



AMERICAN CLASSICS



JOHN ADAMS

City Noir

Fearful Symmetries

Lola Montez Does the Spider Dance

ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra

Marin Alsop



John Adams (b. 1947)

City Noir • Fearful Symmetries • Lola Montez Does the Spider Dance

When Aaron Copland died in 1990, the question naturally arose: Who now is America's greatest living composer? Many candidates could have sprung to mind at the time, but today, almost three decades later, one name stands out: John Adams. The San Francisco-based composer has captured the hearts and minds of innumerable musicians and music lovers around the world. His music shares with Copland not a style per se but a uniquely American viewpoint that celebrates our cultural diversity, our sense of solemn purpose and, not infrequently, our sense of fun.

City Noir (2009)

Despite his strong ties to San Francisco, *City Noir* is Adams' tribute to another of California's major centers of commerce and culture, Los Angeles. Commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and other organizations, the work was inspired by Kevin Starr's seven-volume series of books on the state's cultural and social history, particularly the chapter on the 1940s and 1950s that covered the sensational journalism of the time and what the composer describes as "the dark, eerie chiaroscuro of the Hollywood films that have come to define the period sensibility for us."

As the film noir genre flourished during those two decades, it was given a distinctive musical profile by such diverse composers as Miklós Rózsa (*Double Indemnity*, *Brute Force*, *The Killers*), Max Steiner (*Key Largo* and other Bogart classics), Franz Waxman (*Sunset Boulevard*, *Dark Passage*), Dimitri Tiomkin (*Dial M for Murder*, *D.O.A.*) and other Hollywood music legends. Adams' music bears no stylistic resemblance to any of those; rather, he set out to create "an orchestral work that, while not necessarily referring to the soundtracks of those films, might nevertheless evoke a similar mood and feeling tone of the era." He says he was intrigued by those scores' "hectic mix of extreme lyricism – a sort of romanticism with stage makeup, you might say – coupled with this always threatening sense of violence in the background. ... The music is inspired by Fifties jazz, by film scoring and then, of course, my love of writing for the gigantic modern symphony orchestra." He describes *City Noir* as being "in the form of a thirty-minute symphony. The formal and expressive weight of its three movements is distributed in pockets of high energy that are nested among areas of a more leisurely – one could even say 'cinematic' – lyricism."

In the first movement (*The City and its Double*), a series of powerful dramatic gestures from the full orchestra leads to the appearance of a jazz drummer improvising lightly on a basic rhythmic idea intended to evoke the era and provide a sense of forward momentum. Scurrying woodwind figures – in which the timbre of the alto sax is prominent – dominate the texture over a nervous, pizzicato bass line to evoke what Adams suggests might be "a late-hour empty street scene." Gradually, strings (and, later, brass) try to interject a more lyrical arc over the turmoil, but woodwinds and percussion continue to percolate in the background, albeit in more fragmented fashion. This musical dialectic continues as the woodwinds seem to regain momentum until what Adams calls "a surging melody in horns and celli" leads to a moment of lvesian chaos before the music "suddenly collapses into shards and fragments" and the second movement begins without a break.

This Song is for You is an evocative piece of *Nachtmusik* that demonstrates Adams' skillful use of orchestral color. It opens with hazy strings, played without vibrato, and a cluster from woodwinds that could be the sound of a horn piercing the fog in the Port of Los Angeles. The large percussion section, requiring five players (plus the jazz drummer) and including a set of Balinese-style tuned gongs, adds further mystery to the mix. (Adams is very particular about the gongs in his score, stating that if the right type playing the right pitches are not available, they should be left out.) Slowly, almost imperceptibly, a solo alto sax line begins to emerge from the mist, succeeded by a solo trombone, which Adams describes as a "'talking' solo, in the manner of the great Ellington soloists Lawrence Brown and Britt Woodman (both, fittingly enough, Angelinos)." The music becomes increasingly violent until it loses momentum, and the quiet opening mood returns. Introspective solos from trombone and viola bring the movement to a pensive conclusion.

The city-after-dark theme continues in the concluding movement, *Boulevard Night*. After a solemn opening, Adams introduces a familiar film noir trope: the sound of a solo trumpet. Film composers have often used this timbre to evoke masculine loneliness in both film noirs and military pictures – Adams himself acknowledges his debt to Jerry Goldsmith's *Chinatown* score in the "languorous and nocturnal" sound of the instrument. Churning woodwinds intervene to dispel the reflective moment, leading to a violent passage of what Adams describes as "jerky, stop-start coughing engine music." Solo alto sax returns to lead the music forward, while upper strings impose a more lyrical element over the fray. But the contrast is soon dispelled, and Adams, piling texture upon texture (including a prominent role once again for the jazz drummer), stirs the city to an unforgiving fury with relentless rhythmic figures. As he describes it, "The music should have the slightly disorienting effect of a very crowded boulevard peopled with strange characters ... the kind who only come out very late on a very hot night."

