Internationalism Hits the Opera Stage: *Nixon* (and Dewey) *in China*

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John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987) is one of the most iconic operatic works of the end of the 20th century. It is also an interesting case to study the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In this paper, I offer a reading of the political and aesthetic sides of the work in light of John Dewey's philosophy. Central to my account is to examine the effect that Dewey's own trip to China had on his political philosophy. I argue that *Nixon* is not just a series of anecdotes related to Nixon's 1972 visit to China, as has been claimed by some critics, but that the Deweyan perspective I take particularly on *Nixon*'s third act shows that the opera has genuine political substance, which is also tied to the work's musical and aesthetic features. | *Keywords: Adams, Dewey, Opera, Politics, Aesthetics*

1. Opera, Politics, and Adams's Nixon in China – An Introduction

Ever since it emerged in the aristocratic courts of early 17th century Italy, opera has had close ties to politics. Already the first operas by Monteverdi like *La Favola d'Orfeo* (1607), *Il Ritorno Ulisse di Patria* (1640), and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642) examine three different kinds of rulers from the development of the young prince in Orfeo to the more emotional and tradition-defiant prince of Poppea. Later examples of such 'ruler operas' include, for example, the 19th century operas by Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov* (1874) and *Khovanshchina* (1880). Moreover, the thematic developments in opera's history reflect well the development of European political history and thought: class conflicts, the fall of the aristocracy, the rise of the bourgeois, Enlightenment ideas, republicanism, the ideals of the French revolution, political utopias, and the appropriate expression of emotions in the pressure of social norms. This is to say nothing of the more explicitly politically inclined operas by Giuseppe Verdi (*Attila, Don Carlos, Nabucco*), as well as operas, which became victims of political censorship (Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*) or the 20th century operas that deal with the societal role of the artist in an age of political turmoil (Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, Schönberg's *Moses and Aron*, Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*).[1]

[1] See, for example, Bokina (1997, pp. 1–12) and Cohen (2017, pp. xiii–xiv).

One opera, however, arguably stands out: John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987) (hereafter *Nixon*), or to be more exact by John Adams, Alice Goodman, and Peter Sellars, as the piece is very much a group effort between the three, with Sellars, in fact, being the original mastermind behind the idea of composing an opera on the US president Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972. With *Nixon*, opera's political concerns reached a true global level in the modern sense of the term, as the trip it depicts marked the end of a lack of contact or downright hostility of over 20 years between the world's most powerful country and the world's most populous country, which was gradually leaving behind its isolationalist philosophy, expressing an interest into becoming a more active player in the increasingly global and modernizing world. China's relationship to the Soviet Union, the other major communist force of the time, had also entered a state of deep uncertainty, even to the point that a Soviet invasion of China was considered a real possibility (Reeves, 2002, p. 53). The time seemed right for the US to start building "a more normal and constructive relationship with the government in Peking," as Nixon declared one of the key goals of his presidency in his first state of the union address (Reeves, 2002, p. 169). The handshake between Nixon and the Chinese premiere Chou En-Lai at Peking airport, which in the words of Chou came "over the vastest distance in the world," marked the first stage of the rapprochement (Reeves, 2002, p. 437). This handshake is also included in the opera and follows its most iconic scene, the landing of Nixon's plane *The Spirit of 76* to Peking airport.

A significant feature of *Nixon* is that it brought to the opera stage figures from real life some of whom were still alive at the time of the opera's premiere in 1987 at the Houston Grand Opera, Nixon among them. No longer was the stage filled by characters like Wotan and Elektra, with their outlandish plans to restore order into strange mythic worlds or to carry out hard-to-assimilate revenges to their mothers, but it was taken by political figures whom the premiere audience knew from TV and newspapers. Hence, it is no surprise that *Nixon* was called "CNN opera" by one unenthusiastic critic after its premiere, a description that especially Sellars disliked (Johnson, 2016, p. 5).

On the face of it, *Nixon* seems like a text-book case of a political opera and, hence, a perfect example for exploring the age-old relationship between opera, politics, and aesthetics. After all, it depicts one of the major political events of the second half of the 20th century and particularly three of its characters, Nixon, Kissinger, and Mao Tse-tung, are among the most famous political figures of their time globally. Moreover, the libretto includes sentences like: "We recoil from victory to victory and all its works. What do you think of that, Karl Marx" or "I cut my teeth upon the land and when I walked my feet were bound on revolution."

First impressions, however, can be deceiving in this case too, for it is difficult to extract any type of clear political content and message from the opera or even a clear stance on the significance of Nixon's visit. This difficulty, which is well-reflected in the highly mixed first reception of *Nixon*, is largely due to Alice Goodman's poetically ambitious libretto, which is rife with allegories,

metaphors, and subtle references to both historical events and mythic conceptions and resists any easy interpretation. It is no surprise that Michael Steinberg calls the libretto "a wonder of human perception, generosity, wit, and poetic resource" (Steinberg, 2006, p. 111).

