

# History and Memory in the Music of HBO's *John Adams*

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AMS-SW Conference, Fall 2012

Texas State University, San Marcos

With striking realism and superb production values, HBO's 2008 miniseries *John Adams* presents a visceral and emotional experience of early America during the years from the Boston Massacre of 1770 until the death of both Adams and Jefferson on July 4th, 1826.<sup>1</sup> The production paints early America as a world much different from our own while emphasizing the legacy of that crucial time and place to the modern United States. Based on David McCullough's 2001 Pulitzer-Prize-winning biography of John Adams, the seven-part docudrama is a vehicle of both history and cultural memory, depicting past events and people with great attention to historical accuracy, but also interpreting them through a modern lens.

This paper takes a memory studies approach, distinguishing between history and cultural memory. Both these terms carry an array of meanings for scholars.<sup>2</sup> I define history as the discipline of explaining the past based on the interpretation of historical evidence with the aim of a more or less objective account of a specific time and place. In other words, the aim of history is to reconstruct as close an approximation of the past as evidence will support. History emphasizes a sense of distance and difference from the present. Cultural memory, on the other hand, connotes the body of myths, assumptions, and, I argue, musical ideas that are still alive in the present day and are subjectively used at their moment of remembering to make sense of and give meaning to the present. It implies closeness, connection, and the sense that the past still exists in and shapes the present. The Revolutionary era has receded far beyond our living memory, and yet we maintain a living connection to it because many forces have continually refreshed this connection, molding and remolding our conceptions of the period to suit present purposes. These cascading representations have constructed a large body of signifiers constituting an amorphous haze that I deem cultural memory of early America.

The music of *John Adams* plays an intricate role in expanding and contracting the distance between past and present. Like many history films, the production constructs

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Hooper, *John Adams*, DVD (HBO, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Memory studies is a burgeoning trend in cultural history, and my interpretation of this discourse and its methods has been informed by many authors, including Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* no. 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering (Winter 2000): 127–50; Hans-Jürgen Grabbe and Sabine Schindler, eds., *The Merits of Memory: Concepts, Contexts, Debates* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2008); Udo J. Hebel, ed., *Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2003); David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

two musical timeframes through its diegetic and non-diegetic music, the characters' timeframe of the represented past and the audience's timeframe of the interpretive present.<sup>3</sup> These musical modes interact to create a past that is foreign but familiar, historically distant but emotionally close. The miniseries features historically informed diegetic performances of Revolutionary-era music in scenes that emphasize the foreignness of early American culture to the modern world. In contrast, the production's non-diegetic score, by Rob Lane and Joseph Vitarelli, draws the past into the present with its integration of familiar contemporary musical symbols of American patriotism, such as the film scoring style of John Williams and the culturally engrained pastoral idioms of Aaron Copland, encoding the idea that this formative moment in history still resonates in American national identity.

### **The Diegetic Music**

Early American music occurs only rarely in the eight-hour soundscape of *John Adams*, but in several scenes of striking historical accuracy, the people of the diegesis enact their musical culture, participating in political activism through song. These scenes highlight the foreignness of early America by depicting ritual contexts that would be rare in modern society, and by selecting songs that have dropped from the repertoire of patriotic songs known to most Americans in the 2000s. Thus, the scenes make the past feel distant and unfamiliar. However, to each of these performances the filmmakers add non-diegetic musical enhancements, blurring the lines between musical timeframes. The addition of present-day musical commentary to these scenes has the effect of cordoning them off like museum exhibits, implying the need for an interpreter to help the audience understand the scenes' historical and emotional significance. At the same time, the familiar non-diegetic style and sound naturalize the unfamiliar period music into the rest of the background score, smoothing any disjunctions they might have caused in the musical fabric of the whole.

In each of the diegetic music scenes, the situation enacted has a sense of realism, as though it could have happened in just such a way, and indeed these scenes are all well-researched and historically plausible. For example, take the scene featuring "Hail Columbia," which occurs in episode 6, during which Adams, played by Paul Giamatti, serves a miserable term as President of the United States. In this scene, he and Abigail, played by Laura Linney, attend the theater in Philadelphia. When the Master of Ceremonies notices their presence, he immediately calls for "Three cheers for our President," and boldly sings several verses of a favorite patriotic song of the early Republic, "Hail Columbia."

The selection of "Hail Columbia" for this scene has a high degree of historical accuracy, as primary source accounts show that actor Gilbert Fox did indeed sing it for Adams at the Philadelphia New Theatre in 1798. Although "Hail Columbia" used to be one of the most popular American anthems, it has been largely forgotten in modern decades, making the scene feel more like a history lesson than it would if they were

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<sup>3</sup> For more on codifying aural timeframes, see Linda Kathryn Schubert, "Soundtracking the Past: Early Music and Its Representations in Selected History Films" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1994).

singing “The Star Spangled Banner,” for example.<sup>4</sup> The unfamiliarity of the song works with the cinematographer’s tilted and high camera angles, and the actor’s severe, almost grotesque makeup to emphasize the historical gulf between the Revolutionary era and the 2000s.

