

1 | 'Chronically volatile'

Gesture in Adès's Living Toys and America: A Prophecy

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A single note pierces the air, offered up jointly by bassoon and trombone; others augment the sonority a split second later; then a higher note, and another, nervously crescendoing; brighter winds (an oboe, a clarinet) appear, the melody rising before quickly evaporating, piccolo and piano trailing off overhead. A string-harmonic cloud lingers as an after-image, the memory of a single, composite gesture. Then a gong strikes: a new gesture. For all the detail of the preceding three sentences, the sounding effect of the opening of Thomas Adès's *Living Toys* (1993), as notated in the score (Ex. 1.1), escapes the medium of words. Prose description hardly seems adequate to music's gestural fluency: a tracery of continuously arcing lines, intricate woven textures and delicately fluctuating timbres and weightings. Even so, a notion of gesture as perceptible musical shape – emergent, or recalled – remains intuitive for musicians, whether performing or listening. And while notations for pitch, duration, volume or articulation apparently exceed prose in precision of reference, a verbal language of gestural connotations creeps back in to the score itself. Adès writes instructions ('felt hats', 'pedal'), for example, to control muting and resonance details. Other expression marks are more overtly metaphorical: the percussionist is told to strike the gong 'nobly' (*nobilmente*), as if to convey ceremonial purpose, and there is the movement's title, 'Angels'. Already the musical gestures – whether traced in notation or words – trigger associations, connotations of physical, social or cultural worlds.

No amount of verbal or notational refinement will banish the metaphorical quality of musical gesture. My prose description above is itself metaphor-bound; sounds do not literally 'evaporate', the piccolo is not spatially 'overhead'. But ordinary language is saturated with figurative translations between musical and non-musical domains. If metaphor is the bedrock of verbal evocations of music's passage, the task of defining specific gestures – far from eschewing figurative language in a quest for the 'structural' – will actively engage metaphor as a precise instrument of analytic enquiry. Listeners often acknowledge the element of interpretation in perception – a metaphorical 'hearing as'.¹ The distinctive melodic-registral profile of a given gestural unit, though, might signal many things – some untexted pictorialism, an

Picc. $\text{♩} = 50$ [2] [3]
 Ob.
 Eb Cl.
 Bsn.
 Picc. Tpt. felt hat +
 Tbn. felt hat $\rightarrow 1/2 \text{ } \circ$
 Pno., Gongs Pno. Ped. sempre Gongs l.v. sempre
 Vln. I, II
 Vla., Vc., Cb.

Ex. 1.1 *Living Toys*, 'Angels', bars 1–5, opening gesture

intertextual allusion or a nod to Baroque and Classical traditions of conventionalised gestures (so-called *topics*). Openings 'ex nihilo', from a weightless, high-treble entrance, are for Adès something of a signature.² Does the racing opening ascent of *Living Toys* resemble the kind of arpeggiated 'rocket' theme familiar in late eighteenth-century symphonic openings?³ Adès's gesture climbs faster than a Classical theme, its flashing woodwind and

¹ Among recent theoretic perspectives, see, respectively, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and Helen M. Prior, eds., *Music and Shape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and the colloquy by Joseph Dubiel, Marion A. Guck and Bryan Parkhurst, 'Hearing as Hearing-as', *Music Theory and Analysis*, 4/ii (2017), 229–70.

² See for example Adès's *Violin Concerto* (2005) or the upper-treble register emphasis of the early piano works.

³ On the Mannheim 'rocket' as beginning gesture, see William Caplin, 'Topics and Formal Functions: The Case of the Lament', in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. by Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 415–52 (p. 415).

trumpet colours delineating a single arc. But the gesture is also fluent and subtly modulated, less conventional than *sui generis*. Rapidly cutting between distinct moments, without obvious pattern, Adès here pursues aesthetic proclivities he himself describes evocatively – a lava-like flow, a search for the ‘chronically volatile’: ‘my music is naturally always transitioning, always slipping’.⁴

Before considering this central notion of volatility more closely, let me briefly outline some axiomatic features of a gestural approach to Adès’s early music. We may recall, to begin with, the composer’s rejection of a tidy distinction between abstract and programmatic writing – ‘to me all music is metaphorical, always’ – and his emphatic embrace of music’s potential for semiotic correlation: ‘Musical and non-musical things are inextricably connected.’⁵ The specificity of music’s ‘non-musical’ meanings, *chez* Adès, often evolves according to a range of metaphorical signals – including titles, programme notes and other paratexts. ‘Angels’, opening *Living Toys*, invites listeners to varied proximate associations – the playthings of the title, a child’s imagination of their animated adventures or brightly ethereal realms. Adès’s own programme notes, in this vein, speak of the horn’s solo in ‘Angels’ as ‘haloed with gongs and little trumpets’.⁶ The programmatic view of musical gestures will often centre on a proto-dramatic event sequence, and within it, interpretation will soon discern the activity of defined musical agents.

Definitions of gesture, in the present essay, will interweave structural and semantic traces – not only tonal and metric features, but also a bevy of micro-expressive detail inflecting the passage of even brief musical units. In Robert Hatten’s evocative phrase, gesture encompasses all that pertains to the ‘energetic shaping of sound through time’.⁷ The Adèsian gesture, as already seen, transcends definition solely in rhythmic or pitch domains, demanding attention to the less codifiable realms of timbre and texture. The notion of ‘energetic shaping’ applies both to brief single events and to much larger continuities including extended ‘movements’. The characteristic gesture in Adès’s music, moreover, is fleeting and mobile – its

⁴ Thomas Adès and Tom Service, *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises – Conversations with Tom Service*, paperback ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), pp. 4, 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5; Joseph Finlay, ‘A Jewish Quarterly Interview with Thomas Adès’, *Jewish Quarterly*, 60/iii–iv (2013), 126–7 (p. 127).

⁶ Thomas Adès, programme notes on *Living Toys*, 1993, www.fabermusic.com/music/living-toys-2373.

⁷ Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 95.

interplay of parameters producing what Hatten terms ‘perceptually *synthetic* gestalts with *emergent* meaning, not simply “rhythmic shapes”’.⁸ As for semantics, Adès’s cyclical pitch patterns in particular have attracted analytic attention for the expressive effects of transmuted ‘lament’ figures, intersecting ‘orbits’ or continuous ‘spiral’ transformations.⁹ To play classical integration off against modernist ‘disorientation’, Arnold Whittall observes, is a basic Adèsian strategy of some dramatic force: ‘idyllic sublimity tilts towards nightmarish horror’.¹⁰

With images of unending gestural transformation, we return to the cardinal idea of a volatile music in perpetual flux. An early exemplar, Adès’s *Chamber Symphony* Op. 2 (1990), shows the degree to which ‘returning’ materials lack stable identity. The first movement’s forthright Beethovenian horn-call (*maestoso*, C major, bar 46) soon deteriorates chromatically, losing pulse definition behind the topically alien jazz of the solo clarinet. Later reworkings of the opening murmuring theme (alto flute and viola, bars 6–14) – a semitone lower (trombone, bar 131), then a fourth lower (basset-clarinet, bar 282) – exhibit characterological shifts to the point of erasure. While all musical ‘repetition’ spans a dialectic of identity and difference, Adès’s variation procedures invite awareness of textural and timbral signatures (as well as intervallic or rhythmic profiles) as integral to hermeneutic understandings of their sounding evanescence.

