

JOHN ADAMS (b.1947) **The Chairman Dances** foxtrot for orchestra

Classicism from California? Written in 1987? And from an opera about 1970s superpower diplomacy? Yes - that's how vibrant the classical tradition still is, and how brilliantly original a composer is John Adams. As well as being an IKEA-inspired interior design craze, "Minimalism" has been one of the most refreshing trends in contemporary classical music. The idea's simple - a return to the basics, first rhythm, then colour, harmony and (whisper it) melody. By building from the rhythm and keeping things clear, composers like Glass, Nyman and Adams have given us a music that's wholly modern but unashamedly enjoyable – two phrases you'll rarely find together!

Modern music needs modern subjects. As Adams saw it, Handel and Verdi wrote operas about historical rulers; why shouldn't he write an opera about President Nixon's 1972 summit with Mao Zedong? *Nixon in China* opened in Houston in 1987. *The Chairman Dances* is a kind of postscript - a fantasy scene Adams didn't include in the opera but thought too good to waste. Madame Mao gatecrashes the Presidential Banquet in Beijing, hangs some paper lanterns, slips into a slinky dress and foxtrots seductively round the political dignitaries - whereupon the portrait of Chairman Mao on the wall behind comes to life, steps down, and joins her. Adams sets up his rhythm with the very first bar, and builds an unstoppable momentum, as the orchestra glints, chimes, jives and kicks its way through big-band riffs, romantic interludes and swoonsome 40s film-music. By the driving climax, the whole room's dancing.

QIGANG CHEN (b.1951) **Enchantements Oubliés**

for string orchestra, harp, piano, celesta and percussion UK premiere

Human beings are never content with what they have at present, always craving something they remember from the past, which seems superior in comparison. In reality, what we achieve through this process of striving and fine-tuning does not necessarily end up being an improvement on the original and the unrefined object. Refined beauty often carries too many traces of deliberate planning and scheming and, on closer inspection, signs of fakeness and lies. The most powerful beauty is the most unprocessed one – nature, of course. Many human creations today inevitably overlook the heart and the essence of the matter, always highlighting new concepts and skills. As a result, we get much on the surface but it might not bear a closer look.

When writing *Enchantements Oubliés*, I wanted to set myself free from formal constraints and let the music itself lead me to wherever it seemed willing to go, and I would be recording the journey of this natural force with my notes. Of course, what ends up in reality is never exactly the same as what we have in our mind, but I do hope this is a truthful depiction of how I felt about the essence of beauty at the time.

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Enchantements Oubliés (Forgotten Delights) was composed in 2004 to a commission from the conductor Kurt Masur, then Music Director of the Orchestre National de France. The instrumental line-up was also his suggestion. The work received its world premiere in January 2008 in Paris, under the baton of Alan Gilbert, now Music Director of the New York Philharmonic.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER QIGANG CHEN

Qigang Chen was studying music as a teenager at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing at the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. He was confined for three years and underwent "ideological re-education", yet went on learning composition despite social and political anti-cultural pressures. In 1977 the state reopened entry to the Conservatory and he studied there for five years with Luo Zhongrong.

In 1983 Chen won a postgraduate contest to travel abroad, and for four years was Olivier Messiaen's only student after his retirement from the Paris Conservatoire. Messiaen described how Chen's compositions "show real inventiveness, very great talent and a total assimilation of Chinese thinking with European musical concepts". Chen has received commissions from Radio France, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal and the Koussevitzky Foundation. He was composer-in-residence at the Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg from 2004 to 2006.

In 2008 Chen worked as Director of Music for the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, watched by 100,000 in the stadium with several billion watching worldwide on TV. His new work for piano and orchestra, *Er Huang*, was premiered by Lang Lang at Carnegie Hall in October 2009. www.chenqigang.com

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DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975) Symphony No.7 in C major, Op.60 'Leningrad'

Allegretto

Moderato (poco allegretto)

Adagio

Allegro non troppo

Few symphonies became so instantly recognisable, indeed so sensationally popular, as Shostakovich's 'Leningrad Symphony', a work first performed on 1 March 1942. With the world in the grip of an unprecedented total conflict, the symphony's apparent message of resistance and ultimate victory was soon to provide audiences both in the Soviet Union and in the West with an intoxicating emblem of defiance and hope. Because of the work's far-reaching success Shostakovich became not just a national but an international icon: at home it won him the coveted Stalin Prize First Class; and in the United States an image of the composer in the heroic guise of a voluntary fireman appeared on the front cover of *Time* magazine.

The Soviet leader Stalin fully realised the propaganda value of the work both at home and abroad, and for once – at least for a time – allowed Shostakovich to enjoy the limelight (though enjoy it he did not). The work had its detractors – among them Bartók who was to later parody it in his *Concerto for Orchestra* (1944) – yet official political and media channels portrayed the work as a rallying call in the fight against Nazism. Revelations that much of it was composed in Shostakovich's head before the war and his own claim that it was as much a response to Stalin's brutality during the notorious purges of the 1930s only came later.

