

THE EARTH – AN HD ODYSSEY

Grades 9-12 Young People's Concert Listening Guide

PERFORMERS

Nashville Symphony
Giancarlo Guerrero, conductor

PROGRAM

John Adams – Short Ride in a Fast Machine
R. Strauss – Also sprach Zarathustra

The program will be accompanied by high-definition images taken from NASA missions to Earth's orbit

JOHN ADAMS

Born on February 15, 1947, in Worcester, Massachusetts;
currently lives in Berkeley, California

John Adams, whose new opera *Girls of the Golden West* received its world premiere at the end of last year at San Francisco Opera, is equally at home on the stage and in the concert hall. In fact, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* is a concert-opening fanfare that Adams wrote during the period, in the mid-1980s, when he was busy composing his first opera, *Nixon in China*. It also shows a kinship with the exultant passages of *Harmonielehre*, Adams's breakthrough orchestral work that preceded *Nixon*.



Adams had an opportunity around this time to experiment twice with the format of the stand-alone concert fanfare. Preceding *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* was *Tromba Lontana* ("Distant Trumpet"). The composer characterizes both pieces as "*in extremis* versions of the traditional fanfare." As a pair, they form a kind of fanfarish yin-and-yang: *Tromba* being a reserved, ruminative "anti-fanfare," while *Short Ride* is a boisterously in-your-face, virtuoso roller coaster ride of orchestral sonorities. Although both are sometimes presented as companion pieces, Adams points out that he never actually intended them to be played together.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*

Composed: 1986

First performance: June 13, 1986, with Michael Tilson Thomas conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony

Short Ride might almost be heard as a concise primer on how Adams forged a freshly powerful musical language all his own from the building blocks of Minimalism as well as from the vernacular idioms of his upbringing—all transmogrified by his buoyant imagination. Like a metronome gone mad, the woodblock lays out a basic pulse against which varying rhythmic patterns generate a trilling tension. The result brings to mind snatches of Sousa recalled in a fever-dream. Adams himself likens the piece to being invited to go for a spin “in a terrific sports car”—after which “you wish you hadn’t.” The repetitive swirl of Minimalist motifs is further energized by hints of the big-band sound of Duke Ellington, which the composer mentions as another generative source of the piece. While Adams has a superb instinct for larger architectonic spans—as we will hear in this evening’s *Harmonielehre*—*Short Ride* compacts the long-range sonic landscapes for which he is known into a dizzying blur. What we hear, as Adams puts it, is “a cranked-up, high-velocity orchestral juggernaut.”

Short Ride in a Fast Machine is scored for 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling English horn), 4 clarinets, 3 bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 synthesizers (optional) and strings.

RICHARD STRAUSS



Born on June 11, 1864, in Munich, Germany;
died on September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

By the turn of the 19th century, the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had started to influence artists across all the disciplines. His “prose poem” *Also Sprach Zarathustra*—written in the mid-1880s but not published in full until 1892—features a language rich in symbolism, parable, and enigmatic oracles. The name Zarathustra (also known as Zoroaster) refers to the ancient Persian prophet credited with developing a religious vision of the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Nietzsche’s version remodels Zarathustra after his

own image. The prophet now returns to subvert the old values, preaching a message of extreme self-reliance in which humans must become superhuman: i.e., create their own meaning by affirming life and nature rather than rely on the illusion of a transcendent god.

Some have argued that Strauss's tone poem is less about Nietzsche than about the reactions that reading his philosophy aroused. The composer himself wrote that "I did not intend to write philosophical music or to portray Nietzsche's great work in musical terms" but instead meant to reflect "my homage to the genius of Nietzsche" in the evolutionary arc suggested by the piece. *Also Sprach Zarathustra* can also be heard as an orchestral showpiece, a massive ensemble concerto in which Strauss flexes his muscle as a master of an instrumental surround-soundscape.