This chapter concentrates on ‘early’ Adès, in particular on two major works from his first professional decade: *Living Toys* and *America: A Prophecy*, for mezzo-soprano and orchestra with (optional) chorus (1999). With gesture as guiding concern, I shall explore two facets of a conceptual spectrum. At one end are the directly mimetic gestures and ‘actions’ (bullfight, battle, funeral, etc.) defined in the literary programme accompanying *Living Toys*; in *America*, meanwhile, the composer charts a more metaphoric network of gestures grounded in historical circumstances – the sixteenth-century conquest of Mayan peoples in Mexico by arriving Spanish *conquistadores*. With the singer as lonely prophetic witness, Adès creates temporally shaped gestures of apocalypse, in a language whose volatility is rooted in the denial of pulsation and the fracturing of time’s flow.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94 (emphasis original).

⁹ On ‘lament’ as expressive topic, see Edward Venn, *Thomas Adès: Asyla* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 31–4; for ‘spiral’ motions, see Chapter 5.

¹⁰ Arnold Whittall, ‘The Adès Effect’, in *British Music after Britten* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2020), pp. 255–69 (pp. 261, 264).

Living Toys: Gesture and Programme

Beyond the arresting opening of 'Angels', *Living Toys* describes a continuous seventeen-minute sequence of discrete, titled movements whose main gestures correspond to – or even enact – the imaginary hero's life mentioned in the score's prefatory epigraph. As Adès's invented text ('from the Spanish') begins, 'When the men asked him what he wanted to be, the child did not name any of their own occupations, as they had all hoped he would, but replied: "I am going to be a hero, and dance with angels and bulls."¹¹ The literary scheme is supplemented by a visual dimension in the score-cover reproduction of Goya's etching *The Agility and Daring of Juanito Apiñani in the Bullring of Madrid*. For concert listeners, then, the gestural life of Adès's work corresponds to the elaborate metaphor of a literary-cum-pictorial paratext. Where Goya's matador is frozen in a single instant, musical gesture restores him to life. The interpretive challenge, amid the temporal unscrolling of gestures, will be to sort out the degree to which changes of gestural state – Adès's characteristic 'slipping' – support coherent musical agents – dramatic actors, individual or collective – or the distanced perspective of a narrator.

Before discussing specific gestures, we may ponder the narrative precision of Adès's epigraph and programme notes. These 'dream-adventures' range from excited combat ('into the ring charges an **Aurochs** . . . He is whipped and goaded by the brutal, elegant matador-kid') to a ritualistic 'three-gun salute' in the closing scene.¹² Adès's programme is as anthropomorphic as anything in Schumann or Strauss and equally bound by the essentially arbitrary quality of its real-world denotations.¹³ The unfolding plot sequence, as in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, conveys dream-experiences bound by a logic of uncanny doubles or strange repetitions. Gestural transformations, in this realm, may transcend 'realistic' narrative. We may also consider the verbal tokens of Adès's programme as a supplementary or dialogical response to the score's internal musical logic. The formal scheme in *Living Toys* comprises eight titled segments, five of which bear numbers; interspersing them are three interludes whose anagrammatical titles promise a disguised continuity. A prominent melody – which Adès calls the 'hero' theme – is first announced in 'Aurochs' (Ex. 1.2).

¹¹ Adès, programme notes on *Living Toys*. 'I invented this story . . . after I'd written the piece' (Adès and Service, *Full of Noises*, p. 72).

¹² Adès, programme notes on *Living Toys* (bold emphasis original).

¹³ For closely hermeneutic readings, see Jacqueline Susan Greenwood, 'Selected Vocal and Chamber Works of Thomas Adès: Stylistic and Contextual issues' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Kingston University, 2013), pp. 277–339.

223 [♩. = 67] Z Poch. allarg. ♩. = 60

Perc. Talking drum
B.D.
mp *p*
sempre

* Vln. 1, Vln. 2, Vla.: (quasi) con una dita sola al "Balett"; tutti molto cantabile

Tbn., Vlns., Vla.
mf espr.

Pno. solo
mf

Picc. Tpt., Hn.
p

Pno., Cb.
mf marc.

Vc., Cb.
p *sonore*

Vc. pizz.
mf marc.

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B.D.
mp *p*

III (+C. A.)
IV

Vc. arco senza vib.
mf

Hn., Picc. tpt., Cb. harm.
mf

Vc. arco Pno.
mf

Vc. arco, sul pont.
Flt., Cb. harm.
sf *mf*

Ch. pizz.
mf

B. Cl., Bsn.
mf

(+ Pno.)
mf

Vc. pizz.
mf

B. Cl., Bsn.
mf

Pno., Cb. pizz.
mf

Vc. pizz.
mf

Ex. 1.2 *Living Toys*, 'Aurochs', bars 223–30, the 'hero' theme announced

It returns to preface the later anagram segments, so enacting an underlying three-stage progression:

- I Angels II Aurochs ['hero' theme, E] BALETT
 III Miliatiamen IV H.A.L.'s Death ['hero' theme, F#] BATTLE
 V Playing Funerals ['hero' theme, G#, E] TABLET

Since the 'hero' theme enters on an E tonic, moving later to F# and finally to G#, its returns trace an emergent tonal progression. Such a pattern offers long-range formal coherence, even as the shifting tonal level, locally, embodies change. With more fragmented flashes of materials within the anagram interludes – and a constantly evolving instrumental palette between and within each segment – *Living Toys* can sound almost kaleidoscopic in its moment-to-moment agility. Before revisiting the distinctive role of the 'hero' theme itself, there is room to consider more closely the pattern of brief, apparently ephemeral gestures contributing to such an impression.

Adès's score signals 'childish' detachment from the adult world by the use of timbral coding: the emphasis on high-range percussion (very small cymbals, piccolo snare drum) or markedly 'high' solo sonorities – piccolo trumpet, sopranino recorder – defines a palette of pronounced brightness, set in relief by deep bass touches (contrabassoon). Such timbral choices bear cultural-semiotic affinities with the magical realm of fairy tales (where large and small are subject to strange inversions). Timbre itself – particularly where 'unusual' instruments are heard – defines or inflects gestural meanings in conjunction with a host of stylistic or topical references. For example, in 'Aurochs', the solo piccolo trumpet hardly signals any specific national origin, but Adès's choice of accompaniment – prominent clicking castanets and handclaps (by pianist and conductor) – clearly indexes the Spanish locale of a bullfight. Apart from the folk-traditional allusions, the Iberian setting is further delineated in Flamenco-tinged harmonies. The trumpet deepens the reference through characteristic *jota* triplets, and by imitation (in staccato repeating notes) of *rasgueado* guitar strumming. With this multiplicity of references, Adès constructs a Spanish topical field by a fusion of signs.

