

## Late Night Adams

Friday, September 15 – 9:30 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

### XENAKIS

*Jalons*

(14')\*

### ADAMS

*Harmonielehre*

(42')\*

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The Anfortas Wound

Meister Eckhardt and Quackie

NOTE: There is no intermission in tonight's performance. Please join us in the lobby following the concert.

program subject to change

\*indicates approximate performance duration

### *Jalons*

**Iannis Xenakis**

(b. Brăila, Romania, 1922 / d. Paris, 2001)

First performed: January 26, 1987 in Paris

This is the first work by Iannis Xenakis ever performed by the ESO

Romanian-born, naturalized French, Greek composer Iannis Xenakis was one of the most important figures in the niche but influential spectrum of music which united the classical avant garde to electronic and computer-assisted music. Xenakis did not limit his interest to music, either. He integrated it with his training and understanding of architecture, designing music for pre-existing spaces, and designing spaces to be integrated with specific music. Not surprisingly, some of his compositions used the spaces themselves as part of the performance, by dispersing musicians all around the performance chamber. He also created electronic works using his own UPIC (a double acronym: UPIC standing for Unité Polyagogique Informatique CEMAMu; CEMAMu standing for the Paris-based Centre d'Études de

Mathématique et Automatique Musicales) system; and massive multimedia performances Xenakis called polytopes.

*Jalons* (“signposts,” or “landmarks”) was written for, and premiered by, the Ensemble InterContemporain which, under the direction of Pierre Boulez, had become one of the leading presenters of contemporary music in the late 20th century. The work was written to mark the ensemble’s tenth anniversary. In this case, no electronics are used; the unusual scoring is for single musicians (save for two clarinets) on each instrument, with each instrument treated independently from all the others. The highly idiosyncratic parts make for a work which is constantly in transition. Instruments may seem to build to something, but move apart; sounds may seem highly independent, even erratic, blocks of sound appear and are gone – the entire work, which lasts a quarter of an hour – is kaleidoscopic on its ever-changing and unsettled journey.

### ***Harmonielehre***

**John Adams**

(b. Worcester, Massachusetts, 1947)

First performed: March 21, 1985 in San Francisco

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

It’s not a surprise that works written immediately following a prolonged “writer’s block” would have a certain sense of triumph to them. It’s certainly the case with Rachmaninoff’s *Second Piano Concerto*, and so it is with *Harmonielehre*, composed by American John Adams in 1985 after some 18 months of inactivity. The work is named for the comprehensive harmony textbook by Arnold Schoenberg – a fascinating choice, and more revealing than it may appear.

For a composer from the “minimalist” school, Adams uses elements of minimalism, but only as one of many tools in the drawer. There are references, some more overt than others, to other composers, but the extra-musical influences are at least as important – including dreams. Adams’ writer’s block was finally broken by a dream he had, in which a giant tanker ship rose out of San Francisco Bay, turned upright, and streamed upward like a rocket. “As it rose out of the water, I could see a beautiful brownish-orange oxide on the bottom” of the ship, he said. In the work’s intensely powerful beginning, 39 repetitions of a huge E Major chord pound out of the orchestra (the tanker taking flight), following which the music follows a chromatic progression that at least nods in Schoenberg’s serial direction – Adams referred to the tonal transitions as “chord gates.” Schoenberg dedicated his book *Harmonielehre* to Gustav Mahler; whether that’s behind the climactic moment in Adams’ first movement, nearly halfway through, when a powerful fortissimo echoes an equally passionate moment in the Adagio of Mahler’s *Tenth* - "what comes through is not, say 'Mahler', but rather John Adams's personal experience of Mahler," Adams himself has said.

A more material influence lies at the heart of the second movement. In Grail lore, Anfortas, “the Fisher King,” was the last in a line of guardians of the Grail, rendered impotent due to a wound, and unable to carry on the burden of his task. For Adams, this wound is a metaphor for his writer’s block, and the movement proceeds as a long unfolding melody (and so not really minimalist), and many have pointed to references in its bleak opening to Sibelius (the *Fourth Symphony*), and its shattering climax again to Mahler’s *Tenth*.

“Quackie” was the affectionate nickname Adams had for his infant daughter. Meister Eckhardt was a 13th century German mystic, theologian, and philosopher. In another dream Adams had, his daughter rode Meister Eckhardt’s back through the cosmos, as she whispered the secret a grace into his ear. Musically, the final movement’s progression is Wagnerian, as Adams says of the music of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, “The harmonies, restless and forever migrating to a new tonal center, moved between tension and resolution in an uncanny way that constantly propelled the listener forward ... This was not just music about desire. It was desire itself.” As the work concludes, it does so in a clash of tonal centres, again as Adams explains, “I simply place the keys together, as if in a mixer, and let them battle it out. And finally E-flat wins through its strength, and this moment seems like an epiphany.”

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