

Program Notes for VSO Concert – January 30-31, 2026

**John Adams – Piano Concerto (Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?) and
Carl Nielsen – Symphony #4 (The Inextinguishable)**

By Jonathan Berkowitz

JOHN ADAMS (b. 1947)

John Adams is one of the most influential and widely performed modern American composers. He helped redefine what contemporary classical music could sound like, whom it could speak to, and how it might engage with history, politics, and public life.

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1947, Adams grew up in a household steeped in music. He was exposed to classical music, jazz, musical theatre, and rock and roll. His mother was a singer with big bands while his father was a clarinetist and bandleader. The young Adams learned the clarinet early, absorbing classical repertoire, the traditions of marching bands and jazz-inflected wind music. These early experiences left a permanent mark; Adams's music has a physical, instrumental vitality reminiscent of communal music-making.

Adams attended Harvard in the late 1960s, where he experienced the dominant modernist ethos of the time—serialism (aka twelve-tone music), structural rigour, and a suspicion of overt expressivity. Although he mastered these techniques and used them in his earliest work, he began to diverge from their principles after reading John Cage's *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Adams commented that the book, a gift from his mother, “dropped into my psyche like a time bomb”, causing him to drop out of academia, “pack his belongings into a VW Bug, and drive to California”.

No longer loyal to modernism, in the 1970s and early 1980s Adams worked as a composer, teacher, and conductor in the San Francisco Bay Area. This included a tenure directing the San Francisco Symphony's New Music Ensemble. He wrote electronic music for a homemade synthesizer, which Adams explained revived his belief in tonality.

Amid the emerging minimalist movement, Adams began to develop a personal language that rejected strict serialism without completely embracing minimalism's austerity. His first major work with a minimalist aesthetic was the solo piano piece *Phrygian Gates* (1977), which he later labelled “my first mature composition, my official ‘opus one’”. He followed that with orchestral works that introduced his distinctive voice: pulsing repetition and harmonic stagnation inherited from minimalism, but enlivened by dramatic surges, romantic harmony, and orchestral colour.

Although Adams is often grouped with American minimalists, his relationship to the movement is complex. Unlike the steady, impersonal approaches of Steve Reich or Philip Glass, Adams's music accelerates, erupts, and collapses; it recalls Mahler, Wagner, and Sibelius as much as it does Reich. By the mid-1980s, Adams had already begun pushing beyond minimalist techniques, integrating lush harmonies, sudden contrasts, and a renewed interest in large-scale dramatic form.

A defining composition was *Nixon in China* (1987), an opera that made Adams internationally famous. Adams transformed a recent political event, the 1972 visit of U.S. President Richard Nixon to Maoist China, into a meditation on power, memory, and myth. The opera's success went beyond the music; it showed that contemporary opera could wrestle with modern history and still capture

the public imagination. His second opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), was based on the Palestinian Liberation Front's 1985 hijacking and murder of Leon Klinghoffer and incited considerable controversy for its subject matter. Criticized as antisemitic by some, it was defended by others, including the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Continuing with morally and politically charged historical subjects, Adams wrote the opera *Doctor Atomic* (2005), based on J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Manhattan Project, and the building of the first atomic bomb. Later operas include *A Flowering Tree* (2006), *Girls of the Golden West* (2017), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2022). Adams has never shied away from controversy, and his operas often provoke debate about representation, responsibility, and the role of art in public discourse.

Alongside his operas, Adams has produced a substantial body of orchestral and concert music that has entered the modern repertory. Works like *Harmonielehre* (1985) and *Naive and Sentimental Music* (1998) reveal a composer aware of Austro-German symphonic tradition but presented through an American lens with postmodern awareness. Adams called *Harmonielehre* “a statement of belief in the power of tonality at a time when I was uncertain about its future”.

Adams' *Chamber Symphony*, *Violin Concerto*, *The Chairman Dances*, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, and *On the Transmigration of Souls*—the latter a Pulitzer Prize-winning memorial to the victims of September 11—have become staples of orchestral programming worldwide. These works exemplify Adams' gift for immediate impact without superficiality: they are rhythmically exhilarating, emotionally direct, and structurally sophisticated.

Adams' influence extends beyond his compositions. He has conducted major orchestras around the world, and been a tireless advocate for contemporary music. He often leads performances of his own works and those of other living composers. His tenure as Creative Chair of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in the 2000s further solidified his role as a public intellectual within classical music. In 2009 he was inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame. Adams' prose writings—most notably the memoir *Hallelujah Junction*—offer candid reflections on aesthetics, politics, and the practical realities of a composing life. Adams emerges as deeply aware of tradition yet unafraid to challenge it, committed to clarity of expression and skeptical of dogma in any form.

