

How the subarctic  
winter light inspired  
new music of elemental  
harmony and colour

# From *Winter Music*

A Composer's Journal

by John Luther Adams

For the past twenty-five years composer John Luther Adams has made his home in the boreal forest near Fairbanks, Alaska. From there he has created a unique musical world, grounded in the elemental landscapes and indigenous cultures of the North. Each winter—which, he says, “is the season when I burrow most deeply into my music”—he keeps a daily journal as he tries to understand where the music is leading him. The winter of 1998–99 was a time of change, as he composed a major new piece entitled *The Immeasurable Space of Tones*. The present article comprises journal selections from that period and is excerpted from *Winter Music: Selected Writings 1974–2000*—a book in progress that includes journals, essays, and other writings by John Luther Adams.

photos by Gayle Young

### Winter Solstice, 1998

For much of the year, the world in which I live is a vast, white canvas. In the deep stillness of the solstice, I'm profoundly moved by the exquisite colours of the subarctic winter light on snow. Reading art critic John Gage's essay "Color As Subject," I'm struck by a parallel between the view out my window and Mark Rothko's use of white underneath the colours in his paintings. Like Rothko's translucent fields, the colours on the snow suggest to me broad diatonic washes suffused with gradually changing chromatic harmonies.

Slowly, faintly, I begin to hear it: music stripped to its most essential elements—harmony and colour floating in space, suspended in what Morton Feldman called "time undisturbed."

### Christmas, 1998

A life in music is a spiritual practice. As in many disciplines, my practice sometimes involves "fasting." From time to time there are periods in which I listen to no music at all. I feel this as a physical need.

During busy periods of performance and teaching I hear a great deal of music. And just as I might feel the need to fast following a period of feasting on rich foods, after several months of intensive listening my ears tell me they need a time of rest from music. As I begin new work, my hope is that fasting may help me to hear sounds I haven't heard before, and to hear familiar sounds with new ears.

In her life and work, Pauline Oliveros practices an extremely difficult discipline: "Always to listen." I admire this very much. And though fasting from music might seem to be a retreat from listening, I experience it as a time for listening to silence. These days, most of us are inundated with music and other sounds. I feel very fortunate to live in a place where silence endures as a pervasive, enveloping presence.

### New Year's Day, 1999

While beginning to sketch a large new orchestral piece, I'm studying the paintings of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. Like Cage in music, Pollock made a radical new beginning in the middle of the twentieth century. Both he and Cage opened territories they could only begin to explore during their lives. The questions posed by their work will continue to occupy others for a long time to come.

By contrast, Rothko and Feldman were endings. They both explored intensely private, self-contained worlds. And what Brian O'Doherty said of the one could apply just as well to the other: "Rothko was the last Romantic. But the last of something is usually the first of something else."

Which makes me wonder: is it somehow possible to live and work in that timeless intersection between endings and beginnings?

### January 20, 1999

For me, composing is not about finding the notes. It's about losing them. Although I'm still involved in writing scores, the most difficult thing is not to know what to write down; it's to know what *not* to write down.

I hope to discover music that sounds and feels elemental and inevitable. And before beginning to write, I want to hear as much of the new piece as I can, as it begins to take shape in my mind's ear. This is a slow, sometimes difficult process, but over the years I've learned to trust it—even to savour it. I spend a lot of time thinking, reading, looking at art, walking, listening, sketching, trying to understand the essence of the new piece.

After six weeks in this mode, I now have several pages of notes for the new piece. But, I've yet to start writing out the score.

### January 22, 1999

Over the years, I've moved away from working with audible compositional processes—an inheritance of minimalism—and toward an increasing focus on the fundamental materials of music: sound and time. My work is less and less a process of performing operations on notes, imposing compositional processes on sounds, or working within a syntax of musical "ideas." I now concentrate primarily on asking questions about the essential nature of the music—what it wants from me, and what it wants to be.

### January 23, 1999

Today I'm forty-six years old. By this time in his life, Ives had lost his physical health and had virtually stopped composing. But Feldman was leaving the dry-cleaning business and moving into his more expansive "middle" period. Pollock was gone. But Rothko was poised on the verge of his major breakthrough into his signature style. That happened in 1950, when he was 47.

