

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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

19 minutes

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.

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

b. 1947

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

9 minutes

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.

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

40 minutes

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.’

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-01-07-rattle>

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