The piccolo trumpet solo in 'Militiamen' – a 'mad bugler', according to Adès's programme – 'talks' with a plunger-muted, *parlato* stream of snarls and growls. The stylistic borrowing here is from jazz, framed as a historical topic (a style relocated to a new context),¹⁴ and more specifically from the 1920s playing of Bubber Miley. With fusion or collision of 'otherwise incompatible style types', as Hatten observes, expressive meaning arises by a *troping* of musical gesture.¹⁵ Adès's jazz trumpet is further marked as a topic by audible paradox – a sounding incompatibility of materials. Directing the player to feel his/her 'own meter' (3/4 against the ensemble's 9/8) and meticulously notating cross-rhythms and 'speech' syllables, Adès maintains palpable performative tension throughout 'Militiamen'. The plunger-muted idiom is a stylistic about-face in relation to the earlier *brillante* role in 'Aurochs' – as if the player, switching between trumpets, has suddenly donned a disguise. Nor is this the only stylistic topic on display in 'Militiamen'. Adès's opening direction – *in modo popolare* – gives a verbal hint, but most listeners will immediately catch, at the end (bar 336), the jolting arrival of a famous James Brown phrase (from the 1965 hit song 'I Feel Good'). The acrobatic arpeggio figure is not actually

¹⁴ See Danuta Mirka, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. by Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–57 (p. 2).

¹⁵ Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, p. 68.

new: the trumpet calls it out three times, moments earlier (bars 325–9). Only with heavy percussion – bass, field and snare drums – does the ensemble’s punching syncopated response suddenly speak intertextually as Brown’s funk horn section. Perennially volatile, the stylistic-topical reference vanishes almost instantly. Adès continues the rising F[#] arpeggio string – F[#]–A[#]–C[#]–E–G[#] – with seven further pitches – G–D–A–E^b–F–B–C – an answering descent that completes a twelve-note aggregate (stylistically remote from the quoted funk lick).

Within a programmatic frame, *Living Toys* coaxes semiotic precision from individual gestures by a timbral-textural dialogism founded on the meaningful interplay of solo instruments and larger groupings. Possible concertante situations (as in the *Chamber Symphony*) reflect the basically soloistic scoring. Adès’s street-band vernacularisms, along with the prominent percussion and virtuoso trumpet soloist, recall Stravinsky and Walton as precursors.¹⁶ With the rhetorical and dramatic force of virtuoso soloists – the ‘Militiamen’ trumpet, the horn in ‘Angels’ and ‘BATTLE’ – *Living Toys* also continues an ‘instrumental-drama’ genre whose hallmark is the assignment of instruments to character-like roles.¹⁷ An account of musical gesture, as Hatten has shown, will entail a rigorous delineation of *agency* within music’s ‘virtual-fictive world’.¹⁸ To understand the agentive function of individual gestures, we revisit Adès’s ‘hero’ theme, attending closely to its first entrance, and later transformations.

Arriving suddenly, the ‘hero’ theme (Ex. 1.2, above) quells the frenetic bullring combat of ‘Aurochs’ in a salient ‘rhetorical gesture’.¹⁹ In melodic terms, the tune’s rising third (E–F[#]–G[#]) reverses the falling motion of the nursery-rhyme tune (‘Three Blind Mice’, E–D–C) that dominates the earlier hectoring brass phrases.²⁰ The bullfight’s taut machismo display is countered now by a relaxed loping motion at a slower tempo (bars 224–52), a kind of dream-march by a triumphant hero (as in ‘O Albion’

¹⁶ As a seventeen-year-old, Adès listened ‘obsessively’ to *L’histoire du soldat* and *Façade* (Adès and Service, *Full of Noises*, p. 118).

¹⁷ On British genre contributions, see Philip Rupprecht, ‘Images in Sound: Movement, Harmony and Colour in the Early Music’, in *The Music of Simon Holt*, ed. by David Charlton (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), pp. 56–79 (pp. 59–61).

¹⁸ Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), p. 37.

¹⁹ I use the term in Hatten’s strict sense, to denote ‘sudden change in energy, force, direction, and character’ of some musical discourse. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, p. 165.

²⁰ On interactions between ‘hero’ and ‘mice’ themes within a network, see James Donaldson, ‘Living Toys in Adès’s *Living Toys*’, presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory, Columbus, OH, 8 November 2019.

from *Arcadiana*, the elegant swoons recall Elgar). The instantaneous shifts of mood, perspective and tonality are further marked, as gesture, in the timbral domain. With two-string unisons on muted violins and viola and lazy sliding portamentos, tuning is meaningfully fuzzy. Previously raucous brass timbres are now reduced to soft doubling lines (*espressivo* and *cantabile*). Behind the hero's song-like march, the gentle accompaniment reveals a new instrumental colour (talking drum).

The 'hero' theme, after defining a public triumph at the end of 'Aurochs', reappears in two later movements – 'H.A.L.'s Death' (at bar 369) and 'Playing Funerals' (bars 512, 520) – in each case in gestures quite distant in character, bearing and dramatic effect from the original theme's presentation. Tonally, I have noted, this 'hero' theme accumulates a long-range coherence as *Living Toys* unfolds, rising by step from E to G# before loosely revisiting E (a possible 'home' tonic cruelly swept away in the F minor cadence of 'Playing Funerals', bars 549–53). With an ear to timbre, again, it is volatility of gesture that tells in performance. For the two funereal dream-scenes, Adès finds fresh instrumental colours: the soprano recorder's bird-like piping (*lugubre*) announces the tune as H.A.L. expires; for the hero himself, finally, the tune is borne with great solemnity in a respectful collective blending of instrumental voices (each new timbre entering softly 'inside' those already sounding). This tune gradually loses definition, as perceptible pitch is lost to hearing: in a cloud of ghostly percussion strokes ('slacken drums', bar 530), prolonged trombone glissandos and string shivering effects (*pizzicato tremolo*), gestural coherence fades, along with any outline of musical figure, into the distance.

