

JOHN LUTHER ADAMS

Become Desert

BORN: January 23, 1953, in Meridian, Mississippi

NOW RESIDES: Mexico and New York

WORK COMPOSED: 2016

WORLD PREMIERE: March 29 and 31, at Benaroya Hall, Seattle. Ludovic Morlot conducts Seattle Symphony and Chorale.

As everyone who has spent time in a southern desert knows, light is a constant and imposing presence throughout the day. It shimmers, glares, sometimes softens. It can reveal the beauty of wide vistas and small details; it can be nearly blinding. And it is constantly changing. *Become Desert* renders desert light into sound. The music evolves slowly and seamlessly, without episodic events or drama. It requires, and induces, a contemplative form of listening.

Among the paradoxes that define civilization in the early 21st century, perhaps none is more striking than growing reverence for the natural world, and acknowledgement of our dependence on it, even as environmental crises deepen across the planet. Nearly half a century has passed since the first Earth Day observance marked the beginning of modern ecological consciousness and activism. Today, as nature is relentlessly degraded by human activity, three in four Americans say that environmental protection is an important issue for them.

The new environmental awareness has, inevitably, found its way into the arts. British sculptor Richard Long, for instance, has turned from conventional sculptural materials and procedures in favor of rearranging branches, stones and other natural substances found *in situ* to form temporary outdoor sculptures. Seattle-based photographer Chris Jordan has created disturbing images that bring home the reality and cost of nature's despoiling.

Among today's creative musicians, none embodies the new environmental consciousness more than John Luther Adams. For some four decades, this American composer has made the sounds and processes of nature the source and subject of his work. Birdsongs, winds, the boom of ice breaking in the Alaskan wilderness, the electrical fields that produce the aurora borealis — this and much more has found its way into his music. A milestone in Adams' career came in 2013, when Seattle Symphony, under the direction of Ludovic Morlot, gave the first performances of *Become Ocean*, a large orchestral piece it had commissioned. The work attracted widespread notice and garnered the Pulitzer Prize for music composition in 2014.

With the success of *Become Ocean*, Seattle Symphony commissioned Adams to write another composition, one that turns out to be a companion piece of sorts. This commission, which the New York Philharmonic and San Diego Symphony Orchestras have joined in tendering, coincided with a major alteration in the composer's circumstances. Since the 1970s Adams had lived in Alaska, whose landscape and weather provided a frequent source of inspiration for his music. But having entered his seventh decade, he felt ready for a change. Accordingly, he left his adopted home state and now divides his time between New York and the Sonoran desert of northwest Mexico.

The latter location inspired his second composition written for Seattle Symphony. "I used to say that if I ever left the tundra it would be for the desert," Adams observes. "Now, some 40 years after first coming to Alaska, I've finally made that move. As I've begun to learn the landforms, the light, the weather, the

plants and the birds, I've dreamed of music that echoes this extraordinary landscape." The music thus dreamed is *Become Desert*, which receives its premiere here this week.

Though sonically quite different from the earlier work, *Become Desert* shares two important traits with *Become Ocean*. One is its conception as music for several ensembles that are distinct yet part of a larger whole. Adams has divided the orchestra for *Become Desert* into five ensembles, each with its own palette of sounds and each stationed in a separate location. (The composer notes that the physical placement of instruments is a fundamental element of this piece.) One ensemble, made up of strings, harps and percussion, is stationed on stage. The remaining four groups are placed at different spots around the auditorium. One of these ensembles consists largely of voices, which Adams, following a modern tradition that is now more than a century old, uses as though they were instruments rather than to convey a text. Their singing intones just one single-syllable word: *luz*, Spanish for "light."

The other unusual aspect *Become Desert* shares with *Become Ocean* concerns its musical rhetoric — or, more accurately, lack of it. The composition is neither a picturesque tone painting of a desert scene nor a musical narrative of a desert journey. Nor does it offer vivid episodes, dramatic gestures or intimations of human tragedy, triumph or jest. Rather, it presents a sonic environment in which to immerse oneself. From the start, that environment is enveloped by sustained tones, played by the onstage string section, that expand from a single pitch to form open, widely spaced chords, a luminous wash of sound at volumes that range from quiet to barely audible. Gradually the other ensembles join in, altering and enriching the sonic hue, much as daylight changes with the rising position of the sun. No less gradually, the music expands in volume and harmonic complexion, becoming a dense roar midway through its 40-minute duration. Then, in near-palindromic fashion, it reverses direction, slowly thinning and subsiding until it reaches the single tone on which it began.

Clearly, such music requires a different kind of attention than that we usually bring to the concert hall. A hint as to what this might be lies in a short poem by the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, which Adams has inscribed as a preface to the score of *Become Desert*. One line reads, in English translation: "Close your eyes and listen to the singing of the light."

Scored for 5 separate ensembles: Choir I – 4 flutes; 4 oboes; 4 clarinets; 4 bassoons; crotales. Choir II – 8 horns; chimes. Choir III – 4 trumpets; 4 trombones; chimes. Choir IV – mixed chorus; handbells. Choir – percussion; 4 harps; strings.

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