Moreover, the music of the opera, which combines the core ideas of musical minimalism with lush melodic lines and vast harmonic architecture, both exhibiting a strong commitment, even a celebration of tonality,[2] stands in contrast to the kind of unsettling and disturbing avant-garde and modernist aesthetics that many following Theodor Adorno and critical theory have claimed to be essential to politically effective music and art.[3] Especially in his early career, Adams was a vocal critic of different forms of atonal modernism, claiming that they had eradicated "communal experience" (Ross, 2006, p. 34) from classical music and he saw, in musical minimalism, the possibility to restore what he calls "the pleasure principle" into contemporary music (May, 2006, p. 24). In fact, what motivated Sellars to ask Adams to compose the music to the opera he was planning was precisely the features that sets Adams's music apart from avant-garde aesthetics, namely "incredible sweeps of tension and… release and then adrenaline-inspired visionary states," which he found perfect for "theater music" because of its "ability to build and sustain tension" (Sellars, 2006, p. 241). Adams puts his musical technique building both on American minimalism and late-Romantic European musical classics into diverse use in *Nixon*. Not only does the energy characteristic of Adams's music fortify the optimistic spirit of the first act and bring home the cultural clashes gradually emerging in the second, but, with its subtle melodic lines, the music also enhances the sense of reflectiveness underlying especially the second part of the third act.

I begin by dwelling even further into the complexities of making sense of *Nixon*'s political content after which I develop a positive account by exploring the China visit of another major American figure, that of the philosopher and aesthetician John Dewey, which took place some fifty years before Nixon's. Dewey was especially struck by the powerful sense of tradition, which he found underpinning Chinese social life. Such features of Chinese society are a key theme of *Nixon* as well, and this pathway takes us to some fundamental ideas of Dewey's political philosophy on the relationship between community and democracy, which, in Dewey's eyes, are closely connected. Rather than a political system in which citizens have the right, for example, to vote in elections at regular intervals, Dewey regarded a sense of communality between citizens and community members as an even more essential characteristic of a well-doing democratic society and community. Dewey initially developed this type of experiential understanding of democracy in the 1920s, culminating in the book *The Public and its Problems* (1927).

[2] Adams calls (2008, p. 139) his major orchestral work *Harmonielehre* from 1985 "a statement of belief in the power of tonality at a time when I was uncertain about its future".

[3] See, for example, Diana Boros's (2012) account of visionary art. A highly accessible account of Adorno's philosophy of music and its political motivations can be found in Hamilton (2007, ch. 6). For an overview of the different ways in which art and politics have been related in aesthetics and art theory, see, for example, Goehr (2003).

In the later phases of his vast intellectual career, Dewey began to address the conditions of community life, i.e., how to build a sense of communality between individuals, from a more global perspective and in terms of international relations and cultural differences between nations and people. I argue that such concerns are also at the forefront particularly in the third act of *Nixon*, where the main characters of the opera, after days of negotiations and official cultural programs, turn inward and reflect on the difficulties of bridging the cultural differences between two nations as different as the United States and China. As Michael Steinberg aptly characterizes the act, "the characters… turn away from the externals of their 'real' surroundings to the inner landscapes of their minds. With a candor sometimes painful to witness, they contemplate, they relive the paths that have brought them to this place and this moment. Humor, ethos, pathos, nobility – each finds its place in this moving scene" (Steinberg, 2006, p. 119). These psychological aspects, both the inner turmoil the meeting has erupted in the main characters and their more restful and focused contemplation and dialogue, do not remain on the level of words, but I try to show that they are also expressed in or at least strengthened by Adams' music. I argue that this act reveals potential common ground between the main characters and, hence, exemplifies the seeds required in building a sense of communality, as that process is understood by Dewey.

As *Nixon* is one of the most performed contemporary operas – if not the most performed –, it has also been the subject of a fair amount of research. Alongside a full-scale book-length study by Timothy Johnson, which is one of my key references, the opera has also been investigated in numerous academic articles. Their authors consider *Nixon*, for example, from the points of view of gender roles (Daines, 1995b), the presence of history in the opera (Germano, 2012), the piece's contemporary significance in light of more recent historical developments like China's rise to a world-power (Pauly, 2012), as well as the conception of space and time embodied in Adams's minimalist music and the ways in which it undercuts understandings of geography perceptible in the cold war between East and West (Lee, 2011). Despite their differing perspectives, one feature of *Nixon* is frequently pointed out in these articles: the distinctness of the opera's third act.[4] My aim, however, is to engage with the third act and its overall significance for the political character of *Nixon* much more extensively than has been previously done.