Gustavo Dudamel conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the premiere of *City Noir* on 8 October 2009 – his first official concert as music director in the Los Angeles Walt Disney Concert Hall. Adams had met the conductor in Venezuela and developed a good understanding of his strengths and passions, keeping those in mind as he wrote the work. *City Noir* is now considered the third panel in a triptych of Adams works inspired by the landscape and culture of California; the other two are *The Dharma at Big Sur* (also commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic) and *El Dorado* (commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony). After its European premiere in March 2010, *The Times*' critic Richard Morrison cited the work's "seething energies, menace and melodrama. ... The restlessness, the sardonic relish of urban angst familiar from the hard-bitten tales of Hammett and Chandler seeps through it like a dark stain."

The composer has called *City Noir* "an imaginary film score." With the diverse images it evokes, it might be a wonderful challenge for an enterprising filmmaker to fashion a real-world film around its many-layered moods. It would not be the first time such "reverse engineering" was applied to Adams' music (see Buster Keaton reference below).

Fearful Symmetries (1988)

In a program note for *Fearful Symmetries*, Adams explains that he began thinking about a new orchestral work shortly after successfully launching his first opera, *Nixon in China*. "Working in the almost too beautiful confines of the American Academy in Rome, I found that ideas were slow to arrive. When they did make an appearance, I was surprised to see that they were in much the same vein as the *Nixon* music. Apparently, I had more to say in that particular style, although this time it would be purely instrumental music, and the sound would be largely dictated by the Nixon orchestra, a kind of mutated big band, heavy on brass, winds, synthesizer and saxophones. To this ensemble I added for *Fearful Symmetries* a keyboard sampler playing sampled percussion sounds, two horns and a bassoon."

The composer's first big orchestral hit was the still immensely popular *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*. His fascination with mechanisms and machinery is evident in many other works as well, and easily gives rise to some of the more "minimalistic" passages in his *oeuvre*. (We should acknowledge that Adams does not like the label "minimalism" applied to his music and, indeed, it is much more than that.) *Fearful Symmetries* might well be subtitled 'Long Ride in a Fast Machine' since it maintains a strong motor pulse throughout its nearly half-hour duration.

In his autobiography, *Hallelujah Junction*, Adams reveals, "The title phrase comes from the poem *The Tyger* by William Blake. It was not so much the content of Blake's poem that stirred me but rather the key phrase, 'fearful symmetries,' that I was drawn to. As I worked on the piece, I found that ideas were coming to me in almost maddeningly symmetrical packages of four-, eight-, and sixteen-bar harmonic units. [...] Rather than try to deconstruct the obviousness of these harmonic structures, I did the opposite: I amplified their predictability and in so doing ended up composing an insistent pulse-driven juggernaut of a piece that has continued to prove useful to scores of choreographers and dancers." So far, there have been over a dozen choreographed stagings of the piece. The music has also been used for a live-to-film presentation of silent Buster Keaton clips, featuring the legendary comic actor in a collage of high-energy escapades.

As the music starts, Adams evokes thoughts of a train, with keyboards and strings providing a steady, clacking rhythm against a mournful whistle created by a combination of English horn, bassoon and two alto saxes. And once underway, the musical steamroller never stops. Adams provides an endlessly inventive series of shifts in timbre and texture to constantly engage the ear. In describing the work, violinist and music blogger Timothy Judd has said, "The jazz of Ellington and Gershwin collide with Stravinsky and the endless arpeggios of Philip Glass. Pop rock and the garish sounds of the double-manual Yamaha Electone synthesizer blend with a 'lounge lizard' saxophone quartet." The frequency of Adams' recurring changes resembles swift film cutting (a fact well on display in the Keaton film) to near-dizzying effect.

The composer conducted the first performance of *Fearful Symmetries* with the Orchestra of St. Luke's in New York's Avery Fischer Hall on 29 October 1988.