Gesture and Myth: *America: A Prophecy*

History as Gesture

Where gestures in *Living Toys* cast solo instrumental agents as proto-dramatic enactors of a literary programme, in *America: A Prophecy* the modalities of music's temporally unfolding shapes spring from the very different textural situation of a lone voice pitted against the collective. The solo mezzo-soprano in *America* issues her prophetic visions of destruction as a challenge to the massed sonority of a full orchestra and chorus. Like William Blake (from whom he took his title), Adès seeks to illuminate within documented historical events an underlying layer of deeper archetypes. This historical 'America' refers to the home of Mayan and Mexica

(Aztec) peoples in the Yucatán peninsula, invaded in 1519 by Spanish *conquistadores*. Adès's vocalist is a seer, her 'Prophecy' delivered in words sacred to the vanquished, from books of their 'jaguar priests' (*Chilam Balam*).²¹ 'O my nation / Prepare . . . They will come from the east', she warns in the first of the two panels of Adès's fifteen-minute diptych form; in the second she foretells inevitable destruction: 'we shall burn, we shall turn to ash'. The music's fierce progression is from a briefly glimpsed antediluvian calm, through states of disturbance, to a climax of mounting excitement, moving on finally to an awful emptiness, the aftermath of destruction. *America's* Panel I falls into six sections, while the shorter Panel II comprises three.²² Like a mural, the score treats actual historical events, yet seems to avoid diachronic 'history' in its local arrangement. The piece, instead, works in gestures with more abstract referents: fear of the future, a fateful moment of encounter, apocalypse as calendrical certainty. *America* does not create a musicalised drama so much as give sounding form to the broader cultural representations of myth.²³

The grand gestures in Adès's scheme cannot be reduced to some schematic 'before-after' sequence. The whole piece is taken up with the 'priestess'-singer's prophetic visions. At the end of Panel I Adès writes only a comma, directing that Panel II follow *attacca*: the absence of transition or real pause marks a filmic gap in representation (a black screen between visual scenes). 'Prepare', she warns (but there is no time to do so). When she returns, just a few seconds later ('Weep'), she sings in a prophet's future-tense vision of that which is to come. The Mayan texts, Adès observes, 'are both prophecies and histories',²⁴ and it is from this double-temporal perspective that we may listen for the telling musico-gestural signals of *America*. The sumptuous brass fanfares, for example, midway through Panel I (bars 124–93), in context, announce a self-evidently 'Spanish' music, yet the musical battle, as Paul Griffiths suggests, sounds ambiguous in tone, mingling graphic destruction with flamboyant

²¹ Hélène Cao calls the soloist a 'Mayan priestess' ('la prêtresse maya'). Cao, *Thomas Adès le voyageur: devenir compositeur, être musicien* (Paris: MF Éditions, 2007), p. 97. Adès's literary source for Mayan texts is Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, trans., *The Destruction of the Jaguar: Poems from the Books of Chilam Balam* (San Francisco: City Lights Publisher, 1987).

²² On the temporal proportions, see Christopher Fox, 'Tempestuous Times: The Recent Music of Thomas Adès', *Musical Times*, 145/1888 (2004), 41–56 (pp. 44–5).

²³ Valuable historiographic contexts include Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁴ Quoted in Tom Service, 'Altered States', *Guardian*, 29 August 2002, section G2, p. 17.

excitement.²⁵ Listening for gesture at a mythic level, we may discern the crusading certitude of European Christianity, and also the strangeness of encounter, of ‘contact’ – for both sides – with the unknown.²⁶ Stories of Hernán Cortés in March 1519, greeted by the Mexica ruler Moctezuma as a returning lord, the god Quetzalcoatl foretold by astrologers, constitute a widely circulated apotheosis trope which was inscribed by the 1570s in Franciscan conquest narratives.²⁷ Cortés’s establishment of ‘New Spain’ on the ruins of the cities of indigenous peoples – and Europe’s rapacious imperialism – sprang from a collision of mutually strange selves and others, channelled through voices speaking for opposing faiths and cosmologies.

Preparing *America* as a literary scheme, Adès foregrounded a rhetoric of interruption at the level of the chosen texts. The centre of consciousness here is the priestess’s voice: her English words, in Panel I, predict the future: ‘They *will* burn all the land . . . it is foretold.’ The Spanish arrival interrupts, but does not ultimately displace, the sibyl’s visions, which remain in the future tense in Panel II’s premonitions (‘On earth we *shall* burn’). While she sings in English, the words of the European invaders are ‘foreign’ and present tense: the chorus’s arrival quotes Spanish words from a sixteenth-century source, Matteo Flecha’s ‘La guerra’, rowdily praising ‘good soldiers’ (‘Todos los buenos soldados’). The New Testament Latin words they sing to end Panel II – ‘Haec est victoria . . .’ (‘This is the victory by which our faith conquers the world’, I John 5:4) – are also from Flecha. The contradictory perspectives of Adès’s libretto are all too starkly opposed: for Spanish invaders, present-day victory and ‘eternal glory’; for Meso-American people, a coming slaughter.

Access to the metaphoric levels in Adès’s music will entail recognition of the density of its gestural discourse. One reconciles the forward flux of musical time – a syntagmatic concatenation of events and shapes – with music’s paradigmatic axis of accruing change (‘variation’). Adès’s focus in *America* on a rhetoric of interruptive ‘encounter’ – the shock of contact – beyond its literary definition registers forceful disruption of recognised patterns. Hearing gesture in *America*, the density of ‘hearing as’, in Michael Spitzer’s terms, assimilates experience to schema while affirming

²⁵ Paul Griffiths, ‘Thomas Adès: *America: A Prophecy*’, note to recording (EMI 5 57610-2, 2004), p. 5.

²⁶ See James Lockhart, ‘Introduction’, in *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico*, ed. by James Lockhart (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 1–46 (p. 4).

²⁷ See *Florentine Codex*, book 12, chapters 3 and 16, trans. in Lockhart, ed., *We People Here*, pp. 60–2, 114–19; and Restall, *Seven Myths*, pp. 112–16.

the 'replete', infinitely rich semantic potential of specific gestures as living 'figures'.²⁸ Identifying musical gestures, further, as the sounding animation of mythic tropes, we dwell on a Mayan world of prophecy bounded, in Inga Clendinnen's phrase, by patterns of 'recurrence behind occurrence'.²⁹

Adès's gestural imagination, I have noted, transcends the directly mimetic – the piece is neither opera nor imaginary cinema – while sounding its own accents of apocalypse. In a semiotic layering, the first-order 'language' of *America* – the history of 'Conquest' narratives – becomes the conceptual referent for a second discursive layering, that of musical gesture.³⁰ *America* re-envisioned a thematics of ending in music eschewing most conventional signs of cadence or easy consolation. Adès's exploration of the dynamically open and inchoate, using his favoured vocabulary of strictly turning melodic and rhythmic cycles, speaks of the eternal 'transition' of apocalypse. If end-times are a double gyre, between past and future, history and prophecy, *America* reverberates with impending crisis.³¹ The following analysis will highlight facets of a sounding gestural continuum: beyond the shock of interruption, discussion explores tensions in rhythmic-temporal patterning, between static 'floating' movement and the more periodic, embodied rhythms of dance and lullaby. Registering the violence of conquest, meanwhile, Adès fashions moments of contrapuntal build-up – crowding out individuated line in full-orchestral 'eclipse' gestures of overwhelming weight.

Calendars and Rhythms

America constructs musical images of intrusion – gestures by which some existing state of being is challenged or undercut – at multiple levels. The rhetoric of interruption is evident from the very opening, where each detail carries metaphorical significance. A hypnotic opening flute figure (labelled *M* in Ex. 1.3) is quickly disrupted by a shocking challenge (in piano, clarinets, strings). Within *America*'s historical frame, the revolving flute figure is Mayan, a sign of meso-American identity; the unmistakable tutti

²⁸ Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 110–11.

