

John Adams Conducts John Adams

Saturday, May 22, 2027 · 15:30 · Wiener Konzerthaus
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>After the Fall</i>	25'
3	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>Harmonielehre</i>	40'
TOTAL MUSIC		69'

John Adams

b. 1947

Short Ride in a Fast Machine

4 minutes

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

John Adams turned eighty in February 2027, and the Vienna Philharmonic has given him a whole programme to conduct: three of his own pieces, written across four decades. It opens with the shortest and best known of them.

Short Ride in a Fast Machine dates from 1986. Michael Tilson Thomas commissioned it for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's Great Woods Festival and conducted that orchestra in the first performance; the piece is occasionally listed under its other name, Fanfare for Great Woods. Adams calls it a fanfare for orchestra, a label he also gave to the quiet Tromba Lontana of the same year, and the two could not be less alike. Asked about the title, he answered with a question that has been reprinted in programme books 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 was written in the years of *Harmonielehre* and the opera *Nixon in China*, when Adams had taken the basic tools of minimalism (a steady pulse, short repeated patterns, plain consonant chords) and begun to use them for dramatic ends. It lasts four or five minutes and employs a very large orchestra, with four trumpets, a big percussion section and two synthesizers. Everything in it is governed by one idea: a beat that will not give way, and an orchestra that has to keep up with it.

The harmony moves in the manner Adams called gating. The music holds one small collection of notes for a long stretch, adding to it by stealth, and then switches to another all at once, like a change of gear. There is no conventional cadence anywhere in the piece until the last bars.

Heard at the start of this concert, with the forty-minute *Harmonielehre* at the other end, it works as a miniature of the larger piece: the same pounding energy, the same bright orchestral colours, compressed into the time it takes to find one's seat.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

A woodblock begins alone, very loud, and sets the beat. The trumpets join it on the same pulse while clarinets and synthesizers run at twice the speed. Keep the woodblock in your ear, because the rest is measured against it.

Soon other instruments start to disagree. New patterns enter, in the trumpets first, in rhythms that cut across the beat, and for long stretches the orchestra seems to move at two speeds at once. Adams has described the players as running a gauntlet through the tunnel of rhythm that the woodblock creates.

One published analysis hears the woodblock marking out the form as well: a high block for the first section, a low one for the second, the high one again, and then none at all. In that last

stretch the brass come to the fore with broader phrases, the nearest the piece gets to a fanfare in the old sense, and it ends on the only real cadence in the score.

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 a piano concerto in all but name, the third full-scale work for piano and orchestra that Adams has written. *Century Rolls* was composed for Emanuel Ax in 1996 and *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?* for Yuja Wang in 2018. This one was written in 2024 for Víkingur Ólafsson, whom Adams had heard play the second of those concertos and had come to know on tour. Ólafsson gave the first performance on 16 January 2025 with the San Francisco Symphony under David Robertson, and then took the piece round the orchestras and halls that had shared in the commission. Two of the commissioners were Viennese, the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* and the *Wiener Symphoniker*, so the city has heard the work before. These are performances by the pianist it was written for, with the composer conducting.

The title has two sources. One is domestic. Adams's son, Samuel Carl Adams, is also a composer, and his piano concerto *No Such Spring* was first played 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 other is the double sense of the word: autumn, and the loss of Paradise. According to his publisher, Adams connects it with a remark by Pierre Boulez, who declared that the age of the avant-garde was over and that what remained was an era of return, consolidation and quotation, with the whole of music history available as a library of models. Boulez meant it as a diagnosis of decline. Adams, who has always written with the past in plain view, takes it as a description of how he works.

The past in this case is Bach. While Adams was composing, Ólafsson was on a world tour devoted to the Goldberg Variations, 88 performances in all. “Something of Bach was bound to leak into my piece, I guess,” Adams remarked. In the last part of the concerto the C minor Prelude from the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* surfaces in the music.

The orchestra is of normal size but lightly brassed, with two trumpets and no tuba, and its colours come from two harps, celesta and tuned percussion. The piece plays for a little under half an hour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Adams’s two earlier piano concertos are laid out fast, slow, fast. This one behaves more like a fantasia. Reviewing the premiere, the critic Harvey Steiman noted that no idea lasts more than a minute or two before it turns into the next, each one growing out of what came before. It is easiest to follow as a chain of episodes.

The opening is a soft haze of harmony in the orchestra. The piano enters with chords that rise and fall like a line of chant, and the music drifts into a rhythm that is almost a tango. A calmer passage follows, with slow arpeggios in octaves for the soloist, and then a nervous, angrier one.

