The History in This Program

The first work by John Adams that the New York Philharmonic performed was *Grand Pianola Music*, in 1983. It was part of a groundbreaking new-music festival called *Horizons: The New Romanticism*, which included six concerts, four symposia, a “Meet the Composers” series, and 25 contemporary composers.

Jacob Druckman (1928–96), the Philharmonic’s then Composer-in-Residence, was the intellectual and artistic force behind the festival, which announced a sea change in both the style and programming of new music. It explored a theory, held by Druckman, that compositional styles move back and forth gradually between two opposing artistic poles: “On the one hand there is the Apollonian, the Classical — logical, rational, chaste and explainable; and on the other hand, the Dionysian, the Romantic — sensual, mysterious, ecstatic, transcending the explainable.” The scores he evaluated for inclusion in the *Horizons ’83* festival both supported and questioned this new stylistic premise. Adams’s *Grand Pianola Music* shared the third program of the festival with works by Morton Subotnick, Barbara Kolb, and Sándor Balassa.

Rounding out the festival were symposia by distinguished critics of music, dance, and art: Thomas Willis, Deborah Jowitt, and John Perrault. In essays and keynote addresses they confronted Druckman’s title thesis: Was there a new Romanticism in art and composition? If so, what drove its emergence? An essay by Willis put forth the idea that a new Romanticism had emerged from humanity’s desire to reconnect with its sensitivity and sensuality, in response to an increasingly technological society. Writing about dance, Jowitt argued that the art form is rarely not sensual.

In an essay on the work, Adams remembered the Orchestra’s performance of *Grand Pianola Music* drawing a “shocking number of boos,” owing, he thought, to its placement as the closing piece on a concert of new, predominantly serialist works. The Philharmonic’s 1987 performance of his *Harmonielehre* fared little better in *The New York Times* review. Critic Donal Henahan remarked: “Things start off unpromisingly, with an insistent clanging and steady pulsations that sound like a large modern orchestra imitating a Balinese gamelan.... For dozens of bars at a stretch one might be listening to a lugubriously tone poem.” However, while *Grand Pianola Music* has not been performed by the Philharmonic since that 1983 festival, *Harmonielehre* has been played numerous times; it was described in 2010 as “restless, rapturous” and “incandescent” by the same *New York Times*.

— The Archives

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Notes on the Program
By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Absolute Jest, for String Quartet and Orchestra
Harmonielehre

John Adams

John Adams, whose 70th birthday is being celebrated this season, has become one of America’s most widely performed composers of concert music thanks to a style in which musical richness and stylistic variety are deeply connected to the mainstream impetuses of classical music. He grew up studying clarinet and became so accomplished that he performed occasionally with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. At Harvard he studied composition with a starry list of teachers that included Leon Kirchner, Earl Kim, Roger Sessions, Harold Shapero, and David Del Tredici. Armed with a copy of John Cage’s book Silence (a graduation gift from his parents), he left the world of the “Eastern establishment” for the relative aesthetic liberation of the West Coast. He arrived in California in 1971 and has been based in the Bay Area ever since.

During his first decade there Adams taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and, like many composers of that moment, explored an evolving fascination with the repetitive momentum of minimalism. But by 1981 Adams was describing himself as “a minimalist who is bored with minimalism.” That was the year when he was composing Harmonium, the first of the large orchestral works he would write for the San Francisco Symphony in his capacity as that orchestra’s composer-in-residence.

In 1985 he began a collaboration with the poet Alice Goodman and stage director Peter Sellars that resulted in two operas that by now rank among the most widely produced of contemporary titles: Nixon in China (1987, based on Richard Nixon’s 1972 meeting with Mao

IN SHORT

Born: February 15, 1947, in Worcester, Massachusetts
Resides: in Berkeley, California

Works composed and premiered: Absolute Jest, composed in 2012, on commission from the San Francisco Symphony in celebration of its 100th anniversary; premiered March 15, 2012, in San Francisco, by the San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, with the St. Lawrence String Quartet; revised version first performed December 1, 2012, at the New World Center in Miami Beach, Florida, with the composer conducting the New World Symphony, with the St. Lawrence String Quartet. Harmonielehre, composed 1984–85, in San Francisco and Berkeley, California, on commission as part of the Meet the Composer orchestra residency program and funded by the Exxon Corporation, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts; premiered March 21, 1985, in San Francisco, by the San Francisco Symphony, Edo de Waart, conductor

