

Alan Gilbert on This Program

Thomas Adès is a composer who has an incredible ear and sense of rhythm, so the complexity in his scores is always there for a reason – Tom really knows how to express feelings through his craft. This quality is very apparent in his opera *The Tempest*, which I conducted in Santa Fe some years ago, and in *In Seven Days*, which the Philharmonic and I performed last year, as there are dramatic aspects to both of those pieces, but even in non-narrative works he tells a story. Always in his work, what the audience hears is understandable even at the first exposure: there are colors and harmonies that are recognizable, but are combined in a very unique and personal way. Tom is such an honest, serious composer that I've always known that *Polaris* would be interesting, and I am looking forward to the increased focus on the orchestra that is possible when not presenting the visuals that can be associated with this work.

Mahler's Ninth Symphony is the last symphony he completed, and as such has a particular resonance. It ends with a powerful, valedictory moment, which seems like death, or perhaps the attainment of the ultimate spiritual peace. All of Mahler's symphonies are great, and all attempt to really encapsulate the human experience, but the Ninth probably goes the farthest. I think that all conductors wrestle with this piece – approaching it feels like climbing an epic mountain – but the rewards are tremendous. It really does say it all, and it seems to give a picture of what it means to be human in every sense, both the joys of living and the difficulty of coming to the end of one's life. Mahler's Ninth Symphony never fails to go straight to the heart.





Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

The Leni and Peter May Chair

Polaris: Voyage for Orchestra

Thomas Adès

The British composer Thomas Adès studied piano and composition at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and at King's College, Cambridge, where his composition teachers included Alexander Goehr and Robin Holloway. In 1989 he was awarded second prize in the BBC's "Musician of the Year" contest, in recognition of his skill as a pianist, and to this day he continues to concertize and record as a pianist, both in solo repertoire and as a collaborative artist.

He also appears regularly as a conductor of symphony orchestras and opera. Adès has served as composer in residence for several organizations, including the Hallé Orchestra (1993–95) and the Ojai Festival (2000). He held Carnegie Hall's composer chair during the 2007–08 season, and in 2009–10 he was the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic's featured composer. He has recently been fêted through the "Aspects of Adès" festival at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, as an artist in residence at the Melbourne Festival, and as a featured composer at the 2011 Holland Festival. His two

operas have met with considerable success: *Powder Her Face* was premiered at the Cheltenham Festival in 1995, and *The Tempest* was premiered and later revived at Covent Garden and has received further performances from the opera companies of Copenhagen, Strasbourg, and Santa Fe (where it was conducted by Alan Gilbert).

Adès has served as Britten Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music; was music director of the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (1998–2000); and from 1999 to 2008 was artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival. He has been honored with many awards, including the Stoecker Prize of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (1998) and an honorary doctorate from Essex University (2004). In 2000 he received the prestigious Grawemeyer Award

In Short

Born: March 1, 1971, in London, England

Resides: in London

Work composed: in 2010, co-commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and Miami's New World Symphony, Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Lisbon's Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, London's Barbican Centre, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the San Francisco Symphony; musical score revised through April 2011

World premiere: January 26, 2011, Michael Tilson Thomas conducting the New World Symphony at the opening of the New World Center in Miami Beach, Florida

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which mark the New York premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 13 minutes

for his orchestral work *Asyla*. The EMI recording of *The Tempest* has earned him two impressive honors: the “Diapason d’Or de l’année” and the 2010 Classical BRIT Award for Composer of the Year.

Polaris was conceived for performance with a projected visual work by the film- and video-maker Tal Rosner. The work has been given with projections arranged in different ways, but it is also written so that it can be presented as a purely musical piece.

A work of some 13 minutes in duration, *Polaris* is structured broadly in three sections. At the very outset we hear piano and second violins intoning delicate droplets of eighth notes. High woodwinds, harp, and touches of percussion join this remote, chilly texture. Here Adès uses the technique of diminution canon, through which the same melodic sequence sounds against itself at different speeds. (This method of melodic-rhythmic construction is inherent to Indonesian gamelan

music, a possible influence, although the effect here is quite different.) Even if one’s ear does not pick up on the canons, there is no mistaking the overall effect, which suggests the process of change-ringing and which yields a kind of ostinato that repeats (not literally, but in its general contour) to lend a clarity of structure through nearly all of the piece.

A gradual enriching of the texture leads to the entry of the brass section, bit by bit, again with canons at play. Adès allows the brass section to be located at a distance from the rest of the orchestra if the conductor so desires. Their slow undulation suggests billowing waves, with the sparkle of the ostinato always hovering starlike above. Only a minute before the end does the ostinato retreat, leaving the orchestra to hammer out its last pages with weighty finality. Just as *Polaris*, the North Star, serves as the center of magnetism, so Adès zeroes in on a single note at the end:

In the Composer’s Words

Polaris explores the use of star constellations for naval navigation and the emotional navigation between the absent sailors and what they leave behind. ... It is scored for orchestra, including groups of brass instruments that may be isolated from the stage. These instruments play in canon, one in each of the three sections of the piece, entering in order, from the highest (trumpets) to the lowest (bass tuba). Their melody, like all the music in this work, is derived from a magnetic series, a musical device heard here for the first time, in which all 12 notes are gradually presented, but persistently return to an anchoring pitch, as if magnetized. With the first appearance of the twelfth note, marked clearly with the first entrance of the timpani, the poles are reversed. At the start of the third and final section, a third pole is discovered, which establishes a stable equilibrium with the first.

— Thomas Adès



the note “A” – to which all the instruments adjust their tuning before a concert begins. For an orchestra, the note “A” serves as the lodestar. It is the musicians’ Polaris.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo, another doubling piccolo and alto flute), three oboes, three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets and

piccolo trumpet, three trombones, tuba, timpani, marimba, vibraphone, orchestra bells, tubular bells, crotales, wood chimes, shell chimes, tam-tam, bass drum, two harps, piano (doubling celesta), and strings.

This note is adapted from an essay that originally appeared in the programs of the San Francisco Symphony, and is used with permission. © James M. Keller

Star Light, Star Bright



Polaris, a multiple-star approximately 434 light years from the Earth, is the brightest star in the Ursa Minor constellation and currently holds the title of North Star. Because of its current position – always visible due north in the sky, about one degree from the north celestial pole – it appears to be fixed while the stars of the Northern sky seemingly move around it, making it an important guide for navigation. Because of this role, it has been known by many names – from the Latin *stella polaris* (pole star) and *stella maris* (star of the sea) to the English “steadfast star” and “guiding star” – and has influenced artists and writers for centuries, from Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* to Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* (left).

– The Editors