

John Luther Adams’s ‘Sila’: New work occupies Lincoln Center plaza



Some 2,500 people congregated on Hearst Plaza at Lincoln Center in New York City for the world premiere of John Luther Adams’s “Sila: The Breath of the World.” (Kevin Yatarola)

By Anne Midgette July 27

Brass players stood like sentinels along the edge of an upthrust triangle of grass against the backdrop of a New York cityscape gilded by the late sun. Below them, women in black gowns moved through a reflecting pool, barely rippling, like chips broken off the Henry Moore sculpture thrusting out of the water behind them. From the hum of the city emerged a barely audible rumbling of drums, growing louder. Then winds, and then the brass, began to unsheathe arpeggios, rising patterns of notes, growing gradually louder, like encroaching

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waves on sand, and the women in the pool raised megaphones and began to sing.

The world premiere of John Luther Adams's "Sila: The Breath of the World" Friday night at New York's Lincoln Center had the visual aesthetic of a music video, the vibe of a cultural Happening — some 2,500 people congregated on Hearst Plaza, between the Metropolitan Opera and 65th Street, to watch — and the sound of Richard Wagner as channeled by John Cage. In short, the piece — by the winner of [this year's Pulitzer Prize for Music](#), a follow-up to his percussion piece "Inuksuit" — spoke in a number of familiar languages to make statements whose outlines are familiar to most cultural consumers but that still, in the classical music world, smack of the new.

This may be even more true in Washington, where the music climate is slightly more traditional, and where "Sila" — co-commissioned by Washington Performing Arts — will be performed sometime next spring. Since a piece like this is partly created by its performers and partly by its setting, what comes to Washington will be a world of its own.

Adams — the "other" John Adams, not the composer of "[Nixon in China](#)" — specializes in creating worlds. Long a resident of Alaska, he is concerned with nature, the environment and the world's future, and

he writes big, organic pieces, not particularly in any school other than his own but unthinkable without the innovations of [John Cage](#) and other West Coast mavericks. “Sila” echoes elements of two recent major pieces: “Inuksuit,” which was something of a sensation when it had its New York premiere at the Park Avenue Armory in 2011, and “[Become Ocean](#),” the Pulitzer Prize-winning piece that the Seattle Symphony commissioned and premiered in 2013. Both of these are large and loose, offering narratives that are easily encapsulated in words — a long growth, a long decline — and experiences that are hard to convey unless you’ve been in them; the recording of “[Inuksuit](#)” on Cantaloupe Records includes [a DVD](#). (A recording of “Become Ocean” is coming out in September.)

“Sila,” like “Inuksuit,” is a large-scale environmental work for a flexible number of performers (16 to 80 or more; Friday’s performance, slightly on the “more” side of the ledger, included members of a number of well-regarded contemporary music groups, including [Eighth Blackbird](#) and the [JACK Quartet](#)). Like “Become Ocean,” it employs the instruments of a standard Western orchestra, though not exclusively; the piece’s five “choirs,” which can perform simultaneously or successively, include a percussion group as well as strings, winds, brass and voice, and the percussionists played everything from timpani to sandpaper and stone.

Still, it's the sounds of the orchestral instruments that define and anchor the piece, particularly the brass, which is easiest to hear and adds a distinctive, even old-fashioned flair — part of the Wagnerian element alluded to above. “Why are they warming up with ‘Also Sprach Zarathustra?’” one aficionado asked before the concert, referring to the ascending opening of the Strauss tone poem familiar to many as the theme of Stanley Kubrick’s film “[2001: A Space Odyssey](#).” In fact, the musicians were simply playing the arpeggiated figure that repeated again and again as Adams’s piece wound its way upward, until the work culminated in vapor trails of tuneless breath blown across the mouthpieces of flutes.

Yet I felt that it was precisely the instrumentation that interfered with “Sila’s” immediacy. Many people passionately love Adams’s work, and I was waiting to feel more strongly about this one, but I found myself appreciating it more as a representative of a type than being drawn in.

Yes, the aestheticization of the city is lovely — the way that the beeping of the plaza elevator is embraced by the piece rather than competing with it — and yes, the gradual, imperceptible shifts of focus mean that you catch yourself apprehending musical patterns sometime after they have already insinuated themselves into your ear; and yes, there are beautiful individual moments, voices rising from

the water as a megaphone sends its sound-beam through your field of perception.

But I was dogged by a sense that I wasn't getting the full range of the sound, in part because the instrumentation creates a set of aural expectations that are hard to fulfill in this environment. There are better places to hear a cello than outdoors, and better places to appreciate an orchestral balance; and therefore those things seemed here not quite to be what the piece was about. Auxiliary elements, things that were specific not to the work but to this particular performance of it, kept intruding into consciousness: the transgressive idea of sending people into the reflecting pool, normally a taboo part of the cityscape, or the sinister connotations of the photographers shooting the scene from the surrounding rooftops, like snipers or security guards in a TV political drama.

In "Sila," as in many such happenings, music is less a finished product than an activity; it both interacts with and creates a space. In the limpid air of a New York summer, it was a sound garden, embracing a multiplicity of narratives as people variously sat in the dappled shade of a stand of trees, or sipped drinks under cafe umbrellas, or talked quietly, or played with their kids, or paced the plaza looking for new viewpoints and that elusive orchestral balance. It remains to be seen whether this eminently worthy

score can, in future iterations, yield something that feels slightly less calculated — and whether, perhaps, a more enclosed concert space is the way to do it.