John Adams is unique in modern classical music: a composer who bridges the gap between avant-garde experimentation and mainstream acceptance. He helps make contemporary music both listenable and meaningful to large audiences without diluting its seriousness or ambition. In doing so, he expands the expressive and thematic range of late twentieth-century classical music, bringing recent history, political consciousness, and emotional immediacy into the concert hall and opera house. His legacy lies not only in his individual masterpieces but by showing that modern classical music can be intellectually rigorous, sensuously engaging, and unafraid to speak directly to the world in which it is made.

Piano Concerto (*Must the Devil Get All the Good Tunes?*) – Adams (2018)

Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes (2nd = piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets (2nd = clarinet in A), bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, percussion (Almglocken, bass drum, snare drum), honky-tonk piano (detuned upright), bass guitar, strings, and solo piano

John Adams' third piano concerto, *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?* was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2018 for the brilliant pianist Yuja Wang. It had its premiere in March 2019 and was later recorded for Deutsche Grammophon. These comments borrow heavily from the LA Phil's program notes.

The Concerto has been described as exploiting a modern virtuosity and is less about pearly tone and more about velocity, attack, and stamina. The result is a work that feels plugged into contemporary urban energy—part concerto, part club music hallucination, part symphonic argument. Adams' skill is on full display as a composer unconcerned about allegiance to any particular style, and in complete knowledge of his musical identity.

The title is borrowed from an old evangelical complaint about the irresistible vitality of secular music. Adams read the phrase in an old *New Yorker* magazine and determined that he must write a piece with that title. The phrase signals both mischief and provocation. Adams is attracted to music that moves bodies as well as minds. Here the piano is not a philosopher, but a rhythmic engine, spurring the orchestra into whirlwind motion. There is little that is traditional or lyrical. The soloist is part of a dense rhythmic ecosystem, providing patterns that accumulate, distort, and shift harmonies suddenly.

The Concerto is played in one continuous movement. Its three seamlessly connected sections follow the traditional fast-slow-fast format, with the piano soloist active throughout. LA Phil program notes describe the work as “a one-movement piano concerto blending gospel, funk, and classical, featuring a ‘gritty, funky’ opening riff, perpetual motion sections with detuned honky-tonk piano, and ethereal slow passages, all exploring the ‘devil's interval’ (tritone) for its dissonant, demonic, yet versatile sound. It contrasts driving rhythms with delicate piano, showcasing technical demands on the soloist and incorporating electronic keyboards for unique textures, reflecting Adams' style of merging diverse musical idioms.” Whew! That's a lot to listen for!

The opening “movement”—**Gritty, Funky, But in strict Tempo; Twitchy, Bot-like**—announces its plans immediately: hard-edged rhythms, pounding piano figures, and an orchestra performing as a massive percussion instrument, not a polite accompanist. The piano does not enter with a grand theme but urgently—hammering and repeating, daring the orchestra to keep up. The gospel-like riff begins in the bass register, and the 9/8 meter gives an off-kilter feel. A perpetual motion variation of the riff marked “twitchy, bot-like” adds momentum. The honky-tonk piano joins the grand piano. The piano writing gets even wilder and more chromatic, shadowed by the orchestra with sharp chords blurted out by the brass.

Listen for the tightly interlocking patterns that sound almost manic. Adams layers them so that they grind against one another rather than align neatly. Beneath the rhythmic surface are sudden harmonic shifts, bright, gaudy sonorities that flash by like neon signs. This keeps the music from

settling into hypnotic monotony. The piano's repeated notes and jagged figures are the spark that keeps the entire machine running. Waves of intensity rise and fall, thinner moments let one catch one's breath, but only briefly as the engine roars back to life.

The second "movement"—***Much Slower; Gently, Relaxed***—shifts the emotional temperature. The pulse remains but the atmosphere darkens. The harmony becomes thicker and more ominous, with the orchestral colours heavier and more saturated. The piano and orchestra throw chords back and forth. Then come strings suspended over a delicate piano solo. There is serenity, but only fleetingly, as the piano explores a melody that jumps all over.

Much of this movement is set in the orchestra's lower ranges. Listen for how the bass instruments and low piano writing create a sense of subterranean pressure. When the piano seems ready to sing out, it is pulled back into line. Lyric gestures appear, flicker, and vanish. Brass and winds interject, challenging the piano's dominance. The movement feels like a tense standoff between piano and orchestra; coiled, dangerous, and unresolved.