Among my gifts today: the new score is underway.

### January 24, 1999

What is line in music? This is a question I've pondered for many years.

In Pollock's poured paintings, long, fluid lines are multiplied into layered fields of perpetually moving stasis and perpetually frozen motion.

Much of my composition *In the White Silence* is composed of continuously rising and falling lines, layered and diffused into an all-over texture of frozen counterpoint. In that piece it feels as though I may at last have discovered a sense of line that is my own. Now, in a new piece, I'm trying to take a leap I've contemplated for years: to let go of line and figuration altogether. But what will be left?

### January 25, 1999

In the new piece, individual sounds are diffused in a continuous texture, always changing but always with a minimum of what the art critics call “incident.” This won’t be easy to sustain. James Tenney, Pauline Oliveros, and LaMonte Young have all found it. So has Glenn Branca in his recent music for orchestra. And Morton Feldman achieved it most fully in his late orchestral works, *Coptic Light* and *For Samuel Beckett*.

Listening to all-over textures, it’s difficult to concentrate for long on a single sound. The music moves us beyond syntactical meaning, even beyond images, into the experience of listening within a larger, indivisible presence.

### January 26, 1999

Monet’s haystacks and waterlilies, Cezanne’s Mont Ste-Victoire, Rothko’s floating rectangles, Diebenkorn’s “Ocean Park” landscapes ... In the twentieth century, painters discovered (or rediscovered) working in series. By freezing a particular motive the artist is free to concentrate on deeper nuances in other dimensions of the work.

As Robert Hughes observes, “One sees how absolutely Cezanne despised repetition, and how working en serie was his strategy for avoiding it.”

It occurs to me that the new piece is part of a series of extended orchestral works, along with *In the White Silence* and *Clouds of Forgetting*, *Clouds of Unknowing*. Some of the sounds are similar, even identical to ones in those earlier works. But this is very different music.

Even within itself, the new piece embraces a series of sorts. Identical formal structures recur from section to section. The temporal relationships between sounds remain the same. Only the sounds themselves change. Rather than moving on a journey through a musical landscape, the experience is more like sitting in the same place as light and shadows slowly change.

The longer we stay in one place, the more we notice change.

### January 27, 1999

It’s forty-five below zero, and getting colder. But it doesn’t matter how cold it is. We’re moving toward the light.

A month after the winter solstice the days are still very short, but noticeably longer (we gain another seven minutes, each day). The low arc of the sun over the mountains is slowly expanding in height and breadth.

I’m working steadily and savouring the stillness.

### January 28, 1999

The cold deepens. So does the silence.

Down the valley, Fairbanks is wrapped in a dense cloud of ice fog. Across the Tanana flats, the peaks of the central Alaska Range have disappeared. But out here in the hills the day is golden. The sun is rimmed in a spectral halo of ice crystals.

The temperature during my afternoon walk is forty below. The only sound not made by me is the brief whoosh of wings as a lone raven flies past, in a straight line to the south. On the hillside, I encounter a young moose browsing on brittle alder branches. I stop. Speaking softly to her, I bow from the waist and move on, giving her a wide berth. She has enough to contend with just staying warm and fed.

They’re predicting fifty below or colder tonight.

Back in the studio at the writing table, I’m startled by a bright, metallic ringing—like a small bell. I look up to see a boreal chickadee at the feeder outside my window. In such deep cold and silence, the smallest sounds speak with singular clarity.

After all these years, I’m still deeply obsessed with landscape. But the resonance of my musical landscape now is more interior, a little less obviously connected with the external world.

In art and music, landscape is usually portrayed as an objective presence, a setting within which subjective human emotions are experienced and expressed. But can we find other ways of listening in which the landscape itself—rather than our feelings about it—becomes the subject? Better yet: Can the listener and the landscape become one?

If in the past the more melodic elements of my music have somehow spoken of the subjective presence, the human figure in the landscape, in the new piece there’s no one present ... only slowly changing light and colour on a timeless white field.

