

# Notes from the edge

Thomas Adès is the most gifted British composer of his time, but his love of musical extremes holds him back, argues *Ivan Hewett*

“Even as the UK is brimming with wonderful young composers, I think few would dispute that Tom Adès may be the most extravagantly gifted of them all.” So claims Simon Rattle, who will soon be returning from Berlin to lead the London Symphony Orchestra. Few would dispute his assertion. Born in London in 1971, Thomas Adès studied piano and composition at the Guildhall before going on to create orchestral and operatic works that have won him enormous acclaim and popularity—even among those who traditionally avoid modern classical music. For some he is our greatest composer since Benjamin Britten.

And yet Rattle’s praise doesn’t quite strike the right note. He suggests Adès differs from his peers simply in the “extravagance” of his gifts. But in many respects Adès is unique. He floats above other composers at a rarefied altitude of celebrity, winning in his twenties prizes that normally go to composers in their seventies. He first came to popular attention with his 1995 opera *Powder Her Face*, his portrayal (with librettist Philip Hensher) of the tragicomic fate of the scandalous Duchess of Argyll. That work is now a fixture in the operatic repertoire.

One of Adès’s favourite quotations is from André Breton: “Life is elsewhere.” And that’s where he always seems to be—flitting from

one high-prestige venue to another, conducting in Salzburg one week, Los Angeles the next. Some years ago his music was the subject of three major retrospectives simultaneously, on three different continents. As an awed critic said to me, not even Britten attracted attention on such a scale.

Yet more superlatives are being thrown at Adès in the wake of the recent premiere in Salzburg of his opera *The Exterminating Angel*. (It comes to Covent Garden on 24th April). Based on Luis Buñuel’s 1962 surrealist film, it follows the fate of 15 dinner guests trapped in a dining room by some unseen power as they descend into madness and anarchy. The praise has been rapturous. “A turning point for Adès and opera itself,” said the *Observer*; the *Telegraph*, more circumspect, commented on the music’s hyperactivity mingled with rapt beauty and brilliant moments of parody.

Adès’s uncanny brilliance can’t be denied; but a balanced critical evaluation of his work is overdue. “Miraculous” is how his music is often described, and as with all miracles, attempts to judge his work seem to be ruled an act of impiety. Given his fame, the almost complete absence of serious critical writing on Adès is astonishing; for whatever his talents, he is far from the finished article.

This is an extreme version of something we’ve seen before. The English have a strange need to discover a *wunderkind* every decade or so, as if to reassure themselves that the *land ohne musik*—as a German critic sniffily described us in 1904—can now hold its head up high. In the 1970s, it was Oliver Knussen; in the 1980s, it was George Benjamin. Just as Benjamin was entering into a protracted fallow period in the early 1990s, a young Adès came along, right on cue.

His Chamber Symphony was premiered in 1991 when he was still a music student at Cambridge. At the time rumours had already spread about a talented young composer who wore white suits and looked like Oscar Wilde. He reached the final of BBC Young Musician of the Year as a pianist in 1990, was an expressive if ungainly conductor of his own works and a dazzling composer.

The critical terms used to describe Chamber Symphony have clung to Adès ever since. He “entrances” his listeners with magical, glittery sounds, ▶

**Strange and familiar: Thomas Adès is a musical phenomenon who attracts little serious criticism**

*Neil Norman*

## Recommends Opera

**Don Carlo**

*Royal Opera House, 12th to 29th May*

Inspired by Schiller’s 1787 dramatic poem, Verdi’s masterpiece went through a number of revisions. When Luchino Visconti directed the five-act version at Covent Garden in 1958, it was considered unbeatable. Nicholas Hytner’s version (below) made its debut in 2008 and has become a Royal Opera stalwart. Although the auto-da-fé sequence still troubles some, it is a worthy successor to the Visconti. The Renaissance has rarely looked—or sounded—so profound, dark and compelling. US tenor Bryan Hymel takes on the challenging title role.



**Ravi Shankar’s Sukanya**

*Curve, Leicester, 12th May then touring*

Legendary sitar-player Ravi Shankar began composing his only opera at the age of 90. Now the Royal Opera and London Philharmonic join forces to produce a semi-staged touring production which begins in Leicester and ends at the Royal Festival Hall. Named after Shankar’s wife, it tells of Princess Sukanya in a tale derived from the *Mahabharata*. Shankar employs both Indian and western classical music in a fusion of dance, music and myth. Susanna Hurrell takes the title role and the Aakash Odedra Company choreograph.