Shortly after the Nazi blockade of Leningrad began in September 1941, Shostakovich and other members of the artistic elite were airlifted out of the city in the interests of their safety. After a spell in Moscow he was moved on to Kuibyshev and here he completed the score of the 'Leningrad' symphony, dedicating it to the besieged people of his home city, hundreds of thousands of whom were to starve to death that winter. Soon after its rapturously-received premiere in Kuibyshev official approval came from Stalin's artistic henchman Alexander Fadeyev: "Let us try to create now, during the war, works that are real, serious, big, but ones that can be used right now as weapons, not set aside for later ... Make it for now, like the Seventh Symphony." It was performed all over the Soviet Union, broadcasted extensively, and the print media devoted page after page to the work.

Leningrad, however, had to wait until 9 August 1942 for what has become one of the most celebrated musical performances of all time. With Hitler's army poised for a final assault on the city, the Soviet artillery unleashed a salvo of high-calibre shells to protect Leningrad's already bomb-damaged Philharmonic Hall inside of which an undernourished and motley-looking orchestra under the baton of a skeletal Karl Eliasberg performed Shostakovich's musical tribute to his birthplace. In equal measure people wept and wildly applauded. An official report stated "Never will anyone present forget this concert ... When they played the finale, the entire audience stood up. You couldn't sit and listen. It was impossible."

If the American media of the day are to be believed, a microfilm of the score found its way to the United States in a manner befitting a spy novel: by plane from Kuibyshev to Tehran, by car to Cairo, by plane once again through Africa to London and then across the Atlantic to New York. Described by the press as "the battle royal", the fight to conduct the first American performance was won by the young Arturo Toscanini who did so in New York on 19 July 1942. The concert was broadcast nationally and numerous US performances followed. Never before had a serious musical work attracted so much attention. In America and Britain Shostakovich's symphony came to symbolise a new-found, if fragile unity between East and West as they cast ideological differences aside and joined forces to combat the Nazi threat.

First movement

According to Shostakovich the agile opening of the first movement "was inspired by the month of August in Leningrad", though the music also hints at less sunlit, more militarised scenes to come. The tempo relaxes and the strings introduce a gentle theme described by the composer as reflecting "love for a people who have become the bulwark of culture, civilisation and life." After ethereal solos for piccolo and violin the side drum enters almost imperceptibly to gradually become dictator of the extensive episode that follows – a section featuring what Shostakovich described during the war as an 'invasion' theme (though he later refuted this, instead claiming it represented evil in general). Surely influenced by Ravel's audacious *Boléro* (1928), the episode consists of no fewer than eleven increasingly loud and menacing repetitions of a deliberately banal, brusque and mechanical motif (actually a partial quotation from Franz Lehár's 'Da geh' ich zu Maxim' from *The Merry Widow*, a song then

hugely popular in Russia and one, of course, with Germanic associations). The theme becomes ever more grotesque and distorted with each repetition. Eventually, with the side drum rhythm still insistent, a folk-like Russian bear of a theme appears as if to confront the approaching malevolence. The music builds to an impassioned unison climax and after a passage of almost overwhelming power and intensity subsides to make way for an extensive and lyrical bassoon solo. The mood is then one of valediction and apparent nostalgia for more innocent times. Fittingly the side drum, now accompanying a trumpet echo of the 'invasion' theme, has the final say.

Second movement

Before the symphony's premiere Shostakovich titled its four movements 'War', 'Reminiscence', 'Native Expanse' and 'Victory', though typically he later removed them. Certainly this 'lyrical intermezzo' – as the composer once described it – is more reflective than the more driven scherzos of his fifth and sixth symphonies. The second violins introduce its delicately tripping first theme, the rhythm of which then forms the accompaniment to an expansive and yearning oboe melody. Some of the menace and grotesque militarism of the first movement returns in a contrasting central episode. The material of the opening section then returns, the second theme now assigned to a subterranean bass clarinet, flutes providing vaporous flutter-tongue accompaniment and harps ghostly punctuations. Eventually the movement finishes as delicately as it had begun.

Third movement

A series of shrill, Stravinsky-like block chords announces the opening of the meditative slow movement. This material then vies for superiority with a passionate declamation by the violins, a theme which recurs a number of times throughout the movement. According to Shostakovich the section which follows reflects a poetic vision of Leningrad at twilight. Here a long flute solo over a gently plucked accompaniment evokes an eerie calm. The central section, by contrast, is a turbulent, Mahlerian affair with distinct echoes of Shostakovich's own Fifth Symphony. By the end of the movement, however, uneasy stillness again prevails.

Fourth movement

Without a pause the finale quietly emerges into life. Gradually the mist clears and the tempo quickens, new themes darting out from all sides in a frenzied and very Russian revel. For a time the frenzy subsides to allow a period of calm (but steely) resolve, before the tempo is further slowed for a final requiem for the dead (tellingly, Shostakovich regarded his Seventh and Eighth symphonies as his own requiem). The coda, however, is a defiant gesture of affirmation. With a shift from C minor to C major we emerge from darkness into triumphant light. Whether against Hitler, Stalin or tyranny in other forms, victory, at least of sorts, has surely been won.

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