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From The Times

March 2, 2007

Variations of an enigma

To some, Thomas Adès is the most brilliant composer of his generation, while others find his work baffling. A new festival seeks to unravel the mystery, reports Neil Fisher

RECOMMEND?

Plot a course through the major works of Thomas Adès and you may end up as stranded as the characters in his opera *The Tempest*. Equally, navigate by the conflicting commentaries on the rise of Britain's most glamorous composer and it sometimes seems as if each one is talking about a different person.

When Adès does speak on record he tends toward abstract pronouncements about his work, or (occasionally) about a particular composer he admires. Interpretation is rarely explored, and he keeps his personal life almost compulsively under wraps.

Yet the clique of musicians, artists and writers that Adès, now 36, does confide in rejects his image as a distant loner. "I always find it puzzling when people remark on how private Tom is," says the violinist Anthony Marwood, a long-term friend and collaborator. "I've even heard the word aloof just because he is private. If he chooses to let his music do the talking, I think he should be accepted."

But just what is the music saying? Over the next two months there will be ample chance to find out. Along with the UK premiere of his latest piece, *Tevot*, nearly all his major works will be performed in a Barbican festival dedicated to his work, *Traced Overhead*, while the Royal Opera hosts the first revival of *The Tempest* since its 2004 premiere. It's an unprecedented chance to experience his work.

Although the name is Syrian-Jewish, Adès was born in London and brought up in Hampstead, the son of an art historian and a linguist. At Cambridge he was a brilliant student, achieving a double-starred first in music.

Yet in his music his character is masked, and the common threads are difficult to unwind. As one critic put it early on: "Adès is good at burying his traces: deception and subterfuge are part of his armoury."

His first opera, *Powder her Face*, whose success rocketed the 24-year-old composer to prominence, seems a case in point: its lascivious heroine, the disgraced Duchess of Argyll, should be as unappealing as her sexual peccadillos, yet Adès somehow makes her downfall as moving as it is humorous, while staying all the while the ironic onlooker.

According to the opera's librettist, the novelist Philip Hensher, part of the fun lay in the experimentation. "Tom was much less well-known than he is now. The Almeida theatre left us to get on with it, so we wrote what interested and amused us."

For a while it looked as though this was an Adès with whom we could feel comfortable. But then he moved on. As Hensher says: "He explores particular sonic phenomena until he's got to the bottom of them, then something new, something else occurs to him."

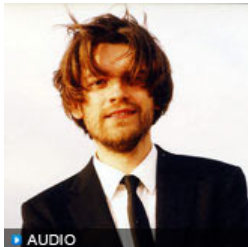
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In the case of Adès's next large-scale work, *Asyla*, few could have predicted such a powerful and different development. And although it shook with the weight of its exotic battery of percussion, it also had a raw and expressive power. Yet there were dissenters. The critic Ivan Hewett wrote that Adès's work tended toward "facile cleverness", and in the difficult build-up to *The Tempest* rumours circulated that other composers were having to leap in to assist in time for curtain-up. Afterwards, some wondered if the neo-Romantic score was a backward step.

The tenor Ian Bostridge, who sang Caliban, recalls: "We were sitting in the auditorium at the moment when Ferdinand and Miranda kiss. Tom had scored a cymbal crash, and he said: 'Oh my god, is this embarrassing?' It wasn't: I think Tom was rediscovering the power of emotion in music." Anyone who heard the 17 high Es that the soprano singing Ariel sang in her first minute on stage could also hear that Adès was still pushing the boundaries. Perhaps his talent is for using extremes of sound — in the case of *Asyla* he once admitted that the pounding percussion recalled a night of clubbing.

When Anthony Marwood heard Ariel's music, he had a premonition that the violin concerto Adès was writing for him would set a similar test (see *panel*). "Tom maintains he knew all along that I could play that high," Marwood laughs. "I barely knew it myself. Somehow he has a sense of where the outer limits lie."

His friends queue up to attest to his personal charm. "He's delightful, funny and really knows how to handle people," says Bostridge. "He's not a snob in any sense," says Hensher. "When you go round to his, he's always got some hilarious discovery on the go." The Adès coterie are resolute that it isn't all about his intellect, even if Adès's idol is the reclusive Conlon Nancarrow, who grew so frustrated by the limits of musicians that he composed for the automatic piano instead.

Recent developments in Adès's personal life may change his direction again. Last year he and his boyfriend, the Israeli video artist Tal Rosner, became civil partners, and Adès has admitted that it changed his attitude to his work. "Maybe now I'm allowing certain feelings or spaces in one's soul or heart which before I wouldn't have recognised or even known were there," he confessed.

Perhaps it will also allow him to move from being a Prospero, bound by his own formidable art, to being more of a Ferdinand — a little more willing to show us exactly how he feels.

Traced Overhead, including the Violin Concerto performed by Anthony Marwood, begins on Wednesday at the Barbican (0845 1207550); *The Tempest* opens at Covent Garden on March 12 (020-7304 4000)



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