

'REVISIONIST' SPECTACLE

Nixon Opera Comes to KQED

By Joshua Kosman
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In 1972, when Richard Nixon made his historic trip to China and met with Mao Zedong, the television cameras monitored the entire event — as the president himself was acutely aware. Tonight at 9 on KQED (Channel 9), the cameras capture that charged visit once again — or at least a unique interpretation of it.

In a welcome broadcast, the "Great Performances" series is presenting Berkeley composer John Adams' opera "Nixon in China," filmed during its world premiere last October at the Houston Grand Opera. It's an ambitious and provocative work, part revisionist history and part pure artistic spectacle.

Conceived by the brilliant young director Peter Sellars and fitted out with a strange and complex verse libretto by Alice Goodman, the piece treats Nixon's visit as a piece of contemporary mythology, involving larger-than-life figures (the cast of characters includes Dick and Pat Nixon, Mao and Madame Mao, Henry Kissinger and Zhou En-lai) who act out of personal as well as political imperatives.

The result is still not entirely convincing in some ways as a work of music theater, but it's fresh and original, and certainly represents required viewing for anyone interested in contemporary music. It will be simulcast on KQED-FM (88.5).

There's a delicious irony, of course, in the fact of this work showing up on the television screen. Once again, a major news event — artistic this time, not political — makes its way into America's living



John Duykers plays Mao Zedong in 'Nixon in China'

rooms thanks to the power of the television camera.

That this connection is not lost on the producers of the broadcast is made clear by the material they've included between scenes of the opera. Here we see news footage from the actual trip — Nixon and Zhou trading toasts, Pat touring pig farms and schoolrooms in the Chinese countryside — all the events, that is, which we are about to see esthetically stylized and transformed in the opera.

And as the crowning touch, the producers made an exquisite choice of host: none other than Walter Cronkite, doing a hilariously

straight-faced (and apparently unwitting) Walter Cronkite parody. His presence gives the whole enterprise that delightful extra touch of verisimilitude.

The telecast offers local folks the first chance to see "Nixon" in its fully staged incarnation — so far all we've gotten here is an unorchestrated concert performance last May. (The fact that our most celebrated local composer's first major opera wasn't staged here is a topic for another day.) It certainly seems a more substantial and more theatrically effective work now than it did last year, with only the composer's spoken commentary to suggest the action.

Adams' musical vocabulary is essentially minimalist, but less single-mindedly so than his important predecessor in the operatic field, Philip Glass. Unlike Glass, Adams is treating highly dramatic material, and the scenes tend to develop and build to climaxes with noticeable persuasiveness.

The most striking example is the long and powerful final scene of Act II, in which the Nixons watch and gradually become involved in a performance by the Red Ballet (the witty, mercurial choreography is by Mark Morris). The scene builds in intensity over a good 30 minutes, culminating in a show-stopping aria for Chiang Ch'ing (Madame Mao), performed with unforgettable steeliness by Trudy Ellen-Craney.

There are other sequences as well that stick in the memory. In the opening scene, a chorus of Chinese diplomats and functionaries awaits the arrival of Nixon's plane. With some cannily handled repetitions of ascending scales and rhythmic syncopations, Adams' score builds a sense of nervous expectation. The

scene comes to fruition with Nixon's arrival. In a long and well crafted aria, he bubbles over with enthusiasm about the historic importance of the occasion; you can feel his mixture of vanity, anxiety and genuine excitement in the music.

But other scenes, particularly the long and (for the Americans) frustratingly enigmatic encounters with Mao himself tend to drag. Part of the problem, especially with such a self-consciously literary work, is the difficulty in making out most of the words. Even in an English-language opera, subtitles would not have been unwelcome.

If "Nixon" still does not quite seem like the operatic masterpiece of the decade (as some imprudent souls have labeled it), it's no fault of the performers. They are uniformly excellent, both as singers and as actors. Every role in this opera is a remarkable challenge, for Adams' writing is consistently "heroic" throughout, with grandiose declamation and vocal lines that proceed almost entirely by leap. But the musical level of performance is extremely high.

James Maddalena's gorgeous high baritone captures with the tiniest quaver Nixon's determination and his barely concealed self-doubts, as does his nicely understated facial impersonation. Carolann Page is utterly touching as Pat, in addition to singing with astounding sureness and clarity.

John Duykers' Mao is difficult to read — as intended — but the singing is beyond reproach, and Sanford Sylvan is a terrifically engaging Zhou. No composer could ask for a stronger or more creditable cast.

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