**The Magic Flute**

*Charles Court Opera, King’s Head, London, 4th May to 3rd June*

The King’s Head plays host to the Charles Court Opera company, whose “boutique” productions of Gilbert & Sullivan have established it as punching well above its weight. Their pared-down version of *The Magic Flute* has already had critics reaching for superlatives after its debut at Ilford Arts Opera Festival last year. Sung in a new version by John Savournin and David Eaton, this beautiful production includes puppetry, magic and witty surprises.



The dinner party scenario of *The Exterminating Angel* is perfectly attuned to Adès's claustrophobic world

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which have the fascinating quality of being “strange and familiar” at once. “He weaves parody and mimicry, subliminal echoes and ingenious borrowings, into a voice uniquely and fabulously his own,” said the *Independent*.

Many of the same adjectives had already been applied to those earlier *wunderkinder*. It's surely no accident that Adès, Knussen and Benjamin are all published by Faber Music, which was co-founded by Britten in 1965. There is a definite family resemblance running through all four: an expressive world best described as magical.

Britten had a genius for evoking enchanted states, where sometimes the magic is good as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and sometimes rotten to the core, as in *The Turn of the Screw*. The sound of glittery-tuned percussion runs through his music, a sound that reappears refracted through the sound-world of avant-garde composers like Pierre Boulez and György Ligeti. Knussen composed two operas based on Maurice Sendak's children's stories, which are shot through with echoes of Modest Mussorgsky and Maurice Ravel. George Benjamin's music is magical in its essence. In his early Chamber Symphony there are moments when you ask yourself “what is making that extraordinary sound?”—and discover it's newspapers being torn.

That same feeling is often prompted by Adès's music. A particularly striking example occurs in the big orchestral fresco *Asyla*, an evocation of spaces that can either threaten incarceration or offer sanctuary. It's full of the ear-tickling sound of cowbells, tin cans, knives and forks, and an upright piano which is a quarter-tone flat. Again the

**“If Adès can find a way of cultivating the centre ground rather than mounting guerrilla raids on it, he could become the great composer he ought to be”**

effect is of delicious uncertainty and dislocation. One literally can't believe one's ears. His opera *The Tempest*, first seen at Covent Garden in 2004, is full of musical “enchantment” as befits Shakespeare's late romance. It has a big part for a coloratura soprano, who at one point is required to sing a top E 18 times in a row.

The magical strain appeals to the English. They warm to things suggestive of lightness and the otherworldly. Americans warm to pop-flavoured minimalism, tinged by strenuous aspiration and triumphalism; the

Germans love music with ponderous politically-charged appeals to emotional depths. We have elfin lightness. Is it any accident that the most celebrated English singer of recent decades is Ian Bostridge, whose unearthly high tones are so well-suited to Britten's music? (Adès and Bostridge once collaborated on a performance of Schubert's *Winterreise*, which was strange, haunted and “extra-terrestrial” in exactly the way one expected).

Adès would probably take being pigeonholed as a purveyor of fey English enchantment as evidence of the essential stupidity of critics. For a composer who has been so uniformly praised, he has a puzzling loathing of critics. (He has a furious contempt for some composers too, once labelling Wagner as “fungal.”) He absolutely doesn't want to be compared with the *wunderkinder* of recent decades, and has done his best to distance himself from Britten by pouring scorn on his music. “In *The Turn of the Screw* the formal conceits only show up the one-dimensionality of the piece,” he says, one of many instances of *lèse-majesté* in his fascinating volume of conversations with Tom Service entitled *Full of Noises*.

There is indeed something distinctive about Adès. To get a sense of what that is, one only has to listen to the third movement of *Asyla*. It's a symphonic evocation of a club night, with a pounding four-in-a-bar rhythm

and a deliberately crude phrase in high violins, repeated incessantly. As the drums pound, a jagged woodwind phrase rises against it in an opposing rhythm. One feels the music approaching the edge of something dangerous—chaos or frenzy. Far from being genuinely crude, the music is hugely sophisticated. Like a Chopin waltz, it's not a real dance but an artful portrait of one. It captures something which a real piece of club music, with its mechanical, digitally produced beat, never could. Nothing like it could ever issue from the fastidious pens of Knussen or Benjamin.

What adds to its disturbing quality is the way it suddenly evaporates into piccolo and percussion flourishes, which in turn vanish into silence. It's a typical example of the way Adès puts opposites side by side. Or—even more disturbingly—piles them one above the other, as he does in the weird moment in the mini piano concerto entitled *Concerto Conciso*. In that work the sinister bass writhings in the piano are set against slow, beautifully glistening high strings. In these early pieces, nothing is permitted to last long; it's as if Adès wants to keep the music—and the audience—in a state of suspense. This is in line with his stated vision of what music should be: “a captured eternal volatility.” He warms to composers who share that vision, like the Hungarian post-war modernist Ligeti, whose startling confrontations of total opposites—a murmuring string texture followed by a sudden blaring outburst in the brass—are clearly the model for his own. He loves Janáček and Berlioz for the same reason; but in their case eternal volatility is more to do with refusing to obey the norms of harmony. This too finds an echo in Adès's delicate and moving moments of slightly blurry harmony, like the one that appears like a mirage amid the hectic complications of the Piano Quintet.

