

John Adams at 80: Adams Conducts Adams, with Víkingur Ólafsson

Wednesday, January 13, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
John Adams, conductor · Víkingur Ólafsson, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>Short Ride in a Fast Machine</i>	4'
2	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>Shaker Loops</i>	26'
3	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>The Chairman Dances</i>	12'
4	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>After the Fall</i>	25'
TOTAL MUSIC		67'

John Adams

b. 1947

Short Ride in a Fast Machine

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.

4 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Short Ride in a Fast Machine lasts about four minutes and is among the most frequently played pieces Adams has written. He composed it in 1986 as an opener for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's Great Woods Festival, which is why the piece is sometimes called Fanfare for Great Woods. Michael Tilson Thomas commissioned it and conducted the first performance.

Adams groups it with the quiet Tromba Lontana, written the same year, as one of two 'fanfares for orchestra', though it sounds nothing like the short brass flourish the word usually suggests. The title came with an explanation that has been quoted ever since: 'You know how it is when someone asks you to ride in a terrific sports car, and then you wish you hadn't?' The piece is that ride. A steady, unyielding beat is set going and everything else has to hang on. The writer Michael Steinberg, drawing on the composer's own description, pictured the rest of the orchestra 'running the gauntlet' through the rhythmic tunnel that the beat creates.

It dates from the year after *Harmonielehre* and *The Chairman Dances*, when Adams was in the middle of composing his first opera, *Nixon in China*, and it shows the style of those years in miniature. The repetition, the steady pulse and the bright consonant harmony come from minimalism. The sense of drama, of events arriving and danger narrowly avoided, is Adams's own addition, and it is what commentators mean when they call his music of this period post-minimalist. The scoring is lavish for so short a piece: a large orchestra with four trumpets, a long list of percussion and two synthesizers.

As the opening number of a birthday concert conducted by the composer it hardly needs explaining. It is his calling card, and it puts the whole orchestra on its mettle in the first thirty seconds.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The woodblock comes first, alone and very loud, tapping out a beat that will not stop or bend. Trumpets join it on the same pulse while clarinets and synthesizers chatter at twice the speed. Everything that follows is measured against that tick.

Listen to how other instruments try to pull away from it. New figures enter, in the trumpets first, in rhythms that cut across the woodblock, so that for long stretches you seem to hear two speeds at once. The harmony behaves in a similar way: it sits on one group of notes for a long time and then shifts to another without warning, like a change of gear.

Late in the piece the brass at last get a broad, ringing tune to play over the machinery, the nearest thing here to a traditional fanfare, and the ride ends almost as abruptly as it began.

John Adams

26 minutes

b. 1947

Shaker Loops

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Shaker Loops is the earliest music on tonight's programme, and the piece in which Adams first found a voice of his own inside minimalism. It began in failure. While teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music he wrote a string quartet called *Wavemaker*, built from long chains of oscillating figures that were meant to ripple like the surface of a pond. By his own account it 'crashed and burned at its first performance'. He kept the idea of the oscillating patterns, enlarged the group to seven players for the sake of more sonic mass, and over the following four months worked the material out again with his students. The result, completed in 1978, was a string septet with a new title. In 1983 he made the arrangement for string orchestra that is played tonight.

Both words of the title have two meanings. 'Loops' comes from tape music, in which a short length of recorded tape joined end to end repeats a figure indefinitely; Adams names Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain* as the model. Here the loops are short melodic figures that the players repeat and overlap. 'Shaker' is partly a pun on the string player's 'shake', a tremolo with the bow or a rapid trill between two notes. It is also a memory. Adams grew up in New Hampshire not far from a

former Shaker colony near Canterbury, and he had in mind the picture of those ‘otherwise pious and industrious souls caught up in the ecstatic frenzy of a dance’.

That image is what separates the piece from the cooler minimalism around it. Adams wrote that this ‘dynamic, almost electrically charged element’, so out of place in what he called the ‘orderly mechanistic universe of Minimalism’, gave the music its reason for being. Shaker Loops repeats, but it also speeds up, swells, breaks off and changes mood. It has remained one of his most performed works, has been choreographed several times, and was heard in the 1987 film *Barfly*.

Adams notes that some listeners prefer the clarity of seven solo players and others the density and power of a full string section. The second of those is what the LSO’s strings offer here.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

There are four parts, played without a break.

‘Shaking and Trembling’ grows out of near silence, with a single interval pulsing in fast repeated notes. Other voices are added one at a time, the pattern thickens into a dense, slowly changing cluster, and the intensity keeps rising. You may notice that the music seems to move fast and slowly at once: the bows are busy while the harmony shifts very gradually.