All of the songs performed in the miniseries are mostly unfamiliar and not part of our contemporary cultural memory. By enhancing these diegetic performances with just a touch of present-day background accompaniment, which helps to guide audience interpretation and encourage an emotional response, the filmmakers both naturalize these moments into the rest of the miniseries and cordon them off as artifacts of historical curiosity and authenticity.

### **The Non-Diegetic Score**

Throughout the miniseries, as in many history films, the non-diegetic score helps the audience interpret the historical representation through the lens of the present day, constructing the past as an emotionally relevant cultural memory. The main theme, for example, speaks from a contemporary American nationalist musical style, bearing little resemblance to Revolutionary-era music. This theme has now itself become a carrier of cultural memories of the Revolution in present-day political and patriotic contexts.

In the opening credits sequence, the music is expertly woven together with the visual field, which is immersed in transparent waving flags. The rich textures of the fabrics give the impression that these are the actual flags flown during the Revolution. Stars from several past versions of the American flag fade into stars from the modern flag, all superimposed on each other as the fabric waves.<sup>5</sup> The blending of these flags and patriotic images from the Revolution with the modern American flag symbolizes a deep level of meaning in the production: that Revolutionary-era America will merge with contemporary America, and that the miniseries tells not only the story of the past, but also the heritage of the present. The music, metaphorically, contributes the same meaning; it was composed in a contemporary style in 2008 and does not sound like early American music, but through its union with the visual images, the theme becomes linked with early America, serving to remind audiences of the importance and emotional relevance of the Revolutionary era to their own lives.

The style of the main theme and the rest of the non-diegetic score draw on the Hollywood film music styles of composers such as John Williams, who has scored dozens of blockbuster films, including *The Patriot* (2000), one of the most well-known, if maligned, cinematic representations of the Revolutionary War.<sup>6</sup> In *The Patriot*, as in many of his other scores for Americana films, Williams borrows stylistic elements from what Neil Lerner has called Aaron Copland’s pastoral trope, especially a preference for intervals of fourths and fifths, high pedal tones, and stratified voicings.<sup>7</sup> Lerner writes,

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<sup>4</sup> On the popularity of “Hail Columbia” in the Early Republic, see Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Music for Patriots, Politicians, and Presidents: Harmonies and Discords of the First Hundred Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 142–143.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Leepson and Nelson DeMille, *Flag: An American Biography* (Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Roland Emmerich, *The Patriot* (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Neil William Lerner, “Copland’s Music of Wide Open Spaces: Surveying the Pastoral Trope in

“The trope surfaces many times in John Williams’s output... The pastoralism functions in traditional ways: to evoke a utopic space, accompanying characters defined by their self-sacrifice in the service of the common good.”<sup>8</sup> This is certainly how pastoralism works in *The Patriot* and *John Adams*.

The main themes of both *The Patriot* and *John Adams* build from fiddle solos into full orchestral power. While the violin solo in *The Patriot* is poignant and peaceful, as opposed to the roiling, determined quality of the solo in *John Adams*, both begin to intensify when snare drums enter, and the separate musical lines unite to play a powerful melody. In this way, both themes suggest an individual who rises to his duty (through the summons to war signified by the snare drums) to become a leader of a cause greater than himself. Both feature musical elements reminiscent of Copland, such as intervals of fourths and fifths, high pedal tones, and other techniques that have come to evoke a strong sense of the American landscape and nationalist values. This pastoralism plays a large part in the rest of the non-diegetic music in both films, too. Neither theme bears any resemblance to historical music of the American Revolution. Instead, their aim is to stir the emotions and sense of patriotism of modern Americans, and to do this they must use a musical language built after America’s ascendance on the world stage in both politics and music.

The themes from *John Adams* and *The Patriot* have had lives beyond their originating productions, and both have been used in other patriotic and political contexts. The use of this music connects contemporary political figures and events with the Revolutionary era, calling upon an associative process that nations have long used to evoke their own pasts and thereby legitimize their present activity, imply direct lineage and heritage, and promote a sense of unity in shared origins.

