

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

4 minutes

Short Ride in a Fast Machine

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

b. 1947

Shaker Loops

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

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

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.



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Version 1, 7 October 2026