

# CHANNELING JOHN AND ABIGAIL



by Terry Quinn

As a playwright and librettist, it's bracing to learn how many theatergoers regard the whole idea of *adapting for the stage* as a suspect and slippery business. "Just what are we getting here?" the audience wants to know – especially, I've found, in cases where famous correspondences are being rendered in theatrical or musical form.

I've ventured several times into this intriguing area, and so I know. Some of the questions I've gotten as an adapter of the letters of Nabokov and Wilson (*Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*), Hemingway and the Fitzgeralds (*Zelda, Scott and Ernest*) and the transcripts of a marital confrontation mediated by a psychiatric consultant (*One Sunday at the Fitzgeralds*) are along the lines of "How could you have overlooked her letter to him about barbiturate abuse?" Or "Why on earth did you include that apocryphal exchange about penis length?" Or "What gives you the right to fiddle with the chronological order of the letters?" All sensible queries, though for the most part rhetorical. These folks aren't looking for answers.

Far more welcome were the good-will questions put to me following the premiere of a music theater work titled *John Adams in Amsterdam* at the Concertgebouw in 2005, and posed again after the premieres of *Abigail in the Colonies* and *A Distant Love*, a few years later: "What percentage of the song lyrics we heard tonight actually represent the words of the Adamses?" I didn't get the feeling I was being attacked as a slavish quoter or a shameless inventor. These were just Adams lovers and admirers curious to know to what extent the libretto they'd just heard, set so compellingly by composer Gary Fagin, actually hewed to historical and literary fact. Loved the score, was the message, but are these your words or theirs?

On the question of 'faithfulness to the original,' a charged phrase if there ever was one, music makes all the difference. In the dramatic dialogues I mentioned earlier, two of which I co-authored with George Plimpton, we took no liberties with the

language of the celebrated correspondents. (Can you imagine presuming to alter the words of Vladimir Nabokov?) Nor did so much as a phrase of mine or Mr. Plimpton's make its way into our playscripts. The work involved only the selection and sequencing of letters and letter fragments for the purpose of charting the rise and fall of several storied friendships and loves. In each case, the goal was to present an hour-long crystalization of an immense and at times unruly archive of exchanges.

And when the Holland-based John Adams Society first commissioned the work that eventually grew to become *A Distant Love: Songs of John and Abigail Adams*, the idea was to present a similar set of selected letters in an unstaged, uncostumed dramatic dialogue format. But that modest concept soon morphed into a music theater project for two voices and string quartet, to be costumed, lit and fully staged in Amsterdam's finest concert hall. At that point a set of original lyrics and a score were required. John's cogent words to a faraway Abigail would need to be transformed into a concise body of singable poetry, supported by a narrative arc – which is what a libretto is.

If before, when stranded in Leyden or the Hague, John complained in lucid prose of how he missed seeing Abigail, he would now sing, in near ecstasy:

I see ... I see the image of your smile.  
No pale memory ... a living image.  
Fantasy, perhaps. But ah –  
    if only for a heartbeat, Portia –  
I am not alone. And we are not apart.  
No, no, I am *with* you! ... I am *with* you! ... with *you*!

As a librettist charged with providing your composer a text both logical and lyrical, and one that does justice to a multi-volume correspondence so widely known and loved, you begin with six to eight months of research. You read every available letter John sent to Abigail and vice versa, all the while annotating those you find particularly compelling. You scour, as well, not just the mass-appeal biographies – David McCullough for him, Phyllis Lee Levin for her, *First Family: Abigail and John Adams* for both – but a few that, though they received less media attention, were at least as good. (No fan should overlook *John Adams: Party of One* by the brilliant James Grant.)

Your subject firmly in hand, you proceed to develop a concept. I decided early on that the piece needed to focus relentlessly on *separation* – a nobly chosen interruption of an ardent love. This hiatus would begin when John left the family to see to the nation’s needs during the buildup to the Revolution; it would endure, scarcely unbroken, for just under eleven years. And from that sustained sacrifice would flow the themes of *A Distant Love*: loneliness, frustration, avowals of affection and passion, the dangers each faced on either side of the Atlantic.

Once the long-awaited writing phase began, it was clear that it would never do simply to string together a series of quotes. Composers often set existing poems verbatim, as art songs. But who would attempt to create music for, let us say, the following passage from one of Abigail’s letters: “I have a request to make of you, John. It is that you would send out Mr. Bass and purchase for me a bundle of pins and put them in your trunk, for me. The cry for pins is so great that what I used to buy for seven shillings and six pence are now twenty shillings, and not to be had for that.”

Wait, you may say. Given all the meaty matters Abigail is known to have treated in her side of the correspondence (the struggle for women’s equality, the scandal of slavery, the deprivations of war and disease), why devote a full segment of one’s libretto to a plea for pins? Because few of this exacting woman’s requests and instructions to her husband were more revealing of her pluck as a wife and solicitude as a mother. And so she sings, in two key segments of the cycle:

Keep us in mind – the ladies – when fashioning  
the nation’s laws.  
Treat us more fairly than your forbears did  
and limit husbands’ powers.  
Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.

and:

Oh were there not one slave in this province, John.  
Oh how I would rejoice should every colony renounce  
the sin of bondage.  
We don our righteous armor, yes, to fight for what?  
For a godly gift we snatch away from souls  
whose very bodies we have bought ...