²⁹ Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, p. 135.

³⁰ Interpreting *America* as a semiotically layered discourse, I have in mind the model of Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 109–59.

³¹ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 101.

a)

♩ = 96

1. *ben articolato*

Flts. 1-4

(+ Bsns.)

ff senza espress.

M

4

Flts. 1-4

Cls.

B.D.

con sord., hard vibraphone sticks

ppp

p > very dry

grace notes as fast as possible (virtually simultaneous)

[+ crotale] solo

lontano

ff martellato

(a due mani)

(+ string harmonics)

mp

Ped. sempre

(b)

10 Flts., Hns. con sord.

pp

Cls. Cl., Cbsn.

fff

Tba. (+ Hp.) *leggiero*

mf

B.D.

pp

(c)

26 (+ str. div.)

sub. cantabile

soli

molto f

Hns. 1-2 (3-4 8va bassa)

soli

f

Tpts. 1-2

Ex. 1.3 *America: A Prophecy*, opening orchestral layers. (a) Bars 1–5, flutes at MM 96, interrupted; (b) bars 10–11, tuba and wind entrance; (c) bar 26, horns at MM 120

response to the singer's 'my nation' call (at bar 45) confirms as much. Four flutes in unison, low in register, produce a markedly breathy timbre, as if to echo 'folk' sonorities (pan pipes or ocarina).³² Their fluent, ostinato-like undulations (hinting at a hocket) are also pentatonic. The shocking piano entrance (with crotales as metallic 'edge', bar 4), by contrast, is much higher in register and treads slowly downwards in doleful 'lament' (familiar material for Adès).

The collision of the two opening gestures is confirmed in the temporal-rhythmic dimension. Where the flutes project a mid-tempo tactus (crotchet = MM 96) with metrical depth (by quaver and semiquaver sub-pulsation), the striding piano arrives a third slower, moving at MM 72 (notated in sharply audible tactus beats of four triplet quavers). Avoiding a smooth 2:3 polyphony of layers, Adès maximises the jolting effect by means of metric displacements. The piano enters one triplet ahead of the bar line; the flutes, too, drift from the 4/4 metric grid (by one semiquaver, bar 6). The double displacement conveys radical lack of coordination. Each orchestral layer has its own flux, but the polyphonic result – as in Stravinsky, Nancarrow or Birtwistle – is dissociation of metrically independent layers.³³ Only with the entrance of a third layer (tuba and wind triplet quavers, bar 10) are flute and piano layers manoeuvred into uneasy metric coexistence in relation to the opening MM 96 tactus. One more new layer at bar 26 (Ex. 1.3c) – horns in quintuplet crotchets, projecting MM 120, in 5:4 ratio with the opening MM 96 – further intensifies the polyrhythmic build-up.

Fracturing of music's time-flow – of pulse, metre and tempo, out of joint – defines the gestural universe of *America* and wider metaphoric resonances. The independence of musical layers is also tonal (the flutes affirm an F tonic, the piano 'lament' ends on E^b – but the hypnotic rhythms, in particular, mark out the ostinato as something culturally specific. These low flutes, in context, circle enigmatically as tokens of a Mayan world view bounded by seasonal-cyclic repetitions. The original *Chilam Balam* texts are calendrical, rife with recurring cycles of twenty named days, with thirteen-fold repetitions completing a 260-day ritual cycle. Wider historical 'wheels of time' count off *katún* cycles (twenty years), turning towards a prophesied end: each time division in the Mayan calendar was named as a deity.³⁴ The extant codices are peopled

³² Initially (bars 1–3), the four-flute unison timbre is prepared by flute/bassoon doubling.

³³ For analyses of fluctuating intensity of rhythmic dissociation in Adès's music, see Chapter 5.

³⁴ Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, p. 145; Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Destruction*, pp. ii–iii.

with gods on earth and in the underworld.³⁵ In Adès's flute ostinato, accumulating repetitions meet capricious interruption. The initial *M* fourth-shape (see Ex. 1.3) from middle C rises seven times in a row, an expected eighth iteration disrupted by the new pitch G (bar 2), from which a complementary *M'* shape falls. Do the next four *M* statements pursue hidden calendrical purpose, or do we simply hear a play of flutes, less strictly cyclic in melody and rhythm than the piano and crotales layer? With the arriving brass layers (at bars 10 and 26) the 'Mayan' flutes are increasingly occluded, overtaken by metrically independent ideas of greater sonic force.

A Prophet's Voice, Signs of Warning

The opening tumult is silenced by the priestess's voice: a Prospero-like entrance establishing her power and authority. Her single-syllable cry ('O', bar 17) is metrically 'early', cutting off the crowd-like polyphony; she follows with a first plea ('O my nation / Prepare', bars 41–8). Placing the singer in a balcony above the orchestra (as at the premiere) heightens the dialogic *mise en scène*. Except for two quite brief appearances of the chorus, the gestural sequence of *America* is controlled by the priestess's keening voice. I have noted that gestures here function less as mimetic acts within a *scena* than as temporally bound metaphors, tokens of an underlying mythic-historical complex. A hearing of the opening gestures reveals already Adès's metaphoric precision in wordless instrumental textures. But gesture, more typically in *America*, involves the interplay of voice(s) and full orchestra, as close readings of specific passages in Panel I and the shorter Panel II will reveal. Approaching sonic details, one recognises equally in Adès's libretto an originary, verbal layer of gesture, comprising significant speech acts for the solo singer and chorus – a backdrop to the piece's larger formal sweep.

We may assume that Adès created his libretto for *America* before finalising many (or even most) details of melodic shape, rhythmic layering or orchestral shadings. The composer's 'adaptation' from English-language poetic renditions of the *Chilam Balam* books includes much reshaping and

³⁵ In the cover image reproduced in *America's* score (Faber Music, 2002) twenty day signs surround a skull in a calendar-square further framed by four 'deceased and bundled' gods and four human figures. Gisele Díaz and Alan Rodgers, *The Codex Borgia: A Full-Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript*, ed. by Bruce E. Byland (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1993), pp. xxii, 52.

