

## The BBVA Foundation recognizes John Adams for developing a unique voice that weds musical complexity with the power to engage audiences through a rich palette of emotions

- The committee describes him as pioneering a new operatic genre – the “docu-opera” – with *Nixon in China*, *Doctor Atomic*, *The Death of Klinghoffer* and *Girls of the Golden West*, which “fearlessly address contemporary and controversial issues,” such as international relations, nuclear war, terrorism or women’s rights
- Though framed in the classical tradition, Adams’ music is recognizably inflected with multiple genre influences from jazz to rock and pop
- He has “created a personal style based on the highest standards of musical and technical excellence” in the words of the citation
- “An extraordinary communicator, as a composer and a conductor,” Adams, says the committee, “has reached audiences in a way that democratizes contemporary music with no loss of formal integrity and musical complexity”

**Madrid, 9 April, 2019.-** The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Music and Opera category has gone in this eleventh edition to American composer John Adams, the author of music which, the citation states, “is genuinely of our time, and always has been, from the late 20th century into the 21st.”

The committee describes Adams as eschewing the figure of the “scientific, intellectual composer.” He seeks instead to be “an artist who engages with the public,” without rigidities or formalisms, deploying the full breadth of his “emotional palette” in order to re-connect with the audience. “I felt that the world of contemporary music was becoming increasingly sterile – the new laureate concurs – and composers were increasingly self-absorbed and only writing for each other. At the same time I witnessed the blossoming of the great period of rock music, which spoke to the culture in a simple and passionate language. I wanted to forge a musical language of my own that, while framed in the ‘classical’ tradition, had the kind of energy and power of communication that great American popular music possesses.”

Initially one of the fathers of minimalism, the American composer soon cast off this label to become a “unique voice in contemporary music,” the citation continues, “creating a personal style based on the highest standards of musical and technical excellence, while communicating powerfully to a wide audience.”

This distinctive voice owes undoubtedly to the multiple influences that Adams draws on. He himself offers a list including such diverse names as Bach, Mozart and Stravinsky, Bob Dylan, Duke Ellington and Stevie Wonder: “They are part of American culture and they have all been an influence,” he remarked shortly after hearing of the award. “I grew up listening to all kinds of music and I think what makes American music so different is that there are no strict borders between ‘high and ‘low’, or what you in Europe consider ‘art’ or ‘entertainment’.”

From childhood, he was surrounded by music in his native New England, taking clarinet lessons from his father. His grandfather owned a jazz club in New Hampshire, where he listened to the greats of the time, like Duke Ellington & His Orchestra. He began composing at the age of ten and, while still a teenager, conducted an orchestra performance of one of his own works. After earning a BA and an MA in Music Composition from Harvard University, in 1971 he moved to the west coast in search of new musical horizons, settling in California, where he has lived ever since.

It was during his ten years teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music that he first came into contact with minimalism. Although its influence is clearly detectable in an early work like *Shaker Loops* (1978), even then, says the committee, “that distinctive voice was emerging.” From 1982 to 1985, he was composer-in-residence of the San Francisco Symphony, and some of his landmark works were written for and premiered by this ensemble, including *Harmonium* (1981), *Grand Pianola Music* (1982) and *Harmonielehre* (1985). In these pieces, Adams’ personal voice shines through “more obviously,” as the committee puts it, adding that “there’s something immediately recognizable about a John Adams composition, (...) a style that is hard to define, but somehow ‘American’.”

### **Founder of a new operatic genre**

Adams’ works span every genre – solo, chamber, orchestral, opera and oratorio – but it is in opera that he has come fully into his own, carving out a unique and fertile path.

In 1985 he began what would be a fruitful collaboration with poet Alice Goodman and theater director Peter Sellars that produced the innovative and successful *Nixon in China* (1987), about the ex U.S. President’s encounter with Mao Zedong in 1972. With this piece, Adams “pioneered a new kind of ‘docu-opera’, writing about events in living memory,” the citation states, and “fearlessly addressing contemporary and controversial issues.” “I have always had an intense interest in history and politics,” the composer explains. “I believe that if

opera as an art form is going to have a future, we composers must choose themes and stories that reflect our current collective myths, just as Wagner did during his time."

This drive to tell contemporary stories, some involving people alive at the time, would remain intensely present in his operas. In *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), which recreates the 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship by members of the Palestinian Liberation Front, Adams deals, he says, with "terrorism and the terrible distrust between populations and religions that leads to violence." In *Doctor Atomic* (2005), he turns his attention to the Manhattan Project and the building of the first atomic bomb, which he sees as "the ultimate existential narrative of our human condition, both in terms of our technological mastery over nature, and our potential to destroy ourselves and our planet." In his more recent *Girls of the Golden West* (2017), Adams looks back on the American West of the mid-19th century gold rush to reflect on the plight of women.

Adams is often referred to as a political composer. His view is that "any dramatic work that addresses human conflict, whether it's among nations or between two individuals, is 'political'. My work is no more 'political' than Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* or Wagner's *Ring*. However, the term is probably applied to me because many of my themes are drawn from recent historical events." He prefers to put feelings at the center: "Music, more than any other art form, has the power to communicate feeling. How this happens is a deep mystery that perhaps only can be answered by behavioral psychology or biology. We don't know exactly why, but music's combination of sensory stimuli and formal constructs affects us profoundly."

