

‘Frenzied Tangos’ from Adams, Diehl headline Cleveland Orchestra premieres (Feb. 19)



by Stephanie Manning |
ClevelandClassical.com

*This article was originally
published on Cleveland.com*

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Just like his music, insistent and perpetually in motion, John Adams has little interest in slowing down. At 79, the celebrated composer and conductor is as busy as ever, and

he’s never far from his next premiere.

A Cleveland Orchestra regular, Adams returned to the Mandel Concert Hall podium on Thursday, February 19 for “Frenzied Tango,” a program of firsts that reunited him with pianist Aaron Diehl. The performance revealed plenty of gems, both in his own works and those he chose to precede them.

Adams’ ear for programming served him well here, making a collection of somewhat disparate pieces feel intentional. He singled out the third-movement fugue from Charles Ives’ Symphony No. 4, based on the hymn “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains,” as a calming opener.

The warm sound of the Orchestra’s string section, sprinkled with a small group of winds, brass, and organ, gently carried the melody through the various instruments.

Adams has long been inspired by Ives, and the same can be said of composer Timo Andres, whose piano concerto, *Made of Tunes*, draws its title from Ives’ song “The Things Our Fathers Loved.” Andres wrote the piece for Aaron Diehl, who showed off all of the music’s brilliance in its first Cleveland Orchestra performance.

Sonically shifting gears away from the Ives, *Made of Tunes* immediately sets up a 21st-century style. The piano entrance then introduces a rhythmic engine, which is eventually echoed by hand-struck timpani and other percussion.

Diehl's hands practically glided over the keys, repeatedly crossing his left hand over his right and accentuating important moments with swift glissandi.

In the second movement, "American Nocturnal," his sweetly lyrical moments became an oasis of calm as the rest of the orchestra turned the energy up, culminating in a searing wave of sound that immediately disintegrated, leaving only the sentimental sounds of piano and alto saxophone.

Diehl then released some of his own pent-up energy in his encore, a blazing fast ragtime selection by James P. Johnson.

Post-intermission, Adams delivered some remarks on the program before leading the Cleveland Orchestra premiere of *Frenzy*: a short symphony. Despite its title, Adams called the piece "congenial," saying it became something different from what he initially imagined.

While it doesn't reach the frenetic peaks of something like the *Andres*, calling it "congenial" isn't exactly accurate. The interlocking layers and brass interjections create a sense of urgency, and once the thumping of the pedal bass drum kicks in, it's a thrilling race to the finish.

Adams capped off the evening with his arrangements of three tangos by Astor Piazzolla, a trio of world premieres. These thoughtful realizations stay true to the original tunes while taking advantage of larger orchestrations that highlight individual players.

Solos by cellist Mark Kosower and soprano saxophonist Timothy McAllister gently danced over the string pizzicatos in "La Mufa," while Marc Damoulakis's bowed vibraphone in "Oblivion" accented clarinetist Daniel McKelway's lyrical melody.

"Libertango" is perhaps the least subtle of the three, partly due to Adams' decision to introduce the melody via the entire bass section. Still, they and all the other soloists were deservedly singled out during the long, warm round of applause.

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Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 26, 2026

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