-
- 1 MM 96 (bar 1) introduction (orch); *Mezzo*: ‘O my nation’
 2 (bar 55) ‘The people move as if in dreams’
 3 MM 96 (bar 84) ‘End of all our ways’
 4 MM 162 (bar 124) *Chorus*: ‘Todos los buenos ... eterna gloria’
 5a MM c. 90 (bar 194) *Mezzo*: ‘Your gods’
 5b (bar 221) *Orchestra* ‘scaffold’/eclipse (bars 229–30) *rit. molto*
 6a MM 32, 46 (bar 231) ‘They will rule from the backs’
 6b *a tempo* [MM 90] (bars 236–50) ‘Prepare’
-

Fig. 1.1 *America*, Panel I, synoptic overview

reordering of the source texts.³⁶ Where Mayan seers address specific regional groups (‘O Itzá make ready! / Your villages will be turned / into piles of rubble’), Adès’s priestess speaks, from the start, to an unnamed ‘nation’.³⁷ The next section (‘The people move as if in dreams’) conflates several *Chilam* passages.³⁸ Later in Panel I, Adès treats the opening call (‘O my nation / Prepare’) as a simple refrain, in a couplet and separate lines. The fire images of Panel II (‘ash feels no pain’) derive from one complete *Chilam* poem, but diction is pared to stark monosyllables.³⁹ Defining the priestess’s voice timbrally as non-operatic (*senza vibrato*), Adès universalises her unflinching speech by excising proper names and direct references to ‘foreign lords’ or ‘conquerors’; the Spanish invaders figure verbally as a shadowy other (‘They will come from the east’). The interpolated Spanish and (in Panel II) Latin words are direct linguistic images of a ‘foreign’ conquest represented as anything but heroic. The Europeans in *America*, with their crude, collective chanting, are a rudimentary musical crowd.⁴⁰

From a text of terse fragments, how does a composer assemble a continuous musical form in two contiguous parts? Panel I, in synoptic overview (Fig. 1.1), comprises an arch-like progression of six blocks. With minimal

³⁶ The poet Sawyer-Lauçanno, in turn, credits prior sources, including Ralph L. Roys, *The Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1933); Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Destruction*, p. v.

³⁷ Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Destruction*, p. 18. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 21–2, 6.

³⁹ Sawyer-Lauçanno’s line is ‘Ash does not suffer’; *Destruction*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Though the score lists ‘large chorus’ as optional, performances without massed voices surely deprive *America* of a vivid embodiment of foreign invaders.

[♩ = 96]

Dux 10 ♩ — 5 ♩ — 10 ♩ — 5 ♩ — 5 ♩ — 10 ♩ —

59 Vlns. *ppp* <Long, Short> { 10 : 3 } Comes 3 ♩ — 1.5 ♩ 3 ♩ —

Mezzo-Sop. *f* The peo - ple. <Long, Short>

66 1.5 ♩ 3 ♩ — 1.5 ♩ 3 ♩ — [1.5 ♩] etc.

move as if in dreams

74 Cl. Vlns. 7 ♩ — 15 ♩ — 7 ♩ etc. *ppp* <Short, Long> *mf* 3 ♩ — 1.5 ♩ — 3 ♩ — etc.

The pro - phets and the priests are blind

{ 7:12 } <Long, Short>
{ 5:2 }

Ex. 1.4 *America*, Panel I, section 2, bars 59–68, 74–8, tempo canon, orchestral and vocal entries

transition or instant shifts between musics of contrasting speed, the argument elaborates the splintered, interruptive energies of the layered opening.⁴¹ The entire progression is witnessed by the prophet’s increasingly urgent warnings (sections 1–3) leading to the central moment of Spanish ‘arrival’ (section 4), during which she falls silent. Her return, with further predictions of catastrophe (sections 5–6, the latter subdividing by tempo), concludes a scheme of elemental temporal fracturing. *America* maps a gestural universe defined by opposing forces of musical motion. Where the juxtaposition in section 1 reflects an interplay of pulse-streams of evident regularity, the full metaphorical force of this cyclic-‘calendrical’ music comes into starkest relief in relation to its dynamic opposite – a music of near-stasis, virtually devoid of coherent motion. In section 2 of Panel I – ‘The people move as if in dreams’ – the Mayan blindness to fate finds its most intricate sounding realisation.

As a musical image of pre-invasion obliviousness to impending catastrophe – a failure to heed astrological omens – the ‘dream’ motions of section 2 unfold in a weave of canonic imitation (see Ex. 1.4). Melodic

⁴¹ The shorter three-part Panel II (considered below) lacks abrupt tempo shifts.

phrases hover eerily for some two minutes in performance. The sounding images of destruction are rhythmic-metric – an apocalypse felt by a nation adrift from the basic calendrical-spiritual parsing of existence. Mayan flutes play on in section 2 as a remnant of the past, but their sonority is now divided and ‘weak’ (*ppp*) – ‘from fuck and drink’, the priestess sings – and increasingly obscured by creeping contrapuntal chaos. The flutes still move at MM 96, yet their time-flow is undermined by the circling vocal-orchestral tapestry. The priestess’s utterances are stable (their alternating long and short beats are fixed in duration), yet her song floats amid rhythmic incoherence. On the eve of the ‘jaguar’s misery’ at the hands of the ‘foreign fox’, time has lost all measurable pattern.⁴²

The musical image of suspended time-flow is constructed by rigorous melodic imitation. Twelve canonic entries in the orchestra (bars 55–84) crowd around the priestess’s four phrases, but since each instrumental voice follows its own languorous path – turning at a unique rhythmic rate – one hears endless wandering.⁴³ Temporal elasticity denies listeners any stable counting unit or regular pulsation. The first and third of the singer’s entries (see Ex. 1.4) are *comes* phrases, following an orchestral *dux*. Her eight syllables alternate long and short beats (dotted minim, dotted crotchet), the resulting «long, short» motive in phrase 1 (‘The peo-ple’) echoing the slower violin line at an ‘irrational’ tempo ratio (10:3, in crotchets).⁴⁴ In a second pair of entries (‘The pro-phets’), Adès further subverts pattern by melodic inversion, and by reversing the clarinet and cello *dux* – now «short, long», from C# – while the singer maintains her «long, short» entrance (creating new ratios – 7:12 and 5:2, respectively – between C#s and Bs). As the flutes pursue their forlorn counting-out of history, the priestess confirms wider temporal vagrancy (‘It is the end of all our ways’). Without measurable time, one hears the Mayan apocalypse.

After the violent temporal layerings of *America*’s opening, the rhythmically static ‘dream’ music floats on a hazy scrim of strings (*sul tasto*), a delicate prelude to the raucous woodwind-brass colours of the more histrionic section 3. Convinced of imminent disaster, the prophet’s voice climbs ominously from its early high F# (‘the end’, bar 86) to an ululating

⁴² Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Destruction*, pp. 17, 16.

⁴³ For an overview of the canon, see Shin Young Aum, ‘Analysis of *America: A Prophecy* by Thomas Adès’ (unpublished DMA dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012), pp. 21–5.

⁴⁴ The imitation is not quite strict: the violin’s six-pitch subject falls a fifth (A–D), while the voice rises a fourth, before circling back to opening pitches.

G ('pre-*pare*', bars 98–9). Her final, desperate plea – 'O my nation' (bars 122–3) pushing on to G# – is silenced, abruptly, by the sounds of arrival.