‘Hymning SLEWS’ is the still centre. The pulse drops away, and the players exchange slow slides from one pitch to another (the ‘slews’ of the title) in a sound world that seems suspended in time.

‘Loops and Verses’ starts with a lamenting melody for solo cello. Under it a rhythmic motor gradually starts up again and gains force until it reaches the climax of the whole work, the passage that comes closest to the ecstatic dance Adams had in mind.

‘A Final Shaking’ serves as a coda and carries the last of the waves out.

John Adams

b. 1947

The Chairman Dances

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

The Chairman Dances is a by-product of *Nixon in China*, the opera about President Nixon's 1972 visit to China that Adams composed between 1985 and 1987 with the librettist Alice Goodman and the director Peter Sellars. In 1985 he owed the Milwaukee Symphony a long-delayed commission. He had already seen the scenario for the opera's third act and, as he put it, could not wait to begin work on it, so the orchestral piece became a kind of warm-up. Adams has called it an 'out-take' from Act III: neither an excerpt from the opera nor a fantasy on its themes. The Milwaukee Symphony gave the first performance under Lukas Foss on 31 January 1986, well over a year before the opera reached the stage in Houston in October 1987.

The 'Chairman' is Mao Zedong, and 'dances' is a verb. The scenario printed with the score, by Sellars and Goodman, imagines Chiang Ch'ing, Madame Mao, gatecrashing the presidential banquet. She hangs paper lanterns around the hall, strips down to a tight cheongsam, signals the orchestra to play and begins to dance by herself. Mao, present only as a huge portrait on the wall, steps down from the frame, and the two of them foxtrot together, carried back to their youth in Yenan, 'dancing to the gramophone'.

Adams was candid that the subject is half absurd. He called it the 'slightly ridiculous but irresistible image' of a youthful Mao dancing with a former film actress who would become the driving spirit of the Cultural Revolution. The music takes its cue from her past in the

cinema. He described what he wrote as a parody of what he imagined Chinese film music of the 1930s to sound like, and the result crosses his minimalist pulse with ballroom glamour.

The piece is not part of the finished opera, which differs from it both in style and in instrumentation. Some of its themes do come back there, in the last act, where the Nixons and the Maos look back on their younger selves. In the concert hall *The Chairman Dances* has had a separate and successful life of its own.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Adams gives the plan himself: three parts, A-B-A, with ‘a persistent, chugging pulse in the basses’ marking the outer sections. The opening is all motor. The low instruments tick over while short fragments of tune flicker across the top, and a large and unusual percussion section, which includes sandpaper blocks, castanets and a hi-hat, adds its dry clatter.

In the slower central section, as Adams puts it, romance makes an appearance. This is the foxtrot proper, a swooning tune of the kind a dance band or a film orchestra of the 1930s might have played, with harp and piano in the texture. He describes his themes as ‘sometimes slinky and sentimental, at other times bravura and bounding’.

When the chugging returns it builds further than before and then runs down. In the last bars the music thins to a few ticking sounds that slow and fade, like a gramophone winding down.

John Adams

25 minutes

b. 1947

After the Fall

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

After the Fall is the newest work in the LSO's two birthday programmes: a piano concerto in all but name, composed in 2024 for Víkingur Ólafsson. He gave the first performance with the San Francisco Symphony under David Robertson on 16 January 2025 and went on to play it for the other orchestras and halls that shared the commission, a group that stretches from San Francisco and Los Angeles to Zurich, Hamburg, Paris, Vienna, Gothenburg and London. Adams's publisher announced the first British performance for 25 February 2026, with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Esa-Pekka Salonen at the Royal Festival Hall.

The piece follows two earlier full-scale works for piano and orchestra: Century Rolls, written for Emanuel Ax, and Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?, written for Yuja Wang. Adams had heard Ólafsson play the second of these, and his admiration for the pianist's Bach, Rameau and Mozart fed into the plans for a new one.

The title has a private meaning and a public one. The private one concerns Adams's son, the composer Samuel Adams, whose own piano concerto, No Such Spring, was first heard in 2023. 'I was so overwhelmed by it that I really didn't think I could ever write another piano concerto,' Adams has said. 'So the title is partly a tip of the hat to Sam's piece: there is no such spring after the fall.' The public meaning plays on 'fall' as both the season and the loss of Paradise: the position of a composer who writes late in a long tradition, with a whole library of earlier music within reach, and who chooses to use it.

