John Adams - Violin Concerto (Leila Josefowicz) [2018]



1 Violin Concerto: I. Quarter-note = 78 14:45 2 Violin Concerto: II. Chaconne - Body Through Which the Dream Flows 10:58 3 Violin Concerto: III. Toccare 7:24 Leila Josefowicz - violin St. Louis Symphony David Robertson - conductor

Throughout his composing career, John Adams has generally avoided explicit genre titles such as symphony or concerto for his orchestral works. He has now composed a whole series of scores of genuine symphonic proportions and weight, from the epic Harmonielehre in 1985 to City Noir of 2009, while pieces such as Century Rolls, for piano and orchestra, and Gnarly Buttons, with solo clarinet, are concertos in all but name. But it's never been a hard and fast rule, and as early as 1993, Adams produced a Violin Concerto that was called simply that, without any more fanciful title or explicit extra-musical connotations.

In many ways it's the nearest thing to "absolute music" that he has ever composed. The concerto was written for the then leader of the Minnesota Orchestra, Jorja Fleezanis, but it was Gidon Kremer who recorded it first (also for Nonesuch). Over the last 15 years or so, Leila Josefowicz has been most closely identified with it. Adams' regard for Josefowicz's passionately engaged playing has led him to compose another large-scale work for violin and orchestra for her, Scheherazade 2 (which, to confuse things further, he calls a "dramatic symphony"), and she has now performed the concerto more than 100 times. She has even recorded it before, on what's now a rather obscure disc, with the composer himself conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

This new version, though, with David Robertson conducting the St Louis Symphony, vividly demonstrates the quality of Josefowicz's playing, which manages to be both full-blooded and immensely refined at the same time. It also demonstrates the way Adams has so successfully reinvented the traditional concerto form in his own eclectic image, whether asserting the

expressive power of melody in the first two movements, or in the sheer physicality of the final, irresistible moto perpetuo.

One of Adams' essentially symphonic works that is not called a symphony, Naive and Sentimental Music from 1999, appears on the latest Chandos disc from Peter Oundjian and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. It's a decent enough performance, if perhaps not quite so svelte and cogent as its only current rival, from Esa-Pekka Salonen and the LA Philharmonic, for whom the piece was written. The RSNO's pairing, though, is Absolute Jest, for string quartet and orchestra, with the Doric Quartet as soloists, which seems to me one of Adams' weakest recent works – a riff on Beethoven (the late quartets Opp 131 and 135 particularly) whose jokey borrowings wear very thin, very quickly. ---Andrew Clements, theguardian.com

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