

Rattle: John Adams at 80

Thursday, January 7, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican

Sir Simon Rattle, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>Frenzy</i>	19'
2	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>Feast of the Passover, from The Gospel According to the Other Mary</i>	9'
3	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>Harmonielehre</i>	40'
TOTAL MUSIC		68'

John Adams

b. 1947

Frenzy

THE COMPOSER

John Adams (born 1947) is among the most frequently performed living composers, and one of the defining American musical voices of his era. Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s in the wake of minimalism, he forged from its pulsing, repetitive language a richer, more dramatic and harmonically expansive style entirely his own. He first reached a wide public with works like *Harmonielehre* and *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, and went on to write a series of landmark operas drawn from contemporary history (*Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *Doctor Atomic*) that redefined what opera could address. A conductor as well as a composer, deeply versed in the orchestra, he has produced a steady stream of major orchestral scores. His music combines rhythmic drive and brilliant, sensuous orchestration with a distinctly American openness, wit and grandeur.

ABOUT THE WORK

Frenzy is the most recent of John Adams's large orchestral scores, and the London Symphony Orchestra has a claim on it. Adams composed it in 2023 and dedicated it to Sir Simon Rattle, who conducted the first performance with the LSO at the Barbican on 3 March 2024 and then took it on tour to Bristol, Dortmund, Luxembourg and Paris. It returns to open the first of the orchestra's concerts for the composer's eightieth birthday.

19 minutes

The subtitle, ‘a short symphony’, is meant literally. In his own note Adams calls the piece a one-movement symphony that fits ‘a variegated yet unified symphonic structure’ into about twenty minutes. What sets it apart from his other music, he says, is its concentration, ‘almost to the point of obsession’, on developing and transforming small, vivid motives. That is the old classical craft of working out a theme, the thing German musicians call *Durchführung*, and it is a different habit of mind from the gradual change through repetition that drove his earlier, minimalist-influenced scores. Adams writes that the finished piece surprised him by turning out to be a meeting of the two methods: the rhythm still rides on a steady pulse, while the melodic ideas keep changing shape and spinning themselves out.

In a note for his publisher he adds that the starting point was a brief quotation from his opera *Antony and Cleopatra*, which he then led through ‘an extended hall of mirrors’, twisting and reshaping it. The same note quotes the dictionary definition of the title, from ‘agitation or disorder of the mind’ to ‘a mania for something’, and links the word to the feeling, at times overwhelming, of taking in the world through a daily dose of digital news.

The title is a little misleading all the same. Adams describes the music as ‘generally buoyant and extrovert’, and says that it holds back its truly frenetic energy until the closing moments. He has also said that the piece has its share of repose and good humour, which he thinks fitting for a work dedicated to Rattle, a longtime friend and a champion of his music.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first bars set out the two ideas that matter: a sharp, punctuated tattoo in the winds and brass, and against it an urgent, muscular theme in the upper strings. Keep both in your ear. Adams says they reappear throughout the piece, ‘always transformed in one way or another and yet always identifiable’, and following their disguises is the surest way through.

There is no separate slow movement. In its place the surface of the music simply thins and quietens. The pulse carries on in a gentle exchange between the two harps and the celesta, and the strings float a long lyrical melody above them.

The last section is where the title is earned. Adams lists the ingredients himself: hard-driven, choppy string figures, ‘tsunami-like waves of brass’ and madly scurrying woodwinds, all converging on the finish.

John Adams

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Feast of the Passover, from The Gospel According to the Other Mary

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ABOUT THE WORK

The Gospel According to the Other Mary is a Passion for our own time: an opera-oratorio in two acts that Adams wrote with the director Peter Sellars, his partner on *Nixon in China* and on the nativity oratorio *El Niño*. The Los Angeles Philharmonic gave the first performance under Gustavo Dudamel at Walt Disney Concert Hall on 31 May 2012, and a staged version followed there in March 2013.

It tells the story of the last weeks of Jesus's life from the side of people the Gospels keep in the background: Mary of Bethany, her sister Martha and their brother Lazarus. Jesus never appears. His words reach us through the other characters, the chorus and a trio of countertenors who act as narrators, much as the Evangelist does in a Bach Passion. Sellars assembled the libretto from the Old and New Testaments and from much later writers, among them Hildegard of Bingen, Dorothy Day, Louise Erdrich, Rosario Castellanos, June Jordan, Rubén Darío and Primo Levi. The action slips between biblical time and the present, where Mary and Martha care for homeless women and take part in political protest.

The later part of the first act tells of the death and raising of Lazarus, and the act closes with a Passover scene. Tonight's extract comes from that ending. At its centre is Lazarus's setting of 'Passover', a poem by Primo Levi, the Italian writer and chemist who survived the Holocaust. The poem takes up the question traditionally asked at the

Passover table: ‘Tell me: how is this night different from all other nights?’ Critics have often picked out this aria as a high point of the whole score.

The LSO’s London listing gives the extract the title ‘Feast of the Passover’ and names no singer. The halls in Paris and Luxembourg, where the orchestra repeats this programme later in January, both list the tenor Russell Thomas, who sang Lazarus at the 2012 premiere; the Luxembourg listing calls the extract by the poem’s first line. Rattle knows the complete work well. He conducted it with the Berliner Philharmoniker in a performance filmed in 2017, and it is part of that orchestra’s set of Adams recordings.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

If a tenor is on the platform, as the Paris and Luxembourg listings suggest, the extract is in effect a single aria with orchestra. Listen first to the words. Levi’s poem is a plain question that keeps being asked, and the vocal line is broad and songful where much of the oratorio’s writing for voices is angular. A reviewer of the 2014 London staging heard in it ‘an almost Broadway-esque breadth and lyricism’. Another, in San Francisco, called it the vocal highlight of the evening and described the poem as one of forgiveness, hope and humanity.

