

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

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.

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

b. 1947

After the Fall

25 minutes

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.

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

b. 1947

Harmonielehre

40 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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