

Christopher Taylor

with the North Carolina Symphony conducted by Benjamin Wallfisch
“...a first-rate performance.”

North Carolina Symphony's John Adams Fest

By Tom Moore - Classical Voices North Carolina March 26, 2011 - Raleigh, NC:

Those brave enough to travel through wintry rain to the Meymandi Concert Hall at the Progress Energy Center (there were many, many empty seats) were rewarded by an interesting and well-planned NC Symphony program with a scintillating piano soloist (Christopher Taylor) and a dynamic young conductor (Benjamin Wallfisch). Music Director Grant Llewellyn was absent with leave, his spouse having had surgery, and Llewellyn was across the Great Water accompanying her recuperation. He was ably substituted by another Brit, Benjamin Wallfisch, just barely over thirty, but fully in command of the challenging repertoire he took over for this concert. Wallfisch, although his biography does not note it, is a member of a notable English musical dynasty.

The program celebrated the work of American composer John Adams, who is approaching 65, matching three works from the 1980s with three works influential on Adams's musical thinking. The program opened with the little known *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, Op. 112, of Beethoven, which pairs a hushed depiction of a becalmed vessel with the joy of its return to port. This fairly brief work is characteristic of later work by the master in its exploration of the integration of choral and orchestral effects. The North Carolina Master Chorale, augmented by the ECU Chamber Singers, produced a fine pianissimo at the opening (not an easy way to open a piece or a concert).

Next up was a similarly unfamiliar work by Britten, *Young Apollo*, Op. 16, in which almost all the thematic material was made up of virtuoso effects (scales, glissandi, trills) – the work was brilliant, extroverted, and noisy, and wonderfully rendered by pianist Christopher Taylor.

Adams, along with many younger American composers, has been strongly influenced by Charles Ives (particularly, I think, in his masterpiece *On the Transmigration of Souls*, in memory of Sept. 11, 2001). We heard one of Ives' most familiar and easily comprehensible pieces, *The Unanswered Question*, which remains modern despite dating to 1906 (its ubiquity must be due both to its brevity and the limited forces required – strings, four flutes, one trumpet). Wallfisch elicited a pianissimo such that the first violin line had to be virtually imagined up in the second balcony.

After this we passed through the mirror, and into the first of the three Adams works, *Eros Piano*, 1989, a wonderful piece which I had not heard before, hushed, jazzy, with chromatic scales yearning upwards which recalled Gershwin, full of blues notes and dreamy sonorities (including vibraphone and low flutes), and Taylor back once for a star turn on the solo piano part. For me this moment was the one to treasure, an extended and serious work given a first-rate performance. The first half closed with a showpiece, the *"Short Ride in a Fast Machine"* (1986), built around an unceasing and fortissimo woodblock, unforgiving for both the percussionist who plays it, and the rest of the players who must fit in their parts against its toc-toc-toc. Wallfisch and his crew showed off their chops.

The concluding work, in which the Master Chorale and the ECU Chamber Singers returned, was Adams' *Harmonium* (1981), a piece in which Adams shows more kinship with the rest of the minimalists, and for that reason, less successful musically, with his intricate busy work producing a musical mess. For much of the work the poems (by Donne and Dickinson) were inaudible, the diction of the singers drowned out by the busyness of the orchestra, the fault not that of the ensemble, but of the composer. The choral work was



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basically sound, but particularly the sopranos showed weakness, with unsupported, thin and vaguely tuned sonorities at the top. To my knowledge North Carolina does not have a professional chorus, and in works like this, it shows.

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