Bach is present long before he is quoted. The piano’s spare, repeated figures and its exchanges with the orchestra have something of a Brandenburg Concerto about them, in modern harmony. When the C minor Prelude finally appears, close to note for note, it does not stay intact for long: thicker chords attach themselves to it and bend it out of shape. The publisher compares the effect to a hall of mirrors, a device Adams had tried on Beethoven in *Absolute Jest*.

Watch for the false ending. The tempo picks up and a loud finish seems certain; a few jabs from the brass stop it, and the concerto closes quietly. Steiman likened the last page to a jazz ballad.

John Adams

40 minutes

b. 1947

Harmonielehre

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

Harmonielehre is the piece that made John Adams's name as an orchestral composer, and he has called it a symphony. He wrote it in 1984 and 1985 for the San Francisco Symphony, where he was composer in residence, and that orchestra gave the first performance in 1985 under Edo de Waart.

It came out of a silence. For about eighteen months Adams had been unable to compose. Then he had a dream: he was crossing the Bay Bridge in San Francisco and saw an oil tanker in the water tilt upright and take off like a Saturn rocket. "I could see the rust-coloured metal oxide of its hull as it took off," he wrote. "Shortly after I sat down in my studio to find the powerful pounding E-minor chords that launch the piece."

The German title means a textbook of harmony, and it is taken from the one Arnold Schoenberg published in 1911: a long study of tonal harmony, written by a composer who was about to leave tonality behind. Adams explained the borrowing as "part whimsical, part an acknowledgement of my puzzling father-son relationship to the master". His own piece goes the other way. In his memoir 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 one-off attempt to join the chromatic harmony of the turn of the twentieth century to the rhythmic and formal methods of minimalism.

So the pulsing patterns of the minimalists are still present, but they now carry long melodies, slow harmonic journeys and climaxes on the scale of Mahler. Adams has said that these echoes were never meant as ironic quotation. Writing the piece felt, he said, like “channelling the sensibilities of those composers I loved and finding contemporary form for their special harmonic worlds”.

There is a particular point to hearing it in Vienna. The treatise that gave the piece its name was written by a Viennese, and the most violent chord in the slow movement is said to be drawn from the climax of the first movement of Mahler’s unfinished Tenth Symphony. A good part of what *Harmonielehre* remembers is this city’s music from the years around 1910.

The work lasts about forty minutes and is in three movements, of which only the second and third have titles.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement. About seventeen minutes long and shaped like an arch. It begins with the chords of the dream: E minor, struck again and again by the full orchestra. These chords return as landmarks. Between them the music runs on quick repeated patterns that shift from one harmonic region to another. In the middle the motor falls away and a long, yearning melody unfolds, the passage Adams associates with the German word *Sehnsucht*, longing. The pounding energy of the opening comes back to finish the movement.

The Anfortas Wound. Anfortas is the wounded king of the Grail legend, known to opera audiences from Wagner’s *Parsifal*. The minimalist machinery stops altogether. The opening is slow and bare, closer to Sibelius than to anything American, with a solitary trumpet line high above a desolate landscape. The music climbs by slow degrees to two climaxes, the second a pile of dissonance that owes its sound to Mahler.

Meister Eckhardt and Quackie. The finale comes from a second dream, in which Adams saw his baby daughter Emily, known for a time as Quackie, flying through space with the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart. It begins quietly, and after the

darkness of the slow movement the change of air is immediate. The pulse returns and gathers, the orchestra is drawn in, and the work ends in a blaze of sound.

Tonight's artists

Víkingur Ólafsson *piano*

After the Fall was written for Ólafsson, who gave its first performance in San Francisco in January 2025 and has since taken it to the orchestras and halls that shared the commission. He plays it with the composer conducting at both concerts in the Great Hall of the Konzerthaus, on Saturday 22 May at 15:30 and Sunday 23 May at 11:00.

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*

The composer's own memoir, and the source of his accounts of the creative block, the dreams and the argument with Schoenberg that lie behind *Harmonielehre*.

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

A history of the century's music that begins in the Vienna of Mahler and Schoenberg and ends with Adams, which is the same journey *Harmonielehre* makes in forty minutes.

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 *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*.

SOURCES

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9. John Adams: After the Fall, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/111611>
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12. 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>
13. Harmonielehre, Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmonielehre>
14. Dreams, Myths and Histories: John Adams' Harmonielehre, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/dreams-myths-and-histories-john-adams-harmonielehre/>
15. Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312428617>
16. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>
17. The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781574671322>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2027-05-22-adams>

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