I remember the Gwich’in name for a place in the Brooks Range: “In A Treeless Place, Only Snow.”

### January 29, 1999

The cold hovers in place. The ice fog thickens over Fairbanks. The sun still rises only a few degrees above the horizon, and today it’s veiled in frozen mist. The snow is bathed in a strange slate-blue-grey light.

Toward the end of a long day in the studio, I realize that one of the eight layers in the new piece may be a little too busy and unnecessarily detailed. As always, the hard part is knowing what to leave out. For years, I’ve kept near the piano my variation on Thoreau’s dictum, a reminder of how I try to work: “Believe. Concentrate. Simplify. Simplify. Simplify.”

### January 30, 1999

This deep winter weather has completely changed the acoustics of this place.

A couple of days before the heavy cold settled in, it snowed. Since then the wind hasn’t blown at all. So those two inches of fresh powder still rest undisturbed on the branches of the spruce and birch trees. The ice fog has now enveloped the hills. Snow and cloud mute the earth and sky. There’s almost no ambient noise. No wind. Fewer people and animals are stirring. The air is less reverberant than usual. But sounds travel farther. On my afternoon

walk, the few sounds I hear are vividly present. A distant dog team sounds nearby. My mukluks growl angrily in the soft snow.

### February 2, 1999

The high temperature at the house today was minus fifty. But the clouds have thinned and the sun was back, so I went out for my afternoon walk. Even wearing snow pants, polar mukluks, double mittens, insulated cap with earflaps, and heavy parka with the hood up and the ruff pulled forward, my toes and fingers got cold. In this extreme weather, the air almost becomes a different element—like the vapours of dry ice, like liquid fire. I love it. It makes me feel alive. Down with Global Warming! Long live the cold and the dark!

Back at work on the new piece, I concentrate on the organ, the string orchestra, and the string quartet. Moving at relative speeds of 2, 3 and 4, these are the slowest of eight tempo layers. Relentlessly diatonic throughout, they are the sonic ground of the piece.

One white cloud slowly dissolves into another, tone by tone. This makes an unbroken diatonic field from beginning to end, over seventy-five minutes. To hear the individual tones changing will require very close listening. I think of these as the brushstrokes—the little discontinuities that articulate and emphasize the larger continuity of the whole.

The chromatic clouds—the colours floating on the diatonic ground—are played by three choirs of muted brass and wind instruments, moving in three different tempi. All the instruments within a choir change tones together. But many of the written notes are too long to be played in one breath. So the players are free to breathe individually, as they choose. Brushstrokes again ... Those breaths will impart a certain richness to the texture.

### February 3, 1999

Writing about Rothko, Brian O'Doherty asks rhetorically, "Why all this blurring of edges?" I'm asking myself the same question about the new piece. It might well be called *Colours on a Diatonic Ground*, or *Light On Snow*. Both light and snow have soft edges. But despite my obsession with sounding images, this isn't tone-painting; it's music. The sounds don't grow out of the form. The form of the music grows out of the sounds.

The sounds of *Strange and Sacred Noise* were so complex—machine-gun snare drums, roaring tam-tams, howling sirens, thundering bass drums and tom-toms—that they lent themselves to the decisive articulation of hard-edged geometric forms. But this new piece is in equal temperament. And tempered sounds are more definite and declarative than noise. So to evoke the atmosphere of continuity and expectancy that I'm after, these blurred edges and more diffuse textures seem right.

A good day in the studio. The thermometer holds steady at fifty-five below zero.

### February 4, 1999

This evening I boarded a jet in Fairbanks at forty-five below and flew north across the Yukon River, the Brooks Range, and the Arctic Coastal Plain to Barrow, where it's a balmy thirty-three below—although with the wind chill, it's more like eighty below!

I'm here for Kivqiq, the Messenger Feast: three nights of traditional Inupiat drumming, singing, and dancing. Groups from all the Inupiat villages in Alaska and four villages in Arctic Canada have come to Barrow for this mid-winter festival of feasting, gift-giving, and celebration.

After twenty years of listening to this music, it still sounds wonderfully strange to me. Yet it's also strangely familiar. By now, I know a few songs—at least roughly. And the angular melodic contours, asymmetrical rhythms, powerful unison choruses and deep, explosive drums have become integral parts of the soundscape of my life.

