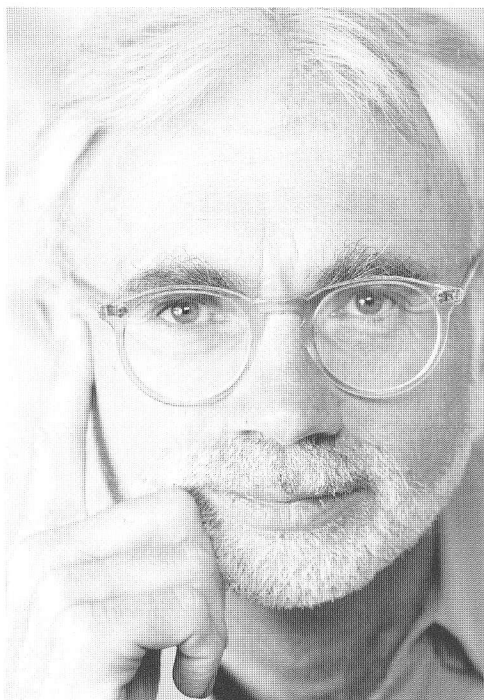


Tromba lontana

John Adams (b1947)



US composer John Adams wrote the brief orchestral fanfare *Tromba lontana* – literally ‘distant trumpet’ – in 1986 for the Houston Symphony, as part of a celebration marking the 150th anniversary of Texas’ declaration of independence from Mexico. It was part of a fanfare commissioning project instigated by fellow US composer Tobias Picker, but what Adams came up with was a deliberately provocative ‘anti-fanfare’.

Unexpectedly quiet, understated and self-effacing, the piece imagines trumpets heard from afar – an effect achieved in the concert hall by positioning the work’s two trumpeters far away from the rest of the orchestra, and from each other. It’s as if the trumpets have something to tell us, or to tell each other, but what that is remains a mystery.

Tromba lontana is one of two pieces that Adams’ publishers brought together under the title *Two Fanfares*. Its companion, however, couldn’t be more different – *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* is loud, boisterous, full of kaleidoscopic colour and rhythmic drive. Adams insists that he never intended the two works to be paired, but recent history nevertheless brought them together. *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* had originally been programmed for the Last Night of the Proms on 15 September 2001, just four days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks – wisely considered inappropriate at a time of such turmoil and grief, it was replaced with the consoling, contemplative *Tromba lontana*.

The music

It’s a relatively early work in Adams’ output and comes from a time when it still felt appropriate to call his music ‘minimalist’ – certainly in the gently rippling, pulsing orchestral backdrop to the trumpets’ insistent calls. Adams’ glittering texture of glockenspiel, piano, harp, flutes and piccolos almost sounds gamelan-like, an effect emphasised by the strangely unresolved mode he uses. Further in the background, the strings play almost unheard, slow-moving chords, the double basses growling at the very bottom of their register. The trumpets’ fanfare themes are restricted to just a few pitches that return again and again – Adams describes them as ‘a sustained note followed by a soft staccato tattoo’. The two trumpets seldom play together, instead passing material between themselves, and after a darker central section with richer, slightly more dissonant harmonies kicked off by the horns, the piece returns to its mysterious blissfulness as it fades away to a hushed, enigmatic conclusion.

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