *Forest Without Leaves*, *Earth and the Great Weather*, *The Light that Fills the World*, among others. John’s contact with the indigenous cultures of Alaska have also influenced his concept of sound as sacred (*Strange and Sacred Noise*)—one hears the booming resonance of Yup’ik and Iñupiaq drumming in John’s percussion works (the “Jekyll and Hyde” contrast to his quieter, more contemplative pieces, as he jokes—but they still belong on the same continuum of the power and mystery of sound, albeit sometimes on opposite ends of that spectrum). Another source of strength and inspiration is in the land itself—the “Mountains and Rivers Without End” (to borrow a phrase from Gary Snyder) of Alaska and the American West. Charles Olson proclaimed in his 1947 landmark essay on Melville, *Call Me Ishmael*, “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America” and “America completes her West only on the coast of Asia.” The indigenous world of John’s Alaska is quite literally close to our Asian origins as Americans (the original Bering Strait!), and Alaska may now be the last place in the United States where Olson’s vision of American SPACE still rings true. With the incredible surge in population in the U.S. since the 1960s, it’s starting to feel a bit crowded down here in the Lower 48; and our generation (John and I are a year apart) may have been the very last to have experienced that sense of space and

its corollary—personal and imaginative freedom. The classic novel of mid-century America, after all, was Kerouac's *On the Road*, a paean to precisely that. And even though in John's hometown, Fairbanks, it's perhaps a case of "one can't see the forest for the trees," his love for the open spaces and sheer magnificence of Alaska is well documented in his writings. His recent installation piece at the University of Alaska Museum, *The Place Where You Go to Listen* (which I have only read about), is a poem to Alaska: its weather, the long days and nights, the magical aurora borealis of the Northern sky, and even the seismic energies in the Alaskan earth itself. Here is Holiness, indeed.

Here Is Nourishment

Obviously this sense of place, and being in the midst of a culturally and ecologically rich environment, alongside all other living beings and spirits (we know about "spirits")—all this is very nourishing, creatively. When I most recently saw John, at the very end of summer 2006, I commented that winter was coming on; and that unlike our friends in academia who often compose during their "free" time in the summer, winter for us was the time when we settled in to compose. He nodded, in total understanding and agreement. The darkness of winter (and nowhere is it darker than Alaska) not to mention the cold—provides a time and space to go inward, and for that special intimacy and solitude that is so conducive to creativity. I heard a news story a few weeks ago about all these urban artists who go to retreats like the MacDowell Colony to create. Composers like John and I come *home* to create. That sense of place, of intimacy, of your own carefully set-up creative environment, both in exterior and interior terms—I don't think either of us would trade that for any "artists' colony." The sounds I hear now in spring are the returning ducks and geese, and my next-door neighbors include a pair of nesting bald eagles. I'm sure John has similar companionship. It certainly beats what Lou Harrison once called, in reference to New York City, "the group chattering of the metropolis."

And yet John, wisely, has never let himself be content—as he could have been—with being a big frog in a small pond, as far as Alaska goes. He has kept his perspective and ambition intact (which time and his own achievement have validated). We wouldn't be talking (writing) about him today otherwise. So—in a kind of opposite direction from those urbanites who go to the wilderness and the art colonies to seek inspiration and the time and space to create—John makes his regular pilgrimages to New York and the "urb" to recharge his creative batteries, going to museums and concerts, meeting people, making the necessary career connections. To then: go home. To compose. Here is nourishment.

