

John Adams' 'Nixon' opera arrives at the Met

By MIKE SILVERMAN

NEW YORK — Air Force One finally landed on the stage of the Met — and so did perhaps the greatest American opera of the last quarter-century.

The Metropolitan Opera premiere of composer John Adams' "Nixon in China" on Wednesday night was both a testament to its enduring power and a demonstration of the company's willingness to add significant modern works to its repertory of classics.

And a long-overdue premiere it was. "Nixon," set to a libretto by Alice Goodman that tells of the president's historic visit to China in 1972, has been produced all over the world since its 1987 debut in Houston. It's even been presented in New York — but at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, not the Met.

Adams' score bursts with youthful energy and inventiveness. He uses elements of "minimalism," the insistent repetition of themes with only slight variation. But his style is far more varied and sophisticated than any label can convey, and he moves seamlessly from somber choruses and expansive arias to jazzy saxophones and triumphant brass fanfares.

Among the glories of Goodman's libretto is the dream-like poetic quality with which she imbues all the characters, ennobling them while maintaining their particular visions and quirks. Her text is a meditation on history, politics and culture, and at the same time a keen dramatization of individuals caught up in a momentous event.

So it's a shame that there was an air of anti-climax about the performance. Part of that may be the fault of Adams himself, who conducted the orchestra and didn't always seem able to make the ensemble cohere or stir up the excitement inherent in his own music. He was at his best in the brilliant third act, in which the principal characters reveal their private thoughts about their past lives.

Then, too, baritone James Maddalena, who created the role of Nixon and has sung it more than 100 times, had severe vocal difficulties, especially in what should be his show-stopping opening aria, "News." It's hard to say whether the problems resulted from indisposition or from the fact that in his mid-50s he can no longer handle the dauntingly high vocal line.

Maddalena, like the other singers, used a wireless microphone to amplify his singing — a requirement specified by Adams for all productions of this work. The amplification only served to highlight the strain in his upper register.

Dramatically, however, he gave a magnificent impersonation of the president, capturing facial expressions, gestures and intonations in uncanny fashion. When he uttered the lines, "Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?" a look of paranoia flashed across his face that would seem familiar to anyone who remembers the Nixon presidency. Yet, true to the libretto, he never lapsed into caricature.

Vocally, the other soloists fared much better. As Madame Mao, soprano Kathleen Kim nailed the impossible coloratura of her showpiece aria, "I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung." Soprano Janis Kelly was eloquent as Pat Nixon, especially in her second-act scene that includes the aria, "This is prophetic."

Tenor Robert Brubaker coped successfully with the heroic writing for the doddering Chairman Mao, while baritone Richard Paul Fink intoned Henry Kissinger's lines crisply (and doubled as the evil overseer in the ballet entertainment *The Red Detachment of Women*). **Best of all the men was baritone Russell Braun as a soulful Premier Chou En-lai. He gets the opera's final words in a solo that asks, "How much of what we did was good?"**

The production marks the belated Met debut of director Peter Sellars, who collaborated with Adams and Goodman on the opera's creation. But Sellars, one of the most imaginative figures in opera today, had little opportunity to show anything fresh or new here. Instead, the Met staging, originally seen at the English National Opera, is mostly a dutiful recreation of the Houston original, down to the choreography by Mark Morris, sets by Adrienne Lobel, costumes by Dunya Ramicova and lighting by James F. Ingalls.

Whatever its shortcomings, however, this is a "Nixon" worth seeing. It's a little like the president's visit to China itself: More than what he said or did there, the important thing was that he made the trip.



In this photo released by the Metropolitan Opera, Russell Braun is Chou En-lai, left; James Maddalena is Richard Nixon, second left; Kathleen Kim is Chiang Ch'ing, center right and Janis Kelly is Pat Nixon, during a dress rehearsal of "Nixon in China," Sunday, Jan. 26, 2011 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.