

Michael Tilson Thomas & the San Francisco Symphony
John Adams *Absolute Jest*
Performance Press Quotes
May 4, 5 & 9, 2013

"The piece unveiled in Davies Symphony Hall boasts all the hallmarks of Adams' finest orchestral music - his extraordinary command of instrumental color, his buoyant rhythmic palette and his sure-handed mastery of large-scale form. The treacherous challenge of writing for string quartet and orchestra, which brought so much of the original version to grief, has now been finessed with seemingly effortless ease....Adams asserts his right to stand beside Beethoven, and to counterpoise the fruits of his own creative imagination to those of the master...The final five minutes of the piece constitute a virtuoso example of how to accumulate rhythmic energy, as the music hurtles toward its conclusion - and then, in the last seconds, deftly sidesteps the expected cliché ending."

- [Joshua Kosman, San Francisco Chronicle](#)

"...the evening's runaway hit was John Adams' *Absolute Jest* for String Quartet and Orchestra. This was the Symphony's second time around for Adams' dazzling 25-minute love letter to Beethoven — Tilson Thomas and the orchestra presented its world premiere in Davies on March 15, 2012, with the St. Lawrence String Quartet as soloists — and this performance re-affirmed its brilliance, and then some...*Absolute Jest* was already a blast — keen, propulsive, and wildly inventive, as only Adams can be."

- [Georgia Rowe, San Francisco Classical Voice](#)

"...last night's performance was certainly well-paced and the interplay between string quartet and just about every possible instrument an orchestra might have made for an exuberating listening experience...Last night the real center of attention was the full SFS ensemble serving both Beethoven and Adams with equal commitment and enthusiasm."

- [Stephen Smoliar, Examiner.com](#)

"For all of his serious intentions about transformation and invention, *Absolute Jest* is mainly a helluva lot of fun to listen to, and if you know your Beethoven, you'll find it hard to suppress a delighted laugh at some of the drop-in quotes and manic energy... Furthermore, MTT calls it "a big scherzo" — which literally means "joke" or, if you will, "jest"...Adams personality is everywhere in this Beethoven homage — a dreamy section spiked by chimes at about the 16 minute mark, signature Adams ostinatos combining with Op. 135 for a ripping good run toward the end, trilling brasses jeering at the Grosse Fuge. The St. Lawrence Quartet was balanced quite deftly against the orchestra (...and Tilson Thomas conducted carefully but with plenty of zest."

- [Richard Ginnell, Classical Voice America](#)

“John Adams’ “Absolute Jest” is a madcap scherzo-fantasy, a wild complex run through snippets of Beethoven, seen and shaped via Adams’ unique kaleidoscopic prism. Rather than dismissed as derivative, it shows the rhythm-driven composer at his high-flying best, a craftsman of high spirit and Lebenslust who represents some of America’s finest contemporary music palatable to a broad symphonic audience, which received it at the San Francisco Symphony with warmth if not ebullience.

The message: Serious music doesn’t have to be deathly serious. Adams is saying, “Let’s have a little FUN!”

- [Paul Hertelendy, ArtsSF](#)