While acknowledging the important political themes of *Nixon*, John Bokina, in turn, presents a fairly unenthusiastic account of the piece's ultimate political significance. Despite its apparent political seriousness, he thinks *Nixon*, in the end, reduces into a collection of 'portraits of the characters' personalities' without any real political ambitions, for example in the form of an assessment of the significance of Nixon's visit. Moreover, Bokina thinks that, along with many other postmodern contemporary operas with a political theme, *Nixon* lacks "a sense of historical direction and purpose," which

[4] See, for example, Germano (2012, p. 822) and Lee (2011, p. 200).

he finds in many earlier operas, like in Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Figures like Nixon, Kissinger, Mao Tse-tung, and Chou En-Lai, do give a seemingly heavy political cache to the opera, but, in Bokina's eyes, the character gallery of the piece, in the end, manages to give *Nixon* nothing more than "a false aura of seriousness and significance" (Bokina, 1997, pp. 11–12, 201–204). With my reading of the opera, I hope to offer a more positive assessment of its political significance and, thereby, continue the views of scholars like Matthew Daines, according to whom *Nixon* is not "platitudinous and trivial," as the opera was described in the *Times Literary Supplement*, but, in fact, deserves "serious intellectual consideration" (Daines, 1995a, p. 3).

2. Making Sense of Nixon through Opera

Part of the difficulty of making a final assessment of the political nature of *Nixon* lies also in the real Nixon. As the biographer Richard Reeves puts it, Nixon "was a tough man to figure" (Reeves, 2002, p. 34). His personality was characterised by a continuous self-doubt, an inability to trust people even in his own administration, low self-esteem, and thinking the worst of people, including of himself, which hardly are among the virtues of a good politician, especially of the calibre of a United States president (Reeves, 2002, pp. 122–124). It has been said that the most amazing thing about the Nixon presidency was that it even happened (Reeves, 2002, p. 11). He was a huge introvert with bad social skills, who removed the soup course from the menu of White House state dinners, because he felt that the dinners took too long (Reeves, 2002, pp. 61–62). Reeves sums up Nixon's character: "Nixon wanted to be alone – an odd preference for an American politician" (Reeves, 2002, p. 29). Nixon's desire for achievement and power really seemed to be driven by his deep insecurity of his own worth, resulting in a personality shifting between grandiosity and paranoia (Johnson, 2016, p. 91). This feature of Nixon's character is well-exemplified already by the first "News, News, News" aria by *Nixon*'s Nixon in which his great enthusiasm about the historic nature of the China visit mixes with a concern about how the ceremonies at Peking airport are received by Americans back home.

Rather than some coherent and well-developed political ideology, Nixon's career was seemingly driven by one thing alone: the urge for power and, once attained, for maintaining it by any means necessary. He was extremely good in securing these goals, and Nixon could even alter his views on some major political issues, such as the civil rights of blacks, if he felt that it benefitted his overall ambitions (Kantola, 2017, pp. 19–38). Tarring his opponents, usually as communists, was a key Nixon political tactic and he has been said to be the first major American politician, who poured fuel and tried to benefit from the deep social rifts, between, for example, liberals and conservatives, underlying the American social landscape (Reeves, 2002, pp. 225–226). Spying not only on his enemies, but even people in his administration, along with truth bending or outright lying gradually became normal policies of Nixon's presidency, ultimately making even Nixon himself unable to tell what was true and what a fabricated falsehood (Reeves, 2002, p. 15). And it, of course, all came down in the Watergate scandal, which led to Nixon's resignation in August 1974.

The fact that Nixon's political thinking and career lack a coherent core makes him a surprisingly bad protagonist for a politically ambitious opera. The differences between the production team's attitudes towards Nixon further complicate how *Nixon*'s Nixon and the kinds of political ideas the character represents should be understood. Adams, for example, says that his understanding of Nixon changed dramatically during the composing process. The research he did on Nixon for the opera made him realise that Nixon is a much more complicated figure than implied by the many comedy routines on Nixon of Adams's time (Adams and Sellars, 2011). Despite *Nixon* includes comic elements, Sellars denies having any satiric intentions when developing the idea of the opera. Instead, he was more interested to use Nixon's visit to China to explore how myths are created (Steinberg, 2006, p. 115). While Adams, Goodman, and Sellars came to a shared understanding on what sorts of underpinnings should be avoided in the opera's portrayal of Nixon (Christiansen, 2006, pp. 251–252), at least according to Goodman, the respective pictures of the production team still did not fully overlap. She tells:

> We disagreed violently about one thing and another, and while some of these disagreements were resolved, others were amicably maintained [...] My Nixon is not quite the same character as John Adams's Nixon, and they both differ slightly from Peter Sellars's Nixon, not to mention James Maddalena's [the singer of Nixon in the premiere production of *Nixon*]. (Goodman, 1987, p. 13)

But if the opera's portrayal of Nixon is a melange of different, even disagreeing viewpoints, this seems to make it even harder to locate *Nixon*'s political content to the figure of Nixon in the opera. *Nixon*'s Nixon simply does not exemplify or express, for example, political ideas or values in any clear sense. Perhaps Nixon and the other main characters of *Nixon* then just are empty shells politically speaking with only an anecdotal interest, which is basically what Bokina's criticism boils down to.