Then listen to how the orchestra answers. The London review describes the end of the scene as a grating orchestral postlude, with shrieking brass chords cutting through throbbing strings. After the warmth of the aria it points to where the story goes next, in the second act, which tells the Passion itself.

John Adams

b. 1947

Harmonielehre

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40 minutes

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ABOUT THE WORK

Harmonielehre is the piece that brought John Adams national attention as an orchestral composer, and it began with a block. In the early 1980s he was unable to compose for about eighteen months. Then came a dream. In it he watched an oil tanker in San Francisco Bay turn upright and lift off like a Saturn rocket, the rust colour of its hull visible as it rose. 'Shortly after,' he recalled, 'I sat down in my studio to find the powerful pounding E-minor chords that launch the piece.'

The score was written in 1984 and 1985 for the San Francisco Symphony, where Adams was composer-in-residence, and that orchestra gave the first performance under Edo de Waart on 21 March 1985. It lasts about forty minutes, is laid out in three movements, and is a symphony in all but name.

The title is borrowed from Arnold Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre*, the treatise on tonal harmony that he published in 1911, before his own music parted company with tonality. Adams called the choice 'part whimsical, part an acknowledgement of my puzzling father-son relationship to the master'. His piece takes the opposite road from Schoenberg's. In his memoir *Hallelujah Junction* he describes it as 'a statement of belief in the power of tonality at a time when I was uncertain about its future', and as a once-only attempt to marry the chromatic harmony of the turn of the twentieth century to the rhythmic and formal procedures of minimalism. The pulsing repetition of Steve Reich and Philip Glass is still there, but it now carries the long melodies, huge climaxes and saturated orchestral sound of Mahler, Sibelius, Wagner and the young Schoenberg.

Adams has insisted that these echoes are not ironic borrowings. Writing the piece, he said, felt like 'channelling the sensibilities of those composers I loved and finding contemporary form for their special harmonic worlds'.

Sir Simon Rattle has lived with this music for more than thirty years: he recorded it with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in 1994. 'Harmonielehre', he says in the LSO's introduction to these concerts, 'is the equivalent to John as the Firebird is to Stravinsky.'

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement has no title and runs to about seventeen minutes, close to half the piece. It opens with the E minor chords of the dream, hammered out in repetition, and they return as a landmark. Between them the music runs on fast, motoric figuration that passes from one harmonic region to the next. The movement is shaped as an arch: at its centre the engines fall away and a long, yearning melody unfolds, a passage Adams has described as ‘full of Sehnsucht’. Then the energy of the opening comes back.

The second movement, ‘The Anfortas Wound’, is the dark centre of the work. Anfortas is the wounded Fisher King of the Grail legend, familiar to opera-goers from Wagner’s Parsifal. Here the minimalist machinery stops. The opening is slow and bare, close in mood to Sibelius, with a high, lonely trumpet line over a desolate landscape, and the music climbs by slow degrees to two climaxes of harsh dissonance in which Mahler is never far away.

The finale, ‘Meister Eckhardt and Quackie’, comes from another dream. Adams saw his baby daughter Emily, whose nickname was Quackie, riding on the shoulders of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart and whispering the secret of grace into his ear. The movement begins with a quiet, rocking shimmer from which a sweeping string melody grows. From there the pulse gathers and the full orchestra is drawn in, and after the bleakness of the slow movement the work ends in a blaze of light.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life***John Adams, Picador 2009*

Adams's own memoir, with his account of the creative block and the dream that led to *Harmonielehre*.

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century***Alex Ross, Picador 2008*

Alex Ross's history of twentieth-century music gives the background to this programme: Schoenberg, minimalism, and Adams's way of bringing the two back together.

DEEPER **The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer***Thomas May (editor), Amadeus Press 2006*

A collection of essays, interviews and programme notes on Adams's music up to 2006, with detailed commentary on *Harmonielehre* and on his stage works with Peter Sellars.

SOURCES

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3. On Tour in Paris: Sir Simon Rattle, 15 January 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/on-tour-in-paris-15-jan-27/>
4. Éclats John Adams (1), Philharmonie de Paris. <https://philharmoniedeparis.fr/en/activite/29179>
5. Sir Simon Rattle celebrates John Adams, Philharmonie Luxembourg. <https://www.philharmonie.lu/en/programme/2026-27/sir-simon-rattle-celebrates-john-adams-000000e9001aab86>
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8. John Adams: Frenzy: a short symphony, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/104592>
9. John Adams: Frenzy premiere conducted by Simon Rattle, Boosey & Hawkes. https://www.boosey.com/cr/news/John-Adams-_Frenzy_-premiere-conducted-by-Simon-Rattle/102376
10. The Gospel According to the Other Mary, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gospel_According_to_the_Other_Mary
11. John Adams: The Gospel According to the Other Mary, Opera Today. <https://operatoday.com/?p=11262>
12. John Adams's Dense, Earnest Oratorio, Seen and Heard International. <https://seenandheard-international.com/?p=69385>
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14. Dreams, Myths and Histories: John Adams' *Harmonielehre*, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/dreams-myths-and-histories-john-adams-harmonielehre/>
15. *Harmonielehre*, Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmonielehre>
16. Programme Note: *Harmonielehre*, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/john-adams-harmonielehre/>

17. Thrilling Rides In Dazzling Machines: The San Francisco Symphony Plays Adams, NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2012/03/27/149467564/thrilling-rides-in-dazzling-machines-the-san-francisco-symphony-plays-adams>
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 20. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>
 21. The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781574671322>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/Iso-2027-01-07-rattle>

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