

“Adès conducts Adès” at Severance: A Conversation with Sasha Cooke

By Mike Telin



When Thomas Adès was commissioned to write a piece for Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic’s “Messages for the Millennium” program, he was asked to compose a “hopeful piece.” But what he delivered was a prophetic work about a country on the verge of crisis. The two-part work for mezzo-soprano, orchestra, and optional chorus was premiered in New York on November 11, 1999.

On Thursday, February 20 at 7:30 pm at Severance Music Center, Adès will lead The Cleveland Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, and mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, in the U.S. premiere of the expanded version of his *America: A Prophecy*. The concert will also include Jean Sibelius’ *The Oceanides*, Kaija Saariaho’s *Oltra Mar*, and Charles Ives’ *Orchestral Set No. 2*. The program will be repeated on Saturday at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

“It’s a powerful, prophetic work that has a lot of lyricism,” Two-time Grammy Award–winning mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke said during a telephone conversation. “But what first struck me about the piece was its beautiful poetry.”

The text of the first two parts — sung by the mezzo — is set to text from the Mayan books of *Chilam Balam* and the poem “La Guerra” by Matteo Flexa. In part three, the chorus takes on greater importance, with the soloist joining in only during the final stanza.

Adès writes that only now the chorus, which has represented the conquerors in the earlier two parts, “takes these texts and becomes, in turn, the army of the vanquished — as happened here, as happens always.”

Cooke said that “this expanded version not only gives the chorus more to do, it also adds some peace and hope for the future.” The now twenty-minute piece was a co-commissioned by the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, The Cleveland and Hallé Orchestras, and received its world premiere in December 2024 in Leipzig.

The mezzo-soprano said that she enjoys singing new music. She has premiered works by Mark Adamo, Mason Bates, William Bolcom, Laura Kaminsky, Nico Muhly, Kevin Puts, Jimmy López Bellido, Augusta Read Thomas, and Joby Talbot. This season Cooke sang the role of Emilie Ekdahl at the world premiere of Mikael Karlsson and Royce Vavrek’s *Fanny and Alexander*.

She noted that *America: A Prophecy* is not without its challenges. “Many times I’m singing straight tone in the highest register, which is not something I’m used to doing. But practicing it has given me more tools in my toolbox.”

She added that the sound she needs to produce is not always pretty. “To do that with the best orchestras in the world and the composer standing next to you is a little intimidating. The piece is also full of unpredictable meters so when I’m practicing I’ve been conducting myself.”

Cooke looks forward to working with Thomas Adès. “He has a certain magnetism and his music is impressive,” she said. “I’m taken by the fact that he’s added his own text. I’m sure that I’m going to learn a lot in these four days.”

Winding down our conversation, Cooke pointed out that the performances of *America: A Prophecy* are taking place at an “interesting” time in our own country’s history. “Music provides a catharsis — it offers a time to reflect and to process what is happening. And this is a beautiful piece.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 18, 2025.

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