The quotation from Goodman nicely brings out an important aspect of opera as an art. Even though operatic works are usually attributed to composers, they can also be distinctly co-authored pieces or, in the terminology of philosophical aesthetics, they often emerge from shared intentions between individuals. While earlier philosophy of interpretation was very much focused on single authored works like traditional novels or paintings, there is an increasing philosophical interest in how authorship should be understood in the case of works, which have multiple authors, and looser and stricter conditions have been put forth for understanding whom should be counted as the authors of an artwork that emerges from a group effort. Sondra Bacharach and Deborah Tollefsen have provided an analysis, based on Margaret Gilbert's plural subject theory, which, in their view, manages to avoid the pitfalls of both very liberal and more restrictive accounts of co-authorship[5] and which they, moreover, believe can embrace a wide variety of works with multiple authors from jazz improvisation to the activist art of the Guerilla Girls.

[5] Among the liberal theories, they include Berys Gaut's pluralist view (1997), while Paisley Livingston's idea of "meshing intentions" (Livingston, 2005, p. 79) as a condition for co-authorship is their main example of a more restrictive position on the issue who should be considered the authors of an artwork the making of which involves a group effort.

A joint commitment to do something together is their key concept. This commitment implies different sorts of rights and obligations to those involved in the group effort and someone can be expelled from the group due to a failure to follow the relevant obligations. According to Bacharach's and Tollefsen's view, in an artistic group like Adams, Goodman, and Sellars, those who have committed to making the artwork together should be considered the authors of the work, while, for example, those assisting them to reach the goal of that commitment should be considered collaborators, not authors (Bacharach and Tollefsen, 2010).

The requirement of joint commitment also raises a worry for the claim that even the figure of Nixon in *Nixon* does not provide any clear political content to the opera. Can a joint commitment involve the kind of disagreement exemplified by Adams, Goodman, and Sellars over Nixon? Perhaps it is possible to present an interpretation of the work, which accommodates the production trio's disagreements over Nixon in a consensus like manner and which should be taken as the opera's ultimate account of Nixon. We should just try harder to identify it.

There, however, does not seem to be any determinate reason why *Nixon* could not include even disagreeing perspectives on Nixon, while at the same time acknowledging that it has multiple, in its case three authors. For having a joint commitment to create an artwork does not arguably imply that the co-authors must agree on every aspect of the resulting artwork or that the finished artwork could not include remnants of the disagreeing viewpoints of the co-authors. In fact, Bacharach and Tollefsen explicitly deny that the condition of joint commitment to do an artwork together requires that the co-authors agree fully on the "expressive content of a work of art" (Bacharach and Tollefsen, p. 31). In other words, the disagreements between Adams, Goodman, and Sellars over Nixon do not imply that they could not all be counted as the authors of *Nixon*. The opera can be considered a co-authored work without the assumption that it must include some unitary view of its main character, which, in this case, would also nail-down the piece's political content.

As a result of possible disagreements between co-authors, operatic portrayals of complicated characters like Nixon can receive so many layers some of which might even contradict one another that make a definite interpretation of their meaning impossible. While *Nixon* can be seen as a part of the tradition of the ruler operas mentioned in the beginning, along with operas like *Boris Godunov*, at the same time, it is difficult to create a determinate political content to a work upon a figure as slippery as *Nixon*'s Nixon, which, again, seems to support Bokina's critical observation that *Nixon* is more about catchy anecdotes about famous political persona than about presenting well-thought-out stances on important political themes. However, while perhaps the most natural alternative, focusing on *Nixon*'s main character is only one option for constructing its political content.

3. From the Optimism of Act 1 to the Inwardness of Act 3 – Where's the Politics in all this?

Despite his failures and inexcusable undertakings, there seems to be a consensus among political authors and researchers that Nixon's trip to China was a success and that the aim to restore relationships with China arose from his genuine interest in foreign policy. Nixon truly wanted to put his stamp on world politics, raising his political ambitions from the realm of the ordinary to a mythic level, in which Sellars was interested. Nixon even thought that US domestic policy would take care of itself without the president; he has been reported saying "you need a president for foreign policy" (Reeves, 2002, p. 35). Nixon's goal was "an active peace," which, in his words, is "far more than the absence of war." Rather, what is needed is "a durable structure of international relationships which inhibits or removes the causes of war" (Reeves, 2002, p. 168). As Reeves explains, what "Nixon did best [was] seeing the world whole, thinking and acting at [an] architectural level" (Reeves, 2002, p. 95).