Lola Montez Does the Spider Dance (2016, rev. 2020)

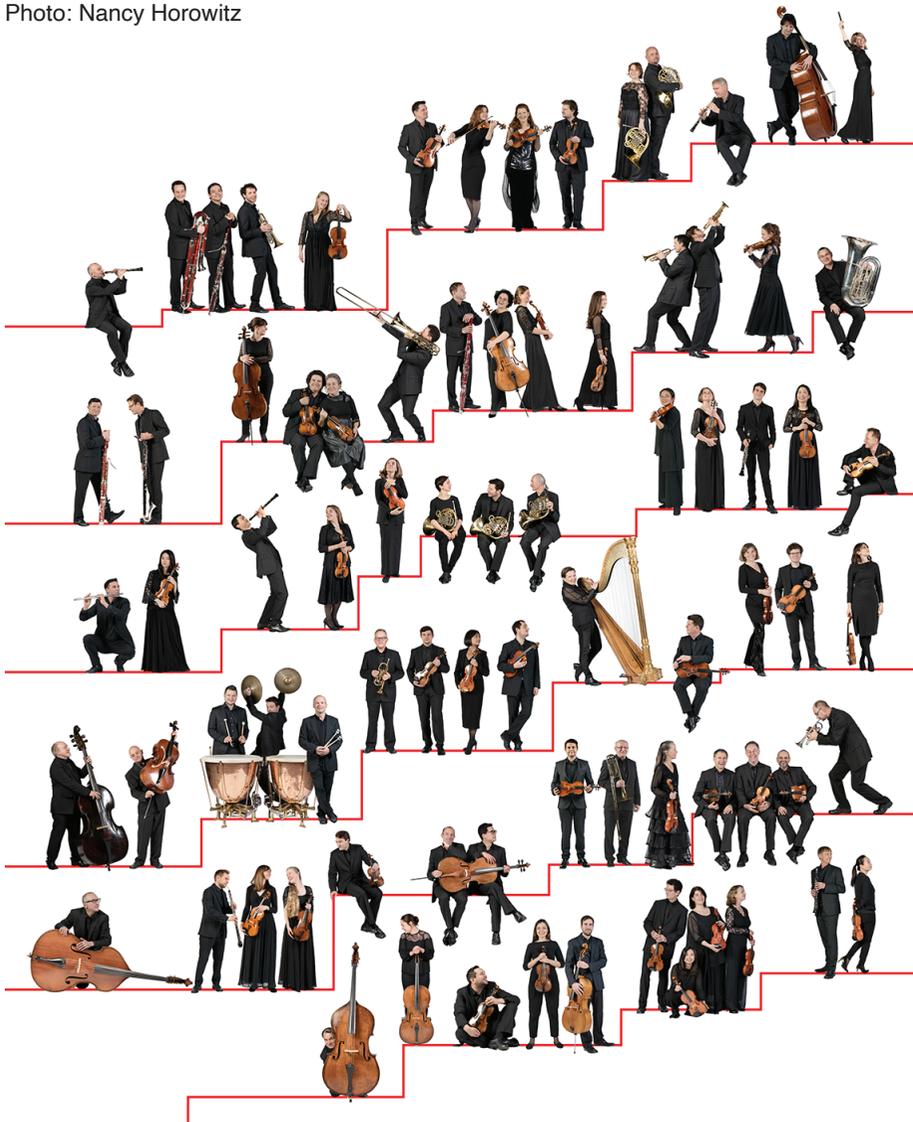
Since its modest start in the early 1960s, the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music in Santa Cruz, California, has grown to become one of the world's most noteworthy showcases of new music. More than 300 composers have participated in the festival, which boasts over 175 world premiere performances and over 78 US premieres. Its musical directors have included Carlos Chávez, Dennis Russell Davies, John Adams and – for 25 years – Marin Alsop (now music director laureate). To mark the end of her tenure, the Festival Orchestra musicians commissioned John Adams to compose a new work in her honor. In a September 2017 interview for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Adams said, “I adore Marin not only for her great musicianship and her advocacy of new music, but also for her immensely warm, generous and gracious personality.” Maestra Alsop returns the sentiment: “John is a very dear friend and, I think, one of the greatest composers of all time, as well as a super human being. ... We have been collaborators – or maybe I should say partners in crime – on many occasions over these decades.” Since its premiere at the festival on 6 August 2016 (an occasion described by the conductor as “especially sweet”), the composer has incorporated it into his opera *Girls of the Golden West*, a work which was already underway when the commission for *Lola* arrived.