Once, passing through a crowded urban airport somewhere down south, amid the noise of rushing travellers, I thought I heard an Inupiat drumbeat. Instantly, I was transported home. The memory of the sound of those drums took me there.

These sounds can take us on all kinds of journeys. The high impact, full-spectrum sound of the drums—reiterated all night long—has an inescapable effect on consciousness. In some ways, the effect is similar to that of rock music. But the rhythms in Inupiat music are always at least a little surprising. And even when the phrases are relatively predictable, the basic rhythmic cells—2+3 or 2+2+3—are asymmetrical. To my ears this Inupiat "heartbeat" (as it's sometimes called) is both more sophisticated and more energizing than the steady 4/4 backbeat of rock n' roll. After hearing a hot dance group from the Arctic coast, even the best rock bands sound rhythmically square.

### February 5, 1999

Just before noon, out across the tundra around Barrow, a dirty yellow disc barely nudges itself above the horizon. Its outline is vague. It gives off no warmth.

Fairbanks is at latitude sixty-four degrees North. Barrow sits at the seventy-first parallel. The days up here are still considerably shorter than in Fairbanks. But within seven weeks—at the spring equinox—they'll be the same length. In Fairbanks, for the past few weeks we've been gaining seven minutes of light every day. Up here, the rate of change is twice as fast. Although it's still dark most of the time, Barrow is rapidly spinning toward the light.

Sunrise turns out to have been the brightest moment of the day. In mid-afternoon, I walk the mile or so from the lodge to the new Inupiat Cultural Center. A vague fog has drifted in from the Arctic Ocean, bathing everything in a soft, blue light. The flatness of the light mirrors the flatness of terrain. The sky feels enormous, all-encompassing. In this blue haze, it's difficult to distinguish the distant horizon. Sky melds with earth, into an enveloping sphere—

the centre of which is everywhere, the circumference of which is nowhere. (Isn't that the way a Christian philosopher-saint described God?) Standing, walking, being in such a place, it's not difficult to feel the presence of the spirit world.

On my return walk, my mukluk breaks the crusted snow, sending shards sliding across the surface. They sing like broken glass.

Again, the dancing goes until 1 A.M. During the final performance of the evening, a woman from the audience walks up to join the dancers from Kotzebue. She doesn't notice that a small plastic bag has caught her mukluk, and she drags the bag with her into the dance area. The audience finds this quite amusing, especially when she finally notices the bag, shakes it free and continues dancing. At that moment, one of the young drummers puts down his drum, moves quickly out onto the dance floor, picks up the bag and stuffs it into his pocket. He returns to the drum line, picks up his instrument and continues drumming. All this happens amid smiles and good spirits. But it leaves no doubt about the fact that this is ritual space.

### February 6, 1999

The day dawns (at eleven-something A.M.) clear and colder. My friend Doreen Simmonds—one of my Inupiat collaborators on *Earth and the Great Weather*—takes me out to the end of the road, to Point Barrow, the northernmost point in Alaska. The Inupiaq name for this place is *nuvuk*—"a point of land which juts into the ocean." Although the wind is fairly light and the thermometer probably doesn't read much below minus thirty, the cold feels intense. We scan for polar bears, but it would be difficult to see them even if they were there.

The low sun floods the ice and snow with a rich pink light. The feeling of endless space is exhilarating. This is what I want to find in music!

Kivgiq is not held every year. It occurs following a prosperous hunting season, when there is enough material wealth to allow for widespread gift-giving. At the heart of Kivgiq is Kalukak—the Box Drum Dance. This elaborate ceremony is grounded in the myth of the Eagle Mother, who gave the gift of music and dancing to the people. Tonight is the final night of the festival, and the highpoint of the evening is the Box Drum Dance. Traditionally, each community on the Arctic coast performs a different variation of the dance. Three years ago at the last Kivgiq, the Kalukak was performed by the dancers from the village of Wainwright. Tonight it's to be performed by the Barrow dancers.