Here Is Tenderness

This is the trickiest one. Hard as it may be to believe—since it is such a natural and taken-for-granted aspect of folk and popular music—tenderness, and things like melody, simplicity, and clarity, were actually *forbidden* when we were coming up as young students (though, fortunately, not by our teachers). Of course, by the late sixties, early "Minimalism" was beginning to subvert all that—and Lou Harrison's music was full of such clarity and tenderness, which was one of the reasons it attracted us so much. Back in the fifties and sixties, music was all about structure and analysis—and complexity.* Now there's nothing wrong with any of that. One look at the score of *for Lou Harrison* reveals that despite its clarity, there is structure and complexity—just as there are in the colors and form of a Mark Rothko painting. There is also a very sensual approach to sound that invites the listeners in, rather than repelling and baffling them with obtuseness, aggressiveness, or a merely intellectual complexity. Many of these latter types of composers have become very defensive and, safe in their academic refuge, blame the listeners rather than themselves, and scornfully talk about "naive and sentimental" music. With these kinds of attitudes, in a mere fifty years composers have become virtually irrelevant figures in contemporary society.

for Lou Harrison is neither naive nor sentimental—though I don't have a problem with that sometimes either (remember: rules are not chains!). But there is a great deal of emotion, and of tenderness—for Lou, and for the listeners who will be moved by this music. This type of expressivity is not to be confused with any sort of "New Romanticism." The latter is a neoconservative response to this communication crisis, a falling back into old formulas of stylistic and rhetorical gestures. Authentic emotion is always fresh: that is the magic and the constantly renewing originality of art; and without a love for the listeners (who else does one write music for?—not just for the sake of theory or analysis, for god's sake!), music becomes only stale technique. In the academic manner in which music is taught and judged these days, we too often confuse

* Even the supposedly freer aleatoric music suffered from this too: the idea that a piece is somehow "justified" by its "explanation."

technical competence with real creativity—but in the end, the discerning public knows the difference. So here is tenderness, and beauty.

Here Is Splendor

So here we have John's 63-minute piece, *for Lou Harrison*. It is one continuous work, though it is clearly divided into nine sections. There are two basic ideas that alternate: ABABABABA. In this regard, the structure of the piece is quite audible. What this does is create a sense of stasis, even though within each section there is constant movement. This static quality, combined with the formal simplicity and transparency, gives the work a monumental, almost monolithic character. This piece is therefore not about melodic/thematic or dramatic development in a conventional (musical) narrative sense. Like the use of paint and color in a Rothko painting, the thematic and dramatic elements—which actually abound—are instead embodied in the sound materials themselves. We are invited into that sound world and hence, the listening experience becomes meditative, as much sensual as intellectual/cognitive. The hour-long length of *for Lou Harrison* contributes to that also. This is music to get lost in—while at the same time, due to the formal clarity, you always know where you are.

I immediately heard two images, two kinds of energy, in the different sections. The principal idea, which both have in common, is that of ascending and constantly overlapping melodic lines. There is a rhapsodic and ecstatic quality that links this music to the legacy of Carl Ruggles (who once wrote in a letter to Dane Rudhyar: “Music is no better than it sounds”—which expresses another essence of this piece). I would describe these two energies/images as “Tidal” and “River.” The A sections have a more rapid momentum—both in terms of ascent and overlap. The musical lines swell and accumulate more quickly and then climax and fall back, to once again repeat that momentum. I hear waves building and breaking. In the B sections, I hear the steady flow and inexorable motion and swell of a river (John referred to it as a “proceSSIONal”). The musical lines are longer, slower; and even though the accumulation and overlapping build to a greater fullness, this energy does not spend itself like waves; rather it subsides.

I know it is perhaps dangerous to indulge in such analogy, but I think this helps clarify matters for the general readership. This is a fun musical score to study, and there is a wealth of “shop talk” for composers here. The instrumentation calls for a string quartet, along with a string ensemble (violins 1 and 2, violas, cellos, and basses) of optional size, plus two pianos. These constitute three autonomous units within the ensemble as a whole. In a real sense these are three simultaneous quartets, as the pianos play continuous single lines in each hand—that is, four lines. The basses of the string ensemble add depth and find their counterpart in the deep bass notes of Piano 2 in the “River” sections. This instrumental configuration thus represents another element of clarity within the constantly shifting textures. Furthermore, in the string quartet during the “Tidal” sections the two violins are always paired together, as are the viola and cello. This mirrors the two pianos, who are always kept distinct in their musical roles.