Lola Montez (1821–1861) was an Irishwoman (real name: Eliza Rosanna Gilbert) who was renowned as a “Spanish” dancer during the middle of the 19th century. She was involved in numerous scandals, including three divorces and liaisons with King Ludwig I of Bavaria as well as, reputedly, Franz Liszt and Alexandre Dumas. Her notoriety followed her throughout Europe and America, where she lived in both San Francisco and New York (she is buried in Brooklyn). The most famous part of her act was her “Spider Dance,” which showed a young woman being attacked by spiders and her effort to chase them off – set, appropriately enough, to the music of an Italian tarantella. John Adams’ music, however, takes a different tack, where the “itchy” feeling derives from his masterful rhythmic drive, led initially by a persistent descending half-step figure that returns later in the piece. At c. 00:24, the trombones (described as “talking trombones” in the score) announce the act – the following words are literally printed underneath their notes: “Ladies and Gentlemen! New attractions! Engagement of Mademoiselle Lola Montez, the greatest American danseuse now living. At great expense now performing the famous Spider Dance!” An extensive clarinet solo threads in and out of the piece, and the persistent staccato articulation of much of the material adds to the image of spiders attacking the hapless dancer until she stamps the last of them out with an emphatic, *sforzando* low C from bassoon, contrabassoon, trombone, tuba, string bass and bass drum.

Frank K. DeWald

ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra

Photo: Nancy Horowitz



An ensemble of international renown, the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (ORF Vienna RSO) is a paragon of Viennese orchestral tradition. Known for its exceptional programming, the orchestra combines 19th-century repertoire with contemporary works and rarely performed pieces from other periods. All ORF Vienna RSO performances are broadcast on the radio, and the orchestra performs in two subscription series in Vienna, in the Musikverein Wien and the Wiener Konzerthaus. In addition, it regularly appears at major festivals in Austria and internationally such as the Salzburg Festival, musikprotokoll im steierischen herbst and Wien Modern. The ORF Vienna RSO enjoys a successful collaboration with the MusikTheater an der Wien, and is also equally at home in the film music genre. The orchestra regularly tours internationally, and its discography spans a broad range of cross-genre recordings. Under the leadership of its former chief conductors, which include Milan Horvat, Leif Segerstam, Lothar Zagrosek, Pinchas Steinberg, Dennis Russell Davies, Bertrand de Billy and Cornelius Meister, the orchestra has continuously expanded its repertoire and its international reputation. Marin Alsop has served as the orchestra's chief conductor since 2019.

rso.orf.at

Marin Alsop



One of the foremost conductors of our time, Marin Alsop represents a powerful and inspiring voice. The 2023/24 season marks her fifth as chief conductor of the ORF Vienna RSO; her first as artistic director and chief conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony; and her first as principal guest conductor of London's Philharmonia Orchestra. She will begin a new position as principal guest conductor of The Philadelphia Orchestra in the 2024/25 season. She is also chief conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra residency at the Ravinia Festival. A full decade after becoming the first female conductor of the Last Night of the Proms, Alsop made history again in September 2023, as both the first woman and the first American to guest conduct three Last Nights. In 2021, she assumed the title of music director laureate and OrchKids Founder of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra after a 14-year tenure as music director, and in 2019, after seven years as music director, she became conductor of honour of Brazil's São Paulo Symphony Orchestra (OSESF). Deeply committed to new music, she was music director of California's Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music for 25 years. Recognized with *BBC Music Magazine* "Album of the Year" and Emmy nominations in addition to GRAMMY, Classical BRIT and *Gramophone* awards, Alsop's discography comprises more than 200 titles. The first and only conductor to receive a MacArthur Fellowship, she has also been honored with the World Economic Forum's Crystal Award, among many other awards and academic positions.

www.marinalsop.com

John
ADAMS
(b. 1947)

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| City Noir (2009) | 33:59 |
| 1 I. The City and its Double – | 13:02 |
| 2 II. The Song is for You | 8:46 |
| 3 III. Boulevard Night | 12:09 |
| 4 Fearful Symmetries (1988) | 29:12 |
| 5 Girls of the Golden West –
Lola Montez Does the Spider Dance
(2016, rev. 2020) | 5:55 |



**ORF Vienna Radio
Symphony Orchestra**
Marin Alsop

Recorded: 31 May–2 June **1**–**3** **5**, 1 and 3 December **4** 2022
at the Grosser Sendesaal, ORF Funkhaus and Grosser Saal,
Musikverein, Vienna, Austria

Producer and editor: Erich Hofmann

Engineer: Christian Gorz

Booklet notes: Frank K. DeWald

Publishers: Hendon Music, Inc. / Boosey & Hawkes

Cover: *Los Angeles at Night*
by choness (www.istockphoto.com)



AMERICAN CLASSICS

John Adams' music has long since captured the admiration of listeners for its inimitable American qualities. *City Noir* was inspired by the cultural and social history of Los Angeles, with Adams calling it 'an imaginary film score' in its evocation of a terse, melodramatic and menace-drenched sound world. *Fearful Symmetries* exemplifies Adams' steamroller motor rhythms, endlessly inventive in their shifts of timbre, texture and color. The album ends with a work dedicated to Marin Alsop, a capricious "Spider Dance" of memorable rhythmic drive.

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Playing
Time:
69:09