



# THE PROMS LISTENING SERVICE

Radio 3's Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight's Prom

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JOHN ADAMS

## Lollapalooza

It's all in the title – literally, since Adams's piece is about a transliteration of its undefinable Americanese moniker into musical material: hear it blaring out there in the brass, Lol-la-pa-LOO-za! Here are some other unforgettable and enigmatic titles that are the starting points for orchestral pieces, each of which is a burst of energetic orchestral bedazzlement: **Thomas Adès's *These Premises Are Alarmed*** was his first full orchestral work, whose health-and-safety title actually heralds four minutes of surreal, intoxicating melody; **Judith Weir's *Heroic Strokes of the Bow*** writes out its energetic lashes for chamber orchestra, with its title based on a Paul Klee painting; and **Oliver Knussen's *The Way to Castle Yonder*** is a digest of the interludes from his Maurice Sendak opera ***Higglety Pigglety Pop!***: a cat-milkman drives a wagon, Jennie the dog dreams of lions and there's a journey on a lion's back, all in just a few minutes of orchestral shimmer and wonder.

DVOŘÁK

## Violin Concerto

Even in a lifetime of writing ludicrously memorable melodies, the tune at the start of the finale of Dvořák's **Violin Concerto** belongs in a special class of musical ideas that, once heard, burrows its way into your brain and refuses to budge, so that it springs into your consciousness unasked-for, on an uncontrollably repetitive loop as you're doing the shopping, trying to sleep or sitting down at a Prom ... it's an earworm, in other words! Dvořák composed more than his fair share of these melodies that stick to our unconscious

brains: the main theme of the first movement of the 'New World' Symphony is another one that stalks my dreams, as is the tune that propels the finale of the Cello Concerto. At the very top of the list, though, is the swashbuckling folksy swagger of the first of his Op. 46 ***Slavonic Dances***. Mind you, every single one of his *Slavonic Dances* contains at least one indelible aural invertebrate ... Dvořák wasn't just scoring these orchestral pieces, he was searing his melodies on our nervous systems.

MAHLER

## Symphony No. 1

That is an astounding opening to a symphony, let alone your first essay in the genre, isn't it? That prelapsarian quiet, out of which Mahler's cavalcade of characters rouses itself from an Edenic slumber at the start of the first movement: it's an orchestral vision that comes out of no known compositional rulebook, launching Mahler's symphonic cycle into its uniquely diverse universe. But other composers' first symphonies are no less imaginative. **Shostakovich's First Symphony**, composed when he was still a teenager in 1925, bursts with a brilliance that's precocious and parodic, in music that simultaneously sends up pretty well the whole tradition, yet offers a vision for a new kind of symphonic rhetoric. Not bad for a 19-year-old! In a completely different way, the opening of **Brahms's C minor First Symphony** is another vindication of its composer's virtuosity. It sounds like a tortured, multilayered cry of pain, because that's what it is: Brahms was simultaneously honouring the Classical and Baroque past, and attempting to escape it with his own hard-won prize of symphonic imagination

when it at last appeared in 1876.

**Tchaikovsky's First Symphony**, from a decade earlier, is no less a negotiation with history, and it caused its 26-year-old composer extraordinary pain and difficulty to write, yet it breathes its air of 'Winter Daydreams' with a superabundant lyricism which shows that a Russian symphony could be a radically different proposition to the traditional German model. However painful they find it, when composers prove themselves in the symphonic crucible, they give us some of their most extraordinary orchestral visions.



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