**Adès, Thomas (Joseph Edmund) (b. 1971)**

Ed Venn

Thomas Adès is one of the leading international composers of his generation. His music builds on twentieth-century developments in rhythm, texture and performing virtuosity, and draws on a wide range of influences both contemporary, ‘classical’ and popular. As a conductor and pianist he specialises in both his own music, that of his contemporaries, and twentieth-century repertoire.

Born in London, Adès is the son of a linguist (and amateur clarinettist) and Dawn Adès, an expert on surrealism. The artistic opportunities provided by this family background helped shape Adès’s own eclectic approach to art in his musical compositions. Yet it was as a pianist that Adès first came to attention, reaching the semi-final of the 1990 BBC Young Musician of the Year competition. Work on his opus 1, the *FIVE ELIOT LANDSCAPES* (1990), followed immediately; this, and other pieces composed whilst studying music at Cambridge University, such as the *CHAMBER SYMPHONY* (1990), helped Adès secure a prestigious publishing contract with Faber Music.

These works demonstrate many of the musical and technical preoccupations that Adès has been developing over the course of his composing career: the *CHAMBER SYMPHONY* reworks both traditional generic expectations as well as cadential patterns. Similarly, the *FIVE ELIOT LANDSCAPES* employ intricately woven musical patterns and textures that have the capacity to evoke traditional classical harmonic functions as well as produce extremely dissonant passages. The quotation of ‘My Curly Headed Baby’ at the end of the first song continues the modernist interest in the quotidian that can be observed throughout the twentieth century, and through much of Adès output, most notably in his arrangement of *CARDIAC ARREST* by the pop group Madness (1995). In works such as *DARKNESS VISIBLE* (1992) and *SONATA DA CACCIA* (1993) the neo-classicist tendencies in Adès music come to the fore; the former reworks a lute song by John Dowland, and the latter is a homage to Couperin (a practice continued in the arrangements of Couperin to be found in *LES BARICADES MISTÉRIEUSES* (1994) and *THREE STUDIES FROM COUPERIN* (2006).

Much of Adès’s music takes its stimulus from extramusical sources: *LIVING TOYS* (1993) is based around an invented story that allows for the inclusion of Spanish rhythms, funk, and allusions to Kubrick’s *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY*. *ARCADIANA* (1994) presents idylls both lost and imaginary, and includes a homage to Elgar; *THE ORIGIN OF THE HARP* (1994), one of a number of works written during Adès’s tenure as composer in association with the Halle Orchestra, is based on a painting in Manchester City Art Gallery. *POWDER HER FACE* (1995), Adès’s first opera, to a libretto by Philip Henscher, courts controversy in both subject material—it was based on the life of the Duchess of Argyle—and in content: it features a now-notorious ‘fellatio aria’.

A string of major works followed. *ASYLA* (1997), a four-movement work for large symphony orchestra, achieved both popular and critical acclaim, winning for Adès the 2000 Grawemeyer prize for music composition. Here, Adès’s intricate musical language and ear for unusual sonorities is writ large, not least in the rave-inspired third movement, ‘Ecstasio’. *AMERICA: A PROPHECY* (1999), a work commissioned by Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic for the millennium, is a somewhat uncelebratory work recounting the destruction of the Mayan civilisation; after the September 11 attacks in 2001, the piece was received somewhat better. In works such as the *CONCERTO CONCISO* (1997) and *PIANO QUINTET* (2000) complex multi-layered textures come to the fore: in these, as well as much of Adès’s output, his admiration for the work of *CONLON NANCARROW*, *CHARLES IVES* and *GYÖRGY LIGETI* is in evidence.

*THE TEMPEST* (2004) was commissioned by the Royal Opera House and set to a reworking of Shakespeare’s play by Meredith Oakes. Though in essence no less complex than Adès’s earlier music, the opera is characterised by a new-found emotional directness. This characteristic was developed in further in the orchestral *VIOLIN CONCERTO* (2005), and *TEVOT* (2007). *IN SEVEN DAYS* (2008), a ‘piano concerto with moving image’, was composed for performance alongside a video installation by Adès’s civil partner TAL ROSNER—as was *POLARIS* (2010)—developing a line of enquiry dating back to Adès’s earlier visually inspired works.

Adès was the music director of the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (1998-2000), and the director of the Aldeburgh Festival (1998-2008). As both pianist and conductor he has performed with many of the world’s leading ensembles and performers. His music has featured in festivals in both Europe and America, and he was appointed R and B Debs Composer Chair at Carnegie Hall.

KEY WRITINGS ABOUT THOMAS ADÈS:

Fox, Christopher, ‘Tempestuous Times: The Recent Music of Thomas Adès’, *The Musical Times* Vol. 145, No. 1888 (Autumn, 2004): 41-56

Roeder, John, 2006. ‘Co-operating Continuities in the Music of Thomas Adès"’ *Music Analysis* 25/1-2 (2006): 125-154.

Roeder, John, ‘A Transformational Space Structuring the Counterpoint in Adès’s “Auf dem Wasser zu singen”', *Music Theory Online* 15/1 (2009).

Taruskin, Richard, ‘A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism’, in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (2008): 144-52.

Venn, Edward, 'Asylum gained'? : madness and sanctuary in Thomas Adès's *Asyla*’, *Music Analysis* 25 (1-2) (2006): 89-120.

Venn, Edward, ‘Narrativity in Thomas Adès’s *Asyla*’, *Res Facta Nova* 11 (20) (2010): 61-70.

Venn, Edward, ‘Thomas Adès’, in *Nowa Muzyka Brytyjska* [New British Music] (2010): 182-201. [in Polish]

Whittall, Arnold, ‘James Dillon, Thomas Adès, and the Pleasures of Allusion’, in *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s* (2003): 3-28.

CHRONOLOGY OF COMPOSITIONS

The Lover in Winter (1989)

Five Eliot Landscapes (1990)

Chamber Symphony (1990)

O thou who didst with pitfall and with gin (1990)

Gefriolsae Me (1990)

Catch (1991)

Darknesse Visible (1992)

Fool’s Rhymes (1992)

Under Hamelin Hill (1992)

Still Sorrowing (1992)

Life Story (1993)

Living Toys (1993)

...but all shall be well (1993)

Sonata da Caccia (1993)

Arcadiana (1994)

The Origin of the Harp (1994)

Les baricades mistérieuses (1994)

Cardiac Arrest (1995)

Powder her Face (1995)

Traced Overhead (1996)

These Premises are Alarmed (1996)

Asyla (1997)

Concerto Conciso (1997)

The Fayrfax Carol (1997)

America: A Prophecy (1999)

January Writ (1999)

Piano Quintet (2000)

Brahms (2001)

The Tempest (2004)

Scenes from the Tempest (2004)

Court Studies from the Tempest (2005)

Concerto for Violin: Concentric Paths (2005)

Studies from Couperin (2006)

Tevot (2007)

Overture, Waltz and Finale from Powder her Face (2007)

In Seven Days (2008)

Three Mazurkas (2009)

Lieux retrouvés (2009)

Concert Paraphrase on Powder her Face (2009)

Polaris (2010)

The Four Quarters (2010)