One book in that library lies open in plain view. While Adams was at work, Ólafsson was touring the world with Bach's Goldberg Variations, 88 performances in all. 'Something of Bach was bound to leak into my piece, I guess,' Adams remarked, and in the final section the C minor Prelude from Book I of The Well-Tempered Clavier surfaces in the music.

The concerto lasts about 25 minutes. The orchestra has no tuba and only two trumpets, and is coloured by two harps, celesta, vibraphone and a set of tuned gongs.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Adams's earlier piano concertos keep to a clear fast, slow, fast outline. The critic Harvey Steiman, reviewing the premiere, heard this one as closer to a fantasia, in which no idea stays for more than a minute or two before it turns into the next. It helps to follow a chain of episodes, each growing from the last.

In his account the piece opens with a haze of soft harmony in the orchestra, against which the piano enters with chords that rise and fall in the shape of a chant. That settles into a rhythm that is nearly, but not quite, a tango, and then into a gentler stretch with slow arpeggios in octaves for the soloist. More nervous music follows and subsides in its turn.

Listen for Bach before he is named. The piano's spare, repeated rhythmic figures point his way, and the back-and-forth of soloist and orchestra can sound like a Brandenburg Concerto with modern harmonies. When the C minor Prelude finally arrives it lasts only a few seconds before the orchestra pulls the music somewhere else. Adams's publisher likens the technique to a hall of mirrors, one he had used on Beethoven in *Absolute Jest*.

The ending is a feint. The tempo quickens and a big finish seems certain, then a few jabs from the brass halt the momentum, and the concerto closes softly, in what Steiman compared to a jazz ballad.

Tonight's artists

Víkingur Ólafsson *piano*

After the Fall was written for Víkingur Ólafsson, who gave its first performance in San Francisco in January 2025 and has since taken it to the orchestras and halls that commissioned it. Its Bach quotation is something of a private joke between composer and soloist, since Ólafsson spent the period of its composition touring the Goldberg Variations. Here he plays it with the composer on the podium, and the two repeat the programme at the Philharmonie de Paris three days later.

Víkingur Ólafsson, born in Reykjavík in 1984, is one of the most sought-after pianists of his generation. He had his first lessons from his mother, a piano teacher, and studied at the Juilliard School in New York before returning to Iceland, where he founded his own record label, Dirrindí, and the Reykjavík Midsummer Music festival. Since signing with Deutsche Grammophon he has released a series of thoughtfully conceived albums (Philip Glass, Johann Sebastian Bach, Debussy and Rameau, Mozart and his contemporaries) which have won him a wide international following. His recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations, which he performed around the world throughout the 2023/24 season, won the Grammy Award for Best Classical Instrumental Solo in 2025. Admired for the clarity, rhythmic precision and imaginative programming of his playing, he joins the Berliner Philharmoniker this season.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life**

John Adams, Picador 2009

Adams tells in his own words how Shaker Loops grew out of a failed quartet and how The Chairman Dances and Nixon in China came about.

ACCESSIBLE **Minimalists**

K. Robert Schwarz, Phaidon 1996

A short illustrated history of minimalism from Young and Riley to Reich, Glass and Adams, useful for hearing what Adams took from the style and what he changed.

DEEPER **The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer**

Thomas May (editor), Amadeus Press 2006

Essays, interviews and programme notes on Adams's music up to 2006, including Michael Steinberg's notes on the early orchestral pieces heard in this programme.

SOURCES

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2. On Tour in Paris: John Adams and Víkingur Ólafsson, 16 January 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/on-tour-in-paris-16-jan-27/>
3. Éclats John Adams (2), Philharmonie de Paris. <https://philharmoniedeparis.fr/en/activeite/29180>
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6. 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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15. John Adams: UK premiere of piano concerto After the Fall, Boosey & Hawkes. https://www.boosey.com/cr/news/John-Adams-UK-premiere-of-piano-concerto-After-the-Fall_/102806
16. After the Fall (Adams), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/After_the_Fall_\(Adams\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/After_the_Fall_(Adams))
17. John Adams's new piano concerto sashays with flair in world premiere with the San Francisco Symphony, Seen and Heard International. <https://seenandheard-international.com/?p=122062>

18. John Adams (composer), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_\(composer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_(composer))
 19. John Adams, Chicago Symphony Orchestra. <https://cso.org/about/performers/composers/john-adams/>
 20. At Home With John Adams, Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.laphil.com/press/releases/1901>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-01-13-adams>

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