The award citation also refers to *On the Transmigration of Souls*, his "poignant reflection" on the 9/11 terror attacks, and the oratorios with which he has explored immigration and gender issues, "making sure women's voices and minority points of view are heard."

Adams' activity shows no signs of slackening. He recently revised *Girls of the Golden West* for its European premiere in the Netherlands, and was soon after present in Los Angeles at the first performance of his new piano concerto titled *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?*, "performed by the two brilliant artists for whom I wrote it, Yuja Wang and Gustavo Dudamel." He is currently finishing a short, eight-minute orchestral work called *I Still Dance*, and working on a libretto for a new opera which he will begin composing this summer.

### **Music and Opera committee and evaluation support panel**

The rigor, quality and independence of the judging process have earned these awards the attention of the international scientific community and a firm place among the world's foremost prize families.

The jury in this category was chaired by **Joana Carneiro**, Principal Conductor of the Orquestra Sinfónica Portuguesa, with **Andrew McGregor**, BBC Radio 3 presenter (United Kingdom) acting as secretary. Remaining members were **Mauro Bucarelli**, Artistic Administrator with the Accademia Nazionale di Santa

Cecilia (Italy); **Víctor García de Gomar**, Artistic Director of the Palau de la Música Catalana; and conductor and composer **Pedro Halffter Caro**.

The BBVA Foundation is aided in the evaluation process by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the country's premier public research organization. The Foundation and CSIC jointly appoint the evaluation support panels charged with undertaking an initial assessment of the candidates proposed by institutions across the world and drawing up a reasoned shortlist for the consideration of the award committees.

The **CSIC evaluation support panel** in this category was coordinated by **María Victoria Moreno**, the Council's Deputy Vice President for Scientific and Technical Areas, and formed by: **José Antonio Berenguer**, Coordinator of the Humanities and Social Sciences Area and scientific researcher at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East (ILC); **Antonio Ezquerro**, a scientific researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution; **María Gembero-Ustárroz**, a tenured scientist at the Mila i Fontanals Institution; and **Emilio Ros**, scientific researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution.

### **About the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards**

The BBVA Foundation centers its activity on the promotion of world-class scientific research and cultural creation, and the encouragement of talent.

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards, established in 2008, recognize and reward contributions of singular impact in science, art and the humanities, privileging achievements that significantly expand the frontiers of the known world, open up new fields, or emerge from the interaction of various disciplinary areas. Their eight categories are congruent with the knowledge map of the 21st century, ranging from basic sciences to key challenges for the natural environment by way of domains at the crossroads of disciplines – Biology and Medicine; Economics, Finance and Management – or the supremely creative realms of music and the opera. The awards come with a cash prize of 400,000 euros in each category, along with a diploma and a commemorative artwork.

### **The award presentation ceremony moves to Bilbao**

The annual ceremony of the Frontiers of Knowledge Awards will change venue this year, with the 11th and future editions sited in Bilbao. The presentation event, held until now in the Madrid headquarters of the BBVA Foundation, will take place on 18 June in the Euskalduna Conference Centre, which will also host the previous evening's concert in honor of laureates. The program at this gala concert will be performed by the Orquesta Sinfónica de Euskadi, from now on the principal orchestra associated with the Frontiers Awards.

After the first ten years of this international award scheme – with seven laureates subsequently going on to win the Nobel Prize – the BBVA Foundation wishes to give new impetus to the social projection of the Frontiers Awards by giving the various formal and celebratory events a stable home in the Basque Country,

concretely in Bilbao. "Bilbao represents BBVA's roots, and shares with us a spirit of openness and a global outlook anchored on a strong culture of knowledge, art and innovation. With the siting of the Frontiers Awards events in Bilbao, the city will be host to a celebration of knowledge that features leading world figures in diverse areas of science, technology and the arts," declared the BBVA Foundation's President, Carlos Torres Vila.

#### LAUREATE'S FIRST DECLARATIONS AND IMAGES

A video recording of the new laureate's first interview on receiving news of the award is available from the Atlas FTP with the following coordinates:

Server: **5.40.40.61**

Username: **agenciaatlas2**

Password: **fronteras**

The video is in the folder labelled:

**"PREMIO MÚSICA Y ÓPERA"**

In the event of connection difficulties, please contact **Miguel Gil** at production company Atlas:

**Mobile:** +34 619 30 8774

**E-mail:** [mgil@mediaset.es](mailto:mgil@mediaset.es)

#### CALENDAR OF ANNOUNCEMENT EVENTS

<b>Humanities and Social Sciences</b>	Tuesday, 16 April, 2019
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Fundación **BBVA**

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For more information, contact the BBVA Foundation Communications Department (+34 91 374 5210 / 91 374 3139 / 91 374 8173 – [973](tel:+3491374973).) or visit [www.fbbva.es](http://www.fbbva.es)