The final movement—***Piu mosso: Obsession/Swing***—unleashes the Concerto's accumulated energy in a blaze of speed and brilliance. Rhythms tighten, textures brighten, and the piano writing becomes even more dizzying. While the earlier sections suggested struggle, here the music celebrates sheer motion. Adams gives us his trademark infectious syncopation, sharp-sounding woodwinds, off-beat brass, stride bass, a battery of percussion, and a brilliantly energetic piano part that traverses the entire keyboard. Three brief interruptions of a held octave in the orchestra propel the Concerto to an exuberant close.

Listen for how Adams sustains a feeling of near-constant acceleration rather than building toward a single climax. The excitement comes from endurance as much as from volume. Bright harmonies give the movement a sense of reckless joy. There is an unmistakable sense that Adams is enjoying the ride. The ending does not resolve, it explodes, leaving the listener exhilarated, slightly breathless, and keenly aware of the physical demands placed on both soloist and orchestra.

Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes? occupies a distinctive place in Adams's output. It shares the rhythmic drive and harmonic saturation of his earlier showpieces like *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, but its scale and intensity are closer to the late operas and symphonic works. This is music written by a composer who no longer feels the need to justify pleasure, groove, or excess. For the listener, the key is to appreciate that beneath the surface excitement lies a sophisticated exploration of momentum, resistance, and release; it is sound that refuses to sit still. In the end, Adams' Concerto reminds us that vitality itself can be a serious artistic value.

Adams answers the title's rhetorical question not with irony but with affirmation: if the devil really does have all the good tunes, the only sensible response is to play them better, louder, and with unapologetic joy.

Postscript: If you enjoyed this wild ride, listen to his earlier piano concertos: *Eros Piano* (1989) and *Century Rolls* (1997), and his latest called one *After the Fall* (2024).

CARL NIELSEN (1865 to 1931)

“Music is Life and, like it, is inextinguishable.”

Carl Nielsen is Denmark’s national composer. He is also one of the most individualistic symphonic thinkers of the early twentieth century, whose music resists easy categorization. Nielsen created a musical language grounded in classical forms but animated by muscular lyricism. He was guided by a philosophical concern with conflict, growth, and the will to live. His fame rests on his complex modern music for the concert hall and his simple yet unforgettable songs for the Danish public. He never compromised his own personal style.

Nielsen was born into a poor but musically active family in rural Funen. For Nielsen, music was a physical and social activity, not an abstract art. It accompanied work, celebration, and community life. This early immersion can be heard even in his most complex works; his rhythms feel walked or danced and his melodies seem sung rather than theorized.

He began studying violin, cornet and piano as a child and played in his father’s amateur orchestra. His parents doubted that he had any future as a musician, so he was apprenticed to a nearby shopkeeper. The shopkeeper went bankrupt and Nielsen returned home. He learned to play brass instruments and joined an army band, continuing to play violin and perform with his father at barn dances.

The practical training of music as craft, his discipline, and daily labour shaped his attitude toward composition. He learned the fundamentals of counterpoint and form well, but for him technique was a means, not an end. The patchy education resulting from his country background left Nielsen insatiably curious about the arts, philosophy and aesthetics.

In his teens, he attended the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen from 1884 through 1886, graduating with good but not outstanding marks. He worked as a violinist in the Royal Danish Orchestra, rising to a position of second violinist, while composing on the side. His First Symphony (1892), written while still in his twenties, already reveals the traits that would define him: a strong tonal direction, rhythmic tension, and dramatic narrative. Unlike the symphonies of Brahms or Tchaikovsky, Nielsen’s do not simply unfold; they struggle.

That sense of struggle became central to Nielsen’s mature style. He was deeply interested in the idea of music as a living process, moving from instability toward balance without ever guaranteeing comfort. This is most evident in his symphonies, which form the core of his international reputation. The Second Symphony, *The Four Temperaments* (1902), takes its inspiration from ancient personality types. The title of the Third Symphony, *Sinfonia espansiva* (1911) refers to growth: music that expands outward, embracing human vitality.

The years surrounding the First World War brought Nielsen to the height of his powers, and into deep musical and personal conflict. His Fourth Symphony, *The Inextinguishable* (1916)—discussed in detail following—is often described as a response to the war, though Nielsen resisted literal interpretation. What is undeniable is the work’s elemental force. The title refers to life itself—stubborn, resistant, unwilling to be silenced.

