



AMERICAN CLASSICS



# JOHN ADAMS

**My Father Knew Charles Ives**  
**Harmonielehre**

**Nashville Symphony**  
**Giancarlo Guerrero**



## John Adams (b. 1947)

### My Father Knew Charles Ives • Harmonielehre

*My Father Knew Charles Ives* is an intriguing, allusive title. But, as composer John Adams freely admits, his father never met the iconoclastic New England composer, much less knew him personally. In his memoir, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), he notes similarities between his father and George Ives, Connecticut bandmaster and father of Charles: “Both fathers were artistic and not particularly successful in their conventional business lives. Both were dreamers, perhaps not fully disciplined or motivated, but capable of inspiring their sons. Both loved small-town New England life and aligned themselves with the individualist, skeptical philosophy of Thoreau.” In his official program note, the composer describes the work as “a piece of musical autobiography, an homage and encomium to a composer whose influence on me has been huge.” It followed one of his most important and popular commissions, *On the Transmigration of Souls*, written in 2002 for the New York Philharmonic to commemorate the tragedy of 9/11, in which he was inspired by what he calls Ives’ “mixing board” technique of handling the orchestra. The title itself owes something to the Morton Feldman piece *I Met Heine on the Rue Fürstenberg*, described by Adams as of “similarly challenged authenticity.” The work was premiered in April 2003 by the San Francisco Symphony conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas.

In the first movement, *Concord* (a reference to Adams’ hometown of Concord, New Hampshire, rather than the Massachusetts town that gave its name to Ives’ epic piano sonata), Adams channels most clearly the influence of his New England predecessor. The opening evokes the hazy stillness of a summer day, against which woodwinds, harps and keyboards suggest the persistent chirping of birds. A distant-sounding trumpet intones a lonely, long-lined melody, while the sound of clarinet (at 4:47) recalls the young John practicing a little Beethoven ditty in the front room of his family’s house in Concord (his early studies on the instrument gave him the opportunity to play

with his father in the local Nevers’ Second Regimental Band). When the parade begins (at 5:38), Adams conjures up an Ivesian Fourth of July, although in this instance the tunes only *sound* familiar. Rather than quoting established melodies as Ives often did, Adams creates his own. “Only a smirk from trumpets playing *Reveille* and, in the coda, a hint of Ives’ beloved *Nearer My God to Thee* are the genuine article,” he says.

Adams calls the second movement, *The Lake*, a “summer nocturne.” It opens on a sound world similar to the beginning of *Concord* – strings are instructed to play “extremely fast tremolo” and first violins are told to sound a quarter-tone higher than written. Solo oboe begins a long melodic line Adams composed with San Francisco Symphony principal oboist William Bennett in mind. With its occasional pitch bends, it evokes the sound of a Japanese shakuhachi flute. Soon, over the water, distant echoes of a dance band can be heard (trumpets playing with Harmon mutes beginning at 2:46 and, a bit later, solo piano). For Adams, this represents the days when his father would sit in with visiting bands at Winnepesaukee Gardens, a local dance hall owned and operated by Adams’ maternal step-grandfather. It was there, in fact, that his parents first met.

Solo trumpet returns to lead off the concluding movement, *The Mountain*. Mountains have played what you might call an oversized role in Adams’ life, beginning with looming Mount Kearsarge that he could see from his New Hampshire backyard (which he says inspired his “adolescent mythic imagination”) and extending to the higher California peaks he loves to climb as an adult. Adams acknowledges that the trumpet solo is an “Ivesian trope for certain, even down to the questioning intervals of the rising major seventh and falling minor third.” But beyond that the movement becomes, in the composer’s words, “less about Ives and more about John Adams.” An insistent pulse emerges, and the orchestra starts to spew flashes of vivid colors, creating what the composer calls “a gigantic mass, an implacable wall of granite.” Once it

reaches its apex, however, the music suddenly subsides, mirroring “a moment of sudden, unexpected astonishment after a hard-won rush to the top.”