Before the dancers enter, two men bring out a tall extension ladder. One of them climbs the ladder and lowers a rope that's already been hung in place. A third man brings out the box drum and ties it to the rope, where it hangs, swinging freely. The drum is made of plywood, about 1 x 1 x 3 feet in dimensions. It's painted bright blue and yellow. The top is finished with jagged edges (representing mountain peaks) and adorned with a single eagle feather.

The drummers, singers, and dancers enter, chanting in unison to the steady click of sticks on the rims of the drums. The box drummer sits on a chair, facing the wooden drum, his back to the audience. He wears a headdress made from a loon's head and wing feathers. Several young male dancers take their places, sitting on the floor, facing him.

The twelve frame drummers (all men) sit in a single long row. They are dressed in bright blue *qaspaqs*. Most of the women, in vibrant red, sit in three rows behind the drummers. But several younger women stand facing the box drummer, holding long wands tipped with feathers.

When everyone is in place, as the chant continues the frame drummers begin playing full force, until the box drummer cuts them off with a wildly irregular beat. In silence, he begins an elaborate series of gestures. He bows forward from the waist, extending his right arm above his head, full length on the floor. The male dancers do the same, and the young women extend their feathered wands. The singers begin a new chant, accompanied by clicks on the drum rims. Slowly, the box drummer pulls his arm backward, holds it there for a moment, then brings it forward rapidly, stopping just short of striking the drum. He does this many times, with stylized gestures of great formality. When he finally strikes the drum, in a sudden unison with the frame drums, the sound is stunning. Tears come to my eyes.

As the dance proceeds, the box drummer begins to swing the drum on its rope. As he swings left, the male dancers move to his right, like puppets on a string. He performs an elaborate series of movements with the drum, which the dancers mirror in reverse. Several minutes into the dance, another dancer appears, also wearing a loon headdress. On each drumbeat, he hops, two-footed, moving around the box drum. Gradually, he closes the circle, moving closer and closer to the drummer. Suddenly, in a marvellously fluid movement on his backswing, the box drummer hands the heavy mallet to the dancer, who becomes the new drummer. All this happens without missing a beat.

This drumming, chanting, and dancing is not art. It encompasses what we usually call art, but it's more than that. This is not art for art's sake. It's not social or political commentary. And it's certainly not self-expression. It subsumes all those things into the larger fabric of life—the life of the individual, the life of the community, the life of the land, and the life of the animals and the spirits that inhabit this place.

This is what so many of us have lost in the twentieth century, and what we so desperately need and desire in our lives. This is authentic. This has meaning. This is ritual. Although this is not my culture, I would rather be here at the Messenger Feast in the Barrow High School gymnasium than in any symphony hall, opera house, or church I can imagine.

About 2 A.M., the festival ends with a processional of all the dance groups and a few songs sung and danced by virtually everyone in the space. The sound of a hundred Inupiat drummers playing in unison is a sound I'll never forget.

### February 7, 1999

On the morning plane back to Fairbanks, reading the arts section of last Sunday's *New York Times* I'm struck again by how remote and moribund the "classical" music world seems. The term and most of what it implies simply doesn't apply to the music of most of the interesting composers working today.

By about 1950 many composers in America had figured this out. But it's taken another fifty years for the full implications to sink in. And by now we can add postmodernism (whatever that was supposed to be) to the casualty list. The media of the cultural establishment will probably be the next to last to know. The administrators of most symphony orchestras, opera houses, and foundations will be the last. They'll read about it in the paper.

But what a relief for composers. We can simply get on with our work.

A dense fog covers the Arctic coastal plain, but as we reach the northern foothills, the stark peaks of the Brooks Range rise up, clear in the pink morning light.

### February 8, 1999

Back to work in the studio, feeling energized and inspired from my experiences in Barrow.

It's still cold, but the light on my afternoon walk is exquisite. Fifty below, tonight.

### February 9, 1999

Another productive and satisfying day in the studio, working until after midnight. The new piece seems strange and extreme to me. The textures are so lush and amorphous and relentless. But that's exactly what I had hoped to discover. And at this stage in the process, the music is leading me wherever it wants to go. I'm just doing my best to follow.