This architectural level is present especially in the first two of the three acts of *Nixon*, which include some of the principal state ceremonials of the actual visit, i.e., Nixon's reception at Peking airport, the meeting between Nixon and Mao, the banquet of the first evening, and Pat Nixon's tour of China. It is hard to find an opera, in which global politics is as front and centre as in *Nixon*.

Nixon's architectural level suggests another route into the opera's political content. Even this approach, however, has its problem, because it fails to account for the opera's third act, which, as already observed in the beginning, is very different in kind from the first two, in that it turns to the private realms of the main characters from the official and public sides of Nixon's visit. In it, the opera's five main characters, the Nixons, Mao, Mao's wife Chiang Ch'ing – who was also a towering revolutionary of her day –, and Chou En-Lai, turn inward. Particularly Nixon and Chou reflect on their experiences of the past few days and the problems of bridging the cultural divides and the different viewpoints they faced. Nixon, for example, laments on how "everything I say is misconstrued." The intimacy of this act is emphasized by Sellars' last-minute decision to change its general setting from a banquet to the respective bedrooms of the main characters. Both the Nixons and the Maos start to reminisce about their youth, Nixon telling Pat about the burger stand he held at an air carrier in the Pacific during World War II and how he was proud that already the smell of his burgers "made strong men cry," whereas Mao and Chiang exchange memories from the beginning of the revolution, which was also when they fell in love. As Michael Steinberg observes, a contrast between "the vitality and optimism of youth [and] their present condition of age and power" gives a stamp to both exchanges and, as a whole, the third act is "full of shadows" (Steinberg, 2006b, p. 107). Especially in the beginning of the act, the characters' strong strive to make sense of their present experience and the shadows behind them is well-reflected in the almost neurotic and fast changing music of the first part consisting of strong musical impulses without clear developmental lines. The huge forward-driven energy, which has been called the "thumbprint" of the Adams sound, is largely absent, although Adams

manages to create to the act's beginning a deep sense of nostalgia and loss of youth with the bitter-sweet, charming chords heard on the piano during the short banquet with which the act begins before the main characters retire to their rooms – these chords have a key role in *Chairman Dances* (1985), the orchestral work Adams composed from the material of *Nixon*.

While especially Nixon and Chou En-Lai seem drained and disturbed by the vast gulf, which the meeting has revealed between the two cultures, Mao feels rejuvenated and even begins dancing – something he in actuality liked very much to do. But of the group, it is the Chinese premier Chou who is most engrossed in his own thoughts, and he is also given the final words of the opera with his intensely reflective closing aria "I am alone and I cannot sleep forever," where he, among other things, ponders whether the communist revolution in China, with all its brutality, was truly for the good. A feeling of deep inability to make sense either of his own thoughts or what the future has in store seems to take hold of the Chinese premier: "Everything seems to move beyond our remedy. Come, heal this wound. At this hour nothing can be done." The character and the inner self of Chou are both musically and poetically marvellously portrayed; his voicing brings out Chou's subtle reflectiveness. Vast heartbreaking cello lines accompany the beginning of his reflections, but the cellos are gradually taken over by short searching melodies on different solo instruments from the clarinet to the viola, ending in an enigmatic quiet tone from a lone violin, all of which give the opera's end a deep sense of uncertainty, highly different from, for example, the optimism or even heroism expressed in Nixon's speech to his Chinese hosts in the banquet of the first act, which even ends in a climax typical to traditional opera arias, set to the words "The world watches and listens. We must seize the hour and seize the day." The change in mood between the first and third act is also very much audible in the music. At some points of the third act, the music almost literally seems to lose all energy to move forward. And to the subtle reflectiveness characterizing the finale of *Nixon*, Alice Goodman's words add an important historical depth (Johnson, 2016, p. 146).

With its solemn atmosphere, the third act stands in stark contrast to the extravagant and saliently political first two. At the same time, at least Sellars, the originator of the whole idea of *Nixon*, considers the third act to be the most essential part of the opera: "We are used to the media feeding frenzy, with the rush to judgment and the rush for the scoop, and then it all gets dropped… Opera is able to go inside to a place where the headlines aren't going… to find what was not in the news, what was missing from the news" (Sellars, 2006, p. 241). This is precisely, where the third act takes the viewer and, as I have tried to indicate especially with my analysis of Chou's closing aria and will continue to in the final parts of the paper, the music of *Nixon* has a key role in revealing the inner world of its political characters, as well as the experiences haunting them while not on camera or in the presence of reporters. William Germano has expressed the differences between the third and the two previous acts particularly well and his description also illuminates the ways in which opera can go to places, where media outlets like CNN cannot. He writes:

> [As *Nixon* proceeds, we] move from the thrilling opening to the grand excitement of the banquet, only to have the complexities of Chines politics wear the Nixons' confidence and strength. By the end of the opera we are back in a moment of sober reflection, reminding us that at its best opera is an art of extraordinary intimacy. *Nixon in China* is a musical exploration of the most intimate knowledge, and dreams, and illusions – carried by the most powerful figures in the world. (Germano, 2011, pp. 821–822)

4. The Seeds of Communality in the Face of Cultural Clashes

Given the overall standing of the third act within *Nixon* and given its stark differences to the first two acts, it seems that the political character of *Nixon* cannot be in the public and political meetings depicted in the first two acts either; the intimate third act arguably overshadows them in importance. Should it then be concluded that *Nixon* is not a serious political opera at all and that Bokina's criticism of its anecdotal character is sound?

This conclusion, however, would be too hasty. Mark Swed, I think, is right in claiming that "[*Nixon*] examines the clash of East and West, but it does so by looking deeply into the characters who held radically opposing views" (Swed, 2001, F1). I believe that this turn to the inner lives of *Nixon*'s main characters includes some interesting political aspects, which undermines Bokina-like criticisms of the piece. To get a sense of them, we need to look at the China visit of another major American figure, namely John Dewey, which took place some 50 years prior to Nixon's.

Dewey arrived in China in April 1919, and he ended up spending two years in the country. Dewey was the first foreign scholar to have been officially invited to lecture in China and his public lectures, held across the country, could draw an audience of thousands. It has been estimated that, with his writings published in China as well as his lecturing and other interactions, Dewey's ideas reached hundreds of thousands of people. To Dewey's most enthusiastic Chinese supporters, the purpose of Dewey's visit was clear; his ideas exemplified modern progress and democracy, which they hoped would help China to leave isolationism and traditionalism behind (Wang, 2007, p. 13).

But the influence, ultimately, went both ways. Jessica Wang argues that Dewey's experience of China had an important impact on his political philosophy, which culminated in the book *The Public and its Problems* published six years after Dewey's return from China in 1927. The stay made Dewey increasingly stress the importance of community for democracy, as well as sharpen the fundamental notion of his account, i.e., the public, which, in Dewey's case, does not refer to some random set of individuals, but to a group of people, who, through communication, try to find the best means of responding to the their common interests and concerns, for example in the form of establishing regulations that help in securing the satisfaction of those interests. Precisely such communality turns a group of people into a public (Wang, 2007, pp. 98–101, 106). Dewey was also preoccupied by issues similar to those *Nixon* considers, even though Chinese society had, of course, undergone some dramatic changes between Dewey's and Nixon's visits. This issue is: How to come to terms with the powerful sense of tradition typical to Chinese social life?

In the opera, this issue initially emerges in the meeting between Mao and Nixon in the first act and then receives a more thorough exploration in the third. At the same time, a new type of political layer opens, which I believe shows that *Nixon* has much more political substance than critics like Bokina or those assimilating the piece into "a CNN opera" think. Amid all the small talk about Mao's books and the upcoming US presidential election, a dispute over the meaning of liberty emerges in the chairman's study. The dispute begins with a comparison, made by both Mao and Chou, of liberty to a tree. Nixon takes his hosts to mean by tree something akin to "a cross," which functions like a symbol of liberty. Mao goes on to emphasise the role of tradition in Chinese society: "Founders come first, then profiteers… the world to come has come, is theirs… We cried 'Long live the Ancestors', once, it's 'Long live the Living!' now." As Johnson explains, "These mottos suggest the Chinese ideal of directly linking the ancestors to the living and the more general ideal of drawing strength for the present from the past" (Johnson, 2016, p. 176). Baffled by Mao's words, Nixon asks, whether the chairman means Confucius, whereas Kissinger admits that he is "lost". Disappointed at his guests, Mao replies, this time in a highly insistent, even a *Heldentenorish* tone:

> We no longer need Confucius. Let him rot… no curse… Words decompose to feed their source… Old leaves absorbed into the tree to grow again as branches. They sprang from the land, they are alike its food and dung. Upon a rock you may well build your tomb, but give us the earth, and we'll dig a grave. A hundred years and ears may press hard to the ground to hear his voice.