At the time he completed *Harmonium* for the San Francisco Symphony and Chorus in 1981, Adams described himself as “a Minimalist who is bored with Minimalism.” He was an artist who needed to move on creatively but wasn’t sure how. For an entire year he kept nothing of what he composed. When he began work on his next San Francisco Symphony commission, *Harmonielehre*, his intent was to expand his language and build more on the rich tonal resources of the past, but he spent eight months on a series of false starts. Once inspiration hit, however, he found himself working like a man possessed. It was “almost as if the floodgates had been opened and nearly two years of pent-up energy and ideas came rushing forth,” says Adams. He describes the 40-minute symphony-in-all-but-name as “a statement of belief in the power of tonality at a time when I was uncertain about its future.” Unlike many of his contemporaries, Adams had never rejected the past, and in this new work he wholeheartedly embraced it.

*Harmonielehre* is, like *My Father Knew Charles Ives*, a deliberately suggestive title. To many musicians, it recalls the theory textbook of the same name written by Arnold Schoenberg and dedicated to Mahler. But Adams was quick to point out that there was no didactic intent behind his music, saying in 1995, “I’m not trying to teach anyone harmony. This is the culmination – so far – of my teaching myself about harmony.” And his relationship to the past is one of love: “While writing the piece,” he says, “I felt as if I were channeling the sensibilities of those composers I loved and finding a contemporary form for their special harmonic worlds, treating them as if they had been conjured in a seance.” Edo de Waart premiered the work with the San Francisco Symphony in March 1985.

The lengthy first part opens with a powerful blast of pure E minor, its repetitive and rhythmic character still drawing much from the techniques of Minimalism. Upper

woodwinds introduce an insistent D (suggesting a functional seventh chord, perhaps?), but the prevailing E minor triad persists, driven by a constant quarter-note pulse in the bass and flurries of eighth notes in the rest of the strings (and eventually woodwinds). The harmony steadily thickens and becomes more complex until the pounding pulse relaxes and eases into a second “theme” – an exceedingly broad and over-arching melody begun by cellos and horns at 6:21. Violins and violas take up the line, which Adams describes as being “full of *Sehnsucht*” (“yearning”); it continues unabated, seemingly without cadence, for several minutes. It eventually climaxes in a brief passage of radiant, Ravel-like ecstasy at 12:34. Gradually, Adams reintroduces the Minimalistic ideas from the opening, creating an A–B–A structure that would make a perfect single-movement symphony in itself. The final, emphatic cadence brings us solidly back to E minor.

The second movement, *The Anfortas Wound*, leaves any traces of Minimalism far behind. Adams describes it as “a piece about sickness and infirmity, physical and spiritual.” Once again, a long line threads through the piece, beginning with muted cellos, a color Adams was inspired to use by Sibelius’ *Fourth Symphony*. Indeed, there is a Nordic bleakness throughout the movement – it might very well be the kind of music Sibelius himself would have written had he lived to the end of the 20th century, yet it is emphatically not a Sibelian pastiche. The title references not the Amfortas of Wagner’s *Parsifal*, but rather his archetype found in the 12th-century writings of Chrétien de Troyes and the slightly later efforts of Wolfram von Eschenbach. The music builds to a powerful and painful *fortississimo* peak (at 8:44) that recalls a similar moment in Mahler’s *Tenth Symphony*. Adams maintains the tension until a sharp outcry from violins dissipates in a falling, three-octave portamento. The texture quickly thins out, and the movement ends on a calming A minor triad (albeit with added sixth).

The unusual title of the third movement, *Meister Eckhardt and Quackie*, references a 13th-century mystic

and Adams' then four-month-old daughter, nicknamed "Quackie" for the funny, duck-like baby noises she made. Adams had envisioned them together in a dream, the medieval Dominican monk floating in space, carrying the infant on his shoulders. "The image, strange and whimsical and inexplicable as dreams often can be, confirmed how the birth of a child can be an event of such intense psychic power that it will cause the most insurmountable walls of psychic resistance to come tumbling down."

Musically speaking, the movement combines the strong pulse of Minimalism with long lines like those heard in the first two sections. Various tonalities struggle for dominance, while Adams also exploits the duality of major and minor modes. "I simply placed the keys together, as if in a mixer," he says, "and let them battle it out." But there is an ultimate winner: *Harmonielehre* culminates in an ecstatic E flat major that summons memories of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* and Wagner's overflowing Rhine.