Whose labor we daily plunder.  
We'll vow to die before we cede our freedom,  
    then turn and clap another's wrist in chains.  
What do you call this, husband? I call it shame ... I call it shame.

Yet she sings as well of everyday anxieties:

Pins, John, pins!  
Have Mr. Bass convey to me, I pray you, pounds of pins --  
    here so scarce and dear.  
The bundle one could buy for seven shillings, eightpence just last month  
    is fetching twenty shillings, six today. Twenty and six!

Pins! ... The very key to your Portia's livelihood,  
    for I can sell them widely.  
I can market pins in all the towns surrounding – *and I shall*.  
Do order Mr. Bass to cram that oaken trunk of his  
    with every blessed pin on sale in Philadelphia.  
Then bid him steer for Braintree ..... I must have pins!

As you will note, all sorts of minor details necessarily change in the process of adaptation – a price or two, a day of the week – due to the exigencies of meter and euphony. This is so above all in the scoring and rehearsing stages, when the composer makes a case for where the melody wants to go. Or when a singer lets you know what does or doesn't sit well in her voice. However, what needs to survive at all costs is John and Abigail's unshakable spirit. Their courage and humor. Their love for country and for one another.

That leads to what I regard as the most formidable challenge in adapting the Adams correspondence for the musical stage: doing justice to the couple's lifelong romance. The circumstances they found themselves in didn't foster the penning of love letters. In the libretto's time frame, John was busy getting kicked out of the French court, mocked by any number of English ambassadors, then stymied at every turn by a phalanx of Dutch bankers, burghers and royalty as he strove to win support for America's cause. Meanwhile, Abigail was contending with a smallpox epidemic, the death of her father, drought, near famine and a host of marauding British soldiers.

Another obstacle for the creative team to hurdle was John's reticence in certain matters dear to the hearts of lyricists and composers. He could write a cascade of words to his beloved, and often did. But they would so regularly confine themselves to the passage of treaty amendments, or the securing of loans, that Abigail would be reduced to such outright begging as: "The letters I receive from you let me know that you exist, but I want some sentimental effusions of the heart. I am sure you are not destitute of them."

Then there is Abigail's own Yankee sense of propriety to deal with. That and her taste for an occasional overlay of literary tropes. It's true that she is far more ready than he is to speak frankly of her love. Yet often, her means of expression can't help but sound quaint or even stilted to a modern-day ear: "How insupportable the idea that three thousand leagues and the vast ocean now divide us! But divide only our persons, for the heart of my friend is in the bosom of his partner. More than half a score of years has so riveted it there that the fabric which contains it must crumble into dust ere the particles can be separated." Or as she writes in an anniversary greeting: "Eighteen years have run their circuit since we pledged our mutual faith to each other, and the hymeneal torch was lighted at the alter of Love. Yet it burns with unabating fervor. Old Ocean has not quenched it, nor old Time smothered it in his bosom." As inspired a composer as Gary Fagin is, I shrank from asking him to set "the hymeneal torch."

While one has only to read a handful of the full letters to sense the depth of John and Abigail's devotion to one another, the implied heat is seldom permitted to rise to the surface. In the realm of music theater writing, this is a distinct problem. You know your two characters shared a heroic passion. Your composer is most eager to give life to that romance in rapturous music, as are the strings and singers. ... And so?

And so, at critical points in your libretto you write ballads. Where you can, you fold in snatches of direct quotes, but you go beyond them. And beyond that paraphrasing of the couple's words required if prose is to morph into song lyrics. You trust that you've lived long enough with these two astonishing personalities that you can now, in a sense, channel them. As a result, John's tender outbursts of longing and painful alienation are distilled into these words for Gary Fagin to set and, in the upcoming Chelsea Opera production, for baritone Peter Kendall Clark to sing:

Oh when shall I see my dearest friend, oh when?  
All in good time, I chide myself each morning.  
And when my dear blue mountain?  
When my beloved Pens Hill?  
Ye reign sublime in my imagination!  
At your blessed foot will I while away  
    the days of my old age –  
if any should be given me –  
in philosophic retrospect upon the roil  
    and turbulence of politics.  
Upon the sickening chaos of war.

As for Abigail's many confessions of love and loneliness, my hope is that they are fairly represented here in lyrics for soprano Victoria Tralongo to voice:

So many seasons now have passed  
since last I held your hands in mine.  
Summers marred by war and drought,  
winters rife with heartless winds  
    that scatter shingles all about  
and weight the soul with fearsome doubt,  
the more they lash and whine.

But John, you would be wrong to think  
    your Abigail bemoans her fate.  
This time apart will surely end.  
These somber skies are bound to clear,  
that we might live as one again.  
And yes, believe me, dearest friend,  
I am content to wait ... content to wait ...

For I know who you are,  
    and all you need to do.  
So I keep deep inside what it pains me to hide,  
and I won't ever plead with you –  
Come home, my love, come back to me.  
The stars above await you no less faithfully.  
God speed your way across the sea.

Come home, home, my love.

But John and Abigail never said or wrote such words, some will surely say. And all I'll know to answer is, Yes they did.