The theme from *The Patriot* played the night of Barack Obama’s presidential victory speech in Chicago on November 4, 2008.<sup>9</sup> When the President-Elect finished his speech, the loudspeakers in Grant Park began to swell with triumphant music, beginning with the theme from the 2000 film *Remember the Titans*, a football movie about racial integration, and then transitioning into the climactic moments of the main theme of *The Patriot* as the Obama and Biden families all gathered on stage, hugging and waving.<sup>10</sup> As Obama said to open this speech, “If there is anyone out there... who still wonders if the dreams of our founders are alive in our time... tonight is your answer.”<sup>11</sup>

CNN used the main theme from *John Adams* to underscore its coverage of the 2010 midterm elections.<sup>12</sup> In these elections, the Republican Party regained control of the

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Hollywood,” *Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 482–483. The main theme of *The Patriot* may be heard here: <http://youtu.be/REUusj4nxh4>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

<sup>9</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye, “Live Blogging Election Night,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, sec. Politics, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/live-blogging-election-night/>.

<sup>10</sup> My thanks to Brad Fowler for identifying these scores. The score of *Remember the Titans* was composed by Trevor Rabin. Video footage of this event is available on YouTube at <http://youtu.be/jfGx4G8tjo>.

<sup>11</sup> Barack Obama, “Transcript Of Barack Obama’s Victory Speech: NPR,” *NPR.org*, November 5, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96624326>.

<sup>12</sup> For footage of such CNN projections, see <http://youtu.be/Kac5IfIVRac> and <http://youtu.be/E83cfKuEGqc>. The theme from *John Adams* accompanies each, although the first shows

House of Representatives and gained seats in the Senate, rebounding from the Democratic sweep that had accompanied Obama's election. Pundits attributed this Republican mobilization to the Tea Party Movement, a grassroots movement focused on Libertarian-leaning views, such as reduction in taxes and government size.<sup>13</sup> The so-called Tea Partiers took their name and political symbolism from the Boston Tea Party of 1773, which, of course, plays an important part in *John Adams*. Tea Partiers adopted several early American flags as banners of their movement, including the Gadsden Flag that says "Don't Tread On Me," the Betsy Ross flag, and others that wave in the opening credits of *John Adams*.<sup>14</sup> By selecting the *John Adams* theme for its election coverage, CNN not only legitimized the groundswell of the Tea Party movement, but also closely connected it, and the political situation of 2010, with the Revolutionary era. Even if viewers did not recognize the music as being associated with the Revolutionary War or the HBO miniseries, CNN banked on it still suggesting the qualities of rebellion, determination, and patriotism due to its musical characteristics and their cultural significations.

The *John Adams* theme also plays prior to each Washington Nationals Major League Baseball home game as the soundtrack of a brief tribute video.<sup>15</sup> The Nationals' use of this theme suggests yet more layers of meaning. Now it not only serves to excite the crowd with a spirit of athletic competition, but also to connect the Nationals to a discourse of patriotism, as if this is the entire nation's baseball team, not just the home team of the District of Columbia.

The Nationals film, which plays on the jumbotron preceding the National Anthem, features a montage of patriotic images, all with waving, partly transparent flags superimposed over them, just like in the opening credits of *John Adams*. At the climax of the music, the video shows a series of Nationals players hitting home runs, and as the bat strikes the ball straight towards the camera, the ball explodes into a fireworks effect, evoking the Fourth of July.

By modeling this team video after the opening credits of *John Adams*, the Washington Nationals align themselves with the spirit of early America that this miniseries promotes, calling upon the associations that link the Nationals, and baseball itself, with American patriotism. Thus, the main musical theme of *John Adams* has become a potent carrier of cultural memories in the late 2000s, evoking early America, the Revolution, the founding fathers, and other symbols of American greatness. I cannot imagine "Hail Columbia" being used in these ways.

In conclusion, HBO's *John Adams* has refreshed how Americans in the 2000s remember the Revolutionary era and its heroes. The music of the miniseries plays an intricate part in painting the past as a distant, historical realm that is still emotionally

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CNN projecting that the Democrats will retain control of the Senate and the second shows that the Republicans will gain control of the House of Representatives.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher F. Karpowitz et al., "Tea Time in America? The Impact of the Tea Party Movement on the 2010 Midterm Elections," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 02 (2011): 303–309.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Scoocca, "Flag Daze," *The Boston Globe*, June 13, 2010, sec. Ideas, [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/06/13/flag\\_daze/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/06/13/flag_daze/).

<sup>15</sup> An unofficial video recording of this film is available on YouTube at <http://youtu.be/wkKX5sgmsbw>.

accessible and relevant to the modern world. While the diegetic music of early America deepens modern understanding of Revolutionary era culture, it also creates a sense of the unfamiliarity, even foreignness, of that unrecoverable time and place. The background score brings the past into the present with emotional vitality, guiding the audience's interpretation of the people and events that still echo as American heritage. The miniseries as a whole, and the music in particular, construct early America as a living cultural memory that shapes, and is shaped by, the present day.