Beyond the unsettling, his music also tends in a completely different direction. He describes composition both as “captured volatility” and “the residue of an endless search for stability.” This search has led him in recent years towards large-scale harmonic structures that underpin the hectic surface variety. His fondness for opposites is rooted in a tension deep in his nature. The Adès of the delicately expressive *Violin Concerto* of 2005 is very different to the Adès of the *Chamber Symphony*. The man too has changed. Gone is the long-haired aesthete in white suits. Nowadays he dresses in workaday black; his intense, stubbled face gazing suspiciously out in photographs.

The characteristic Adès sound of recent years is of a harmonic movement in perpetual circling motion, but a circle that widens and deepens like a spiral. Typically we hear a bare two-note interval which accretes notes and starts to shift up or down by semitonal degrees. As this harmonic complex shifts,

it's joined by others at a greater altitude. The effect is something like watching a giant waterfall. The movement is always down, but there's never an arrival, because the waterfall is always being renewed from above. Perhaps a better analogy are those videos of fractal curves on YouTube, which split and burgeon and multiply in a way that is both fascinating and slightly nauseating.

The most spell-binding expression of this idea is in the grand orchestral work *Tevot*, a Hebrew word describing an ark. As the harmonies wheel downwards the music gathers enormous heft and power. When it arrives at a grinding climax of complication—as though the gears have finally seized up—the sound is torn away, and a new spiral begins in the heights.

The piece is vastly impressive in its unstoppable energy. It is also a superb metaphor for the way music, in Adès's vision, is condemned to be eternally on the move; always searching for a point of rest and never finding it. But by the same token it's oppressive. The music cannot break out of its own process. It has to be rescued from an eternity of spinning by an act of violence on the part of the composer—a sudden silence or a rude interruption. What Adès intended as a beautiful metaphor for the metaphysical puzzle of music turns into something rather less beautiful: it's as if the music were a person who cannot escape an obsession.

That feeling of being trapped in an enclosed world has surely influenced Adès's choice of topoi. Two of his big orchestral scores are about enclosed spaces. In *The Tempest* the outside world never intrudes. And the dinner party scenario of *The Exterminating Angel* is so perfectly attuned to Adès's claustrophobic world it might almost have been made for him.

This surely points to his limitation as an artist. For though he has achieved wondrous things, he's achieved them through music that spurns the middle ground in favour of hallucinatory extremes. It is supremely intense but somehow thin. You could say this is the familiar dilemma of musical modernism—one that no composer who avoids facile neo-romanticism can escape. And yet of all composers now living Adès could be the one to overcome it. Many things about his music—his embrace of old-fashioned tonal devices, his invocation of older music and his use of traditional media like the string quartet—suggest he is aware that the fruitful ground lies near the centre. If he can find a way to cultivate that ground peacefully, rather than mounting guerrilla raids on it with works of super-complexity and crazily intense parody, he could become the great composer his gifts mean he ought to be.

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## Anjana Ahuja Recommends Science



### Crick Late: Discovery Francis Crick Institute, London, 3rd May

The Francis Crick Institute, which opened last year near King's Cross, is a £700m temple to the biomedical sciences. And, this month, Europe's biggest super-lab, which will host more than a thousand scientists working in such fields as cancer genetics and immunology, throws its shiny glass doors open for the evening.

The event will feature the obligatory food, drink and music but, with its theme of discovery, this is a rare chance to quiz world-leading scientists about their research projects, join workshops and try some hands-on activities.

### Securing the UK's Future Industrial Success Society for Chemical Industry, London 23rd May

How should a post-Brexit UK rethink its industrial strategy in order to prosper in the future? David Willetts, former Minister for Science and Universities, sets out a policy road map at a public lecture hosted by the Society of Chemical Industry (SCI) in central London.

He will point out the need for the country to forge ahead on the Eight Great Technologies, previously identified by the government as sectors in which the country already enjoys advantages. These are: big data, satellites, robotics, modern genetics, regenerative medicine, agri-science, advanced materials and energy storage. They will have impacts on such diverse challenges as climate change and feeding an ever-growing world population. Expect Willetts, chair of the British Science Association, to use his celebrated two brains to champion science and innovation as we wave our long goodbye to the EU.