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Winter Music: Composing the North

By John Luther Adams

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To an untrained ear, John Luther Adams' music sounds like the soundtrack to a first rate documentary about the Alaskan wilderness, a strikingly faithful-to-the-original aural representation of intense cold, of water freezing and ice cracking apart, of daylight and darkness tearing free from their expected alternations. Adams seems to possess a remarkable gift for listening, and thereby for hearing ("in the growl of boot steps on fresh snow at 40 below zero, in the haunted cry of a boreal owl, in the luminous dance of the aurora borealis across a moonless sky") the strange, ethereal music of an overwhelmingly silent place. He thinks of silence as "a profound metaphor of the spirit" and believes that "one of the most persuasive arguments for the preservation of the original landscape here may be its spiritual value as a great reservoir" of the same:

The keynote of the northern interior is silence. The rivers are frozen much of the year. Snow mutes the land. And the wind is calm more often than not. With human and animal life spread sparsely over sprawling distances, sound is the exception. This pervasive stillness can attune the ear in extraordinary ways.

Beginning with pieces that incorporate natural elements like birdsong, progressing to works that pay homage to native music, and moving on yet further into the silent northern landscape and, simultaneously, into his own interior, over time Adams has arrived at a place where composition becomes a process of "losing" notes, of "knowing what *not* to write down." He now wants music "to be like a place in the wilderness," with its own inviolacy, transcending human beings "utterly and impassively." But if the "keynote" of Alaska's boreal forest is silence, where will a music that seeks to express this essence finally come to rest?

Each reader/listener will have to decide for himself whether or not Adams has been granted his wish to "discover a new kind of music here—music that somehow resonates with all this space and silence, cold and stone, wind, fire and ice." But this intrepid composer's deep knowledge of the North—both as a geographical location and as a far frontier of musical experimentation—and his unusual articulacy in describing both the process of composition and the very real value of silence make the fascinating *Winter Music* and its accompanying CD well worth a tenderfoot's exploration.

— Ann Stapleton

