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TABLE OF  
CONTENTS

# Woman of the World

*The violinist Leila Josefowicz plays John Adams's latest piece.*

**BY RUSSELL PLATT**

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ILLUSTRATION BY SIMONE MASSONI

It's hard to say that  
classical music is dying  
when one of the world's  
superstar violinists  
devotes her entire career  
to performing new music.  
“I'm almost one hundred  
per cent contemporary  
now,” Leila Josefowicz  
said recently. Her  
heartfelt new-music

advocacy helped win her a MacArthur Fellowship, in 2008, and she will be out front in the world première of John Adams's "Scheherazade.2," with Alan Gilbert and the New York Philharmonic this week (March 26-28).

Josefowicz's close relationship to Adams's music goes back to 2001, when she performed the composer's Violin Concerto at the age of twenty-three. That concerto (1993) was arguably the piece that cemented Adams's transition from post-minimalist upstart to classical master. This new work, subtitled a "Dramatic Symphony for Violin and Orchestra," aims to expand the classical tradition itself. Its title alludes not only to Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade," a four-movement symphonic

poem beloved for its  
lavishly beautiful violin  
solos, but also to Berlioz,  
the Romantic firebrand  
who invented the  
“dramatic symphony” in  
transformational works  
like “Romeo and Juliet.”

Adams’s interest in the  
“Arabian Nights” story  
has little to do with  
Rimsky-Korsakov; his  
creative impetus was  
triggered by the brutality  
that confronts modern  
women in the Middle  
East, and elsewhere. The  
symphony’s four  
movements are guided by  
powerful images. “A  
beautiful young woman  
with grit and personal  
power,” as Adams puts it,  
is pursued by male “true  
believers”; then there’s a  
love scene in which the  
imagined lover just might  
be another woman; the  
woman is tried by a group  
of zealous “men with  
beards”; and, in the  
conclusion, “Escape,

Flight, and Sanctuary,”  
the woman may or may  
not have evaded the  
clutches of her killers.  
Josefowicz sees the piece  
as “theatre with sound,  
unlike any other piece  
written for the violin,” in  
which her role as a  
musician transcends that  
of a typical concerto  
soloist. “What does it  
sound like to be  
condemned to death? I  
have to make that known  
to the audience.” ♦

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Russell Platt is the classical music editor of  
Goings On About Town.

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