Due to their sustaining nature, strings tend to create a denser texture of sound than the more percussive quality of the pianos. This creates another level of contrast and clarity. Between the string quartet and the string ensemble there is a fascinating shift of foreground-background. In the “Tidal” sections the string ensemble provides a solid, though openly voiced and transparent, background, against which the paired melodic lines of the quartet (violin 1/violin 2, viola/cello) ascend and overlap. In the “River” sections the string ensemble itself takes over this function of overlapping lines, and the string quartet shifts to a background function (one of the most interesting moments in the piece, for me), adding melodic fragments and emphases that appear and disappear in the larger texture. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the string quartet lines against the massed string ensemble; but like any key ingredient in a recipe, you would immediately notice if they weren't there. The string ensemble creates continuity between sections by gradually reverting to its background function at all the transition points. This way the alternation of sections is seamless, also kept so by the steady presence of the pianos.

Yet within this stasis and steady repetition, there is constant change. The pitches—in terms of scales, and intervals—always vary, as does the harmonic foundation. Sometimes the intervals—the space between notes—are close and dense sounding; other times they are more open, airy, ringing. In the “Tidal” sections, the possible combinations of overlappings are continuously alternated. This creates two interesting effects: (1) shifting bands of tonal/textural color and (2) an almost verse/quatrain structure. This quality of a “poetic line” of different lengths (longer in the “River” sections, shorter in the “Tidal”) is one of the first things I heard in the piece. This quatrain effect is achieved by a structural symmetry in the “Tidal” sections. First, all the instruments more or less sound and ascend together. Then there are three “phrases” of

ascent/overlap, each with a different tonal/textural combination, followed by all the instruments together again. If you call the unison part a “refrain” and the three following elaborations “verses,” you get a structure of: opening refrain, 3 verses/refrain, 3 verses/refrain, 3 verses/refrain, 3 verses/refrain. That basic, that ingenious: again the combination of complexity and clarity that defines this piece. Like the alternating bands and planes of color in a Rothko painting: If you think that’s simple, well, take another look.

There is a further element in this clarity-complexity scheme, namely, tempo—the speeds at which these melodic lines ascend and mingle. Taking as a basis the idea of 4 beats per measure (4/4 time), other lines play against that with various groupings and speeds of 5, 6, and 7 notes. That thickens the texture, makes it less measured, predictable, and plodding—and creates a sense of different rates of acceleration or deceleration. Yet John keeps these tempo ratios fairly simple and obvious enough so that neither the musicians nor the listeners get lost. He avoids sonic “mud,” while adding yet another layer of rhythmic fluidity.

Finally, there is one almost surprising aspect which links John’s piece to Lou Harrison’s music. John wrote in a letter:

Shortly after Lou died, I dreamed I was rehearsing a new piece for chorus and gamelan . . . I was convinced this was the memoriam I would compose for Lou.

. . . but I’ve never composed for gamelan, and in the months following . . . I came to feel it would be presumptuous for me to compose a gamelan work in memory of the master of the American Gamelan.

One evening . . . I stopped. Suddenly it struck me that the interlocking layers of repeated melodic cells, the longer phrases punctuated by gong-like octaves in the low register of the piano, the stately pacing and solemn tone of the whole thing sounded a lot like Javanese gamelan.

The “gongs” John refers to are in the “River” sections, and their regularity mirrors their function in Javanese gamelan music, to mark off time. This also helps to anchor the performers, who are playing in these 5, 6, 7 relationships against the 4-beat. To me this is stunning—as the simplest ideas often are.

As I was working on this essay, I recalled a mesostic that John Cage had written in honor of Lou (“Many Happy Returns”), and I was struck by the fact that Cage described the same river/ocean imagery in talking about Lou’s music that I have been using here. He wrote that its quality, quantity, and variety

make it Resemble
a rIver in delta.
LiStening to it
we becOme
oceaN.