But as a self-appointed heir to Wagner, Strauss would have been especially tuned in to the philosopher's sensitivity to musical thought, which Wagner had helped inspire. Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is pervaded with references to music and acts of hearing. Its most pivotal moments occur in the form of songs. Strauss selected a small number from the many short chapters comprising the text and reshuffled their order to prompt his muse, fashioning a symphonically unified work.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Op. 30

Composed: 1896

First performance: November 27, 1896, in Frankfurt, with the composer conducting

Stanley Kubrick's iconic use of the introduction for his film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (which also incorporates Ligeti's *Atmosphères*) may have made this music overfamiliar, but it remains a thrilling depiction of the prologue to Nietzsche's work—a scene in which the prophet greets the sunrise and determines to come down from his mountain to share his wisdom with humanity. Against a profound shadow cast by the lowest bass, Strauss introduces the central cell of the piece as four trumpets pronounce a primal ascending motif (C-G-C). Strauss later explained that he meant "to convey in music an idea of the human race from its origins, through its various phases of development (religious and scientific) right up to Nietzsche's idea of the Superman [*Übermensch*]."

The following eight sections are woven together seamlessly and pursue the idea of humanity's evolution. Where Nietzsche resorted to resonant symbols, allegories, and word play, Strauss builds a sense of dramatic conflict through his deployment of key and orchestration. The fundamental tension pivots around the tonics of C (the tonality of the introduction), which is associated with nature, and B (minor and major), used as a symbol for humanity. Each is only a half-step apart, yet when sounded together, they clash in a powerful dissonance.

First, though, comes a momentary oasis in "Of the Backworldsmen." Strauss quotes from plainchant and then develops a lush fabric of divided strings to depict the worldview of those who seek consolation through the hollow promise of an afterlife. While Nietzsche's tone is acerbic and mocking, Strauss nearly convinces with the overwhelming beauty of this music before casting it aside as an illusion. In "Of the Great Longing" and "Of Joys and Passions," the dramatic tension rises to a boil, with the central C-G-C motif now clearly associated with questing. The religious music recurs as a source of dissonance and conflict with natural desires, while Strauss borrows a page from *Götterdämmerung* to inject a

tone of tragic pathos. Particularly elegiac scoring for the winds adds to the intense pity of “The Grave Song” as Zarathustra sees humanity still enslaved by its illusions.

Like religion, “Of Science” presents another potent force for disappointment (the German word actually refers to all scholarly endeavors—the Faustian quest for knowledge). Strauss structures this section around that most learned of forms, the fugue: an especially imposing one that employs all twelve tones of the chromatic scale for its subject. In the midst of this, Zarathustra himself collapses from exhaustion and is then restored to health (“The Convalescent”), as the fugue reaches a climax with a restatement of the introductory sunrise music. A long pause follows, but humanity remains benighted, as the grim music in B minor indicates.

In an extraordinary passage, the orchestra rallies its energy and begins to glimmer and twinkle with sounds of a new awakening. Zarathustra at last begins to preach the ideal of the *Übermensch* (the ultimate goal of the fully self-reliant human, or “Superman”) in “The Dance Song.” This long section, set as a waltz, also doubles as a mini-violin concerto. The idea of a waltz might seem incongruously light-hearted for the philosophical idea being espoused, but here Strauss taps into a very Nietzschean sense of irony, of “unbearable lightness.”

This builds to a new climax (marked by the twelvefold tolling of a bell) for the concluding “The Night-Wanderer’s Song.” The gorgeous, velvety night music suggests an air of leave-taking. Yet it is also emphatically inconclusive. Instead of resolving the nature-humanity dichotomy, Strauss pits the C-G-C theme deep in the bass against a high shimmering chord of B major. The dissonance is now sweet and subtle, but it is still left to ring in our ears as evolution continues.

Also Sprach Zarathustra calls for a very large orchestra of 3 flutes and 2 piccolos, 3 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, bells, 2 harps, organ and strings.

— Thomas May, the Nashville Symphony’s program annotator, is a writer and translator who covers classical and contemporary music. He blogs at memeteria.com