Nielsen's Fifth Symphony (1922) goes even further, by adding instability. For example, in the first movement, the percussionist improvises on the snare drum to disrupt the orchestra. That represents a radical challenge to the idea of symphonic order. And yet, Nielsen does not abandon form; he tests it, stretches it, and reasserts it to resolution. With the Sixth Symphony, *Sinfonia semplice* (1925), Nielsen's tone shifted. The title is ironic because the work is anything but simple. It is elusive and ambiguous, full of abrupt changes and parody that border on the grotesque. For Nielsen, simplicity was not innocence, but a stripping away of dishonest gestures.

Nielsen's compositional output is large and expansive. Alongside the symphonies, Nielsen made enduring contributions to opera, chamber music, and song. His opera *Maskarade* remains a cornerstone of Danish cultural life, cherished for its warmth, humour, and humane portrayal of social conventions gently overturned. His chamber works, particularly the wind quintet and string quartets, are acutely attuned to instrumental character, and feel conversational. And his nearly 300 songs and hymns, many of which are still widely sung in Denmark, reveal a gift for melody that is direct, unsentimental, and deeply rooted in the rhythms of the language. Nielsen also composed three concertos—one each for violin, flute, and clarinet—but very little for the piano (perhaps due to his mediocre piano technique?).

Nielsen's life was not without strain. He endured a turbulent marriage to the sculptor Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen (née Brodersen), marked by long separations. He struggled with health problems in his later years. He felt the frustration of being better understood at home than abroad. Yet he remained committed to his vision. He wrote a memoir and essays on music and culture that reveal a thinker deeply engaged with questions of individuality, community, and responsibility. He died in 1931 and all the music played at his Copenhagen funeral, including the hymns, were his compositions. A monument to Nielsen sculpted by his wife was erected in central Copenhagen in 1939.

In his *Lives of the Great Composers*, Harold Schonberg comments on the breadth of Nielsen's compositions, his energetic rhythms, long-breathed melodies, generous orchestration and his individuality. Schonberg notes that Nielsen had "just as much sweep, even more power, and a more universal message" than Jean Sibelius, Nielsen's Finnish counterpart.

For some time, international interest was largely directed towards Nielsen's symphonies. It was only later that his works firmly entered the international repertoire, spurred in 1962 by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic's recording of the Fifth Symphony. In 2006 four of Nielsen's works were listed by the Danish Ministry of Culture among the twelve greatest pieces of Danish classical music. For many years, he appeared on the Danish hundred-kroner banknote.

Nielsen combined progressive ideas and techniques with a reverence for traditions. The result feels increasingly contemporary. Its skepticism toward easy answers, its refusal of both nostalgia and radicalism, speaks to modern audiences. In an era that often prizes surface effect, Nielsen reminds us that musical drama can arise from the most fundamental materials: scales, rhythms, and the inexorable pull of tonal gravity. His is not music that flatters the listener, but which engages, challenges, and ultimately affirms the challenges of being human.

In 1925 on his sixtieth birthday, he wrote, "If I could live my life again, I would chase any thoughts of Art out of my head and be apprenticed to a merchant or pursue some other useful trade the results of which could be visible in the end... No, it is no enviable fate to be an artist."

Symphony No. 4, Op. 29 (The Inextinguishable) – Nielsen (1914-16)

Orchestration: 3 flutes (3rd=piccolo), 3 oboes, 3 clarinets, 3 bassoons (3rd=contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 sets of timpani, and strings

In 1914, Carl Nielsen wrote to his wife, “I have an idea for a new composition, which has no program but will express what we understand by the spirit of life or manifestations of life.... I must have a word or a short title to express this....” Nielsen completed the Symphony in 1916 and wrote the title he came up with—*The Inextinguishable*—at the top of the score. The name does not apply to the Symphony itself, but rather to “that which is inextinguishable”, namely “the elemental will to life”—a force that persists through conflict, destruction, and exhaustion. Nielsen explained: “Music is Life. As soon as even a single note sounds in the air or through space, it is the result of life and movement; that is why music (and the dance) is the more immediate expression of the will to life.”

Written during the darkest years of the First World War, the Symphony does not describe battles or political events. It addresses something more fundamental: the experience of opposing energies locked in struggle, and the stubborn refusal of life to be extinguished. Right from the opening bars, the listener is thrust into motion already underway. Themes collide rather than converse; tonality is asserted, challenged, and reasserted. The Symphony is full of musical violence and tension, representing Nielsen’s belief that growth is not smooth evolution, but something achieved through resistance.