I could say the same about John’s *for Lou Harrison*. Here’s a music full of energy that is never frenetic; brimming with emotion, but without bombast. Here is Holiness, Nourishment, Tenderness.

Here is Splendor.

—*Peter (Adams) Garland*
Winnegance, Maine, Spring 2007

Composer (still at-large) Peter Garland’s last whereabouts were reputedly the mountains of southern Mexico. Recent sightings now locate him on the coast of Maine.

Composer's note

Lou Harrison was a generous friend and wise mentor to me for almost thirty years. Lou's faith and support of my music was a decisive influence in my life. I learned more of practical value from my time with Lou than from any of my institutional studies. And he was an inspiring model of how to live, without regret or bitterness, as an uncompromising independent composer.

Composed in 2003–2004, *for Lou Harrison* completes a trilogy of large-scale memorial works that also includes *Clouds of Forgetting*, *Clouds of Unknowing* (1991–95) and *In the White Silence* (1998).

for Lou Harrison encompasses the most lush and active textures in my music to date, moving in four tempo layers (in the proportions 4/5/6/7) throughout. The work's two textures—rising arpeggios over sustained harmonic clouds, and long solo lines over “procession-like” material—alternate in nine continuous sections, each of which is grounded in a different five-, six- or seven-tone harmony. The formal structures of the composition recur throughout the score, but the sound of the music is always changing.

for Lou Harrison was not commissioned. I composed this work because I was compelled to do so in response to the death of one of the most important figures in my life. Amid the daunting realities of today's world, Lou Harrison and his joyful ecumenical life and music seem more vital and more pertinent than ever before.

From his home in Alaska, **John Luther Adams** has created a unique musical world grounded in wilderness landscapes and indigenous cultures, and in natural phenomena from the songs of birds to elemental noise. His music includes works for orchestra, small ensembles, percussion, and electronic media, and is recorded on New World, Cantaloupe, Cold Blue, Mode, New Albion, and other labels.

He is the author of the book *Winter Music*, and his writings have appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies. His sound and light environment *The Place Where You Go to Listen* is a permanent part of the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska—Fairbanks.

In 2006 Adams was named one of the first United States Artists Fellows. Previously he has received awards and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Rasmuson Foundation, and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

He has worked with many prominent performers and venues, including Bang on a Can, Other Minds, Almeida Opera, the Sundance Institute, Percussion Group Cincinnati, So Percussion, the California E.A.R. Unit, FLUX Quartet, the Paul Drescher Ensemble, and Steven Schick.

John Luther Adams has served as composer in residence with the Anchorage Symphony, Anchorage Opera, Fairbanks Symphony, Arctic Chamber Orchestra, and the Alaska Public Radio Network, and as president of the American Music Center. He has taught at the University of Alaska, Bennington College, and the Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

Well-known as a champion of contemporary music, **Stephen Drury's** repertoire extends from Bach, Schubert, and Liszt to the complete piano sonatas of Charles Ives and music by John Cage, Elliott Carter, Frederic Rzewski, John Zorn, Morton Feldman, Gyorgy Ligeti, and Luciano Berio. He has performed throughout the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Asia, taking the sound of new music into remote corners of Pakistan, Greenland, and Montana. Drury was a prizewinner in the Carnegie Hall/Rockefeller Foundation Competitions in American Music, and the United States Information Agency selected him twice for its Artistic Ambassador program. Recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and Meet the Composer, he has commissioned new works from John Zorn, John Cage, Terry Riley, Lee Hyla, and Chinary Ung. Stephen Drury teaches at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he directs the Callithumpian Consort and the Summer Institute for Contemporary Performance Practice. He has recorded for Mode, Tzadik, Avant, New Albion, Catalyst, MusicMasters, and Neuma.

