'Nixon in China' in Houston

New Adams opera is part satire, part history, part fantasy, part spoof and totally exciting

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HOUSTON — Texas, we all know, is big. Texans think big, act big, build big. Houston sprawls. Its spaces are grand. Its downtown architecture epic.

And now Houston has a big new, $72 million opera complex, the Wortham Theater Center, including an impressive, state-of-the-art 2,176-seat auditorium designed for grand opera.

But Thursday night Houston Grand Opera had something even more important to show off than its new digs — the premiere of John Adams' "Nixon in China."

The idea of an opera about Nixon's historic trip to meet Chairman Mao has, not surprisingly, captured the fancy of the entire opera world. But the interest extends even beyond its subject. It is the first opera by the 40-year-old Adams, arguably the leading American composer of his generation. The opera was conceived and directed by the always astonishing Peter Sellars. And Alice Goodman has provided a libretto of astonishing poetic richness.

A concert reading, with piano accompaniment, given last spring in San Francisco, indicated that "Nixon in China" is an opera that presents Nixon in a mythic light, with potential for wonderful theater and also a work that has a special meaning for our time.

"Nixon in China" has just enough basis in historical fact to be immensely humorous. The entrance of Nixon, descending from the presidential jet, met by a delegation of Chinese soldiers is one of the more delicious entrances in all opera. And the opera also contains many other equally inspired moments of almost cartoonish cleverness, such as Pat Nixon's amusing tour of hospitals, factories and a pig farm.

But the opera has, since San Francisco, evolved into a work that will bear relevance for as long as mankind cherishes humanity. The pop-art veneer, which is also mirrored in the colorfully one-dimensional yet strikingly elegant set design by Adrianne Lobel, is only a witty surface.

"Nixon in China" is only occasionally a satire, rarely a spoof. Instead it is a powerfully effective study of some of the most wonderful and involving characters in 20th-century opera. It is also a study in the conflict of wildly opposite cultures, and a study in how power affects both the common man (Nixon) and an uncommon one (Mao). Most importantly, it is a revelation of the human emotions behind a great historical moment.

So many-leveled is "Nixon in China" that it is impossible to absorb it all at first introduction (even with a knowledge of libretto and score from the San Francisco reading), as it would be with any great opera.

But Adams' music, in its orchestrated form, makes a terrific first impression. It is music luminously, gorgeously written for a 33-piece orchestra that includes a synthesizer. The music of the great banquet scene simply beams with a minimalist's joy in rhythmic exuberance. In an especially haunting prelude, Adams proves himself an effective scene painter. But beyond that he is the inheritor of Ravel's talent for creating music that spins out a fantasy world.

And what makes "Nixon in China" so impressive is that it is so sophisticated a fantasy. On one level, the opera has fun with the fantastical. There is a really offbeat choreography of the Chinese ballet "The Red Detachment of Women," by Mark Morris that is half pseudo-Chinese committee ballet, half 1987 post-modern dance. But the level of fantasy in the end is far more pointed and important than that.

The concluding scene was originally intended to be a final

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banquet where the world's two most powerful couples reminisce about the past as they dance. Sellars now stages that scene more abstractly and disturbingly. A row of beds faces the audience, and all the main characters seem to undergo private catharses on them. The closing aria, Chou En-lai's deeply moving meditation on aging, consequently becomes an even more profound denouement.

Throughout, Sellars' staging incorporates a little of just about everything, from the cutout conventions of Chinese opera to Brechtian absurdity, and there was a certain first-night awkwardness.

But the cast of superb singing actors proved as capable with Sellars' theatrical demands as with Adams' musical ones. James Maddalena was a strikingly lifelike Nixon; Carolann Page, a delightfully apt Pat; John Duykers, a mysterious Mao. Vocally, however, the evening pretty much belonged to Trudy Ellen Craney who sang with spectacular enthusiasm Madame Mao's show-stealing big aria; and Sanford Sylvan who brought the proper profound majesty to Chou En-lai's pronouncements. Thomas Hammons hammed up the silly doings of Kissinger.

The voices, incidentally, were miked, at the composer's suggestion, to aid intelligibility of the text, and balance problems still need to be worked out. Often the orchestra was loud, but then John DeMain conducted with unbending foursquare earnestness. But the Houston Grand Opera chorus was positively heroic in its mastery of a long and difficult part.

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The production is likely to grow as it wends its way to New York; Washington, D.C.; Amsterdam and, yes, Los Angeles. But its problems are minor. And already we can welcome a new American masterpiece of the lyric stage.