'*Todos los buenos soldados*': *Battle Sounds*

For a musical representation of 'contact', Adès gives the invading Spanish forces historically marked materials. The blaring brass fanfares, running scales and garish reiterations of a B major tonic triad in the arrival of section 4 mimic, in modern orchestral colours, some sixteenth-century European keyboard *batalla*, overpowering everything heard to this point. Even the jingoistic chorus – yelling words from Flecha about 'good soldiers' dying for glory – is almost drowned out in the shrill paranoid style of this military parade.⁴⁵ The encounter foretold by prophecy races forward with accelerating speed and deafening sonority, in just over a minute, from preliminary fanfares to its closing *tutta forza* shriek ('eternal glory'), a hectic montage with the kaleidoscopic feel of a cinematic newsreel.

Spanish and Mayan conquest chronicles abound in descriptions of war as sound – cannons, trumpets, drums, the throbbing of hoof-pounding cavalry;⁴⁶ Adès stages the military presence in equivalent sonic close-ups. We feel the army's rumbling in the drum tattoo (bars 121–3), drowning out the priestess seconds before the brass burst in. The entrance itself is immediately much faster (MM 162) and rhythmically anarchic, with pseudo-Renaissance hemiola groups disturbed by internal lurches (Ex. 1.5). A virtuosic piccolo trumpet (as in *Living Toys*) is the brash musical standard-bearer for the full ensemble. The pace quickens again as the chorus enters (at MM 171, bar 142), its boorish chant competing with a swaggering *gallarda* in the brass (Ex. 1.6).⁴⁷ A pair of B and E triads, matching the chorus tune, asserts a crude major-mode tonality, with an overlay of complicating chromatic detail (trombones, after bar 180). One could hear the tuba's F♯ calls as a Mayan challenge to the 'European' B major; on the orchestrational level of the metaphor, shrieking piccolos supplant Mayan flutes.

This arrival *batalla* is a forceful gesture of interruption writ large, but the heavy triple-metre *Totentanz* subsides almost as quickly as it appeared. The priestess's visions of an aftermath (sections 5 and 6) reinstate the slower

⁴⁵ Adès mentions the presence in *America* of one distinctly recent historical trope, 'the invasion paranoia that gripped the States in the 1950s'. Service, 'Altered States'.

⁴⁶ For passages from the *Florentine Codex* see Lockhart, *We People Here*, pp. 186, 110.

⁴⁷ The dance phrase is subtly prefigured in the layered texture of the previous section (bars 102–3).

usual. With such metric-temporal shards, the closing cycles of calendrical time reach an end.

'On earth we shall burn': Dense Gesture in Panel II

Addressing her nation, the mezzo-soprano 'priestess' of Panel I delivers a prophet's warnings. In the more compact and continuously flowing sequence of Panel II, however, her role shifts. 'They will come' gives way to 'we shall burn': the singer is no longer a witness, but herself a victim. Adès creates a macabre incongruity between her words and their musical form. 'Burn, burn, burn', she begins, with strange composure, in a euphonious D major, without orchestral preface ('line 1', Ex. 1.7a). As in Panel I, a weightless initial proposition is quickly undermined by something more lugubrious: the unyielding challenge of an Eb-Bb-rooted attack (in piano, with contrabass clarinet to the fore). The singer's terse repeating monosyllables, one begins to realise, are a form of hieratic utterance, a funereal incantation possibly. It is with her second line – 'On earth we shall burn' – that the priestess slips into the first-person plural, speaking in numbed and mechanical accents, of trauma.

At its 1999 premiere, as a 'Message to the Millennium', *America* already performed cultural memory in the public sphere. Animating a scene of Mayan-Spanish 'contact', the music provides imagined documents of a historical conquest whose witnesses were mostly annihilated. The memorial process, psychologically, is a working-through. We who listen are displaced, historically and affectively. While we feel their suffering (the suffering of the other), identification is qualified by distance.⁴⁹ To acknowledge the public memorial work of Adès's *America* (however briefly) is to align its mythic viewpoint with the bracing energies of vocal, choral and orchestral utterance. Of pre-Columbian societies destroyed by European invaders we learn what we may through listening to gesture.

Framing gesture as a working category, the preceding analysis gives particular emphasis to the shifting rhythmic-temporal dimensions of *America*. At the same time, I have treated certain features of the broader theoretic construct as touchstones: gesture's emergent synthesis (of rhythm, theme, timbre) into meaningful gestalt; and its sheer density, both

⁴⁹ On affect and narrative in cultural memory, see Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999). On the score's significance for North American audiences post-9/11, see Service, 'Altered States'.

(a)

(Line 1)

Velocissimo ♩ = 132
Mezzo-Sop.

p *mf* *f*

Burn burn burn

Upper Str. *ppp* Flts. *f*

Hns. *pp* *p* (*M*)

Lower Str. *ppp* *ppp* (+ 8va)

(b)

(+ Vln. I harm.)
Picc. *pp*

(+ Flts.)
Tpt. I *f* *ff* *mf* *p* *f* *p* *mf* *p*

whisper
mute
Tpt. II *f* *ff* *mp* *f* *pp* *p* *mf* *ppp*

Tpt. III *f* *mf* *f* *p* *f* *p*

Line 2

A Antecedent (12 X δ) *mp* più marc., poco più cantab. *M'* A' Conseq.

Mezzo-Sop. On earth On earth we shall burn we shall burn On

[Bsns., Vcs., Cbs. not shown]

... interrupted; B ...

21 *mf* più a più appassionato *mf*

earth On earth we shall burn we shall burn we shall burn

(M')

Ex. 1.7 *America*, Panel II, opening. (a) Bars 1–4, D major, undermined; (b) bars 16–24, B minor lullaby phrases

in the replete individuation of each local figure and in the cumulative, 'ever-increasing' hermeneutic density of returns concatenated over musical time.⁵⁰ To conclude this hearing, attention turns to the patent density of the priestess-victim's few closing words, and to the wordless orchestral moments with which *America's* 'prophecy' reaches an ending.

With the solo singer centre stage, Panel II unfolds lucidly as an animation of her words. Its smoother continuities are managed by gradual slowings of pulse, a large-scale calming of Panel I's interruptive discourse. Dense with accrued history, these closing gestures surround texted utterance with lavish orchestral accompaniment, or punctuate speech with wordless continuations of the evolving argument. Despite the sinister challenge to the opening D major, the priestess continues her prophecy undeterred.

'On earth, on earth, we shall burn, we shall burn': each word in line 2 repeats as part of a lullaby-like rocking. Balancing four-bar phrases unfold a period (bars 8–12, 12–16) that repeats with restrained orchestral backdrop (bars 16–24; Ex. 1.7b). Tonally, the simple melodic descent affirms a steady B minor, unsettled by a 'de-tonicising' swerve, pushing the line away from B (D#, enharmonically, transmutes the previous E^b challenge). The lullaby enfolds two forms of the original *M'* trichord, a signature of the Mayan peoples whose incineration is impassively recounted now. The priestess's melody is slowly enveloped by delicate *divisi* polyphony, multiplying and diffusing – but not obscuring – the contours of her voice. Ringing high above, soft pedal notes – violin and piccolo Cs, Ex. 1.7b – limn a celestial ceiling below which happenings 'on earth' unfold.