Early in his composing life – first as a student and then as an emerging artist – John Adams strove to be a man of his own time. As the works on this album demonstrate, he remains rooted in modernism, but his compositions have accrued an aura of timelessness that only experience and maturing genius can bring about.

Frank K. DeWald

Excerpts from John Adams' official program notes for *My Father Knew Charles Ives* are reprinted with the kind permission of [www.earbox.com](http://www.earbox.com). Additional composer quotes come from his memoir and from program notes prepared by Michael Steinberg for the San Francisco Symphony (reprinted in *The John Adams Reader*, ed. Thomas May, Amadeus Press, 2006).

## Nashville Symphony



Photo: Kurt Heinecke

One of Tennessee's largest and longest-running nonprofit performing arts organizations, the Nashville Symphony has been an integral part of the Music City sound since 1946. Led by music director Giancarlo Guerrero and president and CEO Alan D. Valentine, the 83-member ensemble performs more than 160 concerts annually, with a focus on contemporary American orchestral music through collaborations with composers including Jennifer Higdon, Terry Riley, Joan Tower, Aaron Jay Kernis, Michael Daugherty, John Harbison, Jonathan Leshnoff, and the late Christopher Rouse. The orchestra is equally renowned for its commissioning and recording projects with Nashville-based artists including bassist Edgar Meyer, banjoist Béla Fleck, singer-songwriter Ben Folds, electric bassist Victor Wooten, and composer Kip Winger. The Nashville Symphony is one of the most active recording orchestras in the US, with more than 40 releases, the majority on Naxos. Together, these recordings have earned a total of 25 GRAMMY Award nominations and 13 GRAMMY Awards, including two for Best Orchestral Performance. Schermerhorn Symphony Center is home to the Nashville Symphony and widely regarded as one of the finest concert halls in the US.

[www.nashvillesymphony.org](http://www.nashvillesymphony.org)

## Giancarlo Guerrero



Six-time GRAMMY Award-winning conductor Giancarlo Guerrero is music director of the Nashville Symphony and the NFM Wrocław Philharmonic in Poland, as well as principal guest conductor of the Gulbenkian Orchestra in Lisbon, Portugal. He has championed contemporary American music through numerous commissions, recordings and performances with the Nashville Symphony, presenting eleven world premieres of works by Jonathan Leshnoff, Michael Daugherty, Terry Riley, and others. As part of this commitment, he helped guide the creation of Nashville Symphony's Composer Lab & Workshop initiative. In North America, Guerrero has appeared with the orchestras of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Toronto, and the National Symphony Orchestra. He has developed a strong international profile working with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Brussels Philharmonic, Deutsche Radio Philharmonie, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra. An advocate for music education, he works with the Curtis Institute of Music, Colburn

School, the National Youth Orchestra (NYO2) in New York, and the Nashville Symphony's Accelerando program, which provides intensive music education to promising young students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

[giancarlo-guerrero.com](http://giancarlo-guerrero.com)

**John  
ADAMS**  
(b. 1947)

**My Father Knew Charles Ives (2003) 27:28**

- 1 I. Concord 9:40**
- 2 II. The Lake 7:10**
- 3 III. The Mountain 10:34**

**Harmonielehre (1985) 41:28**

- 4 I. — 17:21**
- 5 II. The Anfortas Wound 12:41**
- 6 III. Meister Eckhardt and Quackie 11:16**

**Nashville Symphony**  
**Giancarlo Guerrero**

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**AMERICAN CLASSICS**

Pulitzer and Erasmus Prize-winning composer John Adams occupies a unique position in the world of American music. His works stand out among contemporary classical compositions for their depth of expression, brilliance of sound, and the profoundly humanist nature of their themes. Adams describes *My Father Knew Charles Ives* as “an homage and encomium to a composer whose influence on me has been huge.” *Harmonielehre* was a deliberate move by Adams to expand his musical language beyond Minimalism, keeping its energetic pulse but embracing the rich tonal resources of the past to create a work that has accrued an aura of timelessness.

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