The Callithumpian Consort is based at the New England Conservatory, where it performs a regular concert series, led by Stephen Drury of the NEC faculty. A smaller group of senior members, largely NEC alumni, is supplemented by a loose aggregation of advanced NEC students, alumni, and new-music specialists. The ensemble has performed locally, throughout the U.S., and in Europe, and has recordings on Mode and Tzadik.

Recognized nationally and internationally as a leader among music schools, the **New England Conservatory** was founded in 1867. The Conservatory presents more than six hundred free concerts each year in NEC's Jordan Hall and throughout New England. The college program instructs more than eight hundred undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral music students from around the world, and has a faculty of two hundred twenty-five artist-teachers and scholars. Educated as complete musicians, NEC alumni fill orchestra chairs, concert hall stages, jazz clubs, and recording studios worldwide. Nearly half of the Boston Symphony Orchestra is composed of NEC faculty and alumni.

The Callithumpian Consort, Stephen Drury, artistic director/conductor

Solo Quartet

Gabriel Boyers, violin
Gabriela Díaz, violin
Wendy Richman, viola
Benjamin Schwartz, cello

Yukiko Takagi, piano
Keith Kirchoff, piano

Orchestra

Violin

Yura Lee
Ethan Wood
Laura Colgate
Megumi Stohs
In Sun Jang
Benjamin Scott
Kristopher Tong
Joshua Weilerstein

Viola

Sarah Lemons
Verona Rapp
Sharon Tenhundfeld

Cello

David Huckaby
Soo Jee (Susie) Yang
Tao Ni
Anne Lee
Jing Li

Bass

Evan Halloin
David Goodchild

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing. Apollo Chamber Orchestra, JoAnn Falletta conducting. New World Records 80500-2.

Dark Wind. M. Walker, bass clarinet; A. Knoles, marimba/vibraphone; B. Pezzone, piano. Cold Blue Music CB 009.

Dream in White on White. Apollo String Quartet and Strings; B. Chapman, harp. New Albion NA 061.

Earth and the Great Weather (A Sonic Geography of the Arctic). New World Records 80459-2.

The Far Country of Sleep. The Cabrillo Festival Orchestra, JoAnn Falletta conducting. New Albion NA 061.

The Farthest Place. A. Knoles, marimba/vibraphone; B. Pezzone, piano; R. Lorentz, violin; B. Newton, double bass. Cold Blue Music CB 0010.

The Immeasurable Space of Tones. M. Walker, contrabass clarinet; A. Knoles, marimba/vibraphone; B. Pezzone, piano; N. Reichman, electronic keyboards; R. Lorentz, violin; B. Newton, double bass. Cold Blue Music CB 0010.

In the White Silence. The Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble, Tim Weiss conducting. New World Records 80600-2.

The Light That Fills the World. M. Walker, contrabass clarinet; A. Knoles, marimba/vibraphone; N. Reichman, electronic keyboards; R. Lorentz, violin; B. Newton, double bass. Cold Blue Music CB0010.

The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies. Steven Schick, percussion. Cantaloupe 21034.

Night Peace. C. B. Lower, soprano; N. Rigell, harp; M. Cebulski, percussion; The Atlanta Singers, Kevin Culver conducting. New Albion NA 061.

Strange and Sacred Noise. Cincinnati Percussion Group. Mode 153.

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Production Assistance: Nathaniel Reichman

Recording engineer: Patrick Keating

Recorded at New England Conservatory’s Jordan Hall, September and December, 2005.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, NYC

Cover photograph by Dennis Keeley.

Design: Jim Fox

This recording was made possible by grants from The Rasmuson Foundation, The Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University and the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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JOHN LUTHER ADAMS (b. 1953)

80669-2

<i>for Lou Harrison</i> (2003–04)	63:01
1. Beginning	5:34
2. Measure 93	8:40
3. Letter H	5:34
4. Measure 315	8:40
5. Letter P	5:34
6. Measure 537	8:40
7. Letter X	5:37
8. Measure 759	8:40
9. Letter Ff	6:00

The Callithumpian Consort, Stephen Drury, conductor

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