This Symphony, one of Nielsen’s most dramatic, features a “battle” between two sets of timpani placed on opposite sides of the stage as if in a musical duel. The battleground is tonality, with opposing keys and rhythmic impulses locked in combat. Yet the music does not end in despair. Four movements are played without breaks so that the energy spills over boundaries. That creates a single, sweeping argument with accumulated ideas and sounds, instead of a sequence of discrete episodes.

The opening movement—*Allegro*—begins abruptly with a roar from timpani and winds. They are joined by a surge from the strings answered immediately by the winds and brass. There is no sense of settled key; the two tonalities sounded simultaneously give a feeling of distress right from the outset. This instability is a driving force as Nielsen sets musical ideas against one another, not as contrasting themes in the classical sense, but as competing impulses.

Central to the first movement is a three-note motif. Winds calm things down and then slide into a gentle second theme which will reappear in the third and final movements. Some have identified this as the “will to life” theme. The stage is now set for the emotional swings that continue throughout: sudden gentleness and sudden rage. These abrupt switches are a challenge for the conductor. During a tempestuous development the second theme shatters. The storm continues through to a high-powered coda before quiet strings and solo timpani merge smoothly into the impending second movement. Rhythm is central. Accents fall unexpectedly, phrases push beyond their natural endpoints, and the music often feels impatient. Even moments of lyricism are uneasy. This movement establishes energy that refuses to settle and sound that will not be contained.

The second movement—***Poco allegretto***—offers a deceptive calm. It unfolds with a lighter touch, but not into conventional relaxation. Instead, Nielsen gives us music that moves with elegance while never fully letting its guard down. Picture the music smiling, but with clenched teeth. Listen for the underlying unease beneath the surface—supple rhythms and unexpected shifts in harmony. Woodwinds have the main role here, with strings providing commentary. The winds and strings do not blend into one another. Conflicts of the first movement are not resolved but reframed, suggesting that life can take many forms, including wit and flexibility.

The slow third movement—***Poco adagio quasi andante***—has the symphony’s most inward music, providing space for reflection. The mood is serious, even somber, yet never static. It opens with a brief simple melody from unison violins over thumping timpani, presenting material that will reappear in the finale. Agitated repeated notes, typical of Nielsen, dot the landscape. The strings now play a soft, slow hymn-like section, with colour provided by the winds. Nielsen’s instruction is that they should play like “an eagle riding the wind.” Then the low brass enters as intensity and heaviness grow, building to a climax before running out of steam. The movement closes with a single oboe playing over trills in the upper strings as a bridge to the fourth movement.

Throughout this movement, listen for tension in suspension. The music breathes slowly, but there is still strong harmony. Climaxes rise and fall. There is no lush sentimentality characteristic of late Romantic slow movements; rather, Nielsen gives us restraint and concentration. This is not a lament for what has been lost, but a gathering of strength before the final confrontation.

The finale—***Allegro***—erupts without pause. It is dramatic and aggressive, launching an extraordinary conclusion. Energy returns in full force, but now it is sharpened, focused, and driven toward resolution. Themes from earlier movements are transformed and pressed into service to help the entire Symphony converge on a single decision point.

The defining moment comes with the dueling timpani. Nielsen instructed them to play “from here to the end, maintaining a certain threatening character even when they play quietly.” The terror comes, in part, from the timpani playing tritones, a dissonant interval sometimes called “the devil’s interval.” This is not theatrical effect for its own sake. The timpani embody the Symphony’s central idea: irreconcilable forces clashing head-on. How does the orchestra respond to this conflict? Brass blare, strings surge, and gradually the music forces its way to a blazing affirmation. The final pages are written in grand nineteenth-century symphonic tradition. Life wins, not by eliminating conflict, but by outlasting it.

An amusing postscript: If the music doesn’t grab hold of you, watch closely for the contrabassoon (played by the third bassoonist). It has only one note to play in the entire Symphony: a single, held note that opens the coda of the fourth movement accompanied by timpani. But don’t worry; there is much else for the third bassoonist to play.

Nielsen’s *Fourth Symphony* asks the listener to experience music as action rather than description. It is less about themes to be admired than about forces to be felt. Very often, momentum matters more than melody, and resolution is delayed. Everything in the Symphony feels earned, inevitable, and alive. *The Inextinguishable* is not a comforting or reassuring narrative. In it, Nielsen gives us an honest musical affirmation that promises persistence, not peace.