New York Philharmonic premières and most recent performances: Absolute Jest: these performances mark the Philharmonic première. Harmonielehre, premiered March 5, 1987, Leonard Slatkin, conductor; most recently performed, November 12, 2010, at Carnegie Hall, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated durations: Absolute Jest, ca. 25 minutes; Harmonielehre, ca. 41 minutes
Zedong) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1990, inspired by the hijacking, five years earlier, of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* by Palestinian terrorists). Both of these revealed Adams’s willingness to use his music to address subjects rooted in politics. A third stage work followed in 1995: *I Was Looking At The Ceiling And Then I Saw The Sky*, a “song play” with a libretto by poet June Jordan. In this work, as in many of Adams’s instrumental compositions, one finds the confluence of popular and classical styles, the intermixing of “high” and “low” aesthetics,

**In the Composer’s Words**

The following comments are extracted from John Adams’s essay about *Absolute Jest*:

The real challenge [in writing a work for string quartet plus orchestra] is in marrying the highly charged manner and sound of a string quartet to the mass and less precise texture of the large orchestra. Unless very skillfully handled by both composer and performers, the combining of these two ensembles can result in a feeling of sensory and expressive overload.

At its premiere in March of 2012, the first third of the piece was largely a trope on the [Beethoven] Op. 131 C-sharp-minor Quartet’s scherzo and suffered from just this problem. … This original opening never satisfied me. The clarity of the solo quartet’s role was often buried beneath the orchestral activity, resulting in what sounded to me too much like “chatter.” And the necessity of slowing down Beethoven’s tempo of the Op. 131 scherzo in order to make certain orchestral passages negotiable detracted from its vividness and breathless energy.

Six months after the premiere I decided to compose a different beginning to *Absolute Jest* — a full 400 bars of completely new music, replacing the “quadrangular” feel of the Op. 131 scherzo with a bouncing 6/8 pulse that launches the piece in what is to my ears a far more satisfying fashion. The rolling 6/8 patterns recall the … Ninth Symphony’s scherzo but also summon up other references — of the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, of the Eighth Symphony, and other archetypal Beethoven motives that come and go like cameo appearances on a stage.

The high-spirited triple-time scherzo to the F-major Op. 135 (Beethoven’s final work in that medium) enters about a third of the way through *Absolute Jest* and becomes the dominant motivic material for the remainder of the piece, interrupted only by a brief slow section that interweaves fragments of the *Grosse Fuge* with the opening fugue theme of the C-sharp-minor Quartet. A final furious coda features the solo string quartet charging ahead at full speed over an extended orchestral pedal based on the famous *Waldstein* Sonata harmonic progressions.

*Absolute Jest* had elicited mixed responses from listeners on its first outing. Quite a few reviewers assumed, perhaps because of its title, that the piece was little more than a backslapping joke. … Of course there are “winks,” some of them not entirely subtle, here and there in the piece. But the act of composing the work [one that took nearly a year of work] was the most extended experience in pure “invention” that I’ve ever undertaken. Its creation was for me a thrilling lesson in counterpoint, in thematic transformation and formal design. The “jest” of the title should be understood in terms of its Latin meaning, gesta: doings, deeds, exploits. I like to think of “jest” as indicating an exercising of one’s wit by means of imagination and invention.
that reflects the breadth of Adams’s catholic inspiration and comprehensive language. Further operas followed: Doctor Atomic (2005), A Flowering Tree (2006), and Girls of the Golden West, which will be premiered by San Francisco Opera this coming November.

Since 2009 he has held the Creative Chair of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; among the works he has written through that affiliation are City Noir (2009) and the oratorio The Gospel According to the Other Mary (2012). During the 2016–17 season he is also composer in residence of the Berlin Philharmonic. In 2008 he published Hallelujah Junction, his warmly received volume of memoirs and commentary on American musical life.

In 1999 Nonesuch Records issued The John Adams Earbox, a ten-CD retrospective collection of his music, at once a valuable sonic archive and an extraordinary tribute. His many honors include the 1994 Royal Philharmonic Society Award for his Chamber Symphony and the 1995 Grawemeyer Award for his Violin Concerto. In 2002 Adams composed On the Transmigration of Souls to memorialize those who perished in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The work was premiered with immense impact by the New York Philharmonic (one of its co-commissioners) on the opening subscription concerts of its 2002–03 season. Shortly thereafter the piece earned its composer the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Music, and the recording received three Grammys, including one for Best Classical Composition.

His Absolute Jest, for string quartet and orchestra, takes as its point of departure certain works by Beethoven. The idea came from experiencing a performance of Stravinsky’s Pulcinella:

Hearing this ... I was suddenly stimulated by the way Stravinsky had absorbed musical artifacts from the past and worked them into his own highly personal language. I ... had loved the Beethoven string quartets since I was a teenager, and crafting something out of fragments of Op. 131, Op. 135, and the Grosse Fuge (plus a few more familiar “tattoos” from his symphonic scherzos) was a totally spontaneous act for me.

