

# *Bottomless self-indulgence*

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The new production of *Nixon in China*, which opened recently at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, was a hyperactive orgy of live video, pop-cultural appropriation, and cartoonish irreverence, all seemingly directed by a six-year-old on a sugar bender who had just discovered the joys of yelling the f-word at full volume. It was undeniably terrible, but in a way that was impossible to take seriously. Although there were a handful of fine performances buried in the wreckage – [Heidi Stober](#)'s Pat Nixon was very good, as was [Daniel Carter](#)'s stylish navigation of the score's many moods – the staging did everything it could to undermine its operatic text until all that remained was a vacuous anarchy bereft of purpose.

What made the evening baffling is that the staging – directed by Franziska Kronfoth and Julia Lwowski of performance group Hauen und Stechen – was clearly the product of considerable technical skill. There was nothing shoddy or slapdash in its integration of old-fashioned stagecraft and cutting-edge technology; great care had obviously gone into the dancing sausage costumes and the large papier-mâché heads of Mao, Hitler and Darth Vader; the staging's near constant use of live video – including live green-screen – required careful choreography and impeccable timing. Chaos may have reigned on stage but nothing whatsoever had been left to chance. One had to suppose that, for good or ill, the directors achieved exactly what they had set out to accomplish.



Kronfoth and Lwowski, *Nixon in China* © 2024 by Thomas Aurin

**Berlin, sábado, 22 de junio de 2024.**  
Deutsche Oper Berlin. Adams: *Nixon in China*. Franziska Kronfoth and Julia Lwowski, directors. Kyle Miller (Chou En-lai), Thomas Lehman (Richard Nixon), Seth Carico (Henry Kissinger), Ya-Chung Huang (Mao Tse-tung), Heidi Stober (Pat Nixon), Elissa Pfaender (Nancy T'ang), Deborah Saffery (Second Secretary), Davia Bouley (Third Secretary), and Hye-young Moon (Chiang Ch'ing). Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Daniel Carter, conductor



Adams: *Nixon in China*. Daniel Carter, conductor. Franziska Kronfoth and Julia

It was obvious from the outset that the directors had no intention of taking the opera seriously: an episode in the foyer of the Deutsche Oper – relayed live in the auditorium – gave way to a ridiculous video credit sequence vaguely reminiscent of the A-Team. But for the duration of the first scene, it seemed possible that the staging, for all its visual exuberance, might at least stick to the vague contours of the libretto. Instead it followed its own path, combining imagery loosely inspired by Mao and Nixon – the dancers dressed up as the

Lwowski, directors. Berlin, Deutsche Oper,  
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*Little Red Book* were a nice touch – with ideas clearly derived from a lifetime of watching midnight movies and Saturday morning cartoons.

While the individual images were occasionally amusing – the idea of Pat Nixon engaged in a gun battle with two panda bears was at very least original – and the energetic bustle on stage captured the nervy excitability of Adams' music, one had to wonder what was the point. The staging offered neither critique nor rebuttal of the opera's political rhetoric, it had no engagement with the nominal story, nor was it interested in any of the characters except as vehicles for outlandish costumes (and did we really need to have Mao dressed up as Jabba the Hutt?). As the evening progressed the action on stage became increasingly estranged from the opera itself, lost within its own manic world of ideas that must have seemed hilarious in the writing room but, to the outside observer, were merely incoherent; one was left with the suspicion that, if the directors had been commissioned to direct *Il Trovatore* or *Figaro*, the production might not have been substantially different.

If the first two acts had raised questions about the quality of the staging, the third act removed all remaining doubt: without the vigorous thrust of Adams' more animated music – the score becomes introspective in its long final scene – the stage action grew unbearably tedious and the paucity of underlying ideas became all the more apparent. It was, indeed, so bad, that it forced one to question the worth of the opera itself. Did the directors hate the opera so much they were trying to turn us against it? Were they trying to create a staging so devoid of good ideas that it would highlight the vacuity of the opera by analogy? Was the notion of a grand spectacle underpinned by nothing actually the point?



Adams: *Nixon in China*. Daniel Carter, conductor. Franziska Kronföth and Julia Lwowski, directors. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, June 2024. © 2024 by Thomas Aurin / Deutsche Oper Berlin.

Whatever the staging may have been trying to achieve, creating a space in which vocal performances could flourish was clearly low on its list of priorities; this was something of a shame, as there were several fine voices among the ensemble cast. Although Pat Nixon is a marginal figure in the opera's drama of statecraft she is very much its human centre, and Heidi Stober, despite the best efforts of the staging, was able to invest her character's lines with great emotional range. Although she was the dominant voice in the sightseeing sequence that forms the first scene of the second act, she had equally distinguished moments in the final scene of the first act and in the opera's long finale.



As Nixon, [Thomas Lehman](#) played his role with a manic presence well suited to the staging, but in the 'News' aria of the first scene he revealed great vocal authority, a notable warmth of tone and a facility with Adams' occasionally unconventional vocal lines. [Kyle Miller](#), as Chou En-lai was equally at ease with the demands of the music, and his finely crafted toast aria was a highlight of the third scene. [Ya-Chung Huang](#) brought considerable subtleties of phrasing to the role

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of Mao, Hye-young Moon delivered Chiang [Ch'ing](#)'s 'I am  
the wife of Mao Tse-tung' with declamatory power and  
acrobatic grace, and even Henry Kissinger – marginalised in  
both the opera and the staging – received a sensitive reading  
from [Seth Carico](#).

If *Nixon in China* doesn't quite belong to the top tier of late-twentieth-century scores – one can never quite dispel the sense that Adams' minimalist tendencies are more a stylistic device than the result of any deep belief in the transcendent power of repetition – Daniel Carter's musical direction made strong arguments for the opera's qualities. Mr Carter was especially good at stressing the work's rhythmic variety, from jazzy amiability to pulsing insistence; and if some of the score's finer moments owe a debt to Adams' peers – the presence of Glass, although downplayed, was palpable in various scenes – Mr Carter also highlighted the connections with other works in Adams' corpus (notably *Harmonielehre*) which share a more individually epic sensibility.

Unfortunately the qualities of the musical performances were too often overwhelmed by the staging; but for all the staging's attention-seeking self-indulgence, it was also curiously unmemorable. The imagery, despite its absurdity, was all surface: it was designed neither to provoke nor entertain, and the overload of undistinguished chaos yielded a staging that succeeded only in negating itself. If the first act elicited mild amusement and the third act mild tedium, one left the opera house neither enraged nor elated, perplexed or enlightened. It was as if the whole thing had never even happened.