### February 10, 1999

The cold is slowly dissipating. After two weeks of forty below and colder, twenty below feels absolutely balmy. The air is softer, now. The light is more intense.

The music continues to unfold almost effortlessly. I find myself a bit overwhelmed, even intimidated by it.

At evening, the progressive shades of blue—slate, indigo, midnight—are breathtaking. The aurora borealis begins dancing. If only I could find the sounds of those colours.

### February 12, 1999

I'm studying Ellsworth Kelly. A couple of years ago, Cindy and I visited the Guggenheim retrospective of his work. The next day, we took in the Jasper Johns exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Both shows made strong impressions, but I was overwhelmed by the richly tactile surfaces and the sheer creative fecundity of Johns' work. Although the whole body of Kelly's work was impressive, I wasn't as immediately enamored of individual pieces. By now, though, it seems that my own aspirations in music have more in common with Kelly than with Johns.

The big Mondrian exhibit at MOMA several years back also engaged me. Seeing the paintings themselves gave me a completely different reading of Mondrian. In reproductions, his paintings appear hard-edged and hyper-geometrical (without the obvious "painterly touch" of, say, Barnett Newman's surfaces). But "in person," Mondrian's canvasses seemed so fragile, so awkward, so human. Still, I've never been able to completely warm up to Mondrian.

With Kelly, the obvious differences between the reproduction and the actual painting are size and fidelity of colour. Beyond that, what you see in one is pretty much what you see in the other. There's little of that tactile element that so appeals to me in art and in music. As John Coplans observes, Kelly is more sensory than sensual. Still, I find myself more taken with Kelly than Mondrian. Maybe it's simply that he's more modern, more "American," and more extreme.

Like Kelly's paintings, my new piece emphasizes only colour, form, and space. Reading Coplans' book on Kelly, these words leaped off the page for me: "Since color and the canvas shapes are one and the same ... color itself takes on spatial characteristics. 'Color' becomes both color and space."

I imagine that at some point I'll work with harder-edged forms and more uninflected sounds. *Strange and Sacred Noise* is extreme in its geometric formalism, but the sounds themselves are much too rich and complex to be equivalents to Kelly's hard, flat colours. My guess is that I may find those equivalents in large harmonic blocks of electronic sounds. Silence, too, is likely to be a structural element in such music.

But that's another world, very different from the one in which I'm currently immersed. While the new piece is rigorously formal, my hope is that it will sound organic, even formless.

### February 16, 1999

I'm fascinated with equivalents, shared resonances between different domains: between landscape and mind, culture and ecosystem, painting and music.

Colour and form, surface and texture, field and gesture: The equivalents between these elements of music and painting continue to fascinate me.

### February 17, 1999

One of the defining currents of twentieth century painting was the movement away from the detached viewpoint of perspective and its illusions of receding depth, toward a new emphasis on colour and surface.

In music there's been a parallel movement away from the sequential development of relationships between sounds, to a new emphasis on the inherent qualities of sounds heard in the present moment. In this new context, harmony becomes simply (in Cage's all-encompassing definition) "Sounds heard together."



### February 18, 1999

After all the innovations of the twentieth century, most Western music continues to exhibit a perplexing two-dimensionality of time. The bars are little boxes indicating precisely measured portions of time. Even when the rhythms within those boxes are relatively complex, they're still bouncing off the measured walls that contain them. Stravinsky railed against the tyranny of the bar line. By rapidly juxtaposing boxes of different dimensions (measures of different meters), he created a new illusion of depth in a flat temporal plane—much as Picasso and Braque did in the field of painting by using cubism.

Ives was a pioneer of more truly multi-dimensional space. Although still narrative in conception, his music begins to move beyond the theatrical space of Berlioz and Strauss, toward a more complete physical space in which events occur with an independence more like that in nature. Varèse left the story behind entirely, constructing like an architect, in abstract geometries of sound.

It was Henry Cowell who first postulated a unified theory of temporal harmony (in *New Musical Resources*). But it wasn't until the works of Conlon Nancarrow with simultaneous dimensions of tempo that complete temporal depth entered Western music. As the twenty-first century begins, we're just beginning to explore the possibilities inherent in Nancarrow's work.