Rather than an idolised cross, Confucius and the Chinese tradition are, on Mao's account, like the roots of a tree and its decomposed, i.e., rotten fallen leaves, which continue to nurture the Chinese mindset in a much more deep-seated way than stale symbols like crosses typical to Christianity, for example. Mao's words, however, again, fail to reach Nixon, who ponders whether Mao is talking about the Ming Tombs.[6]

Nixon and Mao are also musically portrayed very differently. The music associated with the former is optimistic, even heroic, and his attempt to get his Chinese counterpart to understand the historic nature of the meeting are accompanied by sumptuous melodies – like in the case of "Fathers and sons, let us join hands, make peace for once. History is our mother, we best do her honor this way" –, while Mao seems unresponsive, more like a frustrated philosopher surrounded by dozens of open books than a world leader. The role is set to a tenor voice, which, in this scene, tends to move in a high register and has a strong piercing quality. Mao's health was at this time already considerably bad, and one can hear the frustration and cognitive decay, if not madness in his piercing and insistent voice.

Interestingly, the communicative difficulties this scene portrays parallel Dewey's experience. During his stay, Dewey started to increasingly feel the vital position of tradition in China, which he also saw as a possible obstacle for the democracy his hosts were eager to establish to their country,

[6] This reading of the scene in Mao's study draws on (Johnson, 2016, pp. 171–179).

as an overpowering tradition, in Dewey's view, was at odds with the kind "dynamic morality" that he saw as a condition for the emergence of a true, well-founded public opinion, a cornerstone of democracy according to Dewey's theory (Wang, 2007, p. 25). Such public opinion, according to Dewey's ideal, requires a free communicative interaction between the different beliefs and interests held by community members; an overpowering tradition might hamper the dynamic interaction required in this type of communal opinion-forming.

At the same time, however, rather than implementing some external political system, Dewey encouraged the Chinese people to look for the seeds of democracy in their own heritage and existing social fabric (Wang, 2007, p. 83). And this is something Dewey found in the day-to-day community life of ordinary Chinese people. In Jessica Wang's words, Dewey found in China "a culture in which people embrace interpersonal interaction and communication as providing opportunities for intellectual and moral growth, rather than as obstructing possibilities for self-realization" (Wang, 2007, p. 109). In fact, Dewey hoped that China could establish a community-based democracy without a detour to Western individualism the ills of which Dewey considers at length in *Public and its Problems* (Wang, 2007, p. 20).

Whereas the scene in Mao's study reveals the seemingly unbridgeable differences between the interlocutors for example in the form of the different musical portrayals of Nixon and Mao, the third act points to their similar joys, fears, and hopes, as was shown earlier. The third act, which lasts slightly over 30 minutes, can be divided into half. In the early part, various sorts of thoughts and memories spring to the mind of the main characters, but they do not form coherent wholes. The music, too, is anxious, episodic, and constantly changing in tense and mood. It comes and goes like the flood of thoughts and emotions that the meeting has set in motion in the main characters.

Gradually the music calms down and the act becomes more reflective, both psychologically and musically, the further it proceeds. Mao's voice also takes on a more colourful and warmer character compared to the first act. Identifiable monologues and duets start to emerge some of which include highly beautiful melodies and harmonies, making the "inner landscapes," to quote Michael Steinberg again, of the characters more vivid – the duet between Mao and Chiang beginning with Chiang's words "Peking watches the stars" is a great example of this. The earlier pathos is replaced by nobility. The focus on the inner lives of the characters intensifies, which is reflected in the more sustained musical lines accompanying the characters' engagement with their thoughts and, in general, fortifies the reflective character of the act, for example in ways already specified in the discussion of Chou's closing aria above.

The act reveals considerable overlap between the inner lives of the main characters and the calming, reflective music in a way ties the characters together in a joint imaginary space – imaginary because they are in separate rooms. Mutuality between these major political figures is finally found in the

individuality of each character, that is, in their way of reflecting on their past joys and future uncertainties, on their regrets and achievements, and the seeds for building ties and connections between people with very different political and cultural backgrounds emerge. One could even sense the beginnings of a community, as its conditions are understood by Dewey. He writes:

> To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values. But this translation is never finished. (Dewey, 1996, p. 332)

As life is rife with different sorts of changes – individual, social, and environmental – building a sense of communality between people, too, is a never-ending process, as it needs to be nurtured or restored within existing groups, for example due to unexpected experiences and events faced by the community, as well as created in new contexts between new groups of people. Such a sense of communality can, in Dewey's view, only be achieved through communication, where either different members of a given community or different communities altogether interact with one another, whether in the form of conversation, through different forms of media or through art and other cultural products like opera. It is only as a member of a dynamic and forward-looking community, which is responsive to new emerging problems and changes, that we can have a sense of ourselves as distinct individuals, who contribute to the community one is part of.

The third act of *Nixon* exemplifies precisely this "give-and-take of communication," which Dewey thinks establishes one's sense of being a part of a community and which ultimately holds that community together, although in the case of the third act, the communication mostly takes the form of subtle dialogue, both inner – Chou – and between partners – Richard and Pat, Mao and Chiang. The music accompanying these interactions, too, has a large role in giving these inner and outer communications their subtlety in the ways already indicated. Even though the act reveals commonalities between the main characters, the tragedy is that the Nixons, the Maos, and Chou En-Lai, are unaware of each other's reflections. The opportunity is, in this case, missed. This incompleteness, however, does not mean that *Nixon* lacks political substance. To see, why the piece could even be argued to be at the forefront of some key political developments of the latter part of the 20th century, we need to turn to Dewey again.

