

# 'Nixon in China' Gets the Sellars Stamp

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CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

## Houston

America's widely heralded new opera for this year was introduced Thursday by the Houston Grand Opera, with everything going for it except the music.

Peter Sellars' "Nixon in China" represents the break with operatic precedent that probably was inevitable — the producer-director finally assuming total charge to the point where he, rather than the composer, John Adams, is the primary creator.

Sellars' concept is bold, wholly intriguing and somewhat risky: an opera about Richard Nixon's historic three-day visit to Beijing in 1972 that scrutinizes the principal characters of that epic trip. Alice Goodman's libretto provides a searching look, not satirical, but sharp and candid.

When the curtain rises on a chorus of 40 Chinese citizens singing chant-like "The people are the heroes now," the context is immediate and real. An almost life-size mock-up of the presidential plane, "The Spirit of '76," slowly descends to the stage. The Nixons deplane and, with the president's introductory remarks, his obsessive awareness of making news and history comes tumbling out of him, while among the clichés emerges a sense of great urgency and determination.

That and most of what followed had been set out last May in the concert preview in San Francisco with the same cast as this, under the same conductor, Houston's John DeMain. There, in Herbst Theatre, the text was at least clear for this inordinately wordy opera. Here in Houston's 2,176-seat Brown Theater in its brand new Wortham Theater Center, intelligibility was a problem.

Even the simple repetitiveness and openness of Adams' music, which gives the vocal line a consis-

tent prominence, was no advantage. The problem was the hall (Christopher Jaffe, the acoustical consultant), not the addition of the orchestral instruments to the pianos and keyboard synthesizer, which was all that was used in the San Francisco preview.

In the Grand Tier, where I heard Act I, the effect was as though there were an envelope around each singer's head, an echo like an aura. There seemed to be some electronic enhancement for some of the singers some of the time.

Adams' music alone doesn't convey much sense of meaning or make significant commentary. The accompaniment simply carries the singers, suggesting through changes in the rhythmic patterning and tempo and orchestral color, the mood and pace of the scene, but not much more. Two and a half hours of Adams' jogging, jiggling and noodling minimalism becomes wearing.

Sellars' staging is tight, concise, and pointed in its use of gesture for characterization. In the extended meeting between Mao Zedong (tenor John Duykers) and Nixon (baritone James Maddalena), the way they held their bodies and moved reflected Nixon's eagerness to come off well and Mao's way of catching him up with conundrum-like answers and ducking into simulated attention.

Mao's answers were parroted

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*The finale establishes the puny humanity involved in these great events of history*

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by his three female secretaries (Sellars's Mao-ettes), making jerky movements like mimes, as they sang, always in simple triad harmony. Henry Kissinger (bass Thomas Hammons) here, as elsewhere in the opera, is given a minor part in the proceedings, more like a henchman who may or may not have any importance.

Chou En-Lai (baritone Sanford Sylvan), on the other hand, is presented as the wise, philosophical genius of the event. At the big banquet that closes Act I, it is Chou's toast that is the eloquent expression of hope. Nixon's response again stumbles through platitudes onto a genuine statement.

Sellars has made the greatest changes in Act II, done since he got into the rehearsals for this production. Pat Nixon (lyric soprano Carolann Page) was presented more sympathetically than in San Francisco. Her words in the touristic situations that we see her in are conventional, pretty but shallow. But something natural and likable emerges, a naive, altogether believable sincerity. Page sang beautifully.

The stage production gave a much more cutting, real and pitiless view of the course of the Chinese Revolution than the concert preview. For one thing, the "Evening at the Beijing Opera," at which the Nixons view the revolutionary ballet "The Red Detachment of Women," has vivid choreography by Mark Morris. The ballet heroine is beaten cruelly and eventually whipped insensate by the "Landlord" (intentionally looking like Kissinger — Hammons plays both parts).

The opera goes into complete fantasy as first Pat, and then President Nixon, rushes onstage to help and protect the heroine.

It is a bizarre, surreal climax. The dancing was wild and satiric in its excess. The portrayal of Chairman Mao's wife, Chiang Ch'ing, was much keener than in the preview, revealing her blind zealotry. Coloratura soprano Trudy Craney was brilliant in this hair-raising, ultimate Queen of the Night role.