

The Cleveland Orchestra: Timothy McAllister plays John Adams

by Mike Telin



“It’s just a thrill to come to Cleveland,” Timothy McAllister said during a telephone conversation. “And audiences will be witnessing a piece that for the saxophone has literally made history — and I’m honored to be part of that history.”

On Thursday, April 4 at 7:30 pm at Severance Music Center, McAllister will join The Cleveland Orchestra in John Adams’ *City Noir*. Under the direction of Adams, the concert will also include Gabriella Smith’s *Breathing Forests* with organist James McVinnie as soloist and Debussy’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. The program will be repeated on Saturday at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Based in Ann Arbor, McAllister serves on the faculty of the University of Michigan, and is no stranger to Northeast Ohio, having performed Avner Dorman’s *Saxophone Concerto* with CityMusic in 2014. His first Cleveland Orchestra performance came in November of 2018 when Matthias Pintscher led Bartók’s *The Wood Prince Suite*.

Adams describes *City Noir* as “jazz-inflected symphonic music.” The 35-minute work is made up of three movements: “The City and its Double,” “The Song is for You,” and “Boulevard Night.” It is inspired by urban California during the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, and features extensive solos for trumpet, trombone, horn, viola, double bass and alto saxophone. It was premiered by Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic on October 8, 2009 with McAllister as soloist.

“The premiere was Dudamel’s first concert of his tenure with L.A. and I remember it was just electric. And the international press and local news media were there filming the very first rehearsal of this brand new commission by John Adams.”

Since then McAllister has become Adams’ player of choice for performances of the work. “It really did boom after that. I’ve done it with John quite a bit as well as with five or six different conductors. By the end of next year I will have played it with 21 different orchestras. And in terms of the number of concerts, I think this week will make it 61 or 62. So it’s just a part of my life. The conductor Marin Alsop once called it one of my cottage industries.”

McAllister said that *City Noir* is a powerful work that features the saxophone as a textural instrument within the orchestra, as well as being “three-quarters concerto.”

“John has me stand during the elaborate solos the way you would during a big band solo. At first he did it to shine a spotlight on the saxophone to guide the ears of the audience during those moments. And if an orchestra is really cranking, you have to play with a very big sound.”

This begs the question of whether the player should use a mouthpiece that is designed for jazz or for classical. “I asked John if he would like me to use a jazz mouthpiece, and he said, ‘No, I don’t want that sound. I want a classical symphonic sound, but one that is larger and has a profile that’s much more prominent.’ I said okay, and that sent me on a journey to craft a new American sound for the instrument.”

McAllister noted that the way Bizet and Ravel used the saxophone in the orchestra requires a light, diffuse sound, with a fast vibrato and a narrow palette. “I think John put the instrument in a sound world that references both the jazz and European traditions, which meant that I had to find something right in the middle. And I relished being an architect of that.”

In addition to the solos, there are many places during the work where Adams writes stunning lines that are doubled in the strings. “He and I have just been licking our chops, so to speak, about what those places are going to sound like with The Cleveland Orchestra in Severance Hall, because Cleveland has a string sound that for me is to die for.”

Given McAllister’s long professional relationship with John Adams, what is it about his music that he finds attractive? “Whether it’s his early pieces or a piece like this, it’s always lush and there’s so much to grab onto and listen to. I think he’s uncompromising.

He writes incredibly difficult music for the performers but it's always accessible. And no matter how hard it is, or how dense it is, it's always meant to be beautiful.”

McAllister's journey with Adams' music began while he was in high school in Houston. *Nixon in China* was being premiered by Houston Grand Opera, and his saxophone teacher was called in to play in the orchestra.

“My teacher was practicing one day. The saxophone part was a thick book full of notes and he was complaining about how hard it was. So I asked him who it was by, and he said a composer who's got the name of a president — a guy named John Adams. And he said, you need to hear this opera. So he got me a ticket and I went. It was a life-changing moment. I was aware that composition was a thing and that there were living composers, but when you're a young student, you've got blinders on.

“But to hear the premiere of this opera, to hear that sound, even at that moment in my life as a young teenager, I knew that was what I wanted. So I pointed my compass in that direction, and for me to get to work with John Adams has been a dream come true.”

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