'We shall turn to ash': reaching this extraordinary vision, the soloist abandons the lullaby's gentle rocking. As the ash drifts over mountains and out to sea, she regains her penetrating high F# (stretching the word 'sea', bars 47–51) to unlock the movement's climax. This second orchestral 'eclipse' – counterpart to Panel I's section 5b – is a brief, fierce crescendo of less than thirty seconds in performance (bars 47–62). The effect, as before, is of frightening erasure of melodic presence. Amid the sonic force of massed brass (bells up) and roaring percussion, figural gesture is lost: line becomes surface. The notion of 'eclipse', my interpretive intervention, seeks both descriptive precision – a label adequate to the specificity of score events – and metaphoric resonances. Each eclipse overwhelms the priestess's singing, as if to move beyond human linguistic presence into wordless

⁵⁰ See, respectively, Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, p. 94; and Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought*, p. 111.

(instrumental) ‘divination’. We listen to the orchestra on the priestess’s terms. We hear what she sees, so to speak. As her voice falls silent, its echoing melodic shapes are magnified and pulled, contrapuntally, into a swirling mass. Where Adès’s percussion choices for the Panel I eclipse correlate in performance to a sung image (murderous ‘scaffolds’), the deeper rumbling in Panel II mimics ‘thunder’, a natural omen for a *Chilam* seer.⁵¹ Just how precisely do listeners interpret the impossibly dense orchestral emanations – as enactments of monstrous slaughter, or glimpses into the obsidian surface of a seer’s black mirror?⁵² The evolving volatility of musical gesture exceeds the reassuring fixity of verbal or visual denotation. And yet the orchestral climaxes in *America*, for many listeners, will assume metaphorical-semantic potentialities within the larger diptych, as the vortex-like nexus of complex interference patterns spanning this prophecy-cum-history – between Mayan and Spanish, between American and European visions, between past history and present memory.

With what gesture does a musical myth of apocalypse conclude? In the verbal realm of the libretto, the priestess’s valediction (‘Know this, the ash feels no pain’) defiantly undercuts the chorus’s mumbled ‘victory’ (Ex. 1.8a). The pitch-structural basis of her defiance is a repeated Eb, frozen in unyielding chromatic resistance to the chorus. As the chorus adopts the lullaby’s fragile B minor, the priestess voices the ‘challenge’ that has haunted *America* since the very opening. (Typically for Adès, enharmonic doubling, D#/Eb, acquires mythic-semantic significance.) Tending towards stasis, registral depths and, ultimately, silence, *America*’s final gravitation towards a B minor tonic has many ghostly precursors.

‘No pain’: coming to rest on the flutes’ low ‘Mayan’ F–C fourth, the priestess herself falls silent. The final gesture in *America* will be an orchestral coda (bars 78–86; Ex. 1.8b and c) – wordless, extremely slow, but not quite motionless. Over the sepulchral B tonic, the archetypal opposition of major and minor third – D# (Eb) and D♯ – prolongs the struggle for focus, stability, ascendancy, closure. The scumbling of the major/minor duality involves the microtonal blurrings of trombone and lower string glissandos (enhanced by flutter-tongue ‘growls’ in trumpets). Only in the fourth and final chord is D# extinguished, a ‘chilling of ember to ash’.⁵³ The gesture is

⁵¹ For ‘thunder’ omens, see Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Destruction*, pp. 47–9. The Panel I eclipse (bars 221–31) comprises tenor drums with metal beaters, joined by crotales; in Panel II (bars 50–62) timpani and bass drum (rolls) augment tenor drums as timbral signifiers.

⁵² On the mirror as Meso-American ritual object, see Pedro Lasch, *Black Mirror/Espejo negro* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵³ Griffiths, ‘Thomas Adès: *America: A Prophecy*’, p. 6.

(a)

H

Giusto, molto più grave

p sub., marcato sempre

Mezzo-Sop. *poco vib.*
poco f

But know this But know this But know this But know

S.A. Chorus
T.B. *ppp sempre, non marc.*

Haec est vic - to - ria

[Str., Winds, Perc. not shown]

(b)

I

Grave assai Grave

Vlins. *mf* *mp*

Fils., Tpts., Tbn. I,
Tba., Vin. II, Vc. Flt. I. (+ Obs., Vla.)

bucket mute *ppp sempre*

Trbs. II, III *pp sempre*

Vc. *pp sempre*

Tam-tam (no splash) *mp pesante* *pp cantab., lontano*

Hns., Ww., Hp., Pno. *p pesante*

rubber ball on surface
smooth, continuous arc or straight line

(c)

Cls., Bsns., Hns., Tba.,
Hp., Pno., Lower str.

ppp *pppp*

Ex. 1.8 *America*, Panel II, closing rites. (a) Bars 69–72, chromatic resistance to the chorus’s mumbled ‘victory’; (b) bars 78–9, closing cortège: modal scumbling; (c) bars 84–6, D# erased

also timbrally specific, for it is in the unison Mayan flutes that the last D# vanishes from hearing, leaving only the coldness of the bare third, B-D (Ex. 1.8c).

Hearings of volatile gesture, couched in verbal language, drift imperceptibly from the structural to the metaphoric. Adès's fondness for endings that survey events 'as if from a great height'⁵⁴ continues in the registrally vast space of *America's* orchestral coda. Contemplating the wordless utterance of this ending, we are bound, as listeners, to move beyond purely structural understandings of gesture towards a semantic frame. Could the distance between spectral harmonics and the nethermost vibrations of the bass (contrabassoon, tuba, double bass) speak, for instance, of the Mayan cosmos – of an earthly existence hanging 'between the thirteen heavens and the nine cold hells'?⁵⁵ To invoke such a culture-specific schema is to interpret more directly the registral position of those flute D#s, expiring in a middle register evacuated of other voices.

While the episodic dream programme of *Living Toys* inhabits a very different affective realm from the mythic landscape of *America: A Prophecy*, one senses vestigial rhetorical similarities between the endings of the two scores. The military salute of the boy 'hero' in *Toys*, of course, is a child's daydream, worlds away from the collective historical trauma glimpsed in *America*; one links the scores only in schematic terms, as two versions of a recognisable gesture of closure: single-chord repetitions, punctuated by near-silence. Technically, musicians recognise 'cadence'; in a more metaphorical vein, we might call the chords ending *America* a brief cortège. Perhaps we should not be surprised to discover an understanding of the most characteristic moments in this composer's art in relation to music's most archetypal and universal forms of motion. If the concept of musical gesture hovers beguilingly at the intersection of physical sonority and metaphysical sense, it may also tell us much about how Adès's music goes.

⁵⁴ Thomas Adès, programme notes on *Chamber Symphony*, 1990, www.fabermusic.com/music/chamber-symphony-2009.

⁵⁵ Sawyer-Lauçanno, *Destruction*, p. 50.