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Brief but Close 'Encounters' Of the John Adams Kind

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"Encounters: A John Adams Snapshot," a concert presented by the Post-Classical Ensemble at the Harman Center's Lansburgh Theatre on Wednesday night, wasn't really a snapshot at all. For one thing, it offered two images of the composer, taken at different times: the piano solo "Phrygian Gates," from 1977, and "Gnarly Buttons," for clarinet and chamber ensemble, written 19 years later.

Both of these are seminal Adams works. Their juxtaposition offered a thoughtful, intense look at the composer. Brief, yes. It even left you wanting more. But despite the agreeable informality of its presentation, it still had features of a more carefully thought-out image.

Informality is a good thing for Adams. He's become the go-to figure among American composers, well known for a populist touch ("Nixon in China"), yet firm about staying in the mainstream classical world of opera houses and major orchestras rather than the renegade fringe of small downtown ensembles on the Steve Reich or Philip Glass model. He seems to have an advisory role with half the orchestras and institutions in America, from Carnegie Hall to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. And he can take himself a little too seriously. So it was nice to hear two works for smaller forces presented with a straightforward intimacy, framed by conversation, and played with vibrant vitality.

Not that these are exactly light pieces. "Phrygian Gates," played here by Benjamin Pasternack, stakes out what for Adams amounts to high minimalism, meaning that repeated patterns serve as its driving force, rather than development of melody or harmony in the conventional sense. But if this piece offers a surface, it's an undulating, expressive one, ebbing and flowing, in constant motion. The music, Pasternack said, in comments afterward, initially "looks and seems mechanical on the page" -- he was playing the piece for the first time -- but his performance made it sound downright dramatic. His hands sank into the music, expanded it, and punched it down as if kneading dough -- an activity that, like this piece, is about a slow but substantial process of becoming.

"Gnarly Buttons" is a more conventional concerto showpiece, with a formidable part for solo clarinet (Adams's instrument), played with aplomb by David Krakauer, and a set of references extending from Benny Goodman to Latin dance, with a cow's moo thrown in for good measure. Angel Gil-Ordóñez, the music director of the Post-Classical Ensemble, conducted smoothly. If you want a real, solid picture of a composer whose reputation often inflates him to larger-than-life proportions, this concert offered an excellent one.