5. Towards a Global Community in *Nixon in China*

The Deweyan notion of community, which I believe the five main characters of *Nixon* approach in the third act, is intended to embrace not only different sorts of local communities but, ultimately, the state itself. A sense of communality between members is, in Dewey's view, vital for the proper functioning of communities of any size and for their reaching the democratic ideals he lays out in his political philosophy. As Dewey writes, "the clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of

democracy" (Dewey, 1996, p. 328). As already mentioned, communal life, in the Deweyan sense, has to do with a group of people identifying common interests and goals, as well as jointly deliberating on the best and most just ways of achieving them. Without common interests, there is no public either in the Deweyan sense of the term. From Dewey's perspective, the state is just another form of the public; "the state is the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members" (Dewey, 1996, p. 256).

Global developments after the publication of *The Public and its Problems*, most importantly World War II, however, led Dewey to add new layers into his political philosophy and to think about the problems of community and the public on a more global level. In the afterword to the new 1946 edition of the work, Dewey criticizes the isolationist tendencies of his country of the time and insists that the United States should be a more active force in finding ways to stabilize the relationships between different nations and cultures. He is also quite sceptic about the possibility to achieve this goal without establishing institutions that ensure global commitment to shared objectives and regulations, and he mentions the 1920 established League of Nations, the predecessor of the United Nations, as an example of such a global regulating body – the United Nations was, in fact, established in 1946. In other words, instead of isolationism, Dewey favours internationalism. When the Deweyan public previously consisted of a group of individuals of which the state was the largest instance, now Dewey claims that the public can also take the form of a group of states, based on their common interests and joint efforts to secure that those interests are reached. This new emphasis does not mean that Dewey's earlier reflections on the conditions of democracy would become obsolete. Rather, issues relating to community and democracy just concern the relationships between much larger bodies than earlier, namely states and cultures.

As surprising as this might sound, similar themes were also at the forefront of Nixon's foreign policy and, like Dewey, he supported internationalism against US isolationism, which was still a viable political option in Nixon's time, i.e., that the United States should avoid taking part in foreign conflicts. Nixon's internationalism emerged from the belief that the earlier-mentioned active peace he sought could not be achieved without the active and mediating role of the United States. The trip to China emerged from these goals and, even though some political calculation might have been involved, given the upcoming US presidential election, it also involved a genuine effort to establish a more meaningful relationship to an old enemy and to find common ground with it, i.e., in Dewey's terminology, to forge the US and China into a public, at least with regard to a certain range of issues.

In my interpretation, these types of Deweyan themes are central to *Nixon*. The picture of the challenges of internationalism, i.e., how to construct very different groups of people into a public with common interests and joint deliberation on how to secure that they are reached, revealed by the third act is far from optimistic, but it is not pessimistic either. The visit as depicted by the

first two acts of the opera has opened unknown territories and none of the main characters seem to have a clear idea of how things will develop hereafter, which is expressed in the taste of uncertainty left by the music of *Nixon*'s closing bars. This ambiguity between pessimism and optimism is also conveyed by Chou's final words, "Outside this room the chill of grace lies heavy on the morning grass," which includes words with positive connotations like "grace" and "morning grass," but also words with negative connotations like "chill" and "heavy" (Johnson, 2016, p. 28). At least Nixon's visit, as depicted in the opera, has shaken the ordinary ways of thinking of the characters of *Nixon*, as again shown by the piece's third act, and already this factor makes *Nixon* into a refreshing opera, particularly in times of deep cultural and political divides. As Sellars describes the dialogic character of the third act: "As Mozart reimagined what opera could be by inventing the ensemble, [we wanted] to reinvent the ensemble on our terms and find the basis of equality and exchange – which is, of course, what we're looking for globally in our generation" (Sellars, 2006, p. 241).

The third act might, indeed, represent only the first step of a renewed exchange or something Dewey might call building an international community, but that is already a worthy move forward from the status quo of the time of Nixon's visit. The reason why *Nixon* does not present a clear vision of the following steps might not be in its production team's incapacity to express politically well-developed thoughts and ideas through the medium of opera, as Bokina's interpretation seems to imply, but because the challenges, which emerged during Nixon's visit, cannot be answered easily. Rather than as a collection of anecdotes of major political figures without any real political content or value, *Nixon in China* should, rather, be understood as an opera of internationalism and its challenges, especially as those are expressed in Dewey's philosophy.[7]

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