### February 20, 1999

What a joy it is to listen with curiosity and fascination as this strange music unfolds, each new sonority emerging from the last. The experience of working on a piece of this scale is like taking a journey through large, open country. I hope the experience of hearing it will be even more absorbing.

I want this music to be a wilderness. And I want to get hopelessly lost in it.

### February 21 to March 4, 1999

We're moving into late winter. It's still quite cold, but the light is back. The arc of the sun is higher and wider. It no longer sets behind Ester Dome, but farther to the west and north, behind the ridges of Murphy Dome. Three days of soft snow falling and of dusty grey light are followed by several days of sparkling blue.

Driving home from the Festival of Native Arts in the wee hours, the aurora is so beautiful I have to whoop out loud.

The animals are more active. The squirrel at the studio has emerged again. The redpolls have joined the chickadees at the feeder. The ravens seem to be more extravagant in flight, and even more vocal than usual. The boreal owl has been calling since late January. And tonight, I hear

the great horned owl for the first time this year. Walking through the woods one afternoon last week, I flushed a snowshoe hare—a sudden apparition of white on white. I feel fortunate to have wild animals as my neighbours.

### March 8, 1999

I'm back at work on the new orchestral piece, moving into the home stretch.

I want the sound to be lush and transparent at the same time. The danger is that all the colours will run together. The physical space, the distance between the instrumental choirs is an integral part of this music. But I also hope to find a full and purely musical space, in which each of the layers of time, harmony, and timbre is distinctly audible. The diatonic ("white") layers can be lush. But the chromatics need to be more transparent—like veils of colour floating over the surface. As the manuscript nears completion, I'm thinning out the chromatic layers and re-spacing the harmonies as widely as possible.

### March 13, 1999

It's finished this evening: *The Immeasurable Space of Tones*—seventy-four minutes of continuous orchestral sound, it's the strangest thing yet to come out of my studio. After six weeks thinking and sketching, actually writing the notes took only about the same amount of time. The piece really did seem to write itself. I'm exhilarated and exhausted.

Twelve years ago, after the première of my piece *The Far Country of Sleep*, my friend Leif Thompson made a prophetic observation: "I especially like that middle section," he said. "You know—the part where nothing happens. That's what you really want to do, isn't it?" I've been trying to find the courage to do this ever since. My fear has been that by leaving everything out of the music, there'd be nothing left. Now that I've finally taken the leap and left everything out, my hope is that the only thing left is—the music! Working on *Immeasurable Space*, I was continually amazed at how much is happening in the music all the time. What at first I thought was static and empty turns out to be remarkably active, full, and constantly changing.

We travel into new territory and slowly we begin to locate ourselves, to understand where we are.

*John Luther Adams is currently working on a permanent sound and light installation for the University of Alaska Museum, and a concert-length work for percussion and electronics for Steven Schick, commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum, the Subtropics Festival (Miami) and radio station WNYC (New York City). The work described in this journal will be released in fall 2002 on Cold Blue Records.*

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## RÉSUMÉ FRANÇAIS

Résumé de l'article : Inspiré par les couleurs, l'esprit et la réclusion de l'hiver 1999, le compositeur John Luther Adams discute du processus de composition d'une nouvelle œuvre, *The Immeasurable Space of Tones*. Sous la forme de notes de journal personnel, il explore les idées suivantes : la musique comme pratique spirituelle ; la mise à l'écart des autres musiques afin d'entendre des sons qu'on n'a jamais entendus auparavant ; la capacité de vivre et de travailler dans un intervalle intemporel se situant entre les commencements et les fins ; le travail avec un ensemble syntaxique d'idées musicales ; la découverte d'une musique que l'on éprouve comme étant fondamentale, première et inévitable ; l'arrêt prolongé sur un motif particulier afin d'en explorer les nuances plus profondes par rapport à d'autres dimensions de l'œuvre ; découvrir la possibilité qu'un paysage musical ne fasse pas tant l'objet de sentiments subjectifs qu'il ne devienne lui-même le sujet de la composition.