When musicians see the title Harmonielehre, their minds leap to the treatise written by Arnold Schoenberg in 1910–11 and dedicated to the memory of the recently departed Gustav Mahler. Sometimes referred to in English as Treatise on Harmony, this volume gave voice to a very modern ambivalence on the question of proclaiming authority in matters musical. In Harmonielehre, Schoenberg deplored the crystallization of musical rules in textbooks as an after-the-fact watering down of solutions that had been created to solve problems in specific
contexts. He also suggested implications attached to this phenomenon:

No art has been so hindered in its development by its teachers as music. For no one watches more jealously over his property than that man who knows that, strictly speaking, it does not belong to him.

This observation followed the treatise’s famous opening: “I have learnt this book from my pupils.”

All composers during the ensuing century have been Schoenberg’s pupils, in a sense. His ideas have been embraced by some and rejected by others, but essentially no important composers have gone untouched by them. John Adams was exposed to Schoenberg’s work as his musical awareness was just emerging. He was fascinated by the composer’s Pierrot lunaire during a weeklong seminar he attended at Brandeis University in his mid-teens. There followed an immersion in Schoenberg recordings and then, during his junior year at Harvard, he played clarinet in a Boston Symphony Orchestra production of the composer’s twelve-tone opera Moses und Aron. At the time Adams was also studying with two teachers who had been Schoenberg students, Earl Kim and Leon Kirchner.

In the end, Adams would rebel against Schoenberg’s non-tonal precepts. He would later reflect:

It is difficult to understand why the Schoenbergian model became so profoundly influential for classical composers. Rejecting Schoenberg was like siding with the Philistines, and freeing myself from the model he represented was an act of enormous willpower.

In some cases this took the form of comical parody. “In my Chamber Symphony,” he reported, “the busy, hyperactive style of Schoenberg’s own early work is placed in a salad spinner with Hollywood cartoon music.” He continued:

My own Harmonielehre is a parody of a different sort in that it bears a “subsidiary relation” to a model (in this case a number of signal works from the turn of the [20th] century like Gurrelieder and the Sibelius Fourth Symphony), but it does so without the intent to ridicule. It is a large, three-movement work for orchestra that marries the developmental techniques of minimalism with the harmonic and expressive world of fin de siècle late Romanticism. It was a conceit that could only be attempted once.

In his autobiography, Hallelujah Junction, Adams reports that he suffered from an 18-month creative block in 1982 and ’83:

In a particularly revealing dream that occurred during this difficult period I found myself on a dirt road in a dark, damp winter forest…. I was carrying two babies in my arms, twins. Out of the damp, nocturnal gloom a malevolent-looking man in an overcoat suddenly appeared in front of me…. He reached out to grab one of the babies from me. A violent struggle ensued. I knew that it was Schoenberg and that he was trying to abduct my children. This image doubtless had less to do with Schoenberg than with my own anxious predicament at the time, some of which I blamed on the long shadow he cast over my thinking.

Adams responded by breaking his fallow spell with Harmonielehre, an ebullient 40-minute symphony proudly rooted in tonal harmony, a work that meshes the yearning sentiment of sunset Romanticism with the exciting rhythms and timbral vividness of minimalism. He wrote:
The Work at a Glance

John Adams provided this note on Harmonielehre:

The first part is a seventeen-minute inverted arch form: high energy at the beginning and end, with a long, roaming Sehnsucht section in between. The pounding E minor chords at the beginning and end of the movement are the musical counterparts of a dream image I had shortly before starting the piece. In the dream I’d watched a gigantic supertanker take off from the surface of San Francisco Bay and thrust itself into the sky like a Saturn rocket. At the time (1984–85) I was still deeply involved in the study of C. G. Jung’s writings, particularly his examination of medieval mythology. I was deeply affected by Jung’s discussion of the character of Anfortas, the king whose wounds could never be healed. As a critical archetype, Anfortas symbolized a condition of sickness of the soul that curses it with a feeling of impotence and depression. In this slow, moody movement entitled “The Anfortas Wound” a long, elegiac trumpet solo floats over a delicately shifting screen of minor triads that pass like spectral shapes from one family of instruments to the other. Two enormous climaxes rise up out of the otherwise melancholy landscape, the second one being an obvious homage to Mahler’s last, unfinished symphony.

The final part, “Meister Eckhardt and Quackie,” begins with a simple berceuse, or cradle-song, that is as airy, serene and blissful as “The Anfortas Wound” is earthbound, shadowy, and bleak. The Zappaesque title refers to a dream I’d had shortly after the birth of our daughter, Emily, who was briefly dubbed “Quackie” during her infancy. In the dream, she rode perched on the shoulder of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhardt, as they hover among the heavenly bodies like figures painted on the high ceilings of old cathedrals. The tender berceuse gradually picks up speed and mass … and culminates in a tidal wave of brass and percussion over a pedal point on E-flat major.

Image by Carl Jung, from his exploration of dreams in The Red Book